

# TYPOGRAPHIC DESIGN AS VISUAL HISTORIOGRAPHY AND RACIAL FORMATION

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## Abstract

This paper maps the theoretical and methodological dimensions of an on-going project called *1882–1982–2019* which entails the design of a “chop suey” typeface and specimen book. The project experiments with typography’s indexical affordances and capacity for historical narration. The typeface is not optimized for legibility, but is rather developed for unpacking critical questions surrounding the relationship between labor, design, craft, quality, value, and race. While most of these notions would not be out of place in discourses of typography, the latter term — race — is seldom given serious attention in the field.

The typographic (or, type) specimen is taken up as a genre of commercial writing that invests letterforms with significance and value. It is framed by a synthesis of scholarly work from a variety of fields including performance studies, whiteness studies, and Asian-American studies, and the history of illustration. This idiosyncratic composition of reference points strives towards a more radical resonance. That is, *1882–1982–2019* is rooted in an examination of the historical persistence of the anti-Asian tropes as one constitutive element in the construction of normative, white-supremacist ideas around labor, craft, and value. It explores how the language and attitudes of such tropes are resonant in typographic discourse, pedagogy, and practice.

A primary methodological vehicle — endemic to type design — entails the mining of archival sources for letterforms. These are extracted from a variety of historical documents ranging from late-19th century political cartoons to contemporary popular media, and digitized. Artificial intelligence image generators like Dall-E and Midjourney are also applied to generate typographic form to stage a further examination of the performativity of contemporary typographic labor.

This project opens critical questions about the disciplinary aims of typographic history, implicates it in racial discourses, and challenges normative, ostensibly de-racialized, processes of valorization in typography.

**Keywords:** Racial Formation, Asian-American, Whiteness, Chop Suey, Typographic specimen



Fig. 1 1882–1982–2019, type specimen.

### Typographic Design as Visual Historiography and Racial Formation

This paper maps the theoretical and methodological dimensions of an on-going project titled *1882–1982–2019*, which entails the design of a “chop suey” typeface and a publication known as a specimen book, which is typically produced for marketing fonts. The project explores typography’s indexical affordances and capacity for historical narration. The typeface is not optimized for legibility, but is rather developed for unpacking critical questions surrounding the relationship between labor, design, craft, quality, value, and race. While most of these notions would not be out of place in discourses of typography, the latter term — race — is seldom given serious attention in the field. A search for “race and typography” on JSTOR turns up nothing that explicitly addresses the relationship between the two topics. Canonical texts such as *The Elements of Typographic Style* promotes “neutrality” and “universality” without interrogating whose perspectives these terms presume.

The typographic (or, type) specimen is taken up as a genre of commercial writing that invests letterforms with significance and value. It synthesizes scholarly work from a variety of fields including performance studies, whiteness studies, and

Asian-American studies, and the history of illustration, and explores their resonances. *1882–1982–2019* examines the historical persistence of anti-Asian tropes as a constitutive element in the construction of normative, white-supremacist ideas around labor, craft, and value. It turns on an often overlooked aspect of racial politics in the North American context — a third point in what the American political scientist Claire Jean Kim calls “racial triangulation” (Kim, 1999). The project also explores how the language and attitudes of such tropes resonate within typographic discourse, pedagogy, and practice, and draws insights and concepts from musician and scholar Sophie Fetokaki’s work on the embodied whiteness of vocal pedagogy (Fetokaki, 2023).

A primary methodological vehicle — endemic to type design — entails the mining of archival sources for letterforms. These are extracted from a variety of racially charged images ranging from late-19th century political cartoons to contemporary popular media, and subsequently digitized. After all, the visual, as Michael Omi and Howard Winant remind us, is the register from which race emerges. They write that “Bodies are visually read and narrated... Corporeal distinctions ... become essentialized [and] are understood as the manifestation of more profound differences that are situated *within*

racially identified persons: differences in such qualities as intelligence, athletic ability, temperament, and sexuality, among other traits.” (Omi, 2015 p. 111). The result, derived from the residue of visualized racial distinctions, is a “chop suey” typeface that indexes various racist, anti-Asian tropes articulated in the US American context around the mid-late 19th century, and particularly around the passage of the so-called “Chinese Exclusion Act” of 1882. Furthermore, the racializing of the Asian subject and their labor, then and now, help to consolidate “whiteness,” not so much as an identity category, but as what the scholar of critical whiteness studies Ruth Frankenberg calls a “strategy of authority” (2001, p. 653). As it will be explored below, this strategy slips into a «strategy of legitimization» of western settler-colonial capitalism in the face of an emergent threat — the so-called “Yellow Peril”<sup>1</sup> of invasive Asian labor and Eastern forms of authoritarian capitalism.

This is further exemplified in popular films, but also in the gruesome murder of Vincent Chin, a Chinese-American engineer killed by two white auto workers in Detroit in 1982. The murder of Chin violently echoes a nativist fear of the ascendant Japanese corporation as American modernity’s other (vis-a-vis white labor struggles), as depicted in popular films like Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982).<sup>2</sup> The film fantasizes that accelerated technological development, unmitigated by western enlightenment values, leads to social, environmental, and spiritual deterioration. Its characters are tormented by the contradiction of their dual ontology as “replicants” (a fictional bio-engineered humanoid) and as individuals desiring to exceed the limitations of their lot. This parallels the critical race scholar Iyko Day’s description of the racialization of the East-Asian diasporic subject’s ontological status as both labor and capital. As such, this project also employs AI image generators like Dall-E and Midjourney to generate

typographic form to stage a further contemplation of this phenomenon, as well as the performativity of contemporary typographic labor.

A central aim of this project is to posit typographic design practice as one that enacts historical narration. Inspired by Société Réaliste’s project “Futura Fraktur” (2010), my particular approach here is *not* to conduct historiographical work that valorizes, legitimizes, and normalizes typographic practice as a commercial enterprise or even as a noble craft. Rather, it is to explore typography’s capacity for staging cultural criticism while examining the way that normative typographic praxis (commercial, craft) is itself invested with the performative authority of whiteness.

Applied critically to the persistence of the “Yellow Peril” the historical narration that drives this work is less one of “look how far we’ve come,” and more one of “look what they did to us.” What I am therefore claiming “they did» is to construct the figure of the white Euro-American as the normative standard against which all other groups are measured as deficient — in effect, they designed race as the Other to an “unmarked” whiteness (Frankenberg, 2001). It ought to go without saying, but when race (a contingent administrative designation) is actuated as immutable ontological status, and a foundation for violence — it must be contested.

Herewith, I shall briefly introduce the phenomenon of “chop suey” fonts, the genre of typographic specimens, and the notion of racialization. I will also elaborate on the historical narrative introduced above. Finally, the conclusion accounts for the way the project conducts criticism through the design of a typeface, and proposes a new cultural/critical role for the practice.

1 See *Die Gelbe Gefahr*, 1895, a propaganda poster commissioned by Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany in the wake of Japan’s defeat of China in the Sino-Japanese war. Visualizing Cultures, MIT. “Yellow Promise/Yellow Peril.” Accessed December 10, 2024. [https://visualizingcultures.mit.edu/yellow\\_promise\\_yellow\\_peril/ypvisnav07.html](https://visualizingcultures.mit.edu/yellow_promise_yellow_peril/ypvisnav07.html).

2 Incidentally, the year of Vincent Chin’s murder is the same year that Scott’s film was released. Both events occur 100 years after the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act.



Fig. 2 USA. Certificate of residence for Ju Sing. 1894, May 3. Certificates of residence for Chinese laborers, MS 3642, courtesy, California Historical Society. Public Domain.

## CHOP SUEY<sup>3</sup>

"Chop Suey" fonts are a category of display typeface where Latin letterforms are composed of strokes that allude to the morphology of Asian brush and ink script. The historian and type designer Paul Shaw, claims that the typeface *Mandarin*, released by the Cleveland Type Foundry in 1883, is the "granddaddy of chop suey types." (Shaw, 2009) Its exaggerated wedge-shaped strokes have since been imitated profusely and generated a typographical genre (although not a canonical category) unto itself and become a visual shorthand signaling the Asianness of, for example, a restaurant, to a western public. These fonts open typography to queries about the extent to which fonts can enact what Omi and Winant

(2015) call "racialization" — the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group — participating in what they call "racial formation" (2015, p. 111). These concepts ground the main contention of my work: while we see chop suey typefaces and lettering (examples of which are shared below) equip its audience with markers for racialization, they enable folk (as opposed to institutional/legal) modes of racial formation that load race, in this case, "Chinese"<sup>4</sup> with a variety of derogatory meanings and serve as a constitutive Other to evolving notions of whiteness. Furthermore, chop suey fonts as a stylistic category supply a foil against which normative, canonical western typography (elaborated in the following section) is able to strategically ground its authority cum whiteness in the traditions of European typography.

Recently, through mainstream news commentary as well as through independent bloggers, there has been a limited amount of public discussion as to whether or not chop suey fonts are racist, and when it may or may not be appropriate to use them (Typeroom, 2022; Park, n.d.; Boman, 2022; Quito, 2021). These discussions, however, largely miss an opportunity for a substantive critique of a broader racial system by simply lamenting their lack of authenticity and crass caricaturization, or offering facile, liberal apologies for their banality amongst a panoply of other ethnic types. Considering that 1882, the year prior to the release of *Mandarin*, was the year that the US Congress passed the *Chinese Exclusion Act*,<sup>5</sup> its appearance might trigger some more scrutiny. Concomitantly, one finds examples — usually in illustrated works expressing anti-Chinese attitudes — where what I call "proto-chop suey" lettering appears. A fuller evaluation of this genre of typography ought to take into consideration this context, and

3 Chop suey is the name of a Chinese-diasporic dish, particularly American. One apocryphal origin story of the dish claims that it was created by Chinese-American railroad workers. Another tells that a Chinese chef in San Francisco had to serve a group of miners after regular restaurant hours. The chef quickly fried up leftover meat and vegetables to escape a beating.

4 The 1890 US Census lists "Chinese" as a category alongside other more commonly understood racial categories like white, black, and "mulatto" (Omi, 2015, p. 123).

5 This was the US's first immigration law to explicitly ban a specific national/racial group.

ask what kinds of applications and clientele did the Cleveland Type Foundry imagine for its product.

I posit that chop suey typefaces and their proto-typical lettering variants express in their idiosyncratic structure and morphology not only an affectation of Asianness, but also a tone of mockery through the crude, unsteady, and irregular articulation of irrational forms created manually.<sup>6</sup> One reads their appearance in satirical anti-Chinese cartoons, for instance, in contrast with the, formal, machined affect of the typographic letterforms that appear in the captions below them. In light of the standard hagiographic, technoprogressive narrations of the Gutenberg press, which casts moveable metal typography as catalyst to the emergence of an enlightened western modernity, non-western manuscript is cast then as a subordinate and regressive hangover to be left behind, or proactively banished.

## TYPOGRAPHIC SPECIMEN

As long as we work with the arbitrary signs of the ALPHABET [sic], we shall be dependent on the past and — like the Greek vase makers — we shall derive our finest effects from the subtle personal variations on a traditional style and shape. (Frederic Warde, quoted in Zapf, 2005, p. 19)

Familiar to professional practitioners of graphic design, publishing, typography, and adjacent fields, type specimens are designed to showcase a typeface's components, qualities, and optimal usage. The introduction to designer and historian Dori Griffin's extensive survey of historical type specimens, offers that they are produced as prospectuses offered from foundry to printer, and printer to client in the commercial trade of typography and printing services. She adds that "Today's type designers still need to

answer the essential questions of the very first specimens: what does a specific typeface look like, what sizes and styles are available for purchase or use, and in what situations will the type be functional and context-appropriate?" (Griffin, 2022, p. 9). Beyond their commercial function, type specimens also serve as primary material for researchers, students, and practitioners of typographic design. Griffin posits that annotated facsimiles of historical specimens proliferated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries due to intensifying scholarly and commercial interest in typographic history, and helped to establish "the foundations of contemporary research in typographic history" (Griffin, 2022, p. 17). The type specimens included in her historiography progressively make cultural references (i.e. to other publications using the typeface) and draw associations beyond the strictly formal, and self-evident register of the typeface itself (e.g. to historical provenance, canonical influence). This narrative investment reads as a tactic for commanding surplus value for the wares beyond recovering the labor and material costs spent in their production. Although Griffin's historiographical agenda doesn't necessarily yield such an analysis, she does offer that such specimens "cultivated a sense of typographic legitimacy by echoing the form of broadside predecessors." (Griffin, 2022, p. 30). In other words, respect for precedent is taken as a hallmark of validity/value.

The designer Mark Boulton's project *Type Specimens*, "part publication — a newsletter, journal, and more to come — a feed of type specimens that grab my attention, and most importantly, a design and research project" (Boulton, n.d.) elaborates from a more contemporary, consumer perspective. His surveys into what motivates designers to choose any typeface for a project has lead to the development of an open-source template for type specimens that includes features responding to the following functions and priorities:

<sup>6</sup> Would the use of a chop suey typeface by a person who identifies as Asian necessarily represent self-mockery? I would say no, and leave it at that. My point is more to explore the social, cultural, political consequences of these typefaces, rather than make excuses for their existence.

- Print [sic] specimens are used as reference or cataloging detailed information.
- The back story or design reference for the typeface is of less importance than detail of the glyphs and language support.
- Users expect paragraphs and headings set in every weight or style at multiple sizes.
- Users also expect a complete list of all glyphs (Boulton, n.d.).

The only point I intend to derive from this is that “back story” and “design reference,” according to Boulton’s research, tend to be included consistently enough in type specimens that this feature — although consumers of digital typefaces express less interest in the referential basis of a typeface — warrants inclusion in his template. This is to say that from the commercial perspective of type designers, the valorization of their labor apparently has something to do with the investment of what are essentially banal letterforms with special meanings through the articulation of minor distinctions. What this suggests for my purposes is that the radically arbitrary morphology of typographic forms can be vehicles for particular and relatively stable investments of extrinsic (racial) meaning. Typographic letterforms can be valorized in ways that exceed the classical ideal (i.e. Greek/Latin canons of proportions, as suggested by the Warde epigraph above — legitimacy derived from ancient or divine provenance), or essential function of human visual cognition (e.g. universalist, colorblind, essentialist ideas about legibility [read: helvetica] — legitimacy derived from neuroscientific explanations of perception, ocular biology, etc.).

These perspectives map to two of Omi and Winant’s three stages in the evolution of “racial consciousness,” where the former maps to a stage where *religion* conditions prototypical conceptions of race, and the latter from (quasi-)

*scientific* justifications for the maintenance of inherited racial hierarchies from the former stage. The third, current stage, labeled *political*, is one where race is figured administratively. This is clearly a highly condensed distillation of this evolution, but for my purposes, they echo perspectives in typographic design practice and pedagogy that can be understood as bases for evaluation and valorization. Both racial categorization and the evaluation/valorization of typography are highly contestable processes that establish a stable normative ground against which legitimate and mongrel forms can be distinguished (does the student’s work respect canonical precedent?; does it rationalise its decision using scientific methodology?). In typography, the two modes of valorization mentioned just now seem to have largely held out against political valorization.<sup>7</sup> Below, I shall further explore the resonances of such grounds in typography with the process of racializing the “Chinese” other, and as a corollary, performing the authority of whiteness. But first, I will elaborate on the process of racialization, as argued by Omi and Winant to provide a model for this manoeuvre.

## RACIAL FORMATION, RACIALIZATION, RACIAL PROJECTS...

Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s seminal work *Racial Formation in the United States*, argues for an understanding of race as social construction while foregrounding the “phenomic/corporeal/‘ocular’ dimension of racialization” (2015, p. viii). Race, they argue, is an unstable, contingent, and contestable phenomenon that is neither objective (i.e. rooted in biology/genetics) nor illusory (i.e. an ideological conceit). It is a field of meanings where different groups and institutions struggle to (re)define racial hierarchies and ideas — a phenomenon they term “racial projects” (Omi, 2015, p.124). There is an originary moment of *race-making*, which can “be understood

<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the last significant time this was not the case was with the development of the Romain du Roi, even though it is noted for the rationalised, geometric basis for the construction of its letterforms.

as a process of 'othering' and that this is predicated on distinctions that are primarily visual, but also can be "[seen] through interpersonal and institutional socializations and practices" (Omi, 2015, p.112). As it will be outlined below, the racialization of the "Chinese" worker is undertaken through illustration, lettering and typography. While illustration might provide more intelligible representational content, the chop suey script stands in as a synecdoche for a broader set of racializing claims.

As a "master category of difference and inequality" of the *longue durée*, an accounting of race must be located in a "social structural (and historical) context" (Omi, 2015, p. 127). To Omi and Winant, a modern conception of race emerges with the rise of Europe and the arrival of colonisers in the "New World." The conquest of lands and extraction of wealth, premised on the coercive exploitation of Indigenous people, reaching its heinously apothecic form in the African slave trade, realised an apocalyptic worldview where white Europeans were figured as the divinely sanctioned architects of an historical progress to be built on the ground — figuratively, and literally — of the black, brown, and yellow Other who are biologically, culturally, politically, technologically mired in the pre-modern. Whiteness, in other words, stands in for progress, modernity, intellect, civilization.

The critical race scholar Ruth Frankenberg provides a more precise ontology of whiteness. She argues that whiteness is not so much an affirmative, positive subject category, but more a "strategy of authority" (Bhabha, 1998) figured negatively by what it is not. Whiteness is largely unmarked and unseen, understood as self-evident, without content, and eminently structural, by those aligned to it. Agreeing with Omi and Winant's characterization of race as unstable and

contingent, Frankenberg says of whiteness: "Whiteness, or white people, I suggest, through history, mainly named themselves to say 'I am not that Other.' ... This indeed is why, to the chagrin of some white people, it becomes extraordinarily difficult for white people to name whiteness, and why whiteness has a habit... of sliding into class and nationality all the time." (Frankenberg, 2001, p.75)

### ... WHITENESS, PERFORMANCE

The musician and scholar Sophie Fetokaki's critical assessment of western classical vocal pedagogy resonates distinctly the three aforementioned scholars' assessment of whiteness. Citing canonical pedagogical literature she describes a consistent expression of historically contingent techniques as articulations of universal values. She observes that "discourse around technique takes as its starting point the notion of a universalised, naturalised body, as well as the tendency to endow the historically specific phenomenon of western classical vocal music with universalised value and hierarchical status" (Fetokaki, 2023, p.322). She also asserts that, in the absence of a stable epistemological foundation for pedagogy and practice, methods of knowledge transmission often uncritically reproduce these values and assumptions in the authoritative interpellation of the student-practitioner (who does not yet possess/embody these values) by charismatic and idiosyncratic pedagogues (who do). By thinking through the pedagogy of western classical music, her work offers a mirror for critically evaluating the imperatives of typographic design pedagogy and practice, and discerning its "performatic"<sup>8</sup> dimension (Taylor, 2003) and racializing impact. The parallels to typographic discourse, practice, and pedagogy become apparent through the writings of typographers that articulate normative imperatives.

8 For the performance theorist Diana Taylor, "performatic" knowledge production, storage, and transmission is a category distinguished by its Other, "archival" knowledge production, storage, and transmission. The former tends to be stored somatically, and transmitted through performance and direct observation (i.e. learning to dance through imitation). The latter is exemplified by the artifacts of graphic design, documents of one sort or another. The former, in other words, is embodied/subjective, unstable and negotiable, and mutable; the latter is objectified, stable, prescriptive, and immutable.

Approaches to institutional typographic design pedagogy are varied and contested. Yet, I contend that there remains a set of canonical values and assumptions that are axiomatic to the discipline, and are available to those that seek certainty in the face of the sort of contingency that pervades design education and practice. They are composed by an amorphous assemblage of texts, quotes, specimens, workshops, Pinterest boards, among others, that circulate, in effect, as a vast and unmanaged repository of apocrypha. The sampling of quotes below only scratches the surface of the vast array of expressions through which normative values in typography find their manifestation.

The designer of new typefaces is limited by the traditional forms of the alphabet. There are few possibilities for new ideas, for a good design should not have eccentric and unusual details (Hermann Zapf quoted in *Typeroom*, 2015)

Type well used is invisible as type, just as the perfect talking voice is the unnoticed vehicle for the transmission of words, ideas. (Warde, 1955, p.13)

It means typography that can walk familiar ground without sliding into platitudes, typography that responds to new conditions with innovative solutions, and typography that does not vex the reader with its own originality in a self-conscious search for praise. Typography is to literature as musical performance is to composition... Like music, it can be used to manipulate behavior and emotions. But this is not where typographers, musicians or other human beings show us their finest side. Typography at its best is a slow performing art, worthy of the same informed

appreciation that we sometimes give to musical performances, and capable of giving similar nourishment and pleasure in return. (Bringhurst, 1997, p. 19–20)

Words originated as gestures of the body. The first typefaces were directly modeled on the forms of calligraphy. (Lupton, 2010, p.13)

Although the 1990s<sup>9</sup> are best remembered for images of chaos and decay, serious type designers continued to build general purpose typefaces designed to comfortably accommodate broad bodies of text. (Lupton, 2010, p.31)

Even when a great typeface stumbles, it's a testament to the vision at work: you can spot the flaws that don't go with the rest of the design... Even the most unconventional typefaces employ some sort of logical system, which is intuitively recognized and joyfully resonates in the mind of the reader. (Hoefer, n.d.)

This small selection will likely be recognizable to many formally trained designers, if not by name, then perhaps by attitude. Each is a kind of admonishment for how things ought to be on the basis of a disavowal of subjectivity (Zapf); an implied universal human reader (Warde, Bringhurst); the inevitability of natural origins and bodies (whose bodies? [Lupton]). Even in the helpful advice of Hoefer regarding systematization — where one might detect a distancing from historical reference as a basis of legitimacy, and a move towards the self-validation of an internally coherent system — is reminiscent of Fetokaki's critique in that he appeals to the transcendent (intellect, ordered, regulated, [read: civic]) as opposed to

9 To be sure, this selection does not include any proponents of the so-called "postmodern" tendency because those interventions really only make sense as interventions when discerned against the ground of what is in effect the field's canonical center. This quote from Lupton resonates with a common attitude that the formal excesses of the 90s were an embarrassing mistake.



Fig. 3 Chris Lee, *AI Chop Suey—Tschichold*, 2023.

the corporeal (affect, haphazard, unregulated [read: ethnic]).<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere one reads obtuse references to optical biology and neurology as well, as bases for normative principles in technique and craft, again, echoing Omi and Winant's evolution of racial consciousness.

It is here that I identify whiteness in typographic design pedagogy and practice. Lupton's "serious" typographic designers notwithstanding, the legitimacy of even highly idiosyncratic and unconventional type design is founded on the mastery of drawing technique and a quasi-transcendent, perhaps virtuosic attentiveness to microscopic detail and restrained, transparent systematization. The unruly forms of chop-suey lettering and typography, held against these admonitions, figure as a constitutive other to normative values and attitudes of typographic design. The project's narrative content will now be outlined, emphasizing the features that are salient in relation to concepts and discussions in the sections above.

## 1882–1982–2019

### 1882

The project of "Manifest Destiny" — a hubristic cultural notion that US American settler-colonists would expand across the entire continent — drove the development of a transcontinental railway network. This undertaking would not have been possible without the recruitment of somewhere between 10,000 and 15,000 Chinese workers (Smithsonian, n.d.) who accepted lower wages and took on more dangerous work than their Euro-American counterparts. The critical ethnic studies scholar Iyko Day (2016) has postulated that the racialization of these workers is distinct from the racialization of Black or Indigenous people primarily

<sup>10</sup> Incidentally, I am currently a participant in a typographic design course where the instructor similarly (albeit with self-conscious criticality) sometimes steers student outputs towards normative techniques and tendencies. I recognize this tension from my own pedagogical practice. It is one that is characterized by a skepticism of certainties in the interest of cultivating free and radical creative experimentation, and an anxiety about how to offer feedback of student work — that is, how to evaluate in the absence of a lack of established coordinates and standard assumptions. # Fetokaki reflects this in the case of western classical vocal pedagogy: "The desired technique is constructed as universally correct, healthy, or natural, while other techniques are engaged with only insofar as they are understood to deviate from or be inferior to classical vocal technique. The favoured technique is 'invisible' and 'unmarked'; it is 'the absent centre against which others appear only as deviants, or points of deviation'" (Fetokaki, 2023, p.321).

because they occupy a hybrid ontology as labor *and* capital – what she calls “alien capital.”<sup>11</sup>

Racialized as alien capital, Chinese workers, neither Indigenous, slave, nor settler, were seen as a multitudinous mass of interchangeable, expendable particulars. Day suggests that the Chinese workers became commensurable and fungible, like capital, expressed as money or machines, in spite of their other possible status as labor.

This is poignantly illustrated in the first chapter of her book *Alien Capital*. She describes a portrait made by William Van Horne, president of the Canadian Pacific Railway (who was himself an American), of a Chinese worker on the verso of a telegraph transcript which announced to the Canadian Prime Minister the completion of the railroad in 1885. Day’s formalist reading of the image notes that the pen strokes used to calculate sums echo those that render the face of the Chinese worker, “accentuating their symbolic resemblance and projecting a quality of mutability and interchangeability.» (Day, 2016, p.43–44)<sup>12</sup>

After the completion of the network in the US, Chinese laborers dispersed, many ending up in growing Chinatowns in settlements along the Pacific coast to find new work. Restrictions on buying property, obtaining business licenses, and general discriminatory attitudes compelled the workers to take low-paying jobs, and live in squalid bachelor communities in order to survive.

Day, quoting Henry Yu, points out the irony of the way that the railroad network that consolidates the settler-state is also the thing that ends up bringing more settlers to antagonize the Chinese through political agitation and outright murder. These settlers formed a labor organization called the California Workingmen’s Party (CWP), and agitated against the competition faced by white workers and for Chinese expulsion.<sup>13</sup>

According to Richard Samuel West, illustrations in *The Wasp* – a popular illustrated periodical of the time – characterize the Chinese worker as:

- An infestation
- A subversive labor monster
- Ruthless competitor
- Immoral and diseased, and,
- Analysis of anti-Chinese political movements
- Exposés on the hypocrisy of people who complained about the Chinese but employed or patronized them. (West quoted in Walfred, 2014)

Led by an Irish-American worker named Dennis Kearney, CWP agitation eventually led to the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. This law severely restricted new migration to the United States, barring “skilled” and “unskilled” Chinese workers from entering. The largely Irish composition of the CWP is significant when regarded in light of the equally derogatory representations of the Irish in American satirical cartoons. Although perhaps adjacent to whiteness, Irish immigrants were not fully included in the category. Caricatures would often

11 To paraphrase severely, for Day the racialization of Black people and Indigenous people is circumscribed by their relationship to white settler-colonists as labor, in the case of the former, and for the latter, in relation to their status as those to be eliminated (through genocide or assimilation) from lands desired by the colonizer.

12 Many of the workers who had contributed to the construction of the transcontinental rail network in Canada had experience with this work from having helped build the American counterpart over a decade earlier. The presence and contribution of the Chinese worker has been marginalized in the historical record. The famous photographs taken at Promontory, Utah (1869), and Craigellachie, British Columbia (1885), are completely void of Chinese workers.

13 For the full platform of the party: [http://instruct.westvalley.edu/kelly/History20\\_on\\_campus/Online%20Readings/Cross\\_Kearney.htm](http://instruct.westvalley.edu/kelly/History20_on_campus/Online%20Readings/Cross_Kearney.htm)



Fig. 4 "The great fear of the period That Uncle Sam may be swallowed by foreigners : The problem solved." Lithograph. San Francisco: White & Bauer, [between 1860 and 1869]. <https://lcn.loc.gov/98502829>. Public Domain. The caricatures (left: Irish, right: Chinese) are typical for the period.

depict Irish people as boorish, disorderly, and somewhat ape-like. The theory of racial formation suggests that the work of the CWP can be understood as a racial project that, through the Othering of the Chinese, helped to align Irish immigrants more squarely with whiteness ("I am not that Other!").

We see in the following illustrations various expressions of the characterizations listed by Walfred, as well as attitudes circulating at the time of the CWP's agitation that simultaneously enact a modified racialization of the Chinese cum consolidation of whiteness.

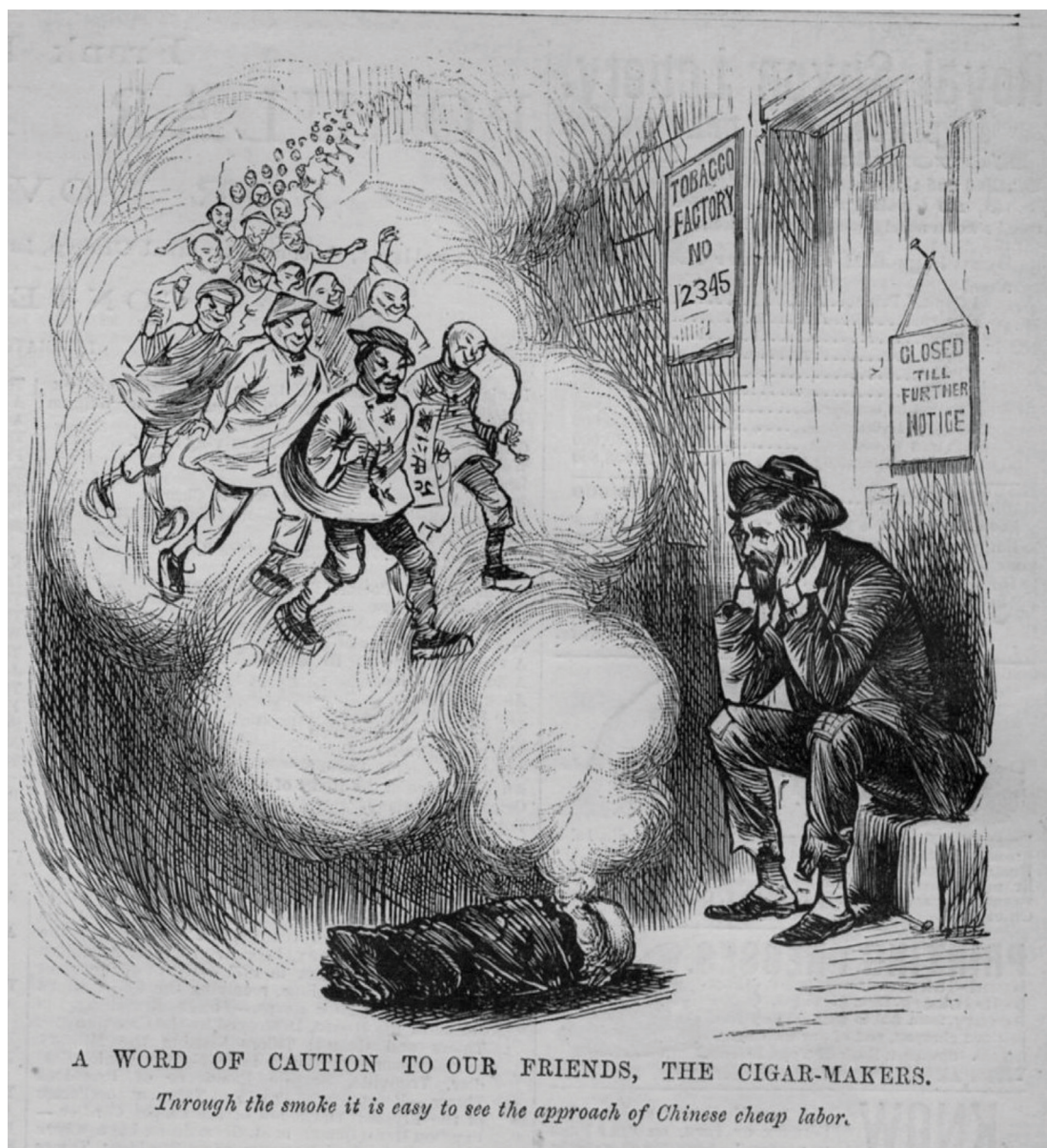


Fig. 5 "A WORD OF CAUTION TO OUR FRIENDS THE CIGAR MAKERS." Wood-cut engraving. In *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, November 1877. Public Domain. An uncountable horde of smiling Chinese workers descends through the smoke emitted by a cigar butt. They are rendered in less detail, less individually distinct, than the singular, dejected white man sitting in front of a shuttered cigar factory.

This sampling, in sum, articulates a strategy of Othering that sought to delegitimize the presence of non-white workers in the US and to mobilize the settler-state towards preserving and opening the labor market to more opportunities for white workers. Moral standards and traditional values represented by Euro-American tradition and craftsmanship, wages, as well as ideas about a secure, progressive future, are threatened by the Chinese worker. In the CWP's analysis,

this "parasite" is aligned with the capitalist to rob the white worker of their claim to a piece of the American Dream.

### 1982

One hundred years later, Vincent Chin, a Chinese-American engineer from Detroit was beaten to death by two white auto workers. One of the workers is alleged to have said to his victim "Because of little motherfuckers like you, a lot of



**Fig. 6** J. Keppler. "A picture for employers. Why they can live on 40 cents a day, and they can't." Lithograph. In *Puck*, 1878 Aug. 21, p. 16. <https://lccn.loc.gov/2002720432>. Public Domain. The banal domestic scene on the right attributes the white worker with dignity, morality, and civilization (as well as a tone of righteous protest) by its contrast to the spectacularly immoral and degenerate obscenity of its counterposed scene.



Fig. 7 "San Francisco A.D. 1900." *The Wasp*, v. 5, Aug.–Dec. 1880. <http://www.oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/hb3489n5pc/?order=1>. Public Domain. A cautionary illustration depicting San Francisco as it might appear if the Chinese were to become dominant. A cacophonous and regressive scene.

Americans are losing their jobs!"<sup>14</sup> In their documentary film *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* directors Christine Choy and Renée Tajima Peña record the conversations of a group of white autoworkers. They lament the decline of the American auto industry and the ascent of the Japanese counterpart. The attitudes they express echo some of those articulated by Kearney and the CWP a century earlier, and manifested in racist, satirical cartoons. One of the workers complains: "They (the Japanese) can do it so much cheaper because they don't pay

the wages." Another asserts "If you screw up, you don't get a reprimand, you get your ass beat." There is a suggestion in this commentary that these workers see their Japanese competitors as ruthless and immoral, figuring the American labor situation as rational and civilized. It echoes the "Why they can live on 40 cents" illustration, and laments the decline of American labor in the face of an unscrupulous competitor.<sup>15</sup> Vincent Chin, though he was not Japanese, was associated with this and disposed of as an enemy.

14 John White, Wynne Davis, "His Life Cut Short, Vincent Chin is Remembered for What Might Have Been," *NPR*, June 23, 2017. Accessed December 10, 2024. <https://www.npr.org/2017/06/23/533977175/his-life-cut-short-vincent-chin-is-remembered-for-what-might-have-been>.

15 At the beginning of 1982, the January 19 edition of the *New York Times* reported that the Japan-US trade gap was estimated to be at \$13.4 billion (Farnsworth). Furthermore, the Yen had been significantly devalued against the US dollar from the early 1970s to the mid 1980s (FRED).



**Fig. 8** George Frederick Keller, "What shall we do with our boys?" in *The Wasp*, March 3, 1882. Public Domain. Young white boys hanging around idly outside the all purpose manufactory on the left. The content of the "our" in the caption is only coherent against the "them" of the Chinese labor monster.

## 2019

1982 was also the year Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* was released. The film, which takes place in 2019, is notable for its seminal cyberpunk depiction of a future Los Angeles. The opening scene, an aerial shot, depicts a sprawling urban landscape — dense, polluted, and dominated by obscenely monumental architecture. When we get to the scenes that show what the street level, we are introduced to the now common sci-fi trope of the futuristic Chinatown, and the dystopia of an ethnic future. It is an 18/1980s vision of what happens when despotic Asian capitalism subverts the normativity of an enlightened democratic western capitalism. The main characters

in the film are called "replicants" (a fictional bio-engineered humanoid), whose ontological status as both machine (capital) and human (labor) parallels Iyko Day's description of the racial formation of the East-Asian diasporic subject.

To return to the matter of the typeface I am designing, and as a contemplation of the current discussions about artificial intelligence in relation to creative visual practice, 1882–1982–2019 includes "artificial chop suey" glyphs extracted from images generated by Dall-E and Midjourney. The image generators are prompted to create scenes from phrases such as the following: "hi-res, sci-fi chinatown, blade runner style, dense,



(Fig. 9: left) Thomas Nast. "The Martyrdom of St. Crispin." Harper's Weekly, 16 July 1870. Public Domain.



(Fig. 10: right) Thomas Nast, "The Latest Edition of 'Shoo Fly.'" Harper's Weekly, 6 August, 1870 by Thomas Nast. <https://thomasnastcartoons.com/2013/11/19/latest-edition-shoo-fly/>. Public Domain. These two illustrations echo each other in composition and topic. The left laments the declining sanctity and value of traditional Euro-American craftsmanship in the face of cheap Chinese labor. St. Crispin is the catholic patron saint of cobblers and leather workers. The right depicts St. Crispin as a shoe/fly/angel hovering angrily over the shoulder of a shrewd Chinese cobbler using a frayed stick.

crowded, unregulated streets, lots of neon signage" and other variations. The signage that appears in these images contain nonsense typographic forms that, in effect, caricature Asian scripts. Almost invariably, the street scenes produce the seedy atmosphere of a dark, leaky, Asian wet market — the kind of space that westerners have imagined with disgust as the origin of the covid virus.

2019, the year that the COVID-19 pandemic seized the world, generated a dramatic upsurge in anti-Asian hate crimes in North America. Racist tropes took on a new virality through media images and memetic phrases like "China virus" and "kung flu" (Gover, 2020). Once again, yellow peril fears gave renewed impetus to an upsurge in harassment and violent crimes targeting victims due to their perceived Chineseness

(Mays, 2022). The modification and persistence of anti-Asian tropes is on-going.

## Conclusion

The typographic design project I have undertaken draws material from historical popular media sources spanning from the late 19th century to the present. These sources and the letterforms derived from them index the development and persistence of anti-Asian animus as a constituent element in figuring whiteness as a strategy of authority. The typeface itself is functional, and to be published with an accompanying typographic specimen that elaborates the ideas explored in this paper, investing its crude chop suey forms with an opportunity for critical reflection. The typeface and specimen

together actuate a meta critique of the whiteness of typographic pedagogy and practice by asserting as intentional and oppositional, the very things that normative design imperatives admonish. The non-commercial misappropriation of the genre of the specimen makes a case, and will be offered for scrutiny as to the question of typography's discursive capacity. In sum, the crass, inconsistent morphology, and the non-human manufacture of the letterforms of 1882–1982–2019 are not designed with legibility or even application to linguistic expression in mind. Rather, they evacuate traditional typographic conceits about craft and technique to exercise another function — narrative index and racial formation.

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