

Krista Mitchell

Dr. Kim

ENGL 3212: Asian American Literature

2 March 2023

“Interior Dorothy” Project Rationale

I chose to create a paper dollhouse that engages several of the “roles” played by Dorothy Wu in Charles Yu’s *Interior Chinatown*. The dollhouse has three panels, each with a different background illustration of a setting Dorothy interacts with in the novel: the Alabama hospital (left), the Golden Palace restaurant (center), and her apartment in the Chinatown SRO (right). Each of these scenes is drawn in black and white as a reference to the title of ongoing crime show in the novel, *Black & White*, which perpetually casts Dorothy in background roles. The three panels of the dollhouse are arranged in a semicircle to form a faux interior that serves as a model of Dorothy’s interior world. The Dorothy doll is drawn in a sexualized pose with only lingerie on—reminiscent of hypersexualized paper dolls from the 1940s and 1950s—referencing how Asian women are continuously objectified as sexualized caricatures including “Pretty Oriental Flower,” “Asiatic Seductress,” and “Young Dragon Lady” (8). Dorothy has a matching outfit for each scene in her life: a nurse’s outfit, a hostess’s qipao, and a vintage-style outfit of polyester shirt and bellbottom pants for daily wear. Dorothy can assume these costumes based on which minor role she is assigned to at the moment. As a doll, she is quite literally flattened into stereotypes of the Asian American woman, and her role remains at the discretion of the person who plays with her, just like how she remains at the disposal of the casting directors in *Interior Chinatown*.

As aforementioned, the dollhouse itself is constructed to suggest insight into Dorothy's interior world. Even though she is a background character in *Black & White*, she nevertheless has a backstory of her own, even if it is simplified into that of a striving immigrant working as a nurse, a hostess, and a dutiful housewife. Each of the three scenes on the panels of the dollhouse features a scene in which Dorothy encounters oppression. One of her first roles is as a nurse in pre-Civil Rights era Alabama, where she is subjected to harassment from male patients, and when she refuses their advances, she is subjected to their "entitled anger" (135). Dorothy experiences similar treatment while working as a hostess at the Golden Palace restaurant years later, where she is repeatedly groped. These men quite literally view Dorothy as a doll, "[imagining] a world where they could keep her, in some small apartment, and visit their little China doll" (153). Because she is Asian, her body is perceived as exotic and therefore not deserving of respect nor autonomy. Yet burdened by poverty, both her and her husband, Ming Chen, must submit to this disgusting behavior—Dorothy's body in the role of pretty hostess is the commodity that allows them to survive. Even in her private life in the SRO, Dorothy is objectified with "straight-up ogling from the men" (154), and because she is beautiful by Western standards, she has an easier time assimilating into American culture than her husband. In short, Dorothy wears the costumes of different roles, but her body underneath is what defines her most in American society, hence the sexualized pose and lingerie of her doll.

Each of Dorothy's roles in her backstory is rather one-dimensional, and Dorothy is aware of this. Both Dorothy and Ming Chen know how they fit into American society:

Tiny, anonymous parts for each of them, an undercurrent of social or political relevance. Hard to see the big picture from their vantage point, but they knew that they were part of a prestigious project, with the sweep and scope of a

grand American narrative. So they do what it takes, make the best of a small role, just to get in (134).

They yearn to be Americans, work long hours in service of America, yet are ignored by the American mainstream, cast aside into non-speaking roles. Even when they slip out of character for a moment, they are quickly reminded to “put their Asian costumes back on” (156).

Undiscouraged, however, Dorothy dreams of more. After reading and rereading Hamilton’s *Mythology* over and over again, she begins to create her own minor god in her head—a god of immigrants, perhaps. Her roles may be minor in the present moment, but she knows she deserves the veneration of a goddess.

The “Interior Dorothy” dollhouse is in no way intended to suggest that Asian American women lack agency of their own. The project is instead intended to highlight how American society traps Asian immigrants in a Sisyphean struggle for success, as Yu explores in *Interior Chinatown*. No matter what “role” they play, they are still participating in a system that was not designed to include or uplift them. My goal in creating the dollhouse is to underscore how Asian immigrants are shuffled into different costumes of what an Asian is supposed to be—and in particular, how Asian women are objectified and sexualized no matter what their current role may be. Dollhouses are also intentionally artificial, constructed environments, similar to the set of *Black & White*. I also wanted to dollhouse to have a somewhat surreal atmosphere tantamount to that of *Interior Chinatown*.

Constructing the “Interior Dorothy” dollhouse took me approximately ten hours. I have several vintage paper doll sets at home, and much of my visual art in my personal portfolio is inspired by vintage aesthetics. I have wanted to create a paper doll set and dollhouse of my own for several months. Upon reading the first few pages of *Interior Chinatown*, which list the roles

played by Willis, Dorothy, and Ming Chen, I was reminded of how there is a Barbie doll set for nearly every occupation from ballerina to pilot, and I decided that this would be the perfect opportunity to challenge myself to make a dollhouse and paper doll set. The dollhouse itself is made of a cardboard box cut into panels attached to each other with masking tape, and the exterior designs and interior drawings were separately cut out and glued on. I drew all of the interior scenes myself using as many details from the novel as possible. I drew the Dorothy doll first, then attached her to a cardboard silhouette, which I also traced to create her various outfits. I then crafted a cardboard stand for Dorothy and glued her to it. My final step was coloring in Dorothy's outfits with watercolor markers. I found this project to be quite demanding as it forced me to carefully consider every step of my construction method—if I did any step out of order, my project would not end up as I wanted it to look. This was also an incredibly rewarding process, however, as I was able to both challenge myself and realize one of my personal artistic goals.