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Materializing Immigrant Experiences through Fashion

When brainstorming my research project, I immediately knew it had to have an element of sewing. Due to the pandemic, my quarantine hobby was learning how to sew, making me the family tailor. Therefore, an excuse for my family to ask me to hem their pants or dresses, especially since the garments were for their professional wardrobe, as work was beginning to become in person again.

My approach to my research proposal was inspired by an excerpt in *Senegal Abroad*, “french is the “high” language of the elites and Wolof is the “low” language of the masses” (Smith, 7). I wanted to connect something physical, such as fashion garments, to the exact comparisons of high and low. Many of the readings had their protagonists searching for economic prosperities, which required them to conform to the standards of societal or professional attire, some to the expense of their own personal and cultural style. In “Lost in L.A”, the main character demonstrates the insecurities of assimilation with fashion, “someone must have ordered the group to wear a uniform of blue jeans and T-shirts with catchy slogans...I wasn’t told, so I’m wearing a wide skirt” (Baingana, 118) in comparison to “I, of course, am decked out in tight green velvet trousers and a frilly white blouse... it’s now so normal for me to be in the wrong place and look wrong” (Baingana, 133). There is a pressure to stylistically conform through an accumulation of immigrant experiences, exemplified by “Lost in L.A.” and *Illegal* by Jose Angel N. Yet, studies showed that “Hispanic immigrants maintained their original culture while adopting the host culture” (Tolozza and Terrell), which brought me comfort and further inspiration for my project. The understanding that both situations, an external pressure of assimilation versus an internal loyalty to one’s culture, could coexist, particularly within one thrifted Goodwill trench coat. My research proposal was solidified by the expression of “fashion [that] reveals itself as a precious field for radically re-imagining our relationship to space, place and one another; and for challenging borders, nations and the institution of citizenship” (Loscialpo).

Fortunately, with all the scrap fabric I had from hemming pants and dresses, some pieces served as the patchwork elements that would represent the experiences that overlap and build upon each other to fill in the gaps on a professional coat, a professional expectation. However, my scraps were insufficient to convey my overall message or look aesthetically pleasing. I relied on Joann Fabrics’ 50%-Off Scrap Bin, which has an array of small amounts of leftover bulk fabrics that would be essentially “useless” for any typical project, as the pieces don’t surpass .8 of a yard, although this was to my advantage.

The presence of water became another essential element within my garment. It has been an important reoccurring theme within many readings, such as “Children of the Sea”, *Welcome*, and *Tomboy*. As water has been shown through the forms of sea, oceans, channels, and rain, I wanted to show water as a different form: clothing. As the pleated blue chiffon represented waves. As well as the beads (repurposed from a thrifted table cloth) along the sleeve openings

and bottom of the coat conveyed the lasting impression of immigration and values. Many immigrants travel through bodies of water in search of refuge or opportunities, along with the mentality that one must push up their sleeves to work. Lastly, I wanted to incorporate a hint of militaristic style within the garment to represent the experience that Japanese Americans were expected to serve at war. I wanted to add additional pockets or (faux) leather. Unfortunately, due to time and lack of knowledge, the task presented a bigger challenge than expected.

Bibliography

- Loscialpo, Flavia. "“I Am an Immigrant”: Fashion, Immigration and Borders in the Contemporary Trans-Global Landscape.” *Fashion Theory*, vol. 23, no. 6, Routledge, 2019, pp. 619–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2019.1657258>.
- Toloz, Cho, E., & Terrell, A. (2021). Understanding Cultural Adaptation of U.S. Hispanic Immigrant Couples and Their Shopping Orientation toward Fashion Products. *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal*, 50(1), 42–58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fcsr.12417>

(Little Cousin Modeling My Jacket)













