



**Courtesy of the Laboratory of Speculative Ethnology.**

## **The Laboratory of Speculative Ethnology: Suits of Inquiry**

Elizabeth Chin | Art Center College of Design

### **Abstract**

The Laboratory of Speculative Ethnology uses design and performative exploration to explore social fictions created by social facts. Race is our current area of exploration. This piece expressively engages material produced during 14 weeks of intensive research undertaken in summer 2014. The team constructed lab suits of African wax fabrics, loaded a range of technologies into these 'suits of inquiry' and roamed the city to understand their properties and potentials.

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Principle one: fuck rationality.<sup>1</sup> Ours is an afrodiasporic, afrofuturistic ethic of beyond-whiteness that materializes the now and the then and the yet-to-come as full of color, craft, and technology, spiritfuf and ripe with.<sup>2</sup> Afrodiasporic peoples were abducted by aliens. Therefore, they are the first and original pioneers of space travel.<sup>3</sup> The future is us, all of us, and we are here now making it, *ayi bobo*. We are travelers who ride the trains, and some people recognize us for what we are. Others are charmed. Some fear us. They see our surfaces; we are cocooned inside, communicating with covered gestures, flicks of fringe.<sup>4</sup> Our bodies are our language, but our skin betrays no secrets. Old identities zipped away, we float. It is a new form of weightlessness, a social fact-in-the-making. Are we freed from what we were? Sometimes. Here is a rhythm we can share, a fleeting, syncopated friendship. Do we become something better? Perhaps not. Here, it

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comes together. *Rasanblaj*. The journey is us, we wear it upon ourselves, it is our second skin.<sup>5</sup>

Here in my hand is a microphone, I cup my palm to your face, you can whisper ever so quietly and still you will be captured gently.<sup>6</sup> What will you say? The color of your jacket, see how my face lights up in the same shade to show my solidarity with your solidity? Let me explore you, it won't hurt. There's no need for touch, light moves in waves from you to me.<sup>7</sup> We are recording, we make records, we collect, we preserve, we consider, cut and recut, making narratives out of the journeys that some think are nothing. They are our treasures.

Principle two: fuck empathy.<sup>8</sup> We are self trackers cutting new paths. Our data is our own, we cede nothing to Nike, seeding sites and sights.<sup>9</sup> Our gps trails are blazing as we cruise the rails, run on roads, dancing when the white man in the crosswalk sign beckons.<sup>10</sup> Our choreographies move to cyberspace, our footsteps scale up and up and with this timestamp what is us is caught, a digital moment of forever.<sup>11</sup> We are not here for you but we are here with you. In your time we are now.<sup>12</sup>

We wear our stories head-to-toe.<sup>13</sup> Stories of generations, crossing continents and *sou lanme*, we travel from Ginen to new worlds. Let us quilt them together. The waves rise and fall above us, our footfalls land in sand beneath the depths. They train astronauts for weightlessness in the deep sea. They learn to be aliens by diving down. In this print, onlays of Indonesian wax, color by color by color, designed in Nairobi for a British company and displayed in Kampala in an Asian-owned shop. The pattern is pinked-up versions of the British monarch's crown. Real English Wax. Real Dutch Wax. Whose Real Africa is this? Whose Real African is this? Stripped of history and marketed as tradition. Our national dress was invented by missionaries. Muslim conglomerates supply our silks.<sup>14</sup>



Courtesy of the Laboratory of Speculative Ethnology.

*M'pa gen anyen pou bay ou!* don't have anything to give you

*M'ap bay ou kouray mwen!* I'll give you my courage<sup>15</sup>

Take courage. When you look into my face you see yourself.

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## **Jump.**

Gravity holds us to the earth.

## **Down.**

*Sou lanme we go.*

## **Turn around.**

I face you face my face you see you face yourself.

## **Pick a bale of cotton.**

The triangle of trade is the global geometry of capital.

Pick a bale a day.

*M'ap bay ou kouray mwen.*

## **Oh lawd.**

Ogou Ezili Damballah Yemanja Osanyin Xango Dantor

I can touch you from here.



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*M'ap navigé/I'm finding my way*

There you are slouched down, you there on the train. Taking up space with your sound. We all feel you. Weed-rank smell. And oh lawd he's talking about outer space. Right here, here I am. M'ap bay you kouraj mwen. There's that nod of recognition. I see you. Nod. You see me. We're bonded in the rhythm. Loud beats, quiet connection. You can't see me smiling.

Everyone else acts like you are invisible, unknowable, untouchable. Me too. We can't be missed but no one would miss us. Kinned.

Here I am, proclaims my surface. See me, see me, see me.<sup>16</sup> You add: hear me, hear me, hear me.

*Ou pa we'm inosan la/you don't see I'm innocent<sup>17</sup>*



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Your beat moves me and I am moving, first my head just a bit more. Bounce, bouncy, jaunty. Fingers wiggle wrists bend and knees are flexing. Balls of my feet are tapping the floor, and feet start to flutter ready to fly and now I'm up, standing there, riding the sway of the car the beat is ours, I have touched you from here. Your waves have moved me, and this tide we share has traced the triangle once, twice, three generations over. Now. Then. We. These moves are liquid infinite infinitesimal. Curves not lines. Sinews and bone carry iron swords slice toward free form free from free the blood that binds this sense this sensor sees beyond. Your tiny blue speaker blurting volumes of hurt.

*Pa genyen anyen pou bay ou*

*m'ap bay ou kouraj mwen*

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pa genyen anyen pou bay ou

m'ap bay ou kouraj mwen

e sou lanme a m'te ye

m'ap navige

ou pa we'm inosen la

o way o<sup>18</sup>

I see you see me you are.<sup>19</sup>

Human.



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**Elizabeth Chin** is an anthropologist whose practice includes experimental writing, performative scholarship, and good old-fashioned ethnography. Her work has long focused on race and social inequality, children and childhood, the urban U.S., and Haiti. She is the author of *Purchasing Power: Black Kids and American Consumer Culture* (Minnesota, 2001) and editor of *Katherine Dunham: Recovering an Anthropological Legacy, Choreographing Ethnographic Futures* (SAR Press, 2014). She is a founding member of the Media Design Practices/Field track at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> As an anthropologist, I am quite dedicated to seriously investigating the world around me with discipline and rigor. However, I could care less whether the lwa of Vodou or the orisha of Santería are “real” or not. And I care even less whether possession can be dissected. It is what it is. Hewing too closely to rationality is at best reductive and much more frequently it is a form

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of violence.

<sup>2</sup> The Laboratory of Speculative Ethnology was born of my many frustrations. As an anthropologist who comes from a background in the performing arts, I had long been struggling with how to engage in knowledge production that moved (quite literally) beyond the monograph or ethnographic film (2006; 2014). I did not want to write about embodied knowledge; I wanted to present it, to do it. Furthermore, at the time I was serving on a Presidential Task Force of the American Anthropological Association tasked with assessing racism within the discipline. Meanwhile, in 2011 I joined the faculty of Media Design Practices/Field, entering a whole new world: the world of design. Now surrounded by people who talk about “learning through making,” I spend my days in a 10,000 square-foot space I describe as a “playroom for mad scientists.” There are laser cutters, plotters, milling equipment, more arduinos than you can shake a stick at, and that's just the beginning. So much of my thinking has been freed up, but the space is assaulingly white. The blank whiteness of the physical space, my colleagues, the institutional culture came as a shock, although it shouldn't have. Here in sunny southern California, at an elite art school, I am one of only three women of color employed on the full-time teaching faculty that numbers nearly 150. Not surprisingly, I was quickly tapped to join the Diversity Council, a body from which I extracted myself after a year of meetings whose incremental progress only sharpened my impatience. In my previous institution (a national leader on diversity in higher education), I had spent untold hours banging my head against the wall of white privilege and had vowed to cure myself of that form of self-abuse. The Laboratory was born of those dilemmas and struggles. At one level, my goal was to saturate the whiteness of my workspace with color. So I made lab suits out of the Dutch Wax Fabrics that I had been buying on trips to Uganda. The team that worked with me for the duration of the summer included MDP graduate students: Jay Hong, Daisy Bao, Marcus Guttenplan, and Jenny Rodenhouse. We were lucky to have studio visits from Aimee Cox and Jacqueline Tarry, who wore suits and rode the rails with us. My colleague Tim Schwartz provided a fantastic opportunity for collaboration on his project *Playing the Library*. Thanks to my department chair Anne Burdick for studio space and funding for this project.

<sup>3</sup> No, the abductors were not gods. No, they were not advanced. No, they were not enlightened. No, they were not gods. We had our gods already. Our gods were ready. We carried them with us. Their endurance is the persistence of spirit that has no time. “You're like the alien who doesn't need to be captured and destroyed,” said Tisa Bryant, who I met on the train. She'd seen us, and I could hear from what she was saying that she could read the suits. She mentioned Yinka Shonibare and Nick Cave. Yeah, girl, you get me. Her work is now in the suite of references I'm finding invaluable (Bryant 2007). Afrofuturism certainly prodded us along—musically, Sun Ra and M. Lamar; comic-wise, Stanford Carpenter—and the idea, the challenge itself. A future where afro IS. Fundamentally, then, something that overflows and overwhelms the modernist, Bauhausian future. (Which, by the way, is so passé in any case. Pottery Barn, anyone?) Afro being a stand-in, catch all, metonymic representation of all that exceeds whiteness. It's an open-access, equal-opportunity invitation to go beyond.

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<sup>4</sup> Our headgear is a cultural mashup of Korean face visors and Brazilian Candomblé. Topped with \$1.00 sequin tiaras from Joann's Fabrics. Decorated with bling-y trim used by the Muslim women in Kampala, those East African Muslim women can rock the bling. We learned that our fringe was delicately eloquent. Moving it this way or that, we invented gestures and fringe-languages as we went. I bought the fringe from a place that, from the look of it, sells supplies for ballroom dance competition costumes. We also have what I call “computer Bjorns,” backpack-like sacks that can house computers running various software and technology. The computer Bjorns have six-foot-long, six-inch-wide straps coming from the top. These can be criss-crossed and tied either front or back, and the packs themselves can be worn on the front or back. They are quite comfortable. The packs are made of aluminet, an aluminized plastic fabric used as shade cloth in gardens. It is quite beautiful. The straps are made of woven polyester jaquard in floral patterns typically seen in Chinese silks. Taken together, the suits and the gear quote a range of cultures, industries, histories, and technologies. Over time I learned that some people could translate the suits, read the messages. Others could not. Learning who was who was a journey in and of itself.

<sup>5</sup> Lab suits are an announcement, an assertion, and also a protective covering. If we, as Laboratory members, must put our bodies in protective suits, what does it mean that those suits are made of African textiles? Challenging the notion that blank whiteness signals neutrality, I employed color as countermeasure. I even made little protective booties, because we all know what the streets can do to a person. The booties wore out too quickly, though, so I am experimenting around to see if I can print patterns on Tyvek and use that to make long-lasting booties.

<sup>6</sup> Over the summer of 2014 my team and I experimented with integrating a range of technologies in the suits. For us, the suits are instruments of collection, of data capture, and also of expression. We wanted to play with the idea that we ourselves could collect data with what was on our bodies, using a variety of sensors and capacities. We wore long stretchy satin gloves, and I could run a small microphone into the palm of my hand, connected to a digital audio recording device. This let me use my hand to “hear,” creating a new way for me to use and experience my body. Marcus had a distance sensor that triggered a recording of drum music. The music came out of a pocket sewn inside his suit, and the pocket housed a small speaker. We didn't measure when we put the pocket in, and when he put the suit on, the speaker was right about his butt level. As a result, Marcus found himself talking out of his ass all summer.

<sup>7</sup> If you do an image search of “anthropologist fieldwork,” you get a whole lot of really scary images. The core similarity in the images is that of a white person wielding technology at natives. To document them. As if the natives cannot do this for themselves. I am, of course, being unfair. The problem is. The problem is, the images speak for themselves. Daisy has a light sensor on the tip of her right index finger. She communicates by color. When the sensor senses, LEDs on her visor light up, taking on the color sensed. She roves across the surfaces she finds, fingertipping them. She writes: “When I use my finger to collect someone's color,



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(there is a color sensor on my finger), I have a feeling of judging him, because he will hold the pose while I'm collecting, or to say reading. And that pose won't be a relaxed one. He will wait, staring at the area my finger touching, keep quiet but be prepared to say something. And what's interesting is, after we tell people that my headgear shows the color I just collected, they start to judge me. They judge whether my read is right. Sometimes, my system will tell us a white woman's skin is purple or green. And I could feel her thinking, 'No, that's not me at all,' while people around her will feel excited because she is 'hidden purple.' This kind of communication seems stupid. But actually it's much fairer than many other kinds of communication for me. Everyone has power to judge. And no one will be judged by color because the color sensor cannot not read skin color well. In other words, if my headgear shows purple, you have no idea which kind of people my finger is touching."

<sup>8</sup> Empathy is the design panacea for the alienating properties of the product. The dehumanizing push of production. Empathy in the face of what? Frankly I don't give a shit what you feel, or whether you can feel what I feel. Just stop what ever it is you are doing that's fucking up me and the world around you. Hire some people of color. Talk about race, really talk about it. Take inequality seriously. Or, like Eva Illouz (1997; 2007; 2012), talk about the way capitalism itself shapes our emotions. Then, after you read her devastatingly smart analysis, the concept of empathy really starts to seem pernicious. Take this quote from [ideo.org](http://ideo.org), one of the primary proponents of empathy in design: "Design empathy is an approach that draws upon people's real-world experiences to address modern challenges. When companies allow a deep emotional understanding of people's needs to inspire them—and transform their work, their teams, and even their organization at large—they unlock the creative capacity for innovation." Why should my deep emotional needs serve "innovation" of my job? I certainly don't want my employer having anything much to do with my deep emotional needs, and I really, really do not want to give my company access to them so that they can make more money. That's the old-fashioned political economist in me talking. Wikipedia puts it this way: "Empathic design using field observation can reveal opportunities to commercialize innovations existing users have already developed to improve products." The neoliberal come-on goes something like this: imagine a guy sidling up to you, leaning in, whispering in your ear, "I want to make a personal investment in you." Capitalizing on affect, capitalism as affect.

<sup>9</sup> Data for what? Big data, big data, big data. Nobody knows what to do with it, except to generate it and wallow in the excess of it. Boring. Me, I like little data. I like precision, intimacy, and the slick sexiness of touch. We gather, GPS points, time-stamped images we can match to our locations, to make something else, something intuitive. Don't forget that the one-world worldview is ideology. Time to move beyond whiteness.

<sup>10</sup> We used GPS-enabled GoPro cameras to shoot video and to track our movements. We mounted them in our headgear, on our belts, on our backpacks. The GoPro footage turned out to be not so interesting for the most part. The GPS trails have more potential, though we need to experiment more with levels of scale and the way in which the paths we trace can be

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translated into choreography, maps, and other forms worth exploring.

<sup>11</sup> The most interesting images came off the game cameras that we used. Game cameras are those cameras that those National Geographic people tie to a tree on the savannah and try to capture photos of the elusive jaguar. You can set them to take video or stills when something crosses the motion sensor. They also take infrared photos at nighttime. The quality of the video was all jiggety-jaggety, the colors blown out, and it looked like bad super 8 footage from someone's home movie from 1973 (only what the heck are those people wearing)? We liked the notion that we were out hunting, capturing images that we could not control. We also liked the huge size and clunky proportions of the cameras which, sometimes, we had hanging from our necks, or threaded onto our belts. Somehow they were more satisfying than the GoPros, which did not announce themselves nearly so boldly.

<sup>12</sup> I am sick to death of the chronopolitics of time placement: the notion that “they” live in the stone age. The implicit and explicit association of progress with being ahead in time and primitivity or simplicity with being behind is so perniciously ever-present that if I could spit it out I would. Anthropology has a lot to answer for here. Fabian and Bunzl (2014) call it the denial of coevalness, the denial that “they” live in the same time as “us.” I can barely figure out how to make my research team aware of its effects. My friend Wilson, in his village in Haiti, still works his land by hand, with a hoe, and his wife drops seeds from her hand, covering them using her bare feet to smooth the soil. Sure this is an “age-old” method. But he has one kid living in New York, another in Port au Prince, and he's selling his corn and pwa kongo in a market where the rice comes in big bags emblazoned with an American Flag. American Rice! Widely available because the neoliberal economic strategies foisted upon this little country (and so many others) have put 80% of Haitian rice land out of production, to be replaced by America's subsidized and substandard product (Georges 2004). He. Lives. Now. So, too, the guys I know living in the Kivulu slum of Kampala. These good Christian boys, out of work, use their days to rehearse in their church, putting together hip hop choreography and writing rhymes to inspire other youth to do good things. “We want to give back to the kids in the ghetto,” they say. There are girls in the group, too; one of them was grabbed by her parents and taken back to the village because they wanted her to get married. The LifeChangers raised the 700,000 shillings it took to pay her school tuition and petitioned the parents to let her go back to school. She is only fourteen after all. They could do this because they are young men. The girls would not have succeeded. There is nothing archaic about the contemporary ways patriarchy asserts itself in Uganda or anywhere else. Pine trees have been nearly unchanged for much longer than humans. We don't call them primitive. Especially when they are being planted in Uganda to offset French carbon credits, ruining the soil and displacing local farmers. The LifeChangers watch Jamaican films and teach themselves patois like it's a foreign language. Then speak to each other for hours on end in patois. Sanny lost his hotel job because a Sri Lankan diplomat didn't like the way he served him.

<sup>13</sup> For my teaching, I travel to Uganda twice a year with my students and supervise their

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fieldwork in media design. This is what allows me to roam the market in Kampala, buying fabric by the armload. Kampala is the market capital of East Africa, or at least a central hub. The King Fahd center is a series of cement buildings, each taking an entire city block, three stories in the air and one or two below the ground, shot through with hallways running block to block, and stairways twining up and down. Each of the floors lined with stalls, stalls filled with goods. Most from China, the off-gassing so pungent my eyes water. Boatloads of baled-up secondhand clothes being stuffed into trucks. Hair, hair, hair, hair. Here in East Africa, at least, there is a fashion aesthetic of all the same. Your head is covered with what's on your body and your earrings, bracelet, necklace, shoes, all the same color. There is a wholeness to it. I try to build this into the lab suits.

<sup>14</sup> The national costume of Uganda is the gomesi, an ankle-length and rather shapeless garment with a square neck and sharply pleated sleeves that rise up from the shoulder as if to defy gravity. It looks very much like a muumuu; the missionary genealogy of both garments is unmistakable. Around the waist is worn a wide belt, tied into a square-shaped knot, with the ends hanging down to the knees. The belts are about six inches wide, made of a contrasting color to the main fabric of the dress, and for fancy events, bright silks are the choice for the dress and the belt. Stores where they sell fabrics for gomesis source their textiles in Dubai, and the prints are a range of abstract, computer-generated patterns, Japanese-style florals, and Indian brights. These stores and stalls sell saris too. Sari fabric can be used to make a gomesi. Here's the flow of trade in the now. Climate change has melted the ice this far, the northern passage is opened up, and giant cargo ships move through it. The triangle of trade is today more like a lasso connecting China, Europe, and Africa. Or perhaps it is a noose.

<sup>15</sup> These are words from a Vodou song I recorded in the Haitian village of Matènwa summer 2014. The singer, Zaza, is a 35-year old mother of five who had her first child at age 12. She has nothing to give but her courage.

<sup>16</sup> “What's your problem, let me see your face, man!” The middle-aged black guy is freaked. We're on the train car, silent, wondering whether to speak. “I'm gonna get my homies and beat your ass!” He's talking to us, to everyone, refusing to contain his consternation. “LEMME SEE YOUR FACES!” Tiny, diminutive Jenny, toughness wrapped in charm, sitting near him, leans toward him and lifts her face gear. “See?” she says. Marcus chimes in. “You know,” he says, “It's Afrofuturism? Like Sun Ra?” The guy relaxes. “Yeah,” he says, “Ok.” Looks into the middle distance between him and us. Unsatisfied.

<sup>17</sup> Is it “you do not see that I am innocent” as a statement, or is it “you do not see I'm innocent” as a question? Or, perhaps “you do not see me as innocent,” or maybe even, “you do not see me, the innocent one.” Vodou songs are like this, doubling and tripling their meanings. That's the spirit. The slippage of the you and me. Who is “you” here? God? A person? All people? And what about the idea of innocence, or the claim of innocence? Innocent of what? Compared to what? To live in the United States as a black male is to utter that cry through the pores of your skin wherever you go. The distance between plaint and accusation might be long or short,

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in time, in space, in beats of heart fibers straining to stay on rhythm. The Central Park Five. Trayvon Martin. My son.

<sup>18</sup> *o way o*: Untranslatable. Roughly, a cry coming from the depths of the soul, lacking self pity, speaking of centuries, generations of suffering and survival.

<sup>19</sup> “She can dance!” says a lady on the train to Aimee, who is sitting beside her. Yeah, I’m rockin’. Aimee and I have both studied poor black kids and both of us have, in our anthropology guise, written about the ways that these kinds of kids fight to exist in public space (2001; Cox 2009). We are not the only ones, of course. Oneka LaBennett has a beautiful description of girls on a train, too (2011). And then there’s Ferguson. Latasha Harlins. Real fights, real lives lost beyond the fatuities of whiteness, and it’s all right. So when I see a guy like this one, slouched down in his seat, dangling dreads, blasting rap music, I get it. It’s like fuck it, you all think I’m an asshole so I’ll be an asshole while listening to my music. I’ll make this space my space and since you hate me anyway, fuck you, I have a right to exist. Here. No, he does not need empathy. But I sit there and think, let’s play. So I start nodding my head to the beat, and he nods back. So I think, let’s get funky in here, and take my time, but over the next five minutes get it working to the point where I’m up and dancing all over the train car. He’s watching, acting like he’s not watching. I wonder what he would have thought if he could see what’s inside the suit. A fifty-year-old Chinese lady who can dance like she isn’t.

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