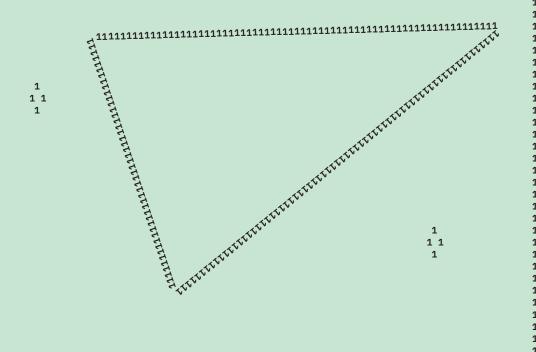
STITCHING PIECES OF HERSTORY

ARIKO S. IKEHARA



11

IN COLLABORATION











All people [...] remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others. (Ghostly Matters, 4)

Haunting is part of our social world, designating the ghost as a social figure. Shifting the gaze from the dominance of what is seen to the domain of the unseen, the ghost exhumes what has been left behind in the past, showing up in the present at the crossroads when both collide/walk into one historical vista. I/my body represents and presents a multiple-subjectivity becoming three: the sight/cite/site of knowledge. How can an Asian-black female subject who seeks to understand something beyond her own experience look to the black-Asian history in America while her own body of *mixedness*—the simultaneous difference of being black and Okinawan—is linked directly to Asia, where she was born and seen? How does my body's knowledge give meaning to the mystery woven within other mysteries? I slip in, travel across and beyond, and return to my roots, where I am banished or cloaked in another figure, split, and curdled, made and remade in this space in motion that turns into miXtopia. I participate in history, in pastness, as a ghostly matter that is flesh and blood: The Now. I am "we" as both a phantom child in the past and a contemporary traveller, as the ghost that walks on chance hovering between dream, fantasy, reality, and indeed, surreality. If it is an act of homecoming, then performance art is the route through which I return to my roots, body, and first love. I returned to my birthplace of Teruya as a ghostly figure with a composite persona, that of an Okinawan child, an Amerasian, an artist, a researcher, a chimera who is hailed and ushered into others' memory-scape. My everyday (body) became a catalyst of disclosure through a random chat (yuntaku), looking at photographs and walking in the streets, bringing objects and materials that people thought were useful and important. I recognized three elements of history, story, and

mystery (MiXtory) in their stories, that organically "came to be" the method I employed in my research. MiXtory fills in the gaps of history and story by lodging mystery as a possibility in a narrative that performs like non-fiction, writing to illuminate the in-between-ness of everyday life. It captures the senses that reside in the movement in-between spaces of mystery, history, and story in unexpected revelations, in retrospect.

Stitching Pieces of Herstory tells the stories of women who worked as seamstresses in the district of Teruya, a place formerly known as the Black District during the US military occupation period from 1945 to 1972. Teruya became unofficially known as the Black District, accommodating black servicemen during a period when the place could be described as Okinawa's Harlem, lasting until four years after the formal occupation of Okinawa (1952 ~ 1976) ended. Teruya's capital was built on three economies that operated in togetherness—the market district, the shopping and business district, and the bar and entertainment district each meeting specific needs and prospering together as a mixed community, creating what I propose to call the First Postwar Economic Miracle. The tailor shop was one type of business among the hundreds that experienced a high return on capital for women. Challenging the standard narrative of women's labor in the bar districts as sexual labor, the Herstory of these women gives fecundity to the history of occupation in which they cultivated a womanist space of affinity and networking. What is revealed through the stories of these women is how their lives are connected within the grand narrative of Teruya. Amid the hustle and bustle, they also built both business and personal relationships with customers who were mainly black soldiers, and whose presence is also felt/stitched into the MiXtory of Teruya. Non-linearly told, the stories assuming the shape of MiXtory operate as a window, an entrance, an opening into the world of MiXtopia, a third space that presents everyday life as performance life/art.

The Battle of Okinawa (1945) claimed the lives of one-fourth (200,000) of the civilians who lived on Okinawa. In its immediate aftermath, the US military occupied the

Okinawa Islands from 1945 to 1972, during which period Okinawa became part of the U.S. territory and underwent structural changes in terms of power, economy and politics. Moreover, the changes also affected the culture and everyday life, the way people survived the present to rebuild their lives for future generations. The demand for sewing was immediate. In 1946, one year after the war and into the occupation, the demand for military clothes created a need for sewing work that immediately spawned a "sewing boom" that would last for 28 years. Having lost their husbands in the war, many women who had become widowers took up sewing, considered "woman's work" in heteropatriarchal imagination. Eventually, sewing not only became a powerful tool for women as a means for economic survival, but it also afforded a woman's space for affinity, relationship, and networking (Janaha, 2021).

The map is an ar(t)chive, which simultaneously operates as an artwork and archive, to illuminate the quality of perform-ing, a living map. As such, the map is always in

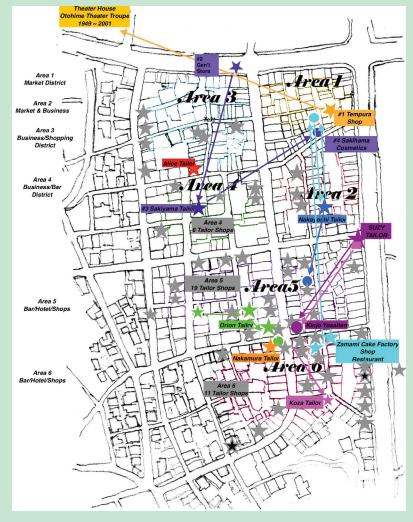


IMAGE 1: THE SEAMSTRESS MAP

the process of becoming, as new information becomes available, transforming both the archive and the artwork. The Seamstress map performs like a fabric where pieces of stories are sewn together as they emerge and create a manner of stitching pattern that shows how one herstory branches out, weaving and texturing the next. This project builds on the Gender and Women Series that began in 2019. The Seamstress Installation is the first series within the Gender and Women Series Exhibit showcased in March 2019, which was a mini installation couched within the main exhibit, Sketches of Teruya. The installation profiled five women who worked as seamstresses during the occupation era. The idea of the Gender & Women Series was spurred by a daily yuntaku with a woman who worked next door to a shop where she had worked for the last 45 years. Her story of making clothes for Rika-chan dolls (the Japanese version of Barbie dolls) led to other stories of women working as seamstresses or at tailor shops during this period. These five women who had had a variety of experiences differed in their life trajectory; yet, somewhere they crossed into each other's paths, kick-starting a chain of stories that went beyond the exhibit and across national borders. This project builds on the series. The map introduced here is performative. It is a living object that maps the herstory of women who worked as seamstresses, continuously changing its form and content as more information is gathered unexpectedly, by chance, or by word of mouth. Moreover, the performative function of the map is akin to Okinawan Opera, a traditional Okinawan play that reflects everyday Okinawan life, especially performed in the aftermath of the war, giving hope to Okinawans who were "hungry" to work and build their future.

"Hungry Spirit": women's work/hustle: Tailor Shops
While the common image of women who worked in the bar
districts is sexualized as bar women, hostesses, honeys and
prostitutes, in Teruya, significantly more women worked at
a variety of shops as beauticians, salespersons, and helpers.
Because sewing was lucrative and in high demand, most
women, and some men as well, worked at tailor shops in
and outside of the U.S. military base. Money made from
working at various businesses, including the bars and

hotels, built a solid foundation and opportunity for future generations – i.e., building homes and sending children to good schools in Japan to achieve a higher education. Many children would become doctors, professors and chief executives, gaining upper to upper-middle-class status. *Hungry Spirit* is an expression many women used in order to describe their mentality at the time, hustling to create a better future for their children. I first learned of the expression through a *yuntaku* (chat) with Mrs. H., which was the impetus for creating the Gender and Women Series.

Mrs. H./Tempura Shop (1974/75 ~ 2020) (Map #1 Mustard Yellow)

Before coming to Teruya in the early 1960s, Mrs. H. lived in the next town with her family. She sewed clothes for dolls and later altered dresses for women. While being a housewife, Mrs. H. was hired by a company in Naha to sew clothes (buttons, ribbons, etc.) for Rika-chan dolls from home. Once the orders became too large for herself to fulfil, she became the point person/supervisor who hired the staff and managed the production of doll clothes from home. She made good money (in U.S. dollars) but was hungry to work more jobs that were available outside the home. Her wish to make more money was hindered by her husband, who considered that her role was to be a full-time housewife and raise the children. Eventually, he gave in to her "hungry spirit" and made a pact with her: once their youngest child would graduate from grade school, she would be allowed to work outside the home. While she continued to sew at home, she waited with anticipation and as soon as the last child graduated from grade school, she was on the streets looking for jobs, reading the advertisements posted on walls, buildings, and other street structures. Perchance, she got a job filling in for someone who was a no-show at the tempura shop, becoming the main cook after a long turnover in cooks and cleaners positions over the years until 2020. The shop was very near to my research centre, which I established in 2019, and through our daily yuntaku, I came to know her story and some of her favorite memories from childhood about going to a theater house nearby. Teruya is also known for its Okinawan performing arts, especially during the occupation era.

Her family is from the Yomitan village but her marriage brought her to a town next to Teruya. Her father played Sanshin, the traditional Okinawan 3-string instrument, and sang Okinawan minyo (folk songs), while her mother danced and taught Ryukyu buyo, an Okinawan classical dance. Growing up in a theatrical household, she and her siblings often performed in front of the visitors: family members, friends, and/or performers. She was particularly tall for a girl, which made her timid in front of an audience as she preferred to stay in the background serving food and drinks to the visitors. However, she loved theater as an audience and was a great fan of Otohimegekidan (1949 ~ 2001), the female-only theater troupe that dazzled the audience for over two decades with their unique skills of performing both male and female characters in Okinawan language. The troupe often performed at a nearby theater house in the Goeku district (see map) where she would go see them perform as many times as possible. Going to see the performance was the delight/joy of her youth.



IMAGE 2: THE TEXT AND DRAWINGS BY MRS. H.

Mrs. S./Cosmetic Store Owner (1969 ~ Present) Mrs. S. is a vibrant 86-years old woman from her hometown Yanbaru, in the northern part of the Okinawa Island. As a child, she learned to sew by watching and copying women making hats. With her father's encouragement, she moved to Naha after high school and began working for her family who lived there. She attended a sewing school and learned how to sew a type of underwear that was manufactured during the period before the sanitary napkins became available. The demand for underwear hit the roof and the business prospered. Through a hometown connection, she moved to Teruya with her husband in the early 1950s to find the opportunity that many among her fellow hometownspeople had found in Teruya. Over more than 60 years, they occupied three locations in Teruya, each dedicated to different business ventures, the last one being the cosmetic store that is currently in business. Established in the early 1950s, the general store (Map #2 Purple) was the first business selling groceries from their hometown and sundry items of Japanese, Okinawan and American products. Within the store, a translation service was run by her husband, who translated the love letters of black American soldiers and Okinawan women. Later, the couple moved to another location (Map #3 Purple) in Teruya where they started sewing and selling clothes from home, and that also functioned as a tailor shop. Mrs. S. sewed school uniforms for students and maid uniforms for women working on the base while her husband altered and sold dress shirts to fit the customers. They bought a building next door as a rental housing unit. For some time, a couple, a black man and an Okinawan woman, rented the house. They were friendly neighbors, happily living together as if they were married. Unfortunate luck would strike one day: the house caught fire and the couple died in the house together. The burned bodies were discovered by Ms. S. who still remembers the sight of the burned flesh of the lovers. By some cruel irony, their skin turned the same color as if to perform a vow, until death do us part. To give context, one must turn to the zeitgeist of the time, when marriage or even romance between black men/soldiers and Okinawan women meant social death for the latter; some left Okinawa never to return to their birthplace, while others remained and rebuilt

their lives under scrutiny. But in Teruya, black men and Okinawan women could live a different life: they could love each other, eat together, walk together, and engage with each other as friends, customers, neighbors, and even as strangers who can still coexist in a place where racism was not the norm, rather the proximity that gave rise to the human relationships through business transactions and everyday living, creating a community where people engaged with each other with the flaws and beauty of humanity. In the late 60s, they moved to the market district area and started a cosmetic store where the mother and daughter still operate today (Map #4 Purple). At the store, they sold mostly cosmetics, but also other beauty items such as bags, stockings, hair nets, wigs, colognes and perfumes, and sundry items for women and men. When the economy was at its peak during the Vietnam war and before the reversion (1972), the items flew off the counter especially during the paydays when customers, mostly black soldiers (see photo) would buy presents for their girlfriends, wives, daughters, and friends in Okinawa and the U.S. On one occasion, a black man bought 30 wigs for his Okinawan girlfriend who wore a different wig every day for a month, showing off a different look, a fashion statement of the time. The pattern of selling various side items was the ordinary way of business for many stores which operated as a one-stopshop where people could buy vegetables or shoes and get their hair done or find someone to translate a letter. A food delivery boy delivered goods not only to the market district where many products were sold, but also made rounds to bars and restaurants in the bar district and the business district, creating an economically-rich flow made up of three economies working in one seamless movement.



IMAGE 3: THE PHOTO OF THE FIRST STORE WITH THE SIGN, "TRANSLATION SERVICE", EARLY 50S.

Stitching Pieces of Herstory shows the interconnectivity of lives brought together through sewing and their contribution to both the capital and social landscape of Teruya. The two herstories presented here serve as an entrance to a broader, more intricate MiXtory of Teruya, giving the reader a glimpse into a world full of dramaturgy. Herstory will be fully developed as part of the collective MiXtory of Teruya in the forthcoming book, Teruya Soul MiXtory: Dramaturgy of Place (publishing date TBA).

A DIFFERENT DISTRICT WHERE SHE AND HER STAFF ALSO REQUIRED SEWING SKILLS IN ORDER TO ALTER SOME OF THE ITEMS TO FIT THE NEEDS OF THE CUSTOMERS. EVEN THOUGH THE STORE WAS SUCCESSFUL, HER HUSBAND WANTED TO VENTURE INTO ANOTHER TYPE OF BUSINESS, SELLING MEAT IN TERUYA WHERE THEY FOUND YET ANOTHER NICHE. IN THE EARLY 1960S, THE MEAT SHOP EVOLVED INTO THE TEMPURA SHOP, WHICH SOLD NOT ONLY TEMPURA, BUT ALSO OTHER FOOD ITEMS MADE FOR TRADITIONAL OKINAWAN HOLIDAYS CELEBRATED THROUGHOUT THE YEAR. THERE WERE MANY SHOPS, STORES AND RESTAURANTS THAT SOLD TEMPURA ALONG WITH OTHER ITEMS WHICH WE NOW CALL THE OKINAWAN SOUL FOOD. LOCALS NAMED ONE STREET TEMPURA STREET, WHERE MANY MOM-AND-POP RESTAURANTS SERVED PEOPLE OF ALL AGES;

PEOPLE FROM THE VICINITY AND OTHER AREAS FLOCKED TO THEIR FAVORITE PLACE WHERE THEY WOULD BECOME LONG-TIME CUSTOMERS UNTIL THE STREET CHANGED OVER TO OTHER TYPES OF BUSINESSES. EVEN TODAY, IN RANDOM ENCOUNTERS AND YUNTAKU, PEOPLE RECALL THE STREET, THEIR FAVORITE SHOPS AND THE FLAVOR THAT WAS UNIQUE TO

1 BACKSTORY: LIKE THE EXPERIENCE OF MANY ENTREPRENEURS, THE

OWNER HAD VENTURED INTO MANY
BUSINESSES BEFORE STARTING THE

TEMPURA SHOP. HIS WIFE OWNED AND OPERATED A KIMONO STORE IN

THEM.