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ALBERT'S WAREHOUSE

For many years, I used to migrate every spring back to Albert's warehouse. I would walk from the N/R train stop at 59th Street, cross under the expressway, zig and zag my way through the maze of structures in the Brooklyn Army Terminal to finally arrive at its East Building. The fashion label Lafayette 148 relocated its headquarters there in 2018, but its distribution center has been around much longer. Known affectionately as "Albert's warehouse," the facility stores and sends clothes made in Shantou, China to over 100 retailers as well as thousands of online and catalog customers worldwide. I came to marvel at a logistical feat: the coordinated movements of workers as they unloaded shipments from Shantou twice a day, and ironed, sorted, tagged, stocked, picked, packed, and reshipped clothes so that they could arrive at their final destination as early as the next day. I was seeing the world in a warehouse, and in the process, witnessing the undoing of fashion as I knew it.

Albert is soft-spoken and talks at a leisurely clip. He is like the warehouse he runs; quiet and organized. The only sign of his unease is his darting eyes. They never stop moving, glancing here and there, as if he could hold this entire hundred thousand square foot space in his

Images by the author

sole gaze. At Lafayette 148, Albert is considered Employee #1, because he was the first one hired, but even more so because his position is considered of the highest importance. As "Executive Director, Warehouse Operation," nothing moves without his knowledge. And in the fashion industry, if clothes don't move, they may as well not exist at all.

"Making clothes is easy, we figured out how to do it," Albert once told me, "it's getting them delivered that's the real headache." Why? Because "the customer cannot wait!" he says, with half a smile. He is kidding, but he is also right.

In recent years, fashion has sped up dramatically, both at the high-er-end, where luxury consumers can "see now, buy now" their favorite runway looks, and at the lower-end, where shoppers can browse newly stocked shelves every time they arrive at the mall. We typically use the term "fast fashion" to describe mass-market clothing, quickly and cheaply made, but in a sense, all fashion is now "fast" fashion. All fashion depends on the quality of speed. It is an essential element of their value. Lafayette 148's clothes sell at high-end outlets likes Saks and Nordstroms, with prices reaching

past several thousand dollars for some pieces. But none of this would be worth anything, Albert tells me, if it does not arrive at the stores on time. "If we're late, they might not accept it at all. We can't sell them. They're ruined."[1]

If knowing how to move clothes is as essential to its value as knowing how to make clothes, what does this suggest about fashion as an aesthetic object? Since at least 1903, when French couturier Paul Poiret established his own house and insisted on characterizing his work as art, we have become accustomed to seeing the designer as a creative agent and fashion as the articulation of their cultural imagination. As critics, we try to find traces of this culture in the garment's form and style. This end product view reduces the collective labor of clothing production to an act of individual genius. It also assumes fashion to be a static form, imbued with its aesthetic DNA from the very ink on the designer's sketchbook.

From behind the walls of Albert's warehouse, clothes look less like art and more like *stuff*: matter waiting to be animated as objects of beauty and luxury. In this built-not-be-seen space, clothing's visual dimensions recede into the background of its material dimension. Attending to the ways that Albert's entirely Chinese staff treat these garments, we begin to appreciate the creativity and innovation involved in the work of warehousing, and to see it as an art form that challenges how we think about a concept like "Asian fashion." Lafayette 148 is undoubtedly making "Asian fashion"—their entire company relies on diasporic practices reaching from Asia to the U.S. and beyond. Yet none of this is apparent in the brand's styles. There are no mandarin collars, frog closures, and the like in their collections. It's built, instead, into the brand's very architecture, in its network of Asian labor and capital without which neither Lafayette 148 nor, in fact, fashion itself could exist.

Lafayette 148 was the brainchild of former Chinese manufacturers, the husband and wife team of Shun Yen Siu and Ida Siu, and retail insider, Deirdre Quinn. When I met Deirdre many years ago, she narrated its founding as the story of a close if unusual friendship. She met Shun Yen Siu while working for Donna Karan when her firm contracted with his Chinatown factory. The two hit it off and began hatching up plans to pool their resources and create their own label. Together, they grew Lafayette 148—named for the address of their first building—into a 160-million-dollar fashion business, whose revenues has only dipped once since it began. Deirdre remembered Mr. Sui, as he was known, as an incredibly hard worker, beloved by his staff and deeply loyal to them. Mr. Sui had recently died when I spoke to Deirdre. I could hear the sense of loss in the softening of her voice.

Mr. Sui's story is a remarkable one. Very few garment workers get to cross to the other side of the assembly line. Fewer still bring their co-ethnic colleagues with them. But behind the front room operations where Deirdre reigned,

1. Unless otherwise noted, all interviews are with the author.

it was Mr. Sui's world, forged by his decades-old ethnic ties. It was Mr. Sui who had hired Albert, bringing Albert over from his old factory, and offering him the closest thing he could to lifetime employment. It was he who tapped one of his oldest worker's daughters to design a sparkling new factory in his place of birth, Shantou, where he returned to live out his days. He kept the sample room filled with Asian sewers, much like in Albert's warehouse. The company produces solely in Shantou. Now, Lafayette's customers also hail mainly from Asia; 16 of its stores are located in China as compared with only 6 in the U.S.

Lafayette 148's success owes much to Mr. Sui's diasporic networks. The company does not brand itself as avant-garde or even fashion-forward. They do not claim to be young and hip. The marketing rep tells me their customers skew towards older, professional women, who care about quality. She says that Chinese customers, in particular, are very picky about their fabric. They may not be up on the latest styles, but they know a well-made coat.

What they don't know, and yet is apparent at Albert's warehouse, is how that shearling coat travels. How it must be stored and cared

for, before it can be displayed. We tend not to see our clothing as biotic material, but fur, leather, and other luxury fabrics were once living flesh. They retain these lively properties. Shoes must be kept at cooler temperatures, much like the way we refrigerate our meats. Fur produces unpleasant odors if not properly housed. That $5,000 dollar shearling coat would not, in other words, look well-made without Albert and his team.

Workers at the warehouse see and touch each garment. Like the sewers and patternmakers who understand the properties of clothing, how fabric folds and falls, these workers hone in on the stuff of fashion—on the qualities that make it difficult or easy to wrinkle, tear, warp, and even rot. Their job is to preserve these goods. Conservation is an art form that requires the most intimate knowledge of an object's composition. These workers are not incidental to the craft of clothing; they often know these garments more intimately than designers themselves. The traces of their imagination are everywhere in the warehouse.

Over the last decade, Albert has done everything he can to ensure that Lafayette 148's clothes are not ruined. From the ingenious custom-built shelves and shipping containers to the keen eyes and quick study of a picker; and the delicate touch of the packers standing by. Everything is done to move clothes at maximum speed. The company now flies its goods across the Pacific, rather than using the far slower shipping method. They maintain their own trucks to pick up deliveries from the airport. They have invented new shipping crates: metal boxes that are built in Shantou and discarded in Brooklyn, which allows 3,000 pieces of clothing per box to hang without wrinkling. Several crates arrive each morning and evening.

Xian is a picker. Her job is to pull clothing from the racks and deliver them to the packaging area. A scanner now tells her exactly where to find them, but before the barcodes arrived, she searched for them herself, thumbing through each piece to find the right one. In a typical day, she walks about 5 miles, back and forth, up and down the aisles, arms draped in dresses.

Xian is short and slight, but she moves very quickly. There is no explicit quota to fill and no time limit on each order, but Xian knows speed is key. Her legs oblige, it's the clothes that are less accommodating. Different sizes look the same. Color variations are not always clear. Sweaters arrive folded and

individually wrapped in plastic, which easily slips when stacked. Albert has manufactured shelves that tilt ever-so-slightly upwards in order to contain these slippery piles. But the picker must approach it carefully. Gravity is relentless.

Standing near the delivery areas where the crates from Shantou also arrive, several packers await Xian's delivery. They fold the garments neatly, pressing it with their hands to create the perfect form, line each outgoing box with a thin sheet of paper emblazoned with the brand's name. Albert says, with surprising gravity, that the plastic mailing bags used by many other online retailers are not allowed in his warehouse. Instead, packers seal boxes with the brand's logo, managing to tape them in perfectly straight lines. They repeat this dozens of times per hour. When the delivery trucks finally arrive, each packer is surrounded by a tower of boxes, perfectly wrapped gifts that have traveled the world.

If we only look at the visible garment, it is hard to see the kind of knowledge and imagination that pervades the warehouse, or to recognize how important this attention to the materiality of fashion is for Lafayette 148. The brand commands its high-end prices by promoting not its design but its fabric and craftsmanship. At a meeting with its design team, the staff spoke repeatedly about the quality of their materials. "Touch this cashmere;" "Here, feel this leather." This too is publicized on their website: "Cashmere from Loro Piana. Printed silks from Como, Italy. Cotton from Reggiani, shearling from Spain and classic wool from Botto Giuseppe." In addition to sourcing their fabrics only in Europe, and mainly in Italy, the brand claims to have had their own artisans trained by "a team of European craftspeople" who can help them "achieve an extraordinary mastery of the technique" and "painstaking feats of handcraft that takes years to perfect."

This advertised intimacy with European couture allows Lafayette 148 to burnish its reputations as purveyors of luxury. Or, as a *Fortune Magazine* headline put it, to occupy the singular status of "A 'Made in China' Retailer That Makes Clothes Like Milan." Albert's warehouse is central to this.[2] It allows Lafayette

2. Jen Wieczner, "A 'Made in China' Retailer that Makes Clothes Like Milan," *Fortune Magazine*, October 3, 2018. Accessed at: https://fortune.com/2018/10/03/

148's various visions of itself—a European luxury house, an American fashion firm, a "Made in China retailer"—to co-exist by maintaining the infrastructure that makes this global movement possible.

We know that fashion is global. To begin to grasp this, we only need to ask how a country like England, which clothed itself almost solely in the wools of local sheep, became the engine of an industrial capitalism predicated on the manufacture of cotton textiles. In *The Empire of Cotton*, the author Sven Beckert offers a fascinating account of the importance of cotton in motivating England's conquest of India, but many others have written about the global reach of the garment industry—the ways it has pulled material, labor, and aesthetic resources from far across the world, often violently so, into what we now call a global supply chain. This system both makes fashion production possible and poses the central problem for the industry.

A decade ago, the quintessential Italian brand Prada made headlines by announcing that it would now begin manufacturing in China. "Sooner or later it will happen to everyone because [Chinese manufacturing] is so good," Miuccia Prada told the *Wall Street Journal* in 2011, adding that the Chinese are particularly good at making shoes.[3] For decades, brands like Prada have staked their reputation (and prices) on the assumed quality of Italian craftsmanship. Think about the iconic status of Italian-made shoes, imagined having been stitched painstakingly by the skilled hands of a modern-day Geppetto, and you get a sense of how this works. Miuccia's admission of Chinese mastery in shoemaking was in this sense as shocking as it was prescient.

Louis Vuitton and other couture houses have since all followed suit, turning European fashion into "Asian made" clothing. At the same time, so-called Italian fashion itself has changed, as Chinese firms have flooded the country, taking over formers mills and factories in cities like Prato. These firms have relocated to Prato so their clothes can claim to have been "Made in Italy," even as they bring workers, materials, and machines from home. This move

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3. Christina Passariello, "Prada is Making Fashion in China," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 21, 2011. Accessed at: https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304231204576403680967866692.

has prompted to Italian state to tighten reigns on the use of the "Made in Italy" label, prohibiting under Article 517 of its Code of Industrial Property any labeling that "may mislead the purchaser as to the origin or quality of the work or product." There is some irony in the fact that this provision was instituted even as Italian firms continued to migrate to Asia to access its high-skilled and low-waged workers.

The result has been a fragile truce in the fashion industry, between the need to reconstitute Europe as the site of couture and the recognition of Asia's centrality to fashion production. To talk about fashion now is inevitably to talk about Asia. But invoking this place makes it difficult to sustain the myth that we can identify the value of a garment by asking where and how it is made: by hand or machines, in Paris or Phnom Penh. It makes it hard to continue to believe that fashion is somehow magical, made of "Phantom Threads"—in the title of Paul Thomas Andersen's film about yet another brilliant and difficult couturier—and existing outside of a changing geopolitical, economic, and cultural order. If we cannot keep up these fantasies, what happens to the value of fashion?

From Albert's warehouse, we see that fashion is a material object, whose value is always in flux. Clothes can spoil. When Albert says that garments can be "ruined," he does not mean, of course, that they can no longer be used, only that they have no or decreased exchange value. But it is this kind of deterioration, this loss of economic value, that preoccupies the entire global fashion industry most. At a time when we are glutted with clothes, thanks to the increased speed of production, retailers have a very small window to sell clothes at full price—no matter where or how they are made. After a few weeks, sometimes days, they are discounted or removed from the shelves altogether. Retailers struggle with how to rid themselves of billions of dollars-worth of unsold clothes, which, if discounted, can damage their brand, and if destroyed, costs time, labor, and money.

Seeing clothing in this way—as unstable matter—helps us to recognize how fashion's value is shaped at multiple locations in the supply chain. It is not inherent to the garment itself. Rather, this value is activated by various actors, who turn stuff into aesthetic objects through creatively making, using, and, most crucially, moving clothing.

We tend to think of the warehouse

as what French theorist Marc Auge called a "non-place." These are spaces, like the airport or train station, where most people simply whizz through, if they enter at all. Of course, workers in these non-places don't dash; they spend hours each day, week after week, making it possible for others to move. Albert's warehouse is a transit hub, but is not simply transitory. Like those other non-places, it too is abuzz with life.

There is always a faint smell of rice in the air. In a small corner of the massive space, there is a makeshift kitchen with a large rice cooker. Rice is provided every day to the staff. "The smell reminds me of home," I hear Xian say. Eating together is important. At the factory in Shantou, a whole floor is reserved for workers to eat. A tall green plant stands near the warehouse kitchen. Someone has been tending to it; despite the lack of light, it thrives. There are signs written in Chinese throughout the space. Most are informational. One, near the kitchen counter, says *Happy New Year*, leftover from months ago, Albert tells me. Signs of life intrude in this tomb for clothing, turning this place of work into something like home. Eating together is a way of being together, a way of knowing each other as more than workers moving fast to move things faster.

Albert remembers Mr. Sui fondly. This warehouse does not look so different from the old factory in Chinatown where they once worked together. Bigger with more racks, but not so different, he says. I'm sure he's right. These are both Asian diasporic spaces, the materialization of a China of Albert and Mr. Sui's imagination. In both these places, they are making "Asian fashion," using their creative knowledge and cultural networks to bring clothing to life. This is of course a different notion of "Asian fashion," one that de-emphasizes the visibility of clothing and the centrality of the designer. One that finds traces of diasporic cultures not just in a particular style, but in the care of the garment, and the world made so that it can move.