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Memories of Asian America: Present Realities, Collective Pasts

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Memories of Asian America:
Present Realities, Collective Pasts

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To All:

Working on this thesis project over the past year has been a long, challenging journey. Ethnic studies and Asian American studies had formally entered my academic sphere just last summer, and they were shaking my world perspective. The enthusiasm and curiosity that inspired my thesis topic were also what made the work so overwhelming. Thesis aside, I had already become hyper-aware of lectures, courses, news, conversations, films, events, and sites that would better inform my understanding of Asian American Studies; bringing in the documentation, research, and reflection necessary for the project meant that my thesis permeated nearly everything I did.

I was documenting through Thanksgiving, winter break, spring break, visits to friends in Boston, New York, New Jersey, San Francisco, Seattle, as well as time spent at meals, while studying, performing, or hanging out. I even ended up collecting footage for my thesis through the Alternative Spring Break trip I went on when I had actually hoped it would be a break from my project. At the same time, as someone who was new to the fields of ethnic studies and Asian American studies, I constantly felt unqualified to be working with the topics I had chosen, and had a looming feeling that it just *won't work*.

With all of this in mind, I want to express deep gratitude to anyone who expressed interest in the outcome of my project, whether you were involved with the project or even just interacted with me at any point during the year, because those moments of validation, however small, kept me motivated. Every "That sounds cool," or "I can't wait to see it!" reminded me that I have an audience who wants me to succeed and whom I don't want to let down.

Special Thanks:

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Participants in the final thesis installation:
Patwa Family (Zarina, Farzana & Co), Kumu Kawika Alfiche, Joseph Lachman, Peter Luo, Kevin (alias), Catrina Sun-Tan, Mehak Sarang, Michelle Wang, Shivani Mangal, Joy Ming, Janie Gu, Debbie Ly, Amy (alias), Dianna Hu, T. James Kodera
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Sites: Museum of Chinese in America, Museum of the American Indian, Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience, Angel Island State Park, San Francisco Asian Art Museum, San Francisco Chinese Historical Society of America, National Civil Rights Museum, Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, Selma Interpretive Center.

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INTRODUCTION

Memories of Asian America is an installation that offers a glimpse at how I see my personal experiences as building upon a long history of the presence of Asians in America. Through multiple media forms displayed in a living room-like setting, the space illustrates my take on what it means to have become aware of a collective memory that I am a part of as an Asian American, and to come to understand my personal memories in the context of the collective. As viewers browse the space, they see images from moments throughout history and read about how learning about them resonated with me; they hear present-day conversations that I have been a part of, see scenes of where I have travelled, and find the same topics and places in the historical media. While the historical narrative I have chosen for the installation reflects the way I have arranged Asian American history and experience in my mind as of now, which is in terms of exclusion and othering, assimilation and the Model Minority, and resistance and activism, the viewer is free to explore it on their own terms, reflect critically, and keep in mind that collective and personal memory both are changing and impermanent.

Inspired by an Internship

Last summer I was an intern at the Museum of Chinese in America in New York City where the inception of my thesis project began. The internship experience not only helped me develop my career interests, but also deeply impacted how I understand myself as a Chinese woman born and raised in America. I learned about the history of people like me, whether Chinese Americans, Asian Americans, or minorities in the United States at large, and how intersections of politics and race over centuries have made its way into my life.

Because of how relevant the histories I was learning about were to my own experiences, what I was taking away from my experience was more a product of my own reflection than it was a result of the mere information contained in the museum content. Furthermore, with a lens informed by cultural anthropology, I began to scrutinize the mediated forms through which I was learning about these stories in a museum environment and discovered a sense of dissatisfaction; I found myself searching for a reflection of the actual lived experience integrated within the macro-level analyses I was seeing. What I felt was important about cultural anthropology and ethnography was not reflected in the history-focused collections, but at the same time, historical artifacts and records still revealed what ethnographic methods could not. Thinking about ways to articulate the connectivity between historical records and experienced realities, especially my own, was what brought me to the idea for my thesis project.

Connections Drawn Through Experience

As an intern, the more time I spent exploring the exhibit at the Museum of Chinese in America, the more I realized that, with my identities in mind, I saw myself in every piece of history I was viewing. As with any exhibit -- art, culture or science -- what viewers take away from it is not a constrained to the content, but a product of the analyses and understandings they bring to the exhibit on a personal level. However, with the topic of the museum being so close to my personhood as a Chinese American, I felt as if my experiences, shared with many others like me, should find a place as a part of the exhibit.

The museum's core exhibit, called *With a Single Step*, walks through a timeline beginning with the appearance of China on the global trade map with the Silk Road, until Asian

American history in the last few decades[1]. It captures some noteworthy times and moments in the presence of Chinese people in the United States, such as court cases and legislation, cultural developments like foods and social societies, and publications that reflect how the nation defined their place in society at different points in history.

One of the first things we did as interns was take a guided tour of this exhibit. This was not my first time viewing it, but because of the extratextual information the guide brought to light, I drew new connections and realized ways the exhibit was lacking. For example, when the guide drew our attention to an image of a crowded San Francisco Chinatown at the turn of the 20th century, she explained that at that time, Chinatowns on the West coast were filled with Chinese men who had come to work on the Central Pacific side of the Transcontinental railroad in the late 19th century. Because they were paid lower wages than their European counterparts, they became the primary source of labor for the railroad. After the Chinese Exclusion act of 1882, their families in China could not come to the U.S. to reunite with them, and at the same time, according to the 1907 Expatriation Act, American women risked losing their citizenship if they married foreign men[2]. Thus, Chinatowns seemed to those on the outside like a horde of single Chinese men, with no sense of family, foreign and strange.

To me, this story spoke to not only the devaluation of Chinese labor by the West, but also to the long history of the emasculated Asian man stereotype that has persisted until today. This part of history connects to not only early depictions of the Orient, but also to Long Duk Dong

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[1] "With a Single Step: Stories in the Making of America." Mocanyc.org. 2016. Accessed October 16, 2018. http://www.mocanyc.org/exhibitions/current/the_chinese_american_experience.

[2] Brown, Tanya Ballard. "That Time American Women Lost Their Citizenship Because They Married Foreigners." NPR. March 17, 2017. Accessed April 15, 2018. https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/03/17/520517665/that-time-american-women-lost-their-citizenship-because-they-married-foreigners.

from *Sixteen Candles*, and countless other examples of Asian men in American media I watched growing up that made me think Asian men were undesirable for most of my adolescence. As I spent more time with the exhibit, I started breaking down my instinctual responses to connect what I was learning to my experiences and memories, and discovering that in many ways, none of my experiences happen in isolation. Conversations I have with friends about news about cultural appropriation follow a long history of appropriation of Asian aesthetics by the West; talk about prospective career paths echoes roots of the Model Minority stereotype -- the myth of the well-educated, highly occupationally and economically successful Asian immigrant in the United states; something as seemingly insignificant as a friend wanting to dye her hair brings up questions of the history of white beauty standards in Asian culture[3].

When I was developing my thesis project, it was important that my project showed the connectivity between my everyday experiences and key moments in Asian and Chinese American history. Unlike the historical exhibits that seemed to present events as moments that have passed, I wanted people viewing my project to see the reality of my lived experience, which is changing as I learn about a history that I never knew about until I developed enough of an awareness in college to pursue it.

Ethnographic Approaches Through Audio

Through anthropology courses I had learned about practices of ethnography, which is a qualitative research method for analyzing social and cultural life in a particular context that involves observation and documentation through immersion, and can take a variety of written or

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[3] Chow, Giselle W. "The Model Minority Myth." Nais.org. Winter 2011. Accessed April 20, 2018. https://www.nais.org/magazine/independent-school/winter-2011/the-model-minority-myth/.

multi-media forms[4]. Since discovering the depth and nuance with which ethnography captures

people's experiences, I came to appreciate the way ethnographic methods revealed all the

culturally and socially informed values, practices, languages and ways of being that an individual

carries into any experience. I began seeing where ethnographically derived understanding could

be applied in the world around me to enrich interactions between people, or fields of study, and

felt myself mentally advocating for it.

One of the projects I assisted with at the museum was the oral history initiative. I

transcribed and helped record audio and video of participants who were asked to recount their

experiences during a certain time period, event, or incident in history that occurred in their

lifetime. In these recordings, questions were planned, and specific topics were meant to be

covered for the purpose of the collections. Most of the time, the recording session was set up

with a lavalier mic attached to the interviewee's clothes, a DSLR camera on a tripod in front of

the interviewee, and a lighting set pointed at the scene. Having spoken to the staff in charge of

running the interviews, I understood it was a matter of maintaining clarity and consistency for

the database and potential media usage that called for the formal setup.

With my enthusiasm for ethnography, however, I began to consider how the museum's

priorities in the oral history recordings compromised authenticity, and how ethnographic

methods could compensate for it. For example, one Chinese American activist had been asked to

be interviewed at the museum about her organization's work in a community in the aftermath of

a hate crime in the 1990s. While watching her interview, I noticed that she stuttered, spoke very

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[4] The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Ethnography." Encyclopædia Britannica. October 24, 2014.
Accessed April 17, 2018. https://www.britannica.com/science/ethnography.

slowly, and searched for words as if she were reciting the story. A week later in the internship, the same activist came to speak to our intern group about her experiences in community work and touched briefly on the same story. This time, in speaking to us as a live audience in a casual set up, she had no stutter and no trouble speaking fluently and naturally. She also did not speak about her story of the hate crime in isolation; her train of thought drifted back and forth from her organization's other work, past and present.

Capturing the activist's story in the setting we met her in would have captured more of the culturally informed nuances in her lived experience as an activist, and simply who she is as a person. We saw the kinds of settings in which she speaks as an activist (in this case, at the museum), what she wears (her organization's T-shirt and a visor), her personality (matter-of-fact and down to business), and we heard her New Yorker accent, which she toned down in the formal interview -- all while still getting the story of her earlier work with the specific hate crime.

I began to see oral history and ethnography as complementary methods of capturing history and experience. On one hand, oral history is targeted and procedural in order to highlight specific memories of the interviewee and asks them to search their memory thoroughly to provide a more focused account. On the other hand, ethnography is immersive and captures what is naturally important to the person in question, revealing details that reflect their upbringing, their cultural surroundings, and what their day to day life is like in light of their identities or occupations. I thought about ways to minimize the factors of the formal oral history interview that were sources of discomfort for the interviewee and that made the recording less authentic, including setting, lighting, recording technology, the demeanor and tone of the interviewer, and

their familiarity with the interviewer. At the same time, I considered the aspects of the more casual experience we had with the activist that were not necessarily organic or unplanned, but were set up in a way that still allowed her to be herself; for instance, the invitation for her to come speak about her activist work tailored what she talked about, and the setting which placed her at the front of the room in front of a group also affected the way she spoke. When it came to collecting footage for my project, I wanted to collect footage of my daily experiences in a way that would balance the goals of both oral history and ethnography.

PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

After my internship at the Museum of Chinese in America ended, I used what I learned to develop an idea for a thesis project. I wanted to capture my everyday experiences, specifically through conversations, and exhibit them in relation to the histories that influence them in an effort to reflect on my own learning experience. I wanted to be intentional with how I collected audio to capture more authentic interactions, but kept in mind that I had to define what "authentic" meant for the purpose of my project. I also needed to continue to explore Asian American history, since after a summer at the museum, I had barely scratched the surface. Throughout the development of my project, I was balancing my own theoretical choices with the goal of communicating a cohesive message to the audience, because I ultimately wanted the final product to be a learning experience for viewers.

Process

At a glance, my process involved collecting audio from conversations, reviewing each conversation to draw both directly and indirectly related topics to find visual artifacts for, and deciding how best to edit and arrange these in an audio-visual composition to communicate the narrative I had in mind. Because of my interest in ethnographic methods, I focused on preserving authenticity as much as possible for the footage I collected. In order to do this, I took into consideration whom I was recording, what devices I would be using, where I would record, and how or whether I would preface the recording.

Why Audio

After some experimentation, I decided to focus on audio. Even when I was with close friends who were completely comfortable chatting with me, as soon as I held out a camera, whether an advanced DSLR or simple iPhone, their instincts were to pose, cover their face, or change their behaviors because of the presence of the camera. On the other hand, whenever I ran Voice Memos on my phone and left it recording between me and a friend, they would be much less bothered, and sometimes even forgot it was there. To me, it was more important that I captured the way they spoke and what they spoke about when not directed, than to capture what they look like or where we were when we talked. To make up for this missing contextual information, I recorded video of the participants when they were not speaking, before or after the conversation, or in similar context on other days.

I decided to use a Zoom H5 recorder as well as my iPhone depending on the setting I would be recording in. Although the Zoom recorder produced higher quality audio, the iPhone appeared less intimidating and still produced a recording of comparable quality. Since the goal of video recording was for record keeping purposes, rather than aesthetics, I just used my iPhone 7 instead of a DSLR or camcorder.

Consent

For legal reasons, the first thing I did in Fall 2017 was add all of my friends who I predicted could be a part of my thesis project into a group on Facebook, provided some background information on my thesis project, and sent a pre-emptive consent form that allowed me to collect footage of them for the purpose of the project. The intent was that if people were aware that I

was doing a project and consented beforehand, I could begin a recording during a conversation without disrupting them and making them self-conscious about the recording. Later on in Spring 2018, after deciding which recordings to use for the project, I sent another form for consent to publish the footage in my thesis.

Consent Form
[GMING Thesis Files > Final Consent Form (Google Form)](#)
This is the consent form sent to the participants whose recordings made it into the final installation.

Participants

A lot of my friends fall under the label of "Asian," so it was easy to find participants for the project. It was important to me that the project presented the full spectrum of diversity that I have in my friend groups, especially since it would end up being received as a look at "Asian America". I also feel strongly about the imbalanced dominance of East Asian narratives in Asian representation in the global scene at large, and was wary about perpetuating it. The difficult part was deciding whether I should prioritize diversity and risk losing depth and cohesiveness, or vice versa. In the end, because I felt I could speak most strongly to histories relating to my own identity as a Chinese Asian American, I decided to refocus the content around my personal journey, and resolved to make the personal nature of the content clear in its presentation.

In the final consent form for participants, I had each respond to questions about their background and how they self-identify, so that I could get a sense of how much of Asian America I was able to include. Based on the data, the final installation features the voices of people with the following self-identified "heritages": Chinese, Malaysian, Vietnamese, Korean,

Japanese, Filipino, Punjabi, Bohra Muslim, Indian Marwari Baniya, Hawaiian, as well as
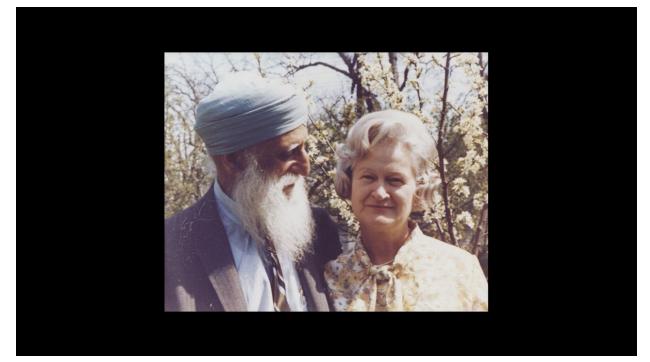
mixed-heritages within these.

Participant Data
GMING Thesis Files > Consent Form Responses - Participant Background Data
This spreadsheet shows participants' responses to questions about their "race," "ethnicity," and
"heritage" as they define it, in order to get a sense of the extent of representation in my project.

Drafts

Version 1:

The first iteration of the project was a linear audio-visual composition that spotlighted my audio

recordings of candid conversations. Quite literally, I brought history into the everyday

conversations I had with my friends by pairing visuals to the content of the audio; the visuals

were in the form of both videos I took to provide context for each conversation, as well as

primary historical sources I found that were relevant to the content of the conversations.

Example: Mehak/Shivani - Talking about Bhagat Singh Thind and Takao Ozawa
GMING Thesis Shared Files > Drafts > Version 1.mp4

After a few drafts, however, I realized that it was important for me to be able to show

how multiple conversations were connected in complex ways. For example, the case of Takao

Ozawa, a Japanese man who petitioned for U.S. citizenship in 1922 on the basis of his relative

whiteness and ability to assimilate, is related to a conversation about popular eye surgery in

Korea for larger eyes, as well as a conversation about Japanese incarceration, and a conversation

about the original article that coined the "model minority" term in the 1960s[5]. The audience

needed to be able to draw connections over the course of many conversations, and with the

length of each being anywhere from 15 minutes to over an hour long, it would be difficult to

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[5] Densho Encyclopedia Contributors. "Ozawa v. United States." Ozawa v. United States | Densho
Encyclopedia. April 16, 2014. Accessed April 16, 2018.
http://encyclopedia.densho.org/Ozawa_v._United_States/.

know that the audience retained an image from the beginning of one conversation to the next when they were separated by more audio and visual content.

Version 1.5:

I briefly entertained the idea of an interactive web platform where users could follow transcriptions of the audio conversations as they played to navigate to new historical connections. However, in light of my advisor's comments, I agreed that it was too directive and rigid, and did not accurately represent the more inferred nature of the connections I was making in my mind. While a web platform would give much more comprehensive information, it would give the impression that the connections I programmed were definitive ways to understand the content, whereas, in reality, the links I drew felt more like impressions than direct connections, more implied than explicit, and more suggestive than conclusive.

Version 2:

I revisited my audio-visual composition format and this time worked with visual loops. The idea behind this iteration was that different sets of images, intentionally composed to juxtapose images drawn from different topics, would loop throughout different portions of the composition. At the same time, the audio would alternate between select conversations, and as new content is revealed through the audio, the same set of visuals will have gained new meaning to the viewer. By seeing images on a loop, the viewers would not only see passively, but begin to actively remember what images are coming and form understandings that carry through the rest of the production and into their lives. This repetition of images also echoes how, after learning about

something like the Chinese Exclusion Act through visual aids like anti-Chinese propaganda, and photos of Chinese railroad workers and Chinatown laundromats, every time something related to it comes up, I see those same images play in my mind.

Example: Mehak and Catrina - Hesitation with wearing culturally-specific fashion
GMING Thesis Shared Files > Drafts > Version 2.mp4

   The project would have been projected onto a surface where more than one loop of images could be shown at once while the audio was running, and each would disappear and be replaced with a new one, depending on the space available. One of the main challenges with this, however, was that while the viewer could view the images on loop as they played, they would not be able to get to know what each image was on its own; while the images were creating meaning through juxtaposition with audio and other images, the viewer would not be able to explore where the images came from, and why they were significant as images in themselves.

For example, a political cartoon caricaturing a Chinese man preceding a photo of Ken Jeong from *The Hangover* would gain meaning from a discussion of the emasculation of Asian men and othering of Asians in western media, but the context of the political cartoon in U.S. history cannot be simultaneously conveyed, and the mannerisms of many of Ken Jeong's caricatured characters in his filmography would not be communicated to emphasize the point.

I considered hosting all of the images on a website and directing viewers to explore them on their own after viewing the production, but it seemed too scattered; the viewers should be able to let the conversations draw them in to individual images, while they also saw them alongside the others, all within the space and time of viewing the installation. Furthermore, I wanted the viewer to be able to not just glance at images, but look closely at details in them, and displaying using a projector would diminish the quality of the experience, because of the flattened appearance of projections and the issue of cast shadows. Taking all of this into consideration, I arrived at the final version of the project.

THE INSTALLATION

Philosophy

Realizing that using only projections would be technically and theoretically challenging to work with, I thought back to all of my experiences over the course of the school year while working on my thesis to find a way to bring it all together in the installation. Recalling where the idea started at the Museum of Chinese in America, and tracing back through my site visits and travels for the project throughout the year, I decided to echo the museum settings through which I learned of the histories I referenced in my content while introducing dimensions to the experience to set it apart from what museums offered.
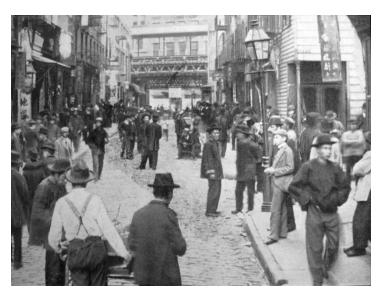
In the process of gathering audio throughout the year, I had found myself in many "home" spaces, whether it was someone's dorm room, apartment, or house. After spending a lot of time interacting with people in these settings, I noticed the way people furnished and ornamented these private yet public spaces. Rooms that welcomed guests, like dining or living rooms, seemed to be highly personal, showing photos of the host and their friends and family perhaps, decor curated to the host's taste, functional pieces to hold personal items. Yet, because these spaces were also meant for guests, the act of merely displaying also became an act of showcasing; some homes showed trophies or marks of accomplishment, ornate decor, or posters with messages for guests. Often the ideas of private/personal and public/shared were intermixed.

The philosophy behind my installation is to blend this kind of personal, yet shared space in a "home," with the type of archival, impersonal displays I encountered in museums. For every artifact displayed on the walls through objects in the space, I have written my personal reflections next to them. Interspersed between historical artifacts sourced from public media are

videos, photos, and words that I collected. While viewing the artifacts, the audience hears my

voice in candid conversation with others, discussing matters that range from educational to

personal. The personalized living room-like decor is meant to highlight the idea of collective

memory -- what a group of people remembers about its past -- being something with both

personal and shared dimensions, regardless of whether the viewers are Asian American

themselves[6].

Media

With the mix of media forms that are time-based, still, or interactive, a viewer can enter and

leave having learned something, no matter how long they feel compelled to stay. On the walls I

arrange images from a wide range of sources -- magazine covers, political cartoons, photos,

artwork. On a shelf I place photo albums filled with images of people and places, as well as news

articles. On the television screen, I play videos collected from my iPhone, while conversation

audio is ongoing. All items have written personal commentary displayed alongside it.

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[6] Roediger, Henry L. "The Power of Collective Memory." Scientific American. June 28, 2016. Accessed
April 16, 2018. https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-power-of-collective-memory/.

Source: Museum of Chinese in America[7]

Source: New York Times[8]

Examples: One of the photos and one of the articles featured in the installation.

The content of the media artifacts are arranged the way I have come to understand Asian

American history, as a Chinese Asian American, and after taking AMST151 Asian American

Experience. The images on the wall are loosely grouped in the themes of exclusion/othering,

assimilation/the model minority myth, and resistance/activism. The juxtapositions are meant to

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[7] *1899 Chinatown on Sunday - Poll Street, New York, NY Angora.jpg*. 1899. Museum of Chinese in America. In *Wikimedia Commons*. February 15, 2016. Accessed April 20, 2018. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1899_Chinatown_on_Sunday_-_Poll_street,_New_York,_NY_anagoria.JPG.

[8] Lim, Audrea. "The Alt-Right's Asian Fetish." The New York Times. January 06, 2018. Accessed January 8, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/06/opinion/sunday/alt-right-asian-fetish.html.

highlight some of the contradictions in the Model Minority Myth when taking into account the historical vilification of Asians in Western media. At the same time the sources are meant to question how Asian Americans have accepted or defied the stereotype, and suggest the latter has happened and could continue to happen through activism.

The featured conversations are edited into a near two-hour-long reel that loops throughout the installation, where the audio fades in and out from one segments of a conversation to another, and is roughly guided by topic of discussion. This means that In the process of editing the audio, I balanced a meaningful audience experience with my theoretical conviction of absolutely "authentic" representation of a conversation. First and foremost, I removed portions of conversations by request for privacy reasons. Beyond that, I made editing decisions about cutting out ambient sounds, lengthy tangents, or interjections, while still being mindful of leaving enough in to preserve the character of the participant's speech and the context of the conversation. Ultimately, I came to peace with cutting out a lot of material by realizing that each conversation is already a new experience for the audience -- a person they do not know, a conversation they have never heard -- while to me they seemed hyper-familiar since I had spent so much time with the recordings, and the people themselves. In this sense, the audience's reference for authenticity is the installation itself, rather than all of the information I know as the one who collected the footage and lived the experience.

Database of Recorded Media
This data sheet is a record of all of the conversations and videos I got around to processing.
GMING Thesis Shared Files > Database of Media

	A	B	C	D
1	**Audios**	**key contribution**	**location**	**video of person?**
2	mehak	friends, boy talk, personal level	w	yes
3	joy/debbie/eva/jenny	aa experience, elite colleges, social issues	sf	no
4	Catrina/Michelle	personal, beauty	w	can get
5	Catrina/Michelle	TV, fresh off the boat show	w	can get
6	mehak	fashion - orientalism	w	yes
7	catrina	fashion - orientalism	w	yes
8	Peter/Josh	job searching, dream pursuing	nj	yes
9	zarina's mom/fam	1.5 gen parents, representation TV	cam	yes
10	dianna's parents	immigrant parents, immigration stories	bos	no
11	dianna	mm myth, disability activism/activism	cam/bos	can get
12	Mathangi	hinduism, the woman, spirituality	w	yes
13	Mathangi	home setting, food	nj	yes
14	Anshul/aunty	language? food	cam	yes
15	Mehak, court cases	history	w	yes
16	joseph lachman	japanese incarceration/activism	sea	yes
17	kumu	hawaii - indigenous/native culture	ssf	yes
18	saila/gabe's house	diaspora, 2nd gen (?), native am stories	oly	no
19	Tanvee/shivani	stats/data	w	yes
20	Jkodera	professor, Mm myth, anti-blackness	w	no
21	Jake	white guy, affirmative action	bos	yes
22	Anshul/Will	rice cooking,	bos	no
23	Monica	med student, gen 1	bos	no
24	Joanne Bland	segregation, selma	sel	no
25				

Sample Screenshot of "Audio" sheet

Overall, the viewing experience is an explorative, self-directed one. The shortest conversation excerpts range around 3-5 minutes, while the longest conversation excerpts reach about 10-15 minutes, so someone who spends at least 10 minutes with the piece will probably catch 2-3 conversations while browsing the artifacts.

A Note On Including the Civil Rights Movement

In late fall 2017, I had been accepted to the Wellesley Office of Religious and Spiritual Life's Alternative Break, "Confronting the Unacceptable," a trip that explored the intersection of faith and the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. I had applied in search of some resolve in the ambivalence

I felt in my spiritual journey at the time, and to delve deeper into the historical roots of the Civil Rights Movement. I considered that it might be relevant to my thesis, but I did not expect the drastic change it brought to my perspectives on my role as an Asian American. Over the course of the week-long trip, we visited spaces dedicated to telling the lesser-known stories of the Civil Rights Movement and unveiling the grassroots level work of the movement that mainstream education did not, as well as spoke to activists who had marched with Dr. Martin Luther King or contributed to the movement in their own way. I realized how differently the North, where I've lived all my life, remembers the Civil Rights Movement compared to the South, and I learned how underrepresented stories of the Civil Rights Movement were even when I learned about them in public school. Furthermore, I started sensing a need for intersectional perspectives on how Asian Americans have benefitted from the work African and Black Americans have done, or how both of their movements have intersected through history, especially in light of the anti-blackness in Asian American communities that persists today.

Continuing my thesis documentation practices, I had collected audio and video footage of people we spoke to or places we visited on the trip. It would have been dishonest to not include my experiences on the trip in my project because of how meaningful they were in the context of learning about Asian American history, but at the same time I risked stepping into territory that was beyond my scope. I contemplated including the voices of Black activists, whose descendants were enslaved and brought to the U.S. by force, who could speak to the realities of fighting for the civil rights in a country that other immigrants often see as a beacon of hope and freedom. In the end, I decided to include the visual footage related to the trip, while

maintaining that the voices who spoke about topics like Black activism and anti-blackness would still be Asian American.

CONCLUSION

Over the course of the thesis year, what started out with more theoretical observation about oral history and ethnography practices became a personal reflection about learning about my own history. Ultimately, the installation shares my learning experience and addresses the issue that I have seen among peers of a lack of awareness about Asian American history and our part in it, because it is not taught in public schools. For me, it was shocking just one summer ago, to learn just how noteworthy the presence of Chinese people in the U.S. has been in the larger narratives of U.S. history and politics; it had been ingrained in me through my mainstream public education that as a Chinese Asian American, my existence is pretty insignificant, and that the growing population of Asians in the country right now is a new phenomenon that is only carving new narratives as it happens today, rather than a continuation of a narrative that extends centuries back.

Because of how much time I have spent with the project from its inception to its completion, and seeing all the different forms it has transitioned through, I will always see it, as I see all of my works, as flawed. However it is seeing the flaws that pushes me to move forward to new works and endeavors, and let those flaws be resolved in aspects of later projects. For example, the conversations I decided to include in the final project are only about 20 percent of all of the conversations I took. Thinking about all the memorable conversations I have sitting in drive makes me dissatisfied at my failure to let them be heard in this project, for reasons of representation and simply because of the amount of work and time I put into them, but it also drives me to think of ways they can take on a life of their own and be the centerpiece of a later project. Furthermore, being ready to record my interactions with my friends became a habit and I

started to realize just how valuable it was to me to be able to capture conversations that, beyond reflecting my friends and their stories, created a record of myself for myself to see how I have learned and grown between and through conversations with others.

What the installation accomplishes for me as an artist is that it made me to reimagine one consistent concept in many forms, and understand that mediums are as important as the idea. Because of the way I have learned the arts, which is through classes focused on a medium of some sort, I tend to find myself seeing design challenges as: how can I work with this medium to communicate this idea I have? If there is an issue, I end up criticizing my own abilities within the medium to communicate the idea effectively. I forget that outside of given prompts through classes, the real question is: what are all the different mediums I can use to represent this idea? In what ways is this medium lacking? My instinct is always to be self-critical and self-deprecating, but the reality is that often I set limits for myself that hinder my creativity.

Working on the installation was also an exercise, as someone interested in working in educational arts such as museums and installation arts, in thinking through design decisions and bringing theoretical and metaphorical ideas to life in a physical form. On this front, I look forward to hearing responses from audience members about what spoke to them and what was unclear. In the weeks following the thesis submission, I will be arranging modes of feedback for people involved in the project and people through forms, hashtags, and meetings. I hope to build upon this type of multi-media work in the future, in the topics of ethnic studies, ethnography, and beyond.

APPENDIX

Please follow this link to access the Google Drive folder, "GMING Thesis Shared Files" to supplement your reading.

https://drive.google.com/open?id=19Z7_PUGywN4f_i_JQuCzgBc4AiyBObFb

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