



# The American Papers

2021-2022

Volume 40

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The artwork on the cover of this journal was designed by CSUF student Rianna Titular.

Below is their artist's statement:

"Taking inspiration from the courses offered at Cal St Fullerton, I created a journal cover that features many elements of our diverse area of study. This piece highlights people of different backgrounds, some state flowers and visuals that allude to American history. I wanted to create a cover that was fun and colorful – allowing viewers to move their eyes all around the page."

- Rianna Titular, 2022

As the 2021-2022 faculty advisor of this illustrious student journal, I would like to thank the entire editorial board of this year's *The American Papers* for sustaining and amplifying this forty-year tradition of the Cal State Fullerton American Studies department. For those reading this copy in the distant future: do note that the editorial board was comprised entirely of volunteers who worked on this issue during a global pandemic. Despite this difficulty, they worked tirelessly to review dozens of submissions, edit a chosen few, and prepare the following issue before you.

Next, thank you to Ela Cabrera for their assistance in securing funding from the InterClub Council so that the journal could be printed. Thank you to the staff at PM Group for their work in printing the journal. And thank you to Rianna Titular for the design of this year's cover. The artwork is a beautiful symbol of the diverse topics that CSUF's American Studies students research every day.

I'd like to give special recognition to our 2021-2022 editorial leadership. First off, this year's issue was led by co-editors-in-chief Shannon Anderson and Raymond Gandara. They were exceptional and diligent leaders of our diverse volunteer team, and their keen insights, attention to detail, and pragmatic approach to the numerous challenges that organizing a published volume entails made it a true success. They were also aided by two exceptional managing editors this year—Kathy Loreto and Michelle Lê, both of whom were strongly organized and compassionate about each of the submitted work. Both went beyond what was required to get our team to the finish line. Michelle Lê also took on the important role of co-layout editor with Michelle Okawa, both working hard in the late stages of this project and during a busy semester to organize this year's submissions into a presentable and accessible format. To Shannon, Raymond, Michelle L., Kathy, and Michelle O.— I'm simply in awe of each of you. You helped make this historic issue a beautiful reality.

-Professor Gonazba



Welcome to the 2021-2022 and 40th edition of *The American Papers*!

As with the previous two issues, this year's edition of *The American Papers* demonstrates the resiliency of our department. The following essays were written by undergraduate and graduate students for fully online American Studies classes due to the continuing COVID-19 pandemic. The editorial process likewise was conducted virtually as the rise and fall of new variants of the virus kept all of us in a state of uncertainty, even as students and faculty made a tentative return to campus in Fall 2021. Nonetheless, these essays continue our tradition of strong student scholarship that speaks to the social, cultural, and political world around us and the history which informs it.

This year's journal is organized thematically, demonstrating the range of student work and the multiple ways we can critically examine American culture. We use the following five themes to showcase our authors' work: Who is American?, Unpacking Popular Culture, Complicating Environmentalism, Asian American Cultural Practices, and Public Memory of White Supremacy. Additionally, we have elected to pair these submissions with advanced scholarship that discuss similar themes and questions. We do this (1) to demonstrate how our department can produce critical contributions to these scholarly discussions and (2) to connect our readers with further sources which may benefit their own research and personal libraries.

In honor of Earl James Weaver, one of the founding professors of the American Studies department at CSUF, a committee of professors selects an exceptional graduate essay to award the Weaver Graduate Essay Prize. We are happy to present Michelle Lê as this year's winner for her essay, "*remember me in all my glory, in all my pieces, and all my losses: The Memory of Little Saigon in the Oral History of Vietnamese Americans in Southern California.*" Also published in this edition of *The American Papers* is "Written on the Walls: The Public Memory of the Fullerton Union High School Auditorium," written by Shannon Anderson, which the Weaver Committee awarded with an "Honorable Mention."

We are proud to carry on the tradition of excellence produced by the CSUF American Studies department with this 40th issue of *The American Papers*. The Editors-in-Chief thank our contributing authors and members of the editorial board for helping make this year's edition possible. We would also like to thank our managing editors, our layout editors, and the cover artist. Finally, we thank Professor Eric Gonzaba for guiding us throughout the editorial process as our faculty advisor.

- The Editors

# Course Descriptions

## **201: Introduction to American Studies**

With the concept of culture as a unifying principle, focus is on four separate time periods in order to provide the framework for an understanding of American civilization. Several different kinds of documents will be used to illustrate the nature and advantages of an interdisciplinary approach.

## **345: The American Dream**

Interdisciplinary analysis, in settings both historical and contemporary, of the myth and reality surrounding the notion of America as a land of unparalleled and unlimited possibilities, especially in the achievement of personal material success.

## **350: Seminar in Theory and Method of American Studies**

Understanding and appreciation of methodology, theories of society and images of humanity as they affect American studies contributions to scholarship. Fulfills the course requirement of the university upper-division baccalaureate writing requirement for American Studies majors.

## **401T: The Body and American Culture**

Concentrating on the period from the late nineteenth century to the present, examines the relationship between American culture at large and shifting definitions of the healthy and appealing body. Issues include gender, race, disability, weight control, and bodily alterations.

### **401T: American Culture & Nature**

Analyzes the meaning of nature in American culture, past and present. Traces the development of environmental attitudes as reflected and shaped in such cultural landscapes as the frontier, countryside, city, suburb.

### **442: Television and American Culture**

American television as an interactive form of cultural expression, both product and producer of cultural knowledge. Structure and content of television genres, and social-historical context of television's development and use, audience response, habits and environments of viewing.

### **454: American Nightlife**

Development of nightlife in American society and culture. Topics include the meaning of night, evening labor, prohibition, gender roles, sexuality, race, material culture, ballroom culture, music, cinema and urban cultures.

### **502T: Seminar on Public Memory**

Analyzes narratives of the past encapsulated in museums, memorials, historic preservation sites, living history projects, and popular culture. Emphasizes the cultural politics and packaging of public memory and tensions between national identity and local, ethnic and regional identity narratives.

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# Who is American?

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*"It's because being American is more than a pride we inherit. It's the past we step into and how we repair it."*

-Amanda Gorman, "The Hill We Climb" (2021)

*"A place belongs forever to whoever claims it hardest, remembers it most obsessively, wrenches it from itself, shapes it, renders it, loves it so radically that he remakes it in his image."*

-Joan Didion, *The White Album*, (1979)

<b>Suggested Readings:</b>
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Karla Cornejo Villavicencio, *The Undocumented Americans* (Penguin Random House, 2020)

George Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Identity, and Culture in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (Oxford University Press, 1995)

# Tracey Esquivel

Tracey K. Esquivel

AMST 201: Intro to American Studies

This essay was written for Professor Elaine Lewinnek's American Studies 201 class - Introduction to American Studies. This essay was written as a synthesis of the semester's themes and sources and as a response to the question proposed by Heidi Schreck's Broadway play *What the Constitution Means to Me*, "Should we abolish the United States Constitution?" My hope is that the reader reflects on their own connections to history and our country as a whole.

I am often teased about my name. It usually happens when I meet new people, new Latino/a people who can't quite wrap their tongue around such an Anglo name. "Tracey?" they say. Almost like they don't quite believe they heard right, like the Tracey somehow negates the preconceived notions they had of me. I try to make light of it. "Yea, my mom thought she was white. My sisters are Kathleen, Trysha, Lesley, and my brother's name is Chase." But deep inside, I'm a little offended. Does my brown hair and skin brand me a Maria or Teresa? Does my Mexican surname clash with my American first name? As a Mexican-American, I have always lived in a cultural limbo. I've always felt the thorn of not quite belonging here or there. The hyphen in Mexican-American, as big and divisive as the southern border wall, reminded me that there is a division in my cultural identity.

In grade school and high school, we were taught the "history" of this country. A history that only reflected the Tracey in me. The stories of Popé and the Hopi people are excluded from this narrative.<sup>1</sup> Even the Spanish and the French colonization of Indigenous people in the Americas is glossed over, focusing only on the English colonization of the East Coast, all while ignoring the Indigenous origins of the land we reside on. That missing piece of my education left me wanting more, creating a yearning to understand where the Esquivel part of me fit in. I did not receive anything that would even remotely help me make that connection until my college years. But one thing that has always been exalted above all else is the sacred document that made us greater than all other nations—the United States Constitution. And like that, we became the land of the free! Well, only if you were a white landowning male... but still! USA! USA! USA!

Seventy-eight years after the ratification of the Constitution, the amendment that helps with my identity crisis passed. The Fourteenth

Amendment, Section One claims me. It says, “Tracey belongs to me!” It says:

All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the state wherein they reside. No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.<sup>2</sup>

This amendment not only establishes my Americanness, my Tracey, but it also protected my parents when they were undocumented immigrants in the 1990s. Or it was supposed to, just as it was supposed to protect the 146 victims of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, a preventable disaster fueled by capitalist greed.<sup>3</sup> These victims were immigrants, young men and women that took on repetitive, body-aching work. My dad worked in a factory that produced the advertisements and coupons that were mailed out by JCPenney and Sears. It was an assembly line job; he had to stick on the shipping labels and cut the mailers to size. He often came home with minor cuts and bruises due to the fast pace of his job, a job that he performed for only \$3 an hour. In 1989, California’s minimum wage was \$4.25. He continued to work there until I finished elementary school. My dad deserved better, and the victims of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire did too, just like the numerous people of color that are protected in the letter of the law but not in its spirit.

My last name is Esquivel. Originally from Spain, it means “home behind the lime tree.” Though a common last name, it is not often heard. I always get a weird excitement when I meet someone with the same last name. It’s the feeling you get when someone shares a childhood experience you believed was unique to you, like when I found out other children of immigrants also grew up with the thick San Marcos tiger blankets from their local swap meet. It’s the same feeling I felt when I read reporter Nikita Stewart’s essay titled “We are Committing Educational Malpractice” from the 1619 Project.<sup>4</sup> Stewart’s essay spoke to eighteen-year-old Tracey, who had just completed her first college-level history class. The biased history I learned in school excluded so many stories and facts. It made me feel like I did not belong to the story of America, even when the Constitution claimed me by birthright. The hyphen in Mexican-American made me feel less American because America viewed the Mexican first and the American as an afterthought, just as Tracey was overshadowed by the Esquivel. Why am I portrayed as the outsider? I am both, so why should I have to change?

This need for assimilation isn’t unique to the immigrant experience. I discovered this as I listened to students who took the *Dolly Parton’s America* class at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, on a podcast also entitled *Dolly Parton’s America*. This podcast explores how Dolly Parton has remained an American icon with a very diverse fanbase. In episode seven of the

podcast produced by RadioLab, University of Tennessee students shared that their parents told them to get rid of their Appalachian accents in order to be taken seriously.<sup>5</sup> Getting rid of the things that make us stand out is a very common tool for children of immigrants. We assimilate so others will accept us. Even now, my view of exclusion is widened, all thanks to a podcast that connected the two worlds. How can we be American and still feel excluded? Hearing these students' experiences changed my "us versus them" view of belonging. It made me understand that we all have the need to belong. And the preamble of the Constitution claims us all: citizens and foreign-born alike, it wraps us in its protections regardless.

In the play *What the Constitution Means to Me*, author Heidi Schreck presents the debate of whether the Constitution should be abolished.<sup>6</sup> My gut reaction to that question is "NO!" How could destroying the proof of my belonging make this country better? The Constitution was not written with me in mind, but it still protects me. It still claims me. The Constitution can change just as my own interpretation of my name has changed. It can include all the beautiful and ugly truths of being part of this country. The Constitution is the written proof that we can change. It is the opportunity to create a nation that is more inclusive, that is better. The Constitution says that I belong regardless of the hyphen, the exclusion, and my own doubts.

## References

- 1 *Frontera! Revolt and Rebellion on the Rio Grande*, directed by John Jota Leaños (2014), <http://leanos.net/frontera/>. This animated documentary explores one of the first revolutions in the United States. In 1680, the Pueblo people, along with many different Indigenous tribes of the Rio Grande area, organized a revolt against the cruel and barbaric Spanish colonists that tried to occupy the area.
- 2 U.S. Const. amend. XIV. Sec. 1
- 3 Cornell University, “Remembering The 1911 Triangle Factory Fire,” Cornell University, 2018, <https://trianglefire.ilr.cornell.edu/story/introduction.html>. In 1911, a fire broke out at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York City. Due to unsafe working conditions like the lack of functioning fire escapes and locked doors, the workers could not safely exit the building when the fire broke out. One hundred and forty-six people died that day. This event is seen as a catalyst for labor reform activists.
- 4 Nikita Stewart, “We are committing educational malpractice’: Why slavery is mistaught — and worse — in American schools,” in “The 1619 Project,” *New York Times Magazine* August 19, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html>. The 1619 Project is a journalism project by Nikole Hannah-Jones and *The New York Times* writers that puts slavery and its impact at the center of United States history.
- 5 Jad Abumrad and Shima Oliace, *Dolly Parton’s America*, podcast audio, December 3, 2019, <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/dolly-partons-america/episodes>.
- 6 *What the Constitution Means to Me*, written by Heidi Schreck, directed by Oliver Butler, streaming online video, Amazon Prime, 2020, [https://www.amazon.com/What-Constitution-Means-Me-Official/dp/B08KRNSLB6/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?crd=2GJE8D6FN4PAL&dchild=1&keywords=what+the+constitution+means+to+me&qid=1634507634&s=instant-video&sr=1-1](https://www.amazon.com/What-Constitution-Means-Me-Official/dp/B08KRNSLB6/ref=sr_1_1?crd=2GJE8D6FN4PAL&dchild=1&keywords=what+the+constitution+means+to+me&qid=1634507634&s=instant-video&sr=1-1).

# Documenting an Undocumented History: A Counter-Narrative of Americans, their Deportations, and their Separated Families

Marisol Rivera

AMST 502T: Seminar on Public Memory

The following paper was written for Dr. Alison Kanosky's Spring 2021 Graduate Research Seminar in Public Memory, or AMST 502T. Written as an original research project about public memory in the United States, this paper explores the public memory of undocumented Americans and how this community helps us understand public memory in American culture. Through intimate and original oral histories, this research constructs a different angle to view undocumented Americans, their deportations, and their separated families. I tie together firsthand experiences, historical context, and deconstruction of popular misrepresentations of undocumented Americans to shed light on this community's unspoken and largely unrecorded experiences.

*¿Por qué  
ya no podemos hablar  
sin una guerra empezar?  
Y la queremos ganar  
Y la queremos ganar*

*Why  
can we no longer talk  
without starting a war?  
And wanting to win it  
And wanting to win it*

*¿A dónde vamos a parar?  
esta hiriente y absurda actitud  
Démosle paso a la humildad  
Y vamos a la intimidad  
De nuestras almas en toda plenitud*

*Where are we going to end up, Con  
with this painful & absurd attitude?  
Let's take a step towards being meek  
and let's go to the intimacy  
of our souls to the fullest*

*¿A dónde vamos a parar?  
Cayendo siempre en el mismo error  
Dándole siempre más valor*

*Where are we going to end up?  
Always making the same mistake,  
always giving more value*

*A todo, menos el amor*

*to everything, but love.*<sup>1</sup>

--Marco Antonio Solís

### **Introducción**

The land between the United States and México is filled with extensive history, adaptations, and labels. Up until recently, a monument was erected not only to physically divide these two nations, but to remind foreigners of the exclusivity of American citizenship—that monument is the border. Historian CJ Alvarez introduces the U.S.-México border as an area not visited by most Americans, yet political opinions condense our spatial imagination of 1,954 miles into “a single place, a single thing.”<sup>2</sup> The complex symbolism of the border and those who have a “toxic relationship” with it have been grossly diluted if not completely ignored.<sup>3</sup> American society suffers from a state of scant empathy, inadequate action, and erroneous neglect towards survivors of this toxic relationship. The act of crossing the U.S.-México border into the United States has been criminalized, causing American society to view an illegal crossing as a direct attack to our country versus understanding this act for what it really is: an aspiration for a better life. This paper examines how American society has justified and consequently erased from its memory *its* crime against families by separating them in the name of national security. To remember these separations is to undergo an extraordinary fight against suppression and silence. To neglect these separations is the greatest act of violence against one of America’s principal values: families. Without a doubt, border policies cultivate national trauma for selected American families.

In my research, I analyze five individuals who have bravely agreed to share their experiences as survivors of family separation due to Immigration Customs and Enforcement (ICE) interventions. I use pseudonyms to protect my interviewees’ privacy and share a few non-identifying details to remind readers of their humanity, which is so often disregarded by American institutions. Four of my five interviewees are part of the Villarreal family.<sup>4</sup> Amlo and Elizabeth Villarreal, both currently in their early 50s, migrated to the United States from México. They began to center their lives in Southern California in their late teens, early twenties, the stage in which individuals are confronted by the challenges of emerging adulthood. Over the span of ten years, the Villarreals had four children—Esmeralda, Elena, Alexandria, and Sebastian—and were deported before their eldest turned 18 in May 2012. The Villarreal children who were interviewed, Esmeralda and Alexandria, are currently 26 and 19 years old.

My fifth interviewee, Ricky Leva, is the eldest son of deported parents.<sup>5</sup> Similar to Amlo and Elizabeth, Ricky’s parents migrated to Southern California separately, then met, married, and had their two sons. Ricky’s parents were deported in August and September 2017, leaving Ricky and his younger brother, Eddie, behind when they were just 20 and 14 years old, respectively. Currently, Ricky is a few months shy of turning 24 years old.

While we see distinctions between generations, we also see interesting parallels between these individuals, like the startling resilience these survivors exhibit despite the persistent reality of their devastating separation. Analyzing their interviews, I argue that the public memory of undocumented Americans and their separated families are absent in its true form from the minds of Americans. This absence constitutes a framework in which trauma and consequences stemming from deportations have gone unrecorded, permitting continued abuse towards undocumented families.

No matter how well one is versed in the English and Spanish languages, it is virtually impossible to capture the message behind words in translation. Therefore, I have transcribed my interviews and provide the exact responses in this paper—regardless of the language that was used. I translate what I think is being communicated when Spanish is used. Investigative reporter Melissa del Bosque emphasizes the importance of collecting various memories to fill in the gaps left by collective trauma which may hinder a survivor's memory.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, I share my own anecdotes since my interviewees' experiences align with my own experiences as a daughter of deported parents. There are some gaps in my interviewees' memories and in my own, but, taken together, these stories produce enough beats for readers to follow the rhythm of heartache within this collective trauma. I do not claim that this is representative of all separated families' experiences, but these conversations reveal a grain of collective memory shared by coercively separated American families through deportation.

Undocumented American families are not limited to families in which all members are undocumented, as the current narrative stereotypically holds.<sup>7</sup> I use the term "undocumented American families" to describe families that have at least one undocumented member. The head(s) of the family, usually the parents, work towards achieving financial and social escalation that would not be available to them in their country of origin. Sooner or later, one or both parents experience deportation, which causes instability in the family. The dominant narrative erroneously claims that after deportation undocumented families strive for reunification by either re-entering the United States illegally or arrange for the migration of the remaining members, usually the child(ren), into the parent or parents' country of origin.<sup>8</sup> Yet this dominant narrative fails to capture the reality of undocumented American families who continue to live on both sides of the border after being separated by ICE. I offer a counter narrative to shed light on this particular consequence of family separation to rectify a glaring oversight.

To counter this narrative, I first examine historical and contemporary analyses of immigration policies, deconstructing what the border symbolized for my interviewees prior to deportation. Next, I analyze the rhetoric around ICE as a benevolent institution and look at its legacy through the recollection of deportation. Finally, I produce a publicly engaging counter memory by examining the ongoing legacies of these displaced families, their stories, and their place in public memory with a humane approach.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, I argue

that these memories have not been afforded enough attention in popular culture or academia.

### **La Frontera: Early Perceptions**

To begin understanding the implications that encompass separation, I sought to uncover what the border represented to my subjects prior to their deportation or their family member's deportation. The experiences of undocumented Americans contrast that of American citizens. In this case, immigrant parents and American-born children hold different interpretations of what the border represented to them before ICE removed the parents from this country.

As American children—more precisely, American-born citizens—Alexandria, Esmeralda, and Ricky recalled interpreting the border, or *la frontera*, as a one-dimensional, literal, and figurative object. Alexandria admitted that she knew there was something more to the border. Although she never knew what was symbolic about the border, she recalled for the most part that it was a fence. Esmeralda and Ricky, being the eldest children in their families, both shared popular understandings of the purpose of the wall: national security. Yet, like Alexandria, they also concluded that it was *just a fence*; it is worth pointing out that all three interviewees used this exact same phrase.<sup>10</sup> These first-generation American children may have made these early interpretations because they possess a privilege their parents lack: citizenship. However, although American-born children of immigrants are shielded legally from political rejection, they continue to live a reality of exclusion vicariously through the status of their parents. Alexandria, Ricky, and Esmeralda had a culturally-hybrid interpretation of *la frontera*: neither the dominant American (*la frontera* as national security) nor Mexican (*la frontera* as a challenge of survival for a better life) interpretation of the border was absolute in their minds. They understood the border as an object necessary for national security, yet because of their parents' immigration status, the children knew that there was more to the border than just national security.

This culturally-hybrid interpretation, although unclear to many first-generation Latin Americans, stretches into a feeling of entrapment that migrant parents feel. Amlo and Elizabeth's early interpretations of the border align closely with that of "una jaula de oro," or "a golden cage."<sup>11</sup> While Amlo considered *la frontera* the obstacle between him and the opportunities he longed to grasp, Elizabeth reflected on the crude reality undocumented Americans face once residing *al otro lado* (on the other side). She relayed, "El muro es una división que nos divide con nuestros seres queridos, nuestros padres, nuestros hermanos, nuestras familias (The wall is a division that separates us from our loved ones, our parents, our siblings, our family)."<sup>12</sup> Compared to Alexandria, Esmeralda, and Ricky's responses, we see *la frontera* from a more abstract lens in the parents' view. Whereas Alexandria, Esmeralda, and Ricky's interpretations were limited to the physical aspects of the border, undocumented Americans Amlo and Elizabeth were burdened

with the literal and figurative division that *la frontera* symbolizes for them and countless Americans. Amlo and Elizabeth's interpretation transcends the dominant perspective of the border existing for national security, as Esmeralda and Ricky were taught in school. To the parents, *la frontera* represents division, pain, and loss—all of which are largely neglected when the memory of *la frontera* is overwritten by national security.

Anti-immigrant groups question why immigrants would choose to illegally cross the border versus legally crossing to access the opportunities of the United States, which supposedly would eliminate the “need” for family separation. The reality of the legal option entails a decade-long process, often leading to a denied visa and/or application for residency.<sup>13</sup> One reason why the challenging process of obtaining legal entry to the United States is unknown to most Americans is due in part to the “moment of fact assembly.” According to Haitian scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot, this moment is achieved when an event is limited in its presentation through an emphasis on a set of attractive “artifacts” or, simply, “facts.” Consequently, artifacts deemed unimportant are shunted from public consciousness as the focus centralizes around the artifacts deemed as important.<sup>14</sup> In other words, a moment of fact assembly situates the popular conversation as the dominant narrative, hindering a more complete understanding of the cultural artifacts in question.

In 1965, the Hart-Celler Act was passed and applauded as a progressive accomplishment. This act resulted in the successful reversal of the racist national origin quota system.<sup>15</sup> However, the Hart-Celler Act also placed a ceiling for migrants from the Western Hemisphere to 120,000 visas per year.<sup>16</sup> As a result, Mexican migrants have been competing with other Latin Americans, Canadians, and each other for legal entry into the United States ever since, completely disregarding the decades of friendly political relations between the United States and México. The new visa policy displaced Mexican migrants who had been practicing “circular migration” for years since it added legal documentation as a requirement to gain access to seasonal jobs in the U.S. when it had not previously.<sup>17</sup> Taking into consideration the limited opportunities for social advancement in México, this immigration law has forced Mexicans to choose between investing money and years in a visa application, that may or may not get approved, or pack a few essential items and migrate illegally *al otro lado*.<sup>18</sup> Many undocumented Americans chose the latter.

The passage of the Hart-Celler Act, however, was only the beginning of what would become today's immigration policy. About twenty years later during the Reagan era, hegemonic powers claimed that the American drug epidemic was directly linked to and caused by Latin America and México.<sup>19</sup> This enabled popular stereotypes to pervade, morphing dominant perspectives on individuals originating from countries south of the United States border. During the Clinton administration, legislation such as the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRIRA) built upon these racist and misleading perceptions, conflating public ideolo-

gies of undocumented immigration with national security and crime.<sup>20</sup> Lastly, after the infamous 9/11 terrorist attacks half a decade after the IIRIRA, we witnessed not only the support for outrageous military funding to regain a sense of security, but also experienced the permanent tethering of crime and undocumented immigration. In the words of sociologist Patrisia Macias-Rojas, immigration underwent “crimmigration,” and the law was not extended to help those accused of committing it.<sup>21</sup> Both the Reagan and Clinton administrations made immigration reform and policies politically volatile by linking undocumented immigrants with a sense of breached national security.

Following 9/11, Americans adopted violent narratives against undocumented Americans. Scholar Maria Saldaña-Portillo highlights the hypocrisy in governmental claims for increased national security at the southern border by pointing out that

[While Canada] is the leading foreign supplier of ecstasy, often laced with highly addictive methamphetamines...[and] El Paso, Texas, just across the bridge from Ciudad Juárez, is consistently ranked the safest city in the United States... the southern hemisphere and the México–U.S. border continue to draw the military heat because of the myopic focus on marijuana, heroin, and cocaine.<sup>22</sup>

Despite statistics debunking exaggerated claims associating Mexicans and Latin Americans with criminality, the strategic use of terms such as “national defense” implies that protection is taking place at the border and that our international neighbors pose a threat. Consequently, we have not seen comprehensive immigration reform since the 1980s, which produces a sense of entrapment in “la jaula de oro” amongst undocumented Americans. These moments of fact assembly, including the passage of the Hart-Celler Act, Illegal Immigration Reform, and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, have compelled American consciousness to celebrate momentary “solutions” to perceived immigration issues despite the consequences imposed on the *other* Americans. Instead of symbolizing “just a fence,” la frontera manifests a false sense of American peril at the cost of repression for nontraditional Americans.

**No hay peor ciego que el que no quiere ver |**

**There is no worse blind man than he who wishes not to see**

Popular narratives and increased national defense policies along the southern border have led to violent narratives against immigrants. In recent years, the United States was subjected to fabricated claims that reinforced the cycle of repression against undocumented Americans. On June 16, 2016, then presidential candidate Donald Trump shocked the world by complaining that México sends “their worst people” to America. More specifically, he targeted Mexicans for being “rapists” and for “bringing drugs...bringing crime” past

the golden gates of the United States.<sup>23</sup> These false claims cause harm in various ways, ultimately continuing a porous memory of undocumented Americans in which selective facts behind illegal immigration are manipulated to construct a negative image no matter the motive for migration.

Trump's statements enabled a familiar type of institutional discrimination often experienced by ethnic groups vulnerable to racism. The murder of Vincent Chin in the 1980s is an illustrative example of this dynamic. With the rise of the Japanese auto industry at the height of American deindustrialization, anti-Japanese and anti-Asian sentiment fueled the nation. Two white men, father and son, brutally beat Chinese American Vincent Chin to death on the day before his wedding, allegedly mistaking him as Japanese. Historian Masako Iino writes, "The incident dearly showed that the anti-Japan and anti-Japanese feelings could be turned against Japanese Americans, and also other Asian Americans."<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Trump's demeaning claims targeting Mexicans are mirrored onto Central Americans, and this pattern of "mistaken identity" racism has real physical repercussions.

According to the Pew Research Center, in 2018 both U.S.-born and foreign-born Hispanics in the United States experienced "at least one of four offensive incidents in the past year because of their Hispanic background."<sup>25</sup> These incidents include experiencing discrimination or unfair treatment because of their Hispanic background, being criticized for speaking Spanish in public, being told to go back to their home country, or being called offensive names.<sup>26</sup> Here, we see parallels between Asian Americans and Latin Americans in the sense of collective rejection. Additionally, it is worth highlighting that the same study reported that an overwhelming number of participants expressed pride in being American, and if given an opportunity to migrate to the United States again, they conveyed that they would absolutely take it.<sup>27</sup> However, the sentiments of Americanness reported in this research are not reciprocated, as exemplified in the various policies stemming from dangerously false claims like those made by Trump. These policies tremendously impact undocumented American families because the consequences affect each individual in the family, whether American citizen or not.

Amlo and his daughter, Alexandria, explained how these ideologies uphold the hegemonic order regarding immigration.<sup>28</sup> Amlo claimed that opinions, such as those expressed by President Trump, "Se equivocan pluralizando a la sociedad y eso hace apuntar y enfocar muchas de las veces, sobretodo en, los intereses politicos, personales; se interesan mucho poner la inmigración como obstáculo (Commit a mistake by pluralizing society and that points to and focuses many times, especially on, political and personal interests; they are very interested in putting immigration as an obstacle)."<sup>29</sup> In other words, Amlo claims that these comments may be strategically repeated to perpetuate the idea of immigration as an obstacle to the health and prosperity of American society. Alexandria expanded on her father's opinion:

I think a lot of it is displaced anger or frustration...because

[Americans] lost their job...and an undocumented immigrant who [is] willing to work for less [money] was able to take that position; [Americans] just seem to get really angry and displace that anger with the undocumented person when in reality [the injustice stems from our] capitalist society [in which] people at the top are trying to make as much profit instead of paying the fair share of the work that is being done.<sup>30</sup>

Bridging Amlo and Alexandria's analysis, we see that the general American population is provided with violent interpretations (rapists, drug dealers, and criminals) of undocumented Americans by the state (President Trump), which is then passively accepted and believed, distracting Americans from the root sources of harm and economic inequality. This ideology that blames immigrants, in turn, enables the marginalization of undocumented Americans in economic, cultural, and legal ways.

With the history of *la frontera* and its powerful effect on larger society's reception to undocumented Americans, I offer a counter argument to what many undocumented and documented Americans falsely believe: citizenship encompasses protections and benefits Americans deserve. Analyzing the memories of the deportation process through the lens of the Villarreal and Leva family, we see how ICE officers target not only undocumented individuals, but their children as well, regardless of citizenship status.

### **Ese maldito día | That damned day**

The media limits how we think about and remember deportation by the narratives it chooses to focus on, typically focusing on one of three things: the current rate of deportations, the current administration's statement about immigration, and/or a comparison of Democratic and Republican work regarding immigration.<sup>31</sup> Not only do these narratives dominate our collective memory, they fail to depict what the act of deportation actually looks and feels like for those impacted. The act of deportation creates a vicious cycle of overexploitation, while also silencing the voices of undocumented Americans in the process. I focus on the unjustifiable effects that overcome deported individuals and their families after ICE removes them from their home. My goal is to capture the act of deportation as experienced by the Villarreal and Leva family to remind readers of the physical and emotional reality that deportation entails, something that is otherwise not given a platform in traditional narratives about deportation.

As an individual who also lives with the trauma of family separation, something that makes me question my own capabilities and existence every day, I felt myself battling the emotions I had suppressed for years when interviewing the Villarreal family and Ricky Leva. What occurs to these so-called "bad hombres" on the day of their deportation?<sup>32</sup> The Villarreal family's life quite literally flipped upside down overnight. Amlo, Elizabeth, Esmeralda,

and Alexandria recollected a sequence of events that raises questions about the ethics and morality behind deportation. It occurred on a Friday in May 2012. Both Amlo and Elizabeth began their day with their routine schedule: Amlo was heading to work in his GMC G-3500, and Elizabeth was dropping off her two youngest children at school to then drive to her domestic labor job. On her way to drop off her last child, Elizabeth was pulled over by an unmarked SUV. At that moment, her curious 6-year-old son, Sebastian, took his seat belt off to turn around and observe the officer who was approaching their vehicle. Elizabeth was asked for her driver's license, proof of insurance, and vehicle registration. Elizabeth recalls presenting her identification card from México, or her CURP, and an expired license.<sup>33</sup> The reason behind her expired license was not due to her unwillingness to renew it, rather her inability to do so due to California measures.

In 1993, the California Legislature passed Senate Bill 976 targeting and excluding undocumented Americans from attaining a driver's license.<sup>34</sup> This discriminatory law impeded Elizabeth's ability to legally drive on the streets of Southern California. The unmarked officer asked her to step outside of the vehicle, and, upon looking in the backseat, the officer told Sebastian, "Since you do not have your seatbelt on, I have to take your mom." Elizabeth recalled,

Entiendo de que por mis errores—por no haber entrado a los Estados Unidos legalmente—tuve que sufrir yo; pero no había necesidad de traumatizar a mi niño de esa manera. Lo más fuerte de ese día no fue que me deportaron, sino que dejaron a mi niño gritando que no me llevaran. Que lo sentía y no se quitaría su cinturón. (I understand that because of my mistakes—illegally entering the United States—I had to pay the price; but there was no need to traumatize my son like that. The hardest thing that day was not my deportation, rather, it was hearing my son screaming and crying as they took me. He cried that he was sorry and that he would not take off his seatbelt again.)<sup>35</sup>

Elizabeth's response implies what the dominant perception of immigration practices holds,—she must be punished for coming to the United States undocumented—and neglects her trauma by focusing on her son's trauma. When considering philosopher Michel Foucault's analysis of discipline, it becomes clear that Elizabeth submitted to policing herself according to societal expectations because she acknowledged that she was an unwanted member of the community. By doing so, she condemned her actions of residing in the United States to balance out the seriousness of her "crime."<sup>36</sup> Building onto this, she then devalued the severity of her trauma by echoing the last painful words she heard from her son while she was still on U.S. soil. Despite participating in the hegemonic ideals regarding undocumented immigrants,

Elizabeth questioned the traumatic experience Sebastian witnessed, which he should have been protected from. Americans should not face the excessive trauma that Sebastian was put through. Thus, Elizabeth allowed herself to be excluded from the framework of American society while simultaneously questioning the same framework that should have prioritized her son as an American citizen.

Amlo was stopped less than a mile away by another unmarked SUV, possibly at the same time as Elizabeth. He remembered the officers' reason for stopping him being bogus, and Amlo determined on his own that he was being detained by ICE. He explained that he felt humiliated and degraded as he was not only cuffed on his wrists, but his ankles as well. Once they arrived at the Los Angeles detention center, reality sunk in as Amlo and Elizabeth realized they were not detained individually, but together. They thought about their four underaged children.<sup>37</sup> Amlo elaborated,

*Adentro, les pedimos la llamada que todos dicen que es el derecho, y nos la negaron por unas cuantas horas. Cuando la obtuve, llamé a un familiar y él mandó su abogado, pero no permitieron su entrada. Me metieron a un cuarto para que firmara el papel de la salida voluntaria, pero me negué. Entonces, entre dos me agarraron a la fuerza para si quiera forzar mis huellas como firma en ese papel... pedimos un juez para negociar algo de tiempo por los niños, y nos dijeron, "Ustedes no tienen derechos de pedir un juez. Son ilegales." (Inside, we requested the phone call people say is given as a right, but they delayed it for a few hours. When I finally got it, I called a family member, and he sent his lawyer. But they didn't let him enter the building. I was placed in a room to sign the voluntary leave form, but I denied it. Thus, between two officers, they tried forcing my fingerprint on the paper as a signature...we requested a judge to negotiate some time to see what we would do about our children, and they told us, "You have no right to see a judge. You are illegal.")<sup>38</sup>*

Amlo demonstrated that he was well informed of the universal rights for individuals detained in the United States. In a web post tailored to undocumented individuals, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) provides recommendations on common scenarios that arise when individuals are detained by ICE or other law enforcement so that the individual can know their rights. The ACLU's advice, however, assumes that law enforcement always responds according to what is legally required of them.<sup>39</sup> What happens when these officers fail to follow proper, legal procedures while dealing with undocumented Americans? ACLU advises individuals to write down identification information of the officers involved in the arrest or encounter. Yet in both Amlo and Elizabeth's recollection, this was impossible since the vehicles and officers themselves were unmarked and, thus, unidentifiable. How can

these officers be held accountable, then? Based on his accounts, Amlo was not only deprived of his universal rights, but also taunted by ICE (cuffed by both his wrists and ankles, forced to leave fingerprints in place of a signature, denied legal representation, and recognized as less than human) and left without an avenue for justice.

Outside the detention center, Elizabeth and Amlo's youngest child was left in the care of one of Elizabeth's cousins, Jackie.<sup>40</sup> Jackie called Esmeralda to notify her that someone had taken their mother. Esmeralda was a month shy of graduating high school, where she was enrolled with her sister, Elena. Jackie was authorized by the school to take the girls home early, and while Elena stayed at home, Esmeralda and Jackie went from police station to police station searching for any information that could lead them to Amlo and Elizabeth. After a few hours, Esmeralda, Elena, and Jackie received a call from another family member informing them that the Villarreal parents were taken to the Los Angeles ICE detention center and were waiting to be transported to Tijuana at 4 o'clock.<sup>41</sup> During this time, Alexandria was left in school, receiving the news from a friend that her mother had been arrested. She explained,

That entire day I spent it kind of pensive and worried about what had happened...what was weird was that my sister's boyfriend went to pick [me] up...he walked me all the way into the house...I opened the door [and] my sister was in the kitchen, crying. My second sister...patted the couch for me to sit...she said that my parents had gotten deported and at that moment I just remembered [long pause, voice began trembling] about all those nights that I had prayed, and I felt betrayed...I felt stripped and violated, and something had been ripped away from me. I was grateful that nothing worse had happened to them and that they were still alive, but just that physical separation of your parents...no child should be put through that.<sup>42</sup>

By 8 o'clock on the day of Amlo and Elizabeth's arrest, the Villarreal children received a call from Amlo indicating that their parents were in Tijuana.

In the Villarreal family's story of separation, we are faced with details that raise questions about the true intentions of ICE. Regardless of ethnicity, location, and time, family separation entails a crude, violent trauma. Is the Villarreal family's trauma justified because Amlo and Elizabeth lacked citizenship status? Media sources recall deportation differently compared to the Villarreals' experiences, with deportation occurring in the middle of the night when Americans are fast asleep.<sup>43</sup> In the Villarreals' experience, detainment and deportation took place with the American population wide awake and in broad daylight. Perhaps drivers stuck on the Interstate 5 freeway got a glimpse of Amlo and Elizabeth's bus as they were taken towards San Ysidrio's

port of exit.

Adding to the Villarreal family's experiences, Ricky Leva offers a distinct, but equally traumatic recollection of his parents' deportation. Ricky's parents were deported a month apart from one another. As Ricky explained, the Leva parents had entered the United States illegally, but resided in Southern California with a work permit. They were required to check in on assigned dates to an ICE field office to renew their work permits. In 2017, however, the Leva parents were requested to check in on different dates than usual. Ricky's mother had her appointment before her husband, and this alone caused suspicion amongst the Leva family. Ricky always accompanied his parents to their immigration appointments out of habit, and on the morning of his 20th birthday, he returned home without his mom. While facing the ICE officer who handled the Leva case, Ricky recalled how his mother was "trying to be strong and not cry. She even told the officer, 'Well, what a perfect gift for his birthday.'"<sup>44</sup> His psyche was branded with a similar form of guilt that young Sebastian Villarreal had experienced. Ricky admitted, "I felt like I turn[ed] her in."<sup>45</sup>

Finding separated undocumented families to interview and study for this research was difficult; to find two families in which at least one member feels responsible for their parent's deportation is astonishing. Considering both Sebastian and Ricky's stories, it is difficult to neglect the similarities that run between them. Although Sebastian was told by the ICE officer that he was responsible for his mother's arrest due to his unbuckled seat belt, Ricky was pierced with guilt because, in his mind, he had driven the car to his mother's arrest. This guilt is a tremendous weight to place on children, yet ICE disregards the wellbeing of those under arrest and the family members that are left behind. These American-born children are just as neglected and consequently rejected as their undocumented parents.

A week after his mother's deportation, Ricky's father had his appointment. By contrast, Ricky's father persuaded the officer to grant him one month's time to make arrangements for his children, home, vehicles, and accounts. As promised, Ricky's father returned exactly one month later to comply with his deportation order. Ricky remembered anticipating his father's call during his morning sociology class, which he left early due to his inability to focus. Ricky set off to the ICE detention center without explaining to his professor what had been going on. After minutes of banging on the lobby window demanding to speak with the same officer that handled his mother's case, Ricky was granted a few minutes to speak to his father. Ricky recalled that while he was waiting to see his dad,

[The officer] went and made me sit in some other dude's office. And [the second officer] was like, "What are you trying to be when you grow up?" And I was like, "I don't know? Probably a police officer..." And he was like, "Yeah, you'd make it. You should try to be one of us." And I was

like, “No, stop right there! I am never going to be one of you guys... you may be proud, doing what you’re doing. I would never.” And I got up and walked away and he was just kinda like, oh shit, you know? Then, the [first officer] came in as [I was] walking out and was like, “Oh, I have your dad on the phone if you’d like to talk to him real quick.”<sup>46</sup>

Contrary to popular belief, Ricky’s father is a prime example of undocumented Americans’ willingness to abide by the law. Instead of running away from ICE, Mr. Leva used his last month in the United States to tend to his family’s future needs. Ricky’s father’s compliance counters general assumptions that undocumented Americans are dishonest and criminal, as Trump suggested. Once Ricky finally got in contact with his father, Mr. Leva revealed that he was never offered a phone call despite his willingness to comply.

From Ricky’s encounter, ICE’s behavior provides a ghostly resemblance to that of Mr. and Mrs. Villarreal’s experience; it is undeniably mocking. Whereas the Villarreals were mocked for their lack of citizenship and treated inhumanely, Ricky’s emotions and trauma were mocked while his father was held for deportation. From one perspective, by suggesting that Ricky should embody the entity that yanked his parents from him and his brother, and consequently destabilizing the family, the ICE agent belittled the Leva family’s traumatic experience as if they were a unit unable to feel the effects of separation as any normal family. From a different angle, this specific mockery reinforces Ricky’s guilt over his mother’s deportation because ICE communicated to Ricky that they saw a part of themselves in him. Without a doubt, ICE’s goal is to not only separate families physically, but also mentally.

Although this research is limited to the Villarreals’ and Leva’s viewpoints and experiences on deportation, it is clear that ICE bears little to no space for empathy. On ICE’s official webpage, the first half of their mission statement reads, “ICE’s mission is to protect America from the cross-border crime and illegal immigration that threaten national security and public safety.”<sup>47</sup> If indeed ICE’s mission was upheld, Mr. and Mrs. Leva should have been excluded from being targets of the agency. They both held active working permits and contributed to American society for decades. How was this a threat to national security and public safety? Contrary to the dominant narrative, the Levas and the Villarreals increased national security and public safety through their model-behavior, holding clean records and raising their children to do the same. They contributed to America economically after decades of paying taxes to the government.

This is not to say that nonworking undocumented Americans do not deserve the same protections and human rights. Rather, when deconstructing ICE’s mission against these two case studies, we can infer that ICE holds intentions to exploit undocumented Americans. If their goal, truly, is to protect America from individuals posing a threat to national security and public safety, why would a family, such as the Levas, be allowed to work legally in

the United States? The Leva parents were permitted to work in America for more than two decades, but their contributions were met with their coerced removal from the country and the displacement of their U.S.-born children. Using ICE's logic, how does removing Ricky's parents protect Ricky and his brother Eddie, both American citizens? The message ICE seems to communicate to American-born citizens of undocumented families is that agony is inevitable. The United States Immigration and Custom Enforcement represents, like many other American institutions, a duplicity that harms marginalized people in the pursuit of protecting those it deems worthy.

There is absolutely no justification for the abuse, humiliation, and taunting that comes with an already traumatic event. Deportation inflicts pain to all members, and based on the Villarreal family and Ricky's recollections, ICE provides minimal, if any, empathy. In fact, ICE seems to ensure the process is burned in the memories of these families, branding them with shock and irreversible scars. All the while, American society is left with the framework confining undocumented Americans to explicit, negative categorization—aliens, illegal immigrants, and “bad hombres.” In analyzing labels such as these, we must remember what scholar Ann Laura Stoler points out: “Social etymologies...attend to the social relationships of power buried and suspended in those terms.”<sup>48</sup> In other words, demeaning terms such as these act as state-sponsored violence, which further upholds hegemonic American values and attitudes against undocumented Americans. We must not forget that these attitudes sanction the daily struggles and trauma that challenge my interviewees and millions of families after deportation.

In both families I interviewed, the members left behind were American-born citizens. Cut from their parents' immediate and financial support—not to mention, left at an extremely young age—one would think that these children received support from the community or the state. However, not one interviewee recalled any assistance from an outside source other than family. Amló, Elizabeth, and Ricky provided recollections of outsiders from their communities, who used their power to inflict unnecessary pain. In Esmeralda's testimony, school office staff allowed Jackie to take Esmeralda and Elena home, which can be constituted as indirect help since the school avoided keeping the remaining family apart during school hours. Yet, no one recalled receiving assistance from Child Protective Services (CPS) or other guardians of children in the community. If any help was offered, it was minimal enough to be dislodged from my interviewees' memories.

In my own experience, my parents were deported when I was fifteen. That entire week, I remember fearing further separation from my siblings by CPS. To avoid detection, my siblings and I slept at my aunt and her family's tiny, two-bedroom home until an uncle returned from México to stay with us. My cousins' room held seven children—my aunt's three kids, my sibling, and myself. My siblings and I slept on the floor, and we joked amongst my cousins about feeling like tamales bunched up in one room. Despite my relief after a month had gone by and no government agent had come to our home,

I was surprised and felt insignificant. I questioned our value in society since multiple parties like our school and ICE knew about our situation as four unaccompanied (for all they knew), underaged siblings recently removed from our parents.

The absence of help counters the romanticized myth that we live in a child-friendly society.<sup>49</sup> In his analysis of children in American history, historian Steven Mintz argues that Americans hold a nostalgic memory of childhood that is simply a story we tell ourselves about ourselves; it is a porous memory combining elements of reality and fantasy. Through historical deconstruction, he argues a counter narrative of American childhood in which children have been anything but happy and innocent due to the direct and indirect neglect of adults and the state.<sup>50</sup> While his work ended at the turn of the twenty-first century, the Villarreal and Leva children prove that Mintz's counter narrative holds true today.

### **Yá me cansé de llorar y no amanece | I am tired of crying and dawn has not yet broken**

What occurs to families after they have become separated? While there are countless avenues taken, all ultimately lead to two basic outcomes. Either the family lives with la frontera dividing them, or families begin a new life beyond it. The Villarreal and Leva family, as well as my own, chose the former. This decision is an extremely difficult one. Although the former choice allows those left behind to take advantage of the opportunities undocumented Americans migrated for, it also robs parents from carrying their duties as parents and leaves children feeling unsupported, overwhelmed, and rushed into adulthood. The Villarreal family, Ricky, and I have persistently felt entrapped in a long night full of sorrow and pain waiting for dawn to break.

All my interviewees emphasized that the greatest interruption for families separated by ICE deportations is the way in which children are forced to experience coming of age in unique manners. While Amlo focused on the inevitable needs of his children, Elizabeth highlighted the magnitude of which these circumstances are affecting children.<sup>51</sup> She mentioned how she has prayed more than ever during these last nine years for her children's safety and success but cannot imagine what it would be like if her children were bunched up like animals in cages.<sup>52</sup>

Amongst the younger members of these separated families, Alexandria, Esmeralda, and Ricky reminisce over the years they've spent without their parents. Although they are all fortunate enough to have legal access to exit and enter the United States as American citizens, they agreed that this familial circumstance falls short compared to the experiences children and parents should have with daily face-to-face interactions. Alexandria reminds us that spectators can disconnect themselves from these realities by focusing on other topics, but for her,

...it's very difficult. Even in society, having to explain why I can't mark this box [when] filling out FAFSA because my family is different...having to explain to a counselor why [I am] having such a hard time identifying [with] a certain category, it makes [me] feel even more marginalized. [I] already check...that...I am a female—which it makes it somehow more difficult to make it in this patriarchal society. [I mark] that [I am] Hispanic and Latina and that somehow makes it even more difficult. But having a different situation in which [I] have to say that you don't live with [my] parents and [my] situation is very complicated, um, that just makes it even more difficult.<sup>53</sup>

What Alexandria highlighted in this section is a “matrix of domination” unique to her by deconstructing each factor contributing to the inequality she and other daughters of deported parents face in American society. According to Healy et al., intersectionality is a concept that

acknowledges that everyone has multiple group memberships and that these crisscross and create different experiences for people with varying combinations of statuses... in terms of separate simple dichotomous systems, based on class, race, gender, or some other criterion...intersectional approach analyzes how these statuses link together and form a “matrix of domination.”<sup>54</sup>

Furthermore, Alexandria produced a specific memory following her parents' deportation, one that haunts her amidst her aspirations for social escalation through higher education. In a society where she feels like her situation is rarely reflected and much less supported, we can interpret the repeated mention of the word “difficult” in Alexandria's testimony as symbolic of her increasing frustrations as a participant in the institution of education. Her intersectional identity, in other words, was further complicated and marginalized by the deportation of her parents.

In the same way Alexandria was reminded of her peculiar familial circumstances, Esmeralda shifted focus on how the absence of immediate, vis-à-vis parental guidance can harm an adolescent financially. She admitted to collecting extensive debt for her younger siblings in order to fill the unexpected void of her parents. Esmeralda recalled how she got her first job almost half a year after her parents' deportation when she turned eighteen. She worked at the community college she attended through the work study program and was paid once a month for the limited 19.5 hours a week she was allowed to work. She joked, “I was balling with \$700 a month.”<sup>55</sup> Although her younger sister, Elena, worked to help contribute to the family's income, Elena was limited to a part-time position due to her lack of work

experience and youthful age. This was clearly not enough of an income for a family of four.<sup>56</sup> In a capitalist society hungry to entangle youth in credit card debt, it is understandable how Esmeralda became victim to marketing strategies offering financial access when her parents were deported.<sup>57</sup> Today, almost nine years after her parents' deportation, she is still paying off that debt.<sup>58</sup> On the surface, Esmeralda's racked up debt may seem as a consequence of adolescent financial irresponsibility, but from a deeper analysis, her testimony reveals its necessity due to familial displacement.

While Alexandria and Esmeralda focused on social and financial challenges, Ricky emphasized the damage that family separations causes to a child's development. He suggested,

It's making them grow a lot quicker than what they should, and they don't fully experience their childhood or their teenage years. Even [for] me, I was 20. And in a way it's still affecting me...[I] gotta focus on, kinda like, [being] the head of the household. I gotta think like "the man" and think about, "What am I going to get first? What do I need to pay first? What do I need to take care of?" You want to think about having fun but that goes away because then you have to think, "I have this stuff to take care of first."<sup>59</sup>

Ricky continued to say that this familial interruption impeded him from experiencing a normal transition from childhood to full adulthood since he was placed as the primary caregiver for his younger brother. Whether it was a planned change in life or not, all parents can agree that adopting the new role is laborious. But they have time to prepare and most importantly, a choice. Ricky, on the other hand, was given exponentially less time to prepare to become a caregiver. ICE's deportation of his parents robbed Ricky of his right to an emerging adulthood, and he was left with a minor of his own to raise.

Ricky focused on specific ways older siblings are often overwhelmed with adult responsibilities when forced to care for their younger siblings after their parents' deportation. Esmeralda, too, shared a similar experience as the first-born child in the Villarreal family. After a long pause, and with built courage, she admitted,

For a long time, I was upset [with] my parents. I would tell them, "These are your children, not mine," because I kind of felt like they wanted me to play that motherly role that I really didn't know, that I wasn't really aware of until, you know, now that I have my child. Now I understand what they were talking about...I knew that at one point they could have gotten their citizenship papers but because of that one mistake of saying, you know, "I am here to visit. I am not going to come back." It just put me to think... [because of] one mis-

take like this...we wouldn't have been in the situation that we are in now. I feel like it took me a long time to fully understand why they [took] that decision, because as a 17-year-old, 'til now—a 26-year-old—I feel like I've made several decisions where I feel hesitant about doing stuff...I think to that point I feel guilty now about being mad at them.<sup>60</sup>

When juxtaposing Ricky's recollection of ICE suggesting that he become an agent himself with Esmeralda's displaced anger against her parents for choosing not to pursue a secure status in America, it becomes evident that ICE deportations destabilize the physical and emotional unity of families. As mentioned before, Ricky and Sebastian's experiences led them to feel responsible for their mothers' deportations. This threw Sebastian and Ricky into years of emotional trauma rooted in guilt. Esmeralda, on the other hand, reacted to her parents' deportation and its consequences on the entire family's situation with anger and frustration, only to carry the guilt years later. In either family's situation, the shared injustice relies on the fact that these deportations transcend beyond the moment they occur. No matter how much time passes, trauma affects these individuals in complicated ways. Esmeralda and Ricky classified their parents' absence and their consequential role of caretakers for their younger siblings as something that stripped them of their free will, stifling them with responsibilities. But while the narratives of children of deported parents are striking in their similarities, these stories have variance to them, including mine.

When my parents were deported, they had moved to México with my two younger siblings, and I fell into a depression. I was pulled twice a week from my chemistry class to meet with a psychologist, the only form of outside support offered. The only method of seeing my family for months on end was through Skype; however, due to the consistently strong storms and lack of stable internet where my parents lived, I would face internet lags that would blur my family's faces, interrupt our conversations, and cause frustration that would send me into an agonizing depression. This experience limited me to visualize this as the only future I would have with my family. A week would go by, and I would wallow in resentment and pain because I would become aware that I was missing out on seeing my younger siblings' inevitable growth.

What released me from my depression was not consistent therapy, but the privilege my parents gave me in adopting my younger siblings. Perhaps because I felt completely alone during the first year after my parents' deportation, I was able to appreciate the motivation that came with responsibility. Perhaps because Esmeralda and Ricky were left with no choice but to raise their younger siblings, they hold a unique memory. The consequences of separated families due to deportation are a multidimensional range of responses. Nonetheless, these responses, as different as they may be, echo the same cry for reunification that continues to be overshadowed by dominant

narratives that suggest all “illegal immigrants” are criminals and, therefore, must be deported.<sup>61</sup> For undocumented American families, it is indeed a restless, long night anxiously anticipating the dawn to shed the light of reunification.

### **Lo que no se pregunta no se dice | What goes unasked goes unshared**

This nightmare, however, remains disconnected from the public memory even within vulnerable communities that face possibilities of deportation and separation. This silence is achieved through a common belief found amongst the Mexican American community: “lo que no se pregunta no se dice (what goes unasked goes unshared).” Although not explicitly mentioned verbatim, there is evidence that this saying ran through the minds of some of my interviewees. Amlo and Elizabeth, the eldest of my interviewees, demonstrated this attitude more than Esmeralda, Alexandria, and Ricky. On average Amlo and Elizabeth spent 17.55 minutes throughout their interviews providing a combined 68 sentences for the 11 questions I asked. On the other hand, my younger interviewees spent an average of 47 minutes to complete the interview providing a combined 268 sentences for the same 11 questions. This means that Esmeralda, Alexandria, and Ricky’s interview time increased by 267.81% and provided 394.30% more combined sentences compared to Amlo and Elizabeth. In addition, the parents were more reluctant to share more concrete details regarding how they felt emotionally about their deportation, opting instead to speak in a more detached, manner-of-fact way about what happened to them in the past. The children on the other hand were more willing to speak at length about how family separation continues to affect them emotionally on ese maldito día and today. The differences in length and content of this interview data suggests there are generationally specific ways of interpreting and coping with family separation.

When explicitly asked if they have shared this story with anyone outside of their family, Amlo claimed, “No tiene uno que exponer tanto sus debilidades o experiencias que la misma vida le da a uno (One does not need to expose the weaknesses or experiences that life hands them).”<sup>62</sup> Amlo felt discouraged from publicly sharing his story to avoid any reticule from society. Following this ideology, Amlo silently acknowledged that sharing his story would not bring any immediate benefit. He was unwilling to be viewed as a victim by society, which Elizabeth expands on. She admitted that amongst her family, “Hemos platicado lo difícil que a sido. Y todavía lo es porque no me doy por vencida de que me quede separada de [mis hijos] (We’ve talked about how difficult it is. And it is still difficult because I am not resigning in remaining separated from [my children]).”<sup>63</sup> Elizabeth disengaged from publicly sharing this story in a form of protest against the Villarreal family’s reality. Both Amlo and Elizabeth’s responses reveal unwillingness to publicly participate in telling their story because of the factors beyond their control, but also to retain some semblance of control. Since they have learned that behaving according to societal expectations in and out of the United States does

not grant them any assurance that they will soon reunite with their children on U.S. soil, they are unwilling to publicly become a statistic that will remain just that.

On the contrary, the Villarreal children and Ricky Leva hold a different ideology embedded in communal support, perhaps because society failed to help them. Similar to Amlo and Elizabeth, Esmeralda and Alexandria agreed on withholding their story from particular audiences. Alexandria and Esmeralda both mentioned that a strong determining factor as to whether they share their story or not is completely based on the listener's ability to empathize. Alexandria explicitly mentioned that she will share her story with "the people who... have more of a compassionate understanding of things... so they can be more aware of the reality of certain things."<sup>64</sup> Esmeralda agreed to a similar selective process of sharing her story "so that people know that this does happen."<sup>65</sup> Although limited in their willingness to share, both Alexandria and Esmeralda's responses differ from their parents' stark refusal to share their story with the community. Where their parents fear that their experiences will either fall on deaf ears or be met with reticence, the Villarreal children understand the importance of sharing their story to demolish misconceptions surrounding undocumented Americans, their deportations, and separated families.

On this same note, Ricky admitted to sharing his story with anyone who asks him about it. He explained, "If they ask me anything I'll tell them. I'm not like, 'Ahhh.' Unless it's super personal, but I don't get that a lot."<sup>66</sup> By personal, it was clear that he excluded his own emotional reactions. Throughout his interview, he provided details of his parents' emotional reactions and their constant fears, but he neglected to express his own feelings. While Amlo and Elizabeth refused to acknowledge their trauma publicly, Ricky escaped by silencing his emotions and acknowledging the pain this situation inflicts on his own family.

There is a clear generational divide amongst my interviewees. The striking variances between my older and younger interviewees may explain why the public memory of deportations and separated families is largely underdeveloped and skewed in American society. Voicing these unfortunate realities and providing an accessible platform for Americans to reach can overturn the current narrative of deported Americans and their families.

### **La Frontera & its Change Over Time**

I acknowledge that as an interviewer for this research project, I am representative of the public, and my interview subjects bravely agreed to share their stories with me. It was inevitable to avoid asking what *la frontera* symbolized to them now. Ultimately, all my interviewees agreed that this wall stood with meaning far greater than *a simple fence*. Alexandria concluded her final thoughts by tethering the anti-immigrant community's greed to the symbolism of the border.<sup>67</sup> Her words echo the 2010 argument of Republican State Senator Russel K. Pearce regarding the benefits of Arizona's racially

oppressive SB 1070 law: “Illegal is illegal...[w]e’ll have less crime. We’ll have lower taxes. We’ll have safer neighborhoods. We’ll have shorter lines in the emergency rooms. We’ll have smaller classrooms.”<sup>68</sup> Indeed, for some, *la frontera* stands as a reminder of the impeccable innocence it is protecting; one that must not be tainted or shared with outsiders.

Elizabeth and Ricky, on the other hand, shared their current understanding of the border: separation. For Ricky, this specifically referred to “the separated dreams, aspirations, or goals of some people,” while for Elizabeth, separation embodied by the border reminded her that it is the only thing standing between her and her children.<sup>69</sup> Whereas in the beginning of the interview, Elizabeth saw *la frontera* as a sacrifice, enduring the separation from her parents and siblings for social mobility in the U.S., she later claimed it was “lo único que nos divide; lo único que no nos permite estar juntos [the only thing that divides us; the only thing that does not permit us being together].”<sup>70</sup> In other words, *la frontera* now symbolizes her stripped agency. Lastly, Esmeralda and her father shared ideologies in claiming that *la frontera* represents a closed door. Esmeralda explained that it is “a closed door for family unity.”<sup>71</sup> Amlo symbolically related the border as a closed door preventing him from carrying out his duties as a father.<sup>72</sup> *La frontera* is a monument commemorating the exclusivity of American opportunity, values, and identity.

### **Final Thoughts**

This research is meant to inspire a counter narrative of undocumented Americans, their deportations, and their families. Undocumented Americans deserve more than being exploited for their labor and neglected from their fundamental civil rights in “*la jaula de oro*.” Children of undocumented Americans deserve their rights to a physically united family, rather than displacement in the name of national security.

*La frontera* as a monument does not have to encompass greed, separation, and exclusivity. Americans can change what the U.S.-México border represents if and only if just and reasonable policies are put in place that acknowledge undocumented Americans as humans worthy of respect. Then, and only then, will our institutions, legislation, and the dominant narrative provide these communities a platform that is denied to them. To combat the current memory that criminalizes and dehumanizes undocumented Americans, these individuals need to be recognized as humans rather than aliens, illegals, and dangerous suspects simply because of their nationality. I argue for a complete demolition of the Immigration Customs and Enforcement agency. This is not to underscore the need for an agency guarding our borders. Rather, my argument derives from the fact that an institution rooted in racism, discrimination, and power cannot gain the trust of the millions of lives it has already affected. Lastly, comprehensive immigration reform that will allow for faster and easier access into the United States must be worked on and successfully transitioned into society. Cherry picking specific transmi-

grants through government policy solely based on their inherited social and economic wealth gives an unfair advantage to a selected few, leaving other migrants ambitious for a better life with no choice but to enter the United States illegally. Together, these humble suggestions can rid undocumented American families of the cultivated national trauma they face today.

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# Unpacking Popular Culture

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*"As it is now, television was seemingly everywhere, its narratives and characters pervasive, and a clear – even preeminent – part of popular culture. If identity and agency, ideology and power, worked through this realm of the popular, the close analysis of television would tell us how such entities worked. Similarly, if we wanted to change society and culture, an understanding of the entire television system . . . could help us better understand the dominant ideology and how to change it."*

-Jonathan Gray and Amanda Lotz, *Television Studies* (2018)

*"Popular music is not history, but it can be read historically, dialogically, and symptomatically to produce valuable evidence about change over time. Popular music can mark the present as history, helping us understand where we have been and where we are going."*

-George Lipsitz, *Footsteps in the Dark: The Hidden Histories of Popular Music* (2007)

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# The American Sound: The Illusion Behind the Dream

Mariah Janeé Ross

AMST 345: The American Dream

This essay was written for Professor Elaine Lewinnek's AMST 345 - The American Dream in the Fall of 2020. The assignment was to choose a piece of art and analyze it in the context of the illusive "American Dream." Understanding that the ideals behind what encompasses the "American Dream" were never meant for all is the first step to making the essence of it attainable for everyone. After reading this essay, my hope is that readers will take a deeper, more honest look inward and at the world around them and have those sometimes uncomfortable conversations that can create a path toward understanding and necessary change.

Black America has a long history of using music both as an escape from the horrors of life in a country that creates systemic inequalities and as a healing mechanism to vent and express themselves, while also calling out those systems of oppression. Rapper Kendrick Lamar has added to that history by being the first rapper to win a Pulitzer Prize for Music after starting his rap career as a sixteen-year-old from Compton, California. His 2015 song "Alright" garnered political attention on both ends of the spectrum after becoming an anthem for the "Black Lives Matter" movement. Lamar has since continued to challenge listeners to not only examine society and its power structures, but to look inward at the impact listeners have in shaping society.

From one perspective, the American Dream is as advertised. The opposing standpoint comes from millions of the country's minorities that see and live a less inclusive life structured to deter progress. Lamar's 2017 album *DAMN* embodies this second perspective by exploring various themes, including religion, duality, and America's role in it all. On the eleventh track of the fourteen-song album, Lamar placed the song "XXX" strategically and respectively between "LOVE" and "FEAR," two songs full of raw, unfiltered emotion. What makes "XXX" a unique cultural representation of the American Dream is how the song exposes the country's hypocrisy and willful ignorance, through storied verses and the words of the iconic rock band U2. The song opens with the lyrics, "America, God bless you if it's good to you," followed by a plea for America's hand and understanding before an abrupt

change in tempo.<sup>1</sup> The subsequent two verses set the scene of a person resorting to violence in seeking justice after being placed in less-than-ideal positions. Before realigning the theme of hypocrisy with the break, “Alright, kids, we’re going to talk about gun control,” Lamar both accuses and questions American ethics and morality with poignant metaphor and rhyme.<sup>2</sup>

Lamar opens “XXX” by implying a person living in American ghettos would prefer a series of unideal scenarios like “a sea full of sharks” and “the wilderness with a nemesis,” rather than the life they were born into. In the closing lines of the first verse, Lamar adopts the unfortunate misconception that the only way out of the ghetto is through making music or becoming a professional athlete:

Johnny don’t wanna go to school no mo’, no mo’  
Johnny said books ain’t cool no mo’ (No mo’)  
Johnny wanna be a rapper like his big cousin  
Johnny caught a body yesterday out hustlin’  
God bless America, you know we all love him<sup>3</sup>

Inevitably, that route leads to the song’s subject being trapped in his environment and a perpetual cycle of violence, much as it does in life outside of music. Despite homeownership being a focal point of the American Dream, millions still suffer the repercussions of century-old legislation, making that goal near impossible to attain. The commentary is similar to historian Marisa Chappell’s *Washington Post* article, “The False Promise of Homeownership,” in which she writes, “The policies [post-World War II politicians] enacted made homeownership more attainable for middle- and upper-income white families but have left minorities and low-income Americans behind in the process. If this was the American Dream, it was one purposefully put out of reach of many Americans.”<sup>4</sup> Lamar supports this theory by sarcastically praising America and denouncing the country for the mentalities it helped foster for its Black and Brown youth.

The second verse opens with a dramatic beat drop, complete with the occasional sound of a siren and the lyrics, “Yesterday I got a call like from my dog like 101, said they killed his only son because of insufficient funds.”<sup>5</sup> The reference to “insufficient funds” is a possible connection to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have A Dream” speech where the Civil Rights leader stated, “We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation.”<sup>6</sup> Whether the son was involved in violence or just a bystander, the unrest that permeates American ghettos stems from a lack of equal opportunity and false promises. The “funds” King referred to, according to Lamar, still haunt the Black community as they continue to be plagued by injustices and inequality. What King said in 1963 about the United States Declaration of Independence, that “instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds,’” arguably rings just as true today in 2020.<sup>7</sup>

In regard to receiving “a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice,” the option isn’t there for everyone.<sup>8</sup>

Following a shift in tempo that meets a more mellow tone, we hear rock icon Bono sing, “It’s not a place, this country is to me a sound, of drum and bass.”<sup>9</sup> This unique way of seeing the country evokes the idea that what America can or should be is greater than what it truly is. What America represents is more important than the quality of life it offers its citizens. The concept is reminiscent of the message in Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes’s poem “Let America Be America Again.” In his famous poem, Hughes argues that the American Dream is nearly dead and that, though it has never truly been the “land of the free and home of the brave,” it was intended to be, it should and still can be. When writing, “O, let America be America again—the land that never has been yet,” Hughes conjures the belief that America is simply an idea, an idea Bono connects to in the chorus and Lamar continues to hit on through the remainder of the song.<sup>10</sup>

Bono finishes the concise chorus with a paradox insinuating willful ignorance on the part of millions: “You close your eyes to look around.”<sup>11</sup> Author and journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates discusses a similar dream state when he writes, “Americans believe in the reality of ‘race’ as a defined, indubitable feature of the natural world,” in a book written for his son *Between the World and Me*.<sup>12</sup> Coates describes white Americans’ tendency to categorize in terms of race as a direct result of racism, not of race itself. He goes on to write, “The belief in the pre-eminence of hue and hair, the notion that these factors can correctly organize a society and that they signify deeper attributes, which are indelible—this is the new idea at the heart of these new people who have been brought up hopelessly, tragically, deceitfully, to believe that they are white.”<sup>13</sup> Despite whiteness being the nation’s way of maintaining a system of hierarchy, millions are walking around believing its false validity. Lamar reemerges with the opening lyrics:

The great American flag is wrapped in drag with explosives  
Compulsive disorder, sons and daughters  
Barricaded blocks and borders  
Look what you taught us!  
It’s murder on my street, your street, back streets  
Wall Street, corporate offices  
Banks, employees, and bosses with  
Homicidal thoughts; Donald Trump’s in office<sup>14</sup>

Connections to *Between the World and Me* can again be found as Lamar shifts his focus to American realities. Violence does not only exist within Black and Brown communities, a point both Lamar makes above and Coates makes when he writes about the enslavement of African Americans. Coates writes, “They were people turned to fuel for the American machine. Enslavement was not destined to end, and it is wrong to claim our present circum-

stance— no matter how improved— as the redemption for the lives of people who never asked for the posthumous, untouchable glory of dying for their children.”<sup>15</sup> When Lamar exclaims, “Look what you taught us,” he’s asking America to recognize its long history and present reality full of violence.<sup>16</sup> The American flag, a widely acknowledged symbol of freedom and independence, “wrapped in explosives” drives the point that much further.

Ultimately, it’s safe to say Kendrick Lamar is skeptical of the American Dream as it is marketed. Much like Coates, Lamar has an outlook that could easily be viewed as pessimistic by some but a reality for others. In many ways, Lamar asks Americans to see the world strategically crafted around them by taking off their blinders to look around. Like Coates, Lamar speaks to an audience who looks like him, but still hopes to educate and foster some kind of understanding from those that do not. In “XXX,” Lamar paints an image most of Black America can easily recognize; the American Dream does not come wrapped in the same package for everyone.

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# American Expectations: Nostalgic Ties to *WandaVision*'s Reception

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AMST 442: Television and American Culture

This essay was written for Dr. Falero's course, AMST 442 Television and American Culture. The assignment called for analyzing an American television show and relating that show to American culture in some way. This essay analyzed multiple episodes of the show, *WandaVision*, and attempted to make some connections to the main character, Wanda, and how nostalgia and expectations shape and hinder fans of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. This essay pulled information from some great articles about Marvel superheroes and how those superheroes were seen through the lens of different people within different stages of American history. With the help from the articles, *WandaVision*, Dr. Falero, and Professor Abnet, "American Expectations: Nostalgic Ties to *WandaVision*'s Reception," was able to shine.

As American citizens, we have a plethora of expectations within our lives. We expect to wake up every morning to a new day. We expect to live amongst the people we love and cherish. We expect the media we consume on a daily basis to be fulfilling and rewarding. However, these expectations can also leave us dissatisfied if they are too unrealistic. One reason this happens is due to nostalgia. Nostalgia is an idealized version of the past, so these memories are often stripped of all the negatives, leaving us only with the positives. If we see something new that conflicts with these idealized memories, we are often quick to reject that competing memory, becoming dissatisfied with anything that inevitably fails to be perfect. The question at hand is why do we *expect* these idealized versions of our past? Why do we harbor negativity when these expectations fall short? Can the American fear of change be rooted in the expectancy for uniform living and nostalgia?

A great way to contextualize these questions and the broader ideas of nostalgia and expectancy can be found in Marvel Studios' television series, *WandaVision*. Since *WandaVision* is within the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), there is a certain expectation these films and television series must meet in order to appeal to the American masses. *WandaVision* is a perfect series to help shed light on American expectations due to its mixed reception

between fans and critics, its boldness to bend an age-old television genre, and its themes of nostalgia, grief, and loss. This essay argues that nostalgia for the hallmarks of the MCU affected the reception of *WandaVision*.

Marvel Studios began its fourth “phase” with one of the most ambitious stories they have ever told. *WandaVision* fleshes out two of their less dynamic Marvel characters, Wanda Maximoff and Vision, a Tony Stark (Iron Man) AI turned sentient.<sup>1</sup> The show centers on Wanda’s grieving process after the death of Vision and her twin brother all within six years. The series also shows how Wanda uses nostalgia for American sitcoms to suppress her grief. When she was young, Wanda lost her parents when a Stark missile crashed into their home in the fictional county of Sokovia. The only things she had to keep her company were her brother and the American sitcoms she used to watch with her family every night before bed. In the present day, Wanda uses her powers to trap an entire suburb called Westview, and she forces its residents to live an idealized version of Wanda’s life before her loved ones were killed. This idealized version of Wanda’s life is in the style of the sitcoms she watched growing up as a kid. For example, in episode 1 Wanda forces two residents to play dinner party guests at her and Vision’s home in the style of *I Love Lucy*. When the husband begins to choke, the wife begs Wanda to help him. Yet, through the begging, the wife is forced to keep a smile, indicating to the audience that Wanda’s powers are holding the couple captive to keep up the facade.

Through these sitcoms, viewers see Wanda’s strong belief in television playing such an integral part of normal family values. Understanding the central argument of Cecelia Tichi’s *Electronic Hearth* proves advantageous when questioning Wanda’s nostalgic desires early in the show. Tichi compares the television to the hearth due to the former’s comfortability and familiarity within early American households across the nation. The hearth served feminine values of family-oriented domesticity.<sup>2</sup> This idea, although dated, was something Wanda could find a sense of normalcy in. The television was her home, her place of safe tidings. This nostalgic box was her beacon of serenity in a world created by a facade. In a way, *WandaVision* depends on nostalgia for American sitcoms not only to progress Wanda’s story but to captivate the audience. The series pays homage to *Bewitched*, a 1960s sitcom about a wife with magical abilities and a husband who continuously tries to get her to hide those abilities. In fact, just about every episode of *WandaVision* honors a different era of sitcom television, from 1950s shows like *I Love Lucy* to early 2000s mockumentaries. It is within these early American television programs where *WandaVision* shows off its knack for thematic use of nostalgia within American culture. Although there were audience members and critics who applauded the themes of Marvel Studios’ ambitious project, a large majority of American viewers had trouble finding interest in *WandaVision*. To understand why this may be the case, one must look deeper into how nostalgia affects American values and beliefs.

In the simplest way, Wanda’s love for old sitcoms is a perfect example

of nostalgia and its power. These sitcoms remind her of a time when everyone around her protected her with a smile and a punchline. Nostalgia is remembrance, looking at one's memories of good tidings and feeling all the positivity they used to feel. Although it is mostly subjective, nostalgia seems to stay consistent within the MCU fandom. For 13 years, Americans have been following the stories of some of Marvel's most famous superheroes on both the big and small screens. Viewers have developed a set of expectations for each movie or show that further extends the lore of the MCU, and these expectations are based on pure nostalgia. The first to establish these expectations was 2008's *Iron Man*. This film gave the audience action, explosions, and arguably the most charismatic character superhero films have seen to date. *Iron Man* also planted the seed of nostalgia with something that is deep-seated in almost every Marvel movie-goer's expectations: the post-credit scene. After the credits rolled on *Iron Man*, Samuel L. Jackson's Nick Fury was shown reaching out to Tony Stark about the Avenger's Project, opening the floodgates to fan expectations and theories for years to come. The post-credit scene was Marvel Studios' new staple. People began to reminisce about every prior post-credit scene and how the next one would top the last. Between audience theories and Marvel Studios' brilliant writing, the MCU franchise became a culminating factor of American nostalgia, which ironically creates a reason behind fans' rejection of *WandaVision*.

Considering how Wanda uses nostalgia to keep her sanity and find her safe place, it is ironic to see how many people were upset with how *WandaVision* turned out due to their nostalgic expectations within the MCU. Voiced publicly through Twitter, there were multiple tweets about how "boring" *WandaVision*'s first two episodes were, many of them citing the sitcom homages. One Twitter user wrote, "One-sentence #WandaVision review: The first two episodes are the most boring hour of the MCU released to date." Another user typed, "#WANDAVISION is not for me. I love Wanda and Vision but I'm not sitting through and watching each episode as a parody of each decade. It's boring, not funny, and it doesn't even pull ya in." One of the most revealing tweets said, "Everyone for years: 'Marvel needs to do something different!' Marvel Studios: 'Okay. Here goes #WandaVision, something we've never done before.' Everyone: 'Omg. Why is it so boring? We want more spectacle.' Y'all are never pleased."<sup>3</sup> Although not directly, this final comment brings up the question of what kind of nostalgia are Americans longing for if not *WandaVision*'s? One way to interpret this question is to look at film historian, Jeffrey A. Brown's, ideas on nostalgia in *Captain America: First Avenger*:

As the only modern superhero movie set in the same time period that spawned the genre in comic books, *Captain America: First Avenger* is thoroughly grounded in a nostalgic vision of an idealized American past. The clean, romanticized depiction of 1940s America and the simple good-guys

vs. bad-guys view of the war presented in *Captain America: First Avenger* was a sharp departure from most superhero films. Critics applauded the look of the film and its relatively simple heroic narrative.<sup>4</sup>

Brown points out the nostalgia of an ideal American past in *Captain America: First Avenger*, and the same can be said for *WandaVision*. Ironically, Wanda uses sitcoms from the past, which are more often lighthearted and preach moralistic American values, to keep her nostalgic dream world alive in the present. She romanticizes American entertainment through the eras of television by use of her homages, rather than through gritty action, witty banter, and CGI raccoons, something that MCU fans did not expect. *WandaVision* keeps true to the idea of nostalgia but carries the baggage of MCU fan expectations that bolster the theme of superpowered men taking down larger-than-life villains.

When we compare *WandaVision* (the first series in MCU's Phase 4) to *Iron Man* (the first movie in MCU's Phase 1), we can see that there is not much of a difference.<sup>5</sup> As stated previously, before *WandaVision*, both Wanda and Vision were characters who had yet to be given dynamic stories. Having *WandaVision* be the first installment of the new phase was almost like looking into a mirror and seeing Phase 1's leap of faith with Tony Stark's rise to fame. *Iron Man* had few if any epic moments filled with fanservice and speculation; America got a superhero movie. The important part for *Iron Man* was that fans got that special post-credit scene at the end, showing off what was to come in the MCU. *WandaVision* does the exact same thing with their season finale by showing Wanda reading the Darkhold and Monica Rambeau reporting to a Skrull at the end of the episode, implying that we would see both Wanda and Monica Rambeau in future MCU films. Until that moment, MCU fans were left unamused by the rather small amounts of fanservice and Marvel comic easter-eggs that the studio was so known for.

Fans ran rampant throughout the entire series with theories and speculations, expecting *WandaVision* to be the *Avengers: Infinity War* of Phase 4, replete with cliffhangers and post-credit scenes. Where it may lack in actualizing fan theories, *WandaVision* does its audience justice by providing fanservice throughout the series. Fanservice refers to material in works of fiction that are intentionally added to please the audience. For instance, in the Halloween episode, Wanda and Vision sport their class comic book costumes rather than their more high-tech, new-era-appropriate ensembles. Fanservice is expected since it has been Marvel Studios' bread and butter for the past 13 years. It was also what made comic books so popular. Most fanservice is used to generate audience hype and expectations for future Marvel productions. *WandaVision* was just the beginning of blossoming new theories and fan expectations for years to come. Unfortunately, many fans could not shift their perspectives to highlight this new beginning due to their infatuation with water-cooler theorizing each new episode from week to week. The idea of a

person being able to sit through a two-to-three-hour movie, only to have all their theories fizzle out by the time a sequel came around, was no longer the norm. Weekly episodes now became weekly reminders that viewers' expectations were or were not being met.

There is something to be said when studying fan expectancy and the American fear of change when comparing *WandaVision* and the rest of the MCU movies, especially in terms of genre. For example, the writers of *WandaVision* take both the MCU formula and the original sitcom formula and blend them together, creating an entirely new take on Marvel Studios' cinematic experiences. *WandaVision* is not just another superhero drama, but a blend of multiple genres into something new. Tricia Jenkins, author of Chapter 6 in *A Companion to Popular Culture*, discusses the formation of genre and the "need for new" below:

Leo Braudy asserts that genre conventions shift when "genre [texts] essentially ask the audience, 'Do you still want to believe this?' Popularity is the audience answering, 'Yes.' Change in genre occurs when the audience says, 'That's too infantile a form of what we believe. Show us something more complicated.'"<sup>6</sup>

Jenkins makes a strong point regarding the audience being a driving force in the change of televised media, but was *WandaVision*'s genre-bending too ambitious? The show added sitcom to drama, drama to mockumentary, and navigated terrain that had never been touched by television. Jason Mittell, the author of *Television & American Culture*, creates an argument involving television as a cultural forum that adds context to this question:

According to some critics, these differing visions coexist within programs, offering a cultural forum in which diverse ideas can be heard and seen. Some of these perspectives present dominant ideologies, but others might offer alternative positions and ways of looking at the world beyond hegemonic common sense. The cultural forum model suggests that television programs, especially in the classic network era, seek to reach the broadest possible audiences; thus they must offer a range of viewpoints, rather than just one dominant perspective, in order to hail viewers and promote identification.<sup>7</sup>

For *WandaVision*, there is no dominant perspective, which may be the problem when comparing *WandaVision* to most other MCU titles. *WandaVision* was never looking for an audience of solely superhero or action fans. To compare the mixed reception of *WandaVision* to a specific MCU title with high praise like *Captain America: First Avenger*, one could see where this cultural forum doesn't translate quite the same way from movies to television. *Captain*

*America* used a very direct formula of “underdog-turned-hero stops the villain and saves the nation.” By contrast, *WandaVision*’s exploration of grief and loss may have weighed too heavily on the minds of a younger generation looking for fantastical plots and high-octane action. Altogether, this may have been too much for the average MCU fan.

To understand fans’ rejection of *WandaVision*, we need to understand *who* the fans of the MCU are and why they enjoy superhero movies. As Mittel writes, “We need to ask what a genre means for specific groups in a particular cultural instance.”<sup>8</sup> The lack of *WandaVision*’s uniform “superhero” genre seems to produce a negative reaction in American society at the peak of Marvel Studios’ MCU greatness. So, what does it mean to be a fan of MCU titles? Most of these MCU movies are high-budget action films that take place across the galaxy in beautiful environments and cost millions of dollars to make. *WandaVision*, however, is an all-American, boots-on-the-ground experience that takes a newly beloved superhero and shows the audience her descent into madness episodically. Although foreign to the MCU, this idea was quite a familiar arc from the Marvel comic books.

In 2004, Marvel comics created a miniseries called *Avengers Disassembled*, which focused on the Scarlett Witch (Wanda) destroying the lives of the Avengers due to the deterioration of her mind and the loss of her children. Although nowhere near as violent, we can see similar motives between *WandaVision*’s Wanda and the *Avengers Disassembled* Wanda. Among these similarities is a common theme of the early 21st-century: terrorism. Superhero historian Jeffrey Johnson makes a strong point regarding this theme:

[*Avengers Disassembled*] paved the way for the new Avengers by turning a long-time team member into a mentally disturbed murderer who cruelly and calculatingly slaughters her fellow heroes though. The Scarlett Witch does so by changing the universe’s very essence and recreating a new warped reality. This new reality creates a terrifying state of existence in which random attacks kill, maim, and destroy without warning and seemingly for little or no reason. No one can really ever feel safe because an enemy may attack at any moment in any way. Although this is the underlying plot of a superhero story, it sounds suspiciously similar to the way that many Americans were feeling in 2004.<sup>9</sup>

Through context clues, the audience could notice Wanda’s mental health deteriorating throughout the series of *WandaVision*, which is why she made up her nostalgic bubble of Westview to begin with. S.W.O.R.D., a fictional government agency that works with our Marvel superheroes, knows Wanda can strike and take anything at a moment’s notice. Further, the people in Westview, although happy on the surface, feel trapped, unsafe, and afraid of what could happen knowing an all-powerful superhero-turned-villain could

strike at any moment. As Johnson points out, this theme is very similar to the fear in America during the chain of terrorist attacks of September 11th as well as the Anthrax paranoia that rocked the nation in the first decade of the 21st century.<sup>10</sup> This theme of terrorism on American soil hits home for many in our country; most MCU titles feed off this theme. Yet the problem American society had with *WandaVision* was not the theme, but the character portraying the theme. Wanda portrayed herself as a typical American housewife. Wanda was a hero. Audience members expected a series that showed off this heroism but instead received a nostalgic joyride through the failing mind of Wanda as she struggled with grief and loss. To some, this was not the MCU formula. Super-heroes combating super-villains was the norm. It was what felt safe. *WandaVision* took a leap of faith and ripped off its mask, showing the face of an American culture in fear of change, rooted in nostalgic expectancy.

It may have been uncommon for masses to respond poorly to a Marvel Studios title, but it was not uncommon for audience expectations to outshine the final product. A similar argument can be made when looking at the discourse between fan expectations for the *Game of Thrones* finale and why fan theorizing often leads to disappointment. *Game of Thrones* is arguably a history-making show; with such a large fandom, satisfying each fan's expectations for a finale was nearly impossible. For years, fans got together on the couch, in the office, on forums, etc., and speculated what could happen by the end of the series. This sparked astronomical assumptions that became the bible for a community of *Game of Thrones* viewers. Theorizing is not necessarily wrong, but the disappointment fans displayed after their theories fell into the abyss of speculation is something to question. In chapter 6 of *A Companion to Popular Culture*, Tricia Jenkins (building from media studies scholar Mark Andrejevic), argues that audience response may be directly related to changes in television series:

Andrejevic also notes that fans on these forums often provide detailed commentary on everything from plot development to continuity, wardrobe, and makeup choices (27), which may help change the direction of plot, and perhaps, more broadly, genre. Exactly how much these fans actually influence producers is still hard to gauge, however, since, as Andrejevic points out, fans and recappers have a “tendency to interpret changes in the show that seem to be direct responses to online criticism as having been prompted . . . by their comments” (28), even though a variety of other factors may have played a more powerful role. Likewise, it is still unclear how much these feedback systems can actually work to affect the trajectory of an entire genre, but at least they highlight one specific way that audiences are able to provide direct feedback to media makers.<sup>11</sup>

Once fans saw changes happening in the show in their favor, they felt a certain aspect of power within their favorite digital media outlets. This idea magnified the problem viewers had with *WandaVision*. Why? *WandaVision* was a television series recorded in full, with no plans to continue past the original 10 episodes. These 30-minute episodes were much too short for the average MCU movie fan, which led to theorizing and speculating week to week, only to be met with a prerecorded finale that satisfied not even the simplest theories thrown into the void of the internet. This is not to prove Burns and Andrejevic wrong, necessarily; however, it does show that not every piece of digital media can be gauged in the same way.

The reception behind *WandaVision* is neither right nor wrong. How people experience their television is nothing but subjective. *WandaVision*'s reception is not reflective of the show's ability to impress. However, its reception *is* reflective of the way in which nostalgia affects American expectation. The Marvel Cinematic Universe has been around now for over 13 years, and within those 13 years, audiences have grown attached to the way this universe works: action, drama, fanservice, and those sneaky end-credit stingers. *WandaVision* responds to that comfortability and attachment to the norm by introducing American viewers to something new and something they can also connect with. That connection could be the love for classic television. It could even be the connection to Wanda's feelings of grief and loss. Whatever the connection may be, it was not bogged down by bad reviews and jaded reception, but rather it has yet to be found in a sea of expectations. Marvel's *WandaVision* is not a meek excuse for the start of a new action-packed phase in the MCU. In reality, *WandaVision* is a bold example of the exception.

## References

- 1 The MCU Phases refer to different sections of the films released over the past 13 years. 2008's *Iron Man* is the beginning of Phase 1; *Iron Man 3* is the beginning of Phase 2; *Captain America: Civil War* is the beginning of Phase 3; *WandaVision* is the beginning of Phase 4.
- 2 Cecelia Tichi, *Electronic Hearth: Creating an American Television Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 48.
- 3 @ScottPorch, Twitter (Twitter, January 15, 2021), <https://mobile.twitter.com/scottporch/status/1350070054939987970>; @DuncanTASM2, Twitter (Twitter, January 15, 2021), [https://mobile.twitter.com/duncan\\_tasm2/status/1350092293185933312](https://mobile.twitter.com/duncan_tasm2/status/1350092293185933312); @Jay12678, Twitter (Twitter, January 15, 2021), <https://twitter.com/Jay12678/status/1350087874939645952>.
- 4 Jeffrey A. Brown, *The Modern Superhero in Film and Television: Popular Genre and American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 102.
- 5 *The Falcon & The Winter Soldier* was actually supposed to be the first MCU television series on Disney+ but was delayed due to COVID-19, so *WandaVision* became the beginning of the MCU's Phase 4.
- 6 Tricia Jenkins, "The History and Logic of Genre Study," in *A Companion to Popular Culture*, Gary Burns ed, (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2016), 89.
- 7 Jason Mittell, *Television & American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 284.
- 8 Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 5.
- 9 Jeffrey K. Johnson, "Terrified Protectors: The Early Twenty-First Century Fear Narrative in Comic Book Superhero Stories," *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture*, 1900 to Present 10, no. 2 (2011).
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Jenkins, "The History and Logic of Genre Study," 91.



# Morticia Addams, a Different Kind of Housewife

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AMST 442: Television and American Culture

This essay was written for Dr. Sandra Falero's AMST 442-02 course: "Television and American Culture" in the Fall of 2020. The assignment was to choose an American television program and analyze three episodes through a specific lens or topic. I chose to examine the 1964 television show *The Addams Family* and identify how the character Morticia Adams was used to subvert the cultural expectations of American housewives and mothers in popular culture-- specifically the ones presented in 1950's television. Though the trope does not represent the realities of all mothers and housewives of this generation, it is important to note the prevalence and impact it had on American culture. This essay examines the idea that if *The Addams Family*, as a unit, was meant to parody and critique the ideal American family, Morticia Addams was meant to critique the stereotype of the American housewife.

They're creepy, kooky, mysterious, and spooky. The Addams Family has become one of America's favorite clan of misfits. First airing on ABC in 1964, *The Addams Family* is an American sitcom that features your typical American family, but with a twist. The Addams are known for their love of the macabre, obsession with death, dark humor, and unusual gothic fashion. In fact, many of the show's plotlines involved ordinary people meeting the Addamses for the first time and becoming absolutely terrified and affronted by their odd customs and their outlandish appearances. But perhaps it is no coincidence that this show aired when it did.

In the 1950s, family sitcoms had dominated television, and this was due in part to an American fear associated with the Cold War. During this time, there was a large push for unity and togetherness, especially within the familial and domestic spheres. In her book, *The Electronic Hearth*, author and former president of the American Studies Association Cecelia Tichi explores the American people's relationship with television throughout the years. Tichi argues that "Americans were well poised to embrace domesticity

in the midst of the terrors of the nuclear age.”<sup>1</sup> In the mid-1900s, the fear of war posed a constant threat to American society, and the fear of communism had many Americans worried about the safety of their values and beliefs. As a result, Americans found comfort in the domestic sphere, as it not only strengthened their ideas of Americans uniting together but also reflected a sense of normalcy that was otherwise being disrupted. The televised families portrayed in 1950s sitcoms all fell into traditional familial gender roles. They did more than just convey a sense of normalcy to the American people: they also helped shape the perceptions of American families for years to come. They conveyed the ideas of what a “normal American family” looked like, and anyone who did not meet these expectations were seen as being different, unusual, and perhaps un-American. Therefore, *The Addams Family* served to showcase a family that was average and ordinary, but also peculiar and different.

Airing a decade after the height of suburban American families on television, *The Addams Family* acted as a foil for the families of the 1950s. For all intents and purposes, the Addams Family *was* a normal American family, at least by television statistics. In a study done by Marvin L. Moore, most American families portrayed on primetime television during this time period were like the Addamses: conventional, nuclear, and patriarchal families who lived in middle-class suburbs with children, pets, and live-ins.<sup>2</sup> Their differences, then, came in the form of their behavior and their way of life. Yet their presentation on American television wasn’t to condemn the 1950s American sitcom family, but rather to broaden the definition of what a normal family was supposed to look like. Laura Morowitz extends this idea in her article, “The Monster Within,” in which she presents *The Addams Family* as a parody on the 1950s sitcom family in order to question the social conventions and norms portrayed within these families. Morowitz states that the purpose of this show is not to overthrow the ideal of the nuclear family, but rather to showcase new perspectives through the use of parody.<sup>3</sup>

If the presentation of the Addams Family as a whole was to parody social conventions of 1950s televised families, then this essay’s goal is to examine the character of Morticia Addams specifically and her role as a juxtaposition to the housewives and mothers presented in 1950s sitcoms. I argue that Morticia Addams was written as a contrast to the 1950s housewives for the purpose of sending a message to the viewers that the role of housewives and mothers in American society can broaden to give more freedom and power to women. In this essay, I assess three episodes of *The Addams Family* and examine how the character of Morticia Addams subverts typical social conventions of housewives and mothers of the 1950s, and what that says about their role in society as a whole.

In order to discuss Morticia Addams’ subversion of the 1950s American housewife, we must first understand what that role meant. The 1950s American housewife on television was a put-together woman whose lot in life was to care for her family and her home. She cooked all the meals in the

home, cleaned the house every day, and raised her children effortlessly. This housewife was expected to always look flawless and beautiful, despite all the manual labor she did. The televised American housewife was subservient to her husband, and she had no power in her home, let alone in American society. Previous depictions of the housewife on television were given a little more freedom to express themselves and be outspoken individuals, but that was short-lived. In her article, "Situation Comedy, Feminism and Freud," Patricia Mellencamp explains, "In situation comedy, pacification of women occurred between 1950 and 1960...the housewife, although still ruling the familial roost, changed from being a humorous rebel or well-dressed, wise-cracking, naive dissenter who wanted or had a paid job...to being a contented, if not blissfully happy, understanding homebody."<sup>4</sup> Televised housewives once had the freedom to be outspoken and ambitious, but their images shifted throughout the '50s to pacify them and portray them as content in their confined domestic roles. This was when the image of the white suburban housewife and mother of the 1950s truly took form. When one thinks of a 1950s housewife, the passive images of June Cleaver from *Leave it to Beaver* or Margaret Anderson from *Father Knows Best* come to mind. These women lived to serve their families and were perfectly content giving up all individuality for the sake of maintaining a happy home.

As televised families of the Cold War served to showcase normality and good American values, televised housewives served as an expectation for the behaviors and roles of housewives. Wives and mothers were meant to be as the TV showed: flawless, subservient, and family-oriented. As far as expectations go, this was a rather hard one to live up to. For many women, this portrayal of perfection was stifling. Women were pressured to live up to their televised counterparts, be an ideal homemaker, and to not dream beyond the domestic sphere. Feminist author and activist Betty Friedan touched upon this concept in her 1963 publication *The Feminine Mystique*, where she discussed the disappointment and discontent many American housewives and mothers faced due to their limiting role in the household. Friedan evoked the imagery of this gendered American ideal specific to white women when she wrote that "each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material...lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—'Is this all?'"<sup>5</sup> Friedan explained that this discontent felt very personal to each individual woman facing it, as if they were the only women wondering if they were discontent. And as this went on, the televised housewives and mothers showed these same women that they *should* be content, as society expected them to feel fulfilled and blissfully happy.

It is noteworthy to point out that the experience that Friedan critiqued is specifically a white housewife experience viewed from a white feminist angle. For many women of color during this time period, their reality differed greatly from the experiences of housewives like Friedan, even if they were also wives and mothers. The trope of the 1950s American housewife is

specifically portrayed as coming from a white, middle-class household. There have been responses to this specific racial viewpoint, such as feminist author and activist bell hooks, who actively critiqued the work of Betty Friedan. In response to Friedan's book, hooks wrote,

Friedan's famous phrase, 'the problem that has no name,'... actually referred to the plight of a select group of college-educated, middle and upper class, married white women—housewives bored with leisure, with the home, with children, with buying products, who wanted more out of life... She ignored the existence of all non-white women and poor white women.<sup>6</sup>

As hooks pointed out, the definition of housewife as portrayed by Friedan and televised media of the '50s is a limited viewpoint, and this essay is not written to depict this narrative as the only reality for this time period, but as an examination of a specific group of women.

As stated before, the purpose of *The Addams Family* was to present a different perspective on American life as a critique of norms and customs in society at the time. Women were unhappy in their roles as housewives and mothers, but television did little to portray other options for them. Then, in 1964, Morticia Addams came to the television screen. Morticia Addams entered households as a new kind of housewife—one with a distinct personality, interests, and hobbies. Along with that, Morticia's character was also respected by her husband, and she held power over her family. This was important because Morticia went against most of the stereotypes set by her predecessors. Unlike June Cleaver or Margaret Anderson, Morticia was not confined to the kitchen as a house servant to her family.<sup>7</sup> Unlike Lucy Ricardo of *I Love Lucy*, Morticia was not confined to her house, unable to make a name for herself.<sup>8</sup> Morticia Addams was a new kind of housewife television had not yet seen. To examine the extent to which she differed from other American housewives and mothers, I examine three episodes of *The Addams Family*.

In the fifth episode of season one titled, "The Addams Family Tree," the Addams Family is in the midst of a rivalry with another family. In this episode, Morticia and her husband, Gomez, are seen fencing in their spare time, as it is their shared hobby. Morticia ends up defeating Gomez, who immediately proceeds to praise her fencing prowess. From this alone, much can be understood of the Addams Family's approach to gender roles. Fencing is a typically masculine sport, something women of this time were not likely to do, and Morticia is seen not only participating in it against a male competitor, but besting him. What is also important to note is the reaction Gomez has to losing to his wife. Sports such as fencing are typically gendered a male activity, and often there is an expectation of the competitive attitudes many men have over any sport. Rather than being upset that he was bested in a physical competition, Gomez immediately recognizes Morticia's ability,

and he genuinely congratulates and celebrates her victory. Gomez's ability to recognize his wife's skills, even though they are better than his own, sets their marriage apart from the televised couples of the past decade. Morticia and Gomez's fencing match, much like their marriage, is based on their equality. Neither of them has the upper hand against the other and they are matched as respected equals.

Televised married couples of the 1950s, by contrast, typically showcased glaring inequalities between the husband and wife. For example, June Cleaver was never seen as an equal to her husband, Ward Cleaver. Not only that, but she was often the butt of his jokes and ridicule. Mary Beth Haralovich brings up this concept in her work titled, "Sitcoms and Suburbs: Positioning the 1950s Homemaker." In this article, Haralovich analyzes the characters June Cleaver and Margaret Anderson in order to fully explain how the concept of the 1950s homemaker was created through pop culture. When discussing June and Ward's relationship, Haralovich writes, "Ward, often a misogynist, encourages [his sons] to adopt his own cynical attitude toward their mother and women in general... Ward responds [to his son] by positioning his knowledge as a condition of June's ineptness... *Leave it to Beaver* works to contain June's potential threat to patriarchal authority."<sup>9</sup> The significance of Ward's dismissal of June is not only to undermine her as a character but showcase to viewers how housewives and mothers are to be viewed as lesser than their husbands. This works in part to undermine their roles in the broader society. Morticia and Gomez, strange as they are meant to seem, showcase a contrasting type of marriage because they view one another as equals, and they do not put each other down the way Ward would do to June. This portrayal of Morticia and Gomez countered the perspective of a marriage wherein the male had the sole power and the woman had to be his lesser.

Along with her hobby of fencing, Morticia participates in many of her interests in this episode, such as painting. Not once in this episode (or in most of the series) is Morticia Addams seen participating in household chores. Of course, this may be attributed to the presence of Lurch, their butler, but even so, it was significant at this time that Morticia was almost always shown doing leisurely activities or spending time with her loved ones. In this time period, the woman of the house was expected to do all of the household chores. That is why oftentimes when one thinks of a 1950s housewife, imagery of chores and household labor come to mind. As Haralovich writes, many of the tasks housewives tend to be seen doing on television are cooking, cleaning, watering plants, and ironing.<sup>10</sup> Though many middle-class American women lived comfortable, suburban lives with loving families, their confinement to a house of chores and tedium took a toll on their well-being. Friedan discussed the dissatisfaction and unfulfillment many housewives faced at this time for not having the time or space to partake in their own interests.<sup>11</sup> This was why Morticia's presence on television was so significant for housewives. By contradicting her 1950s housewife counterparts, Morticia showed that

women who were able to participate in their own interests and hobbies were fulfilled, content, and better off for it. Morticia showed that the household did not fall apart without the mother doing all of the work.

Another important point of interest presented in this episode is the allusion made by Gomez and Morticia to their active sex life. This was a touchy, taboo subject for this time period, especially on television. Sex was a subject that was meant to be a private affair, and it was deemed impolite to allude to or reference one's sex life. The housewives and mothers of the 1950s did not even entertain the notion of having an active sex life with their partners. When discussing the love life of June and Ward Cleaver, Haralovich simply mentions that their room is shown with two separate twin beds for the two of them, a fairly common practice for televised couples of this time.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, Gomez and Morticia are rarely ever subtle about their sexual interest towards one another, with even the slightest word from Morticia sending her husband into a romantic frenzy of passion. The concept of Morticia Addams being simultaneously a housewife, mother, and a sexual being was something significant, to say the least, as the culture of the 1950s appeared to separate those traits into different identities. Morticia was a message to audiences that a woman did not have to give up her sexuality in order to fulfill the role of wife and mother. The televised housewives of the previous decade were somewhat enigmas of sexuality in comparison to Morticia: they were meant to be viewed as objects of sexual desire, yet they were not supposed to be sexual beings. The stereotypical image of the 1950s housewife came with implications of a sexual nature. In regard to this image, Haralovich writes, "Both Margaret and June exemplify Robert Woods Kennedy's theory that housing design should display the housewife as a sexual being...June's ubiquitous pearls, stocking and heels, and cinch-waisted dresses as amusing in their distinct contradiction to the realities of housework."<sup>13</sup> Though the housewife is supposed to appear glamorous and desirable, she is supposed to be prudish even though the very presence of her children stand proof of her once active sexuality.

In her article, "The Monster Within," Laura Morowitz contrasts this image by using the examples of Morticia Addams as well as Lily Munster of *The Munsters*. Lily, like Morticia, also contrasted the 1950s housewife look. As stated by Morowitz, "Both Lily and Morticia are in violation of one of the central codes of the sitcom mom: the short, no-fuss hairdo that serves to desexualize her. In contrast, Lily and Morticia display almost identical, dark, waist length locks, which culminate in prominent widow's peaks. Such tresses mark them as overtly sexual."<sup>14</sup> Not only does Morticia's hair mark her as a sexual being, but so does her wardrobe. Morticia wears a long black gown with a plunging neckline that shows her cleavage. Her dress is form-fitting, and it showcases the curves of her figure. Morticia's appearance is a stark contrast to the prim-and-proper American housewife stereotype. Morticia owns her sexuality and is never once ashamed by it—it becomes a major point of her life. Considering her appearance, wardrobe, and allusions to her active sex

life, Morticia sets herself apart from the other housewives and sends the message that a woman's sexuality is not a bad thing.

In the next episode titled "Morticia, the Breadwinner," Morticia and Uncle Fester misunderstand Gomez's financial situation and believe that he has gone bankrupt. Morticia rallies the entire family together to earn money to help Gomez. Morticia takes up a job teaching fencing lessons. As the episode progresses, Morticia realizes she possesses a valuable stock, and she haggles with a stockbroker in order to sell it for one million dollars. This episode is significant for Morticia's character in many ways. To start, she participates in the male dominated sport of fencing once more, even going so far as to teach fencing lessons for a profit. This is a significant point because she decides to earn her own income in order to help her family. Women were not expected to have any say in the finances of the house, which makes it all the more important when Morticia proceeds to haggle with a stockbroker and help earn one million dollars for her family. Morticia sets herself apart from the 1950s American housewife in that she does not need her husband to help with financial matters and is able to take care of the situation herself, earning her own money. At the end of the episode, it turns out that Gomez was the one who unknowingly paid her stock. Even so, he firmly stands by his decision to pay his wife one million dollars for it, despite her protests. He declares that it is a matter of honor, and he will not accept her refusal. To Gomez, the honor was not that he, as a man, kept his money, but that he acted fairly to his wife and paid her what she was owed. Once again, this is an instance of Morticia and Gomez seeing one another as equals in their marriage. Gomez could have easily refused to pay his wife, but he valued and respected her. Throughout this episode, Morticia demonstrates a woman's ability to handle finances, as well as a woman's right to a fair partnership with her husband.

The last episode I will close read is "Morticia, the Writer," which is the eighth episode of the second season that aired on November 5th, 1965. In this episode, Morticia becomes outraged at the books her children have to read in school, so she takes it upon herself to become an author and write books that she deems appropriate. Morticia puts everything in her life aside for her newfound passion of literature and locks herself away in her writing cave for days to master her craft. Gomez is upset at her choice, not because she is choosing passion work over domestic work, but because he misses her and wishes she had more time to spend with him. Wherein many other housewives and mothers presented on television can be viewed more as live-in help or servants, Gomez's unwavering love and loyalty towards Morticia shows that she is valued and appreciated by her family, rather than viewed as a servant. In this episode, Morticia decides to set everything in her life aside to pursue a career she is passionate about. Women on television were not often portrayed as wanting to leave the domestic sphere and enter the workforce. Or, if they did wish to pursue interests beyond their domestic sphere, they were often foiled and sullenly brought back home. This is touched upon by Mellencamp in her examination of Lucy Ricardo, whose weekly tele-

vised plots often involve her trying to make a name for herself in society, but always result in Lucy being confined back into her home.<sup>15</sup> It was a new perspective to show Morticia wanting something beyond her domestic life, and actually succeeding in it.

In the same vein of going beyond the domestic sphere, women of this time were often not seen working. In Moore's demographic approach to the American family on primetime television, he found that "wives and mothers across the decades were predominantly shown as home centered and supported by their husbands and fathers."<sup>16</sup> Women were actively discouraged from joining the workforce, with television acting as the medium to send this message. If women were to work, who was to take care of the home? The unpaid labor of maintaining a home was viewed as less important than working for pay, and thus it was pushed on the wife so that the husband could be the breadwinner of the family. Because of this, it was crucial that women maintain the role of the homemaker. This was adamantly clear in the show *I Love Lucy*, as Lucy is constantly portrayed as wanting to break out of her domestic sphere, only to be dragged kicking and screaming back into it. As Mellencamp writes, "If Lucy's plots for ambition and fame *narratively* failed, with the result that she was held, often gratefully, to domesticity, *performatively* they succeeded...Lucy never got what she wanted: a job and recognition. Weekly, for six years, she accepted domesticity, only to try to escape again next week."<sup>17</sup> This was true not only for the women of television, but in American society as well. When discussing women's roles in American society, Friedan wrote that women "were taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists or presidents. They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights—the independence and the opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists fought for."<sup>18</sup> With all of this in mind, one can see how significant it was to show Morticia Addams approaching a new career with enthusiasm, passion, and unrelenting drive. Morticia did not care for the social conventions keeping her homebound; she set her mind to be an author, and she would stop at nothing to make this happen. Women could see Morticia's drive within this episode, and see how there was nothing to be pitied about a woman with a motivation to work.

The last point of interest brought up in "Morticia, the Writer" is the subtle inclusion of Morticia's writing cave. One of the main aspects of housewives presented on American television in the 1950s was that they were easily used as a marketing ploy. Televised housewives spent most of their time confined to their kitchen, where they could subtly display their modern technological kitchen gadgets to unsuspecting audiences, who would then marvel at how easy these gadgets made these women's lives. Companies could easily promote their products to women at home simply by showcasing a televised housewife using the latest dishwasher or the newest vacuum cleaner. By purchasing all the modern appliances and convincing others to do the same, Haralovich argues that the televised homemaker wife was important to the

American economy.<sup>19</sup> A major part of Morticia's appearance on television was that she rejected modernity—the Addams Family altogether valued tradition and old-school gothic aesthetics. Morticia's home, the manor on 0001 Cemetery Lane, was not able to be used as a marketing ploy as there were no modern kitchen gadgets in it. Unlike June Cleaver or Lucy Ricardo, Morticia's home could not be utilized by corporations to showcase their products, as the newest innovations would look out of place in the traditional manor. This combined with the fact that Morticia was rarely ever seen doing household chores to begin with meant that she, as a character, could not be used as a marketing ploy. Morticia's sanctuary, a dank, dingy cave, showcased again how unmodern Morticia is, and how she could not be used as a gimmick to sell gadgets to unsuspecting women, even with her hobbies.

*The Addams Family* can be argued as a direct critique of the previous ideals of American normalcy and social customs. If this is the case, it can also be argued that Morticia Addams can be viewed as a direct critique towards the roles of housewives, mothers, and homemakers presented in 1950s American sitcoms. In nearly every possible way, Morticia differs from her 1950s sitcom counterpart: she dresses differently, she behaves differently, she's seen engaging in different activities, and she has a quite different relationship with her husband. In examining all of the ways Morticia differs from the television housewives of the 1950s, one can see that none of those differences affect her ability to be a good wife and a loving mother. By presenting Morticia as a unique individual with distinct hobbies and a healthy relationship with her husband and family, *The Addams Family* showcases that women should be free to express themselves and behave how they want, and that women straying from the societal roles they once held is not something to be feared but welcomed enthusiastically.

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# Complicating Environmentalism

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*"Yet it must be borne in mind that conservation . . . did not function in the interests of all Americans. At the core of the movement stood the clash over class and racial politics."*

-Ted Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History* (2002)

*"By creating parks, playgrounds, and open space, nature could be brought into the city. Southern California, and the suburbs that emulated it, followed a very different model. Instead of bringing nature into the city, they brought the city out into nature, dispersing housing and allotting private yards rather than public parks."*

-Lawrence Culver, *The Frontier of Leisure: Southern California and the Shaping of Modern America* (2010)

## Suggested Readings:

Jennifer Thomson, *The Wild and the Toxic: American Environmentalism and the Politics of Health* (University of North Carolina Press, 2019)

Marguerite S. Shaffer and Phoebe S. K. Young (eds.), *Rendering Nature: Animals, Bodies, Places, Politics* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015)

# Give a Hoot: Raising Masculine Environmentalists with Woodsy Owl

Hannah Batchelor

AMST 401T: American Culture and Nature

This essay was written for Americans and Nature (AMST 401T) with Dr. Sara Fingal in Spring 2021. It examines the cultural implications of a 1997 reboot of Woodsy Owl into a muscular, slim, humanoid owl. It discusses political pressures of the time, fatphobia, toxic masculinity, and how all of this is marketed to children.

On Earth Day 1997, the United States Forest Service decided that the body of an owl was portraying the “wrong” image of health and environmental protection and rebooted him to model the ideal “American Man”: muscular, protective, and fearless in nature. The press announcement released by the Forest Service declared, “The new Woodsy looks a little like his natural counterpart; he’s more physically fit and has a new message to go with his familiar give a hoot, don’t pollute!”<sup>1</sup> Vice President Al Gore and Bill Nye the Science Guy joined the Forest Service to sponsor the new Woodsy Owl. Gone was the round, shirtless owl of yesteryear. In his place stood a slim, muscular Woodsy with a watered-down, vague slogan: “Lend a hand, care for the land!” Flanked by these powerful men of the political and scientific worlds, the birth of the new Woodsy was shrouded by the early stages of the 1990s health panic and a growing fear that children raised alongside modern technology were disillusioned with nature and contemporary environmentalism. The Forest Service gave Woodsy Owl the idealized muscular “superhero” male body to support the notion that environmental participation is masculine and heroic, rather than an exclusively feminine pastime.

Woodsy Owl (Image 1) debuted in 1971 following the sudden uptick in environmental interest on a national scale, culminating in the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency the year before. Following their long-running success with the Smokey Bear campaign, the Forest Service set out to create another environmental icon, this time targeting pollution rather than forest fires. The agency chose the figure of an owl over a ladybug, raccoon, bull elk, and rainbow trout.<sup>2</sup> Woodsy was moderately popular in the 1970s, and his image was promoted across newspapers, magazines, and parades.



Image 1. 1971 iteration of Woodsy Owl.<sup>3</sup>

### **From Apolitical to Controversial**

However, within a year of his release, Woodsy met his first of many controversies. The United States Department of the Interior opposed the Forest Service's new mascot, citing concerns that Woodsy might be a distraction from the Interior's well-known "Johnny Horizon" campaign and his slogan, "This land is your land—keep it clean." The Forest Service countered that Johnny Horizon was not a universally relatable figure because he "was strongly masculine, very white, and definitely western."<sup>4</sup> The Forest Service wanted Woodsy to be a relatable, apolitical icon that united urban and rural spaces with his simple anti-pollution message: "Give a hoot, don't pollute!" How strange it is that, ironically, nearly twenty-five years later, Woodsy would come to embody some of the traits that Johnny Horizon was criticized for.<sup>5</sup>

During Woodsy's peak in the 1970-1980s, environmentalism was largely a bipartisan topic. Former president Richard Nixon, a staunch conservative, opened the floodgates for the most influential and powerful decade of environmental legislation in United States history. Decreasing pollution was considered a universally acceptable message. Though Woodsy was intended as a neutral, apolitical environmental icon, his existence elicited prosecution. Three years after his creation, Congress passed "The Woodsy Owl Act" (Public Law 93-318) on June 22, 1974 to protect the "image and song" of Woodsy Owl. Any unauthorized reproduction of Woodsy Owl or use of "The Ballad of Woodsy Owl" would be punished with a fine or up to six months in prison. This law delegated any funds collected from unauthorized Woodsy use to

environmental education.<sup>6</sup> Lawmakers used an “apolitical” figure to increase government regulation and prosecution, punishing the target audience of the Forest Service’s marketing campaign.

In the 1980s, there was a sudden shift in cultural perceptions of owls across the Pacific Northwest. The northern spotted owl populations native to old-growth forests had begun rapidly declining after decades of logging operations. Environmentalists began pushing to legally protect the birds’ native habitats, which served as a blow to the lucrative logging industry. Loggers, who felt the government had overreacted, immediately positioned themselves against environmentalists as the protected bird became a major point of contention in the Northwest.<sup>7</sup> Sentiments toward owls and environmentalists immediately became hostile, with bumper stickers reading, “Save a logger, eat an owl.” In 1989, the Forest Service pulled Woodsy Owl and Smokey Bear from a parade in Oregon due to anonymous death threats against the characters.<sup>8</sup> In 1990, the northern spotted owl was officially listed as “threatened” on the Endangered Species List. One year later, logging in the spotted owls’ forests was prohibited by court order. Loggers were angered by the sudden loss of jobs that accounted for around 18% of the logging industry in the Pacific Northwest. Though loggers attributed their unemployment to owls and environmentalists, the logging industry had been declining for nearly forty years due to overharvesting lumber from old-growth forests.<sup>9</sup> Rising prices due to lumber shortages led to a boom for logging companies, who laid off their workers and kept the profits. Without realizing it, the loggers and the northern spotted owl were both suffering as a result of unsustainable logging practices and corporate greed.

Woodsy Owl was temporarily retired during the spotted owl controversy for fear of more social backlash like the 1989 death threat incident. Woodsy had begun to symbolize radical environmentalism in a way that concerned the Forest Service. In 1993, three Greenpeace activists scaled the smokestack of a cement plant to protest hazardous waste burning. Two were dressed as environmental characters geared toward children, one of which was Woodsy Owl.<sup>10</sup> He became an accidental figure of activism, too political for those who had created him and the environmental movement he supposedly stood for. Perhaps this is why Woodsy was given such a weakened message in 1997, trading a message of active environmentalism for passive care of the land. After the political changes of the 1980s, it became increasingly difficult to market an environmental figure that appeased both political parties. This politicization of the owl from both sides set up the future Woodsy as a lesser version of his former self. The Forest Service was initially reluctant to bring Woodsy Owl back at all, preferring instead to focus on the more successful Smokey Bear campaign.



Image 2. A small Woodsy Owl toots his message to a large, amused Smokey Bear.<sup>11</sup>

Woodsy Owl had a lot of catching up to do compared to his beloved and iconic predecessor Smokey Bear. By the time Woodsy was introduced, Smokey had already been preventing wildfires for nearly thirty years. The Smokey Bear campaign is still the longest-running public service announcement in U.S. history.<sup>12</sup> Benefitting from his highly publicized connection to a real bear cub of the same name who had been rescued from a forest fire, the character quickly became a cultural sensation. In later decades, when Woodsy was associated with a real-life animal, it had the exact opposite effect on his popularity leading to death threats, protests, and Woodsy's temporary retirement.<sup>13</sup>

Woodsy's 1971 version closely followed the art design of Smokey: shirtless, barefoot, belted pants, and a distinctive hat (Image 4). However, in comparison to Woodsy, Smokey has not gone through a significant change to his design. Smokey remains shirtless, which goes against the Forest Service's rationale that environmental cartoons should promote safe hiking gear. So why has Smokey not undergone the same body modifications as Woodsy? Is it because Smokey is actively protecting the forests like the ideal superhero figure? Is Smokey not insecure in his masculinity, as the Forest Service was of Woodsy? Or is a bear just an acceptably masculine figure to rally behind?

### **Return to the Spotlight**

Woodsy was finally allowed to return from disgrace in 1997 after

several years of focus groups and a collaboration with Children’s Television Workshop, best known as the nonprofit group behind *Sesame Street*. The focus groups determined that Woodsy needed a modern update to be an effective symbol again, attempting to “reach children during their crucial years when their environmental attitudes are forming.”<sup>14</sup> Additionally, the image reboot was enacted to potentially gain back support from the logging industry with his new, less radical message.

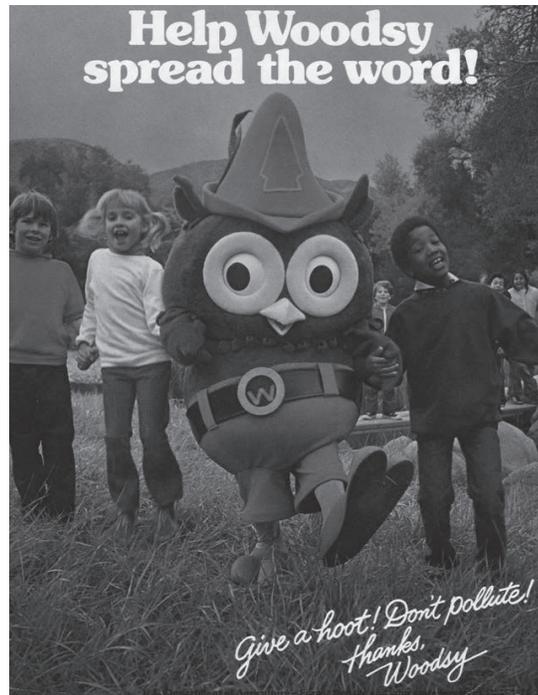


Image 3. 1977 poster of Woodsy Owl with children (Unknown, 2017).<sup>15</sup>

Today, the Forest Service website reads that Woodsy Owl is a “whimsical fellow...[with] his heart set on motivating kids to form healthy, lasting relationships with nature.”<sup>16</sup> By connecting with children in their early years, the Service hoped that the next generation of environmentalists would not be corrupted by modernization. The desire to pull youth into the environmental movement before they could be molded by urbanization is a common thread in Woodsy’s history. This fear, paired with increased national interest in the environmental movement, likely contributed to the Forest Service’s renewed interest in their mascot and dedication to bringing him back.

The Forest Service directly targeted their 1971 and 1997 Woodsy marketing campaigns toward young children, specifically under ten years old. The original Woodsy was tested in churches and schools in La Habra, California to determine his accessibility and effectiveness.<sup>17</sup> The 1997 design was also explicitly meant for “future conservation leaders — children aged 5-8.”<sup>18</sup> The 1990s saw an uptick in environmental support and regulations, including the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, revisions to the Clean Air Act, concerns over acid rain, and fear of the ozone layer disappearing. To maintain

the drive of the 1990s environmental movement, the Forest Service marketed Woodsy Owl as a new, fit, superhero-man-owl that would save the planet.



Image 4. Woodsy Owl's design 1997 to present<sup>19</sup>

### **Woodsy's Revenge Body**

The rebooted Woodsy was introduced at a 1997 Earth Day celebration in Washington, D.C. Gone was the “short and portly” figure of 1971 as the new Woodsy was “lean and athletic.”<sup>20</sup> Vice President Al Gore helped introduce the updated Woodsy Owl to the world with a revised outfit and new slogan (Image 3).<sup>21</sup> Woodsy's previous saying, “Give a hoot, don't pollute!” was replaced with, “Lend a hand, care for the land!” Woodsy's body issues were “fixed” in his reboot: he was thinner, fitter, and carrying a gentler, less demanding tone in his vague message.

The same year the new slim, muscular Woodsy was released, the World Health Organization officially declared obesity an “epidemic,” a declaration that has since been attributed to medical fatphobia.<sup>22</sup> The fear of losing children to modernization paralleled concerns for their health and weight. Increasing focus on the bodies of young Americans and potential connections to future health issues led to a public effort to “fight” the war on obesity. The idealization of the thin body as “a moral imperative and a symbol of good citizenship,” while “the fat body [is deemed] unhealthy, costly, and immoral” in American culture is represented in the 1997 redesign of Woodsy Owl.<sup>23</sup> His new body emerged from the battle as a symbol of national pride.

The idea that obesity was determined by the built environment led to positive changes in urban planning, such as more walkable cities. However,

this focus on health also turned to “increasing awareness” of obesity, encouraging interactions with nature to fight it.<sup>24</sup> Thus, physical fitness became a priority. Woodsy Owl’s 1997 update encouraged children to get outside, and his new outfit was specifically designed to depict how an adventurous man should dress. While the 1990s infamously idealized the feminine, heroin-chic body, men were pressured to attain a different standard. Over the decade, the popularity of superheroes and bodybuilding transitioned the ideal male body into one of extreme muscle composition, reimagining the archetypical American man as a steroid-superhero of sorts. Bodybuilding icons such as Arnold Schwarzenegger encapsulated the hypermasculine, heterosexual male in the 1980s, who “raged war on any ‘other’ who could be seen as a threat to the ‘freedom’ of the United States.”<sup>25</sup> The patriotic male body must be both slim and muscular.

The media had mocked Woodsy’s body shape since his original debut, diluting his anti-pollution message. *The Washington Post* reported in 1971 that the Forest Service was releasing “a fat owl wearing trousers and a feathered cap holding up a finger-like wingtip to admonish forest visitors against pollution.”<sup>26</sup> The media praised the updated 1997 Woodsy iteration as thinner, fitter, leaner, healthier, more athletic, slimmer, and improved in contrast to the original 1971 version, which was considered fat, portly, round, roly-poly-like, and large. What is the fascination with the round body of an owl? Applying human body standards to an owl reflects American cultural notions regarding health, weight, and who belongs outdoors. The public shift toward a new Woodsy image implies that larger bodies are not welcome in nature or wilderness. If the intention was solely to depict safe hiking gear, rather than the half-naked and barefoot 1971 Woodsy, then the change to Woodsy’s body itself does not make sense. By promoting the perfect image of health as the new environmental icon of the Forest Service, the agency was also promoting idealized masculinity to encourage environmental participation with young audiences.

To encourage interaction with environmentalists, the Forest Service pushed Woodsy into a hypermasculine box that would represent him, and his followers, as superheroes protecting the environment rather than the round, silly owl he once had been. The transformation from the body of an owl to a humanoid, muscular man-owl implies that non-muscular bodies do not align with the ideal outdoorsman. Changing his body and stating that the 1997 version represented morals different from that of the 1971 version implies that larger bodies cannot be heroes or environmentalists. Applying American cultural beauty and bodily standards to an owl is a strange transition, insinuating that if children were to see the round body of an animated owl, they would not seek a healthy lifestyle.

### **Toxic Masculinity Pollutes Woodsy’s Message**

Marketing animals to teach moral lessons is not a tactic confined to Woodsy. The Walt Disney corporation popularized the reinforcement of

morality and gender roles through animals in the 1950s, even collaborating with churches to maintain the good messages, similar to how Woodsy was tested out in churches.<sup>27</sup> Even Bill Nye's involvement with the 1997 Woodsy release echoes previous unions created to encourage conservation, such as the connection between Digit the Gorilla and Dian Fossey, "a charismatic animal and a celebrity scientist."<sup>28</sup> Using techniques that already proved successful for predecessors, Woodsy Owl morphed into the ideal man, encouraging children to perceive environmentalism as masculine.

Since its founding by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1905, the Forest Service has intertwined natural spaces with masculinity, following the belief that men must escape from the feminizing cities to the trees. For much of his life, Roosevelt embodied what it meant to be a white, American man.<sup>29</sup> However, early in his political career, he was considered too effeminate, and a legislator even threatened to "toss him in a blanket."<sup>30</sup> To recover his career and ego, Roosevelt quickly reinvented himself, transforming into a form of extremely violent masculinity. He saw manliness as a moral imperative, developing the reputation of fearless hunter and frontiersman. Roosevelt prided himself on his courage on the frontier and his ability to face nature at its worst.<sup>31</sup> Roosevelt's ideals of a true American man were embedded in his prized creation, the Forest Service, and reaffirmed in the reboot of Woodsy Owl nearly a century after Roosevelt's presidency.

What Roosevelt feared was not creatures in the brush or Indigenous people protecting their lands from his army — it was white emasculation. Roosevelt staunchly believed that a country could be "over-civilized," in which men would become so effeminate, they could no longer protect their country in future wars.<sup>32</sup> He argued that to maintain national virility, white American men must fight to retain their "racially masculine strength."<sup>33</sup> He popularized the phrase "the strenuous life," which became synonymous with the performance of masculinity required of the American male. Roosevelt believed that any man who was content to lay idle and not protect his country failed in his masculine duty, living their lives as "waste spaces."<sup>34</sup> As he fulfilled his masculine duties in both the Navy and cavalry, Roosevelt's strict adherence to gender roles remains a steadfast notion in American culture of what is expected from powerful men.

National leaders must fit into a "Superman standard," fulfilling cultural requirements built upon an idealized image of masculinity.<sup>35</sup> Woodsy's new figure embodied the glorification of the American man and symbolized the cultural ideal of what type of leader a man should be. By creating a creature with the body and tight-fitting suit of a superhero, the Forest Service marketed environmentalism as a masculine act akin to protecting and serving.

By the time he appeared alongside Woodsy Owl in 1997, Al Gore had already been an active member of the environmental movement for over 20 years, focusing much of his political career on green issues.<sup>36</sup> Gore long embodied the powerful political male ideal, and he was rewarded for it. In 1992, *Fitness Magazine* named Al Gore as the "Fantasy Ideal Male" over

celebrities like Michael Jordan, Tom Cruise, and Mel Gibson.<sup>37</sup> Gore's connection with 1997 Woodsy incorporated both his environmental focus and emphasis on health in a way necessary for his upcoming 2000 presidential campaign. Following his loss, Gore no longer exuded success in a way that the country could accept. He went on to win two Academy Awards for his documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, but despite his success, Gore's weight filled news headlines. A 2006 *Observer* article scornfully noted that "In the White House, Mr. Gore was stiff, dark, hard-bodied...but [after the 2000 election], Mr. Gore remains a soft, jowly presence."<sup>38</sup> Environmentalism for men is only sexy if they fit that damn Superman standard.

Men's hesitation to become involved in the environmental movement has caught the attention of behavioral researchers. The issue is not a lack of care for the environment; instead, it is a fear of appearing feminine.<sup>39</sup> A study found that Chinese and American participants held a "green-feminine stereotype."<sup>40</sup> Researchers discovered that self-reporting participants perceived actions beneficial to the environment as feminine, regardless of the gender performing them. Men were also found to be more sensitive to the environmentally based decisions they made, concerned that even something as simple as carrying reusable bags would be regarded as more feminine than carrying plastic ones. The results also showed that the men who felt emasculated were more likely to engage in environmentally harmful behaviors, such as using excess electricity, littering, and wasting water.<sup>41</sup> Thus, to validate their masculinity, men are encouraged to harm the environment. Woodsy's slogan change from "Give a hoot, don't pollute" to "Lend a hand, care for the land" appears to echo the dissonance of green behaviors. Caring for the land is a legacy of Roosevelt's connection of masculinity and nature, upheld through the Forest Service. However, it is an empty act; anyone can care for the land without having to feel emasculated.

Corporations have begun to realize the gender disparity in green product consumption. New marketing lines are specifically targeting male audiences through so-called "men'-vironmentally friendly" branding to combat the emasculation men might feel. Through this type of branding, companies have been able to reaffirm masculinity and encourage environmentally good behavior. In other words, "make the man feel manly, and he's more likely to go green."<sup>42</sup> If an owl can embody the male ideal of a muscular hero who saves the environment, it is okay for human men to do it too.

### **Woodsy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Today, Woodsy Owl and Smokey Bear have transitioned to a new form of marketing: social media. Their social media pages have language directed toward youthful audiences. One image posted on Instagram shows Woodsy and Smokey riding in "the whip" together, with a hashtag containing the phrase "bestie" (Image 5).<sup>43</sup>



Image 5. Woodsy Owl and Smokey Bear are #bestie (@woodsyoowl on Instagram)<sup>44</sup>

Woodsy still must cover his body with a tight white tee while Smokey remains shirtless. Interestingly, both the cartoon and costume versions of the 1971 and 1997 Woodsy Owl designs are used interchangeably on his social media. This dual portrayal both evokes nostalgia in older audiences and plays into the trendiness of vintage imagery for younger audiences. Posing beside recycling containers and promoting waste reduction, Woodsy has kept his “Lend a hand, care for the land” slogan. However, some other phrases sneak into his vernacular, such as, “Turn your key, be idle free!” But this message is confusing to the young audience Woodsy is intended for, who presumably cannot drive. Despite modern marketing, Woodsy Owl has still failed to reach the popularity of Smokey Bear.

Apart from social media, Woodsy Owl became relevant again during the COVID-19 pandemic. In December 2020, he appeared in a section of the over 300-page, \$900 billion Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act). In addition to distributing stimulus checks to the population, the CARES Act quietly greenlit pending legislation. Hidden between increasing museum funds and plans to establish a new national park, Public Law 93-318, which protected Woodsy Owl’s image rights, was

repealed.<sup>45</sup> The reasons for this repeal are unclear, and its addition to the Act appears to be treated as a joke.

Not only was the “new, improved” Woodsy intended to promote healthiness and environmental care, but the Forest Service was also responding to the fear of emasculation within American youth in regard to the environmental movement. Roosevelt’s fears of a civilized society’s effects on the future of American masculinity wormed their way into the 1997 redesign of Woodsy, pushing the Forest Service into rethinking its marketing campaign. Thus, Woodsy’s new, diluted slogan permitted young men to be environmentalists with the bare minimum of “car[ing] for the land,” presenting a much softer message than the original demand to not pollute. Woodsy represents Roosevelt’s nationally projected idea of what it means to be a real man in America: a hero, a protector of nature, and an everyman. Existing as a man in America means striving to embody superman, even if you happen to be an owl.

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# Consuming California Modernism: Landscape, Environmentalism, and the Single-Family Home

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AMST 401T: American Culture and Nature

This paper was written for AMST 401T: American Culture and Nature with Dr. Sara Fingal in Spring 2021. Through the course theme of landscapes, this capstone project explores American relationships with nature. Looking at the built environment through architecture and suburban development, I assert that the environmental movement was a result of protecting the new leisurely lifestyle represented by the consumption of the single-family home. I researched the Case Study House program created by the editor and owner of the magazine *Arts and Architecture*, John Entenza, as well as the suburban development of Lakewood, California to understand how the indoor-outdoor lifestyle of the postwar period was a response to cultural changes that were occurring during this era. The goal of this work is to understand how California modernists and suburbanites used the single-family home as a symbol to try to resolve the tension between consumerism and the rising environmental movement.

In the January 1945 issue of *Arts and Architecture* magazine, owner and editor John Entenza announced a Case Study House program. He wrote,

Perhaps we will cling longest to the symbol of “house” as we have known it, or perhaps we will realize that in accommodating ourselves to a new world, the most important step in avoiding retrogression into the old is a willingness to understand and to accept contemporary ideas in the creation of environment that is responsible for shaping the largest part of our living and thinking.<sup>1</sup>

Entenza boldly aimed to persuade the post-World War II American public that it was possible to embrace a modern lifestyle through contemporary

design. The Case Study Houses were designed by architects to demonstrate how homes could be built with cutting-edge materials while still embracing nature. A significant influence on the development of the program was the architectural movement referred to as California modernism. A key component of this movement was the indoor-outdoor lifestyle created through an open plan design and refined building methods. With the embrace of indoor-outdoor living that was made possible by the warm climate of the American Sun Belt, postwar Americans expressed a desire to connect with nature. Thus, California modernism offers evidence of the lifestyle transformation that occurred within the middle and upper classes of mid-century American.

Beginning in the early 1920s, California modernism began to influence the built environment. Architects in California took influences from colleagues in Europe to blur the lines between indoor and outdoor space. The Case Study program idealized this emerging lifestyle at a time of rapidly increasing migration into the suburbs of Sun Belt states, like California. The Eames House, the Stahl House, and the Eichler development are examples from the Case Study program that demonstrate how integrating homes within the landscape, framing nature through glass and steel, and celebrating the seductive sunny climate personified the postwar indoor-outdoor lifestyle. Comparing the Case Study program with other developments of the time, such as the suburban tract housing development of Lakewood, California, this paper will show how postwar Americans used the single-family home to symbolize the new American way of life.

As postwar prosperity began to grow, Americans became prolific consumers. The purchase of a single-family house came to represent an improved way of living to a generation exposed to war and economic depression. Struggling to make their way in a postwar society designed around consumerism, Americans responded by escaping into nature. The rise of environmentalism grew out of this postwar return to nature, as newly affluent Americans became aware of the destructiveness of modern industry and the negative impact on suburban life caused by the mass production of homebuilding.<sup>2</sup> Environmentalism sought to address problems exposed by this rapid change on the built environment. This research paper seeks to understand how the indoor-outdoor lifestyle, embraced by California modernists and suburbanites alike, responded to nature and the California climate. Ultimately, this paper seeks to reveal how the single-family suburban home, and the lifestyle that accompanied it, tried to resolve the tension between consumerism and the rising environmental movement.

### **The Foundations of California Modernism**

In the late 1910s, modern European architects unveiled works with new materials, showcased unique aesthetics, and demonstrated the rational use of standardized, mass-produced parts.<sup>3</sup> Interested in the economy of production, European modernism was cold and minimalist against harsh industrial aesthetics. Conveyed to California by way of European architects

like Rudolph Schindler and Richard Neutra, European modernism brought a progressive style of simple, pragmatic, and innovative architecture to California. Though influenced by its European counterparts, California modernism found ways to incorporate the unique sub-tropical Southern California climate, melding nature with the rationalist influences of European modernism, more specifically the International Style.

During the interwar period, architects bounced ideas between the continents. Modernist architects shared ideas on designs, prefabricated materials, and mass production techniques between Europe and America. The International Style, or “new spirit,” took European modernism and radically simplified its focus on architectural design by adopting steel, glass, and concrete as the movement’s preferred materials. This style defined architecture by volume rather than by mass, expressing regularity without symmetry, while avoiding unnecessary decoration.<sup>4</sup> With a similar emphasis on new materials, California modernists made efficient and adaptable homes that rebelled against the ornately decorated, claustrophobic, Victorian homes that dominated the housing landscape before World War I.

Based on the ideas behind the modernist movement, the dwelling became a catalyst for reform and social renewal.<sup>5</sup> New technology allowed for the prefabrication and standardization of mass-produced parts to create homes that endorsed a new way of life, partially shaped by the scarcity of materials due to the economic depression of the time. In California during the 1920s, the International Style of modernism inspired a brand-new, comfortable lifestyle.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, architects emphasized a way of life that was more relaxed and comfortable with the dry climate of California. Scholar Paul Adamson defines the new culture that emerged from the warm climate as a modern revolution, writing, “California modern architecture was an outgrowth of European modernism, whose refined building methods, open planning, and technical innovation dovetailed with an emerging, innately modern California culture.”<sup>7</sup> With a minimalist aesthetic, California modernism blurred the distinction between the indoors and outdoors, creating a sense of flexibility and freedom. By integrating these spaces, California modernism softened the barriers between nature and life. As a result, Americans felt a closer and more private connection to nature.

California modernism was influenced by several European architects such as Rudolph Schindler. Born in Vienna, Austria, Schindler moved to Chicago in 1914 to work in the office of visionary American architect, Frank Lloyd Wright. In 1920, Schindler moved to Los Angeles to supervise the construction of Wright’s Hollyhock House.<sup>8</sup> Once the building was complete, Schindler decided to stay in Los Angeles to open his own architectural office, giving him the freedom to experiment with concrete, glass, and redwood. Like many influenced by the International Style, Schindler’s architecture used new materials in exciting ways to create a uniquely contemporary look. For Schindler’s first project, he designed a two-family home that he and his wife would share with Clyde and Marian Chance. For the Schindler

and Chance House of 1921-1922, Schindler innovatively used concrete for the walls, which stood in contrast to the sliding glass doors that fully opened onto the home's gardens.<sup>9</sup> Surrounded by trees and vines that dropped from the roof over the glass and into the garden, the house appeared to be wrapped in nature. Though the materials were industrial, Schindler designed the entire home to interact with the landscape. At the time of its design, Schindler described how the home came to embrace its natural environment: "the rooms will descend close to the ground, and the garden will become an integral part of the house. The distinction between indoors and outdoors will disappear."<sup>10</sup> Schindler had visibly created an easy flow from inside to outside, making indoor-outdoor living possible while also embracing the landscape through new building technology.

Schindler's protégé, Richard Neutra, was perhaps the most significant influence on the California modernist movement. Also born in Vienna, Neutra worked with the modern German architect, Erich Mendelsohn, before moving to America in 1923 for an apprenticeship under Frank Lloyd Wright. In 1925, Neutra moved to Los Angeles, working briefly with Schindler, before opening his own office. Unlike his European modernist contemporaries, Neutra's buildings embraced the landscape. As architectural historian Thomas S. Hines eloquently writes, "Neutra's buildings in verdant California reached out to embrace and intermingle with nature. His buildings were the quintessential machines in the garden."<sup>11</sup>

Neutra's first major building in California, the 1927-1929 Lovell Health House, is an International Style icon. Defined as one of the most important examples of California modernism, the house is an iconic villa made of steel, glass, and concrete. The home was commissioned by Dr. Philip Lovell, a naturopathic physician who would treat his patients with natural agents and avoid the use of drugs or surgery.<sup>12</sup> He believed a healthy lifestyle would make for a good life and wanted his home to reflect these beliefs. Lovell further perpetuated this image through his weekly *Los Angeles Times* column that advocated for a lifestyle centered on bodybuilding, nude sunbathing, and a vegetarian diet.<sup>13</sup> The stark white, box-like structure looms large in its volume against the hillside greenery with the house's regularity and lack of decoration contrasting the unpredictability of the trees that surround it.<sup>14</sup> Lovell intended his home to be a "healthful communion with nature."<sup>15</sup> Arguably, his home came to represent how a flow between the dwelling to the natural landscape could encourage a beneficial way of living. Ultimately, Neutra's design established California modern architecture as a movement that embraced the landscape to reflect a healthy, and therefore, leisurely lifestyle. In addition, Neutra used contemporary materials and modern building technology that sought to embrace the landscape, bringing his knowledge to the Case Study Program and influencing California modern style.

## **Postwar Idealism and the California Lifestyle**

One of the most influential boosters of California modernism was John Entenza. Seduced by the California sun, like Schindler and Neutra, Entenza moved to Los Angeles in 1932. As editor and owner of *Arts and Architecture* magazine, Entenza believed himself to be uniquely positioned to influence the postwar housing market. Similar to earlier California modernists, Entenza's ethos was based on good design for a comfortable lifestyle. He believed that "nature is the finest architect. It says what it wants to say directly and with great economy of thought. This is the secret of all creative work: to say the most with the least."<sup>16</sup> Entenza wanted to highlight the modern style of living through architectural design that integrated how people lived within the home and the natural environment. *Arts and Architecture* became a powerful tool for disseminating information on California architecture and cultural ideas about the California lifestyle. While the magazine spoke primarily to an elite audience, it proved to be very influential in promoting mid-century modern idealism.

In January of 1945, John Entenza officially announced the Case Study House program. The Case Study program was originally envisioned to be an eight-house project but was then expanded to twenty-eight houses. Lasting from 1945 to 1966, the program's purpose was to build well-designed modern housing that used standard mass-produced materials. Each house would be funded by the respective owner of the home, but materials were provided at a significant discount with the promise of being featured in *Arts and Architecture*. Entenza believed that the Case Study program could solve the need for postwar housing through contemporary design. According to historian Kevin Starr, the program was "fundamentally a way of looking at the future."<sup>17</sup> Initially intended to be affordable to the rising middle-class consumer, the Case Study program ultimately produced relatively expensive bespoke homes. Though the program failed to provide a solution for low-cost postwar housing, it came to symbolize an idealized vision of the postwar American way of life. The enduring popularity of the program offers evidence of the ideal lifestyle that middle-class Americans sought to achieve.

Based on the California climate of warm, dry summers and mild winters, the Case Study program sold a complete lifestyle to readers who were building new identities and seeking a more leisurely way of life. Architectural historian Esther McCoy argues that it was "the California sun rather than the hearth that was at the base of the Case Study houses."<sup>18</sup> In postwar America, as the building of uniform suburban houses began to grow, the Case Study program showcased the idealized hopes and aspirations of the growing middle class. Images of these homes were featured monthly in *Arts and Architecture* making it easy for Americans to imagine a new modern lifestyle.<sup>19</sup>

The Case Study House program encouraged the architects to design homes built with mass-produced materials that were integrated into the natural landscape. Entenza promoted the relationship of the home within nature through the principle of human ecology, believing that good architectural design would preserve the environment. In the January 1950 issue of

*Arts and Architecture*, Entenza wrote that good design would show “the drama of the integration and the determination of materials—with the land and the useful requirements—for a specific purpose. This is the type of architecture which is closer to nature—it is alive—it has the virility of realness, and is not a mere mask of beauty.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, Entenza contended that exemplary architecture is successful when the house blends with the authentic beauty of nature. Consequently, the most famous Case Study Houses were designed for indoor-outdoor living, reminiscent of International Style.

The Case Study House program was an ideal platform to showcase the design talents of modernist architects in Southern California while idealizing nature in the postwar home. Architectural historian Thomas Hine explains how the Case Study House program was “among the most potent and engaging expressions of some quite widespread assumptions and attitudes about the nature of postwar life. Their matter-of-fact attitude toward technology and their generally practical, middle-class modernism reflected a more general postwar willingness to start new and figure out what works.”<sup>21</sup> Each architect considered the landscape when trying to integrate the home into nature, working hard to tie the inside and outside spaces together. Hine describes the appeal of the integrated California lifestyle, saying, “sliding open the glass doors and having lunch on the dining terrace next to the avocado tree was an appealing prospect, even if you didn’t know what an avocado was. If you were scouting for images of a new, relaxed, and open kind of domestic life, Southern California was a natural.”<sup>22</sup> Ultimately, the Case Study architects represented postwar ideals through the celebration of California’s sunny climate and seductive landscapes.

### **The Architecture of Human Ecology**

Case Study House No. 8, known as the Eames House, is considered the most famous of the houses developed under John Entenza’s program. The home was designed by husband-and-wife duo Charles and Ray Eames, who were hailed as the most influential designers of the twentieth century. Known for their furniture designs and experimental films, the Eameses had a significant impact on the ideals of the Case Study program. In *Arts and Architecture*, Charles Eames wrote, “The house represents an attempt to state an idea rather than a fixed architectural pattern, and it is an attitude toward living that we wish to present.”<sup>23</sup> Originally designed in 1945 to cut across the landscape, the Eameses redesigned the home in 1949, but due to a postwar shortage in materials, the project was delayed. Charles and Ray were given four years to enjoy the natural landscape of their Pacific Palisades property. As a result, the couple fell in love with the eucalyptus trees spread in a line down the middle of their land. When the prefabricated materials finally arrived, the Eameses reworked the materials to create two spacious steel and glass pavilions.

In the tradition of California modernism, the home fits into the side of the landscape with the help of a retaining wall. Buried behind a row of eucalyptus trees, the industrial materials that make up the home arguably ap-

pear softened by the surrounding nature.<sup>24</sup> The idea of the home's design, according to Charles, demonstrated how "constant proximity to the whole vast order of nature acts as re-orientor and 'shock absorber' and should provide the needed relaxations from the daily complications arising within problems."<sup>25</sup> Built as a retreat from the daily grind of a crowded urban environment, the home offered the couple a relaxing private sanctuary during the postwar years. Like the International Style, the Eames house is measured by volume, built with regularity rather than symmetry, and devoid of unnecessary decoration.

In their 1955 film titled, *House – After Five Years of Living*, the Eameses celebrate the indoor-outdoor lifestyle of their Case Study home in the beautiful California climate. Made from still photographs shot by Charles on 35mm transparencies, the film shows breakfast served outside on the patio with images of a table covered in plates of toast, bowls of grapefruit, and cups of coffee laid out on a red and white checkered cloth. Following the visuals of breakfast are images of leaves on the patio bricks that surround the table, blurring the lines between the home and its surroundings.<sup>26</sup> The steel-bordered glass panes of the Eames House created a reflection of the surrounding landscape, like a snapshot of the hillside blending in with the facade of their home. *House – After Five Years of Living* illustrates how the shadows of the trees reflect against the glass on the southwest corner of the home. From the inside of the home, the Eameses decorated the corresponding corner with large green plants that mixed with the outdoor eucalyptus trees as they framed the ocean view.<sup>27</sup> Eames Demetrios, the grandson of Charles and Ray, eloquently describes the indoor-outdoor combination, writing,

Just before twilight, when shadows still fall on the image, and the natural light turns the reflections of the leaves monochromatic, it becomes almost impossible to tell where the building ends, and the reflections begin. One truly believes Ray when she remarked "after 13 years of living in it, the building for me ceased to exist a long time ago."<sup>28</sup>

For Ray, the home had indeed become one with nature, merging the built environment with the natural environment.

Like the Eames House, Case Study House No. 22, also known as the Stahl House, used steel and glass to create the ultimate image of the indoor-outdoor California lifestyle.<sup>29</sup> Built from 1959-1960, architect Pierre Koenig wanted to challenge traditional home construction by using sophisticated and industrial technologies developed during World War II.<sup>30</sup> Koenig firmly believed that steel construction could change how people lived. He described his approach by saying, "As outdoor living became more important, we felt that houses should reflect this. Outdoor space became a continuation of indoor space; buildings moved down to slab-level so that the outside could continue the inside. Glass was used to extend indoor space visually."<sup>31</sup> In order to create this type of lifestyle, Koenig needed the sunny and dry climate

of California to make the move to slab-level. Making the outdoor space a continuation of the indoor space, Koenig proved it was possible to achieve a harmonious relationship with nature through steel and glass.<sup>32</sup> The Stahl House symbolized the relaxed California way of living by engaging with its climate and landscape through modern materials and design.

During its announcement in the May 1959 issue of *Arts and Architecture*, Koenig described the Stahl House as “shelter only,” stating, “All else is subordinate to the focal interest, the surrounding panorama.”<sup>33</sup> The Stahl House was situated on a view lot located in the Hollywood Hills above Sunset Boulevard. “The building site is located on a promontory overlooking the city of Los Angeles and its environs. With an unobstructed view encompassing an angle of 240 degrees from the mountains to the sea, the owners felt it would be illogical to design a conventional walled structure,” wrote Koenig.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the Stahls felt the only way to take advantage of the view, without any obstructions, was to build in the modernist style.<sup>35</sup> For the Stahls to afford such a contemporary home on limited funds, they relied on the discounted materials offered by the Case Study program. While the program encouraged the idea of low-cost housing built with prefabricated materials, the Stahl House proved the modernist style was beyond the reach of most postwar Americans. Ultimately, California modernism represented a dream lifestyle of postwar America that was financially unattainable for most Americans.

Although architectural historian Elizabeth A. T. Smith has called it the most radical and reductive design of the Case Study program, the layout of the Stahl House takes full advantage of the California climate. Koenig designed all main public rooms and private spaces to open onto the pool deck.<sup>36</sup> The only entrance required visitors to cross over a sequence of concrete footbridges that spanned the south side of the pool. The roof design also extended beyond the building line to provide shade from the California sun and further encourage a leisurely lifestyle.<sup>37</sup> Viewing images of the Stahl House, it is easy to mistake the outside for the inside when the only separation between the rooms and the outdoor pool are the sliding glass doors. Koenig approached the design of the home as “a contextual problem because of the unusual and challenging site.”<sup>38</sup> He has specified, “At the time, I couldn’t see anything other than to create an interior space that was an extension of the exterior.”<sup>39</sup> Koenig’s design also provided privacy for the occupants to relax freely. One solid wall runs along the back of the house and along a driveway, which gives the only clue that a home exists in this space. Hiding entrances from the street was a typical design element in many of the Case Study Houses, allowing for the freedom to enjoy the indoor-outdoor lifestyle privately.

Privacy was a potential problem in tract house developments, one that Joseph Eichler attempted to solve with the modern tract homes he developed.<sup>40</sup> Beginning in 1949, Eichler was the first to build architecturally-inspired modern tract houses, and in 1961, he sponsored the most unique of the Case Study projects. Case Study No. 24 was designed by architects A. Quincy

Jones and Frederick E. Emmons. Unlike the other Case Study projects, the architects planned a public community of 260 houses with five model types on 142-acres of land in Chatsworth, California. Interestingly, Jones and Emmons placed the homes directly on what had been a working ranch on the outskirts of Los Angeles. According to McCoy, the site was “heavily wooded, and the houses were placed on the plan to preserve the trees. Houses were also adjusted to the contours of the land, and a minimum of grading was anticipated.”<sup>41</sup> The basic design concept of the natural retaining wall that would surround the homes provided four functions: “One, visual integration of house to adjacent housing and terrain. Two, sound privacy from neighbors and street noise. Three, visual privacy from neighbors and street traffic. Four, thermal insulation adequate for both heating and cooling.”<sup>42</sup> With the homes integrated into the landscape, they would provide privacy for the indoor-outdoor lifestyle while delivering an early idea of environmentally friendly housing.

Jones and Emmons planned to include multiple gardens within the homes to make indoor-outdoor living possible in a large community. In fact, their designs called for every room to have access to a garden. As the announcement of this Case Study had explained, “The enclosed living area (25’ by 25’) will have three full walls of floor to ceiling glass, which extends the actual living area to the retaining walls. The space for living will then become 50’ by 50,’ and with the use of two fire pits, this additional outdoor space will be usable almost year-round.”<sup>43</sup> Each house was planned to sit on a 4,000-square foot lot with 2,250-square feet of garden space, including a 16-by 20-foot swimming pool in the center of the house.<sup>44</sup> Expanding the livable space of the home created a sense of grand living in nature. As Jones and Emmons had done with a previous Eichler development called Green Meadows, they took space from each lot to create a greenbelt. This land would create a community area that provided amenities like swimming, barbecuing, and horseback riding. To justify the smaller homes, indoor-outdoor living provided an ideal way of expanding living space for their potential residents. However, the greenbelt concept ultimately stopped the project from being approved by the City Council’s Committee on Zoning who worried about the maintenance of the commons area on this greenbelt. If placing the homes within the landscape had been approved, it would have allowed the Case Study program to realize its full potential of modern design for the broader public.

For Jones and Emmons, this Case Study provided a way to make a statement on the mid-century state of suburban sprawl. They were offering an alternative to the destruction of the built environment by mass-produced tract housing through incorporating nature into the community. Jones and Emmons believed nature would do the work of visually uniting the houses of the community.<sup>45</sup> Their design would also designate a secluded place to enjoy

nature; thus, allowing residents to enjoy a relaxed indoor-outdoor lifestyle *privately*. McCoy recalls how Jones called the typical tract homes “bumps along a road waiting for the trees to grow.”<sup>46</sup> With this Case Study, Jones and Emmons tried to create “a kind of earth sculpture in which houses and land blend together,” according to McCoy.<sup>47</sup> Agreeing with the editors of *Arts and Architecture*, Jones and Emmons promoted natural landscapes with their modernist aesthetic and the idea that an enjoyable leisurely lifestyle could be found when nature encased the home. The magazine wrote, “With the introduction of an earth backfilled retaining wall as the basis for a design concept, Case Study House no. 24 suggests a solution to the interrelated problems which result from today’s commitment to mass-produced housing in newly planned communities.”<sup>48</sup> Thus, with their tract development, Jones and Emmons presented an ideal postwar community with an environmentally friendly design.

### **Suburban Sprawl and the Environmental Movement**

Just as Entenza had predicted, postwar housing developments were booming, and the suburbs were growing extremely fast. Suburban tract housing developments, such as the famous 1950 suburb in Lakewood, California, quickly defined the built environment. The Lakewood development, which covered 3,500 acres of land, came to represent the mass-produced suburban homes of postwar America. The houses were produced by an assembly line of construction workers, building as many as one hundred houses a day.<sup>49</sup> Construction workers built the modest stucco homes onto the bulldozed landscape. Unlike the Case Study Houses, however, suburban tract houses like those in Lakewood were mass-produced homogeneous boxes.

Singer-songwriter Malvina Reynolds describes the tract homes best in her song called, “Little Boxes.” Written in 1962 about suburban development in Daly City, California, the song critiques the uniformity of mass-produced houses. She sings,

There’s a pink one and a green one  
And a blue one and a yellow one  
And they’re all made out of ticky tacky  
And they all look just the same.<sup>50</sup>

Just as Jones had called these suburban developments “bumps in the road,” Reynolds expresses her disapproval of the cheap standard housing developments rapidly overwhelming the built environment. Urban studies scholar Becky Nicolaides explains how suburban homes represented “a kind of antithesis of the industrial city.”<sup>51</sup> Despite contrasting with the unique designs of the Case Study Houses, the uniformity of suburban tract homes actually promoted a similar ethos by advertising the leisurely California lifestyle.

Similar to the Case Study Houses, the suburbs symbolized a new ideal way of life for many postwar Americans moving to California for its

warm climate, beautiful natural environment, and economic opportunities. Due to this idealization, the state's population doubled from 1940 to 1960.<sup>52</sup> At a time of mass migration to cities in the Sunbelt, such as Los Angeles and Orange County, suburban housing created a way for many Americans to embrace the open-air homes in the idyllic California climate. When the sales office for the Lakewood tract home development opened, over twenty-five thousand people waited for their chance to purchase a home. Federal policies created a demand for housing that encouraged suburban expansion, especially in Sunbelt cities. Mass-produced homes became available to many Americans through a combination of federal programs like the GI Bill and the Federal Housing Administration, which insured mortgages by private lenders.<sup>53</sup> These policies, however, privileged white suburban neighborhoods through a process called redlining. Excluded from receiving the same benefits, non-white Americans were unable to purchase the postwar American lifestyle. Comparably, the Case Study Houses privileged an elite white consumer by focusing on uniquely designed homes that were exclusively made for an upper-class clientele. Therefore, new suburban developments and the Case Study program encouraged only a specific group of Americans to live the "good life" in California.

While the Case Study program aesthetically countered suburban tract housing developments, both architectural endeavors proposed the same idea that only certain Americans could buy into a lifestyle surrounded by nature in order to live the "good life." According to environmental historian Adam Rome, homebuilding was at the center of the postwar economy. This suburban industrial complex of postwar America reveals how the single-family home had become the defining symbol of the American way of life.<sup>54</sup> Homeownership had become tied to ideas surrounding democracy, freedom, and civic order.<sup>55</sup> As seen in the Case Study and suburban tract houses, single-family homes signified the rise of mass consumption among Americans with newfound wealth. At a time of great prosperity, the postwar period gave rise to the suburban consumer and a new lifestyle centered around the single-family home. Americans embraced the single-family home as an escape from the urban landscape's slums and pollution. The single-family home also provided access to a leisurely lifestyle for a generation that had suffered through an economic depression and multiple wars.<sup>56</sup> As postwar families embraced the good life in the California climate, they used the single-family home to respond to the changes occurring in American culture.

Homebuilding, however, began to clash with the relaxing lifestyle of postwar living as Americans began to see that suburban sprawl was destructive for the environment. At the same time, it also became clear that American industry was intruding on the comfort provided by postwar prosperity.<sup>57</sup> It seemed as though no home could escape the rapid pace of the expanding suburbs and destruction of the landscape, symbolized by the bulldozer in the backyard. The change in response to suburban development highlights the rise of environmentalism as a response to changes in postwar production and

the growth of mass consumption.<sup>58</sup> As historian Samuel Hays writes,

Environmentalism arose from a “fundamental and central” change in values among the American people as a whole following WWII. As standards of living rose, concern with efficiency in production gave way to concern with quality of life. Concern with consumption overwhelmed concern with production; conservation yielded to environmentalism. Increasingly, the concern for quality of life created a demand for environmental quality that the private market could not meet.<sup>59</sup>

Postwar environmentalism grew out of the desire for Americans to improve their lives by purchasing access to the beautiful natural environment. With the purchase of single-family suburban homes, Americans began to focus on environmental issues, like the deterioration of the landscape and the subsequent loss of wilderness, that infringed on their new lifestyle.

Beginning in the mid-1950s, Americans grew concerned about pollution, outdoor recreation, open space, and wilderness preservation.<sup>60</sup> Americans responded with a movement that would help protect their new indoor-outdoor, tranquil way of life. Environmentalism attempted to address the tensions that Americans were feeling within a society designed around consumption rather than community. For Americans, the desire for intimacy with the natural world created tension between capitalism and the environment.<sup>61</sup> Nature was a way for a generation to respond to the changing values of a society that was transitioning from active citizenship to consumption as the primary way to create a meaningful life. The postwar generation had survived depression and war, and for them, consumption led to the American dream. Homeownership promoted the best way to create a leisurely American life. To obtain this lifestyle, Americans simply had to purchase a single-family home. For postwar Americans, the single-family home symbolized the ideal way to live. However, when the environmental impact of mass-produced housing began to become apparent, the single-family home came to represent the impact of consumerism on American values. Therefore, environmentalism was born out of a response to suburbia and the single-family home.

### **Conclusion**

California modernism opened the door to a new leisurely postwar existence for upper- and middle-class Americans. By focusing on the indoor-outdoor lifestyle, select Americans could escape the urban decay of cities and find nature in suburbia. The idealized lifestyle symbolized by the single-family home created order, emphasized peace, and promoted quiet living. While the Case Study Houses were meant to be the epitome of this new American lifestyle, suburban tract houses tried to replicate it. The leisurely lifestyle created by indoor-outdoor living allowed Americans to contain lives

of uncertainty. As the world was changing into a consumer-based economy, power over nature could be purchased and moderated, as exemplified with the single-family home. California modernism emphasized simple, pragmatic, and innovative design that utilized technology to create a relaxed way of life. The International Style, with its “new spirit,” was a catalyst for the dwelling to become a place of reform and social renewal. Instead, the indoor-outdoor lifestyle became a catalyst for the environmental movement, indicating that this “new spirit” was built on a fragile structure of mass consumption.

Today, we continue to cling to the symbol of the house. The Case Study program and suburban tract housing developments, like that in Lakewood, expressed the hopes and aspirations of postwar Americans to achieve the American dream. Still, the purchase of a home signifies achievement of the same dream. Yet, the opportunity to purchase a house also continues to define who has the right to the suburbs. Homeownership remains a sign of democracy, freedom, and civic order, but only for white middle- and upper-class Americans. Thinking about the future, Entenza predicted the impact of the single-family home on the California landscape and the American lifestyle, writing, “Whether that answer is to be the ‘miracle’ house remains to be seen, but it is our guess that after all of the witches have stirred up the broth, the house that will come out of the vapors will be conceived within the spirit of our time, using as far as is practicable, many war-born techniques and materials best suited to the expression of man’s life in the modern world.”<sup>62</sup>

Nowadays, there is no miracle house. The house that came out of the postwar period remains merely a symbol of the unachievable dream. While the demand for housing continues to be extremely high, finding affordable and eco-friendly housing remains a significant issue. Americans need a new way of providing shelter that avoids the use of non-renewable resources and bulldozing of the natural landscape. We need to start thinking about how to build homes that work within the contemporary world. Americans need to be willing to understand and accept innovative ideas for the creation of the built environment. We must be willing to appreciate and acknowledge the kind of change John Entenza promoted with the Case Study House program. Housing is the foundation for a functional society. Architecture should be considered a social process. Now is the time to change how Americans think about issues of shelter. Perhaps the steel, glass, and concrete of California modernism should remain the materials of the midcentury.

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# Asian American Cultural Practices

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*"I wanted to begin as a historian and  
end as an artist."*

-Ocean Vuong, "Survival as a Creative Force: An Interview with Ocean Vuong," (2019)

*"If we are to comprehend the formation of  
Japanese American identity, we must be  
made aware of the political significance of  
the rituals, commemorations,  
folk histories, and other  
community dramas of the group."*

-Lon Kurashige, *Japanese American Celebration and Conflict: A History of Ethnic Identity and Festival, 1934-1990* (2002)

## Suggested Readings:

Shirley Jennifer Lim, *A Feeling of Belonging: Asian American Women's Public Culture, 1930-1960* (New York University Press, 2006)

Chiou-Ling Yeh, *Making an American Festival: Chinese New Year in San Francisco's Chinatown* (University of California Press, 2008)

# *Into the Night: Short Stories about Asian Americans and Nightlife*

Michelle Lê

AMST 454: American Nightlife

Written for AMST 454 Nightlife, these collections of short stories is about Asian Americans and their interaction with different definitions of American nightlife. While written with heavy historical context, they remain colorful works of fiction that hope to represent the complexity of Asian Americans and celebrate their lives that touch upon nightlife. The first story is a snapshot on grief through a Vietnamese American son whose camera tells him about his father's life more than he could ever reach for. The second one is a ground day hog-esque version of a Japanese cane cutter's life and what she chooses to do in that endless cycle which emulated real life. The third intertwines fantastical like dreams of two young teenagers split apart by decades of nightlife that gives us a brief glimpse from a Filipino American and Chinese American perspective. The fourth was written in the imaginative perspective of a lion from a team of lion dancers that splits into a pilot dramedy script about Vietnamese Americans in New Orleans covering their ways of celebration and nightlife.

*Snapshot*

2011: San Jose, California

*A twenty-eight-year-old Vietnamese American finds his father's camera and reflects on what could have been in the silence of the night.*

(The lifespan of a dragon fruit plant is 20 to 30 years.

Quick to bear fruit, it can grow up to as tall as 40 feet and flourish without needing much care. Dragon fruit thrive best in warm weather. It can find solace in the simmering and suffocating heat that makes them bloom. The fruit, a hue that is a blistering mesh of red, purple, and orange turned solid, is spiked with a vivid green. Within the dragon fruit is a transparent

softness, flush with seeds and flavored with a lightness that lingers on the tongue.

The dragon fruit can survive short bursts of cold—of the frost that is not typically found where it should thrive, but in the end if left in lower temperatures, it cannot endure for long. It will wilt. It will die.

All living things must die, all living things must die, but all dead things must have lived, all dead things must have lived—)

The bed sags beneath you. The night and its quiet all tears at you in some unseen way.

The springs creak as you create a dip in the mattress. The blankets you touch are coarse and plain.

Everything is neat. Too tidy. The discomfort stays with you.

It's been fifty-one days, and everything is impossibly still clean with the exception of the dust. Neat and precise, empty, and solemn. There is now dust everywhere and it coats every surface. Your father would disapprove.

*Would he?* The thought pops into your mind, an intrusion that conquers the planes of your mind. You think about it again. You are now prone to reflection against your will, and you consider the answer. *Would he be disappointed?* The paradoxical description of a man with monstrous pride comparable to a stone wall before the siege of a castle and a fragile ghost that glided through your fingers and the fringes of your life at your worst points. You don't dare to know him and not after all this time.

Your hand tightens on the sheets, creating a wrinkle that you smooth out after a moment's hesitation. The camera next to you has not moved. It will not unless you move it. It was his and now it's yours—a gift with no return. You're used to being given things you didn't ask for.

You stare at it. You feel the tendrils of his ghost trailing over the old model, a thing that works no longer after decades, yet you still keep it.

Grief is not what wells up in your throat. It does not come to you like a tidal wave, roaring through the floodgates and sweeping you out to the sea. You are not drowning or drifting. What arrives then in the hollow passage of your throat is an old emotion. It is fear and anger and jealousy for a dead man who has more control over your life than you will ever have. It's a terrible look. Guilt slithers down your throat and covers the taste.

Your father has been dead fifty-two days and this camera has been yours for a grand total of twelve days.

After the cremation, after the forty-nine days of not eating meat and wallowing in what's said to be grief, you're here in this room again. His jacket is wrapped around your shoulders, broader than yours, and you smell *dầu xanh* lingering around the collar.<sup>1</sup> An old balm for any sickness. There is no curing this. There is no turning back time. You are twenty-eight years old, and your father has been dead for fifty-two days and time passes slowly.

Heart failure does make sense in some morbid way. He is strong, he *was* always strong, but genetics won out. Your father is dead at the age of fifty-six from heart failure and you are twenty years away from the same fate.

It ran in the family, taking his mother like it took him, and you're reminded that what you inherit is never your choice. You reach out, toying with the camera.

He was a photographer. A professional one before in Việt Nam and a freelance one after. The stories are here. Ones that you know, because you were part of them, and ones you do not, because they were never told to you.

The lens is cold against your finger, and you trace around it, wondering what it has seen, for these were your father's eyes that don't belong to you.

*Snap! The inescapable eyes of a young child, face open, teeth peeking out, and expression bright. So achingly young. The black and white photo is streaked with a fold that speaks of age and time. It has survived the journey. It has outlasted the subject. It will outlast you.*

*Location: Hanoi, Việt Nam.*

*Time Stamp: 10 PM (in the quiet of the night, in the silence of a mother looking at her second born and loving and loving and loving.)*

You tell a story to someone twice. It's a habit you get from your father. He used to say things twice because he was sure that you never heard the first time. Once in Vietnamese and the second one in English because even if you understood, you *didn't understand*. You used to get annoyed at that.

*Snap! The image of a young man, his white shirt tucked into his jeans, a Heineken in one hand and a cigarette in the other. Four men with arms slung around each other. Young faces, a beach, sand underneath their bare feet, a lifetime of memories that will never be spoken out loud, and a new beginning. The night is theirs. It will always be. Whispers, rumors, gossip, fights, escapades in the night, this is ours.*

*Location: Galang, Indonesia*

*Time Stamp: 9 PM (at the edge of curfew, the line of restraint and the time that is running on the command of their rescuers, the fucking saviors, the war mongers, the overseers, but they defy, they live, they are here.)*

When he was alive, you thought you were waiting for him to die. You had thought from some terrible and awful inhuman part of you that in death it would bridge the gap between you and him. For life, the impossible act of living with all that had happened, had split you apart in so many ways.

You were wrong obviously. The chasm is wider than ever. He is gone and you

are  
still  
*here.*

You flip the camera over.

Here, with the remnants of him in your hands. The strap is barely holding on, the last string one sharp away from a single—

*Snap! The vibrant streak of blue that cuts its way around the contours of a man, not young but not old, delicately in between. He smiles with the band of cloth around his head crooked and titled up. His ears look bigger this way. His hands*

*tucked in his pocket, lucky money for the lucky new year. Hoa mai, yellow as the sun and just as bright, hoa dao, pink and soft like a peach, intertwine. Red weaves its way into the back, calling the luck to come, come!*

*Location: San Jose, California*

*Time Stamp: 7 PM (just before the night market, before the clutter of the streets and food and people, where the celebrations stretch far into the morning.)*

What was your life and his, but unanswered questions? You asked him once about the street he used to live on back in Saigon and he considered you strangely.

“Why you want to know?”

“I just do,” you shrugged because you were trying. You are here and so was he and so you reach. Your father squinted at you and replied,

“Au Cờ. Like the fairy.”

“What fairy?”

“The fairy. The make up one.”

He turned away. Your father told stories twice unless they were the ones he didn't want to tell. You googled it, like most things you had to learn. The tale of the dragon father and fairy mother and the eggs that became the Kinh people.<sup>2</sup> He never did like myths. Or superstitions. Or beliefs. You had asked him why.

“You have too many questions,” he mentioned. There was contempt in his voice. You still hear it.

*You don't have many answers, you bit back and moved on. You had to.*

You don't have his temper. Like the power he had in giving things to you without your consent, he took your temper from you. His father gave him one, and you suspect his father before you gave him one, but you don't. You are no longer capable of rage. Something in you has broken this cycle. You are not sure what it means and what it implies about him or you. Your hands are weak, and they tremble over the camera. Are you the same as he is in the end?

He created you. He made you. Molded you. He loved you. Does this absolve him?

*Snap! A row of young men, pressed into the best of their clothes. Not a wrinkle in their face, not a tan face out of place. There are two lines of them and the ease in which they cling to one another is jarring when the man in the middle will be someone whose touch will grow cold. One will return to Việt Nam. One will pass from lung cancer. One will die of a heart attack. Four will never be mentioned again.*

*Location: Galang, Indonesia*

*Time Stamp: 11 AM (at the start of Tết, the new year is here and tonight they will party and look their best before life will taketaketake.)*

Of the photos that your father took, your mother took half of them. She likes things that last, and you can always see the footprints she left behind. For the entirety of their marriage, she had lived in Southern California in a place called Orange County and growing older with the people she never

left.

*Snap! The march of a parade that seems to live outside the photograph. The noise is almost tangible, sharp cracks and loud bangs, and the colors are distracting. A yellow flag with three red stripes of a nation rising and a nation falling, it could be either. The flutter of áo dài that blows gently in the breeze, a cycle of blue, yellow, pink, and purple. They are worn in the streets that can never be recovered, only reborn.*

*Location: Little Saigon, California*

*Time Stamp: 2 PM (the lull before the beat of an endless parade, an endless re-building, right, wrong, afterafterafter.)*

You remember being part of your grandfather's funeral. You were a child who didn't understand the implication of death, but you did hear how your mom, quiet, stern, but loving, had snapped at her sister. In the middle of carrying his body to the cremation room, you followed your family and felt so small watching everyone drown in grief. Some more than others.

"Shut up," she hissed, sick of her sister's grief and sick of her own. The wailing had been too much, and your aunt didn't even flinch. She kept crying and the look your mother shot her was full of contempt and sadness and something you think you understand now. You still remember that after all this time.

What else is a child supposed to remember?

*Snap! A house that looks like so many others. The youth in motion, a boy in a striped button up anchoring all of his body weight on one hand and he's the center of the party. Beer bottles and cake edge themselves out of the corner of the photo, messy and present. A classic cake that all the Vietnamese buy from the bakery with white frosting and red lettering. Racks of shoes and CD's line the wall and it is the perfect moment for laughter, for joy.*

*Location: Little Saigon, California*

*Time Stamp: 12 AM (the clock strikes midnight, but the wheel keeps turning, they keep dancing to the beat that tells them they are allowed to simply be.)*

Your mother's youth was spent loving her family until her hands wrinkled with exhaustion and age. She is beautiful like your father was handsome, each of them a perfect pairing in their wedding photos. She is still beautiful decades later and to everyone's shock, she was beautiful at his funeral. Everyone had noticed how she looked well and healthy and you had wanted to laugh. People had wanted her to fall apart, to cry and wail and shatter.

She may have done all those things, the rage and the feelings, but you don't see any of it. You are not privy to it. She has raised you and let you go, and this is her life. She will be beautiful how and when she wants.

*Snap! The night club Queen Bee. An older couple carefully wrapped around each other, dancing to the music of the French, American, and Vietnamese. It can't be anything but a live band and some hum along to the music that will never change with time. The balloons dot the ballroom and glide against the dancers. In the next section, hip hop will be played, for the youth will have their way. This is*

*how we live. This is how our lives are lived.*

*Location: Little Saigon, California*

*Time Stamp: 8 PM (even age cannot keep them away for this time is for eras of the past, the music to be nostalgic and wistful for.)*

He spent more years in America than he did in Việt Nam. He died on the soil he was resurrected on, and you think he wouldn't wish it any other way. What happens when the homes you have lived in are gone?

You had moved to Oregon because the last thing you wanted to do was keep growing up in the shadow of your father and who he failed to become. Your mother had stayed in Orange County even when your father had decided to move to San Jose. He never liked the politics of Little Saigon or the people there, so he had packed up and moved across the state just because he wanted to.

Your mother didn't call it a divorce. Or a separation. She didn't give it a name. She didn't give it anything and so you don't know what it was. You just know that she still flew out to see him in the hopes of taking care of him in his last moments.

*Snap! A beautiful tea ceremony. The woman is in blue, a rare choice, and her áo dài is decorated with a delicate lace pattern. She reaches out with a pale hand and glowing smile to her husband, her anh Ơi, and they are set to be married. The procession is so big, for money might not be their best virtue but family is. Good fortune, good words. All they lost behind them and all they are set to gain in front of them.*

*Location: Fountain Valley, Orange County*

*Time Stamp: 9 PM (a long day that will turn into a long night but what are celebrations for? To forget and remember and continue.)*

Your father was a creature of habit. He slept through the day and awoke during the night for his shift that took thirty years. He had been a security guard at a university, and he always thought it was ironic. He had never managed to finish university and there he was, at a university! His jokes always played a chord you could never hear.

You feel like you failed at something. You don't know.

The thoughts drift through your mind and float through the air like the dust that is kicked up in the wake of you shifting in the bed.

You have no idea what he took on this camera. You wonder, you speculate. You think, after a long while, that maybe the photos are all taken at night because that was when he was awake. You imagine that it was his escape. Your mother used to stay awake waiting for him to come home until she fell asleep.

He must have enjoyed going out at night. The stories he told of the camps always took place at night where daylight burned away obligation and there was only him and the friends he made. You imagine that he missed those days as he settled in the new country, and you think that that is why he disappeared often into the night. You imagine all the times he was gone was because he wanted to find something better, good and familiar.

You don't know if this brings you closer to him. You think it brings you farther. You know it's too late. You can imagine him at the night market at Tết, at a friend's house party where they dance and dance, at a fancy nightclub with the ballroom dancers, at an old bakery, wishing for more time.

The only thing you can do is hold tight to his ghost, the haunting in the night.

You lay the camera down in your lap.

It is now 11:59 PM.

You press the button.

*Click! Snap!*

*Cut the cane, Cut the leash*

1910: Occupied Kingdom of Hawai'i

*The story of a young Japanese cane cutter reliving the same day over and over again until she burns the plantation down.*

*"Awake! stir your bones! Rouse up!*

*Shrieks the Five o'Clock Whistle.*

*"Don't dream you can nestle*

*For one more sweet nap.*

*Or your ear-drums I'll rap*

*With my steam-hammer tap*

*Till they burst.*

*Br-r-row-aw-i-e-ur-ur-rup!*

*Wake up! wake up! wake up! w-a-k-e-u-u-u-up!*

*Filipino and Japanee;*

*Porto Rican and Portugee;*

*Korean, Kanaka, Chinese;*

*On the whole plantation---*

*Wake up! wake up! wake up! W-a-k-e-u-u-u-up!*

*Br-r-row-aw-i-e-ur-ur-rup!*<sup>3</sup>

She woke up.

A first, but not a last.

"Get up!" A loud, damning voice pierced the air as did a whistle. "Up! Up! Hana-hana, work, work."

Not a second spared to thoughts of sleep, she rose to the siren of the plantation and slipped out of bed. Her feet touched the wooden floor with only the slightest hint of hesitation before moving quickly. She had made that mistake only once of being too slow. The luna did not hesitate.<sup>4</sup>

(Fear had been a good teacher to her.)

All her life, she was quick. She had been a simple daughter of a fisherman. She was the first to rise at the hours her family set in (Yamaguchi-ken? Hiroshima-ken? Kyoto-ken? Or was it, Nara-ken? Her dialect had been long stripped away) and fell asleep after the day was done. That had been so long ago.

She had forgotten how many years. She barely remembered her own age. She could not remember why she left Japan, only that she was *kari fufu*. A not so real bride. Not even divorced, just left. (What had his name been? Manabu? Nobuyoshi?) They talked about it. They all pitied the widow, seemingly alone.

But *ab*, she pitied the married. For some of the wives were cooks, some did laundry, some ran the houses, and all of them had twice the task in caring for their family. Even the prostitutes had children to run after. She did not. She bore it alone.

She was a cane cutter. She would die as one. Her fate was sealed.

She dressed herself, quick and with haste. She wore most of what she had to already, for the day began early. The only thing left was to tie *ahina* around her hands. Her hands would not survive the day but there was nothing else she could do. The shack she called her home was shared with the other families (What were their family names? Sasaki? Suzuki? Yamamoto? Ito?) that would hopefully be able to spare some balm when she returned. For now, denim first, then the gloves.

"Good morning," someone said to her (Nara-san? Ogawa-san? Tazawa-san?) and she greeted them back. Shuffling into the line, she managed to squeeze herself onto the train. She used to laugh to herself at the absurdity. How scandalous. Men and women that were so close, closer than what should have been allowed. She was used to so many things now.

The train was quiet. Some days it was loud, others quiet as a still pond where nothing was said out of sheer exhaustion. She did not look up until they screeched to a halt at their destination, and she felt her feet meet the ground once again.

Her eyes scanned the fields.

The Hana Plantation was a monstrosity. It sprawled like the cultivated vanity of a man who grew and grew because he consumed those below him. Ravenous, hungry, and never satisfied. She was bound here.

"Move!"

The work began.

The sun burned.

It seared as it did time and time again. The heat blistered because it was an unforgiving and roaming thing, consuming flesh in its wake. The canes, the precious canes that built a fortune for the pale men, they cut her. Skin peeled and red patches formed. They matched in hue the blood dripping from her hands.

The luna were watching. They always were. They never looked

away. She had thought in delirium one strange day that these pale ghosts patrolled the gates to Hell. There were always seven of them. Some fields had seven, eight, or nine but hers had seven.

Every single time. She knew where they were, when they liked to look, and who was the cruelest. Sometimes she would hide. She would step into the shade and dream of the water, cool, moving, refreshing, and how it could float her away. Maybe back to Japan. (She was sure that her home was Nara-ken or Yamaguchi-ken. Maybe Fukushima-ken.) When the luna would come, she would be right back to work.

They loomed like the canes themselves. Both taunted her. It was the canes that were more than twice her size and some part of her felt grateful. If she knew what lay ahead of her, she would faint. It would break her before the breaking even begun.

She heard the neigh of a horse and that was her only warning.

“7450!” Ah, that was her number. The luna whipped the air above her and she tried not to duck. They would become angrier. “Faster!”

This was the life she was gifted. Men who looked at her like a child but drove her like a plow. A life where she was worth only a number and handful of cents. There was once a time where she thought she was more. Now, she did not remember.

The other women sang and spoke to each other. Hole hole bushi. Smattering of words in Japanese and Hawaiian that carried the women through the work. She did not sing. She did not speak. She was weary. There were rumors of unrest and murder. She did not want to be part of what would kill her. She was alone. She would live and die as such.

She ate her lunch, worked through her dinner, and bled through the night. She had no time to herself. By the time she was off the train, she was exhausted and torn to shreds as the work was prone to do. It would continue.

She went to bed.

She woke up.

She worked.

She bled.

She went to bed.

She worked.

She bled.

She woke up.

It was hard, at first, to tell what was happening.

She only knew that her hands had healed too fast.

Her hands, always damaged from the work of hole hole, were in less pain. Less wounded. She knew that she cut herself brutally the other day. A spider had leaped out of the fields and terrified her, and her palm was slick with blood when she sliced it upon the cane behind her. The luna had deemed her too unfit to work and sent her home with wages docked. She could not

fight him.

She ate plain rice and let the bed she assembled offer her meager comfort.

And when she awoke, her hand throbbed with a daily hurt but not the savage cut of a cane. She traced it over and over until the whistle told her she had to leave.

She worked. She bled.

She came back to bed. She traced where the cut was supposed to be.

She slept. She woke up. It was impossible.

There were no words for this. It was a curse, it had to be, and she had no knowledge of the details.

She only knew the cycle.

It was the same day, over and over again.

The urge to scream built up in her throat and she forced it down until she arrived in the fields. She had to know what day it was. Saturday. Saturdays would bring the night to life. They would drink and drink until dawn would come. They would tell stories, trade gossip, and drink long into the night. She would refuse to be sober. Her mind would drift to the stars, find their place among the heavens and high up on the moon. She would endure until for a single slice of freedom.

Stumbling into the kitchen, she gripped the doorframe and asked.

"In four days," they had told her. They answered her slowly as if the heat had affected her mind. Maybe it had. Maybe it had been a long endless nightmare. She returned to her room and sat there until the final call.

She thought about running. Trespass would take a day's wage. If she ran, could she outrun madness?

Could she do anything?

She stayed. She worked. She bled. And she went to bed.

She did it again.

And again.

And again.

And again.

*No.*

The rage cut deep into her, just like the canes did. *No. No. No.*

Her hands, her aching and empty hands, shook.

If she was to live this life, she would do whatever she wanted.

She could die for it.

It started small.

She slept in and was beaten brutally. They had left her there aching but unmoving. She held that sense of peace in her mind and drifted off. When the next morning came, she woke up unscathed.

She did that every few days, sometimes crawling away to hide before

they could find her. She would spend time in the other rooms and peering through the belongings of others. The children who ran across the housing would see her sometimes and she would play with them. She would waste an entire day chasing down dogs or chickens or anything that would give her a reason to move fast that was not the work of cane cutting. She stole into homes, broke into the jails, and took what she wanted. She knew the cycle would restart.

After a while, she moved on to the people. She never was good at people, but she had time. She learned. She saw. She wanted.

Friendships would last one day but she would try again and again. She would listen to all of the women, how they came from Tokyo-ken, from Nara-ken, from Kamamoto-ken, from smaller islands. They had been brides who wanted wealth, prestige, or escape. Some had debt, others had dreams. They were so many, daughters of silkworm farmers, of rice farmers or dressmakers. She knew which ones made a salter miso soup, who hated the Nishimura wife for her face, and who could ride a horse better than any man. She made them teach her. Each day was an inch forward on the progress. She had never been able to finish school back home (third grade or was it fourth?).

But she had time.

Other things were taught to her. She seized them. She devoured the Uyeda husband. Took him apart with her practiced hands. She kissed Izumi behind the barn, blushing. She called it practice for her husband and slid herself between Izumi's legs. She did the same with Hitomi and made the Fujimura boy weep like he had seen the heavens.

She liked the women better.

She began to do things she liked. Once, she had stabbed a luna. She watched him bleed and cower. He died simply, without the power he held in life. She did so a few more times before it all became old.

Sometimes she took the horse and ran. She was a deserter who always outran them before they could find her. She would end up back in the same bed in the morning. A blessing or a curse, she did not bring herself to care.

The Saturdays on the plantation would have brought drinking and dancing after their wages were finally given. They would take the time that was owed to them and do as they wished with all they possessed. But she knew no Saturdays would come under the night sky.

So she tried. She lured out different people every night. She had learned never to get caught, getting caught would take a day's wage or worse and she learned, and she taught them. She took the alcohol and snuck away food from the stores to feed them. She would travel, sometimes, to other camps with the Filipinos or Chinese or Hawaiians and drink with them. All who worked with her, who toiled in the fields and houses, drank to make the day go faster and did so long into the night so they would not have to think about tomorrow. Some brought opium and smoked until nothing was

felt. Some gambled until night turned to dawn. Some celebrated quietly with their families, and she could never understand them.

She tried everything. She would do anything.

And she did. Over and over again.

A hundred, a thousand, a million times.

Countless time, countless lives.

One morning felt different.

She woke up and it was the same. (Always the same.)

But something inside her had shifted. Something had been rattled, shaken apart, or was a growing thing and crawling and inching forward. It might have been the last day of the cycle or simply another day, but her throat felt parched and her belly empty.

She woke up hungry for more. She needed something else than the pursuits of what she could never have for long. Longer than forgettable friendship, more than single night of passion or destruction. It was a dangerous feeling, but it had been building cycle after cycle. Sitting there, waiting.

She had heard the rumors and the chaos and the righteous fury. She had pushed them aside before but now she knew better. She knew what to do with anger and rage.

There was only one solution to this. She would not be the only to bleed. And she knew where to begin.

She turned to the ones next to her first, the ones in the same home before she hunted down all those who were in the same camp. Then she went to the next.

And the next.

And the next.

And the next.

She had learned every language on the plantation. She had it taught to her, slow and painful, but constant like the erosion of water on stone. She knew who these people were. She had feared them, loved them, coveted them, and knew them. She whispered their secrets, the terrible ones and the not-so-terrible ones. The affairs, the lies, the thefts, and the trust, the intimacy of knowing the touch of another, the promises of freedom and the allure of love. Some refused to believe her, and others thought she was the devil, a monster, a spirit.

But still, many trusted her. Many rose up with her. They followed her with something in their eyes and a fist around their heart. They trusted her.

Why should they not?

She was a god.

She remembered the chaos of the unrest. The last year had brought a strike and that strike was fueled by desire. To live better and eat more. To be treated with dignity.

To the luna, they were nothing.

Livestock and labor.

(But she knew differently. They were alive.  
So painfully and  
startlingly alive.)

But she would show them. She had cultivated an army and an endless chance to make the world anew. She was the daughter of a plantation that tried to cut her open and she slit them open in return.

She made a rousing speech and spun the right truths that enticed the others and walked on. She walked to the place she was not allowed to and dared to be—the houses of the masters. The luna lived like they were emperors, serving men who deposed the queen of a sovereign nation and feed off the blood of the Pacific. They spoke of death and violence and punishment and discipline. Planters who spoke of capital and greatness as if it was not greed dressed as honor.

Just arrogant cowards at the end. Men still bled like she did.

That was the lesson she learned on the plantation.

She hiked to the house of the owners and brought torches. She brought wrath and death. She brought all the lives she lived and the ones she could not.

She let the torch go.

And she watched the house burn.

*Ah.*

It struck her like lightning as if the blaze of the fire had caught on to her too.

Her name.

Kawakami Mirai.<sup>5</sup>

(written as future, *future*.)

She laughed.

*Dreaming of you, Dreaming of me*

1928: Eureka Dancing Academy, Chicago & 1955: Chinatown, San Francisco

*The dreams of Joshua Punzal in 1928 and Irene Wang in 1955 collide to bring a friendship thread through by nightlife and the ones they love.*

The talahib grass tickle her hands.

Irene breathes in deeply, inhaling through the thick air and searing sun. The heat touches her skin like it belongs there against all odds. She has grown up in the coldness of San Francisco with its limited warmth but still here, in the corn fields that scatter themselves across the island of Luzon, she is basked in a familiarity that brings comfort. She walks through the land of Cagayan valley and the impossible act of it is an old thrill. Irene has long past exchanged wonder for a quiet peace that comes with time and nostalgia--even if it isn't hers.

Walking through, she catches glimpse of a place she knows by heart now. The fresh upturned dirt. The curve of the mango trees. The bones of a well-cared for home. Miles of land stretching all the way to the fields rushing rivers surrounded by tall talahib grass. She slows but she does not stop. She wishes she could stay in these moments, but someone awaits her beyond this dream, and she knows he is almost there. Sleep is a process for those with patience.

As if on cue, the scenery morphs. She extends a hand, running a finger through the tips of the grass before they break away to the rising skyline of Chicago. The land is spun into the hands of man-made creations and their ravenous ego in attempting to reach the Heavens. Irene watches as the valley is punctured and upturned by an encroaching city belonging to another country. She can no longer see the mountains or reach for the coast as her view is blocked by towering buildings stacked on top of each other. She steps back onto a recently formed corner lit by a single streetlamp. The call of wild-life seeps away for the growing crescendo of a dance hall and its lively band churning out their endless tunes. Like a tidal wave, the sun is washed away by the coolness of a night ready to come to life.

Irene watches as the dancers and patrons come in cars, in taxis, and on their own two feet. Young girls not much older than her with their trim furs and hats come giggling into the halls. Some of the men stumbling in with red faces and giddy expressions that trail after them and she rolls her eyes. She doesn't think too highly of them. Irene turns her gaze to the blaring sign of *Eureka Dance Academy* and its beacon to those ready to lose an entire day's wage for a single dance.<sup>6</sup> Unlike them, she enters with hall without a cost and smiles to herself. The invisible subject of dream had its advantages after all.

Her penny loafers glide across the floor and they are mismatched with every pair of shoes in the room. No one notices but her. Irene turns head to the side, scanning the wide floor crowded with dancers and bracketed by stands for the watchers who gaze at the fancy footwork and twirling skirts. Irene moves forward and lets herself be guided to the back where chairs finally sprout from the floor, completing the landscape. Not too long after, she spots him sitting at the table with his hand fist cradling his chin.

Relief settles in her chest at the sight of slicked back hair, soft features, and an unusually fitted suit. *Not unusual*, she corrects herself. She is the outlier here, a future specter for the Joshua Punzal of 1928 where he fits. Irene slides into her seat carefully and leans her elbows on the table. She follows his gaze.

"Mooning over Peter again?" she says, and he startles before throwing her a look. Irene, raised with two older sisters, is immune to irritation directed at her and her lips quirk up into a small smile. Seriousness is reserved for a world outside of these dreams.

"I do not moon," he says, tearing his eyes away from a figure in the distance. She sees long legs and quick moves---the signature marker of one

Peter Ilagan who has stolen poor Joshua's heart. It's strange to be fond of someone she has never met. Peter is a fellow bellhop gifted with a sharp tongue and a kind heart and his friendship anchors Joshua in more ways than one. It matters to her.

"Forgive me," Irene says dryly. "You simply stare at him longingly enough to produce sonnets about his eyes, lips, and nose." He huffs out a laugh and it makes him look younger. Him and Irene were born on the same day and same month, just shy of being eighteen years old but Joshua has always looked older.

"You're being strangely talkative today," Joshua comments, hoping it retreats into silence. She notes he doesn't refute her about the sonnets.

"Unhappy to hear the truth?" She teases. Irene has always been the quietest one in her family, prone to be drowned out. But she's growing older and a little braver. The world is a little less daunting, even if it's changing beyond her imagination.

Joshua leans back and lifts his chin. "I dream about Peter because he happens to be my only friend." He drops his voice regardless of the ears that cannot hear him. "What's your excuse for the relentless nights we dream about your dear Yueyue?"

At the mention of her best friend, Irene's cheeks pinken. She looks down at the table before looking up at the crowd, refusing to meet his eyes. As if sensing the irony, the band plays "I Like Your Size, I Like Your Eyes, Who Wouldn't?"

"That's...different."

He quirks an eyebrow. "Is it?" Joshua crosses his arms and tips back his chair. Irene scrambles for an answer. She doesn't have one and so she says, "I wonder how Peter's newspaper is doing? Last time I heard, he was writing an entire column with a heading and everything." It's an obvious distraction and the dreams complies. She holds back her triumph.

Joshua inhales sharply as a memory blooms in front of them and the chair slams back down. It is one she has seen countless time because it is one that he thinks about the most. Peter appears, no longer dancing in the crowd but sitting before them and his expression is wrinkled in concentration. His appearance is in disarray with his tie loose and collar popped. The one dimple he has on his left side makes a brief appearance before the pen moves swiftly across the page and he is whipped up into a frenzy, lost in the words of his paper. The simple act has Joshua smitten and she snickers. Only a writer would fall in love with the way another writes.

He makes a face, and she opens her mouth to tease him more, but nothing comes out. Something catches her eyes. Black hair. Red lips. Joshua catches on and he seizes his opportunity.

"Thinking about her?"

"No," Irene says quickly. She hopes the denial is enough. But the dreams betray her. They shift.

Suddenly, the laughter of two little girls rises above the din. The noise

of the dance academy fades, and they are transported to a place that builds itself, brick by brick. There's a different sense of heat and sound and bodies that speak of a life taken on a high-speed trolley. Wood panels painted red and outlined in yellow line the hastily erected interior and tablecloths spun in a deep rich red float down on the tables. The twirl of a blue dress peaks out from the cluster of bodies that fill the room, and she catches her breath.

"So much for not thinking of her," Joshua says, and she shoves him.

Squeezed in the confines of San Francisco's Chinatown, deep in a place where the lines of her people are being redrawn every day now, the glaring neon sign of the *Good Wang's Restaurant* is like a guide to home. The taste of stir-fried rice cakes—savory and peppered with vegetables and pork that never fail to summon the essence of her mother—is an unforgettable aroma and it's an anchor to her dreams. Like the dance hall, she and Joshua find themselves already inexplicably seated at table at the heart of the hustle and unnoticed by the figures of the dream.

"Oh, Huang Yue seems to be everywhere. Sometimes in places she shouldn't be. You would know about that, wouldn't you?" She wants to swear at him. He knows those words conjure up more memories and the floor ruptures gently in preparation of change. The restaurant splits like a colored film. They are now the audience, and the *Forbidden City* is the stage. This she dreams of more often she wants to because every time it's a reminder of what lies hidden underneath and tucked into the softest parts of her soul.

It's a memory she never speaks out loud. She sees herself slipping through the back with Yueyue, afraid to get caught but secretly thrilled by the idea. The *Forbidden City*. The Chinese nightclub full of mystery and intrigue. Irene had wanted to know what was so bad about them, what brought the scorn of her family and the entirety of older Chinatown.<sup>7</sup> She sees her make the choice again.

Irene still can't describe the sight of it all. Chinese chorus lines—girls and women with long legs that flapped around fluttering fans. Dancers that moved like Fred Astaire and flew across the stage. Coy women without any clothes on, others were wrapped up in glammers gowns, or dressed in men's clothing that kept moving, gliding, and sailing with grace. *The Forbidden City* was place where a Chinese girl, held on display, could be anything she wanted, Chinese, American, in love, in lust, in passion. She remembered turning and bearing witness to something that seared itself into her mind. Huang Yue had not been able to tear her eyes away, glued to the woman in men's clothing. As impossible as it was, it had been yearning on her friend's face and something in Irene stirred. In the kaleidoscope of lights, she watches once more as Yuyue's desires float to surface and reflect on her face like the touch of something divine.

She had wanted Yueyue in that moment. It was brief and fleeting but it made her notice. She can't escape it. Every time, she sees her best friend, the one she grew into girlhood with, shared candied apples and ice cream cones with, the memories flood her. In the moment, all she feels is her. Be-

cause how can she think of anything else but the memories of two young girls building their first swing, taking their first fall, and tumbling down like the world is made just for them to explore? A city is a crowded place to raise children, restaurants become playgrounds, heavy tables that spin for customers double as secret treehouses, and cramped roads are hills worth of adventures. Her heart squeezes and her throat grows dry. *What are the words for this?*

Irene looks for the writer. She turns to see Joshua nose deep in her family's dishes without a care in the world. Irene looks at him, salivating over the food and half a mind on his own unattainable love, and snorts. "So romantic." He laughs and she can't help but do the same. She leaves him to the dishes for the stage.

For some reason, the pull of Peter is so strong today that she sees him in the crowd again. Irene doesn't mind it but it's a little strange. She watches him dance an old version of the Charleston and he looks so out place she wants to laugh when it hits her. Something about him is different. He looks more tangible and real. Peter keeps looking back at Joshua as well. Her mind races. Peter feels closer than before and that has never happened before.

Joshua sometimes hides him. Peter's face blurs and his features distort, or they became nothing more than impressions. Affection, they have both learned, is not to be too openly worn on the sleeve. But tonight, *tonight*, is different and the revelation strikes her.

"You're going to tell him." *You're going to tell him that he has taken your heart and soul and you fall asleep dreaming of him.* She sounds breathless. "Why? How?" She has a dozen questions, but she holds them back as Joshua stills. He chews slowly before setting down his utensils.

"Things are changing. You once told me a war is coming." *A war is still coming.* But she keeps it quiet. The world they he knows and the world she knows is being constantly reshaped by people more powerful than they are. "I might not survive." *He might not survive the end of the decade* is what her mind tortures her with. She had heard the stories from her parents, of a collapse so great that people starved on the streets in great doves. Irene has tried to not tell him anymore.

"You might live," she tells him. She hopes. She prays.

"And what will I amount to? A man stuck waiting for his loneliness to consume him?" Joshua shakes his head. "I have to do it. It might cost me, it might not, but regrets will haunt me long before I die if I don't do it. To love someone is a gift, not a curse. That's what I believe." She stays silent.

He's stubborn and set in his ways just like she is. She doesn't want to imagine what runs through his mind to compel him to do such a thing. Her friend, her companion, is not a figment of her dreams. He's real and he holds a part of her heart. She has to keep hoping he outlives the turmoil.

"Will you even remember to do so?" The dreams always fade deep into their memories until sleep came to claim them once more. They remembered each time they met and forgot when they parted for the cycle to begin again.

“I think this time I will.” He’s so certain. She envies his clarity. Joshua has faith where she has doubt and it’s hard to picture what he can do. Irene’s eyes drift back to the stage and the memory plays again. She doesn’t want it to. “I think this will keep me alive in the way I want to.”

Confessions come at cost. Not only of the heart but safety. Her family is the descendent of a son only real on paper. The Great Earthquake half a century ago allowed their family to come to America but their safety is precarious.<sup>8</sup> Neighbors are turning on one another for their own sense of safety, calling themselves more American than the other. She cannot afford to be any different than an American girl wanting an American family.

But then Yueyue laughs, and it rings through the air. A sound like the dying croak of nainai and it’s ugly and horrible and beautiful she is willing to give everything up for her.

“I have feeling,” Joshua says softly next to her. “You will remember.”

She wakes up and the dream fades. Memories slip from her grasp like running water and she stumbles out of bed none the wiser.

But something lingers.

Something finds its way to her waking moments. Irene walks through the day with a feeling tangled up in her chest and the sense she may have forgotten something. It’s strange. She’s fine.

Tonight is Auntie Lan’s birthday. There will be lotus root soup, apple pie, and poached chicken. Everyone will be there, including Yueyue and she’s excited. She’s nervous as well. Lately, it’s been harder to hide the feelings she has only just put a name to. She wants Yueyue, loves her beyond all logical reason, and the thought is terrifying.

The worry haunts her all the way up to the dinner.

She sees Yueyue and the world tips. Everything about herself is throw into chaos by the fact she is undone by her best friend. How can she face her? How can she continue to love her? What if she leaves her when she knows? What if, what if, what if? But Yueyue is the one who grew up with her. She is the one who ran into the nightclub with her, brushed a thumb over the red of Irene’s lip, and danced with her at every song they played at the restaurant. Irene sits next to her, and it makes her chest tighten.

And then Yueyue laughs, and the world rights itself.

*I have to do it. It might cost me, it might not, but regrets will haunt me long before I die if I don’t do it. To love someone is a gift, not a curse.*

She remembers. And she wants.

Irene lowers her hand and slips it underneath the table. Just one step forward. Hesitancy first, then bravery. Dreams are the same as reality. A construct to be lived. Irene takes her hand and brushes a kiss on the back when no one looks. Yueyue’s mouth parts in surprise and, dare Irene thinks of it, hope.

*Love me through the ages.*

*I will, I will.*

*And so we dance*

2019: New Orleans, Louisiana

*The journey of a lion to its destination on Lunar New Year in New Orleans and excerpts from limited tv sitcom pilot “nhỏ nhỏ”*

The birth of the lion begins at any hour against their choosing—there is only the forward motion of creation for them. The foundation comes first, manufactured with haste, ones that rattle in the wind and stay strong when the storm comes thundering in. The skin comes next, rolling over with paper texture painted with colors that define vibrancy—red, orange, purple, green, gold, black. The eyes, the tail, the curve of the body are crafted with practiced hands and a will of their own.

*Made in Việt Nam.* A stamp just for here. And they are born and born.

(If they are born elsewhere, it matters only to the lion keeper. No one else.) These dear lions are crafted and sent to destinations near and far. Some are housed locally; some are imported across nations—others are chosen carefully on a sabbatical. In all, home is the purpose. They must go and they do.

Bearing the summer heat, the lion is held on display. They hang in all parts, in pieces that would come together as a whole. Sweltering humidity welcomes the onlookers and seeps into their shirts, making the search a little more difficult. The lions wait and wait.

Until they are found. *This one*, their seekers say, *this one is the right one*. American hands, Vietnamese faces; contradictions, compliments. Everything is the right answer. Home is the purpose. And so, they go. Pieces, parts, again.

Across the sea. A journey made easier in fragments and pathways forged from years before. Extraordinary in an ordinary way. This lion is given to a small family company in New Orleans, Louisiana. Gifted to their youngest dancers who keep the tradition alive and well. Hands are laid upon the lion. They practice and practice and practice. Night after night, the same beats but a different story.

And the stories are told.

### **selected excerpts from ACT ONE**

**Title:** “nhỏ nhỏ” \*meaning really small, for this team may be little, but still they are mighty.

**Summary:** A family of lion dancers in New Orleans and their attempts are sorting through personal and family drama.

#### **Cast**

**HENRYTRIEU**

seventeen years-old, twin brother, "eldest daughter" syndrome

**ALEXTRIEU**

seventeen years-old, twin sister, asshole

**LILY LUU**

eighteen years-old, newcomer, the-fake-normal-one

**HONG AN MAI**

eighteen years-old, family friend, comes-with-own-caution-tape

**JUN LY**

eighteen years-old, cousin, “thinks charisma is an actual personality”

**VALERIE LY**

twenty years-old, cousin, hot-mess-for-hot-girls

**SCENE 4**

**EXT. FRENCH QUARTER -- DAY**

**They are mid-performance at BAO’S RESTAURANT OPENING in the COURTYARD and arguing about their next move.**

**ALEX**

We’re wasting time. We should just do it.

**HENRY**

No! No. We are not eating another kid.

**ALEX**

Why not? It’s fun. We’ve done it before.

**Henry SPINS THE LION AROUND, forcing the rest to follow. They are still BICKERING.**

**HENRY**

Because the last time we did that, we got in trouble for “unsolicited contact” and “causing undue stress to a minor.” Do you guys not remember this???

**ALEX**

**(insistent)**

Oh, that kid was a little shit. And like, it was in a white neighborhood. We’re fine. I think.

**HENRY**

Such confidence.

**Everyone has opinions. THEY are LOUD about them at ONCE.**

**HONG AN**

You’re sucking the fun out of this. Henry, just do it.

**VALERIE**

Just do it! I don’t know why you’re whining about this.

**ALEX**

See, everyone agrees. You’re just boring.

**LILY**

It’s not that hard.

**ALEX**

**DO IT.**

**JUN**

**EAT HIM!**

**EVERYONE**

**(at once)**

**EAT HIM!**

**HENRY**

**FINE!**

**He caves. Henry LIFTS THE LION UP and makes it ROAR WITH**

**A WIDE MOUTH and CLOSES THE MOUTH over the YOUNG CHILD. They make eye contact.**

**YOUNG CHILD**

(whimpers)

No...

**The YOUNG CHILD drops his CANDY and begins to CRY. HENRY STARES in disbelief.**

**HENRY**

You have got to be fu—

**SCENE 7**

**EXT. COURTYARD OF THE TRIEU FAMILY HOUSE -- NIGHT  
STYLISTIC SHOTS: JUMPS, LEAPS, KICKS, LONG SWEEPS...**

**HENRY AND HIS TEAM practice in a mix of their casual wear and bright uniforms. They move with practiced ease—powerful, graceful, and full of joy.**

**This COURTYARD has seen many late nights. QUIET, LOUD, EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN. It is another PLACE for them, another TIME.**

**They have FORGED a place to belong.**

**Belonging. Tradition. Family. Home.**

**SCENE 8**

**EXT. COURTYARD OF THE TRIEU FAMILY HOUSE - NIGHT  
They are CAUGHT. Everything about them is SUSPICIOUS. They are the EPITOME of TEENAGE DUMBASSERY.**

**HENRY**

What is that?

**ALEX & JUN & HONG AN**

What?

**THEY all LOOK AROUND. HENRY is not fooled, and he POINTS.**

**HENRY**

Don't try to gaslight me.

**JUN CLUTCHES his CHEST like the very thought offends him.**

**ALEX**

(gasps)

We would never do that to you!

**It's a lie. HENRY MOVES FORWARD and YANKS the LION HEAD from behind their backs. He opens it.**

**HENRY**

Unbelievable. Vodka, Hennessy, and what is...IS THIS WEED?

**ALEX**

Whaaaaat....How did that get there...Oh my god...

**HONG AN**

Holy shit, uh, we have, oh my god, there's an alcohol thief!

**They ALL LOOK at her. MANY EMOTIONS color HENRY'S face.**

**HENRY**

...And what, reverse smuggles liquor and weed in lion heads?

**SCENE 15**

**INT. TRIEU FAMILY HOME - WORKSHOP -- NIGHT**

**HENRY** has the scattered parts of the lion on his worktable. He is **HOLDING THE EYE**. It's quiet and he **FEELS** a little **ALONE**. He decides to **MAKE A CALL**. As it rings, Henry recalls a few memories. They seep into the **PRESENT**.

*A simple table with less things. A pair of hands come over his, teaching him slowly how to paint each part of the lion.*

*A woman's voice drifts through the air.*

**(WOMAN'S VOICEOVER)**

*Con, don't go up, go down. Like half-moon, you curve.*

**YOUNG HENRY**

*Like this?*

**WOMAN**

*Slowly, slowly, làm chậm lại.*

She **MOVES** his hands as she **SCOLDS** him **GENTLY**. Every gesture made with affection. Love comes in small forms.

**WOMAN (CONT'D)**

*Just like ông nôi, you do things too fast. You have to slow down.*

**YOUNG HENRY**

*Okay, okay, I got it.*

**YOUNG HENRY** sticks out his tongue as he **DRAGS** the **BRUSH** over the **EYELID**. He gets it right this time.

**YOUNG HENRY (CONT'D)**

*I did it!*

**WOMAN**

*I know. Good job, con.*

More hands come into the **FRAME**. Time elapses. Cut back to the **PRESENT** as the phone is picked up.

**HENRY**

Hi, mẹ.

**HENRY'S MOM**

Hi, con.

A smile **SPREADS ACROSS** his face. He is no longer **ALONE**. Distance is a wound only healed by presence.

**SCENE 18**

**MIX OF EXT. AND INT. SHOTS OF VIETNAMESE AND CHINESE PLACES IN NEW ORLEANS.**

The team **DANCES** at every **CELEBRATORY OCCASION**. Weddings, restaurant openings, open markets, hotel parties, anniversaries, competitions, and festivals. They **RADIATE** with passion and the **NIGHT** is their domain. They are a **BEACON** in the dark, a reminder of **TRADITIONS**.

**But their BIGGEST performance will be---**

**HENRY**

—Tết. We will not mess this up. Not only is it BAD LUCK, our reputation is on the line. If we lose business now, we will lose it for the rest of the year, and we'll basically be cursed, do you guys understand? DO YOU.

**LILLY**

...no pressure then.

**There is a LOT OF PRESSURE.**

**SCENE 20**

**EXT. NIGHT MARKET -- DAY**

**ALEX and LILLY are trying to separate the ingredients for the LY FAMILY'S BOOTH.**

**ALEX**

Don't mix those too. You're literally as bad as Henry, food has to be prepared carefully...

**ALEX paints a picture that is tinged by nostalgia and warmth. She GREW up in New Orleans and was raised by a loving family that never made her feel alone. TET is a CELEBRATION that blurs the day into an endless night—a MAGIC of its own. She LOVES it through the food.**

**LILLY LISTENS quietly, secretly envious, and fond. She can ALMOST IMAGINE the FIREWORKS, the CHILDREN RUNNING, and the CLATTER OF TOY GAMES.**

**NOT HOME, but CLOSE ENOUGH.**

**SCENE 21**

**LILLY straightens up from where she sets up the booth. She SCANS the venue and catalogues the differences. New Orleans has a special take on the food, music, and people, but a lot is the same. The old Vietnamese music that BLARES across the market, the smell of fried food and burnt firecrackers, and EXPLOSION of color through clothes that come from tradition. They are HALLMARKS and ANCHORS she holds onto.**

**EXT. NIGHT MARKET MAIN STAGE -- NIGHT**

**It CONJURES up memories of Lilly's family. Nights where they SANG KAROKE, LAUGHED at Paris by Night, and always felt so OUT OF HER REACH. She thinks she will find it HERE instead.**

**It all gives her courage. She TAKES A DEEP BREATH and EXHALES.**

**The stage is just beyond the curtain, and she must MOVE FORWARD.**

**She PULLS APART the curtain and SMILES WIDE as the LIGHTS COME UP ON HER. LILLY has never lacked courage and it shows.**

**LILLY**

Good evening New Orleans! Happy Lunar New Year!

Chúc mừng năm mới! Let's have fun tonight. Are you ready?

**Her voice ECHOES and the CROWD ROARS.**

And with them, so many stories. So many reasons. Fit for every occasion.

The lion is a true marker of celebration, a beacon that casts a spell wherever it goes. The opening of a restaurant, at the behest of a wedding, the call of the New Year, and the drumbeat of a competition. A dozen reasons, a thousand occasions. They go and find their way.

Pieces, parts, again.

They say the Crescent city is where those who are reborn find their names. In the waters, there is home. Fishermen who longed for the air of their country, the same humidity and waters, sought New Orleans as a sanctuary and faith in a God answered. (The Church of Saint Mary welcomed thousands of refugees to New Orleans. Mary is their Saint; their saviors are themselves. They dance and live and they pass on.) They lost many things to the water but found just as much.<sup>9</sup> The whispers become roars.

Whole and one.

The night is here.

The beat begins. The performance will take hours, the lion has already been worked for months and years. The stage is echoing with thunder that resounds through the air and the weight of an endless celebration. It is easy to buckle underneath the strain.

But the lion does not cave.

The lion dances into the night.

## SCENE 24

### EXT. NIGHT MARKET MAIN STAGE -- NIGHT

**HENRY SMILES and she passes him, they LINK HANDS briefly.**

**HENRY**

(mouths)

You did great.

**LILLY**

(mouths back)

I know.

**He LAUGHS and JUN TOSSES an arm over his shoulder. ALEX WHACKS him with the lion's head and PUSHES HIM TO THE CURTAINS.**

**ALEX**

Stop flirting! We gotta go. Go, go, go!

**VALERIE**

Henry needs to stop coming after me for hitting on girls when he's slowing us down for his GIRLFRIEND.

**HENRY**

Shut up and go.

**NOT A MOMENT WASTED, they pile onto the stage. They take a moment. Time is suspended.**

HENRY  
Ready?  
EVERYONE  
Ready.

**They go. The night sings.**

**The cymbals crash, the lions thunder, and the feet fly and fly—flying until the festival moves as one body, one lion. A soul that beats with a thousand heartbeats, a million stories, and inheritances undertaken.**

**EXIT SCENE. END OF ACT TWO.**

### References

- 1 Dầu xanh is a type of jasmine oil that was the cure for ever ailment I had as a Vietnamese American. It symbolizes a love from family that I believe cannot be translated into anything but simple acts of care. I do not italicize non-English words to emphasize their place in everyday language.
- 2 Người Kinh, or người Việt, is a way to refer to Vietnamese people. Our origins are constantly questioned, debated, and overwritten—even by our own people. I choose the story of the Kinh people, the one where we were hatched from a hundred eggs birthed from a fairy mother and dragon father, just to forget for a moment that our history is full of gaps and to tell another story where we begin without tragedy or loss.
- 3 “The Five A.M. Whistle” is referenced in Chapter III of Ronald Takaki, *Pau Hana: Plantation Life and Labor in Hawai’i, 1835–1920* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983) This cycle was repeated every single day.
- 4 The Lunas were the foreman of the plantation, usually based in a racial and class hierarchy that typically had the Portuguese on top. Sometimes Japanese plantation workers would be promoted to being luna which caused tension. I choose to depict the luna at their worst because many of them made the already unbearable conditions worse, highlighting ones that enacted harsh policies and cruel punishments on plantation workers. See Ronald Takaki, *Pau Hana: Plantation Life and Labor in Hawai’i, 1835–1920* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983).
- 5 I use the romaji version of Japanese names and pinyin for romanized Chinese names. Name choices were consciously made in mind of the influence American society had Asian Americans but also may mean nothing. It is a reminder that these stories are also works of fiction and that stories of truly historical nature lie beyond this collection.
- 6 The *Eureka Dance Academy* was a real location in Chicago where dances were held for mostly working-class people who frequented on their night off. Though the focus is on Filipinos, who were a large part of the demographics and came for many reasons (including leisure and escape) dressed to the nines, there were more ethnicities that worked, served, and danced in the halls. See Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns, *Puro Arte: Filipinos on the Stages of Empire* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015); Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1989);
- 7 The Forbidden City was a real nightclub in San Francisco that operated from 1938–1970 by a man named Charlie Low. It operated outside of Chinatown but within the proximity, luring many patrons to the scene that were majority white and fascinated by Chinese people. The Chinese dancers and singers both embodied Oriental tropes and subverted them, doing dances of “Little Egypt” or performing chorus numbers that white American girls did. They became paradoxical representations that provoked members of the Chinese American community, enthralled wider

America, and allowed many young Chinese Americans to ponder what it meant to be American. See the documentary, *Forbidden City, USA*, produced by Arthur Dong 1953, *DeepFocus Productions 1989*, 57 mins. This story also pays homage to Malinda Lo's *The Last Night at the Telegraph Club* whose Young Adult book is about a young Chinese American girl falling in love amidst the Cold War based on the real stories of queer women in San Francisco.

- 8 “Paper Sons” were those of Chinese descent who came to America on forged papers because of the Chinese Exclusion Act that barred their entry. A devastating earthquake hit San Francisco in the 1900s destroying the records office and many within the Chinese community took the opportunity to resist the exclusion by faking family relations. During the Cold War in the 50's, heightened surveillance hunted for evidence of these “paper sons” and encouraged a network of informing one another. Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015)
- 9 This story was inspired by the novel Eric Nguyen, *Things We Lost to the Water* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2021). After 1975, many Vietnamese people fled to America and settled in places such as Southern California but also in the South, including Texas and Louisiana. Vietnamese refugees in New Orleans lost many things to the waters, but it does not mean they are incapable of joy, humor, and beauty.

# Long Live the Queen: Japanese American Beauty & Identity Formation in the Los Angeles Nisei Week Queen's Program

Michelle Okawa

AMST 401T: The Body and American Culture

Written for AMST 401T: The Body and American Culture taught by Dr. Kris Rowe, this paper examines a well-established program in the Japanese American community, known as the Nisei Week Queen's Program. Initially, I set out to write a paper focusing on the beauty and performance of women that participated in this program, however further research revealed underlying tensions surrounding race, class, gender, sexuality, power, and identity. This paper is an exploration on all these themes that coexist within the Queen's Program to create a complicated space for the women that participate. Ultimately, this paper considers how participants found meaning within the program to establish a Japanese American identity. Part of my research includes interviews with three participants of the Queen's Program. I commend these women for their vulnerability and enthusiasm in sharing their stories with me. One of my goals in this paper is to centralize the experiences of Japanese American women and I hope readers will also consider this while reading.

Following the end of World War II, thousands of Japanese Americans returned home to Los Angeles, weary after years spent imprisoned behind barbed wire in concentration camps. Upon their return, a group of second-generation Japanese Americans, known as *nisei*, sought to forget the trauma and shame experienced during the war by restoring the world they had left behind. In August 1949, just four years after the end of WWII, members of the Japanese American community revived the weeklong event known as the Nisei Week Festival. This festival, held in the Los Angeles Japanese historic district of Little Tokyo, was meant to be a "celebration of ethnic pride, racial harmony, and international friendship," but also served as a method of integration for the Japanese American community during a time when anti-Japanese sentiment persisted<sup>1</sup> The revival of Nisei Week ushered in the return of a highly popular competition for young Japanese American

women, vying for the title of Nisei Week Queen.<sup>2</sup> Now referred to as the Nisei Week Queen's Program, this competition had origins in traditional beauty pageants and was modeled after the mainstream, yet highly segregated, Miss America and Miss California pageants.<sup>3</sup>

During these postwar years, a prominent male conservative newspaper columnist named George "Horse" Yoshinaga used his platform to deconstruct each woman's chances of winning, likening the contestants to entrants in a horserace. Much to the chagrin of the Queen's Program participants, Yoshinaga would publish their body measurements, favorable traits and characteristics, and odds of winning the pageant for the entire Japanese American community to read. Yoshinaga continued this practice until the 1970s, at which point fellow columnist, Ellen Endo criticized him for objectifying these women as "meat to be poked and prodded."<sup>4</sup> Eventually, Yoshinaga was convinced to end the practice of publishing the contestants' body measurements, not by Endo, but rather by the women of the Queen's Program.<sup>5</sup> Despite demonstrating what would now be deemed an objectifying depiction of these women's bodies, Yoshinaga was a longstanding supporter of the Nisei Week Festival. Several decades later, his family legacy within the festival was commemorated when his granddaughter, Juli Yoshinaga, was crowned the 2019 Nisei Week Queen.<sup>6</sup> This interaction between George Yoshinaga and the women of the Nisei Week Queen's Court demonstrates a series of complex exchanges that have historically been repeated and continue to exist within the Queen's Program to this day. Community leaders, who are often male, uphold their power and influence through institutions such as Nisei Week to enforce control over the boundaries of race and gender within the Japanese American community. However, despite these stifling tensions that exist, Japanese American women can discover a sense of empowerment and agency within these tightly controlled spaces.

The Los Angeles Nisei Week Festival Queen's Program is the longest running and most well-known competition of this nature for Japanese American women.<sup>7</sup> According to the Nisei Week website, the Queen's Program is a multifaceted program that offers "young Japanese American women an opportunity to learn about their Japanese heritage, develop their personal and professional skills, and engage with the community."<sup>8</sup> On the website there is a page of "Past Queens & Courts" that features photographs of each Queen's Court starting from 1935 to 2019. At first glance, this gallery appears to celebrate the longevity of the Queen's Program through its preservation, however further inspection reveals notable similarities found in each photograph.<sup>9</sup> While there are slight differences in each woman's appearance, the prevailing image of the Nisei Week Queen is a smiling young Japanese American woman with striking red lipstick, black hair that frames the face, and a glittering crown adorned on her head. Upon viewing this gallery of Nisei Week Queens, this paper considers the following research questions: How does the Nisei Week Queen's Program reinforce ideas about race, class, gender, and sexuality through the regulation of beauty standards on participants? What does the prevailing image of the Nisei Week Queen represent in the Japanese American community and larger American culture? How

do Japanese American women negotiate and challenge longstanding ideas about beauty by participating in the Queen's Program? How has the Queen's Program changed over time?

Due to the legacy of the Nisei Week Festival, the Queen's Program remains a tightly controlled but also highly visible space that leaves women with little agency to make decisions for themselves. The program participants must adhere to guidelines set by the Nisei Week Board of Directors, the Queen's Committee, as well as their community sponsors, in order to embody a particular image that represents the entire Japanese American community. This paper argues that the Nisei Week Queen's Program is a stronghold dedicated to preserving the legacy of the Japanese American community by upholding standards of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Due to this level of power and influence, the program maintains a complicated space that makes it difficult for women to negotiate standards of beauty. However, despite this, participants have found further meaning and a greater purpose within the program to establish a Japanese American identity. For third and fourth-generation Japanese American youth, this is particularly significant as maintaining a connection to the community has become difficult through an inevitable assimilation into mainstream society and the subsequent loss of cultural heritage. This research includes three interviews with two recent participants and one prospective candidate for the Nisei Week Queen's Program. While much has been written about Japanese American beauty pageants up until 2006, this paper offers a recent contribution to prior scholarship on this topic by conducting interviews with women that participated in the program from 2010 through 2021.<sup>10</sup> These interviews are intended to centralize the experiences of women as they navigate tensions from enforced gender roles but also exert their own agency in the process. Since this research seeks to understand the influence of the program on recent participants, it would be beneficial to provide scholarly work charting the history of the Nisei Week Queen's Program to trace changes that have occurred within its historical trajectory.

### **Biculturalism to Assimilation: The Early History of the Queen's Program**

The Nisei Week Festival first began in 1934 as a way to garner business in Los Angeles's Little Tokyo during the Great Depression. The Queen's Pageant was added to the festival one year later to further draw people into the community by appointing a queen as the figurehead of Little Tokyo. The festival relied on female pageant contestants to attract customers to Little Tokyo businesses but also represent the community at official events.<sup>11</sup> Local Japanese American newspapers of the time revealed that these contestants were to embody a bicultural identity that served the dual purpose of solidifying the presence of the Japanese American community, while also providing ethnic "fantasies" to the dominant white society. With this purpose in mind, the ideal candidate was characterized as having "the quiet charm of the Japanese woman with the more lively personality of the American girl" that "represented the best of Nisei womanhood."<sup>12</sup> Participants would soon find the position of Nisei Week Queen to be largely symbolic as they were mainly directed to follow orders but not express their own opinions. These women

played crucial roles in the early formation of the Nisei Week Festival but were largely confined to positions as volunteers or beauty contestants.<sup>13</sup>

Despite these limited opportunities, Japanese American women found meaning in their assigned roles by demonstrating knowledge of fashion and beauty to advocate for the inclusion of Japanese culture into mainstream society. Historian Shirley Jennifer Lim argues that by wearing a kimono to official events, the Nisei Week Queen's Court could play on the orientalist expectations of white audiences, while also showcasing their ethnic pride by appearing "Japanese." Choosing to wear a kimono was an attempt for these women to display both their Japanese and American identities as the traditional kimono was often paired with the more Americanized bright red lipstick and permed wavy hair. Lim argues that during this time Japanese American women had to assert their middle-class femininity to gain respectability, but they also needed to reaffirm their American cultural citizenship. Participating in seemingly benign activities such as beauty pageants was a way for Japanese American women to establish this cultural citizenship but also to embody their ethnic heritage during a time when xenophobia was prominent.<sup>14</sup>

Eventually this meaning would change by 1941 as fears over Japanese imperialism during WWII fueled anti-Japanese sentiment in the United States. Japanese American women were warned to trade in their kimono in favor of "smartly-tailored dresses," and the American flag was displayed prominently at all Nisei Week events to further prove their patriotism. The 1941 Nisei Week Festival booklet featured a photograph of the Queen's Court on a parade float surrounding a replica of the Statue of Liberty with text that read, "America is our home." These prominent displays of Americanism replaced the prior bicultural celebration of ethnic identity with the intention of removing any association they had with Japan. Despite their best efforts to appear as nonthreatening patriotic American citizens, the federal government would proceed to incarcerate 120,000 Japanese Americans into concentration camps, believing them to be unassimilable "enemy aliens." Thus, the early years of Nisei Week came to a close as Japanese Americans were uprooted from the West Coast, leaving Japantowns such as Little Tokyo behind.<sup>15</sup>

Enclosed within barbed wire fencing and under the watchful eye of guard towers, Japanese Americans continued expressing complicated displays of patriotism in camps. According to historian Malia McAndrew, performing in beauty pageants and minstrel shows was a way for Japanese American youth to prove their loyalty and align with white mainstream society, even under incarceration. Through examining camp newspapers, McAndrew argues that these youths would use their bodies to display a patriotic American identity. For Japanese American women, the beauty pageant remained an opportunity to transform into the image of an "all-American dream girl."<sup>16</sup> Titles such as "Miss Manzanar" and "Queen of Rowher" graced the headlines of these newspapers as glamorized depictions of Japanese American women were used to demonstrate physical proof of the community's respectability and further removal from America's enemy across the Pacific. During this

time, the beauty pageant became a hypervisible space where the community could scrutinize the image and performance of Japanese American femininity. McAndrew states,

For young Japanese American girls, this pressure was amplified by war and a prison culture that linked ideal female bodies with patriotism and community empowerment. Not only did the girl who found herself 'too fat,' 'too short,' or too 'flat-chested' sadden herself, camp newspapers suggested, she also let down her community and her nation.<sup>17</sup>

Under these circumstances, Japanese American women faced tremendous pressure and responsibility to represent themselves and their community by conforming to mainstream American society's standards of beauty.

### **Japanese American Postwar Integration & Second Wave Feminist Criticisms**

During the post-WWII era, the Nisei Week Festival and the Queen's Program took on new meaning once again, as the Japanese American newspaper *The Pacific Citizen* reported, "The songs and dances of Nisei Week serve to wipe out the memory of bitterness and frustration of the mass evacuation experience."<sup>18</sup> According to historian Lon Kurashige, after the war the Japanese American community chose to focus more on integration and inclusion into American society by highlighting their success and advancements of overcoming obstacles that previously restricted them from mainstream institutions. To do this the Nisei Week Festival increased its "productions, visibility, and glamour," which was strongly reflected in the Queen's Program through its coronation ball.<sup>19</sup> Shirley Jennifer Lim argues that beauty pageants for racial minority groups were especially significant during this era because selecting a female representative through a beauty pageant exemplified a sense of modernity, self-determinism for postcolonial subjects, ideal femininity, and community values. These beauty pageants were also a way for communities to reinterpret history and solidify their place in American society through the symbolic representation of their ideal female citizens.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, the young women of the Nisei Week Court served the purpose of affirming the Japanese American community's existence in Los Angeles, while indirectly showing the broader society that internment was a mistake.

Although several Japanese American women participated in the popular Queen's Program, there were many that contested the beauty pageant. Lim speculates that these women likely refused to subject themselves to constant scrutiny by the public, while others simply did not have the time or money to commit to extensive rounds of competition.<sup>21</sup> Criticism towards the Queen's Program continued to grow when a swimsuit portion was introduced to the beauty pageant during the 1950s and permanently added to the competition in 1962. Modeled after the Miss America pageant, participants would walk across stage wearing swimsuits for a panel to judge their figure. According to Kurashige, the addition of the swimsuit competition was

used to demonstrate Japanese American integration by aligning with mainstream beauty standards. With the rise of the second wave feminist movement, the swimsuit competition and the traditional beauty pageant aspects of the Queen's Program were criticized as opportunities for men to delight in their ability to publicly scrutinize the bodies of women through the local newspapers.<sup>22</sup> This is an example of what feminist scholar Sandra Lee Bartky would later address in her work. According to Bartky, femininity is manufactured and exhibited through the bodies of women, bodies that perform within spaces such as beauty pageants to reinforce an oppressive patriarchal system.<sup>23</sup> The Nisei Week Queen's Program fits into Bartky's criticism as the beauty pageant stage was often a space where Japanese American women were historically and publicly scrutinized for their appearance. The process of selecting a Nisei Week Queen is an example of how idealized femininity was constructed through this process of displaying women's bodies to enforce traditional gender roles.

Influenced by white feminists of this second wave movement, Japanese American women activists sought to challenge community institutions such as Nisei Week. Georgia Lee, columnist for the Asian American activist newspaper *Gidra*, would write that the beauty pageant was "dull, overly-serious, pretentious, hypocritical, and silly—something avoided altogether by the 'real girl.'"<sup>24</sup> As reflected in Lee's quote, mainstream white feminist criticisms that identified beauty pageants as frivolous sites of oppression were often used to challenge male chauvinism in the Japanese American community. In 1979, the swimsuit portion was eventually removed from the competition when contestants of the Queen's Program collectively refused to participate. These women challenged the program with the reasoning that wearing swimsuits onstage was a demeaning practice used to judge their bodies. In order to proceed with the pageant, Nisei Week quickly cancelled the swimsuit competition demonstrating the women's agency to challenge oppressive standards.<sup>25</sup> These criticisms directed towards the Queen's Program resurfaced in 1985, when a local group of Japanese American women called the Women's Concerns Committee (WCC) encouraged organizations to stop sponsoring Queen's candidates and boycott the Nisei Week Queen's Program altogether.<sup>26</sup> Although the WCC boycott of Nisei Week was unsuccessful, these mounting criticisms forced the Queen's Program to reevaluate their core values and purpose within the community.

### **Beauty Pageant No More: The Nisei Week Queen's Program of Today**

While the second wave feminist movement has traditionally opposed spaces such as beauty pageants that appear to foster an idealized femininity, the experiences of the women that participated in the Queen's Program reveal a more nuanced perspective than what was initially framed. Despite encountering sexism and the enforcement of gender roles, participants found additional meaning within their position as representatives for the community. Many women credited the Nisei Week Queen's Program for allowing them to understand the Japanese American experience and appreciate their ethnic identity. In addition, participants acknowledged that the pageant provided

them with a positive understanding of themselves as women living in a world dictated by white beauty standards. A 1994 interview with a former Nisei Week Queen, identified as Jane Nakamura, expanded on this point:

I think one of the reasons I don't denigrate pageants altogether is that it is an important thing for women of color to have a forum in which they can feel really attractive, because most of these girls could not—simply could not—compete as models or in other contests whether it is because of racial prejudice or facial image or lacking the 'beauty-pageant body.'<sup>27</sup>

As this quote demonstrates, the beauty pageant provided a more positive experience for its participants than second wave feminists had suggested. For many, the beauty pageant was a formative place for these women to establish their Japanese American identity, sense of empowerment, as well as camaraderie with other women.

These positive experiences reflected by the Queen's Program participants align with emerging scholarship that examines the beauty pageant as a more complex area of study than previously considered. Sarah Banet-Weiser has argued that the beauty pageant carries significance because it is a space where individual and cultural identities are constantly negotiated to produce "political subjects" who have the ability to construct and reinvent femininity onstage.<sup>28</sup> However, for communities of color, the beauty pageant is not only about femininity or beauty. Issues of race and postcolonialism are embodied within these spaces, allowing the beauty pageant to become highly politicized and central to the lives of all those involved, including the beauty contestants, sponsors, organizers, and spectators.<sup>29</sup> In addition, for the contestants themselves, there is an added benefit to engaging in these feminine practices as women can possess a sense of empowerment and visibility by claiming space in the beauty pageant. According to scholar Amy Best, participating in body work through makeup, clothing, and hair can provide women with the instant gratification of "self-control, self-definition, and self-pleasure."<sup>30</sup> To reiterate the point made by the former Queen Jane Nakamura, having a space for women to indulge in these body practices was an affirming experience for women of color that were unable to participate in the mainstream beauty culture.

Although these works demonstrate more self-affirming scholarship about spaces of femininity such as beauty pageants, the Nisei Week Queen's Program has largely made the effort to move away from this label in response to previous criticisms and negative associations. One method of distancing the program from its past has been altering the meaning and purpose of the Queen's Program to focus on leadership, cultural ambassadorship, and community service for Japanese American women. In addition, the judging criteria to choose a Nisei Week Queen now focuses on characteristics associated with a woman's moral character rather than her looks. Anthropologist Christine Yano, found that Japanese American queen pageants established a separate set of judging standards that emphasized qualities of a "nice girl,"

which she defines as,

A young, middle-class woman who exemplifies what are often considered Japanese cultural and gendered values of humility, self-effacement, empathy, helpfulness, gratitude, and courtesy in a de-erotized manner. The ‘nice girl’ places others before herself, respects her elders, and, as a representative of the community, presents herself well, especially in terms of public speaking.<sup>31</sup>

These qualities have also influenced the search for the Nisei Week Queen, as ideal candidates have been identified as someone that is community-oriented and can represent an increasingly multigenerational and racially diverse community. Although today’s Nisei Week Queen’s Program no longer considers itself a beauty pageant, there are several elements of the program that remain true to its roots. Sociologist Rebecca Chiyoko King-O’Riain has conducted extensive research and fieldwork on Japanese American beauty pageants by examining the racial eligibility requirements and their impact on multiracial candidates. King-O’Riain found that the format of the Nisei Week Queen’s Program remains close to a conventional beauty pageant because of its similarities to Miss America, specifically seen during the Queen’s Coronation event.<sup>32</sup>

Considering the founding of Nisei Week, the festival largely continues to serve its original purpose of celebrating the Japanese American community and promoting Little Tokyo businesses for guests to patronize. Nisei Week first began with the intention of bringing Japanese Americans, and white Americans outside the community, to visit and spend money in Little Tokyo. Today, Nisei Week has expanded its reach to include everyone, not just white Americans, but the purpose of celebration and patronage remain at its core. On August 3, 2020, Nisei Week posted a YouTube video entitled, “Nisei Week Foundation | History of the Nisei Week Japanese Festival,” which briefly covers the history and purpose of the festival.<sup>33</sup> In the video, Helen Ota of the Nisei Week Board of Directors emphasizes, “Even though it’s called the Nisei Week Japanese Festival, it’s really a festival for everyone.” This message is important to consider as Nisei Week focuses on projecting a curated image of middle-class respectability to represent Little Tokyo and the Japanese American community, an image intended to appeal to all members of the Los Angeles area. The way Nisei Week chooses to represent itself also has profoundly influenced the promotion and image of the Nisei Week Queen and Court.

The current Queen’s Program application stipulates that all candidates must be sponsored by one of seven Japanese American community centers and organizations in the surrounding Los Angeles and Orange County area. Candidates must commit to a four-month training period that culminates in early-August with the Queen’s Coronation in Little Tokyo, during which the Nisei Week Queen and Court are crowned. Following Coronation, each participant must also attend a series of events as a Nisei

Week Court, which is an additional year-long commitment. To be eligible for the program, Japanese American women must be between the ages of 18-25, have at least 50% Japanese ancestry, be a U.S. citizen or permanent resident, single (not divorced/separated with no children), have no conflicts of interest with other pageants, and must be a Southern California resident. As stated on the website, there are also additional monetary costs associated with the Queen's Program. While partially offset by community sponsors, candidates must purchase personal items such as make up, hair products, and wardrobe to maintain their public appearances.<sup>34</sup> These eligibility requirements imply that candidates in the program must be women of a certain race, class, gender, and sexuality. Candidates chosen to represent the community demonstrate the image of a Japanese American woman that is virtuous, young, virginal, and cisgender. Interestingly, several of the current eligibility requirements remain largely unchanged when compared with the 1954 Queen's Report.<sup>35</sup> The continuation of these requirements suggest that the middle-class values of respectability from the postwar era are continuing to be reinforced through the Queen's Program today. These longstanding notions of respectability perpetuate a complicated image of successful integration and model minority status for the Japanese American community. Both the Nisei Week promotional materials and the current eligibility requirements demonstrate how the Queen's Program blurs the line between cultural preservation and an enforcement of traditional values including gender roles.

### **Interviews with Queen's Program Participants (2010 – 2021)**

A significant portion of this research includes three interviews conducted with two previous court members and one potential participant to further understand the recent experiences of Japanese American women involved in the Nisei Week Queen's Program. The first interview was conducted with Mari, a Nisei Week Princess who participated in the program during the early-2010s.<sup>36</sup> Mari was a 22-year-old recent college graduate when she applied for the Queen's Program. At the time, she was working part-time but considering graduate school and saw the program as an opportunity to connect with the Japanese American community. The second interview was conducted with Kristi, a Nisei Week Princess who participated in the program during the mid-2010s.<sup>37</sup> Kristi was a 23-year-old working part-time when she applied for the Queen's Program. Growing up, Kristi's mother worked in Little Tokyo where she was first drawn to the program after seeing the Queen's Court around the community during that time. The third interview was conducted with Emiko, who is a 23-year-old recent college graduate that works full-time and is considering applying for the Nisei Week Queen's Program within the next couple of years.<sup>38</sup> Emiko grew up involved in the Japanese American community through basketball and *gakuen* (Japanese language school), and she wants to participate in the Queen's Program to reconnect with the community. Mari and Kristi both currently volunteer as trainers and mentors for community organizations that sponsor candidates to participate in the Queen's Program. Due to their previous experiences and current position mentoring potential candidates, they were both asked the

same series of questions. Emiko, who has not yet participated in the Queen's Program, was asked a shorter list of questions geared toward her expectations and perceptions about the program. Based on findings from these interviews, the corresponding research has been organized into three sections: Patrolling Bodies Through Beauty Practices, Female Spectatorship of the Queen's Coronation, and Cultural Preservation & Identity Formation.

### ***Patrolling Bodies Through Beauty Practices***

This section examines how beauty practices can be used as a method to control the appearance and performance of the Nisei Week Queen's Court. According to interviewees, the upholding of these beauty standards was often enforced by the Nisei Week Queen's Committee that would sometimes act as chaperones, accompanying the participants on various events and trips. The Queen's Committee consists of former participants of the Nisei Week Queen's Program and is chaired by a current Nisei Week Board Member.<sup>39</sup> Mari explained that during her year the committee would oversee the appearance of the Queen's Court by setting standards on their makeup, hair, as well as approving all outfits. According to Mari, maintaining beauty practices was heavily mandated when she was in the Queen's Program. For the Queen's Coronation, Mari was told to wear fake eyelashes, a specific type of red lipstick, and have her hair in an updo. Upon reflecting on these beauty standards, Mari states,

To be honest, it really did have to do with standards that some of the Queen's Committee overseeing the appearance, who were previous court members, they obviously had to adhere to as well. So those beauty standards did essentially pass down. For them growing up, or at least during their time, red lipstick was a big thing and so they kind of did that with us. I feel like to some extent there were beauty standards that they wanted to maintain, which we still try to do. But I feel like as the Queen's Committee rotates it has changed and it has become a little bit more lax as well.<sup>40</sup>

Mari's interview reveals that older members of the Queen's Committee, that were also previous court members, often enforced these beauty standards on participants based on their own experiences. For these previous court members, they were likely subjected to more strict beauty guidelines when they were in the program and perhaps felt a need to preserve what they considered to be appropriate standards on the courts they were overseeing. However, as younger former court members were swapped on to the Queen's Committee, these standards became more lenient, which was reflected a couple years later in Kristi's experiences.

The interview with Kristi demonstrates how the Queen's Committee would more indirectly suggest the court adhere to beauty standards but did not enforce them as strictly. Kristi explains, "There is some sort of expectation. Our court, we kind of made these rules like, 'Okay for wearing these

particular outfits, it's going to be heavy makeup with a red lipstick. Any other outfits, it doesn't have to be the red lipstick, but you know, just has to be a lip color' kind of thing. So, we as a court just kind of made that decision because we just wanted to match."<sup>41</sup> Kristi's court had slightly more agency to negotiate these beauty standards when making decisions together as a group. She explains that the Queen's Committee possibly wanted them to wear more red lipstick, but together they made the decision to choose what was most comfortable for all of them. Similar to the women that collectively refused to participate in the swimsuit competition, Kristi's court found they were able to demonstrate their own agency when they worked together. With that said, the collective image of the court was often prioritized over individual expression, as standing out too much led to verbal warnings by the Queen's Committee but did not result in disciplinary action. According to these interviews, the preferences on makeup and hair largely varied between committee members, but if the entire court looked uniform, their appearance was approved.

Sociologist King-O'Riain conducted fieldwork on West Coast Japanese American pageants and found that the members of Queen's Committees often rationalized their social control over the participants' bodies through the use of gender norms.<sup>42</sup> The interviews with Mari and Kristi support this claim as the committee members would often tell the court to go with a more "natural" makeup look and hair color for their appearances. Interestingly, court members were also told not to tan, providing the reason that tan lines would look bad in the evening gown at Coronation. Restrictions on tanning practices were reflected in King-O'Riain's research, as she found that participants were blatantly told not to tan because of the longstanding perception that dark skin was associated with the peasant class in Japan.<sup>43</sup> While not stated explicitly, the no-tanning rule implies longstanding perceptions of colorism, and the valorization of white skin that is common in Japan. Scholar Mikiko Ashikari found that in Japan there is a strong preference for lighter complexion, as Japanese women would make a tremendous effort to keep their complexion light by avoiding getting tanned in the sun or using expensive skin lightening cosmetics.<sup>44</sup> Considering that Nisei Week has several Japan-based corporate sponsors, as well as a Sister City relationship with Nagoya, Japan, it can be argued that candidates were told not to tan at risk of jeopardizing their U.S.-Japan partnerships. In Kristi's interview, she stated that their appearances were more strictly controlled up until the court traveled together to Japan. She said because Japan tends to be more conservative, the Queen's Committee wanted to make sure the women would not "stand out" with their appearance; however, these standards became more relaxed once the trip was complete.<sup>45</sup> Accordingly, the reinforcement of colorism is indirectly projected on the Queen's Program participants through the justification of preventing tan lines but is often serving an alternative purpose.

While Mari and Kristi both shared how they sometimes felt uncomfortable with the enforcement of beauty standards, they rationalized that upholding these practices was necessary to maintain a polished appearance for their position on the Nisei Week Court. Kristi compared these beauty standards to wearing a uniform for work. She states, "The pageant part, and

the appearance, it's just like a uniform that you have to wear for this job that you're doing. The job is more important to me, as well as learning about the community and representing the community." The experiences of Mari and Kristi demonstrate their awareness of beauty standards being enforced on them, but also their ability to negotiate these standards, particularly together as a court. As younger committee members were brought in to oversee the participants, these standards were adjusted, becoming more relaxed than they were previously.

### *Female Spectatorship of the Queen's Coronation*

One of the biggest nights of the year for the Queen's Program participants is the Coronation event, which takes place during the Nisei Week Festival. All candidates complete four months of trainings to compete for the title of Nisei Week Queen. Coronation, sometimes referred to as the Coronation Ball, is perhaps the longest running tradition of the Queen's Program that began in 1935 with the inception of the festival. This event first started as a prestigious affair and has become the origin of the iconic image depicting a distinguished Nisei Week Queen wearing a tiara, cape, and evening gown.<sup>46</sup> Despite the disassociation from the beauty pageant label, components that make up the Coronation event are closely associated with the traditional beauty pageant format. Differences between the traditional beauty pageant and the Queen's Coronation are the inclusion of Japanese cultural performances, as well as an adjusted judging criteria that focuses more on the content of the contestant's speeches rather than their appearance. For Coronation, contestants often perform *odori* (traditional Japanese dance) while dressed in kimono, recite a prepared speech, perform a "modern" dance number, and participate in a Q&A. The evening also involves a handful of wardrobe changes between a kimono, modern dance outfit, and the evening gown.<sup>47</sup> Although there are many performance components to Coronation, contestants are mainly judged on the content of their speech and answers, rather than their appearance onstage. Coronation is a highly visible space, meaning women's onstage presence is judged and viewed by hundreds of spectators. Despite this, the event remains closed off from the public with only a specific group of community leaders, corporate sponsors, community sponsors, as well as the contestants' friends and family in attendance to witness the crowning of the Queen. While the live event is private, Coronation is a highly documented affair as the local Japanese American newspaper publish recap videos, photos, and articles for the entire community to view. This privacy ultimately works in Nisei Week's favor, as the organization has the power to influence the selection process for the Queen, without public interference. In addition, the media outlets can shape the community's perception of Nisei Week, heightening the significance of the Coronation event and the Queen's Program overall.

In preparation for the Queen's Coronation the participants must go through months of weekly trainings that are overseen by the Queen's Committee. Mari and Kristi explained that the training helped prepare candidates on aspects such as public speaking, posture, poise, walking, traditional

Japanese dance, modern dance, speeches, Q&A, and kimono etiquette. Mari explained that the trainings on poise, posture, and how to walk were mainly for the candidates to present themselves during Nisei Week opening ceremonies, when candidates are introduced publicly to the community, and for the Coronation event. Mari and Kristi both discussed how during trainings, they were instructed to speak a certain way when it came to delivering their speech at Coronation. Participants were told by the Queen's Committee that they needed to speak slowly and clearly with a specific cadence so that they were uniform with their speech delivery. The reasoning provided was that if all participants sound the same, it will help spectators focus more on the content of the speech rather than the candidate delivering it. Mari mentioned that by doing this, her friends and family often pointed out that she sometimes sounding too robotic.<sup>48</sup> Similar to wardrobe and make up, emphasizing the sameness of candidates' speech delivery reinforces a priority on uniformity among the court rather than individual expression.

During these interviews, Mari and Kristi were both asked questions about their experiences preparing for their onstage performance at Coronation. When asked if she made any alterations to her appearance in preparation for the event, Mari explained, "I didn't have time to do anything to change. The week of Coronation, I went to get my nails done and I got my hair cut. You know, just trying to use that time to pamper yourself but also use it to relax. I didn't really change anything but that's for me personally. I thought my health was in pretty good shape and I was really active just because you're running around so much."<sup>49</sup> When asked the same question, Kristi had a slightly different response,

Yeah, I definitely did, just because being on stage. Nobody told me I needed to lose weight but just me personally, I wanted to lose weight because I knew I wasn't at the weight that I wanted to be. So, this kind of gave me a goal to work for but in the end...I don't know. It's so hard because my body type is different than other girls. Then we have to wear this one dress and we don't get a say in this dress, and the dress we did get I know didn't flatter my body type. I was just like, you know, I probably should have worn like triple Spanx or something [*laughs*] but when I look back on it, it's whatever, like I was happy with how I did at Coronation.<sup>50</sup>

Kristi's response reveals discomfort with the way her body appeared in the dress that was assigned to the court. However, despite this, Kristi brushes off any negative feelings with a sense of humor as she reiterates that appearance is not what matters, rather it is the meaning behind her performance.

Both interviews with Mari and Kristi reveal how the hypervisibility of the Coronation stage influenced the way they presented themselves differently. While most of these influences were enforced by the Queen's Committee through training and practice, candidates also demonstrated their own agency and anxieties in how they wanted to present themselves

and their bodies onstage. For Mari, this meant more ornamental alterations such as getting her hair cut and nails done to help relax before the event. For Kristi, it was physical alterations, such as losing weight in preparation for being onstage. Both Mari and Kristi emphasized that any alterations made to their bodies were their own personal choice because, at the end of the day, the content of their performance was more important than their appearance. Upon reflecting on their performance at Coronation, both Mari and Kristi expressed gratitude for the experience and were proud of how they presented themselves. Kristi explained, “You just feel so loved up there and it like gives you a little ego and confidence boost. It makes you feel better about why you’re doing it and gives you a good experience that the community is there to support you.”<sup>51</sup> The responses from both interviews align with recent scholarship challenging second wave feminist criticisms of beauty pageants as sites of oppression. Rather, the interviewees’ experiences argue that the beauty pageant is an important space for women of color to construct their culture and identity.

### ***Community Preservation & Identity Formation***

Perhaps the greatest appeal to participate in the Nisei Week Queen’s Program, based on interviewee responses, is the opportunity to connect with the Japanese American community and Little Tokyo, a sentiment shared by all three interviewees. Mari and Kristi expressed feeling a sense of pride in their role as cultural ambassadors for the community, which offered further meaning to their experiences of participating in the Queen’s Program. Mari stated that the Queen’s Program is significant because it allows young Japanese American women the opportunity to build a sense a community, develop their leadership skills, and discover themselves in the process.<sup>52</sup> Kristi found the program to be beneficial because it allows Japanese American women to become involved with the community and learn about Japanese American culture and heritage. She also added that being on the Queen’s Program is a unique position that not many people get to experience, and by joining you can connect with other women to form lifelong friendships and a sense of “sisterhood.”<sup>53</sup>

To help participants further connect to their community, the Nisei Week Queen’s Program incorporates additional cultural classes and lessons within the trainings to provide participants with opportunities to learn about Japanese American culture and history. Both Mari and Kristi mentioned participating in various workshops on topics such as Japanese American history, *ikebana* (flower arranging), tea ceremony, and karate. These workshops on Japanese American culture and history provided participants with an additional grounding on the community they were serving. Kristi mentioned that learning about Japanese American history in the Queen’s Program was especially important for participants because it allowed them to make connections with community members. Kristi stated,

We’re going to be ambassadors for the community, and a lot of times people will try to make a connection with you by

asking where your grandparents were interned, and sometimes girls don't know. Or they'll ask what generation of Japanese American you are, or where your family is from in Japan. These are the questions you get asked throughout the year, so having that history class is really important.<sup>54</sup>

As Kristi mentioned, for some participants this is their first time learning about their Japanese cultural heritage. Therefore, by participating in the program, these women are provided the opportunity to learn about themselves and develop a Japanese American identity. It is significant to note that both Mari and Kristi are current trainers and mentors for potential participants to join the Queen's Program, which further demonstrates how this program can foster lifelong cultural ambassadors to represent the community even after their term has ended.

Emiko, a recent college graduate and potential Queen's Program candidate, shared her experiences working as one of only a few Japanese American in a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) field. Emiko describes her work industry as being both a male and white-dominated field, which at times can make her feel uncomfortable. Emiko stated, "I feel like there were definitely encounters where I was the only female in the room, also being Asian, and an early career person, so like you're not the one with the most amount of information. I feel like that was really difficult and imposter syndrome has been something that I've been really dealing with."<sup>55</sup> Through this interview, Emiko expressed that because she is part of the minority at work, she felt it was important to get back involved in the Japanese American community. Emiko explained how growing up, she participated in basketball and *gakuen* (Japanese language school) but felt disconnected after going to college and starting her career. Emiko believes that participating in the Queen's Program will be a way for her to reconnect with the Japanese American community. She also expressed how the program can help her grow through personal and professional development opportunities. Emiko emphasized that the Nisei Week Queen's Program can be a way to bridge the Japanese American community together, especially for an older generation that may feel disconnected from changes taking place. Based on Emiko's response, the Nisei Week Queen's Program could potentially offer older Japanese Americans that sense of familiarity they once experienced growing up. The responses provided from all three interviews support but also expand on the ethnic beauty pageant as a space for identity formation to occur. This work further challenges criticisms directed towards beauty pageants, as interviewees have expressed positive experiences and opportunities from participating in the Queen's Program.

### **The Paradoxical Legacy of the Nisei Week Queen's Program**

Following the crowning of Juli Yoshinaga as the 2019 Nisei Week Queen, columnist Gwen Muranaka of the Japanese American newspaper, *Rafu Shimpo*, wrote an article to reflect on the latest Queen's Coronation. In the article, Muranaka emphasized how the current Queen's Court directly

mirrors the growth and transformation of the Japanese American community over the decades. She writes,

Today the court consists of Ariel Mai Imamoto, Emily Yuiko Ishida, Mia Masai Lopez, Juli Yoshinaga, Kara Chizuru Ito, Marika Kate Gotschall and Kayla Sachiko Igawa. Besides being Japanese American, they are multicultural, multigenerational and even Latinx. In recent years, many of the candidates have been *Shin Nisei* and quite fluent in Japanese. The old template of *Issei*, *Nisei*, *Sansei* is shifting and what comes next is embodied by these young women.<sup>56</sup>

In this quote, Muranaka expresses how the candidate's names embody multiracial and multigenerational heritage, which signify changes in the community that differ from the framework set by generations prior. While these examples celebrate shifts in the Japanese American community as demonstrated through the Nisei Week Queen's Program, closer examination reveals how, despite these changes, longstanding beauty standards continue to be upheld by this program and negotiated by the women that participate.

The experiences and opinions provided by the three interviewees offer further insight into the purpose of the Nisei Week Queen's Program, but also the meaning for those who choose to participate. Based on the findings from these interviews, it can be argued that the Queen's Program carries a paradoxical purpose within its core. The Queen's Program prides itself on preserving the legacy of the Japanese American community by upholding the longstanding image of the Nisei Week Queen. The construction of the Nisei Week Queen first began in 1935 and has embodied several meanings over the years as shaped by historical events. While its meaning has changed over time, the singular purpose of the Queen's Program since its founding has been to produce a female representative that can demonstrate the middle-class respectability of the Japanese American community to mainstream American society. These guidelines that shaped the process for choosing Nisei Week Queen's candidates remains largely unchanged, as demonstrated by the eligibility requirements as well as the gallery of past Nisei Week Queens & Courts highlighted on the website. To qualify for the program in the first place, Japanese American women must meet eligibility requirements, which act as a sort of vetting process when it comes to choosing a candidate that the program wants to represent the community. Once within the program, participants must also adhere to beauty standards, trainings, and practices to construct the perfect image of the Queen's Court. Therefore, although the program highlights its longstanding legacy, the search for a Nisei Week Queen can also demonstrate the reinforcement of race, class, gender, and sexuality.

While the Nisei Week Queen's Program is a tightly controlled space that does contain traditional beauty pageant elements, it is undeniable that the program has had a significant impact on the community and the young Japanese American women that participate. The three interviewees stated that

they wanted to join the Queen's Program because it was a way to connect and serve the Japanese American community. All three interviewees self-identify as *sansei* (third-generation) or *yonsei* (fourth-generation) Japanese American, making it important to consider that they may feel a level of disconnect from their Japanese cultural heritage. For Japanese American youth, connecting with an ethnic identity and community continues to have a significant impact in shaping everyday practices, behaviors, and social networks.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, programs like the Nisei Week Queen's Program can become a method to preserve Japanese cultural heritage for a younger generation that is becoming more integrated in mainstream society and isolated from their Japanese American identity. For the three interviewees, identity formation and a sense of community were the biggest draw to participating in the Queen's Program rather than the longstanding associations of the beauty pageant format. However, for the Queen's Program, the preservation of its legacy and image has made it difficult to disassociate itself from the negative perceptions of the beauty pageant label. In her role as mentor, Kristi found that for potential candidates their greatest concern about applying for the Queen's Program was performing onstage at the Coronation event.<sup>58</sup> For this reason, the prevailing beauty pageant components of the Queen's Program further reveal this paradox that blurs the line between cultural preservation and a reinforcement of traditional ideas.

The Nisei Week Queen's Program has, and continues, to remain a significant fixture within the Los Angeles Japanese American community, however it is important to consider the implications of reinforcing longstanding ideas about race, class, gender, and sexuality. Upholding strict eligibility requirements for participants can be viewed as a form of boundary maintaining, as it implies only those that qualify are worthy of representing the Japanese American community. In the program's eighty-six-year history, there has never been a half Black, openly gay, or nonbinary Queen's candidate. This lack of diversity found in the program's participants implies that the space is reserved for only those that meet these specific requirements. Since these guidelines have existed since the formation of the program itself, these values are being enforced under the guise of cultural preservation.

Although the Queen's Program is tightly regulated, those that do qualify and participate in the program find ways to exert their own agency within these spaces. Columnist Gwen Muranaka wrote, "To an outside observer it probably seems we take this whole Nisei Week Festival too seriously (queens, tiaras, parades etc.), but this is because Nisei Week is one way to mark the passage of time and changes within the Japanese American community."<sup>59</sup> Muranaka reiterates the enormous pressure and responsibility that Nisei Week has in representing its legacy but also the changes within the community. However, to truly document the passage of time and demonstrate adaptability, perhaps it is time for Nisei Week to reconsider the time-honored values being upheld, preserved, and reinforced within the Japanese American community. As the enforcement of beauty standards have demonstrated the ability to change over time, it is possible that space may open up for the first half Black or openly gay Nisei Week Queen. As we eagerly await the forma-

tion of a more inclusive space for these underrepresented participants, the Nisei Week Queen's Program will continue to serve its original purpose of preserving its eighty-six-year legacy, by providing the opportunity for young women to discover and honor their Japanese American community, history, and identity.

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# Public Memory of White Supremacy

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*"These calls serve as a reminder: reckoning with the past is intertwined with current efforts for social justice and transformation, for freedom and full humanity. We live in a world that needs to be reconstructed. The more people understand the long consequences of violence, the more likely we will be to intervene against---to denounce---the violence and death that continues today."*

-Monica Munoz Martinez, *The Injustice Never Leaves You*, (2018)

*"Not every disaster needs to be marked with a memorial to be remembered. The reminders become part of our lives in far more subtle ways as small souvenirs of loss."*

-Kenneth E. Foote, *Shadowed Ground: America's Landscapes of Violence and Tragedy*, (1997)

## Suggested Readings:

Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Beacon Press, 2005)

Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (University of California Press, 1997)

# The People's Grocery Arrest

Nathan Davis

AMST 350: Seminar in Theory and Method of  
American Studies

“The People's Grocery Arrests” was written in the Spring of 2021 in AMST 350 - Seminar in Theory and Method of American Studies with Professor Carrie Lane. The purpose of this assignment was to form discursive analysis of primary documents in a historical context. The events and newspaper coverage of these events described in this essay represent only a small fraction of this type of discrimination and injustice of this era. I would like every reader to leave with a better understanding of how easily language can be used to manipulate the opinions of those ingesting the material, and how to better identify these instances.

During the late 1800s, the United States' understanding and expectations of desirable and appropriate behavior for a man began to change. This effort was largely caused by middle- and upper-class white men who were starting to adopt Victorian ideals that allowed for more brutish and aggressive behavior from men. Privileged men began to excuse themselves for behaving in the same “savage” and “primitive” way that they expected Black men to behave, reasoning that all men did hold the same “primordial instincts for survival.”<sup>1</sup> This was a contradictory set of traits in which white men were expected to be civilized and allowed to be aggressive and “savage,” so when they did behave violently, it was more often interpreted as an act of heroism, desperation, or a one-time incident. On the other hand, the worst was expected of Black men. When they were caught or accused of performing violent crimes, Black men were not given the same leeway and consideration that white men were given. In fact, white men could display violent behavior such as lynching Black men only accused of crime, and this behavior would still be regarded as “disciplined, self-restrained manliness.”<sup>2</sup>

One historical event that shows this dichotomy is the 1892 arrest of twenty Black men at the People's Grocery. The People's Grocery was a grocery store located in Memphis, Tennessee and operated by Calvin McDowell, a Black man. On March 2, 1892, a disagreement between a young white boy and a young Black boy sparked a larger argument that resulted in a fight between a white man and multiple Black men who frequented the People's Grocery. The white man, William Barret, claimed the argument resulted in

him being assaulted by the group. In the ensuing days, Barret persuaded the local police to confront the Black men, resulting in further fighting and eventual gunfire between the two groups. The dispute ended with twenty Black men arrested under suspicion of conspiring against the police. Three of the men arrested, Thomas Moss, Will Stewart, and operator of People's Grocery, Calvin McDowell, would be lynched in an exceptionally tortuous and morbid manner on March 9, 1892. The dozens of white men who performed the lynchings would never be held accountable for their actions. In this essay, I focus on three articles published after the twenty Black men were arrested in relation to the People's Grocery incident to uncover why the newspapers felt the arrests were necessary. I analyze how these newspaper writers went out of their way to generalize and vilify the Black community. Ultimately, I argue that the coverage of this event in U.S. newspapers at the time showed the power the media had in creating and supporting the stereotype that Black men were dangerous and not to be trusted.

In an article from *Dallas Morning News*, published on March 7, 1892, the group of Black men arrested at People's Grocery were described as having been "riotous" and "evidently preparing for trouble."<sup>3</sup> The article claims the men announced to the surrounding white townspeople that "no white sheriff dare attempt to arrest them."<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the newspaper accuses this group of Black men of holding "secret meetings" and scaring their white neighbors into leaving town in fear of violence from the local Black community.<sup>5</sup> The author's purposeful inclusion of unproven accusations towards the Black men involved in the incident is a direct effort to perpetuate the belief that Black men were trouble and a negative part of the entire community. When describing the arrest, the newspaper notes that the police made sure to be "cautious" when entering the business, as they expected they might be "ambushed."<sup>6</sup> The use of language like "ambushed" to describe the behavior expected of the Black men reveals an effort to relate the Black community to violence and mob-like behavior. Meanwhile, the white men who performed the raid were described as "cautious" and as "comrades," words that hold much more positive connotations in comparison to the negative language used to describe the Black men's behavior.<sup>7</sup>

On March 7, 1892, the *Knoxville Journal* similarly wrote that the twenty Black men arrested at People's Grocery had long been terrorizing the town. The paper claimed that the neighborhood where the arrests occurred, known as the Curve, was "notorious for the character of the negroes residing there."<sup>8</sup> The author also claimed that the recent behavior of the Black community in the neighborhood was "more turbulent than ever before."<sup>9</sup> Using language like "more turbulent than ever before" sets a precedent that riotous behavior is what Black men are prone to take part in. While "turbulent" behavior like this was expected after a lynching, this group of Black men, in particular, was viewed as especially hostile towards the white Memphis community. The *Knoxville Journal* went on to describe the initial fight between the children, Armour Harris and Cornelius Hurst, which instigated the larger

conflict. The newspaper described Harris as “a negro youth” and Hurst as a “child.”<sup>10</sup> The inclusion of the word “negro” alone is a tool to separate the fact that both of these boys were simply children. The writer’s use of the word “youth” for Harris, while Hurst was called a “child,” works to strip the Black boy of his childhood innocence, making him seem at fault and older.

In an article by the *St. Louis Republic*, published on March 7, 1892, the author used purposeful language to describe both the African American men arrested and young Harris in a negative light. The language inclined the reader to believe the individuals deserved to be punished. Much like the *Knoxville Journal*, the *St. Louis Republic* article also referred to Harris with language that influences the reader to believe that he is not a child, describing Harris as “a half-grown negro lad.”<sup>11</sup> Comparatively, the newspaper referred to Hurst as “little son.” When describing the Black men arrested at the People’s Grocery, the author described the group as having “outnumbered” the white community, becoming overly “obnoxious” to white residents and spewing obscenities to them on the street.<sup>12</sup> The writer used words like “outnumbered” to make the actions of the Black men involved in the incident seem inherently intimidating, drawing attention to the supposed large number of people within the Black community for white readers. Yet, in the same piece, the writer describes how over a dozen of the white policemen arrived to perform the arrests, using neutral and professional language to recount the officers’ behavior. Although the white officers expressed the same violent and aggressive behavior they expected from Black men, the officers’ behavior was considered disciplined and under their control.

The language used in the newspapers of the turn of the twentieth century actively tried to villainize the actions of Black communities by relating their behavior to criminal intent and terror directed at the white community around them. In the media, the white men were referred to as disciplined and investigative forces. In reality, they harassed those who frequented the People’s Grocery and performed raids that resembled “ambushes,” exemplifying the behavior they accused the Black community of. Rather than provide insight on the personal lives of the white people involved, these articles instead focused on the supposed previous behavior of the Black men involved. These newspapers present a small proportion of the type of language used to perpetuate negative ideas about the Black community during this time. This evidence shows the extent to which writers will purposefully describe Black people negatively based solely on assumptions and stereotypes.

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# Reconstructing the Past: How George Mason University has Included Slavery in Their Discussion Around George Mason IV

Collette A. Rhoads

AMST 502T: Seminar on Public Memory

This paper was written for AMST 502T on Public Memory taught by Dr. Alison Kanosky. This paper examines how the United States, specifically American universities, commemorate slavery. Through public memory theory, interviews, and research into American remembrance around slavery, I conclude that the United States continues to fall short in its memory of slavery. I argue that George Mason University's memorial commemorating the enslaved children owned by Mason is insufficient in making positive change on campus. The memorial is an important step, but it was produced by a small handful of students and faculty and does little to address existing racial disparities on the George Mason campus.

## **Introduction: Public Memory Cast in Bronze**

In 2016, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath as I pressed “accept” on my tentative offer to attend George Mason University (GMU). I had never been to the Commonwealth of Virginia. I had never set foot on the campus nearly 3,000 miles from my home in Southern California, yet it felt like I had been called to attend this university. That summer I packed my life into the back of my pickup truck and drove across the country to start a new chapter. As an anxious new freshman, I sat in my orientation group with wide eyes and a feeling of promise and hope. My group leader walked us around campus, teaching us the ins and outs of “the best four years of your life.” There were a few key takeaways: Gloria in Ikes dining hall makes the best late-night sandwich, the RAC (recreation activity center) was the busiest gym, basketball is like a religion here, and NEVER step on the plaque in front of the George Mason statue as it is a bad omen. We walked up to the large bronze statue of the university's namesake and were told to rub his left foot for good luck. The shoe on the statue was rubbed raw; it shone a com-

pletely different color after years of students passing by while they ran their fingers across the metal. I placed my hand on the statue, hot from the sun, and looked up at the stoic figure. At the time I didn't think much about who George Mason IV was or what he had accomplished for the state of Virginia. It wouldn't be until years later that I decided to dig deeper into the man behind the bronze statue that I walked past every day for three and a half years.

Nestled in between the bustling city of Washington D.C. and vast Civil War battlefields sits the Commonwealth of Virginia's largest public research institution: George Mason University. GMU stands in the city of Fairfax, Virginia, located just streets away from the heart of the historic Old Town Fairfax. Driving fifteen miles in any direction will surely land you at a historic landmark such as Sydenstricker Schoolhouse or Bull Run Battlefield. Driving fifteen miles in any direction will also land you at several plantations in the area, including Gunston Hall, the plantation and home of prominent politician George Mason IV. Here Mason had owned enslaved individuals in the 1700s. In this essay, I add to the conversation around the memory of slavery in our country, particularly, how universities with connections to slavery choose to commemorate their past in public spaces. I question how GMU has honored the memory of the enslaved people owned by Mason and the memory of Mason himself.

First, I examine the history of George Mason University and what it has done to commemorate their connections to slavery. Then, I look at the ways in which the United States and other universities have chosen to memorialize ties to slavery. Finally, I analyze The Enslaved Children of George Mason memorial project and critique the ways GMU has created spaces of public memory. I call attention to other universities that have been confronting similar problematic histories. Through a combination of interviews with students and faculty at GMU and research into the public memory of slavery in the United States, I argue that now, more than ever, is the time for universities to make changes in the stories they tell about their histories. I also question if there *is* an appropriate or accurate way to commemorate slavery in these spaces. Is there a right or wrong way to remember? In addition, the language used throughout this essay is intentional. I use the word *enslaved* rather than *slaves* to acknowledge that slavery was something that happened to humans. Slavery was forced upon them by someone; what was done to them was out of their control, which does not negate their humanity.

### **The Forgotten Founding Father: George Mason IV**

In United States history classes, we often celebrate founding fathers such as George Washington, James Madison, and Thomas Jefferson. While all have made tremendous marks on American history, there is one man who is considered the forgotten founder, George Mason IV. The public memory of George Mason seems small in comparison to other founding fathers. Mason is known for his refusal to sign the Constitution, but many do not know the reasoning behind his decision, or his impact on the writing within the Con-

stitution such as the Bill of Rights. Our memory of him has diminished over time because many of his writings have disappeared or were not well documented, leaving historians with much less to study and analyze than is the case for other founding fathers. Additionally, Mason is documented as having a strong dislike for political hearing and legislative work; he was outspoken on his dislike of a strong government and known as a reluctant statesman.<sup>1</sup> This contradicted what many other founding fathers believed, which caused Mason to become an outlier. Soon after the Constitution was signed, he retired from politics to live the remainder of his days at home.

Mason was born on October 11, 1725, at the Mason family plantation, and he grew to be a complicated man with contradicting and outlying political opinions. He is best known for writing the Virginia Declaration of Rights in 1776, which was later used as a basis for the Bill of Rights in the Constitution.<sup>2</sup> Jefferson and other founding fathers are known to have used Mason as a sort of mentor and trusted friend. Without the works of George Mason, it is likely that our Constitution would read quite differently. In fact, Mason had such strong opinions on our government's involvement in individual rights that he refused to sign the Constitution. Mason refused to sign because he felt that the drafted constitution "gave too much power to a central government and was incomplete absent a bill of rights to guarantee individual liberty."<sup>3</sup> Contrarily, Mason was a very prominent political figure in his community of Fairfax, Virginia. He was the author of the Fairfax Resolve in 1774, which George Washington later introduced to the House of Burgesses.<sup>4</sup> Washington and Mason were neighbors, and they often worked together on influential decisions for our country. Mason was extremely dedicated to his family, and historians have written that he wished for a better life for all Americans, including enslaved people.

Mason, like many white people of his time, was born into a family who owned many enslaved individuals. He, however, was considered a controversial man of his time for his outspoken disapproval of slavery. In the Stamp Act of 1795, Mason wrote,

The ill effect such a practice has on the morals and manners of our people: one of the first signs of the decay, and perhaps the primary cause of the destruction of the most flourishing government that ever existed was the introduction of great numbers of slaves—an evil very pathetically described by Roman Historians—but 'tis not the present intention to expose our weakness by examining this subject too freely.<sup>5</sup>

Mason worried about how slavery affected our nation as a whole and how slavery affected those who owned enslaved individuals. In an essay written by Mason in 1773, he discussed his concerns further:

That slow poison...is daily contaminating the minds and

morals or our people. Every gentleman here is born a petty tyrant. Practiced in acts of despotism and cruelty, we become callous to the dictates of humanity, and all the finer feelings of the soul. Taught to regard a part of our own species in the most abject and contemptible degree below us, we lose that idea of dignity of man which the hand of nature has implanted in us for great and useful purposes.<sup>6</sup>

He later discussed slavery in a speech at the Federal Convention of 1787 where he again condemned slavery. Yet despite this anti-slavery rhetoric, Mason still was an active owner of enslaved people. For a man who seemed to strongly disapprove of slavery, he did little to actually change the laws that kept the institution in place and kept enslaved people under his ownership.

Mason owned more than one hundred enslaved people including men, women, and children. While he spoke of the ills of slavery, he willfully relied on the work of enslaved people to cater to his land and to himself. The enslaved children would work in the fields, and upon teenage years, they would be set to learn a trade. The enslaved men and women ran the plantation, cared for Mason and his children, and they even took care of Gunston Hall in Mason's absence. Mason was a very sickly man and likely wouldn't have lived as long as he did without the nurture and care he received from enslaved people.

It is no surprise that these enslaved people hold even less space in the public sphere as Mason himself is largely forgotten, which makes the job of public memory at George Mason University that much more important. The institution must tell two stories: the story of George Mason and the story of the people he enslaved.

### **Coming to Terms with the Past**

Unlike many universities grappling with their relationship to slavery, GMU is a relatively new university. The need for a university in Northern Virginia in the 1950s prompted the University of Virginia (UVA) to place a branch of their college in Fairfax, where GMU started as a small building with only seventeen enrolled students.<sup>7</sup> In 1953, local politician Charles Harrison Mann, Jr. recognized the extended need for a more permanent university in the Northern Virginia region. Mann created the Advisory Council to the Northern Virginia Center and later worked endlessly to advocate for GMU to become its own four-year institution that grants degrees and offers graduate programs.<sup>8</sup> Finally, after years of advocating, the university would become independent from UVA, and on April 7, 1972, when Governor A. Linwood Holton signed into law Virginia General Assembly Bill H 210, George Mason University became its own institution.<sup>9</sup> UVAP resident Colgate W. Darden, Jr. and Virginia Senator Charles Fenwick decided that the university would be named after Mason, who was one of the most prominent political figures in Fairfax in the 1700s.<sup>10</sup>

As George Mason University grew into its own institution, its student body grew and diversified with it. GMU has never been a segregated school, but it wasn't until the late-1960s, before its official separation from UVA, that any African American students attended the university.<sup>11</sup> In 1971, just months before GMU officially became its own institution, the Virginia State Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights concluded that there "were only sixteen black students out of a total of 2,456 and of 164 total faculty members, only two were black."<sup>12</sup> Today, however, the institution is considered the most diverse university in Virginia.<sup>13</sup> With the addition of more students of color enrolling at GMU and a wave of social justice issues dominating the news in 2016, students began to question the namesake and call attention to the fact that George Mason owned enslaved people. This left the university with the task of bringing previously silenced voices into the light.

After forty-five years as an independent university with virtually no official mention of the enslaved people Mason owned, the university launched a project to uncover the secrets of slavery at Gunston Hall. In the summer of 2017, faculty at GMU chose five undergraduate students to do research on the lives of people Mason had enslaved. The findings of this research team led to the construction of a memorial on campus called The Enslaved Children of George Mason (ECGM).

Dr. Wendi Manuel-Scott, a faculty member at GMU, co-chair of Mason's anti-racist, inclusive excellence task force, and co-director of the new Mason Legacy Center, discussed when issues around the namesake of GMU really began to surface:

Before the summer of 2016, a group of students in Mason's Honors College began to ask questions about George Mason IV. They were like wait a minute, wasn't he a slaveholder? Well, why aren't we talking about that? And so, they had a panel or just an evening, where they invited a few folks to come in and kind of talk about what they knew. What was revealed was that we really don't know much about George Mason IV. He is a slaveholder, part one, and part two, we don't really know anything about the fleet of people he kept in lifelong bondage.<sup>14</sup>

This realization caused alarm for both students and faculty members that taught within the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. This evening resulted in Dr. Manuel-Scott and Dr. Benedict Carton, an associate professor at GMU and one of the co-chairs for the ECGM project, to write a summer grant to fund a research project that would investigate the life of George Mason and the people he enslaved. In our interview, Dr. Manuel-Scott further explained the motivation behind the project:

The essential question was, who were the enslaved held at Gunston hall? What did it feel like, look like, smell like, to be enslaved by George Mason IV, American patriot? At the end of that summer project the students discovered some really interesting and revealing kind of historical facts... President Cabrera asked, well what would you like to happen after this? And so, the students, Dr. Carton, and I, we were like, well, we dream that many, many years from now one day, right...there'll be this memorial to honor the lives of the enslaved.<sup>15</sup>

GMU was already in the midst of redesigning the campus, and construction was taking over. The president of GMU at the time, Dr. Angel Cabrera, encouraged Dr. Manuel-Scott and Dr. Carton to speak with the architecture firm redesigning the campus, and together they created a memorial that honors both George Mason and the people he enslaved. The ECGM project began in the summer of 2017 with the team of undergraduate researchers and is predicted to be finished sometime in 2021, just in time for GMU's 50th anniversary.

This memorial is located in the heart of campus known as Wilkins Plaza, a place where each new student is brought and all current students navigate. Wilkins Plaza is also where you find the beloved George Mason statue. The memorial itself is made up of the Mason statue in relation to two new additions of bronze panels with cut-outs of enslaved individuals. The bronze panels tell the story of two held within the bounds of slavery: James, who was Mason's personal manservant, and Penny, a 10-year-old enslaved girl who lived at Gunston Hall.<sup>16</sup> These panels also include the names of every documented enslaved person that was discovered by the student research team. In addition to the bronze panels, the Mason statue will be updated to include four quotes that highlight the accomplishments and controversies that Mason contributed to American history. There will also be a new base for the existing statue of Mason, which will include a bronze replica of a brick found at Gunston Hall that contains the thumbprint of an enslaved individual owned by Mason.<sup>17</sup> Around the panels will be suggestions on where to stand so you can place yourself within the memorial. There will also be a newly constructed water structure nearby that will contain a quote from civil rights activist Roger Wilkins. Along the bottom of the water structure will be a circular pattern of stones indicative of African rituals that were practiced by enslaved individuals at Gunston Hall.<sup>18</sup> The location of this memorial ensures that anyone who walks through Wilkins Plaza will not only be faced with the history of George Mason, but also the history of the people he enslaved, forcing viewers to situate themselves in that history. This project has dramatically changed the public perception of Mason on campus and in the community.

In my conversations with both faculty at GMU and one of the student researchers, I aimed to understand more about the memorial project

and its overall goal. GMU alum Kye Farrow, one of the original five student researchers, explained his opinions and role within the EGCM project:

I thought it would be really cool for me to focus on Virginia laws and how they impacted enslaved communities and more specifically, doing research into George Mason IV, who he was as a person, who he was as a man and as a professional... for someone so highly regarded with the local laws and the laws of the nation, it seemed like a no-brainer to me that he would have some type of influence or impact on laws that impacted individuals enslaved in Virginia.<sup>19</sup>

Farrow found that George Mason had no influence on laws around enslaved individuals. This is likely because he benefited from the institution of slavery, so ultimately did little to change any laws on the issue. Farrow goes on to say,

We wanted to have the statue really personify the name and the title of the project so that when you are on campus, you have no choice but to question, if you see a statue like that, you have to start to ask yourself questions. My sole goal and my sole intention was that I wanted students at George Mason University, I want the faculty and the people who are a part of the GMU family, I wanted them to start questioning the university's namesake, start questioning the history not for any particular reason other than for you to have the awareness of historical context. In the same breath that we celebrate that [George Mason], let's also celebrate those whose voices have been silenced. Those who pretty much gave him the ability to make the contributions that he did.<sup>20</sup>

As Farrow indicates, the aim of the project was to call attention to the voices that were previously left out at GMU, specifically the voices of those Mason enslaved. Similarly, Dr. George Oberle, GMU's history librarian, faculty member in the Department of Art and History, and director of the Center of Mason Legacies, shared his belief on why this memorial is an important step at GMU:

Everything he [George Mason] did, including his most important document, which was his will, they all demonstrate his commitment to slavery and to his use of unfree labor to secure the wealth and power of his position and his family's position. How does this end? I think it's important to expose that right? And to say, the good with the bad...how does this connect with the bigger picture? It's part of a bigger truth and reconciliation that is necessary. We have been kind

of used to telling half-truths to make ourselves feel better about our collective past, instead of engaging with the more complicated and troubling and painful kinds of portions of our history. That needs to be addressed, if we ever hope to live up to the kinds of universal ideals that George Mason and others espoused.<sup>21</sup>

One thing my talk with Dr. Oberle made clear is that acknowledgement is just the first step. In order to live up to this idea of America that is painted across the world, we need to turn the mirror inwards and look at our nation through a critical lens. We must expose the painful past to create a better future.

Dr. Oberle's remarks are also reminiscent of Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot's ideas presented in his book, *Silencing the Past*. Trouillot writes, "History is the fruit of power, but power itself is never so transparent that its analysis becomes superfluous. The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots."<sup>22</sup> Trouillot explains that history is written and documented by those in power, which means it's always skewed. As Trouillot tries to uncover historical facts and shortcomings regarding the historiography of the Haitian revolution in his book, GMU attempts something similar by telling a story about George Mason IV that hasn't been told before on campus: one that focuses on all aspects of his life, rather than just showing him in a positive manner.

The commemoration at GMU did not occur in a vacuum. Over the past decade, institutions all over the country have begun to acknowledge their pasts with slavery. As awareness around racial discrimination has been on display in the media and daily news, more places are beginning to feel the pressure to do more than apologize for their past with slavery. Universities in particular have felt the demand from students and faculty members to make symbolic and structural changes. Universities such as GMU have held themselves accountable for how they have benefited from slavery, but some have chosen to make empty statements that do virtually nothing to truly reckon with their relationship to slavery. As more universities enroll higher numbers of minority groups and students of color, simply saying "sorry" is insufficient.

As we are reaching a breaking point in our country and thousands have protested with the Black Lives Matter movement for equitable change, now more than ever is the time to begin the painful and complex process of accepting the past. GMU's effort is not perfect, but they have started a foundation for reconciliation and healing around the George Mason IV name-sake. It is through a diverse coalition of students and the activism of professors that these changes at GMU have happened. GMU has done promising work, but this work has been delegated to only a select few, not the university altogether. There is still much work to be done aside from the social sciences and humanities department.

### **The Grand Narrative: American Memory of Slavery**

The United States has always been reluctant in its remembrance around slavery. We remain a nation that prides itself so much on being the land of the free, a place of endless opportunity, a country where you can achieve the American dream. In reality, we are a nation filled with dirty secrets, injustices, and a refusal to acknowledge any wrongdoings we have committed. The atrocities of slavery do not fit into the narrative of the American dream and American exceptionalism. Since the founding of our nation, the power of prominent white men has been facilitated by letting minority groups fall through the cracks. This is also apparent when considering the ways in which we have chosen to publicly remember difficult parts of our past. We monumentalize figures of power and moments in history when they benefit the utopian American ideal, yet we stay silent in moments of history that paint the U.S. in a negative light.

In the book *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves*, author Kirk Savage discusses the complications the United States faced post-Civil War when building monuments to commemorate both war heroes and enslaved individuals. He writes, "The marginalization of African Americans went hand in hand with the reconstruction of white America. African Americans could not be included or excluded in the landscape of public sculpture without changing the fabric of commemoration itself, ultimately without changing the face of the nation."<sup>23</sup> Savage writes about the struggles many artists faced when trying to build monuments of African Americans in an America that was going through drastic changes in race relations. This is similar to the way professors at GMU were trying to accurately portray statues of enslaved individuals owned by Mason. The professors at GMU had to design a monument that would tell the story of the enslaved in a way that wouldn't be overshadowed by Mason himself. How could GMU create something to honor all enslaved individuals? By keeping the George Mason statue and adding the bronze cutouts, GMU was also battling with how to portray enslaved individuals in relation to Mason.

Slavery was abolished in 1865 when the 13th Amendment was added to the U.S. Constitution, which states, "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."<sup>24</sup> In reality, it took many years to end slavery and conditions approximating slavery still existed through harsh laws against African Americans. To this day, there are places in the U.S. where the Confederacy is heralded and slavery is viewed as a necessary evil of the past. As a nation in battle with itself, how does a university take on the task of public remembrance around such a vast issue? While the country fights to take down statues of confederate leaders and new examples of racial injustice can be seen every day, is there a right way to remember slavery? The task at hand is difficult, but the conversation must start somewhere. The reluctance stems from somewhere. Our battle within the U.S. around our memory of slavery is

deeply rooted in a racist past filled with shame, indignity, and humiliation.

In the book *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*, the authors attempt to explain American remembrance around slavery. The editors, James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, offer two main arguments around our relationship with slavery. First, they argue that we celebrate American ideals such as freedom, liberty, and progress in our public memory, while largely ignoring our past with slavery. Second, they argue that some view slavery as a hindrance to our nation's progress, while others view it as an integral part of the U.S.'s history and past.<sup>25</sup> Through a myriad of examples, this book offers us several suggestions on why the discussion of slavery is so skewed in our nation. One huge aspect is that education around slavery is inaccessible and inaccurate.<sup>26</sup> The Hortons write, "The vast majority of Americans react strongly to the topic...most don't know enough about the history of slavery to intelligently participate in any national discussion on the subject, some would rather not know, and until recently there have been few opportunities for them to learn."<sup>27</sup> Recently, there have been attempts by historic sites to more accurately discuss slavery. Examples include the discussion of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings at Monticello and Civil War battlefields that include some history of slavery by the National Park Service.<sup>28</sup> Examples like these allow for open conversation around slavery.

Moreover, the Hortons acknowledge that there is a lot of pushback when slavery enters our national conversation. They write, "Any attempt to integrate these aspects of the national past into the American memory risks provoking defensiveness, anger, and confrontation...For different reasons, Americans, both blacks and whites, are reluctant to bring a painful historical context to bear on contemporary race relations."<sup>29</sup> The narrative that is most often pushed is an out of sight, out of mind approach. That is, if we do not bring up slavery in our national memory, we won't have to acknowledge how horrific it was.

Looking at a variety of changes to public memory through public displays that attempt to grapple with the history of slavery, such as flags and monuments, helps us understand how universities have taken on the task themselves. Authors Joshua F.J. Inwood and Derek Alderman discuss the importance of memory work when it comes to talking about our violent history in their article, "Taking Down the Flag Is Just a Start: Toward the Memory-Work of Racial Reconciliation in White Supremacist America." The article discusses the 2015 Charleston massacre in which nine African Americans were shot and killed in their church by a white man hoping to ignite a race war. Local politicians heard the pleas of protesters after this tragic event, which eventually led to South Carolina legislators voting to remove the confederate flag from the state capitol.<sup>30</sup> Inwood and Alderman write,

[The Charleston massacre] is also indicative of the nation that whitewashes the connections between the material realities of white supremacy and its grounding in historical

memory... As activists and others from across the United States recognize, challenging the legitimacy of publicly displaying Confederate flags and other symbols that legitimize the defense of slavery and white supremacy is certainly the right thing to do...The growing popularity of erasing elements that commemorate the Confederacy is particularly problematic in the context of remembering racialized violence and the important consequences these highly charged memories produce in defining the terms of social identity and responsibility.<sup>31</sup>

While taking away inherently racist symbols like the confederate flag is a much-needed place to start, this barely touches the vast work we need to do to unlearn habits of ignorance around slavery and start on a path towards healing and reconciliation. In order to create spaces of healing, we must tell honest stories about that past, come to terms with the past, find spaces to actively remember our complicated racial history, and fight to educate people about our past.

Similarly, we debate whether there *is* an appropriate way for America to remember slavery. Scholars James Oliver Horton and Johanna C. Kardux argue in their book, *Slavery and the Contest for National Heritage in the United States and the Netherlands*, “For Americans, a people who see their history as a freedom story and themselves as defenders of freedom, the integration of slavery into their national narrative is embarrassing and can be guilt-producing and disillusioning. It can also provoke defensiveness, anger, and confrontation.”<sup>32</sup> In a country that would much rather forget that slavery ever happened, how are we supposed to publicly acknowledge the atrocity of slavery? While the majority of conversation around remembrance of slavery leads to a discussion on apologies and reparation, the topic of creating monuments and structures to memorialize slavery is just as relevant. Historian Freeman Henry Morris Murray feared that building public monuments would lead to an erasure of slavery from national memory and instead put focus on specific Civil War heroes and battles.<sup>33</sup> Placing the focus on isolated events and people would be concerning because the full extent of the horrors of slavery wouldn’t be portrayed. As a nation, we are in conflict with the appropriate ways to build monuments.

Recent monuments have made efforts to commemorate the experiences of enslaved people. First, the *Middle Passage Monument* created in the U.S. Virgin Islands by Wayne James commemorates the enslaved people who lost their lives when they were forced to come to the United States. It consists of two large twelve-foot aluminum arches, and once created, it was lowered into the Atlantic Ocean to serve as both an artwork representative of memory and a literal gravestone.<sup>34</sup> While the concept was a marvelous idea, author Renee Ater argues in her article, “Slavery and Its Memory in Public Monuments,” that the monument lacked a public space and is largely for-

gotten by the majority of the community. Since the monument was lowered into the Atlantic Ocean, there is no exact location that the public can go to pay their respects. The monument only exists in photos and articles causing it to become lost in a sense. The community fails to recognize that there is a monument unless they search for it online or already have knowledge that it exists. Second, The African American Monument in Savannah, Georgia is located in a touristy area depicting a statue of a Black family, comprised of a father, son, mother, daughter wrapped in each other's arms and surrounded by broken chains. The base of the statue is engraved with a quote from Maya Angelou which reads,

We were stolen, sold and bought together from the African continent. We got on the slave ships together. We lay back to belly in the holds of the slave ships in each other's excrement and urine together, sometimes died together, and our lifeless bodies thrown overboard together. Today, we are standing up together, with faith and even some joy.<sup>35</sup>

This monument serves as a reminder of all the things the African American community has overcome and attempts to open conversation around slavery that took place in Savannah. There is also the planned North Carolina Freedom Monument Project (NCFMP) in Raleigh. This monument differs from these other examples in that it is a large space with several internal memorials that aim to discuss the history of slavery in North Carolina, from an auction block to Jim Crow laws.<sup>36</sup> The goal is that anyone who enters the space will get to take a walk through history and ultimately be faced with the challenging conversation and forced to acknowledge the horrid institution of slavery.

The problem is, as these monuments demonstrate, there is no one way to remember slavery in America. Monuments serve as a vivid reminder that our nation willingly took part in a tragedy, as they force us to face our past and go beyond a mere apology. We cannot simply place a statue in a busy park and expect our memory of slavery to be complete, but it is a good start to bring the conversation to light. Public memory work leaves room to make promising changes, but when viewed as the pinnacle of justice in and of itself, more substantial transformation can be stunted. One area we have seen more memory work being done is within American universities. Many colleges have direct ties to slavery: some have done promising work in recognizing their part, while others have largely ignored the issue. I will now shift the national perspective on slavery remembrance to a more focused critique on remembrance within American universities.

### **Public Memory of Slavery: American Universities**

Universities such as Saint Louis University (SLU) in Missouri and the University of Alabama (UA) in Tuscaloosa have taken minimal approaches that lack substantial acknowledgment for their part in slavery. Saint

Louis University was founded in 1829 by a group of Jesuits who migrated to Missouri from Maryland. Not surprisingly for the time, many of the Jesuits brought with them dozens of enslaved people to work their farmland and likely build the university.<sup>37</sup> Slavery played an immense role in the first 40 years of SLU's history: enslaved people built the campus; they were hired as cooks, janitors, and land keepers; they were often sent by their enslavers to conduct business on campus; and if the enslaved passed away, their bodies were dissected and used by the medical school.<sup>38</sup> To put it simply, SLU's founding wouldn't have been possible without the institution of slavery.

After the murders of Vonderrit Myers and Michael Brown in Missouri in 2014, the campus was swept with a series of peaceful protests calling for a needed change around the discussion of race relations and slavery on campus.<sup>39</sup> Myers and Brown were both young African American men who were senselessly murdered by the police. In attempt to ease the minds of protesters, SLU issued an apology statement and promised to make changes within the university that honored the enslaved people who created SLU. It wasn't until years later that SLU made any progress towards these promises. In 2016, SLU paired with the Jesuits of USA Central and Southern Province to create the Slavery, History, Memory, and Reconciliation Project, which conducts research into the lives of the known enslaved people who helped build and run the university in early days.<sup>40</sup> SLU chose not to prioritize meaningful change and rather took decades to create any conversation around the topic.

Similarly, UA came under heat in 2004 when Professor Al Brophy began publicizing his findings on the university's connections to slavery. Brophy took it upon himself to dig deep into the university archives and call attention to the fact UA has never made any public statements regarding their role in slavery.<sup>41</sup> UA sits in Tuscaloosa, a city deep in the South, which relied on slave labor. The university was built in 1831, likely by the hands of enslaved people. Once in operation, many prominent leaders in the school owned enslaved people, and the grounds of the school were worked by enslaved individuals. Many of the buildings on campus are named after prominent members of the school who were enslavers, and the bodies of two enslaved individuals are buried on the campus grounds.<sup>42</sup> Until Brophy, there was no talk of memorializing the enslaved people who made UA possible or any talk of changing the names of buildings on campus. Brophy was threatened online and constantly under attack by members of the school and community. People argued that he was reaching too far in the past and that slavery was not something that should be brought up within the university.

Later that year, despite the backlash, UA issued an apology and built a small memorial for the enslaved individuals whose bodies were buried on campus grounds. Every few years UA publishes some sort of apology, but largely the conversation around slavery has been ignored. In more recent years a tour called Hallowed Grounds has been created for people to walk the campus and learn about the connections between UA and slavery, but the uni-

versity has yet to make a true public statement that remembers the enslaved people who made the university possible.<sup>43</sup> Although the tour has sparked up conversations related to UA and slavery, it does little to offer a public remembrance or, more importantly, an apology for the lives that were used, belittled, and displaced.

On the other side of the spectrum, there are some universities that have made more valiant efforts towards starting the conversation on their campuses. Georgetown University was built in 1789 by prominent Maryland Jesuits making it the oldest Catholic and Jesuit university in the United States. Georgetown was supported by the many plantations in the surrounding area. Local Jesuits would buy and sell enslaved people and donate the money directly to pay off the debts of Georgetown. In 1832, Maryland Jesuits sold many enslaved people to Louisiana for a paycheck worth 3.3 million dollars in today's currency. This sale was headed by two of Georgetown's early university presidents. In addition, the university used the labor of many enslaved people who worked as carpenters, valets, blacksmiths, maids, and cooks.<sup>44</sup>

In 2015, following the name change of a problematic building on campus, Georgetown started the process of recognizing its history and connections to slavery. Alumnus Richard J. Cellini was moved by the student protest and quickly set up a nonprofit organization named Georgetown Memory Project, which aimed to identify the enslaved individuals who have a connection to the university. The nonprofit served as the start of the university's reckoning.<sup>45</sup> The university began looking into the history of their institution and created an open conversation of their findings. The Georgetown Slavery Archive consists of a "collection of research, analysis, and primary documents exploring and substantiating the complex ties between Georgetown University and slavery."<sup>46</sup> The website was produced by the Georgetown University Working Group on Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation. The website discusses "the Maryland Jesuit communities' ownership of enslaved people, how slave labor supported Georgetown University, and the legacy of the Jesuits sale of 272 men, women, and children in 1838."<sup>47</sup> The website includes a historical timeline and encourages users to be present in the conversation around slavery. While this is an important start, Georgetown lacks an official public space designated to commemorate slavery on campus. Their approach to public memory is limited by primarily focusing their apology to an online audience, doing little to deepen the conversation.

In 2001, shortly after her inauguration as the university president, Ruth Simmons, Brown's first African American president, was immediately faced with the task of including slavery in the public memory of Brown University. Brown was established in 1764, making it one of the oldest universities in the United States. Enslaved people helped build and work the lands of Brown University. In 2003, Simmons created the University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice, which sought to provide information on the Brown family's involvement with slavery and how the university reaped

the benefits of slavery. The committee consisted of both students and faculty who were tasked to investigate the historical facts in regard to slavery. Simmons states, "The committee was formed on the belief that powerful debate is one of the hallmarks of intellectual engagement and that universities do well when they encourage examination that rests on a factual rather than an emotional basis."<sup>48</sup> Looking into the history of the Brown family, the committee concluded that they were directly involved with the trading of enslaved people. In fact, they financed several trips to the West African coast, but ultimately lost money in their attempts.<sup>49</sup> They wanted to be prominent traders of enslaved people, but their efforts fell short.

At length, the committee's efforts at Brown resulted in active consideration and a process of apology, which has included lectures about slavery, professorships and fellowships to study slavery at Brown, and information taught to incoming freshman on the university's history. In more recent years, Brown has continued to add documents, events, and memorialization on top of their committee's work. They have broadened the conversation and continue to make strides to bring the history of slavery into the public eye on campus. Brown's dedication to making a public space to remember slavery is admirable because it undeniably engages students with previously ignored narratives, and the university has only continued to make more advancements in their atonement over the years. In an interview conducted by the editors of *The Public Historian*, James T. Campbell, the chair of the University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice, stated, "We'll see whether the university rises to that challenge. But if nothing else, I hope that we've demonstrated that it's possible for a university to confront its own history in an open and forthright way, and to emerge and be enriched from the experience. That's no mean achievement."<sup>50</sup> As Campbell says, Brown has implemented steps to make foundational change, but it remains up to the university to take the advice and run with it.

Clemson University was founded in 1889 by Thomas Green Clemson in the state of South Carolina. Clemson has a history deeply rooted in slavery with enslaved and incarcerated (predominantly African American) people building the university from the ground up. Many enslaved individuals also worked the land and large plantations owned by the Clemson family. For many years, the university largely overlooked its ties with slavery. The school made decisions that painted Clemson in a more positive light and left out any narrative around enslaved individuals. Starting in the late 2000s, students began to question and petition for changes to be implemented on campus. The trustees made many empty promises over the years, and the promises that did pan out were carefully crafted and heavily monitored to maintain Clemson's upstanding reputation. It wasn't until the Charleston Massacre took place in 2015 that any real changes were made. Across campus, different markers were added to serve as a sort of memorialization for the enslaved people who built the university, worked at the university, and even some who died on the property. The markers have brief historical facts on them discussing slavery

within Clemson, but each marker is extremely limited in space, so much of the history is left untold.<sup>51</sup>

Professor Rhondda Robinson Thomas was disappointed in the university's empty promises and underwhelming accomplishments, which prompted her to study the history of Clemson. Through biographical storytelling, Thomas attempted to untangle the complicated public narrative of slavery that Clemson University has pushed throughout the years. She aimed to tell the stories of specific individuals and what they did for Clemson with much more than a simple historic marker. Through the Call My Name Project, Thomas has provided a deep set of resources that allow the university and the community to see the secrets of slavery Clemson has previously tried so hard to hide. When explaining the project's purpose, Thomas states,

Call My Name challenges Clemson University to discard the practice of using biographic mediation to recuperate its reputation amid charges of failure to create an inclusive history, and reinscribe the institution's public history with the names and stories of the people whose unpaid or under waged labor was essential for the institution's existence. Rather than relying solely on traditional modes of documenting and preserving this history, the Call My Name research team is crowd-sourcing our research project, inviting the public to contribute information about people in each generation, and creating digital living archives to share our findings.<sup>52</sup>

This method of remembrance is more than putting up a statue or issuing an apology statement. It allows for students and community members to actively participate in the stories that will be told at Clemson in years to come, as the Call My Name project is a living memorial that continues to grow as new information is added in. Thomas pushed Clemson into taking a step that forces the university to actively remember slavery and those who made the institution of Clemson possible. Taking a biographical storytelling approach humanizes enslaved people. With documented names and stories being told, it is much harder to pretend that you have no part in the horrors of slavery. Telling enslaved people's stories makes it impossible for them to be silenced any longer. George Mason University has taken a similar approach.

### **George Mason University**

GMU does not have direct ties to slavery in the obvious ways many of these other universities grappling with this issue do. It was not built by the hands of enslaved people. It was not a large plantation that was worked by enslaved men, women, and children. What connects GMU to slavery is George Mason IV himself—a prominent slave owner, a huge profiteer from plantation life. Taking steps towards recognizing the problematic past of the university's namesake is extremely important work at GMU. Instead of

brushing the past under the rug or turning their head, students and faculty at GMU started a conversation. Walking through Wilkins Plaza, the heart of campus, students are met with the voice of George Mason IV. They see the large statue and the accomplishments of a man who changed our nation. Within twenty steps, students are now also met with the stories of Penny and James, along with the names of others Mason enslaved. Within twenty more steps, students are met with a fountain that contains shells and stones found at Gunston Hall, in the place where these enslaved individuals set their heads to rest.<sup>53</sup> Finally, students are given the opportunity to voice their own input. At the opposite end of the plaza, farthest from Mason, students are met with chalkboards where they are encouraged to add their own words into the memorial.<sup>54</sup> The goal is to create a collective history between the past, present, and future—but is it enough?

Creating public memory is extremely important for all universities, not just institutions where more students of color are enrolled. By creating a place to discuss slavery, GMU is showing the majority of the student body that they are seen and heard. It is crucial for students of color to feel supported by their university as it is oftentimes the place they call home. Professor Juan Carlos Garibay and doctoral students Christian West and Christopher Mathis, who are all members of the Education and Human Development program at UVA, questioned how Black students think and feel when attending universities with ties to slavery. In collaboration, the three put together a study called the Survey of Black Student Experiences at Universities with Historical Relationships to Slavery (SBSE).<sup>55</sup> After surveying ninety-three undergraduate African American students and publishing the study in 2020, these were the results:

58.1% reported that they “often think about [the] institution’s involvement with slavery”, 48.4% “often feel frustrated because of [the] institution’s involvement with slavery”, 46.3% “often feel resentment towards [the] institution because of its involvement with slavery”, and 40.9% “often feel anger towards [the] institution because of its involvement with slavery.”<sup>56</sup>

Additionally, students felt that their institution’s involvement with slavery has had a major impact on their college experience, and as a result, they did not participate in certain activities that remind them of the institution’s involvement with slavery. Students also reported that they avoided certain areas on campus and experienced feelings of helplessness, depression, or lack of focus all due to the institution’s involvement with slavery.<sup>57</sup> These numbers help us understand that institutions with connections to slavery would be doing their student body a disservice by not acknowledging and apologizing for their past. This information shows the lasting impact that comes with the decision to name spaces after historical figures. This history is not just a story we tell

about the past, but also a story about who belongs in the present.

Creating spaces of public memory is extremely important, especially on college campuses that pride themselves on diversity and inclusion. By creating a space in the heart of campus that opens conversation around the difficult topic of slavery, GMU is certainly taking steps in the right direction. As said by Clemson professor, Rhondda Robinson Thomas,

Stories are extremely powerful and have the potential to bring us together, to shed light on the injustice committed against us and they lead us to understand that not one of us is alone in this world. But our stories are also a commodity—they help others sell their products, their programs, their services—and sometimes they mine our stories for the details that serve their interests best—and in doing so present us as less than whole.<sup>58</sup>

GMU is taking the time to find the history of the people Mason enslaved and telling their stories. Including the individual stories of people like James and Penny helps us to understand what a day would be like if you were an enslaved individual under Mason. These stories are important, but at the same time, in a way, they do serve the best interests of the university by creating an inclusive image that the school can profit from.

By creating the Enslaved Children Memorial Project instead of simply changing the name of the university, the school has stirred up controversy and conversation. In interviews I conducted with the project heads, I asked several questions about difficulties and decisions around the memorial. Dr. Manuel-Scott discussed the decision of keeping the name attached to George Mason University,

The three faculty members and the students, we had a private conversation, being, if that's the proposal [a name change] we will get stuck there. If what we want is to help people understand the larger history, then let's keep our eye on that work. So, there was never a serious public conversation about removing the George Mason statue, or about changing the name...We don't have a lot of traditions, right? Our traditions are rubbing the toe, don't step on the plate, take pictures, you know when you're a freshman at the statue, and when you graduate. I think for many folks, the idea that we would remove the statute would be about removing the few traditions that we have as a young institution.<sup>59</sup>

Since GMU is a relatively new university, it is true that the students do not hold many traditions. Removing the statue may take away traditions, but it could also result in more meaningful change for students of color. Removing

the Mason statue would put the voices of the people he enslaved at the heart of campus. Instead of being faced with a large statue of the enslaver, students would be able to create new traditions with a memorial for the enslaved. Yet, similarly, Dr. Oberle expressed his reasoning behind the lack of a name change,

The three of us almost in unison said, yes, you got to keep the statue and you got to keep the name. Our rationale was that we thought that this was a good opportunity to have a conversation about the issues related to the long-term influence of slavery within American society. We felt that the changing of the name or removal of this particular statute, on our campus, no judgment on other places that do that, but on our campus in our environment, we thought that that would be a mistake, and a lost opportunity.<sup>60</sup>

The decision not to change the name was possibly the result of pushback from community members. Building a monument and keeping the name does spark conversation, but I argue removing the name and statue would have the same effect. It is important to understand why some community members were fighting to keep the name and statue in place.

Dr. Carton, co-chair of the ECGM and faculty member in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, gave an example of some of the pushback the team was faced with,

A retired person from the GMU community, quite prominent, chose Dr. Manuel-Scott and a few other students to send a letter to say that really Mason was anti-slavery. We wrote an evidence-based letter back and received a response that was just a little cute. This person sent hearts and emojis back saying they didn't mean anything serious.<sup>61</sup>

That seems to be one of the main arguments community members have used to challenge the project. This idea that the project was not necessary because Mason himself was "anti-slavery" seems to be one of the main arguments. Kye Farrow also responded to this question around pushback with his own experiences,

Once it got to a greater part of the Mason community, some definitely had things to say about it. In particular, on LinkedIn, as I was kind of like sharing updates on the project, there was so much pushback. They're the ones like, the university has no ties to slavery, it's a stretch. Or it was like, you know, this is just the 10th attempt to get the university's name changed. It's not, it's quite the opposite. The argument

is, we can celebrate George Mason in who he was and what he's done. Truth be told, a lot of people don't know George Mason, a lot of people on the East Coast and in Virginia don't know who George Mason IV was. I want to say that there's even a book I read called, like the *Forgotten Founder*, that was all about how people really don't know the very mysterious kind of guy.<sup>62</sup>

This was the same general type of pushback all the individuals I interviewed were met with: this idea that George Mason IV and GMU were against slavery or far removed from the issue. Yet, there is a clear connection to slavery as GMU is named after a man who did nothing to end slavery.

Some may feel that the university should have changed its name, and some feel the university is doing everything right. Still, others might think that things should have been left in the dark. These responses demonstrate that there isn't a right or wrong way to fully remember and memorialize. Instead of ignoring the issue, GMU has sought to correct their past ignorance. By keeping the George Mason name, the university has chosen a difficult and controversial path, but they have chosen a path that requires hard and constant work. They have made a commitment to telling a previously silenced and hurtful past. A memorial is a great start, but there must be more work done. Amidst the controversy and construction, GMU has been building up their plans on how they can expand this conversation across campus.

When the research team began documenting their work back in 2017, they started a website called *Enslaved Children of George Mason* to report their findings. The website features a description of the memorial project at GMU, nine online exhibits, and thirty-eight documents from the Mason family. The nine exhibits showcase the work done by the research team and their different findings. The areas include health and wellness of enslaved people, the Mason family, the Gunston Hall burial ground, enslaved women, and much more. The thirty-eight documents recovered include letters written by the Mason family, Fairfax County court records, and photographs of Gunston Hall.<sup>63</sup> In addition, the website offers several helpful resources to help people understand the life of Mason and the people he enslaved.

Aside from the memorial project, GMU has created an online research center called The Center For Mason Legacies. The center aims to further research and discuss the legacies of both Mason and the people he enslaved. The website also includes a land acknowledgement and lists all the Native American tribes who once inhabited the land that GMU sits on. In addition to the ECGM project, GMU has already launched several new projects in hopes of continuing their discussion. The Mason Legacies Project aims to engage upper-level honors and history students by having them enroll in a research course, taught by Professor George Oberle that further investigates the life of George Mason IV. The students then add their findings into a continuous *OMEKA* project, a free online platform for displaying archives,

scholarly collections, and exhibitions.<sup>64</sup> The goal is to continue research and add to the online archive.

Another part of this commemoration project is The Mason Family Account Book Project, which aims to dissect the digitized copy of the Mason family manuscript. In 2020, a course was taught where students began transcribing the writing in the account book, a collection of monetary transactions made by the Mason family. The discoveries made in the entry will continue to be researched more in depth. There will eventually be an online archive of all the findings, however, COVID-19 has impacted classes.

Furthermore, The Black Lives Next Door Project will begin in the summer of 2021. The goal of this project is to do deep research into the founding years of GMU, starting when it was a branch of UVA. The team will look into the communities (predominantly African American communities) that were displaced by the creation of GMU. The project description states that the team seeks to answer two questions: “Why and how did the College remove from its immediate vicinity Black communities established by Jim Crow-era residential covenants? What happened to the supplanted people and can their experiences of displacement be recovered and brought to light?”<sup>63</sup> This project will be more focused on how the institution has contributed to inequity against African Americans in Fairfax, Virginia.

The Racial Reckoning Project began in 2020 following protests in response to several police killings of African American individuals. The project is a collection of memories from GMU students who are actively protesting and calling out white supremacy and injustice. The project is a digital archive in the form of a website and is constantly growing as new community members share their stories. The aim of this project is to show that while slavery may have ended, the effects are long lasting and still affecting the Black community.<sup>65</sup>

Lastly, GMU recently elected its first African American president, Gregory Washington. In a statement in 2020, Washington announced that the university will be launching a Task Force on Anti-Racism and Inclusion Excellence. The task force will aim to examine racial inequities that exist on campus. There are several jobs the task force will be responsible for including campus policing, university policies, racial trauma and healing, curriculum and pedagogy, buildings and grounds, community engagement, and resource commitments. The goal is to do a deep dive into these areas of campus life and ensure they are practicing inclusivity and equity.<sup>66</sup> GMU has made a commitment to change their institution to be a safe space for all its students. The ECGM Project was just the beginning. The school’s dedication so far to showcase all aspects of George Mason IV has been promising. They are taking the time and putting in the work to make sure everyone who steps foot on campus is faced with all sides of history, not just the one most remembered.

While the work being done is important, is it enough? Is GMU making any real effort to make an equitable change on campus and in the

community? I argue that, ultimately, GMU appears to be doing valuable work around creating a public memory of slavery on campus. They have started a necessary foundation, but there is much more work to be done at the institution. In a conversation with an African American student who attends GMU, they shared their feelings on the memory work being done at the university

Slavery is a really tough subject. When we talk about how we're going to address it, are we thinking we're going to commemorate slavery? Or are we trying to educate people on a travesty? Most white males and most white folks had a huge role in slavery. George Mason, that huge statue is a celebration of slavery to me. That's what it's doing, it's telling all the black students on this campus a really big "F you". I think if they would have torn down the statue and put the cut out of Penny in his place, that would have honored the lives of folks enslaved during that time instead of adding her on as an accessory to Mason.<sup>67</sup>

This student brings attention to the potential harm in the decision to not change the name or remove the statue of Mason. They felt that the university was doing a disservice to Black and African American students by keeping George Mason IV in the conversation. The memorial project is important, but by not making more focused institutional changes, GMU is not helping minority groups. The student continued to voice their concerns,

110% I feel like George Mason could be doing more. My main thing with this institution is that the Black students on this campus are really one of the largest demographics who feel underserved. When you ask us to take these surveys, when you ask us to attend events and you want to plaster our faces on George Mason advertisements, you can't expect us to not be asking, well when are you going to start taking into consideration what we have to say? I feel like for a very long time and still continuing, George Mason tries to address Black issues in a very public, very 'look at what we're doing,' showboat type way, instead of embedding into the university.<sup>68</sup>

This leads back to the idea that GMU continues to fall short in their effort to memorialize the enslaved and in GMU's effort to make a safe place on campus for Black students and other students of color.

Later in our conversation, the student expressed that they wished the money for the memorial project went towards helping students instead of adding a memorial. The university preaches inclusion and diversity, but internally it is not doing enough to ensure that students of color are staying

enrolled in classes. As we concluded our conversation, the student shared their fears moving forward,

I feel like if we're going to call ourselves a diverse institution, if we're going to say that we are trying to evolve with the times, then we need to understand that everyone doesn't process things the same. Not everyone will need the same type of help. Black students on campus have been asking for an area to congregate in, we've been asking for more mental health professionals who are African American, we've been asking for these things. We've been wanting physical, tangible things for at least four years now and we keep getting turned down. George Floyd dies and all of sudden there's a racial task force and they're trying to put us on the news talking about this memorial and I feel like for the Black students that are at Mason, a lot of this can come as a slap in the face.<sup>69</sup>

To this student, the GMU memorial does not truly make many real changes. It has sparked conversation around slavery on campus, but the funds for the project could have gone towards making more impactful changes, like grants and scholarships for Black students. The memorial is merely a place to talk about a travesty and a visual piece on campus.

### **Conclusion: Road to Reconciliation**

Memory work is profound and challenging. It takes courage to place a memorial honoring enslaved individuals on campus, but is it the right move? Ultimately, GMU appears to be doing valuable work by creating a public memory of slavery on campus. They have started a necessary foundation, but there is much more work to be done. The many projects around Mason's legacy and the legacies of the people he enslaved are the product of hard work done by a very select few at the university, primarily unpaid undergraduate researchers and a small number of humanities professors. This work is largely overlooked or ignored by other parts of the college. In addition, this project does little to recognize existing racial disparities on campus. Students appreciate the work put into the memorial, but they recognize that the addition of a few statues does nothing to help navigate the current issues of minority groups on campus.

To conclude this essay, I leave you with this quote from Frederick Douglass' speech "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July,"

What to the American slave is your Fourth of July? I answer, a day that reveals to him more than all other days of the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him your celebration is a sham; your boasted

liberty an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mock; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are to him mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy – a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation of the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of these United States at this very hour.<sup>70</sup>

Our country is still at war with itself. As racial discrimination and tensions rise, now is the time to stand up to the system and begin on a road to reconciliation. It is time to stop the silence and bring slavery out of the dark forever.

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## **Weaver Prize Honorable Mention**

# Written on the Walls: The Public Memory of the Fullerton Union High School Auditorium

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AMST 502T: Seminar on Public Memory

This paper was written for Dr. Kanosky's AMST 502 Seminar in Public Memory held in the spring of 2021. The assignment was to write a 20-25 page research paper about the public memory of a subject of one's choice, contributing to the scholarly discourse surrounding the construction of history. In this paper, I critically analyze the shifting memory of the Fullerton Union High School Auditorium. Examining primary documents from local sources, I highlight the purposeful silences embedded in the dominant historical narrative of the Fullerton High School Auditorium by focusing on the case of the theater's mysteriously whitewashed WPA mural and the recent removal of founder Louis E. Plummer's name from the façade of the structure. Ultimately, I argue that Fullerton Union High School auditorium is a space haunted by a legacy of exclusion, revealing the functioning of a racialized social hierarchy.

### **Introduction**

Set forth on the bustling corner of Chapman Avenue and Lemon Street stands a picturesque structure that, over the years, has gained esteem as one of Fullerton's most prized landmarks. Faded from the ultraviolet rays of the harsh Southern California sun, the once blush-toned edifice maintains a majestic, yet imposing presence, rising above the surrounding pavement and adjacent sprawling lawn. Distinguished by its arched entryways, stucco exterior, and clay tile roof, the building emulates a Spanish Colonial Revival architectural style, as well as elements of Italian Renaissance design in its symmetrical façade, decorative concrete moldings, and domed clocktower erecting stories from the building's posterior. Mosaic tiles of blue, teal, and

gold forming intricate patterns adorn the concrete tower, further embellishing two tiers of unglazed windows spaced out above the Roman numeral clockfaces. Below, nearly hidden by an overgrowth of trees, runs an arcade spanning the length of the structure's western side, guarded by delicately crafted wrought iron gates. In essence, the motifs displayed in the design of this building evoke memories of a romanticized colonial past, hinting at the histories its walls hold.

Designed by renowned architect Carlton Winslow, this quaint, 40,950 square-foot auditorium has become enmeshed with the community's historic narrative and collective sense of identity since it was introduced to the Fullerton Union High School campus in 1930.<sup>1</sup> For almost a century, this building has been embraced as a public space for the countless students who have filtered through the Fullerton Joint Union High School District, as well as the greater Orange County population. In 1993, the state of California declared the structure a historical landmark, guaranteeing its further preservation in both tangible form and public memory as a symbol of Fullerton's growth and prosperity.<sup>2</sup> Although it stands as a cornerstone of scholastic and social life within the area, this building, in all its majesty and antiquity, is not without its controversies.

While the ornately stylized details that grace its immense façade may suggest a connection between the contemporary town and its colonial association, the deliberate alterations made to the exterior walls of this building provide meaningful insight into its shifting public memory over the years. Up until the summer of 2020, the theater belonging to the public high school was officially known as the Louis E. Plummer Auditorium, named after the man who, from 1909 to 1941, worked to improve the local public education system and establish the neighboring community college.<sup>3</sup> But today, the charcoal-colored lettering on the façade simply reads "Auditorium," as Plummer's legacy has become indelibly tainted by his ties to the Ku Klux Klan. Equally interesting is the case of the disappearing mural spanning the outer west wall of the theater. Instated by the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s, *Pastoral California* was hastily whitewashed for unclear reasons. Decades later in the 1990s, the artwork's rediscovery and the celebration of community that followed failed to address the mural's initial coverup, denying an opportunity for the town to come to terms with its controversial past. These adjustments to the building form a pattern of change over time that indicates narratives of strategic remembering and forgetting in the collective memory of the Fullerton community.

The politics of belonging are often materialized and negotiated through the bounds of landscape. According to cultural geographers Jordan Brasher, Derek Alderman, and Joshua Inwood, commemorated spaces like school campuses "serve as a 'hidden curriculum' that gives sometimes subtle, but often times overt clues about who belongs and whose histories are important to the development [of the institution]."<sup>4</sup> Building from the work of cultural geographer Karen Till, Brasher et al propose a theory of "wounded

spaces,” defined as a site damaged by narratives of symbolic, often racist, violence and social trauma. As a result of avoidance when it comes to confronting their complicated past, these wounded sites continue to cause harm.<sup>5</sup> Thus, critical analysis of wounded landscapes, such as the Fullerton Union High School auditorium, reveals the carefully crafted narratives of inclusion and exclusion which convey relationships of power within society.

Although public memory refers to a community’s collective recollection of the past, its construction and maintenance communicate a great deal about the present. In this paper, I examine the shifting public memory written upon the walls of this building of public education. Focusing on the nearly forgotten mural and the contention surrounding the attachment of Plummer’s legacy to the theater, I situate these modifications to the auditorium’s surface into larger social and historical contexts to better understand the motivations behind the changes. Through the application of theory, I explore the creation of the dominant histories ascribed onto the building and analyze the cultural work being performed by the auditorium’s outer adjustments. Ultimately, I argue the alterations made to the exterior of the Fullerton Union High School auditorium express racialized exclusion in both historic narrative and public space, subsequently revealing the social forces of white supremacy and anxieties about race that continue to wound the local community.

### **Setting the Narrative**

Much of what is known regarding the history of the Fullerton Union High School auditorium comes from the man whose legacy is now shrouded in infamy. In 1949, Louis Plummer was the first to publish an early, sanitized history of the school, drawing from the intimate knowledge acquired during the thirty-two years he spent as educator, vice principal, principal, and superintendent.<sup>6</sup> In the text, Plummer writes of himself and his contributions to the expansion of the education system from a third-person point of view as an attempt to come off as impartial. However, his efforts to be perceived as an unbiased author are negated by gaps in information and deliberate silences around touchy subjects, now corroborated through rediscovered sources.

Anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s ideas help to elucidate the cultural impact of Plummer’s narrow history. In his book about the role of power in the making of historical narrative, Trouillot argues that individuals participate in the formation of public memory not only as actors, but also as narrators. Further, he theorizes that silences slip into history at multiple stages of its production, including fact creation, fact assembly, fact retrieval, and retrospective significance. In this process of forgetting, important varying perceptions are left out, ultimately reflecting who within society holds the power to transform an event into a fact.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, in the production of Fullerton Union High School’s history, Plummer assumes the positions of both actor and narrator. Through his specific selection of viable sources which he compiles into an official archive,

Plummer allows silences to enter the setting of the narrative. He effectively formulates an image of himself as a neutral servant of the people while simultaneously generating an image of the school as a site of community and inclusion. In doing so, Plummer demonstrates the longstanding, coercive power he has maintained over the narrative as a prominent figure of Fullerton's white elite. Nevertheless, the oversights in Plummer's book indicate his lack of reliability as a composer of history, as they point to his intentions of posturing himself and the high school campus into a favorable position within the realm of public memory.

Over the years, the positive legacy that Louis Plummer asserted for himself has been reiterated and reinforced through newspaper articles, city websites, and other local historical works that further portray Plummer as an exemplar of civic leadership. In a short biography posted on Fullerton College's Centennial webpage, writer Sharon Dymmel notes that "the Plummer years" at Fullerton Union High School have been referred to as the "golden age for the campus."<sup>8</sup> Extending beyond the parameters of the schools, Plummer is fondly remembered for his perceived sympathetic and generous disposition toward the Mexican migrant population residing in villages on the outskirts of the city. In her 2011 history of Fullerton Union High School, former teacher and librarian Diane Oestreich belabors the tolerant character of Plummer, stating that, "Mr. and Mrs. Louis Plummer frequently entertained and were entertained by the people of the camp," attempting to keep relations cordial.<sup>9</sup>

In accordance with Trouillot's model of historical production, the perpetuation of Plummer's constructed legacy through the narratives of other authors serves as a means of fact retrieval.<sup>10</sup> Together, these written sources packaged as fact form a singular, official history. With each retelling, the popular recollection of Plummer as a "servant of mankind" becomes more ingrained in public memory as alternative information is simultaneously silenced.<sup>11</sup> Further, this instance of fact retrieval speaks to Plummer's longstanding power over his narrative, which came to include the Plummer Auditorium.

Plummer's legacy became permanently etched upon the auditorium's surface posthumously in 1962.<sup>12</sup> To those involved in the process, the tribute seemed fitting as Plummer was outspoken in his desire for the impractical addition of the theater to the campus in order to establish the high school as a serious educational institution.<sup>13</sup> Four years after his death, the school board received a petition urging the trustees to include Plummer's name on the street-facing façade of the structure.<sup>14</sup> Following a unanimous vote to honor the man for his decades of service, a ceremony was held to celebrate the physical inscription of Plummer's memory onto the edifice.<sup>15</sup>

In his contemporary analysis of the memorial landscape, Reuben Rose-Redwood argues, "The very act of place naming is an attempt to discursively reconfigure a given space as a place *to be remembered*. Naming a place, therefore, is itself a commemorative practice, whether those names are

descriptive, possessive, or otherwise.”<sup>16</sup> In the case of the Fullerton Union High School auditorium, the original act of dedicating the theater to Louis E. Plummer by attaching his name onto its countenance served as a commemorative effort, warranting a recall of Plummer’s outstanding legacy in association with the structure. With this act of commemoration, Plummer’s glorified identity in relationship to the auditorium is meant to remain in the forefront of one’s mind.

### **The Power of Legacy**

In her brief online biography of Plummer, Sharon Dymmel makes an interesting remark when referencing his 1941 resignation. Ironically, she writes, “If the story of Louis Plummer were punctuated with a permanent black stain on his professional legacy...it would certainly be a tragedy.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, a “permanent black stain” had already existed in Plummer’s legacy, though it would not become public information for decades to come.

The first challenge to Plummer’s reputation as an educational founder and exceptional citizen surfaced in 1979, in the form of an unpublished dissertation from the University of California, Los Angeles. In his thoroughly researched work, doctoral candidate Christopher Cocoltchos, explores the reach of the Ku Klux Klan in 1920s Orange County, California, basing his claims on evidence found in historical documentation. Most notably, Cocoltchos looks to surviving attendance lists from Klan meetings once held within the area to glean insight into the pervasiveness of the organization infiltrating the community. From his findings, Cocoltchos makes the shocking assertion that Louis E. Plummer quietly became a member of the Myers branch of the Ku Klux Klan in 1923.<sup>18</sup>

In the 1920s, white-Anglo residents concerned with the growing Mexican picker population created a climate in which the racialized law and order appeal of the KKK could take hold in Fullerton. Claimed to be nonviolent by most historic accounts, the Myers klavern is said to have been focused on promoting civic engagement in the community through a regimen of nationalistic ideals and conservative morals.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, the Myers Klan’s motivations were ultimately to reinforce the symbolically violent ideals of white supremacy that structured the racialized hierarchy presiding over the town. Instead of physical violence, the influence of the Myers branch was fortified through the use of racial assimilation and occasional threats of aggression.<sup>20</sup>

In his text, Cocoltchos analyzes that the Ku Klux Klan had appealed to Plummer as a man “dedicated to the idea the youth should not be confronted with the bad habits of the day.”<sup>21</sup> Bringing ideals of white supremacist nationalism to the burgeoning public education system, Plummer established an Americanization program through Fullerton Union High School. The purpose of the program was to teach English to the children of Mexican migrant workers in segregated classrooms forged near citrus encampments. In the section of his book dedicated to the school’s Americanization ef-

forts, Plummer projects the nationalist logic and intolerant attitudes towards non-white Anglo cultures fundamental of the KKK's Anaheim sect. Praising his perceived achievement, Plummer writes, "It takes the determination and sacrificial spirit of a crusader to undertake and carry to success the training of any considerable immigrant population in the tenets of American democracy. Yet it must be done if we are to be a homogeneous people rather than a conglomerate of Little Italys, Little Chinas, Little Mexicos."<sup>22</sup> Thus, he felt it was his responsibility to enact cultural assimilation through the public high school.<sup>23</sup>

While Plummer's efforts of Americanization were generally applauded, the organization of the Ku Klux Klan was not welcomed by all Orange County residents, creating a sharp line of division among citizens with serious social, political, and economic ramifications for those thought to be affiliated. Though Plummer was not alone in his alliance, it remained in his best interest to keep his membership covert.<sup>24</sup> But as time would tell, the prevalence of the upstanding legacy he publicly forged for himself would overshadow his racist indiscretions.

Cocoltchos' dissertation, though incriminating, failed to turn the tides of Plummer's remembrance in the public memory. Until the internet information boom of the 2010s, very little knowledge could be found referencing Plummer's ties to the Ku Klux Klan. Furthermore, the claims put forth in Cocoltchos' dissertation were called into question when critics noticed that primary sources he cited from institutions like the Library of Congress and The Lawrence De Graaf Center for Oral and Public History of California State University, Fullerton were mysteriously no longer accessible to the public.<sup>25</sup> The refusal to accept Plummer as anything but exceptional and the inability to access these primary documents to verify the conflicting assertions fed into a bleak succession of ambivalence, inaction, and ignorance towards the remembrance of Plummer and his namesake, lasting through the years.

Tellingly, in Oestreich's updated attempt to historicize the Fullerton high school, she neglects to address the serious accusations brought against Louis Plummer, ignoring the issue entirely.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, on Fullerton College's Centennial webpage, nowhere in Plummer's biography is his association with the Klan mentioned.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, in a 2016 article written for the Fullerton College's student paper, *The Hornet*, Plummer's Klan activity is again silenced, as the author urges readers to "remember the countless contributions of a great man."<sup>28</sup>

Referencing back to Trouillot's theory of silences within the history making process, Plummer's positive memory as a civic leader proved to hold retrospective significance. Even with a counternarrative offered, Plummer's exalted recollection as a figure of prosperity and tolerance resonated with the Fullerton community and outweighed evidence of the contrary. Therefore, his legacy continued to remain fixed in public memory. With the disregard and denial of unearthed evidence verifying Plummer as a Klansman, especially in written biographies, silences persisted in the solidification of history.<sup>29</sup> Es-

entially, this pattern of selective remembrance speaks to the narrative power influenced by white supremacy that Louis Plummer has managed to wield long after his death.

Interestingly, Christopher Cocoltchos insinuates that Plummer's involvement with the Klan "tied in with the activities around what now represents the Plummer Auditorium and its directives toward good morals and good culture."<sup>30</sup> Though Plummer's alliance with the Klan was kept clandestine, his white supremacist ideology became attached to the public memory of the Fullerton High School auditorium early on with his program of assimilation. Over time, however, this connection would become less overt, obscured in the shadows of Plummer's perceived achievements.

### The Forgotten Fresco

While Plummer's constructed memory was intended to be forever synonymous with the Fullerton Union High School auditorium, the 75-foot mural stretching across the uneven texture of the west exterior wall was supposed to be forgotten. Nearly wiped from collective recall, the case of the lost fresco exemplifies the shifting public memory surrounding the structure.

With its vivid colors and lively scenes, the images presented in the impressionistic *Pastoral California* rival that of biblical portrayals. Comprised of three main portions, the romanticized scape depicts early-1800s rancho life of Mexican communities residing in the area before the arrival of Anglo settlers. The section furthest to the left depicts a colonial feast in front of the San Juan Capistrano Mission attended by Pio Pico, paying homage to the final governor of Alta California. The affluently dressed diners look on as a man strums a guitar and a woman in a full gown performs, meant to be representative of concert-hall singer Laura Moya.<sup>31</sup> In a lively rendering, stallions buck, nearly galloping off the plaster as they are lassoed, wrangled, and tethered by Mexican vaqueros in the middle of the mural. Riders toss their hats high into the air, contrasting against the swirling colors of the surreal, hilly desert landscape. Among the chaos is a figure representative of Jose Antonio Yorba, an early Spanish settler whose ancestors remain prominent in the Fullerton community.<sup>32</sup> Slightly off center, breaking up the scene, is an illustration of a grizzly bear sinking its teeth into the muscular body of a bull, thought to be a pessimistic take on the status of the struggling stock market at the time of the fresco's creation.<sup>33</sup> The right panel then displays a sense of togetherness among the Mexican female population, as they gather around in their vibrant dresses, with their long, braided hair, working alongside one another to wash articles of clothing at a *lavandería*. Viewed as a whole, the fresco paints a poeticized, yet dignified picture of the communities belonging to California's past in warm and cool pastel hues.

The mural was painted by artist Charles Kassler, who was contracted in 1935. The project had been commissioned by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) that was rolled out the same year by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Especially prolific in Southern California, the WPA

program aimed to keep local artists employed by providing federal funds for beautification works during the economic depression of the 1930s.<sup>34</sup> Through their work, the WPA encouraged its artists to depict scenes thought to be representative of the history of the land and traditional American values, such as hard work and community. As a result, depictions of agricultural societies were a commonly recognizable theme, not unlike that of *Pastoral California*.<sup>35</sup> Following its completion after twelve weeks of labor, a two-day citywide celebration was thrown to dedicate the mural and a new athletics stadium to Roosevelt's New Deal program that spawned their creations.<sup>36</sup> A parade was held to commemorate the event further illustrating the town's initial warm embrace of the mural.<sup>37</sup>

But the period in which the fresco originally graced the exterior of the building was short-lived. Only four years after its state commission, the school board hastily decided to paint over *Pastoral California* in 1939.<sup>38</sup> Curiously, the reason as to why the mural was so quickly removed remains unclear by official word. To this day, there is limited evidence from this time indicating the motivation behind the coverup. However, public opinion can be deciphered from a 1939 *Fullerton News-Tribune* article, ominously entitled, "High School Mural Doomed; Paint it Out, Trustees Order." Focusing on Kassler's stylistic choice of impressionism, the column states that the "much discussed and criticized mural...received its death sentence at the hands of district trustees," after becoming "a mooted point since its completion."<sup>39</sup> The newspaper specifies, "Most occupants of the high school will shed no tears over the decision," due in part to the fact that the mural's "lurid colors and somewhat grotesque figures have apparently failed to capture popular fancy."<sup>40</sup>

Though seemingly made in reference to the artistic style of the mural, these comments draw attention to racial fissures within the Fullerton community when considering the anti-Mexican sentiment running rampant in the 1930s. In Southern California, the citrus industry highlighted social and class difference between the laboring Mexican minority and the benefiting white majority, further feeding into a hierarchy of race. In Orange County, discrimination from white residents forced Mexican laborers to live separated and marginalized on the edges of the town in makeshift encampments with no running water or electricity.<sup>41</sup> In the Fullerton area specifically, contempt was aimed at those working and residing on the Bastanchury Ranch, as white citizens were dismayed with their proximity to the impoverished villages, which they believed to devalue their property.<sup>42</sup> During the economic strife of the Great Depression, the citrus industry in California tended to resist the blows of the failing economy. Thus, Mexican migrants working in the agricultural industry were accused of taking away job opportunities from white citizens who were out of work.<sup>43</sup>

Despite the honest contributions made by Mexican populations who essentially functioned as the backbone of the American agricultural industry, the government rolled out a policy in 1929 ignorantly called "Mexican Repatriation." With this federal order, individuals who simply appeared to

be of Mexican descent were at times forcefully rounded up and taken over the border to be released in Mexico, regardless of actual citizenship status. From Orange County alone, 2,000 individuals were reportedly taken or fled to Mexico.<sup>44</sup> As anxieties manifested in the form of government immigration policy and racial discrimination, Kassler's showcasing of prosperous Mexican culture was no longer perceived to be acceptable by the struggling white community.

As the town of Fullerton chose to actively expel the artwork from their popular memory for decades to come, the fresco was not entirely forgotten. Contrarily, *Pastoral California* was written about in multiple newspaper articles that listed WPA projects across the state, although the masterpiece was assumed to be destroyed under layers of beige paint. One 1990 article from the *Los Angeles Times* mentions the WPA mural painted upon the side the Fullerton Union High School auditorium but notes it "has been stuccoed over."<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, in the 1993 document of registration submitted for historical recognition, not once is the fresco alluded to in the attentively detailed description of the theater's physical exterior.

To make sense of this localized erasure from memory, Marita Sturken proposes useful ideologic framework in her book about landscape and national identity. She asserts that "American political culture is often portrayed as one of amnesia, and the media seem complicit in the public's apparent ease in forgetting important political facts and events."<sup>46</sup> However, she argues that this "culture of amnesia" is instead a lineage of memory presented in new forms, typically misinterpreted as forgetting.<sup>47</sup> Over time, *Pastoral California* has been subjected to patterns of cultural amnesia. With its cryptic covering facilitated by the school board and negative opinions reproduced in the press, members of the Fullerton community actively attempted to forget the mural's existence. But as it turns out, the memory of the Fullerton Union High School mural was not completely lost as the dominant narrative suggests.

Unsurprisingly, in his book acclaimed as a definitive knowledge of Fullerton High Union School's early history, Plummer does not give any indication of his involvement with the matter or why the mural's presence was removed.<sup>48</sup> H. Lynn Sheller, a professor at Fullerton College during the Plummer years, affectionately gives him the benefit of the doubt, citing Plummer's purposeful oversight as proof of his disposition as a gentleman, avoiding sensitive and potentially offensive subject matter.<sup>49</sup> However, I must disagree with this assessment. While the mural was nearly wiped from history as an act of avoidance, it was not for the sake of politeness. Rather, the white-washing of *Pastoral California* served as a notification of who was included in Fullerton's society and recollection. By burying the Mexican pastoral mural painted upon a site of public space, white citizens expressed their desires to exclude individuals and cultures of varying ethnicity from the idealized community they sought to establish. At the same time, the fresco's absence from both the auditorium wall and public memory allows for remnants of racist

anxieties to be more easily forgotten. Attesting to the power white society possesses in dictating narrative, *Pastoral California* would not be brought up again by the Fullerton community for another fifty years.

### **Reinstating History, Shifting the Narrative**

In the mid-1990s, the Fullerton Union High School fresco reentered the community's discourse again after the refurbishment of an additional WPA mural located within the Fullerton police station.<sup>50</sup> The search for the high school's supposedly lost fresco began with watercooler talk in the teachers' lounge. According to most sources, former school counselor Cheri Hansen was credited for sparking interest in the rediscovery. Having heard talk about the school's former mural from older faculty who had once witnessed it firsthand, Hansen decided to conduct further research. Phoning city officials and state historians, Hansen located records of the WPA mural, proving the rumors true. Following a feasibility study, *Pastoral California* was found to be astonishingly salvageable, prompting a hands-on, community-wide restoration effort in 1997.<sup>51</sup>

At this time, the local popular memory encompassing the Fullerton Union High School mural shifted from nonexistent to something of urban legend. As theorized by geographer Kenneth Foote, spaces directly and indirectly associated with violence or atrocities often become the subject of urban legends, allowing individuals to come to terms with the anxiety and shame that stem from these traumas through a reworking of the hegemonic narrative.<sup>52</sup> Wounded by exclusion and anxieties about race, the site of the Fullerton fresco served as a breeding ground for legends to proliferate. Through gossip and conjecture, a counternarrative of *Pastoral California* began to develop, challenging the longstanding narrative of denial. Aided by the transgressive nature of urban legend, action was taken to reinstate a piece of history.

While the memory of *Pastoral California* relied upon urban legend, the mural's physical survival after being suffocated under layers of paint for fifty-eight years was due to Charles Kassler's choice in medium. In creating his artwork, Kassler employed the technique of buon fresco which requires pigmentation to be added between applications of wet lime plaster.<sup>53</sup> Ironically, this masterful procedure suggests that the mural was created with the intention of permanency, literally embedded within the building's caked veneer. The community's attempt to cover the mural and feign amnesia towards the public memory of Mexican American contributions proved to be a temporary solution. Although the town tried burying their anxieties under coats of paint, evidence found its way back to the surface.

The process to refurbish Kassler's mural took place over the summer of 1997. Fullerton Union High School students and community volunteers were trained to remove the layers of paint atop the pastoral scene with acetate and toothbrushes, careful not to disturb the artwork below.<sup>54</sup> To make the restoration efforts possible, students passed out flyers and raised money, while

organizations such as the city's Redevelopment Agency and the State Historic Commission donated additional funds to finish the \$47,500 project.<sup>55</sup> Upon the restoration's completion, the city threw a ceremony to rededicate the mural and celebrate the massive communal effort. Commenting on the commemorative event, one reporter praised, "What makes it so special is watching a community movement to restore beauty grown from just a tiny acorn of an idea."<sup>56</sup> But aside from the sense of camaraderie the restoration of *Pastoral California* evoked, the event also provided an opportunity for the public to think more critically about the initial reason for the mural's cover up.

At the rededication, when again confronted with the question of why the mural was initially whitewashed, the community's conclusions were similar to those Fullerton residents had drawn in the past, as they continued to avoid the local history of racist exclusion through coded statements. Newspapers that covered the renewed interest in the fresco repeated the same phrases, ultimately claiming, "No one can say why with certainty."<sup>57</sup> But when the local press asked former students from the 1930s their thoughts, the students reasoned that the community took offense with Kassler's "artistic license."<sup>58</sup> Mainly, the alumni referred to the subjects and style of *California Pastoral* as "vulgar or gross," "stylized and flamboyant," "too gaudy," and "too vivid."<sup>59</sup>

Though these indirect comments attempt to depoliticize matters of the stifled mural by citing creative decision, they hint at deeper anxieties about race that have long plagued the town. The insight they provide is clearer in additional statements taking aim at the Mexican women within the painting, describing them as "very bosomy," presented as "rather large and buxom."<sup>60</sup> With references to the choice of style and variance of color employed within the scene along with the emphasis of sexualized bodily difference in the Mexican women, a sense of grotesque otherness is indicated compared to the prominent white-Anglo ideals of art, culture, and beauty.

But these racialized nuances were not lost on all citizens. When interviewed about the fresco's whitewashing, former Fullerton Union High School graduate Charles Hart, who remembered the heated debate surrounding the fresco, referred to "speculation that the mural was deemed too ethnic."<sup>61</sup> Hart perceptively recalls, "It was too Mexican, that's why. The school didn't want to leave the impression that this town was anything else but Anglos. Too extreme for them, I guess."<sup>62</sup> But aside from isolated remarks like those made by Hart, open conversation about the mural's coverup and its representation of racial anxieties remained largely unspoken.

Perhaps the Fullerton community's failure to admit to a past of racial exclusion could be better understood when thinking about the context of the 1990s in America. Particularly in the greater Los Angeles area, tensions regarding racial difference were at a historic high. In 1992, divisive riots erupted throughout the city in response to the unlawful and senseless police beating of an African American man by the name of Rodney King, drawing attention to ongoing racial inequality in institutional practices in the United

States. As more people of color expressed discontent with race relations, insincere white guilt emerged. According to a longitudinal study published in 1985, it was found that though white America claims to accept the ideas of racial equality, they resist opportunities to implement meaningful change.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, due to this trend of providing lip service to the topic of racial equality, modern racial prejudice has prevailed through symbolic expression, as opposed to previous overt forms.<sup>64</sup> At the end of the twentieth century, the issue of race remained a sensitive subject; one apparently thought best to be ignored, especially in a predominantly white community like Fullerton.

Over the years, Fullerton Union High School's WPA mural went from being commemorated with a parade, to a mark of distaste grounded into the foundation of the building, to a celebrated achievement of community. By the late 1990s, *Pastoral California* was gazed upon as a treasure of the past, overshadowing its purposeful concealment for half a century. Its restoration failed to address the racial exclusions haunting its historic narrative, denying an opportunity to discuss the lingering ramifications. Without the uncomfortable conversation regarding the wounded nature of the site, the power of white supremacy in determining inclusion in both public space and public memory continues to go unchecked. This repetition of avoidance is evidence of a culture of amnesia.

### **A Modern Movement**

In 2020, after nearly a century of ignoring the anxieties about race ascribed on the Fullerton Union High School auditorium, the legacy of white supremacy afflicting the building, and therefore the community, was openly called out in the public sphere. On June 4, an online petition appeared on the website Change.org, demanding the immediate removal of Louis E. Plummer's name from the high school theater. The call to action was proposed by a local eighteen-year-old, Jacqueline Logwood, who declared that "it is time that we stop honoring Fullerton's racist past...such an important building for the community should not continue to bear the name of a white supremacist, of a proud and active KKK member."<sup>65</sup> Within days of its creation, the digital petition reached 24,000 signatures.<sup>66</sup> Seemingly, for the first time, the dominant memory of the auditorium as an inclusive public space was broadly questioned, prompting the attention of the surrounding community.

Undoubtedly feeding into its proliferation, the virtual petition came at a time when racial tensions were again escalating in America after decades of appeasement and detrimental colorblindness. A little more than a week prior to the petition, an African American man named George Floyd was senselessly murdered at the hands of law enforcement as the world witnessed. In response to the continuous patterns of police brutality against people of color, rallies and protests operating under the collective title of Black Lives Matter took the country by storm. The aim was to make voices heard and bring attention to the decades-worth of political, social, and structural inequalities cast upon people of color in the United States. Adversely, the

Trump administration, who set out to villainize supporters of the movement while denying the existence of institutional prejudices, only exasperated national division and contrasting ideals of white supremacy. But the flames had already been ignited. The 2020 Black Lives Matter movement brought forth a widespread interrogation of the dominant public memory. Across the land, statues and structures honoring one-sided narratives of racial oppressors and slaveowners, including Confederate President Jefferson Davis and Christopher Columbus, were defaced and toppled by activists as an act of dissension against the hegemonic narratives they represent.

The push to disassociate Plummer's racist legacy with the Fullerton High School auditorium became part of a larger nationwide effort to reassess the harmful histories projected onto public space. Unpacking the cultural work of memorial landscape, Sturken argues that "Places and sites of memory have meanings that exceed their forms as authored representations of the past because of the ways individuals experience them affectively [in the present]."<sup>67</sup> Thus, by honoring antiquated racists and oppressors through associating their names and likenesses with the public sphere, individuals of color continue to experience the effects of white supremacy and are made to feel unwelcome within these spaces. As an African American woman who graduated from the Fullerton Joint Union High School District, Logwood, the person who started the petition, personally felt the contemporary pain and exclusion brought about by the attachment of Louis Plummer's shameful memory to the theater. Quoted in local newspapers, she acknowledges, "[Plummer] would not like me on top of his stage."<sup>68</sup> But through her petition, Logwood opened up a dialogue about Fullerton's racist past, paving the way for others to also speak out against racial alienation.

Conveniently, petitions generated through the Change.org website provide an optional section where supporters are asked to explain their reasons for signing, further enabling constructive conversation regarding matters of change. In the case of Logwood's petition, the majority of statements condemned the role of white supremacy, racism, and the KKK in the Fullerton community. However, some signers admitted to being unaware of Plummer's dubious past and were angered with his longstanding status as a local hero. Speaking with a keen sense of the hegemonic silencing at play, one commenter writes, "I'm signing because even though people knew of the racist past they kept it the same."<sup>69</sup>

By the time of the 2020 petition, information regarding Plummer's involvement with the Ku Klux Klan had become more easily accessible, though still eclipsed by the reigning narrative of the educator as a beloved Fullerton founder. Beginning in the 2010s, famed Orange County columnist and historian Gustavo Arellano published a series of articles exposing the history of the Ku Klux Klan in Orange County, calling out Louis Plummer by name. Additionally, in 2016, the La Habra High School Theater Guild used the Fullerton auditorium to put on an original, immersive play portraying the problematic race relations percolating in Fullerton during the 1930s.

<sup>70</sup> However, these efforts to expose the truth were introduced *before* the murder of George Floyd and the profound attention on racialized inequality that followed his death. Therefore, the truth proved not enough to dismantle Plummer's iconic status. Similar to the silences surrounding Cocoltchos' 1979 dissertation and omissions within previous biographical works, Plummer's authority as an inventor of history dominated over modern counternarratives of public memory.

In addition to political context, the success of the Change.org petition in shifting Plummer's legacy was due in part to its viral dissemination through social media. Discussing public memory in the digital age, Ekaterina Haskins contends that social media functions as a platform in which a vast variety of narratives "become part of an evolving patchwork of public memory."<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, she states that in the age of the modern internet, "the audience no longer acts as a consumer of a linear story – it takes part in the experience by making choices to connect particular messages and images as well as to register responses to them."<sup>72</sup> Thus, through the digital realm, the public has gained the capacity to take narratives into their own hands, essentially functioning as a part of the history making process. With the collective effort to recognize Plummer's affiliation with the KKK, the public memory of the Fullerton High School auditorium as an inclusive public space in the North Orange County community had been irrevocably shattered.

On June 16, 2020, a vote to eliminate the name of Louis E. Plummer from the auditorium was held by the Fullerton Union High School trustees in a virtual board meeting. Logwood's petition had been placed on the agenda by board member Joanne Fawley, who took the time to read through Cocoltchos' 1979 dissertation and went as far as to contact the author. Now a retired professor, Cocoltchos weighed in on the matter, promptly maintaining, "I believe that the research and analysis from my dissertation speaks amply for me."<sup>73</sup> Although representatives from both sides of the debate were given the opportunity to speak their peace, the trustees unanimously ruled in favor for the removal of Plummer's namesake from the high school building. Speaking on behalf of her vote, trustee Lauren Klatzker stated, "I think that it is never too late to confront our past, whether it's our personal past or community past, and to look and reflect at the decisions made, and then to make changes moving to make us and our community better."<sup>74</sup> With that, Plummer's name was swiftly taken down from the countenance of the auditorium in an attempt to symbolically wipe the contamination of white supremacy from the community.

### **Unresolved Memory**

The 2020 divorce of Plummer's moniker and subsequent legacy from the building's façade brought about by the people of Fullerton marks the first change to the auditorium to openly address the issues of white supremacy surrounding the topic. However, the removal efforts do not guarantee that the desired shift of race relations or acknowledgement of marginalized existence

will occur. While steps have been made towards finding closure for the collective hurt of racial exclusion represented on the outer walls of the Fullerton Union High School auditorium, there is still work left to be done. As of now, the nameless auditorium remains a half-healed wound.

It seems that now more than ever, the public memory revolving around the Fullerton High School auditorium stands unresolved and up for negotiation. Notably, some of the town locals have been very vocal in denying Plummer's affiliation with the Klan, insistent in upholding his previously untarnished remembrance. The 2020 virtual school board vote was met with dissenters arguing, "If he was a KKK leader and there's supporting information, a picture, something he wrote, something he was quoted in, I'm for it. But there doesn't seem to be any evidence."<sup>75</sup> Even trustee Marilyn Buchi claims she did not find any substantial evidence to convince her that Plummer was in fact a "bigot."<sup>76</sup> Still, she voted to remove the name, "troubled by the possibility that Plummer had ties to the KKK."<sup>77</sup>

While these comments speak to the lasting effectiveness of the deliberately crafted public memory initiated by Plummer nearly a century ago, they also illustrate the unwavering grip of the racial hierarchy perpetuating within the Fullerton community. By negating the evidence of scholarship and supporting a one-sided narrative, these outspoken individuals reveal their personal stakes in the maintenance of white supremacy, promoting a continuation of ignorance regarding lingering anxieties of race. This purposeful ignorance then feeds into the cycle of racial exclusion, limiting discussion and denying the disenfranchisement of people of color. With the focus narrowing in on the debate over Plummer's ties to the KKK, these statements distract from real issue of racial exclusion wounding the Fullerton High School auditorium.

Unconcerned with the factual accounts of history and intentions of memorial practices, Marita Sturken urges, "We need to ask not whether a memory is true but rather what its telling reveals about how the past affects the present."<sup>78</sup> Unless additional evidence is somehow discovered to concur with what Cocoltchos already brought forth, Plummer's involvement with the Ku Klux Klan will always be contested. Regardless, white supremacy is now associated with his legacy and, therefore, with the Fullerton Union High School auditorium. The removal of his namesake will not solve the town's deeply ingrained issues with race, but the change marks a step toward greater inclusion in one of Fullerton's most prized public spaces. The removal represents a new consciousness in which controversies of the past can be brought to light, further expanding the discussion of exclusion within the popular narrative.

However, with wounds so severe and disputed, like in the case of the Fullerton Union High School auditorium, the mere act of acknowledgement may not be enough for them to heal. For the marginalized, a lasting sense of agency and social capital within the public realm and popular memory can be achieved through laying symbolic claim to heal these hurt spaces. Applying

this logic to the public sphere, theorists like Till and Brasher offer their ideas of memory-work, or a commemoration in which social power is redistributed through place naming to create a sense of belonging within the memorial landscape.<sup>79</sup>

Between the alterations made to the exterior wall that houses the notorious disappearing and reappearing fresco and the public outcry to take down the Plummer name, the changes brought onto this building fall short of effective memory-work. With the 1997 community-led recovery of *Pastoral California*, no effort was put into creating serious discussion regarding the anxieties about the place of Mexican Americans within the Fullerton community that drove the mural's original removal. Additionally, there was no attempt to relinquish social capital of any type to the Mexican community who has been previously excluded in white society and historic narrative. While the elimination of Plummer's name from the front of the structure was enacted through conversation regarding the town's history of white supremacy, the auditorium's nameless face represents unfinished business.

According to Caesar Alimsinya Atuire, "The absence of figures of blacks and women in public space reinforces the idea that our societies are led by white men and that only white men are worthy of commemoration in our societies."<sup>80</sup> While the Fullerton High School auditorium has been guilty of this limiting practice, an opportunity for marginalized and excluded individuals to take back power and stake their symbolic claim within this public space has been presented in the empty façade. In interviews with local press, Jackie Logwood suggests that the building should be renamed after a prominent woman of color from Fullerton's history.<sup>81</sup> If the community is to accomplish this feat, the action would be indicative of successful memory-work, allowing people of color to take back social agency and assert belonging within the popularly recalled collective of local history and the physical bounds of communal space.

### **Conclusion**

After the sun sets on the City of Fullerton, the presence of the auditorium takes on a more ominous tone; one that accentuates its battered countenance. Concealed by surrounding trees and the opaque shadows they cast, nestled in the eerie silence of the empty intersection, one becomes completely aware of the auditorium's current vacancy. As of today, the Fullerton Union High School auditorium sits uninhabited, encompassed indefinitely by chain link construction fencing, denying all access to the theater as the campus remains closed for renovations in the lasting days of the COVID-19 pandemic. The building sits almost completely unlit. In the soft glow of artificial light shone from across the street, the chips in the white cement molding and the peeling, stained, and faded paint become more noticeable. The clocktower now looms above forebodingly. Barely visible through slits in the tarped gates, the glass doors under the shelter of the arched portico remain indefinitely locked. From this perspective, it is not difficult to imagine the building as

haunted, in more ways than one.

According to local legend surrounding the auditorium, the departed spirit of Louis Plummer himself is said to linger around the theater, causing inexplicable phenomena within its chambers. Indeed, the Fullerton Union High School auditorium is haunted, though not necessarily by an other-worldly presence. Instead, this location is a wounded space haunted by a continuous, unresolved legacy of white supremacy and racial exclusion ascribed onto its external walls.

The public memory surrounding the Fullerton High School auditorium illustrates a localized system of race and power that presides. Upon the building's scarred surface, the marks of white supremacy and racially driven exclusion are symbolized within the strategic changes made, indicating who is welcome in this public space. Moreover, the racist practice of exclusion dually applies to acknowledgement within the community's history. Over the years, the memory of the high school auditorium has been riddled with silences that have entered in at various stages in the production of its history, serving to police the boundaries of inclusion. Under the guise of cultural amnesia, important elements of the narrative have been nearly forgotten, barely kept alive through rumor and conjecture of urban legend. But even as counternarratives have surfaced presenting opportunities for meaningful conversation about issues of exclusion, the theater's wounds continue to be bandaged over, rather than properly treated. Lacking a meaningful exchange of social power, the racial wounds of the nameless Fullerton Union High School auditorium remain unhealed, as its ghosts have yet to be exorcized.



Image 1: The nameless Fullerton Union High School auditorium, March 13, 2021. Image courtesy of the author.<sup>82</sup>

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## 2022 Weaver Prize

In the spring of 1993, the American Studies Student Association established the Earl James Weaver Graduate Paper Prize to honor the retirement of Earl James Weaver, Professor of American Studies, past Department Chair, and founder of the Department of American Studies at California State University, Fullerton. With an original endowment raised from the generous contributions of American Studies students and alumni, the Weaver Prize is an annual \$250 cash award for the best paper written by an American Studies graduate student during the preceding year. Every spring, a panel of American Studies faculty reads submissions and selects the winning essay.

The 2022 Weaver Prize was awarded to Michelle Lê for her paper, "*remember me in all my glory, in all my pieces, and all my losses: The Memory of Little Saigon in the Oral History of Vietnamese Americans in Southern California.*" The Weaver Prize Committee reported Lê's paper to be thoroughly researched and found her writing to be distinctive, relevant, and poetic. Lê's work makes sophisticated contributions to scholarship on the varied and sometimes conflicting public memories of Vietnamese Americans in Southern California's Little Saigon. This paper engages with a wide range of secondary scholarship to thoughtfully analyze a profound archive of primary sources, Vietnamese American oral histories, yielding important results about "the war over memory." Interweaving creative form throughout her research, Lê's paper explores how longing, nostalgia, belonging, and exclusion surface in diasporic community memory. Lê finds important variations in memory along generational divides, but also pays careful attention to the unique perspective of each interviewee, avoiding totalizing narratives that would collapse the rich variety of perspectives of the community. The committee found Lê's paper to be an exceptional model of innovative scholarship.

Additionally, the Weaver Prize Committee awarded an honorable mention to Shannon Anderson's "Written on the Walls: The Public Memory of the Fullerton Union High School Auditorium," an essay accepted for publication in *The American Papers* prior to the decision of the Weaver committee. The committee remarked that Anderson's paper was meticulously researched, topically important, and written with both clarity and nuance. In examining how the public memory of the namesake of Fullerton high school's auditorium and the mural Pastoral California transformed over time, Anderson engages in pressing questions about how white supremacy is forgotten in public memory, as well as how it is uncovered. Anderson's analysis of the landscape and close readings of the mural particularly shone through her paper. We applaud Anderson's scholarship and contributions to current debates about how to remember the past in complex ways.

## 2022 Weaver Prize Winner

# *remember me in all my glory, in all my pieces, and all my losses: The Memory of "Little Saigon" in the Oral History of Vietnam- ese Americans in Southern California*

Michelle Lê

AMST 502T: Seminar on Public Memory

The “Little Saigon” based in Orange County is unique. Named in the 1980s but created after the first wave of Vietnamese refugees came to Southern California after the Việt Nam War, it became an ethnic enclave that possessed political, cultural, and economic power. It is the first place in America that would assume the moniker “Little Saigon,” transforming to serve different functions, both intentionally and unintentionally. This essay examines oral histories conducted with Vietnamese Americans in Southern California. I argue that memories recalled are done so in a manner that reconfirms the simple narratives of “Little Saigon” as a one-dimensional cultural hub while other memories complicate them and that they depend on the re-telling of their personal history, all of it intertwined with complex notions of nationhood, trauma, displacement, and loss. Using interviews from UC Irvine’s Viet Stories from first-generation Vietnamese Americans, I follow in the footsteps of prominent Vietnamese American scholars to explore how Vietnamese Americans foreground themselves, how they grapple with American society, and how they build their memory of being Vietnamese in America with or without this enclave.

*The tale of the dragon father and the fairy mother.*

*Con Rồng Cháu Tiên.*

*There are many tellings of this story, Mom, just like you.*

*It begins with a dragon prince, Lạc Long Quân, who ascends from the sea to explore the land and fight the many evils that plague Việt Nam. The story is*

*joined by an immortal fairy, Au Cồ, who descends from the heavens in her exhaustion. Somehow and somewhere, they fall in love. From them, a hundred eggs are hatched and their children are born. In their parting, Lạc Long Quân would take fifty to the sea and Au Cồ would take fifty to the mountains where her eldest son, Hùng Lân, would be the first King of the land.*

*The birth of the Vietnamese people.*

*This is our origin story and it comes easy.*

*But what does not come easy is the ending. For the ending is your beginning, Mom.*

*Ours.*

*To start that is hard, to say it is even harder, but you did it and I must do it and*

*the  
cycle  
continues...*

*- to my mother, and her lions, and her ghosts*

I begin this paper with my re-telling of the birth of the Vietnamese people in hopes that, before any story relating to người Kinh (Kinh people) is told, our origins are remembered beyond the tragedies enacted on us. That we are, in all of our glory and pieces and losses, human and *here*.

## **Introduction**

Memory plagues all wars and conflicts but this is especially true regarding the displacement of Vietnamese refugees with the legacy of war haunting them. In summoning the image of Vietnamese people in American culture, the public memory conjured is the tragedy of the war, expenses of the Americans, and the losses of the Vietnamese people. It is about the image of sheer destruction, the plight of the homeless refugees, and their entrance into American society.<sup>1</sup> There is an insurmountable barrier the American public places around remembering, one that refuses to include the Vietnamese unless they come in the strict binaries as living and dead, victim and enemy, tragedy and American dream. But people are complicated, people are full of desires and fears that shape how they remember their own and others. Interrogating who remembers what, how they remember, and what others see reveals the way power works in creating memory and shaping lives. Decades have gone by with Vietnamese people wrestling to have control over their own narratives and for the stories they tell to be centered. They have succeeded in producing art, literature, scholarship, and more that tell of their remembering in spaces they built on their own. The Vietnamese community in Southern California has used different mediums and methods to remember their past, including oral history, and over time, they have had their personal memories turned into public memory. These archives have become sites of knowledge for those interested in engaging with stories of refugees.

As Vietnamese American studies scholar Thúy Võ Đăng reminds us, “any discussions of Vietnamese American community and identity formations must grapple with the figure of the refugee as well as contend with the haunting presences of the Vietnam/American War.”<sup>2</sup> Even for newly arrived immigrants, the memory of war drifts across their image in America, tying them to the conflict in some way or form. Most importantly, there is the American manufacturing of the “good refugee,” as Yên Lê Espiritu terms, who find refuge in America and how, as Viet Thanh Nguyen expands on her ideas, the Vietnamese can parallel America’s method in turning “a true war story into a story of immigrants.”<sup>3</sup> Within that narrative includes how the first and second generation of Vietnamese Americans is embroiled in what Mimi Thi Nguyen calls the “gift of freedom,” where the Vietnamese are framed under circumstances that owe their “freedom” to the liberal empire, creating a debt that can never be repaid.<sup>4</sup> These phenomena complicate any remembering that the Vietnamese in America perform, suggesting we examine them with caution, understanding, and within a larger framework that argues for the acknowledgment of the humanity and agency of all those involved within the crossroads of loss and the power of the empire.

This paper seeks to join the ongoing dialogue of memory regarding the Vietnamese community in America and what lives in their remembering. How do the phenomena of “good refugee,” of the “immigrant America,” and the haunting of war play into the shifting narratives of “Little Saigon” in Southern California? What does the memory of “Little Saigon” narrated by Vietnamese Americans recounting their oral histories tell us? How does the loss of South Viet Nam impact these narratives? I examine the memory of “Little Saigon,” Orange County and how it is remembered by the individuals who lived there, largely of Vietnamese descent in Southern California. I question why memories of Little Saigon, and sometimes its history, are recalled in such a fashion that can be hopeful, bitter, or introspective. In analyzing the public memory of Little Saigon, I examine the political, social, and personal factors that influence Vietnamese Americans’ shared memories which include the war.

I argue that their memories contain a certain portrayal of “Little Saigon” in an arc of rebuilding and recuperation that is wrapped into the refugee journey. It is an act where Vietnamese Americans disremember elements, such as political events wrapped in controversy such as the Hi-Tek protest that divided the community or awful tragedies such as violent assassinations of journalists, of each other’s personal remembering with their retelling shifting upon their beliefs, ethics, and losses. They take pride in “Little Saigon” for its accomplishments in a way that helps them assimilate into an America that claims to have saved them. They mourn the remnants of South Viet Nam that may or may not be re-created or they turn away from the concept completely, influenced by this loss or grieving beyond it. In examining this dynamic, I find their engagement or non-engagement with the memory of “Little Saigon” is an active choice that objects to the idea that their personal

histories must revolve around “Little Saigon” and refuses their representation as a monolith of Vietnamese Americans in Southern California.

“Little Saigon” has been argued by scholars of Asian American Studies such as Christian Collet and Hiroko Furuyu to have become an “imagined political community.”<sup>5</sup> It has transformed over the years, grappling with violence, loss, rebuilding, political tension, triumphs, and the impact of being an epicenter of the largest Vietnamese refugee populations in America. The place has become a cultural touchstone that is integral to those of the identity and history of the Vietnamese American in Southern California. But not all stories are the same and not all are told the same, for the memories of Vietnamese Americans demonstrate a possible contention or parallel of America’s racial liberalism, a representation of the differences that challenge the monolith of Vietnamese Americans, a startling image of loss, and the conflicting narratives that trouble a singular story.

### **Notes on Methodology**

My own memories of “Little Saigon” are tinged with nostalgia. They are the product of a diasporic youth, awaiting the day the answers may come to her that will tell her where she belongs. She is both inside the community and outside, bound by a tenuous connection cultivated by a family who continues to sustain their culture through religion, food, traditions, and celebrations that oftentimes intertwine with “Little Saigon.” But she cannot read or write in Vietnamese—or even speak it beyond the elementary level despite her sharp ear for it. Like Ocean Vuong tells us in *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, her existence would not be possible without war, and it has demonstrated its cost. Her family has survived and lived through those years which has reverberated, but she has never been through what they have been through, and nor is she a refugee with a complicated memory. She is simply a Vietnamese American writer who never lived through the conflict that defines her history, community, and family. These are all things that reveal her shaky ties to the Vietnamese American community and make transparent the gaps in her knowledge and grasp. I navigate this tension by conceding that there is much to be found in Vietnamese scholarship that I cannot access, in Vietnamese stories that will never reach the hands of researchers or the public, and to note that what happens far from the eyes of the witness still happens.

This research draws heavily upon the extensive archives that UC Irvine’s Oral History Project curates. Begun in 2011, the Viet Stories: Vietnamese American Oral History Project at the University of California, Irvine run by Dr. Thúy Võ Đẳng and Dr. Linda Trinh Võ “actively assembles, preserves, and disseminates the life stories of Vietnamese Americans in Southern California.”<sup>6</sup> Training students in oral history, the project conducts the process of building an archive, in both Vietnamese and English full of Vietnamese American stories. They ask their interviewees a standard format of their memories of Việt Nam, the war, their journey, resettlement, experiences in Việt Nam and America, their ties to the community, and what they

hope to leave behind. I chose interviews with subjects who have spent significant time in or near the area and who mention, elaborate, or shortly brush up on the memory of “Little Saigon,” and I listened for their contradictions, complications, and crossovers. I paid attention, as well, to how they present themselves in an interview where they know people are listening to them beyond their family and beyond their community, even as those take front and center as their audience.

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*“The breeze is always perfect. How can that be? After all these years, all this time, you think that the summer breeze, the winter chill, the spring air, the gust of wind coming with fall is perfect. For nothing compares to what is here, what lives outside your memory and within.*

*Impossible. Innumerable. Immovable. You never escape what comes, the scent of fresh bread, the sweetness of sugarcane, and the ever-present flash of colors from the flowers blooming in the new year. The ones sprouting from hastily transported buckets and the ones stitched to the front of ao dai you can almost run your fingers over, feeling for the softness and distinctive texture. Eyes wandering over names, names of emperors, generals, and history reverberating, reclaiming. Fireworks. Feasts. Funerals. You remember it all, the sloping green arches of a mall, the snarling tigers made of stone, and you remember each time when you wake up from the memories. You know that what you remember is a contradiction, living, and breathing. You know that this is not all there is to it, that these memories are full and hollow. You are afraid to know what it means.*

*Are you dreaming? Are you remembering? What is yours, what is ours, what is theirs—are they not one and the same?*

*Remember again and—”*

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## **Section I: The Historical Context of the Việt Nam War, Diaspora, and “Little Saigon”**

The name of the Việt Nam War implies a singular entity, a war that belongs to one location and one history. But that is untrue. The war in Việt Nam was waged physically across three different countries, involving governments, states, civilians, dissenters, and extended far beyond the formal geographic boundaries of the conflict. It entangled South Korean soldiers, Filipino doctors and nurses, Chinese officials, Hmong agents, along with the familiar presence of the Americans and Vietnamese and countless more. The war had an unimaginable impact on a global scale, mapping out a decolonizing world while simultaneously sustaining the US empire by military expansion and its subsequent re-branding as a humanitarian mission.<sup>7</sup>

The end of the Việt Nam War created the largest diaspora of Vietnamese people outside of Việt Nam to this day and a particularly large number of them were directed to the U.S. When communist forces took hold of Saigon in 1975, the mass exodus of refugees associated with the Ameri-

can-backed government of South Việt Nam was the first wave, numbering around 130,000.<sup>8</sup> These individuals were mostly Western educated, military officials, scholars, soldiers, and their families. The subsequent generations in the 1980s, escaping or leaving, did so under extreme conditions as well—they were “boat people,” many of them ethnic Chinese, re-education camp prisoners, and fishermen. The third wave from 1989 to 1997 would consist of the remaining refugees that came through the Orderly Departure Program that prioritized family reunification, resettlement from the refugee camps, and more.<sup>9</sup> The fourth wave would be those brought by the 1990 expansion of the Immigrant Act of 1965, which brought “family sponsored, employment-based, and diverse immigrants.”<sup>10</sup> All four waves had the possibility of overlap, people that fit outside the narrow class, social, and economic background that defined the groups. Their journeys could vary in length and difficulty, and a significant number of them were plagued by violence and tragedy. A large population would remain in the refugee camps for years, enduring a sense of statelessness.<sup>11</sup>

Those who left for America had reasons that were complex and oftentimes obscured by the dominant narrative of the “Fall of Saigon” in 1975 that the U.S. government, American public, and refugees themselves propagate to this day. Refugees were not simply escaping a communist takeover but fleeing war, seeking economic opportunity, terrified of political retaliation, looking to reunite with family, suffering double displacement, or were caught up in the environment of the end of a chaotic war.<sup>12</sup> First generation Vietnamese refugee Sang Nguyen said in his interview with the UC Irvine Oral History Project that he fled as a child because of the “wars and violence,” and Alexander Linh Van Duong, another interviewee, mentioned he escaped for a better future, both of them mentioning the impact of war and specifically highlighting the spread of communism.<sup>13</sup> The refugee population was diverse, some would believe they would return, but many of them were resigned or hopeful that they would never come back to Việt Nam, trying to reconcile with loss and trauma from the war and displacement.<sup>14</sup>

After a while, the Vietnamese people in the U.S. would come to form a place that would be reminiscent of their Saigon. The U.S. government resettlement policy dispersed Vietnamese refugees all across the country.<sup>15</sup> But early Vietnamese refugees gravitated towards one another in hope and in survival, building businesses, neighborhoods, networks—congregating in places where a community could be born. Spaces would crop up in the U.S. that tied people together economically, but these spaces would reflect and shape them, socially, politically, and culturally.

Thus, the birth of “Little Saigon,” Orange County in Southern California.

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*—fall again.*

*As you grow older, you think about it more. The memory of a place that*

*doesn't belong to you. Your recall is wistful, and it's cruel, and it's cloudy. You think this place has betrayed you. (friction, conflict, violence, cruelty, greed, gaps, "america first!") You believe it has raised you. (laughter, language, celebration, sanctuary, knowledge, history, "we are here!") These memories are tailored as much as they are born naturally. They live within you.*

*Picture it. Picture you. Reach for all of it and find what comes.*

*You are arrogant in seeing in one way and you are wise to trust what is given to you. You have not even lived here, you fraud, you half memory, but still you are connected. These boundaries, of you, of your people and the city, are like running water, whittling away at what stands with time but present in every sense of the way. Memories, land, language—you watch them shift. You along with them.*

*You remember, you—*

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"Little Saigon" in Southern California remains the largest Vietnamese ethnic enclave in the United States. Since its gradual creation in the 1970s and subsequent expansion in Westminster and Garden Grove, the area has been home to generations of Vietnamese Americans, new and old. The space houses businesses, temples, community centers, memorials, and more, essentially a place that connects to and divides itself from Việt Nam, the homeland, continuously re-establishing transnational ties as both have transformed over the decades.<sup>16</sup> It was, and in many cases, still is known by its street name *Bolsa*, highlighting a complex intersection that follows identity and geography and the loose boundaries that come with a community based on ethnicity, tangled in nationhood and war.<sup>17</sup> The enclave contains three cities---Santa Ana, Garden Grove, and Westminster---places that are distinct yet tie themselves to the identification of Little Saigon.

After 1975, U.S. military camps would relocate Vietnamese refugees across the nation only for the subjects themselves to participate in secondary migration, seeking areas with more Vietnamese presence and the second wave bringing more people, including Vietnamese Chinese refugees. They would come to Orange County because of its appealing factors such as the "sizable Asian population, warm climate and relatively generous social services."<sup>18</sup> Camp Pendleton's proximity also helped funnel their relocation as did religious sponsors and the conservative populations that hoped to rectify the failure of the American intervention in the Viet Nam war.<sup>19</sup>

"Little Saigon's" history is littered with stories that speak of Vietnamese negotiation of their identity and place in American society. The stores and shops that line Bolsa Avenue run by Vietnamese were built on grassy lands and empty strawberry fields, giving them the image of starting from the ground up.<sup>20</sup> While these are truthful statements and with careful acknowledgement of the organization and community building that Vietnamese refugees have created out of necessity and with limited resources, these circumstances do lead to recurring narratives of struggles coming from nothing. The narratives end in a fruitful success that positions Vietnamese above others

in their “immigrant story.”<sup>21</sup> There are statues and memorials that remember the Viet Nam War in Westminster, marking it as a place that tells of their complicated history fraught with tension. At the heart of “Little Saigon,” lies a mall Phuoc Loc Tho, named “Asian Garden Mall,” where social events such as Tet, the annual Flower Festival, and the memorialization of “Black April,” are hosted, bringing people all over from the diaspora and tourists, non-Vietnamese included.<sup>22</sup> “Little Saigon” was built and populated by Vietnamese people seeking a place of sanctuary, memorialization, and economic security and their remembrance is unique and full of complication.

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*—stumble. Rise.*

*Green. The color of jade, underneath the glass counter where you sit.*

*Purple. The hue of the cut gemstone sitting in the center of the mall’s walkway. Red. The bright marker of luck, of new beginnings, and the fire of a new dawn. Yellow, for the flag. Orange, for the city. White, for the suburbs. Black and Gold, for the eyes of the lion. Rainbow, for a start, a catalyst, the pride in becoming, being, here, here!*

*What else can you do but shout to the heavens, sing through the air above the earth, whisper to the water that runs near your feet about the places that make you who you are. You let it take you.*

*“Away, away—”*

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## **Section II: The Role of “Little Saigon” in the Narrative**

The contrasting moniker and reductive misnomer of the “Việt Nam War” demonstrates that there was no sole way to view or remember the war for a variety of reasons. For even to some, it is known as the “American War” or the “Resistance War Against America.”<sup>23</sup> Each of their remembering contains something different, ways that have them recall the war from their own ethnicity, nationality, and ethics. Regardless of which name is used, their memory reveals costs that are not counted, losses obscured, and stories neglected.<sup>24</sup> For the U.S, their war refuses to memorialize the dead Vietnamese or those who survived but do not come in their rescue narrative. For Việt Nam, their national memory of the war overlooks the traumas and histories of South Việt Nam, the ones who lost the civil-war-turned-global.<sup>25</sup> It shows at least part of what takes place in the war over memory. In this tangled recollection, we see the roots of a remembering already plagued by what Media Studies scholar Marita Sturken terms a “war with a difficult memory” in all ways before we step into the memory of “Little Saigon.”<sup>26</sup>

Like Sturken does in her book *Tangled Memories* where she examines the politics of remembering regarding the Việt Nam War and the AIDS epidemic, I ask “not whether a memory is true but rather what its telling reveals about how the past affects the present.”<sup>27</sup> She tells us to look for how memory creates an understanding of culture and its indication of “collective desires, needs, and self-definitions.”<sup>28</sup> The journeys of Vietnamese Americans

within the decades that came after 1975 are told in terms of negotiation, of a remembering that is also about forgetting. Rather than a question of their validity, it is about revealing the stakes held “by individuals and institutions in attributing meaning to the past.”<sup>29</sup> Sturken’s work tells us that to follow how the memory is formed is to understand the weight behind it and the powers that shape it. Some narratives are recounted in ways that cross into the territory that Yên Lê Espiritu discusses in her article “The “We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose,” in rescue, liberation, and freedom. It is the specific rhetoric of the U.S. saving and welcoming Vietnamese people in a humanitarian mission so they can achieve the American Dream they never would have had in Việt Nam.<sup>30</sup> This is used to fuel the war machine of the US empire and deployed to win back the American losses and reputation produced by the Việt Nam War through the stories about Vietnamese refugees. Such a tactic is used by non-Vietnamese to place the Vietnamese in reductive models in order to reclaim U.S. identity and reap victories in rescued bodies from a defeat despite their loss. But while the Vietnamese are active and fluid figures who complicate and resist these narratives often, some of them do not subvert these constructions. This paper does not seek to equate stakes of Vietnamese refugees and U.S. government, media, and public memory in choosing to remembering these stories this way. Many Vietnamese have made choices out of survival, assimilation, mourning, and fear, and it is within this context that we can understand how this narrative can be used and deployed by more than the American people.<sup>31</sup>

The interviews that involve questions about “Little Saigon” are intertwined in the archive with ones about the local Vietnamese American community. The interviewers ask, “What do you think of Little Saigon? If you go regularly, what changes have you seen?” and “What are the most important things that future generations of Vietnamese Americans should remember about their heritage or history?”<sup>32</sup> These questions open for them to discuss their experiences with the Vietnamese community and how it plays in their larger narrative of their history and their collective memory. As the decades have passed, refugee nationalism has sustained itself by finding ways to build archives of remembering, complicated memoryscapes that reflect what haunts them, what their lives have become. But not everyone has the same memory in the same vein that they are not the same story told.

As works such as *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America* by Karin Aguilar-San Juan, *Becoming Refugee American: The Politics of Rescue in Little Saigon* by Phuong Tran Nguyen, and *The City Within* by Jennifer Hyunh tell us, “Little Saigon” is often treated as the place, by outsiders and insiders, where Vietnamese have achieved the monumental success and represent the American Dream.<sup>33</sup> It is with the connotation that they came here with nothing and built it from scratch, harkening to the myth put forth by the model minority and the “good refugee” who archives the ultimate success in America. “Little Saigon” can be treated as a former capital of a nation lost and where culture is preserved in this phenomenon.

Interviewed by a student to whom he offered a cup of Hennessy Cognac, Alexander Linh Van Duong is one of the people who lived across the United States but decided to settle in “Little Saigon” for its ease of access to Vietnamese dominated services and community. Regarded as one of the “boat people” in the ‘80s as said in his description, his journey was described as harrowing and “more dangerous, more complicated.”<sup>34</sup> When asked about “Little Saigon,” he reframes the memory of its development as a triumph of Vietnamese America, one that excels faster than the other “minorities.” He tells the interviewer that:

We are one of the minority groups that have been here... how shall I put this...we are very young in this community, yet we have developed a lot. We surpassed many other ethnic groups. We developed as you can see the whole little Saigon here in Westminster. We have a lot of business, a lot of lawyers, a lot of doctors, a lot of pharmacists. Business all over the place. We have one of the biggest communities. We are compared to other ethnic groups, like the Chinese or the Koreans, we are very young here in America.<sup>35</sup>

Duong conjures up “Little Saigon” in this recollection here to prove a productivity that is seemingly specific to the Vietnamese people with undertones that resonate with the model minority and American Dream. He pushes their economic mobility as proof of the success that can be “earned.” In doing so, he disremembers the struggles of the community early on, the ones that still plague the area today, and the difficulties of other ethnic communities to build their own places.<sup>36</sup>

As Duong expresses in the interview, he does not know his family’s history, inheriting scant details about his family’s situation and filling in the gaps with what he knows. In order to cope with the inherited losses that came with dissolution of South Việt Nam affecting his family that he mentions before and his continued displacement, he uses “Little Saigon” when recounting his presence in the United States in a way that makes up for those losses. He repeats that the reason his parents decided to leave Việt Nam was because they had lost their income in the war—not quite fleeing communism, but he knew who people left “because of the situation of home is not good. You growing up in a poor village, you try to survive, day to say, try to live day to day, and basically, that’s the situation of your kids.”<sup>37</sup> He had been told that everyone who came before to America was in a better situation and those were the stakes his family came on, a better life that would be worth the cost, or in this case, a 43-day journey on the sea.

Duong’s memory of “Little Saigon” serves as evidence to his later words regarding the economic mobility he believes that everyone can access. When asked by the interviewer in a wrap up if there was anything he would like to share “cus this is going to be for everyone,” Duong says there is

“there is no excuse for you not to succeed” because of America’s equal opportunities.<sup>38</sup> He considers America to be where even if one is not rich, they could be well off enough to live happily with the success. The follow up to that question is just as revealing. Asked if there were any messages he wants to leave for his children that the interviewer claims that they will hear later in life, Duong directly addresses them by name, telling them to work hard with the same mentality that apparently made the Vietnamese exceptional in their development of “Little Saigon.”

One thing to note is the comfort in which he did these interviews, in his own home in Westminster and with a student who was his brother’s friend. This gives a different setting to the interview, as both informal and formal, the answers wavering in between. It shapes how Duong speaks about his memories, leaving some personal information out with the understanding that a public will view it but offering more because of the intimacy of relationships in shaping the recall. Sturken defines cultural memory as “a field of cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history.”<sup>39</sup> Embedded into their negotiation with the legacy of U.S. imperialism in their stories is an anti-communism praxis that the “Little Saigon” in Orange County is partially built on, physically and emotionally. Vietnamese American scholar and writer Viet Thanh Nguyen writes that in order to reconcile with what Vietnamese refugees lost, to think about survival, they can sometimes forget “a true war story,” one with the intersections of the cost of war, in order to remember a flattened immigrant story, one that takes a trajectory upwards from a state of desolation in order to become a staple of American culture.<sup>40</sup> They can transform their narrative from the horrors of war to one that obscures the racialization of refugee in favor of immigration that instills the possibility of the “American Dream.” They funnel into America’s public memory crafted by the “good refugee” and are transformed by their entrance into American society that is the Western presentation of success, a triumph of capitalism, a debt of freedom, and indictment of communism.<sup>41</sup>

Part of the 1.5 generation, another interviewee, Quynh-Trang Nguyen echoes the same sentiments expressed by Alexander Linh Van Duong. Interviewed in her home by a Vietnamese student, she speaks about moving back and forth over the states after coming to Camp Pendleton in 1975 only to re-settle in Orange County. As a co-founder for “Little Saigon” TV and Radio, she has witnessed the community fluctuate and grow over time, saying:

I think the Vietnamese American community in Little Saigon has come a long way. Before 1975, you know, Westminster was a dump, seriously. And because of the Vietnamese Americans, the economy has been boomed ever since. The real estate value has gone up, the economy... just everything in general. So I think Vietnamese community here has done a great job. And compared to other ethnic groups that have been here the same amount of time, I think the Vietnamese

Americans has done a tremendous job.<sup>42</sup>

She emphasizes the “same time frame” of other ethnic groups, again measuring the progress of the community against others. Her journey was different from Alexander Linh Van Duong, but the interviewer’s field notes document that she spoke fondly of her father, whom was a political prisoner, becoming emotional when he was mentioned. His incarceration shaped her childhood. She still remembers how children made fun of her for having a father in prison and he had made an impact on her life by being the main supporter for the family when they left Việt Nam. Nguyen retains the fact that her journey to America was a lucky one and her humiliating loss of possessions, status, and home was painfully earned back.<sup>43</sup> In her narrative of recuperation, she recalls “Little Saigon” with a history that speaks of a sense of dignity that needed to be regained which was taken in Việt Nam by the communist takeover. It is worth noting Nguyen complicates the narrative of the Vietnamese being rampant anti-communists. Instead, she has an open stance regarding the political tension that plagues “Little Saigon,” a tension that has been influenced by vicious anti-communism, pro-democracy that leans far right that conflicts with a various spectrums contrasting political and social views. She strives for a dialogue despite her staunchly believing in American interventions in the efforts to stop the spread of communism.<sup>44</sup>

Huy Bui, who arrived in 1978 when he was sixteen, talked briefly about how he thought “Little Saigon” developed. In a quick back and forth with the interviewer he elaborates shortly:

**Khang Nguyen:** What do you think about Little Saigon?

**Huy Bui:** I think we are growing and we are better usually. We used to look like China Town. Dirty, you know how dirty it is. Now Little Saigon is more cleaner so I’m very proud of it.

**Khang Nguyen:** Does it make you think of home when you go to Little Saigon?

**Huy Bui:** Oh yeah, oh yeah. Every New Year, you go out there and you think it’s just like Vietnam.<sup>45</sup>

Consistent with the beginning of his interview where he mentions that his children are lucky to live in America, he regards “Little Saigon” as a place that has progressed into something that should be celebrated for its evolution overtime and as a reminder of Việt Nam. In the field notes written by Khang Nguyen, the student who interviewed him, he elaborates how Huy Bui chose not to engage with memories of the war too in depth because of the painful reminders of his losses. Bui had family members who fought on both sides and against each other, bringing charged emotions to the interview. Because of where Bui lived, his experiences under the regime, he harbors anti-communist sentiments that lowers his opinion of Việt Nam in its current state. Thus in turn, he remains open to a shifting interpretation of

the memory of “Little Saigon,” a place that developed into something like Việt Nam but better and more worthy of pride because it is in America. Bui acknowledges the growth of “Little Saigon” to be a work in progress that can be used as a destination and stand in for Việt Nam. He remains politically active with the hope that he can organize with the youth in order to rid Việt Nam of communism, harkening back to a loss he pinpoints as the dissolution of the democratic South Viet Nam. These three oral histories point to a certain perspective of “Little Saigon,” one that strives to be manufactured by anti-communism and a recovery of South Viet Nam through the creation of this ethnic enclave, through different perspectives.

I follow in the footsteps of scholars like Tiểu-Khê Lê who choose to move past the all-encompassing perception of the Orange County’s Vietnamese Americans as wholly “conservative, aging anti-communists” and instead, “a community that moves, shifts, changes, and navigates its traumas and measures of recuperation in ways that complicate both the Vietnamese American community and the Vietnam War narrative.”<sup>46</sup> These oral histories demonstrate the multifaceted reasons that influence their perspectives, not quite falling in the strict binaries expected but still giving rise to a pattern of recuperation of loss and polarizing attitudes about the enclave’s success. At the same time, the archive of oral histories provides many examples of individual interpretations that defy this singular view.

Huy Truong Tran gave his interview in the Winter of 2012, identifying as a 1.5 generation Vietnamese American who teaches math and lives in Anaheim, a place that is in close proximity to “Little Saigon.” Offering his home to the interviewer, he retells his history with his spouse and two children present. He describes how integral the place is to him and his identity as well as others.

I think it’s great. I’m proud that we have that little area and how it has developed over the years. It has become almost like a cultural icon for this area. Now of course, the traffic is crazy, the people are crazy. You know you go into stores, they don’t stand in line, they push they shove. People drive recklessly. But there is something charming about all that. I love that area. Do I want to live in the middle of it? No. But yeah, I like Little Saigon, it’s a part of me. It’s me.<sup>47</sup>

Tran considers the place to be a part of him and his identity. “Little Saigon” has undergone steady change and while he has small qualms about the area, he is proud to watch it become important to the Vietnamese culture in Southern California. He also mentions the Hi-Tek Protest in 1999, a fairly decisive event, in a follow up question about the Vietnamese American community. But unlike other depictions, he keeps to an optimistic view point on reconciliation:

Little Saigon not big enough for everybody to get what they want. You have situations like that, the video store owner put up the picture of Ho Chi Minh. That kind of things tore the community apart. But then at the end it kind of brought everybody back. So, I have seen the community very tight knit, then being very fragmented, but at this point I think we are in a pretty good place. I think for the most part we are the younger generation, growing up becoming leaders in the community. I think younger people, we have learn to be more democratic, to be more cooperative, we are more into group dynamics.<sup>48</sup>

In this part of the interview, Tran tracks the change in the community which he thinks is important. He believes that despite the fundamental political tension within “Little Saigon,” it is at the end, a community worthy of a bright future. The cultural place that belongs to him and others can be divided but also united, willing to come together. It is consistent with the rest of his interview, his acknowledgement of the memory of “Little Saigon” as something that can be deemed worthy of reconciliation, just like the perception of his journey to America from Việt Nam.

Even among variations to the 1.5 generations, there are similar responses. A parallel to the memory above comes from Vu Nguyen, a self-identified 1.5 Vietnamese American who was born in Orange County and not in Việt Nam. He grew up in “Little Saigon,” forging memories of the place that tied him to the community despite his relocations across the country. This “Little Saigon” is all he knows and is his representative of the Vietnamese American community, believing it to be:

...going and getting stronger and stronger every year. What I've learned about our people is that we're really goal driven. As you can see in Little Saigon, the Vietnamese took over Garden Grove and Westminster. Everyone is doing successful, not everyone, but most of us. You know you can see the families eating good and all the kids are taken care of real well. Going to college, all the big colleges here you can see full Vietnamese.<sup>49</sup>

Unlike the others, Vu Nguyen is a child of refugees, not a refugee himself. He reaches for the memory of “Little Saigon” differently pertaining to his specific experiences. Nguyen has only visited Việt Nam once when he was twelve and the strong impression his father gave him from all the stories about Việt Nam and the war is that the U.S. was a good place to be. The war cost his family in terms of rebuilding and he says to the interviewer that he wants that message to be passed down, that his parents “went through a lot.”<sup>50</sup> It is alluded that his father, who he cares much about, suffered during his time in war. He

does not elaborate in the interview and nor does he touch upon other family events considering their ties to organized crime.

Nguyen has witnessed the younger generation of Vietnamese Americans expand and celebrate their heritage, making the place of “Little Saigon” almost “like Vietnam.” But he considers it to be better and when recounting his last thoughts, he wants it to be known that the poor infrastructure he remembers when he visited Viet Nam is representative of the luckiness in being here in America.<sup>51</sup> He does not consider the state of Viet Nam to be still reconciling with the post-conditions of war and doubles down on attributing “Little Saigon” in the United States to the hard work of the people here. Acknowledging the continual cost of the war on Viet Nam itself could possibly, in his perspective, invalidate the trauma that his family went through and oppose his father’s viewpoint which he inherited. Nguyen demonstrates an inherited recuperation of loss that haunts, sustains, divides, and builds the Vietnamese American community.

But the narratives of Vietnamese Americans are diverse and complicated, fluid and varied because the Vietnamese population in Southern California embody these descriptions. They have their own agency and individual responses to different circumstances. Some believe in a full recuperation, others a partial one, and some believe it to be a total loss, reflecting how they assume a collective memory tailored to their own individual remembering.

Dan The Le, a refugee from the first wave who left by boat in 1977 expressed in his interview a starkly different belief that the community was not a sign of strength or home. He considers the entire place, and by extension, the Vietnamese American community in Southern California and beyond, to be not so grand or a culture worth preserving, mentioning that

Our culture is so pathetic and so little, nothing, it just wait just long. The Chinese have a billion people so when they have...the Chinese refugee, there’s a lot out there to support in term of economic, in term of...in term of business so it survive. But for Vietnamese, I think 50 years from now, the Bolsa would be gone, all these Vietnamese, retarded old people die and then... then what? It’ll be gone. And again, I don’t think we have that strong of a tradition to be entertain, to be excited, we are, we will be known for the war, as the victim of the war, the conflict between the Americans or the free world versus the communist you know.<sup>52</sup>

To him, the narrative of war is so deeply intertwined and embedded in Vietnamese culture that it cannot be salvaged. He uses ableist comments to describe the Vietnamese culture that will “die out” because of the seemingly irreversible “damage of the Vietnam War.” He does not explicitly say “Little Saigon” but references the area in accordance with the way others do as *Bolsa*, and offers the memory of the place forward as an example of its failure to be

a cultural touchstone or monument. He judges the Vietnamese community for their visceral behavior in the Hi-Tek protest, calling them “crazy” for reacting to the picture of “Uncle Ho” (Ho Chi Minh) being put up.<sup>53</sup> He goes on to say he does not care about altars of worship like “Uncle Ho” is presented on and instead considers it a freedom of choice. Le does not strongly identify with the community he lives near and distances himself for a contrast in values, including the lack of pride in the culture and negative opinion of the community itself. He mentions growing up in Connecticut instead of California for a time and is grateful for that because otherwise he would have turned out to be “gangster” because unlike the other interviews, he regards California as a place only good for weather and certainly not the Vietnamese community based in “Little Saigon.”<sup>54</sup>

Throughout the interview, he constantly degrades and mocks Vietnamese culture while simultaneously pitying and having pride for Vietnamese people for surviving colonialism. He recites the history of Việt Nam that he was educated in and for example, argues instead of *một ngàn năm đô hộ*,<sup>55</sup> he believes Việt Nam had no culture to begin with before colonization. Le does not consider any Vietnamese tradition or mythology to be of value because they are “nothing great” and still in the “dark ages” which he shrugs off at the idea of passing onto his kids. (It is noted that he would highly disagree with the story of the Kinh people I told in the beginning, explicitly saying that it is nothing to be proud of to believe in Hung Vương, the king who came from the one hundred eggs, and that it was as ridiculous as the Virgin Mary birthing Jesus.<sup>56</sup>) Much of the internalized shame and criticism that borders on anti-Vietnamese sentiment seems to come from the pro-American culture and history stance he assumes. When reciting the aftermath of the Việt Nam War that brought refugees to Orange County, Le brings up the American Civil War and the idea that the South was still respected after the war was over. For Southern Việt Nam and those associated with the nation, there seems to be no room for dignity left. His beliefs and ethics shape the memory of “Little Saigon,” where he molds it to reflect his anti-Vietnamese sentiment and the superiority of the lasting American culture.<sup>57</sup>

Whereas Le sees Vietnamese culture both in the US and in Việt Nam as unworthy of saving, others engage with the memory of “Little Saigon” differently, by emphasizing the distance between “Little Saigon” and the nation she was born in. Bùi Bích Hà who left Việt Nam in 1985 worked in “Little Saigon.” In her interview that she recalls with her curving Huế dialect to Dr. Thuy Võ Đặng, she insinuates that the culture of Việt Nam can be passed down with difficulty, but she does not consider “Little Saigon” or Việt Nam itself to be anything resembling a true Việt Nam for those to find home in. She says in her closing interview after being asked about Việt Nam that she:

...only wish that we would be able to build a little Vietnam overseas complete with dignity, culture and moral value. I

would be peacefully close my eyes. We need a community, a little Vietnam overseas. My dream would come true when that happens. Otherwise, we would just be the exiled people living in a place where we do not know what our position is, and we could not see the result of our works. That's the painful part.<sup>58</sup>

Contrary to interviews or news articles that believe that “Little Saigon” as a place to reclaim nationhood, Bui does not see it the way in the development of her history. She mourns the fact that there is no place that allows this reclamation of nation that she knows and will likely never be in her lifetime. Before August of 1945, her father was “ranked one of the fourth wealthiest in the whole country” and was tied to the French business.<sup>59</sup> She mentions the life that she lived before the revolution was paradise, albeit mixed with the power struggle of her father's wives. The affection for her idyllic past is evident in her tone, fondly recounting to her interviewer in a gentle voice about her happiest times. Her legacy of her family's wealth and location changed drastically in the mid-century and subsequent decades, which may contribute to the fact that she does not view this area as Viet Nam as others do. The diverse economic status of refugees can hardly measure up to the sheer amount of wealth and lifestyle that Bui's family retained, something that did not reflect the majority of Vietnamese people at the time, including the peasantry class that waged most of the war. The displacement and social, political, economic upheaval of her homeland may do the act of altering her memories of a location that may never be resurrected. To her, the possibility is gone. It is a total loss linked to her significant change in conditions.

Other interviews may not wholly subvert the narrative of success and “good refugee,” but neither do their stories support the memory of “Little Saigon” as a one dimensional cultural hub in their histories. For the interviews that do not explicitly mention “Little Saigon,” they are because the interviewers do not ask them at all or do not elaborate on them, both sides of the table participating in this choice not to discuss the community in the interview. However, the memories of the enclave still do find their way into the stories in different forms. When asked about the Vietnamese Community in Orange County or the local community, the interviewees bring up Westminster, Garden Grove, and Santa Ana, and their involvement or non-involvement with activities in the area.<sup>60</sup> These places are largely implied to be “Little Saigon,” and while the place itself is something that these interviewees do not deem essential to their story, the presence is important enough to be felt in the interviews. Sometimes they mention it in order to distinguish how they refuse to be part of the politics, or briefly cover the food there, or gloss over the events of New Year.<sup>61</sup> They have threads of memories in common, a collective memory, and their choice in bringing the memory into the interviews or not and what lives in their remembering is shaped by their politics, ethics, and values.

For the Vietnamese people who bring their own remembering to the interview, understanding is crucial and what they leave for the audience is important. It is the way that they mold the public memory of “Little Saigon,” seeing it as a successful ethnic enclave that adds to their transformed story that embodies the narrative of the American Dream. It is also the contrary way others see it as a total loss, bringing an understanding of their community as multifaceted. A wide variety of Vietnamese Americans remember “Little Saigon” with fondness, degradation, nostalgia, grief, pride, and ambivalence, complicating the public memory of the ethnic enclave. They remember in a way that reveals what is forgotten, what they choose to forget, and what the stakes are in their remembering that can be different.

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*“To you, to them, to what is housed in your mind, it will stay but it will grow. It will expand.*

*Authenticity is violence. Authenticity is callous. Authenticity is false, a barometer with a judge that does not have the right to dictate who we are. You will not stand for it.*

*Change is coming, change has always been coming. You just have not seen it in such a way that speaks to you. You must learn to listen and speak again—the way of the world and how it turns. The memories are gone, here, and scattering themselves through the winds.*

*You must find it.”*

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### **Conclusion**

The memory of “Little Saigon” is simultaneously a nebulous yet tangible thing against all odds, wound up in different meanings because of those who draw upon the memory. The memories vary wildly, sometimes overlapping with one another and other times, differing so much they present themselves in a binary. While some interviewees take part in the memory of the simplistic perception of an ethnic enclave on the rise, others have a more complicated remembering shaped by their own ethics, traumas, and understandings of life.

We see how the Vietnamese present themselves to an audience, sometimes to Dr. Thúy Võ Đãng, who is directly referenced as a keeper of the project, giving importance to their words that may not be considered or welcomed by outsiders. They are interviewed by students, sometimes Vietnamese and sometimes not, but many of them are young archive producers that the Vietnamese feel the need to impart their wisdom or experiences on. They shape their responses based on their audience; one of the interviewers may be privy to knowledge that could be otherwise excluded if not for the Vietnamese influence of the project and one of the larger digital archives that are supposed to be for the study of scholars. The memory of “Little Saigon” is chosen to be remembered based on their own experiences and own personal

beliefs, a recalling rooted in the recuperation of loss, the belief that a future is possible, the idea that they are not solely a war story but an immigrant story, or the separation of their identity and politics that “Little Saigon” seems to evoke.

These memories tell us a whole host of things, including that the legacy of war, especially the Việt Nam war, haunts the Vietnamese community in Southern California and their lives and that displacement plays a significant factor in identity. It lingers in the way they view and reclaim their culture or in the case of some, believe that the culture is lost.<sup>62</sup> The memory of “Little Saigon” for Vietnamese living in or near the area is how they assert their dignity, claim a part of a political community, or choose to stand apart from it. It tells us that even the memory of a cultural community is embroiled within complication and whether that is good or bad falls short in recognizing the humanity and inhumanity contained in the power of our remembering and how power itself shapes the past and the present.

Like Karla Cornejo Villavicencio in her groundbreaking work in *The Undocumented Americans*, I tried to build foundations and connections that reveal the stakes in Vietnamese Americans’ collective memory in a way that respects their autonomy. Her efforts to tell complex stories from undocumented Americans mirror the efforts of the UC Irvine Viet Stories archive whose curators chose students that entered the homes of their interviewees, respected their space, and often times, came from similar backgrounds of their Vietnamese subjects. The project is handled by recognizable names in the local Vietnamese American community and held intentions reminiscent of the “shared trauma, shared memory, and shared pain” that Villavicencio wrote from in order to uplift the stories that she always knew were spoken over.<sup>63</sup>

These acts of remembering tell us that our existence, those who identify as Vietnamese in America, will never be simple, but it does not mean this dilemma or circumstances are all we are. Our memories are complicated as the act of living is. They are honed by the expansion of empires, intricately wound up in the process of nation building, and polished by our own ethics and beliefs. They can also be everything that lives in between those polarizing extremes and simply be a way to recall the things that are important or not important to us, refusing the homogenized remembering ascribed onto us.

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*“So. Have you stopped dreaming? Are you awake now? You think you are. But you tend not to believe what you see anymore. You are a single wheat in a wheatfield, making sense of the endless stories you cannot consume all at once. The being that is impossible to define. When have you ever made sense?”*

*When have you, when the cluttered history of you and your people are like the sea that was crossed to bring you here, forever pushing and pulling and prone to rising and falling by the turn of the tide. You are, you are, like many contradictions lost and found in the crossroads of the complication. What is in your remembering?”*

*The answer is:”*

*A way forward.*

*And a way to dream, for we must reach backwards to cast a line out in the deep, in hopes of luring, building, and imaging a future where we are all free.*

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## Meet the Authors

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**Michelle Lê** is a second-year American Studies graduate student with a B.A. in History and minor in Ethnic Studies from UCSD. She loves telling stories, working with school age students, and terrifying herself with the idea she must create to exist. She will be churning out a thesis about Vietnamese American Youth Literature in 2022 so that she can do her grandparents proud before they, as they both like to joke, “change addresses” = pass away. Please stay tuned and tip her as she makes her exit into the unknown challenge of life and further demands of adulthood.

**Michelle Okawa** is a third-year American Studies graduate student. She completed her undergraduate work at California State University, Long Beach, where she received a BA in Asian American Studies and a minor in Film & Electronic Arts. Her research interests include: race & ethnicity with an emphasis in Asian American studies, film & television, and popular culture. After graduating, she hopes to teach ethnic studies at the college-level. Michelle has a penchant for lo-fi music, which has been a great source of comfort for her during late nights researching and writing. Michelle is fourth-generation Japanese American and credits her grandparents for instilling values of hard work and *gaman* (perseverance).

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## Meet the Authors (continued)

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