DO YOU KNOW IF WOODEN BIRDS CAN FLY?

WRITINGS ON INTERGENERATIONAL ASIAN AMERICAN TRAUMA AND ACTIVISM

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The Asian American Youth Storytellers (AAYS) project began as a way to bring together a cohort of six young Asian American artists. There was a need to carve out a space to discuss and explore the ways in which intergenerational trauma and colonialism had impacted various beats of our lives. How have imperialism and colonialism impacted our Asian American experience, present, future and past? This project explores the answers to this question in multiple mediums.

As our work and art evolved over the four months, we discussed what title could encompass the magnitude of research, art and experiences we have come to create. During our discussions, one of our cohort members Ayize recalled how his grandmother brought wooden birds from her homeland on her migration to the United States. Combined with our inspiration from the question Maya Angelou posed, “Do you know if the caged bird sings?”, we have chosen the title “Do you know if wooden birds can fly?” for this publication.

“So you know if wooden birds can fly?” is the question that represents how we — as the wooden birds, as Asian Americans — forge our paths. Can we, as the wooden birds, strip away the ways in which our intergenerational trauma has impacted us? Are we meant to strip away this trauma in order to fly? Are we destined to fly or are we meant to be weighed down and remain on the ground? Do you know if wooden birds can fly?

— Thet-Htar Thet
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Cover artwork by Ahnali Tran
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www.AsianAmericanYouthStorytellers.com
Ayize James

Although the place I call home is San Francisco and the East Bay, I’m falling for the Twin Cities after about a year of living in Saint Paul and attending Macalester College. I don’t consider myself an artist by any stretch of the word but I find opportunities to be creative in my cooking, my clothing, and my writing (as much as I can). I’m fascinated about environmental racism and hope to find vocation at the intersection of racial and environmental justice. I bare a lot of curiosity toward cities and in particular the relationship that cities have to being mixed-race and to being queer, both of which are identities that I hold and I’m constantly trying to understand better. Right now my work is at the Metropolitan Council in their Equity Unit to hopefully steer regional governance and planning toward acknowledging and eliminating structures of prejudice and discrimination that dehumanize women, people of color, disabled communities, poor people, and queer people. Another meaningful part of my life is working as an editor for a students of color-driven arts and culture publication called SPACES. I have a lifelong passion for chasing birds and a severe aversion to flossing (I only do it because I’m scared my mom would find out if I didn’t).

Follow me at ayeezy.peezy (IG) or email me @ ajames3@macalester.edu.

Hannah Soundrarajan

Hannah Soundrarajan is a writer, activist, and youth worker. Her work centers around the South Asian diaspora experience, and exploring our complicated relationships with simple things.

You can find Hannah on Instagram with the handle @soundrahan.
Thet-Htar Thet

Thet-Htar Thet is a writer, educator and activist originally from Yangon, Myanmar. Now based in St. Paul, Thet-Htar has used her experience and identity to explore the creative non-fiction genre. She was a finalist in the Creative Non-Fiction Category for the Loft Mentor series, has served as a community editor for the St. Paul Almanac, and was selected to be an Asian American Youth Storytellers researcher. She is a board member of LOCUS, an organization whose mission is to provide space, connection, and opportunities for authentic community building, identity-driven leadership, and resource sharing - by and for people of color and indigenous peoples. Her work can be found in publications such Jungle Azn and St. Paul Almanac. She is currently at work on a collection of personal essays.

Ahnali Tran

My name is Ahnali Tran, I am a mixed Vietnamese American artist based in the Twin Cities. I am a gallery assistant at my family's gallery, the Dow Art Gallery. I will be an upcoming visual arts senior at the Perpich Center for Arts Education in the fall of 2019. My artwork is reflective of my interests in mixed-race activism and explores many mediums to illustrate that. I work primarily with ink and oil paint, especially painting on surfaces such as plexiglass and other unconventional surfaces. My works are often portraits, whether of a person or the objects that they interact with. I find that storytelling and the expression of otherwise silenced narratives from my diaspora is very important amidst the shift from first generation to second and onwards.

You can view my work at tranahnali.wixsite.com/arts and @tranworks on Instagram.
Xais Nathan Vang

My name is Xais Nathan Vang and I am a mixed Hmong and Lao Twin Cities based artist. I am a recent graduate of Perpich Center for Arts Education. I create work around my identities and the internal and external effects of those identities. My artworks include the amalgamation of both visual and literary art. I create portraits piecing together people and objects of relation to the person, with the synthesis of poetry.

You can view my art at xaisnvang.wixsite.com/mysite or @uglyneeds on Instagram.

Seng Xiong

Seng Xiong is a second generation Hmong American residing in New Brighton, MN who identifies as queer (they/them) and a bodyworker. Having served professionally as a massage therapist for a year, they seek to provide accessible care for underserved and underrepresented people. Their practices center those most marginalized at the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality and more in addressing pain that is often stored within the human body. It is their hope to promote generational healing that can occur in the ways that historical trauma is passed through this service of health and wellness.

In their free time, they enjoy video gaming, dancing, painting, singing, and exploring the world of makeup and fashion. Follow Seng on Instagram @scspeak.
Facilitators

Tori Hong

Tori Hong is an illustrator, zine-maker, consultant and facilitator with roots in community organizing & (inter)personal healing/ transformation. Their work centers queer and trans Asian Americans and the ways we relate to ourselves, the natural world, and each other. Tori is based in Minneapolis, MN.

You can find Tori’s work online at www.ToriHong.com and on Instagram @Tori-Hong.

Khin Oo

Despite her far-flung Southeast Asian roots, Khin is a true Midwesterner at heart who loves fishing at the cabin and consuming dairy products. Her only social media account is a Goodreads. She has spent the past decade experimenting with film photography. She is happiest when she has no plans but to stare at her husband.

You can find her online at khinoo.com and in person at the arcade.
Ayize James

Introduction:
About fifteen years before my maternal grandmother wrapped wooden birds in cloth and left her homeland, my paternal grandmother met a man in Chicago. She had escaped the internment of her people to attend college there, a stray yellow face crossing the imposing black and white borders of a city segregated. She told her family: an abusive father, a picture-bride mother, seven brothers and sisters that she had met a man and he was Black. All but one brother disowned her for rupturing the racial division. The division that became a mandate from the government, the mandate to be white or to disappear. She broke the mandate of whiteness in the segregated city of Chicago and would eventually have kids, half Black, half Japanese American and raise them in the city of San Francisco. One of her sons would meet a Chinese and Indonesian woman and have me. As a multiracial person, holding all of my identities has been a complicated and continual part of my life. Being mixed race gives me power because I'm disruptive. I disrupt the “neat” racial borders that the socialization and institutionalization of white supremacy has placed on my peoples. I disrupt the idea that my body and bodies that have been categorized like mine are “repulsive and averse to every sentiment of pure American spirit”1. It’s both a project and a way of being. This piece and my paper in the zine indulges this curiosity, the geographies of mixed race people and our families. Multiracial people interact with racialized spaces, specifically cities, really differently than monoracial people and that’s interesting to me. Before you is an exploration of that interest through literature and interviews, approaching spatial insights into an increasingly multiracial world.

Theory and Thesis:
Although I’m hoping to write a paper that decolonizes the idea of a standard research paper, I did want to preface by discussing the theoretical basis for exploring this topic. I’m hoping the paper will integrate empirical scholarly research in geography and mixed-race studies with my three interviews. The main theory that I engage and complicate is the idea that spaces are racialized2. By adapting Henri Lefebvre’s theory that space is produced by society and power3, scholar Eugene McCann makes the case that urban American space is racially produced. He breaks this down using Lefebvre’s triangle diagram, where space is represented through plans and diagrams, imagined through art and vision, and practiced by people in our daily lives4. In his argument, however, space is socially produced by and for people of different races, through mechanisms of governance, legislation, enforcement, social attitudes, and sometimes liberatory practice. Through this paper, I argue that in racialized spaces—from segregated neighborhoods in cities to upscale coffee shops—mixed-race people are really disruptive to the distinct lines and rules that a space is for a person of a specific race, which often intersects with identities like class, gender, and sexuality. That disruption is what I will refer to in this paper as the geographies of mixed-race people (or mixed-race geographies). I make the case that the construction of multiracial identity is intimately connected to family, space, and urban geography. Through these connections I’ve found that multiracial people are disruptive and often deconstructive to racial logics.
Background:
Metropolitan regions are the focal point of my research because people of color occupy the greatest share of the population in urban areas. Cities are key sites of racial formation and racialization for a multitude of reasons and continue to be centers for migration and clustering for people designated as “nonwhite” throughout American history. A Pew Research Center Report in 2017 reporting on the trends in interracial marriage found that in 2015, 18 percent of new marriages were interracial in metropolitan areas, as opposed to 11 percent of marriages outside of metros. This contrast can largely be attributed to the disparate racial makeup of most urban and nonurban populations, with people of color concentrated in urban areas.

An important contradiction that my research highlights is around the idea of racial diversity, and the often problematic idea that cities are racially diverse or heterogeneous spaces. Racial diversity in cities is a curious thing to me because it assigns a number of political meanings and contradictions to the city itself. Socially, cities are sites for political progressivism despite harboring the greatest inequality along racial and economic lines. Despite housing the majority of the United States’ people of color, cities are the sites in which policies and social attitudes and incubated and refined to further systematic, institutionalized racism. America’s urban racial memory is comprised of racial-residential segregation through redlining, blockbusting, and restrictive covenants, divestment and disruption by governments brought upon communities of color (most notably through urban renewal), and gentrification. For reference, I define gentrification as a racial and class-based system of forced neighborhood change whereby governments and developers invest in formerly disinvested neighborhoods (low income and nonwhite) to the benefit of incoming residents of primarily white middle- to upper-class backgrounds, often resulting in systematic displacement and derailment of marginalized peoples. Mixed race people push back on the idea that spaces like neighborhoods are diverse, because mixed-race households can access or be denied from neighborhoods differently than monoracial households based on the racial and class backgrounds of the household, as well as the neighborhood and city at large.

The Interviews:
For me, conducting the interviews was a really transformative experience of both learning about the incredible stories of other mixed-race Asian Americans, but also an affirmation of how wild and confusing my own multiracial existence is. Solidarity in the weirdness and the pain that we hold is a really meaningful thing, and while I can’t speak for my interviewees, I’m really grateful to have had the opportunity to have been a part of that space. Here are some key themes that came up across all of my interviews:

• the idea of balancing queerness in our mixed-ness and finding that they can often complement each other
• how our food is a mix of our cultures
• the love that we feel from our parents that’s often mixed with melancholy that they don’t always understand us
• finding ourselves in college
• a constant reconciliation between our identities and the spaces we’re in
Do I Count as a Diverse Neighborhood?

City spaces were critical in different ways to each of my interviewees and how they feel about their mixed identities. My first interviewee, spent the majority of their childhood in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago. Hyde Park, which they describe as one the most diverse middle-class neighborhoods in Chicago, provided them what they call “ambient diversity”. Growing up in an environment where everyone was a different color and where everyone was coexisting made a lot of sense to them, as a kid growing up neurodivergent to a white mom and a Korean-Indigenous American dad. Their neighborhood helped them feel normal, not only in their non-whiteness, but their mixed-ness, neurodivergence, and queerness. This point really struck me and pushed me to think about how the spaces of our childhood can be critically important to helping us—and our families—build identities that aren't just constructed out of oppression or trauma. Place was a key variable for them. They describe the fact that their parents had settled in Hyde Park as an extremely intentional choice born out of the really common fears that caretakers have when raising mixed children. These fears can be around social exclusion from one partner’s community, often evident in the alienation of the other partner and sometimes children, as well as the fear of raising a kid in one cultural context over others, which can lead to them not being able to identify as well with one or more of their racial identities. Studies conducted by a number of scholars on the geographies of mixed-race households found that interracial couples seek diverse and progressive neighborhoods like Hyde Park in seeking acceptance and community for their family and often their multiracial children. In some ways mixed-race families bring diverse backgrounds at the household level, which can affect the way a neighborhood is perceived both around internal judgements within the neighborhood as well as the outward racial presentation of the neighborhood. For a multiracial kid, growing up in a diverse space can often be beneficial in that they aren't put in comfortable positions as the obvious racial “other”, but can also make the realization that they belong to a racially oppressed group more challenging later in life.

This was the case for them growing up. The “ambient diversity” of Hyde Park helped establish this sense that they were just a normal kid. For a kid, feeling “normal” seems so critical to feeling “OK” and living joyful childhoods. But ultimately the white gaze, often our own communities of color, and the institutions reinforcing the arbitrary lines of race will tell us that we aren't normal, often to the point of fetishization or exclusion or shame. So when their parents raised them in a place where their mixed-ness was a non-event, how did that balance the joy of growing up feeling normal with the pain of not being exposed to the racist logics of our society? The challenges of this would become evident when the interviewee and their family moved to Tacoma, Washington. In Tacoma they would be one of three people of color in their fourth-grade class. After years of transactional and othering relationships with white people, straight people, and cis people, they would find that, “the paradigm of normalcy had shifted so far white that I was like, ‘I am friends with these people and yet I am so fundamentally uncomfortable around them?... Race was the thing. Who decided that I would be a kid here? This is a bad idea...”. Intentionality has its limits, and our parents can only protect us for so long. And yet, there's always space for love in the margins of these adjustments. They told me about moving through Chicago, in and out of Chinatown to Koreatown, to reclaiming Indigenous roots
here in the Twin Cities with one of the largest urban Indigenous populations in the country.

Where mixed-race people are is so important because it’s almost always in between one place or another. In a lot of ways, it can seem like we’re caught between these places, or we’re caught between our identities. But really, we’re just in-between them. And that in-between space can be so magical because while it never belongs to one race or another, we get to share it with all these other incredible people that are just as mixed up as we are.

Living In-Between Cities:
The next interviewee brought me back to my own home turf of San Francisco, California with an incredible illustration of rent prices, the messiness we find in our families, the wild relationships we have with our white institutions, and good food. They grew up in-between a number of racialized spaces in San Francisco. San Francisco, which holds the contradictions of simultaneous segregation, gentrification, and “radicalization” in its belly, made for an interesting childhood. They spent the majority of their life in the house that their maternal great-grandmother bought in the Glen Park neighborhood of San Francisco. Both their white mom and Chinese and Filipino dad were anchored to the Bay Area their entire lives and would raise their kids to do the same. They talked about growing up and learning about racism in the abstract, while moving through neighborhoods that embody layers of racial, class, and queer struggles in real life and having a hard time seeing the two pieces fit together. This can be seen through having to navigate neighborhoods like Chinatown, that embody a history of exclusion and cultural survival, or the Castro, that embodies queer existence and placemaking through a narrowly white and cis lens. They described asking their parents to send them to Chinese school because their Chinese friends went there, and they all knew they were Chinese.

We started talking about the word hapa, an Indigenous Hawaiian term for part Hawaiian, part white. Hapa is both a symbol of the United States’ colonial and genocidal annexation of the Hawaiian Islands and also a more neutralized term that West Coast Asian Americans in particular hold to describe the increasingly common part-white part-Asian American mixed people. They described being told they were hapa, end of conversation. They told me their dad “didn’t want to have those conversations with us [they and their siblings] because he didn’t have those conversations [as a Chinese and Filipino person] when he was a little. And, I’m sure it made my white mother uncomfortable [to have those conversations]”. Part of being hapa involves a complex history of US imperialism in Asia, as well as elements of urban culture in our contemporary context. Scholar of International Studies Julie Matthews argues that the aesthetics of Eurasian-ness (being mixed white and Asian) is perceived in Western narratives as an aesthetic of globalism and cosmopolitan culture. Through the racialization lies the morbid perception that a desired racial aesthetic comes through the combination of white normativity and Asian orientalism. The imperialism and militarism that the Western world brought upon Asia involved the systematic gendering, sexualization, and fetishization of Asian women that’s pervasive here in the US. Cosmopolitanism creates a sexual desire for youth and global culture
perceives the subjugation of Asian identities by whiteness as a desirable aesthetic of city life.

We kept talking about the journeys that brought us to finding our mixed identities and how they've taken us through a lot of different places, both emotional and geographic. We implicated our queerness as wonderfully chaotic pieces of ourselves, which invoked a fascinating intersection of sexuality and race that came up in my research process. Research on the identity-based geographies in Metropolitan Sydney have found that many neighborhoods that attract multiracial families are known for progressive values and inclusivity, similar to the research I mentioned in the above section. These same neighborhoods were found to be also be especially attractive to queer couples (both monoracial and interracial) for similar reasons. Within neighborhoods, there are intersections and solidarity between queer people and mixed-race people. Within ourselves, the intersection of our mixed identities and queerness can teach us how to simultaneously hold multiple identities. They tell me being mixed “really helped me with the, like, not binary gender thing and the, like bisexual pansexual things. I was like, okay, you can be more than one thing. But in multiple ways... I like to say that I'm someone who is in the middle of everything”.

Auntie Margo:
My third interviewee is Margo Okazawa-Rey, a scholar, activist, and dear friend of my family whom I call Auntie Margo. Auntie Margo was born in the city of Kobe, Japan to a Japanese mother and a Black WWII GI father. She lived in Japan for ten years before moving to the United States, moving between a number of cities and eventually settling in the Bay Area, California, about sixty years later. She recalls being surrounded by Japanese people growing up and so race was not a problem in Japan. Upon immigrating to the US, she was confronted by the racial complications of space as she moved from Dayton to Columbus, to Boston, then Baltimore, negotiating both her growth and identities as they interacted with these spaces. She would come to the United States as Japanese Americans were only just recovering from internment and as anti-Blackness was written into the laws and culture.

Auntie Margo explained that her mom told her that she could be Japanese at home but on the outside, she would always be perceived as Black. Her mom taught her to negotiate these spaces and the pieces of her identities that were tied to them, and to see that skill as a strength rather than a complication. “She never said to us, you're not that or you're not that. But you are both. But you also have to contextualize right when you are”. Contextualizing when you are one way or another is often a space-specific practice. Much like the idea of racial code-switching, mixed people are almost always confronted by transience inside, outside, and in-between spaces, whether it's organizations of our racial communities, our households, or our schools. We construct our identities through the interactions between these spaces. Auntie Margo told me about feeling alienated by the Black Power Movement, “precisely because I was mixed-race... it was either Black or not Black, right? And I felt that, you know, I would have to kill off my mother if I were going to be in the Black Power Movement”. She would end up working the Anti-War movement and the Women’s Liberation Movement but found race taking a back seat in that
organizing. As a member of the Combahee River Collective she found an expression of her Black womanhood, but what was meant to be a project of liberation would leave her Asian identity in the backseat.

“But then eventually I became more confident in the world and wanted to really just be fully myself. That’s when I hyphenated my name so that I could be both Okazawa, which is my mom’s maiden name, and Rey, which is my dad’s... So just kind of reclaiming the pieces of me that had been scattered because of what was going on in the wider society”.

She talked about the racial mixing for Asian and Asian American communities that flowed through the militarized relations between GIs and Asian women in Japan, Vietnam, and Korea; different “crowds” of mixed-race people whose lives were intimately tied to war; US imperialism; and the gendered nature of militarism. For mixed Asian Americans, the gendering and sexualization of Asian women is a key part of the mixed-race narrative with relations that are often intimately tied to constructions of perceived Asian femininity, and by extension, an urban Eurasian aesthetic (Matthews). There are key generational differences to constructions of these multiracial “aesthetics”. Auntie Margo explained this to me in that her generational “crowd” of mixed-Asian people were generally more linked to militarism. This is in contrast to my generation where parents (including my own) were not directly tied to militarism, belonged to a different class background, and were usually between urban professionals and students.

When it came to spaces where we feel the most comfortable in our mixed identities, Auntie Margo talked about being able to see all kinds of people in cities, and how that heterogeneity almost affirmed her own presented racial ambiguity. She says cities are more comfortable because there are more places to escape, which again, ties into my interpretation that mixed people uniquely access in-between spaces. When she came to be accepting of all sides of her identity she offered this wisdom to other mixed people, “You love both your parts of your being and being in both communities and you’re not going to fit neatly into one or the other—you know—category at all. But claim the space that’s yours, OK?”

Discussion and Action Steps:
Here’s a key question that I think is constantly up in the air for the families of mixed children: Should these kids grow up with a sense of racial normalcy in their own identities? Across my interviews I’ve found different people’s parents have approached the question very differently and ultimately queer the idea of racial normalcy as something that’s inextricably woven into white supremacy and anti-miscegenation rhetoric. Across each interview was also a discussion of our moms, and how holding multiple racial identities can be nurtured, rather than painfully learned through exposure and prejudice. What’s meaningful to me about the entire process of researching and writing was the fact that our society is growing exponentially in its share of mixed-race people, and it’s people of all different races. The occupation of a racialized space—a neighborhood, a farmers’ market, an organizing meeting—presents barriers that we regularly break with our presence and intentionality to claim that space despite it usually not being for us (or all of us). We can claim spaces as our own and uniquely in-between. Racism is really complex for
for mixed-race people because it can often pit one of our identities against or apart from the other(s). But that’s all the more reason to be intentional and loving in our fight for justice. When we occupy spaces where one or more of our identities is not represented, we'll speak up to have intersections and multiplicities engaged because we're not either-or, we're both-and.

Notes & Works Cited:

3. Lefebvre created a triangle to illustrate the social production of space that included representations of space (maps, plans), representational spaces (editorial cartoons, meaningful communities), and spatial practice (the lived experience of space).
5. I use interracial to define relationships between people of different races, not just between white people and people of color. The data on interracial relationships will reflect relationships between people any races that are different from one another, unless explicitly stated otherwise.
Introduction: Starting at Zero

When I was a child, I loved counting things. I did it all the time. Whenever I was bored, unable to sleep, or needed to hold my tongue...I counted. It is a habit that I've carried into my adult life. In moments where I feel like my feelings are close to boiling over, I find something to count. I've found myself counting specks in the ceiling, breaths of air, seams in my jeans, and stripes on my cat's tail. There was always something so grounding about the tediousness of counting. It is truly an endless task. Numbers are infinite, as are the amount of countable things in the world. Numbers would always be there, ready and waiting, should I ever need them. Consistent. Dependable. Healing.

Numbers as we know them today came from India. Indians have been a spiritual and scientific people, interweaving our religion with math at every turn. Out of that need came the number system. We wanted to be able to express both infinity and nothingness, and for the first time...but eternity and nothingness had a number (O'Connor and Robertson 2000). Zero. The zero provided the ability to count infinitely high, but also produce increments that were infinitesimally small. Out of India, came the quantifiable understanding of nothing and everything.

Counting has become a sacred thing to me. I count when I am emotional. Numbers form in my head: one speck on the ceiling, three specks, seven specks, seven hundred and thirty two specks. However, now when I count, it is not just me who is partaking in this ritual. As I add up dots in my ceiling, I am not alone. One speck, I think to myself. Two specks, my ancestor beside me says. Three specks, says another. It was the work of my ancestors, that gave me the ability to count...and through that ability to count, the ability to cope and heal.

After spending a long stretch of time simply thinking about that gift, I felt a burning pride at the work of my ancestors. Alongside that pride, came grief. Consistently throughout history, white supremacy has taken the hard work and accomplishments of color and re-packaged them as new (Gandhi and Wolff 2017). As I sat on my floor, anxiously chewing almonds and obsessively researching the history of counting, I considered all the things that have been taken and re-packaged to center whiteness. Cultural appropriation isn’t something that is simply disrespectful, it is dangerous and painful. As I read page after page of the scope of Indian work and innovation (yoga, the kamasutra, universities, etc.), I was filled with a frustration that most of these things aren’t even associated with Indian people. There was a sense of grief and of loss, and a mourning at the fact that I won’t ever fully understand my history as it was meant to be understood by ancestors.
A Shared Experience: Questions on the Diaspora Grief
As I stared at a wall, counting the amount of leaves in a painting that hung upon it, I wondered if that feeling of grief and loss—and of anger—was echoed throughout the South Asian diaspora. Did other Desi people feel anger when Gwyneth Paltrow claimed to be the reason behind yoga’s success? Do they cringe when they see mass produced “yoga gear” that’s proudly printed with flippant word play like “namaste in bed” or things of the like? Did they feel out of place when they went to yoga studios only to find them full of white people, and the only Brown representations were hangings of Hindu goddesses dancing on the walls? Do they feel a sense of loss when they realize that there are terribly few spaces dedicated to learning yoga from the people that created it, or that are even accessible to those people?

These questions all contributed to a greater question that I had. How has colonialism taken Brown accomplishments and innovation, and forced them to center whiteness? How has this impacted the South Asian diaspora? Is that feeling of unease one that is echoed? Brown bodies are not decorations for white spaces. Brown achievement isn’t lesser work waiting to be brought to fame by white voices.

Echoed Voices: The Interview Process
Over the course of this project, I’ve had the privilege of speaking with seven different South Asian Americans. There was diversity in their age, socioeconomic status, hometown, gender, sexuality, and occupation. Throughout these interviews, there were three that stood out the most. The interviewees—who will remain anonymous—were aged 28, 34, and 53. All three of these interviewees consider themselves activists in different ways, grew up in different parts of the world, and are members of the Indian diaspora. I was able to hear personal accounts that showed the common threads we share.

In my interviews, I asked if they felt as though Indian culture was appropriated and how that impacted them. The response was an overwhelming collective sense of frustration, grief, and rage. Feelings of loss were expressed, very similar to my own. It felt as though the more white culture consumed South Asian traditions as their own, the more distorted it became, and the more it estranged Desi people from their histories. One of my interviewees expressed feeling like a fugitive, like there was no place that was truly home. He called himself a citizen of the world, rather than just of one place. It was clear that being Brown meant not being one's full self in public for fear of racism, yet watching white groups profit off of the same things we kept hidden.

“I never wore my salwar kameez because I didn't want to attract unwanted attention, because of many instances that showed me that wearing my sari made me ‘Unamerican,’” said one interviewee. “Now it's become a trend, and I see something that made me a target become popular culture.”

Another interviewee spoke about how it feels when something is being shared, versus when something is being stolen. She spoke of how she believes that cultural exchange occurs when practices are shared in a way that honors the source, that shows that we “wouldn't have certain things without the people that created it, and founders deserve
We talked about how things like South Asian healing practices that have been long ignored by Western medicine are now being studied and treated like new discoveries.

"Is this being shared, or is something being taken from me?" the interviewee asked, speaking of the line between cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation. She spoke of how she can watch her non-South Asian friends get yoga certified and chant ancient holy words, where she would have been ostracized for speaking in that same tongue. We discussed that feeling of strangeness that occurs when non-Desi friends approach us, telling us of popular trends like “turmeric milk and bikram yoga” as though these were not things that we grew with it.

Yet, with such frustration, also comes hope. Another topic we touched on was what the interviewees loved about being South Asian. There was a clear pattern with the responses. One of the biggest feelings was a sense of pride at not only the accomplishments of our ancestors, but the way that younger members of the diaspora have striven to reject the “model minority” myth and assimilation, and have rose to reclaim their Brownness in beautiful ways. I was privileged to hear stories of young Desi women wearing lehengas to prom, of relearning their mother tongues. We discussed how Brown art has thrived because of pain and frustration, how beautiful creations have come from the struggle.

“Even reclaiming my faith feels like an act of rebellion,” said one interviewee, on what it felt like to practice in a religion again. After being bullied and ostracized for practicing Hinduism in grade school, another interviewee left religion altogether. It was only recently, after connecting with other young Brown people through social media, that she felt secure and empowered enough to slowly re-engage with the cultural pieces of practicing Hinduism. After years of having her religion vilified, coming back to her roots felt like such a radical act of reclaimation because she was valuing her heritage over everything else. She was “taking back” what was stolen.

This story is one that I see echoed throughout social media. Despite the way things have been stolen from us, the diaspora still seeks ways to thrive within our communities. Diaspora members are rising up, reclaiming our culture and asking for recognition for what is ours...and respectful space for the things we do not want to share. Artists like Nisha Kaur Sethi, Salman Toor, Avan Jogia, Salvin Chahal, Humble the Poet, Lilly Singh, Rupi Kaur, and many others reclaim their Brownness through their art, and in turn empower young Desi voices to do the same.

“There is strength in numbers,” an interviewee—aged 53—stated. “You can do things now—be a part of things now—that I never thought possible when I first came to America [fifteen years ago]. Things like Instagram are connecting all of you.”

Moving Towards the Future: Taking Next Steps
When I asked what we could do next to continue to foster equity, a conversation was had about action steps. So many white businesses capitalize off of the work of Black and Brown folks. This can be seen through industries like yoga memberships or Bhakti Chai,
There was consensus that when profiting off a culture that one does not belong to, the question of “how am I honoring the source” must be asked. Honoring the source can mean many things, but there are three key ways that this is done: leadership, autonomy, and fiscal support. Are there members of the culture in leadership positions? Are they shaping how the organization is run? Are they being fairly compensated for their work? All three of these things are important when supporting spaces that profit off of other cultures, whether that be in fashion, wellness (like yoga), or food.

There is also work that needs to be done from within the community itself. It was apparent that South Asian activism is happening, and there is strong pushback by the younger generation of South Asians against how we’ve been assimilated. South Asians are starting to gain visibility and exposure the more we have conversations and refuse to be silent. When asked about how South Asian activism could improve, the resounding answer was that we as a community needed to learn how to be better, stronger allies. We need to continue to have conversations in our circles about not only the injustices that we experience, but the injustices that other groups of color experience—particularly Black and Indigenous communities. By confronting stigmas in our own communities, we advocate not only for ourselves but for those who are in similar situations to our own. This can be done through holding space during community gatherings to discuss larger issues, through calling out prejudice/racism as it occurs, and keeping each other accountable. By being better allies to other communities of color, we are better allies for ourselves.

**Conclusion: Stronger Together**
Throughout this process, I received clear answers to my question. The effect of displacement was very clear, and that bright feeling of frustration that lived in me was one that echoed throughout many members of the diaspora. Being both South Asian and American was like having a foot in two worlds, but never being able to be fully present in one place. In the present day, social media has given young Desi people a platform by which to amplify their voices like never before. We are able to connect with each other across the nation, and share our stories. It is that sharing of stories that showed us that our outrage was justified, that it was echoed throughout our experiences.

Through being able to see that our experiences were not uncommon, we are able to better advocate for ourselves and use our privilege/exposure to advocate for others as well. We are able to see that we do not stand alone, that our struggle is shared. I agree with what my first interviewee stated, that there is strength in numbers. By continuing to speak out, by engaging in our own cultural practices as we see fit, by holding each other accountable and having **intentional** spaces to discuss equity, we help herald a future where we see ourselves—and others—**truly** represented.
Space is Scary and I’m Not Good at Being Brown (Which is Scarier)

When I was a child, I used to want to be an astronaut...and also a farmer. I wanted to grow hybrid beets and carrots on the Moon, and nothing was going to stop me from doing that. Then, my mother took me to a planetarium to watch a film on space, and I quickly decided that I wanted absolutely nothing to do with it. Space was too big, too terrifying, too eerily empty. I quickly let go of my dreams of being a space farmer, leaving them at the door of the Michigan Planetarium. However, one thing did stick with me.

The only tradition that my mother and I have is that we still go to the theater at the science museum once a year--either on her birthday or Mother’s Day--and watch a film on space. When I think of the universe, I think of my mother and I think of my ancestors. Being part of the diaspora--being a fully Indian woman who was raised in America--means that I have never felt like I fit in either dimension. I was too Americanized for India, but too Indian for America. My situation was unique because my mother was a single parent, which isn’t all that common in India. I also have no siblings. We were the only two people in our family--aside from my uncle and his two children--who were in America. We didn't fit the “big Indian family” trope, and I so desperately wanted to.

I wanted to be a Good Brown Person. When I was in second grade, I remember two other Indian girls in my class making fun of me because I didn’t speak Hindi, because I didn’t have any siblings. I was ashamed of only having my mother, of having a mouth that only spoke English. I was ashamed that I had to watch Bollywood movies with the subtitles on. The older I got and the more desperate I was to reclaim my heritage, the more I wished that we were a more traditional Indian family. I wanted to be a part of the crazy Indian weddings. I wanted to know how to make the most perfectly round roti. I wanted to have countless aunts and uncles and cousins to introduce my significant other to. I wanted my tongue to form words in my Native tongue with fluent ease. I wished for Indian traditions, for holidays and celebration. I wanted community. It wanted to be seen as just as Indian as everyone else.

I ended up going to a predominantly white college, where my Brownness felt like a vulnerability. Suddenly, I was the only Indian, and there was no one to compare me to. I felt isolated, alone, and afraid. Though those were dark times, it renewed a new fire in me. I started learning more about my roots, about my ancestors, and thought about my Brownness as my own, rather than something that was collectively owned by the diaspora. As I learned about the accomplishments of my own people on the large scale--yoga, tantra, numbers, universities, and mehendi, to name just a few--I thought about the accomplishments of my family, of how far my mother and I have come. My single mother is every bit as significant as a sprawling family. My childhood is full of quiet memories of sitting on the balcony barefoot with her, sharing a single cup of chai and watching squirrels, of buying pirated Bollywood movies from our local Indian grocer, of her faithfully putting coconut oil in my hair and braiding into two scalp-numbing plaits every week. It’s also full
of memories of her trying to learn how to make meatloaf because I wanted to know what white people ate for dinner, of her falling asleep in the movie theater when we went to see Shrek 2, of us buying fabric and making the dress for my senior prom together. We are so unavoidably Indian in everything that we do, whether that be making a stereotypical curry or stepping outside of that to try and partake in American culture—which is equally my culture—through things like school dances and weird loaves of meat.

There's no one way to be Brown, and that there's no one way to be Indian. Tea with cardamom is my favorite warm drink, my mom makes the best fucking chicken curry I've ever eaten—trust me, this curry would make you renounce your own mother's cooking—and I still feel my heartbeat quicken when I see a picture of Shah Rukh Khan. But even if my mom didn't make good curry, even if I hadn't grown up with the same scent of turmeric and masala in the air like every other diaspora kid I knew, even if Shah Rukh Khan wasn't my first love... I would still be just as Brown, just as Indian.

I didn't think that my mother and I had and “Indian traditions.” Now I know that our tradition of going to see our space documentary is an Indian tradition. If the space documentaries ever stop being made, then we'll find something new, and that too will be just as Indian. We'll continue to not fit the Indian trope, but being Brown means consistently defying preconceived notions of what we are supposed to be. I left behind my dreams of having a farm on the Moon, but I never left behind my love of having something consistent to share with my mother. And that ancient love, that familial bond and trust that keeps us together despite life's curves, is my favorite tradition of all.
Ende Ponnu Molle

What is your favorite word in Malayali, I ask my mother? *Ende ponnu molle*, she responds as she ignores the parameters of my question to send me not one, but three words. I click my tongue, asking her the meaning instead of demanding a single word. I count the words in my head, stringing them together.

My mother’s love is a complicated thing. It smells of jasmine and the spice section of the Indian supermarket. It is both the scent of masala in the air and the disapproving glare of the aunty that’s assessing how short my dress is. It is the taste of the cashew cookies that I am opening before reaching the register, and the nauseating flickering of that one fluorescent bulb that lights up aisle six. I have come to peace that our relationship might always be this contradictory thing, this puzzle, this vaporous cloud that sometimes brings life-giving rain and other times blots out the sun.

She is not just a mother, but she is a temple. If someone was to comminute my mother into many different parts, they would find that she is not just one woman but a multitude of them. She is the voice of my grandmother and my great-grandmother, the voice of my country itself. I grew up away from my homeland, and my mother is the connector between me and my heritage. She loves me enough for ten million women; she loves me enough for a whole sub-continent, and I can assimilate into that love. I am a citizen of my mother’s care and our relationship is the only place where I have never felt like a foreigner.

I wonder who my mother would be, had the world treated her with care. Being Brown and American and woman means carrying the world on your shoulders while you are guiding small children with your footprints. It means that every little act of partaking in your culture is a small act of revolution. When my mother’s voice forms accented words in English, her tongue becomes a sword. The r’s that fall from her mouth echo on, rolling into infinity, refusing to assimilate. Her voice is an act of rebellion.

And so I myself am an act of rebellion, I in my unapologetic existence. I shout at my mother and I shout at my heritage. I apologize to my mother and I am apologizing to every mother, every Brown mother. The love of a Brown mother is a sacred thing. It is built on blood and sacrifice and bunches of jasmine. I love my mother so much that I am allowed to sometimes hate her. My mother loves me so much that sometimes an entire country hates me. But with each day that goes by, the more I know that our fire is not venom. It is just the hottest flame, that burns you into something better.

What is your favorite word in Malayali, I ask my mother?

*Ende ponnu molle*, she responds.

My dearest daughter.
Your Chai Is Just The Right Color

The perfect cup of chai, is boiled in a pot with just the right amount of spice and the critical whispers of your auntie
She makes chai with four cloves
The smell of cardamom fills my kitchen
Sweet, fragrant blossoms of spicy perfume rising in plumes from a copper cup

Lines of mehendi, deep rust and sienna, turning my fingers into that of the first woman
My mother’s wrist smudged with henna as she braids secrets into the folds of my hair
Sheer silk, edged with starchy gold
Ruby, emerald, cobalt, obsidian saree
Wrapped around vetiver skin
Heavy bunches of velvety white jasmine crowning my auntie’s midnight hair
The light on brown skin turns her bronze
Lightning bolts between lashes smudged with kohl
Her eyes are thunderclouds

Mouth ripe with the color of berries
The gentle slope of your brow like the ripple on gentle water
Indian women are made of clay and precious metal and gemstones
I watch you, mother and auntie and sister and friend
Watch how you make the simple act of making chai into a dance, a poem, a lesson
Your fingers are singing
Your bodies are a history book for the Indus Valley
Sacred
You make chai sacred
You make chai with four cloves
The Start of the Universe

My mother’s arms are around me
And it’s a time where that does not feel out of place

Balls of rice in a red ceramic bowl
My blood is red
My mother’s mother’s heart bleeds red
Like saffron is red
Like the bindi between your brows is red

Divine feminine
God was my mother
My mother was myself
I make temples out of curry-stained bowls
Out of threadbare silk and mango pits

I sit between pillars
Of jasmine and plaster

Turmeric stains on my cheek, Divine Feminine

God was my mother
My mother was myself
She plants gardens in the lines of my palms
Her arms around me
Temple pillars
Divine Feminine
It does not feel out of place
"And then we were women" - An Examination of Post-Colonial Conceptions of Asian Matriarchy

I. Introduction & Understanding
When we began this research journey, I was immediately drawn to understanding the role of women in Southeast Asia, specifically the narratives surrounding Southeast Asian women. Much of what I experienced growing up as a Burmese cis woman was being told what a woman’s role was in my community. I remember a conversation that I once had with an Asian American individual who expressed how relieved they were that I had moved to America. Relieved because I would finally have the chance to be a free Asian woman in America. My narrative and the narrative of the women in my family has been of abusers, victims, oppressors, and subjects. But “we were [all] once girls, and then we were women” and that encapsulates how I saw the women in my family grow into their roles. They were at the helm of their families and completely full in their power and truth. Matriarchy—women holding primary power—was a choice in my community.

To understand the history surrounding the narrative of matriarchy, particularly in our Southeast Asian communities, is to place it in direct opposition to patriarchy and its history. The narrative that women and gender non-conforming people are systematically disadvantaged is intrinsically linked in anthropological and cultural studies of Southeast Asian spaces (Andaya 13). The prevalence of this narrative—that Southeast Asian matriarchies are merely a primitive myth—is not only an erasure of the androgynous social systems that are central to Southeast Asia but a practice that perpetuates the denouncement of Asian experiences (Andaya 46).

When this narrative pervades in society, it also pervades in our social movements. The issues that surround Asian diasporas are intrinsically linked to narratives we have internalized due to colonialism and imperialism. If we want to challenge this, we must understand how our actions and assumptions are influenced by the prevalence of colonial conceptions of gender patterns in our consciousness and social relations. Through this project, I wanted to take the opportunity to examine conceptions of matriarchy and femininity across generational lines to better grasp how we have come to understand the impact of postcolonial narratives in our Asian American spaces. To do so, I will first conduct a literature review to define the landscape of Southeast Asia as it relates to colonialism, modernity and matriarchy. Secondly, I will analyze the intergenerational interviews as it relates to the previous conditions and landscape. Finally, I will provide my interpretation of how we can move forward to both deinternalize and internalize narratives on Southeast Asian matriarchy.

II. Literature Review - Terms and Conditions of Matriarchy
To best contextualize the landscape of this research the following terms need to be defined: (1) matriarchy and (2) colonialism. The word matriarchy is often interpreted to mean the general opposite of patriarchy, but it is not an opposite (King and Wilder 265).
According to Peoples and Bailey, matriarchies are not a mirror form of patriarchies but rather “emphasize maternal meanings where ‘maternal symbols are linked to social practices influencing the lives of both sexes and where women play a central role in these practices.” (Peoples and Bailey 261) According to Cynthia Eller, “matriarchy can be thought of...as a shorthand description...in which the culture centers around values and life events described as feminine.” (Eller 25) A matriarch is therefore defined as “a woman who roles or dominates a family, group or state” and the central figure of a matriarchy (Eller 15). In regards to to the term colonialism - the most significant aspect of this power practice is the process of othering. Political geographers explain how colonial/imperial powers (countries, groups of people etc.) “othered” places they wanted to dominate to legitimize their exploitation of the land. During and after the rise of colonialism the Western powers perceived the East as the “other”, being different and separate from their societal norm (Mountz 2). This viewpoint and separation of culture created a dominant/subordinate dynamic, and the “white man’s burden” was to transform this region. This practice devalued indigenous cultures and practices such as holistic medicine, non-nuclear family structures, and the power women were placed into in Southeast Asian society.

To discuss specific gender patterns in Southeast Asia is to also acknowledge the lack of such theoretical and academic literature. The study of gender disparities and gender inequalities is extensive, but the same cannot be said for pre-colonial or postcolonial matriarchal patterns in Southeast Asia that do not denounce Southeast Asian societal structures. The study of pre-colonial and postcolonial gender patterns and this historical neglect is at least confounding and frustrating and at worst calls into question scholars’ work with the subject. Of the literature that exists, either within the coordinates of living or the coordinates of theory, much of it comes from a Eurocentric perspective of Southeast Asia. The gender literature of the colonial period seems to portray Southeast Asian women primarily as victims. There are contemporary pressures to recast female roles in a more domestic and constrained direction. This has been to the detriment of narratives surrounding Southeast Asian societies and often perpetuates the narrative that European colonial powers are liberators rather than oppressors. In contrast, according to Reid, studies of Southeast Asia have led to the conclusion that it is “the only region of the world as we know it which features such androgynous or at least sex-similar systems” (Reid 72) It would appear difficult to find another comparable region of the world where sex symmetry is as marked as it is in Southeast Asia. Yet there are also studies which point to the increasing exploitation, marginalization and oppression of women and removal of matriarchs as a consequence of capitalist development and state formation in modernity (Stoler, 344). The range of narratives on the subject in Southeast Asia, constructed by white supremacy, re-emphasizes the need for project and research that put Southeast Asian researchers at the helm of doing research on their own communities.

III. Analysis - Three Women
Perhaps the ways in which the matriarchal narrative has ebbed and flowed can be best exemplified by the interviews I conducted. This case study was not meant to be representative of all of the Southeast Asian community, but will provide a greater understanding on how outside narratives impact perception. The interviewees are all cis Asian woman. Their names are Anna, Kalia and Mimi with all varying perspectives:
Anna - 18, Vietnamese woman. She represents youth. Born and raised in Saint Paul Minnesota.

Kalia - 39, Hmong woman. She represents middle age. Born in the refugee camps of Thailand, she immigrated to Saint Paul, Minnesota at a young age.

Mimi - 60s, Burmese woman. She represents the elder perspective. Born in Myanmar, she would immigrate to the United States in her 30s in order to raise her family.

They identify from three different and distinct ethnicities in Southeast Asia: Bamar, Hmong and Vietnamese. Additionally, these three interviewees come with varying experiences as it relates to their immigrant and diaspora narratives. The intersecting identities each of the interviewees hold give a wide spectrum of thoughts and experiences. In order to illustrate how postcolonial narratives have impacted conceptions of matriarchy the interviewees were asked a set of questions that pertained to matriarchy, womanhood, and femininity as it relates to their experiences as Asian American woman. Interviewees were also asked on their thoughts on colonialism, as it relates to their view of themselves. Two main themes emerged from the interviews that are indicative of the impact that postcolonial narrative surrounding Southeast Asian matriarchy has had. It becomes clear that the postcolonial narrative—that Asian matriarchs are aggressive and negative aspects of Southeast Asian culture—have not negatively impacted the significance of matriarchs and mothers to these interviewees. Rather, postcolonial narratives have limited the lens and capacity to speak on the trauma of colonialism when discussing the idea of motherhood and family in Southeast Asian communities.

Significance of Matriarch and Motherhood
The first major theme that emerged was the connection between matriarchs and motherhood to the Southeast Asian experience. Historically and traditionally, mothers have taken a central role in family units. Mothers tend to take a dominant role in the household. Though not all mothers would become matriarchs, the narrative surrounding matriarchs seemed to be that women could become prominent figures in the household, related to family decisions, child rearing, money management and cultural education. A woman would either fall into or pursue the role of a matriarch once they became a mother. Anna, the youth interviewee, stated that while women were not always considered the head of the household “they are still the backbone of the family.” Mimi, the elder interviewee, experienced matriarchy through the lens of “Mom’s word goes. You never ever talk back to Mom.” Anna shared similar views on matriarchy as it was defined by “[listening] to my mom and grandma without any questions.”

There is an authoritarian nature associated with matriarchs. This authoritarian nature seems synonymous with “tiger parenting,” a caricature of Asian parenting (Chua 5). The term was first coined by Amy Chua to describe a Chinese parenting style whose characteristics include emphasizing family values, hard work, enduring hardship, honesty and dedicating oneself towards academic excellence (Chua 67). The term largely is associated with mothers rather than fathers, implying the dominance of mothers in the household structure. However the term “tiger moms” has been usurped by western spheres who
have been critical of the harsh nature of parenting and labeled matriarchs as violent and abusive (Seal). Interestingly, all interviewees considered having a matriarch in the family as something that was in contrast to the experience of dominant group families. Mimi went as far as saying “It’s a different kind of upbringing.” But none of this was to imply that matriarchs were a negative aspect of their upbringing. Kalia expressed that through her upbringing she came to understand that matriarchy is “at the core of self knowledge that you come from a long line of women who have been so many things.” Their traditions include physical and emotional closeness that ensured a lifelong bond between parent and child. Rather than authoritarians, these interviewees highlight the narrative that matriarchs are considered pillars of strength, power but also individuals who are “incredibly hard to define.” The reasoning behind mothers being so significant seems to be linked to culture. Mimi states that “Mom is always the most important person in the culture even in Buddhism too. You don’t hear about Buddha about talking about Dad; Buddha talked more about Mom.” We need to understand that matriarchs, particularly in Southeast Asian communities, are mothers who became leaders in their communities out of necessity and emerge as leaders out of resilience.

Colonial and Liberal Lenses
The second major theme was how colonialism created a lens that has warped the narrative around matriarchs for outsiders. In a way, the individual interviewees did not succumb to the white supremacist narrative that matriarchs were aggressive. Instead, the interviewees have had to combat negative stereotypes surrounding matriarchs in their lives. The legacy of colonialism has solidified negative stereotypes about matriarchs and motherhood. Colonialism in all forms was rarely an act of simple political control. Fanon argues the very act of colonial domination has the power to warp the personal and ethnic identities of natives because it operates under the assumption of perceived superiority (Fanon 34). Indigenous people are thus entirely divorced from their ethnic identities, which has been replaced by a desire to emulate their oppressors. Anna expresses how colonialism impacted her life as followed:

“It’s almost as if that’s my whole life. Like the narrative of submissive Vietnamese women. That’s not who I am. But that’s who I’ve been made out to be. Same thing with my mother. Same thing with my grandmother.”

There is a continuation of wrapping and manipulating the narrative surrounding Southeast Asian woman that, in particular, revokes the power that matriarchs have in our community. We live in the world with colonial gender stereotypes that not only limit the women but also men. We have come to grow with a liberal lens that says our cultures and traditions that continue to limit us. I don’t want to romanticize the past, but nobody gets the true nuances of our culture from the outside capitalist world. As Kalia states “...all of the women in my family are strength. No colonial lens could see the reality of these women in my life.” Mimi fascinatedly states that colonialism only “strengthened the matriarchy to survive and protect ourselves. It didn't lessen anything. It just strengthened us more. That’s why Daw Aung San Suu Kyi came as a leader, but her brothers didn’t.” Rather than weakening her idea of matriarchy in her community, it had only strengthened the needs for those ideals for her and her family. It is clear that with the need to address our
complex colonial histories and bodies of trauma, it is time for us to gaze backwards and to parse through understanding our historical legacies.

IV. Action Steps - Moving Forward
Transforming and redefining our narratives is and never will be out of the realm of possibility for us. We can build within our own communities to combat these internalized narratives of patriarchy and matriarchy. I propose two different action plans that can help us move forward to deinternalize negative narratives surrounding gender patterns in our communities. First, we need to actively facilitate and highlight our own analysis and experiences of capitalism and oppression. Secondly, we must decolonize by reclaiming our narratives. Colonialism utilized a very specific form of storytelling that dehumanized different groups. We are still breathing and consuming much of that narrative. The best way to decolonize our activist space is to carve out the space to ensure that historically underrepresented narratives are highlighted. Establishing collective art spaces to highlight this history, holding representatives in office accountable for reparations due to our history, and continuing to speak out about the importance of teaching our history are only a few strategies we can employ. We have not done the work necessary to shed our colonial histories; in fact, I would say that by engaging with them, we might use our past as forms of social empowerment, as means of developing new languages with which we can speak of trauma past and present. Deinternalizing oppressive narratives is not just a collective responsibility—it is ultimately about personal and interpersonal growth and collective liberation.

V. Sources
• Mountz, Alison. The Other, Key Concepts in Human Geography. p. 2.
I don’t want to be a mom. There was a crow once. I remember it being a kalei. The baby crow fell into the garden. It had been a hurricane the night before. A baby crow had fallen out of the tree in our front yard. Alone, cold, wet. I stared into its blue eyes as it cried out. In pain. In fear. In loneliness. I tried I think. I tried to pick up the pieces. I tried to pick her up. But her mom wouldn’t let me. I don’t think. There was a bigger crow in the tree right next to the baby crow who would scream every time I tried to pick the baby up. So all I did was put a cardboard box on top and prayed that was enough. The baby would cry every day. Do something. Later that week I woke up to the sound of nothing. Yet the crow in the tree stayed for many more weeks. Silent. On top of that tree. Maybe that was like my mother. My mother who watched from afar. My A Me on weekends. On weekends we’d have our little conversation. We’d forget that these conversations aren’t little lives being lived in collection, created by my stares and her crinkled eyes and the things she confided. I’d just stare. And then we’d find ourselves on thresholds and it would end—at least the reality of it, because whatever we discussed would preoccupy me for the rest of the week, until I saw her again. She was wildfire that couldn’t be put out and I was always in the way. She painted me so many colors it was hard to tell which one I was. She wanted me to be a tragic backdrop so that she could appear to be illuminated, so that people can say “Wow, isn’t she so terribly brave to love a daughter who is so obviously sad?” A me did you really think I’d be the dark sky so you could be the star? I’d swallow you whole. I won’t do that. I know. I promise.

I want to be a mom. There was no doubt in my mind. When I came with child I had found myself feeling thirsty all the time. Nothing could quench my thirst. I was always in a constant state of searching and looking back at my child. Yearning for beautiful things. Yearning for protection. Yearning for the fear to go away. My baby. She is more myself than I am. My child. I’ve got a stepping stone heart for her, useful for crossing to the other side; it’s cracked, but it’s her work of art. Words? Ma ho bu. I can’t describe. How could I capture what this has meant to me? This child in all her broken and beautiful ways has given me new life. I remember stepping into the crosswalk when it all happened. I had stepped out in mild curiosity. Monks had been protesting in the streets over gas prices and government. Everyone protested the government in those days. I went outside, with my daughter in tow. She helped my fingers, wrapped her fingers around me like I was her stuffed teddy bear, I thought nothing of it. The reason we were there. We bore witness. We were bystanders. Then the gunshots started. The roaring in my head became so loud. I saw blood on the floor and cries of children. I prayed the cries were not my own. Then, I thought of nothing but grabbing her and running away. If I could, I would keep running with her forever. We never looked back. We ran through black tunnels and white noise before we made it home. My mind wouldn’t stop running. I did not allow her to leave my arms until my husband had to pry them open. I cried when he did. I cried for my daughter who had born witness. My little hummingbird, whose heart beat so fast she could hardly breathe. I want nothing but everything for her. She once sat in my lap and made me promise to always be there. I looked into her eyes and
thought I would spend the rest of my life finding immortality if that meant I could keep that promise. I promise.

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All I am is a mom. I’ve grown to accept that now. And I wonder when my mother renounced me whether she had renounced herself in the process. She renounced me at a younger age. See I did not intend to fall in love. I was fully set on spending the rest of my days with myself. Alone in my wonderful. But I fell in love. In an almost violent kind of way. It jerked me, pulled me, thrust me into a new life. Married to this man, I found that my mother had renounced me. At first, when she gave up on me, it felt like my mind had turned into a shapeshifter. One day it could be as small as a baby chick in the palm of my hand resting. Other days it would turn into a large reptile, ready to swallow me whole. On those days I would pretend to lay dead until it was satisfied and moved on. The roaring on those days was enough to drown my entire countrymen. Until I became a mother myself. My mother no longer renounced me then. My children became bridge, heirs, evidence, survivors. I no longer love my mom the same, that’s certain. Or I love her still. Love is so short. She loved me, my mother, I know now. But I didn’t always know until I came of this age. When she passed I became my mother. Then I knew. I am mother still. I am. And I am not motherless. Sometimes I still hear her and a cacophony of women apologizing and begging me to continue. No one is a mother born in full bloom. Sometimes, I feel down in the dirt, right where other mothers don’t want to be. But I remind myself that sometimes when you’re feeling buried, you’re actually just planted. The roots of my motherhood are growing even to this day. I am not uprooted. My mangrove branches are wrapped around my children’s torsos and then on to my own. I remind myself not to shambashme. When my adult children act up, I try to revive my inner child once a day to see with soft eyes. To remember. I promised.

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I don’t know what it means to be a mom. Give me the night and day, but don’t give me a child just yet. I know mothers. Like the wooden table worn smooth with years of use. You visit her, decorate her, laugh over her, lean on her. You overlook her. You need her. I draped my weight upon my own mother. She remained steady, indifferent. She allowed me too. I know mothers but I don’t know what they mean. I get asked a lot whether I am ready for motherhood. Perhaps I have ripened enough in my audience’s eyes. They ask me questions and I have no solid answers for them. I once looked up mother in the dictionary. A mother is a woman related to a child or children. A matriarch is a mother who is head of a family. But it means to be mom you are always in relation to something else. I don’t want to be something else. I wonder if this is my impending doom and I can’t help but feel a knot form in my throat. Then I feel disgusted by my privilege. There are times I feel responsible for not knowing. I’m reminded of my mother. I wonder if she knew. My Ame knows many things. My A Me taught me not to eat mangoes when I have fever, to start my showers with cold water hitting my feet, to chew tamarind to warm my soul. And to me, her word is science. Will I be science to someone else someday? I wonder when she knew what it meant to be a mother. I’m rambling. I don’t know. I must look worried all the time at this age. I feel sorry for my mother. Because of me. Because of her. She asks me thamee lay kaung lar? I’m good I answer. I try to be.
INTRODUCTION:
My aspect of the research project began with an interest in the mixed Asian American identity and spaces. As a second-generation mixed Vietnamese person, I find myself the product of odd spaces, especially between intergenerational discussions. These discussions range from that of politics and immigration, to the cultural rifts between my white and Asian counterparts. I chose to inspect the mixed Asian American identity through that of a growth and identity. Especially associated with the spaces in which constituents of one’s racial makeup are nurtured and received. Through my interviews and research within the limited subject of mixed and Southeast Asian diasporic study, I have discovered a few of the pivotal aspects of creating space as a mixed person where space is unavailable.

PROCESS:
The process of gathering information began long before the project. However, upon starting this project I realized that gaining interviewees would be a difficult procedure. It is a deeply emotional process to retrieve years of racial experiences to be used in the creation of art. From the perspective of a researcher, it was difficult to find mixed Asian American sources. However, one of my useful sources is War Baby, Love Child by Mei Wing Dariotis and Laura Kina, which presents interviews of professional mixed Asian American artists and their works. From that, I framed my interview questions similarly, with a specific lens of how to create spaces and habitats for growth and comfort. My interviewees have all shared their own perspectives of a mixed identity, whether mixed racially or in perspective. I chose to interview my cousin, Jasmin Chou, a junior attending the University of Minnesota. She is a fantastic fit for the process; as an activist and storyteller, she gave insights into holding space as a mixed Chinese and Vietnamese woman. My second interviewee is my father, Khanh Tran, who immigrated from Cần Thơ following the American War in Vietnam. He now owns the Dow Art Gallery on University Avenue, which provides artists across the Twin Cities the ability to show art in a local gallery. His profession indicates a rift in perceptions from first-generation Vietnamese Americans. Although he is not mixed race, his experience as the father of a mixed child, the effects of assimilation, and the lack of spaces available to his identity provide an alternative perspective. My third interviewee is Ali Ross, a former classmate who is involved in activism regarding mixed race issues, especially within the arts. She is the product of numerous mixed generations and a pivotal perspective to my own explorations of identity. She is of Northern and Eastern Asian, Indigenous American and South American descent. Through my interviews and research, I have cultivated some framework on how mixed Asian Americans may create space in the growing mixed environments. In addition, the definition of “mixed” is challenged with the concept of generational “symptoms,” especially with the lost sense of self and assimilation. From my own internal perspective, the interviews and research have provided a sense of sympathy regarding the strange interactions with identity as a mixed person. All mixed experiences are different. However, solutions to the various divides are present in practices such as revisiting practices lost to assimilation and the arts.
RESULTS:
My experience with gathering interviews was largely successful and granted a surplus of reflection on my own identity. Our conversations highlighted the continuance of a growing mixed population. However, deep divisions still remain. These divisions are within the representation of self in society and internal divisions. However, the act of creating has provided some of the most powerful healing in bridging those divisions. There were a particular set of themes that my interviewees described as their own mixed race experiences and perspectives.

Defining “Mixed” in America
As a mixed person, both by racial makeup and by generational differences, the definition of a “mixed” identity becomes complicated. The word serves as an umbrella term for the various descriptions of an assimilation and breaching of a homogenous racial background. The experiences that make up mixed identity are not exclusive to specifically mixed race people. Aspects of two experiences joining into one person, such as assimilation, language and culture define the person’s mixed experience. My interviewees come from various mixed experiences.

Khanh Tran is a 1.5 generation immigrant from Vietnam, his experiences has largely been shaped by the effects of assimilation into American culture. Growing up between the largely white suburb of Apple Valley, Minnesota, his background is shaped by the experience of his parents working as first-generation immigrants from the American War in Vietnam. His experience is mixed, as he describes it as absent of one specific identity. I chose to interview him because of his perspective as the father of a mixed person, as well as his identity shaped under the narrative of an assimilating immigrant. Assimilation into American culture provides the basis of a mixed identity because spaces of safety for both the immigrant and assimilate culture decrease. However, because of the nature of the various diasporas, communities are made to grow together, as well as heal the various wounds of assimilation.

“I’ll never completely assimilate, I’ll assimilate to the point that I’m comfortable. Things happen for a reason, we are in this country and there are many immigrants. Sometimes I think, was it fair to be uprooted from my country and thrown in a mess of other people? To have to deal with bullying, racism, with all of the adversities?” (Tran, Khanh. 2019, April 06. Personal Interview.)

His experience as a gallery owner and curator of diverse spaces pioneers spaces for local artists to be heard.

Jasmin Chou can be considered “fully” ethnically Asian, however her experience is mixed by being both ethnically Chinese and Vietnamese. In addition, under the effects of assimilation, English remains her central language. This can cause rifts in relationships from communication. In particularly white spaces, she experiences the practice of going between identities to best accommodate those around her, “...in a lot of my academic settings where I’m still finding myself in predominantly white settings and I will feel the need to act and identify a certain way and that can express itself where I am conscious of it
and where I'm subconscious of it. It's sort of how I've been conditioned to do that since I've grown up.” (Chou, Jasmin. 2019, March 03. Personal Interview.) To be in spaces where the assimilated portion of one's identity yields mixed experiences. Mixedness appears in situations where an entire racial identity (in most situations) cannot be expressed in cultural spaces. Much of this depends on the assimilation that family goes through, as well as racial counterparts.

Ali Ross holds many racial identities, coming from a long line of mixed people. She is part Kichwa, Ojibwe, Northeastern and Eastern Asian as well as white. Her experience details a racially mixed narrative that extends national borders and continents. She speaks both Spanish and English. Her experience as a mixed person is unique, as her mother is also a mixed person. This provided an insight into what it will look like once our generation ages. Often the generational divides can become catalysts for identity crisis, especially regarding sympathy to the multifaceted multiracial experience. By being with other mixed people and sharing experiences, this can heal intergenerational trauma.

**Disconnection from the diaspora**

Acceptance from within the mixed race community is often the space where a mixed person's racial counterparts can flourish together. Because of the nature of racism and separation in social spaces, it is common for mixed Asian Americans to separate and “act” out a section of their identity. This creates the notion of “not being enough” or “being too much” of one’s racial counterparts. After conversations centered around being mixed, my interviewees Jasmin and Ali described the interest in reconnecting to their Asian aspects of their identities. This includes the attempts to learning their own diaspora's languages, practices and arts. This differs from Khanh’s experience as a 1.5 generation Asian American in the United States. Our conversations were focused within the notion of assimilation and moving as quickly as possible into the average American identity. While discussing the ability to exist as an assimilated Vietnamese person, he states, “There's not necessarily a space that [being ethnically Vietnamese and culturally raised American] can coexist.” His mixed identity comes from the implications of assimilation through generations. He expresses that his physical self does not reflect his character or how he sees himself culturally in all spaces. Although different, each reflect the process and product of a nation divided within race relations, assimilation and the “model minority.”

**Communication & holding the stories of elders**

All of my interviewees stated that one of the most important aspects in continuing the healing of intergenerational trauma due to immigration, separation and miscommunication is to ask about the stories of one's own elders. This creates avenues of communication and healing from its deeply repressed state under systems of assimilation. The representation of the Asian American diaspora relies on the notion of the “foreigner” and often that can cause rifts, both societally and intergenerationally. By asking elders for stories of their arrival in the United States, it eliminates the harsh implications of miscommunication. This was the most common concluding action step in interviews, research and my own personal experience as a mixed person. This is often the starting step to retaining and protecting the stories of one's diasporas and further acts of creating.
Art and creation as a means of healing
Art communicates the multifaceted nature of mixed identity. Because of various generational and linguistic barriers that occur as a result of assimilation, the communication of culture through practices such as fine arts and cooking are some of the ways in which mixed Asian Americans retain their cultures. Ali describes her connection to art, "I love drawing, I draw to express emotion in the moment, also things that I want to fight against. I like to put a lot of thought into the finished ones - meaning the inked and colored ones. I went through a phase of using different flags to make up the colors of someone's face, or someone's body. Nowadays it's hard to find some that is actually "full", the discrimination behind that [towards mixed people] is just - come on guys, we're all gonna be mixed eventually."

This is an example of the power of art as activism, especially to supplement the processing of intergenerational trauma. To create people that are symbolically able to take up space as ethnically variant in white spaces is a powerful exercise.

Colonization of the Asian identity
Because of the nature of assimilation within the United States, there are differences in generational reaction to the removal of culture. Khanh Tran is a 1.5 generation Asian American, who came to America at the age of 7. His family strived to work hard and succeed by the means of the bootstrap mentality, which required a quick assimilation into white culture. Because of this, he strives for equality within the workspace and sharing his profession as an art gallery owner with others of all races. His ideologies follow a traditional family-owned business trend. Culturally, he continues some of the traditional Vietnamese practices such as cooking and respect for his elders. Within the second generation interviewees, Jasmin and Ali, there is a heightened drive for activism in the artistic and cultural restoration of their identities. There are stronger politically left-wing values, especially in regards to education and the role of whiteness within people of color's spaces. Both generations strive to create, with a value in culture and in the arts, as the arts are a product of the upholding of culture. Both also share a level of cultural disconnect. However, Khanh is the only interviewee that speaks his native tongue, whereas the second generations have sought to learn their languages individually. In addition, there is a continued balance with the "whiteness" associated with the expansion of the mixed identity, according to a Pew Research Study done in 2015 which states that 60% of Asian Americans stated that they feel more white than they do Asian. The study also specifies that this can be attributed to many causes, often by how they are raised and also the cultural balances of retaining their Asian sides. When asked about being able to embrace and share more aspects of her mixed identity, Ali expresses, "Being able to feel comfortable within any group of people, without fear of getting kicked out, I feel like the people that have that power should work to change it, so that one day, I can be on the same level." Those that have power in allowing for the expression of a full mixed identity are often political leaders, elders or the ideas that are passed down generationally. She then states, “I think that our generation is beginning to understand what our ancestors did not see yet on what really needs to change. I think if there is at least one elder or one ancestor to change is what's going to help us the most.”
ANALYSIS:
My interviews demonstrate the evolution of the mixed identity when given ample time to process, heal and create. Khanh speaks on the erasure of personal connection with culture due to assimilation. This is similar to the sense of self of mixed people, as culture is only gained when practiced. He was unable to completely retain the Vietnamese perspective. However, complete assimilation was similarly not an option. According to the interviews and research, the characteristic of a mixed identity is a set division, whether considered positively or negatively. That there is often an aspect of one’s identity that is not immediately taught in their homes, or is openly rejected by a one of their “sides.” It is an absence of spaces for a complete mixed identity to develop at once. Because this happens with close family and peers, this can lead to stress within the foundations of culture. This can result in interpersonal racism within family members due to a person’s racial makeup. Another stressor of the cultural foundations is assimilation, which often results in the erasure of languages alternative to English. Those of the 1.5 generations onward tend to lose connection to their languages. Because of this, Asian Americans and other groups of color can lose connection with their elders through oral tradition. Jasmin experienced connections with family members largely through cooking and creating rather than language.

“I think a space where I can embrace my Asian identity is with my family. Like it’s usually in the kitchen where we’re cooking the traditional food. Granted I will feel out of place because I cannot converse in their native tongue; I don’t speak Vietnamese, I don’t speak Chinese. I would love to and I’ve attempted but being raised the way I was it didn’t stick. But even like that, you still learn to communicate, you still make the effort to” (Chou, Jasmin. 2019, March 03. Personal Interview).

Because of historical trauma, especially from war, there is a continued disconnect as elders process their own experiences. At times, this can indicate that the story of immigration will not be shared until then. However, the sharing of their stories often leads to an increased comfort within a mixed person’s identity. Similarly, affirming the state of a mixed Asian American’s identity can prove to improve the experience of processing it in the future. Ali states that her mother reassured her identity by stating “each part of your identity, each part of your regions, you are 100% of that. Each of your ancestors at one point was 100% and if you think to yourself ‘oh, that is not enough,’ then you are pretty much dishonoring your ancestors, saying that they did not exist. Even the smallest percentage - they are still in your bloodline to give you this opportunity.” As a mixed person myself, there is often a divide within how I can process my own identity. Within white spaces, there are times in which you may represent a whole diaspora, which can cause instability within one’s own identity. By stating the internal presence of ancestors in bloodline, we can recall where we came from and alleviate the erasure of self through assimilation.

To create within the mixed perspective is to merge multiplicities within one’s own identity. “It’s not that I physically manifest any sort of art, this sounds really philosophical in a way but I think that there is a meaningful way to exist meaningfully as a person... To me
that means feeling very confident and proud of who I feel I am as a person and every-
thing that has shaped me into that person at any given point. Including—and especially
including my family and what that means to me..." (Jasmin Chou). Capturing centuries of
tradition to expressing aspects of one's self in order to process is a healing practice.

Often mixed people may also find power and comfort in physical spaces and objects.
From cultural motifs such as the intricate blue and white porcelain vases to contempo-
rary Asian American artwork. To solidify aspects of culture through objects allows for
traditions to pass down in another form. Often our stories are shared through oral tra-
dition, which can become complicated due to language barriers. This further instills the
idea that art can heal the perceptions of the mixed identity, both created internally and
externally. In order to process the years of unpracticed culture through assimilation, the
dismantling of ideologies especially associated with the erasure of identity is crucial to
healing intergenerational trauma. This can also help to communicate further with elders
and ideas brought from homelands to America. “Asserting my identity to people who
might have very preconceived notions about it, usually I'll know if people have precon-
ceived notions by the way they're conversing or engaging with me. Like their body lan-
guage or comments that they'll say.”

ACTION:
Conversations in regards to cultural history and intergenerational connections can help
to reduce the pain caused by the division of a mixed identity and recalling the sources of
one's own bloodline can alleviate the trauma. Dialogues between those close to and also
experiencing the mixed identity can also provide healing to the intergenerational wounds
of not quite knowing all of the facets of identity. Holding spaces in which one feels safe in
their identity can be achieved in many ways, from creating ideal rooms and habitations
to confiding in family and other mixed people. It could also mean cooking or creating
with family in order to connect if a language barrier is present. To create is to manifest a
means of processing trauma.

Hosting interviews and documenting the immigrations of our families and ancestors is
pivotal in keeping the stories alive and for generations to come. To decolonize the per-
spectives of young mixed people is to understand where they come from and who they
are. Sharing the stories of family and peers can alleviate the alienation from their own
racial groups and help to bridge those gaps. In addition, I recommend abandoning the
system of percentages while equating them to people. Often people of the mixed identity
can fall prey to the ideology of the numbers and regions that they are from, which can
negatively affect their explorations of identity.

Conclusion:
In my research, I encountered the ideas of three mixed perspectives. They described the
internal processses of capturing comfort and space as mixed people. The American
population is becoming more mixed, however this also places the destructive influences
of assimilations and erasure of culture as a factor of identity crisis. By creating spaces of
habitation where the mixed identity is able to thrive and be nurtured, this can reduce the
pain of intergenerational traumas. This can be found in conversations with elders, other
mixed people and in art. To continue our cultures away from our homelands, we must practice retaining what we have as representatives of diasporas and educate those of our journeys, histories and people. We must practice the small gestures of creating, whether it be through arts, tradition or otherwise, this is how we as Asian Americans can represent ourselves and find connections to our pasts.
Diasporic Asian bodies on American soil

The Asian American experience is felt throughout the mind, body, and soul. To be Asian American is to belong to a diaspora. As a Hmong person living in America, I am part of a diaspora, as my physical body resides apart from my ancestral homeland. My mind and soul still wander. For my individual research topic I chose to focus on both the internal and external effects of diaspora on Southeast Asian Americans, and how individuals reconcile with these effects. I chose this topic as I feel it is important to mine and other diasporic Asians’ experiences to research. Throughout my research I found—being that there is no singular definition of Asian American—there is no singular collective Asian American experience.

My process was to interview three individuals with a set of questions focused on identity and diaspora. I wanted the research to extend beyond generational boundaries, and thus chose my interviewees with that in mind. My first interviewee is Tri Minh Vo, a first generation bigender Vietnamese American. I met Tri at a community gathering focused on the future of food, and they donned a hooded sweater that read “THIS IS NOT A DANGEROUS HOODIE”. Tri is well versed in the political identity of Asian America, and is the lead singer of a local punk band, Fluorescent Midnight. My second interviewee is my father, Lee Pao Vang, a 1.5 generation Hmong American. I chose to interview my father because of the personal disconnect I hold with my culture, and the desire to mend that detachment. I saw this as an opportunity to understand my father’s perspective as an individual ethnically born Lao, but raised and identified as Hmong. My third interviewee is my aunt, MK Nguyễn, a second generation Vietnamese American who works in public policy. MK is knowledgeable in the realm of Asian American experiences. I grew up learning from her and attending powerful activist spaces alongside her.

Although each interviewee had a different approach to the set of questions, they collectively felt they experienced a level of disconnection with their culture as a result of diaspora. When asked what being Asian American meant to them, Tri responded with a political lens on the term “Asian American”. Tri describes Asian American as a political identity, and that to be American is to be complicit in the country’s history of colonization and oppression. Yuji Ichioka, Japanese American historian, coined the term “Asian American” to “frame a new self-defining political lexicon.” Tri critiques the internal and external homogenization of Asian Americanness, which causes generalization within the community. They address that we, as Asian Americans, need to celebrate our differences within the community. The danger of self-homogenizing in the Asian American community is that it disregards the amount of variation and inner diversity within the collective community and leaves room for stereotyping and generalizations to form. Vietnam, along with many other Asian countries, has a long history of colonization from influences such as China for 1000 years and France for six decades. I asked Tri what their favorite food from their country of origin was and they answered with a beer named, “Saigon Scooter Selfie”. On the cover of said beer is an illustration of two white males with beards cycling through...
“That’s what I think about when I think of Asian food in America. We gotta make it appeal to white people. White people are marketing it to other white people. The roots of Vietnamese cuisine, not the roots, but a lot of its DNA owes itself to French baguettes and other French things. In that sense, white people are still selling their culture through Vietnamese stuff and that hurts me.” (Tri Minh Vo)

When prompted about their disconnection with culture, Tri responded that they do not wholly identify as Vietnamese, and self-describes themself as a “Jungle Punk American”. Like Asian American, Punk is a subculture and identity is political in its roots.

Lee took a historical approach to the questions, reflecting on memories and stories, which is an important aspect in Hmong culture. Hmong people do not have a written language of our own creation, so our history and heritage relies heavily upon oral traditions. Thus, stories are passed down for many generations. Lee believes that as a result of diaspora, this generation is losing touch with our origins. I asked how we can preserve connection with our cultures within generations, and he believes intergenerational conversations are the answer. He recollects a conversation with his father as an example:

“I talked to my dad, and he told me stories about fleeing the war and that brings up memories of oh, you know I do remember fleeing the war and hiding under neath some banana leaves so the Viet Cong wouldn't get to us. Just being quiet and going for days without food and when I revisit that, I realize that all of that was hardship for everybody. For having to experience that once and then coming here, I'm grateful to be here. Yet at the same time, I feel sad for the ones that are still back there.” (Lee Pao Vang)

As a result of diaspora Lee feels contradiction, claiming he feels that he is away from home, but has created a new home. He is grateful for where he is now, but an unsaid longing still resides. Lee also addresses the systemic aspects of diaspora, such as navigating education systems, the workplace and being accepted by society. Lee says that growing up, he had to work hard to be accepted as an Asian American. He also feels disconnection with traditional teachings of Hmong culture, saying:

“I feel it now, as I'm older, cause some of the teachings and the way things are done, I don't agree with. So I create my own culture within my own family and my own principles, but I still keep some of the old principles that I believe are true. But the ones that I don't agree with, I just leave them off the table.” (Lee Pao Vang)

Identity and experiences are always fluctuating. Whether intentional or not, diasporic people bring and leave traditions and stories and experiences. Due to that, identity and heritage are ever changing.

MK tends to speak and explain concepts in metaphors. She describes herself as a bumblebee and mycelium. MK describes Asian Americanness as being a “fertile field of
discovery”. She looks inward talking about the effects of diaspora:

“The challenges as a person from a Viet diaspora living on Dakota land laced with colonial toxins is very much similar to what everybody else is also suffering with. I think the day to day symptoms or manifestations of that, usually takes form and we can see it through self-doubt. Just questioning yourself. Anger like, unexplainable anger and anxiety.” (MK Nguyễn)

MK talks about self-love and self-perception, the inner effects of diaspora and colonialism. The displacement of people from their ancestral homeland, displaces their identity and displaces their heritage, which leaves room for self-doubt and a feeling of emptiness. She struggles with her relationship with her parents, speaking of how she and her parents struggle to understand one another due to the generational gap and lack of vocabulary:

“Thaiphy, he was like, you’re the only person who, I think wants to hang out with their parents more than their parents want to hang out with you, you know, and I think for them, like feeling connected and having a relationship with me means like us really not talking to each other, but just like being near each other and for me, that’s not enough. I want a deep connection where I talk to you and we’re like, sharing stories and, you know, like we’re hanging out with each other and talking to each other without judging or fixing or controlling each other. So, language has been really difficult ‘cause I can’t communicate to them all the things that I want to communicate to them. And I don’t think they know how to do that with me either. And so our relationship can only go deep ’cause we have such a hard time being able to understand each other. I think we seek connection in really different ways.” (MK Nguyễn)

I asked MK how colonialism affects the Asian American experience, to which she gave several answers, summing up with:

“There’s a plethora of stories that I could offer to you about the impact of imperialism and colonialism on people part of the various Asian diasporic communities, that point towards people just eating our fucking love and us not knowing how to hold on to it for ourselves.” (MK Nguyễn)

Colonialism, imperialism and diaspora take shape in many forms, and their effects are everywhere. Overall, the interviewees differed in experiences but the collective narrative is inwardly focused on identity and community. To process these interviews, I felt the need to write a literary piece without editing myself or using grandiose, academic vocabulary. That literary piece, navigate is included in this zine.

Sources Cited
how do i navigate strong emotions as a diasporic asian on top of violently colonized and toxic "american" soil? how do i handle centuries of genocide flowing through my veins? my feelings are not dramatized, i do not dramatize for anyone, these feelings simply are and will continue to be this way. i do not want to be complicit in this country's history. i did not ask to be brought here. i feel my existence in itself is colonization. i feel weakened by one half. one half. am i wholly both? or just half and half? or am i just one? constant questions that have bounced around i was brought into dakota land. here, but this mountains and wind cities, for our soil, for rice paddy for steamed i long for i heard have been their feeling now it's here own. another pinecones, we explode dispense all is a tumble

my mind since the moment this world, american soil, mai sota, my home is not my hand. jungles and villages i long for soil, i long i long for dirt, i long and nuts, i long blue hands, indigo, more, reckon isn't, some one say, we tending care of for too long, and to take care of our said we are like when set on fire, and our seeds around. auntie bee, auntie is my silicon, given. i go on life from death. aunt speaks in runs away and she going to me.
navigate

how do i navigate strong emotions as a diasporic asian on top of violently colonized and toxic “american” soil? how do i handle centuries of genocide flowing through my veins?

my feelings are not dramatized. i do not dramatize for anyone. these feelings simply are and will continue to be this way.

i do not want to be complicit in this country's history. i did not ask to be brought here.

i feel my existence in itself is colonization. i feel weakened by one half. one half. am i wholly both? or just half and half? or am i just one? constant questions that have bounced around my mind since the moment i was brought into this world.

american soil. dakota land. mni sota. my home is here but this is not my land. mountains and jungles and villages and cities. i long for soil. i long for our soil. i long for dirt. i long for rice paddies and huts. i long for stained blue hands. i long for more. reckon with it.

i heard someone say we have been taking care of their feelings for far too long, and now is the time to take care of our own.

auntie said we are like pinecones. when set on fire, we explode and our seeds disperse all around. auntie is a bumblebee. auntie is mycelium. growing life from death. auntie speaks in metaphors and similes and she cries to me. she smiles to me. auntie i love you.

auntie you have raised me. you paved paths for me. you have hurt so i and him will not have to. i still hurt but you have and are trying your hardest. i see you, auntie. i see your pain.

tri said. tri said to be american is to be complicit in its history. tri asked, how do you reckon with that? tri, you are a planted seed, grown tree, from the pinecone. the fall of saigon. tri, tree.

father. my father remembers our ancestral homeland. he remembers hiding under banana leaves. father asked grandfather. father remembers. father does not understand in the way i do. father still remembers not eating for days. father remembers the viet cong. father hurts. father you said things changed when i was born. father i love you. father you have your faults, but you work through them every day. father i am proud of you.

kuv hlub koj. khoy hak jao.

auntie is metaphorical. tri is political. father is historical.
of missing home

my skin
like honey
under mercury lighting
a light caramel

—

of missing home:
yangtze, yellow.
century, another century.
extricate, excavate.
bodies fled, bodies flood.

father nearly left you,
you cried too loud.
for him.
small bodies, opium.
limp.
small bodies, yellow rain.
limp.

militarized and terrorized.
our blood is thicker than oil,
my blood,
apart from home,
homesick.

soil beneath my feet.
the wrong soil,
the wrong plants,
the wrong grass,
the wrong scents.

grandmother,
she cooks, she smiles, she laughs.
she is not my blood.

grandfather,
he sits, he smiles, he laughs.
he is not my blood.

kuv txiv,
ua tsaug. kuv hlub koj.

i understand,
you are my blood.

we talk of missing home,
missing a home we've never set foot on.
a home so familiar,
but so unrecognizable and new.
can we return?
as of now, there is no place for us.

—

cultivate, create, make, and mend:
space.
MY SKIN LIKE HONEY UNDER MERCURY LIGHTING
A LIGHT CARAMEL

WE TALK OF MISSING HOME. MISSING A HOME.
WE'VE NEVER SET FOOT ON. A PLACE SO FAMILIAR, BUT SO UNRECOGNIZABLE, AGAIN.

FATHER NEARLY LEFT YOU. YOU CRIED TO LONDON.
SMALL, BOOBY, EPIGMENT, STUMPS, BODIES, YELLOW MAIN.
MILITARIA AND TERRORIZING.

THE SONGS SCENT.
SILK, NIGHTLY.
NIGHTS OF VAMPIRE, HEAVY COUNTRY.
GHOSTS FLEW, BODIES FLEW.
GHOSTS FLEW, BODIES FLEW.
Take the train to Raymond Station.

THAI TEA
THAI COFFEE
THAI HANDS?

NO, LAO HANDS
HMONG HANDS
CALLUSED AND TIRED
Introduction
The US has a record of wreaking havoc throughout Southeast Asia and displacing its inhabitants in the struggle for domination. For so many people of these war-torn homelands, they have had to seek refuge and asylum from the very governments that put them into such precarious points of their lives in the first place. As an Asian American that comes from a family who has experienced this firsthand, I ponder the impacts on how this has shaped my idea of who I am. These traumatic accounts of history have caused erasure of a lot of indigenous and ancestral knowledge that informed ways of gender, sexuality and spirituality for Southeast Asian cultures.

Background
I have spent significant time thinking about the ways in which white supremacy and evangelism informed my upbringing. I am a Hmong queer and trans person from a converted Christian household in Minnesota with parents who came from Laos. They sought refuge in the US during the Vietnam War with the assistance of missionaries and have since had to rebuild their lives here. The journey for them has involved working tirelessly in a society that demands their productivity while still going through trauma and raising a family. To grow up in that kind of environment would surely have taken its toll on the descendants of these survivors, of which I found myself amongst.

In Hmong culture, there are sayings that our bodies are vessels for souls that have chosen to reside in us when we are born into this world. My family has told me that if the soul or fragments of it become separated from the person’s body—known as loss of soul (poob plig)—they will get ill and even die if not aided. A ceremony is performed for the calling of the soul (hu plig), and is often performed by a shaman where offerings and chants are used to bring one back home to its rightful body.

It is a custom that has been lost in my family with the assimilation into American life in order to survive and climb the socioeconomic ladder. In that process were learned conditions of what it meant to be successful in the US, much of which were rooted in homophobia, transphobia and spiritual genocide. These values embedded into my family’s psyche were poison that eventually led to the separation of my own soul. I struggled to come to terms with what the world stated was right at such a young age, while feeling something prophetically innate directing me otherwise as a Hmong queer and trans kid. It took me coming of age, learning more about my roots, and reclaiming my soul to start the process of healing and unpacking what decolonization meant for me.

These issues were deeply meaningful in my life and I wanted to have further dialogue about it with my communities. They are matters that impact our collective well-being as Southeast Asian people. We need to address the pain we experience, and how we can
collectively begin processes of healing. It is through dialogue that we unravel the pieces that make up our souls and who we are as a people.

Interviewees
I've always connected with forces of femininity, and so I sought out matriarchal figures in my life for this project. They were all women of Southeast Asian diasporic roots. I shared space with each one through the interviewing process in order to understand their personal experiences in relation to gender, sexuality and spirituality, and to find if there were any commonalities throughout their stories. Within our communities, so much of what we know comes from the guidance of great women who lay down the groundwork for our livelihoods. My wish was to honor them and their insight through this form of storytelling.

Findings With The Interviews
Of the discourse brought about in these interviews, there were common themes that became apparent for me. I will explore them and share each individuals' narratives, while putting forth my analysis that coincides with these themes:

• For queer and trans members of these communities, the process of coming to terms with their identities can often be isolating and rigorous
• Perceptions of queer and trans people were often made to be shameful or kept out of sight because of misconceptions and ideas of abnormalcy in Southeast Asian cultures
• There's a lack of understanding in how notable queer and trans people were in spiritual and religious practices, especially those of indigenous roots
• These parts of our communities have not been well-known or documented throughout Southeast Asian history, especially those of older generations

Alisse
My first interviewee that I had the privilege of sitting down with was Alisse, a 24 year old Cambodian American elementary school teacher finishing her graduate program in Rochester, Minnesota. Her parents had survived through the Khmer Rouge and lived in the refugee camps of Thailand before coming to America in the 1990s, when she was then born. She identifies as gay and a child of refugees, and discussed with me the implications these topics have had on her history.

For Alisse, her queerness was something that became a personal struggle to bear in her own life. She grew up with words from her mother that made known the idea that “girls can’t like girls”, and how that was something viewed with shame by family and community members. This homophobia would cause much conflict for Alisse in navigating this part of herself since it became apparent how unaccepted this was in her culture. It was a struggle that felt isolating and silencing for her. This would lead her to deny this part of who she was in order to uphold the honor of her family and appease them as a daughter. Doing so created a lot of confusion and loss over who she was as she dealt with it alone.

As the youngest daughter of her family, Alisse felt that she bore a lot of responsibility that did not leave much room to experience her adolescence. She recalled, “I had to
babysit my baby nieces and nephews a lot, and focus very much so on my academics. I wanted to try to make sure my parents’ efforts were not in vain and make them, along with my community, proud. Then as an adult, you think about the things you didn’t get to do as a child and have the chance to experience the fun, brashness and boldness of being an American teenager”. As children of refugees, many of us find ourselves having to take on roles that demand so much, while sometimes neglecting the development of our well-being into adolescence.

In juxtaposition, queer people of this generation get to relive puberty into our young adult lives when coming to terms with our queerness. There is a dissonance created between these paradigms because there have been experiences early in life that provide wisdom beyond our years, but we simultaneously feel juvenile when going through the growing pains of exploring sexuality in later years. As Alisse mentioned in our interview, “I feel like my life has been delayed by five years because it took so long to work through the shame of being gay”.

Thankfully, Alisse has come to a place of acceptance in being gay. It has taken a lot of internal work for her to get to a better point in life. Being able to come across media that presented other stories of queerness contributed to the process of healing in knowing that she was not alone after all. We ended the interview with a call for more nuanced narratives about these parts of our communities, especially for women and girls in need of affirmation about their identities.

Lynn
I had met Lynn in her field of energy work as an alternative healer. She has been a certified Reiki master for over a decade now at the age of 29 years old. Lynn is a Vietnamese American who resides in Richfield, Minnesota. Her parents came from Vietnam over 25 years ago. In early adulthood, she had tribulations that opened her to a sagacity of what spirituality meant for her. As a spiritually adept healer now, she wanted to share her experiences and wisdom in the hopes of encouraging others to explore the meanings of their lives.

One of the things that Lynn brought up that was of great interest to me was the notion of our souls transcending time and space. She offered, “Our souls are very vast. We don’t just occupy one experience, but multiple experiences—we’re multiple dimensional. Our souls live all types of aspects in life. In spirituality, you hear people talk about past lives. Well, there are also parallel lifetimes that are running at the same time as this one where your soul is operating there too”. This made me think about the ways that trans people transcend gender as its prescribed by a binary system. We know that what the world has assigned onto our bodies doesn't align with who we are in our understandings of gender in this realm, and it leads me to think of how this came to be.

We took a brief moment to delve into her familial history with regard to religion. She shared that her family has practiced Catholicism, which was introduced through French colonialism. Southeast Asia has a history of Western interference that ranges from imposed governance to presentations of gender. Inspired by Lynn’s family history, I looked
towards aspects of Indonesian culture that tied together spirituality with indigenous functions of gender.

Indonesia’s largest ethnic group in South Sulawesi, the Bugis, have 5 distinct genders recognized in their cultural system. They recognize the common idea of man and woman, and include also: *calabai* (feminine men), *calalai* (masculine women), and *bissu* (meta-gender; combination of all genders). The bissu have been considered great spiritual beings that played central roles in the creation of earth in accordance to folktales. They were highly regarded amongst rulers, and provided guidance and blessings throughout communities. Even in Indonesia’s current state, with Islam being recognized as the main religion, bissus still bless upon the Muslims that make pilgrimage to Mecca (Guy-Ryan, Jessie, 2016).

Other examples throughout Southeast Asia (Davies, Sharyn Graham, 2018):
- Malaysia acknowledged trans spiritualists as sida-sida, often entrusted with the protection of high-ranking women and their regalia on palace grounds
- Iban people of Borneo had manang, trans ritualists who were famous dispute settlers
- Burma has shamans known as nat kadaw that fall in this category as well

This recognition of trans figures shows the existence of such people since the beginning of times and the importance they served to society that so often is omitted through Westernization of Southeast Asian cultures.

Lynn summarized in our discussion that patriarchy, along with colonization from the Western world, created the falling of consciousness of who we are as a people. She ends with this beautiful conclusion to our interview: “People being able to discover their spirituality helps them to remember who they are before colonialism tried brainwashing and making them forget their origins. It took away the magic of just experiencing harmonious combinations of divine femininity and masculinity. And it’s just about trying to bring about a sense of balance in what life should really be”.

**Chao**

The last of my interviews was with someone whom I have known my entire life. Chao is a Hmong refugee from Laos who has experienced the hardships of escaping the Vietnam War—what she calls the Secret War for Hmong people—and living in the refugee camps of Thailand before finally coming to America. At the age of 48, she has become a Christian and now lives with her family in Champlin, Minnesota. She serves as a medical assistant in having built a foundation for herself in this country. Besides the fact that she is also my mom, the journey that has led her to this point in life was something she wanted to share in uplifting her community and their stories.

In her lifetime, a lot of ancestral knowledge has been lost. Her family had been shamans with not much grounding in it before becoming Christians and living in America. Shamans played an integral role in how Hmong people preserved their collective health with traditional medicine in herbology and rituals of spiritual therapy. With these traditions being largely passed down orally, they are susceptible to ceasing to exist after the death of individuals who carry this information. Many of those individuals in Chao’s life
happened to be taken away due to circumstances of poverty, war and displacement. As a result, Christianity and Western medicine became more prominent to her when coming to America with the help of missionaries and eventually becoming a part of the medical field.

In her words, “I see a lot more American or Western medicine now than Hmong medicine. We also just don't know how to use Hmong medicine because there's no one to teach it. And the herbs for it aren't even here. I chose the way I know because it made my life easy. Everything is in the Bible and there's a church to go to”. When considering the sociopolitical landscape of America, where Christianity is highly epitomized as part of success, it would make sense why she chose this path that represented hope and sense of community when so much of her life had been filled with devastation. There were well means for her to align with Christianity that meant for better odds of establishing affluence and discarding elements of culture that lost its purposes. With a family to take care of, she did this for the sake of survival.

It made me curious how her relationship to the church and background as a refugee informed her thoughts on queerness and transness. Growing up, not much was made known to her about this aspect of life because it was not openly shared and accepted. She explained that it was hard to even comprehend such ways of being because her native tongue was limited in conceptualizing those ideas. Only when she had three children who came out to her as queer in America, which I was one of, did she come to face these realities. There were difficulties for her to learn how to be a mother to children that didn't fit into the framework she had been raised with. She shared that her church had preachers who condemned homosexuality and any divergence of cisgender normativity (the assumption that having the gender that matches the sex of one's birth and that heterosexuality are the norm), and of how she had to develop a disagreement with those claims from religious leaders.

With much being unknown to Chao about her cultural history and the queer people in her community, she has had to do grueling work to become more educated. She acknowledged that there's a long road for her and others in similar situations to make amends. The urge to carry on in her path for reconciliation comes from a place of humility to know that she does not have all the answers. As a blossoming elder, her willingness to grow in humbleness exemplifies how intergenerational understanding can occur.

Conclusion
With the ravage of war, infiltration from Western sovereignties, and intensification of commerce, these once expansive views of queerness and transness within Southeast Asian cultures have become diminished and lost. To this day, there are cases of homosexuality being illegal in nations such as Singapore and Malaysia when having been colonized by Britain (Davies, Sharyn Graham, 2018). The distortion in understanding the vast spectrum of gender and sexuality, and practices of spirituality that derive from indigenous belief systems, stem from colonization on accounts of these examinations. Our histories have been written to reduce the prestige that queer and trans spiritual leaders once held, all the more so undermining the general existences of these people. It's even
apparent in our shift to America where we find ourselves within these similar damaging patterns of this day and age. In order to avert the ramifications of this oppression though, we must be willing to inspect our histories and share the complex stories that come from them. It is through this process that we begin to understand our humanity and see it in others—altogether restoring our souls.

Works Cited

queer ode to my hmoob american soul

tw: gay slur, trans slur

do you remember
how I used to call out to you in my high pitched voice
how I adored to play with the dolls that pog would give us to pass the time
how I eagerly carried dandelions into the house to show off its unimaginable beauty
how I desperately tried to learn the cross-stitching ways of paj ntaub only to prick myself
how I dared to put on a dress and roam freely into the streets
how I revered at the sounds of bell like jingles from the xauv my sister would get to wear
how I felt so exquisite when I first painted my nails with dazzling colors
how I was berated by everyone for parading around in my new gorgeous adornments
how I winced at every bitch faggot and he-she
how I shielded myself from harsh blows hurled onto my frail body
how I would get beat and cry myself to sleep
how I numbed the pangs of hunger that probed me to eat
how I began to avoid sleep
how I learned to sit in the dark and cold on hours end in solitude until my bones ached
how I escaped into virtual worlds and divinely feminine characters where magic existed
how I watched in awe of my shero sailor mars save the world time and time again
how I started to celebrate the differences of what made me
how I found sisterhood that gave me the real tea
how I rediscovered hlub that my mama so graciously imparted
how I forgave myself for unspoken grief
how I came to find you after so long
how I want to make up for lost time
do you remember

how could I have forgotten

koj lub npe hu li cas
kuv hlub koj
How to Have Intergenerational Conversations
by Seng Xiong

Be Well With

• Being patient with one another
• Listening to understand with compassion
• Learning the other person’s perspective and upbringing
• Asking for clarifications and expansions on things not clear to you
• Finding common ground and relatability with each other
• Being willing to grasp the differences in levels of understanding
• Placing value in the counseling of elders and the youth’s capacity to grow

Be Aware Of

• Getting overly frustrated
• Listening to respond for self-justification
• Becoming defensive and accusatory against one another
• Disregarding and dismissing what each other have to say
• Seeking out the worst in others and point it out with ill intent
• Refusing to acknowledge truths and valid experiences aside from your own
• Placing Shame onto one another’s lives that builds resentment

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www.AsianAmericanYouthStorytellers.com