

Going Home Again: Searching for Asian America and Lost Legacies on the Railroad

United States of America

The School of the Art Institute of Chicago

A Transcontinental Art Project by Ameya Marie Okamoto

NOTE: The original title, "Asian America, Fractured Identities and Finding Belonging in Service Work" has been changed due to the project's shift in focus from Asian Americans in service work and the Nail Industry to a more generalized, historical, and sociological exploration of Asian American identity, history, and trauma - seeking to reveal instances of civil rights history and martyrdom in the Asian American diaspora that has been largely forgotten or hidden from the American public and absent from public education.

The complete video diary for this project can be found via the #GoingHomeAgainProject playlist on my personal TikTok account linked [HERE](#) or the hashtag #GoingHomeAgainProject on Instagram and TikTok.

SUMMARY

This summer, I journeyed across America via the railroad with the intention of using the country's landscape and the confinement of train travel to research, memorialize, mourn, reveal, contemplate and connect with Asian America's hidden histories. Through diaristic documentation, research, and reactive art-making, I attempted to reckon with my past and unlearn the shame and indifference surrounding my ethnic identity struggle, bestowed upon me by my upbringing as a 1.5-generation Japanese-Chinese American girl growing up in Portland, Oregon, one of the whitest major cities in America with its own abundant complicity in the internment of Japanese and long history of anti-Asian violence and racial subjugation.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Although the search for belonging and the negotiation of personal identity is a lifelong journey, with this transcontinental project, I hoped to find more understanding of what it means to be Asian in America and begin to answer enduring questions like how does one become American? And what do we lose by forgetting history and gain from discarding collective hurt? How do we reckon with the past? And what stories are yet to be discovered and truths that need to be revealed?

These questions, as well as the limitation of only being able to visit cities along connecting Amtrak routes through, led me to focus on visiting project sites that held particular historical but often-overlooked painful importance like the Michigan bar where Vincent Chin was murdered in a racially-motivated attack in 1982, the New York City alley where artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha was killed at the height of her career, Manzanar, one of ten internment camps where Japanese Americans were incarcerated during World War II, the location of The Los Angeles Chinese massacre of 1871 – as well as places that represent the joyful complexities of Asian America and Asian Liberation like The Forbidden City nightclub in San Francisco, one of the first nightlife venues to feature Asian American dancers and adult performers and Little Saigon in Houston, TX, one of the largest Vietnamese enclaves in the United States that developed in the mid-1970s after the Fall of Saigon.

Throughout my travels, I leaned heavily on my extroversion and interpersonal skills to connect with people I met on the road and learn more about the communities that I was visiting. In these serendipitous interactions, I found solace during challenging times: Lance Blackmon the Amtrak security guard gave me conversation, comedy and comfort after setting up a vigil for landmark hate crime victim, Vincent Chin, in Detroit, the conductor on the 72 hr train ride from Houston to Los Angeles called me "your majesty" every morning, a surfer-boy recovering addict from North Carolina named Christian, on his

way to get his teeth fixed in California, spent an evening learning about the Asian American history I was uncovering that he was

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never taught in school or at his brief stint at UNC – all of these individuals and many more I met on the road affirmed the importance of the work I was doing and showed me genuine interest in a history that Asian Americans have internalized as less than or undeserving of spotlight, research and humanistic care.

I leaned on my own income to complete this project and stay on the road for as long as I did and I am currently seeking more grants or art patrons to continue the project elsewhere. I hope to develop memorials at the sites that I visited that are definitely deserving of landmark, publicly funded celebration and honor – or at least get plaques installed. I would like to continue this project through the midwest and north, which I was not able to do. Hawaii as well as American territories would also be important.

Next summer, I would like to travel across Europe and follow the legacy of the all-Nisei battalion, the 442nd infantry, developed during WWII when Asian Americans were in a segregated unit, a unit that would become the most highly decorated regiment in U.S. military history for its size and length of service.

REFLECTION

I would define peace as a community relationship dependent on mutual liberation, empowerment and support. Although it would be easy to define peace as a social status and the exclusion of war or conflict, I think that peace is much more complicated and mired with human emotion, instinct and desire. It is my deepest belief that everyone deserves to have agency over their beliefs, words and actions and the right to protect oneself from harm both physically and emotionally is very important. In a society that requires the silencing and physical and mental control of the masses to keep social peace, there is no true peace. Thus, I would define peace as shared respect and support for everyone's liberation.

My project uncovers and honors the history of the Asian American diaspora and civil rights story that have been forgotten, ignored or intentionally hidden. In revealing these truths, and educating many about them, I have contributed to peace building by encouraging empathy, care, and coalition building through common hurt and fostered institutional, oppressive resistance. Through this work, I have empowered and gifted individuals the power of information as well as inspiration to pursue their own research into their own stories, history – and take agency over the dominant narratives of society and our country they want to correct.

PERSONAL STATEMENT By Ameya Okamoto

The experience of Asian American women is often one characterized by a sinking and constant loneliness. Constant gaslighting about our diminished identities, violent homeland histories and generational pain. The struggle to find your own voice in a sea of silencing and dismissal. I've been spit on. Assaulted and then threatened. Made to feel smaller than I already am. Followed home. Ignored. Pushed out and told to "know my place" as if there is a place for someone like me, and as if there is a place to confine oneself into for anyone. Growing up, it was hard to dream about the possibilities of who I could be, what I could become, and what it was possible for me to do. I grew up in one of the most racially homogenous cities in America, where I often experienced being the "only one" in many different intersections of identity.

When you are constantly surrounded by people who don't look like or relate to you and, it's hard to imagine yourself assuming a role beyond the socially prescribed caricatures of a society that tends to dilute people into only what is obvious. But who we are and where we come from fuels the way we interact with others; thus it's important we work to understand our differences, because when we are able to recognize them, we can effectively work together to take down the unjust systems that define us and our world.

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As an Asian American in social justice, I've struggled to find my place. To quote the historian Jeff Chang, whose book has become somewhat of my bible, Asians are "in-betweeners." In between black and white, complicity and freedom, and narrow self interest and equal justice. But racial justice impacts us all, and now is not the time to be neutral. Not only for Asian Americans, but for everyone. But how can you know how to insert yourself into the fight for a better future, for a country questions you, community that rejects you and history in which you cannot be placed? How can I share the Asian American story to the world in a way that builds empathy and understanding — and affirms questioning young people in their existence and history?

The #GoingHomeAgainProject is a reaction to the reality that Asian Americans are not visible. We are not represented in our history lessons, taught about our own history our discrimination – and the model minority myth often means that non-Asian people and sometimes Asian Americans themselves gaslight the racism, exclusion, hatred, harm and discrimination that AAPI experience in America and the history of violence and exclusion laws that are often dismissed, but which allowed the current reality and state of Asian America.

The #GoingHomeAgainProject was created from my personal soul searching and contemplation about the details above as well as my interest and anger at the more recent rise of hate crimes against Asian Americans, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, when the reality is that violence and exclusion against Asians has always existed, but the protections, acknowledgment and understanding of how this warps into a diverse, sprawling diaspora are not so easily understood. Asian-Americans have the highest income and education levels of any racial group in the country, but this mostly describes more recent East Asian wealthy immigrants due to racial positioning and immigration laws, while the "Asian American" racial group includes 50+ nations lumped together; many impoverished refugees and more recent immigrants without the same earning power: Cambodian, Lao, Hmong, Vietnamese immigrates largely immigrated to the U.S. via political or refugees because of war and have much higher poverty (and deportation) rates.