Collecting Memories from our Grandparents’ Lived Histories
Ludia Ock | Amherst College | Seoul, South Korea | Summer 2019

Overview
In the summertime when my grandpa wears a pair of shorts that rides up his thigh, I can see the scar of a wound carved deep into his leg like a fissure. One day, my grandma whispered to me that the scar on my grandpa’s leg is a shotgun wound from the Korean War. In that moment, I saw my grandpa not only as my caretaker, but also as a victim of trauma. My grandparents’ stories about Japan’s colonization of Korea, the violence of the Korean War, and the monumental industrialization that followed, have inspired me to illuminate the stories of the civil war era from the perspective of my grandparents’ generation. Are there spaces for elders to gather and engage in honest, profound dialogues to share their unique experiences, recollection of national trauma, and the vivid commemorations of the country’s transformation after the war? How are these memories passed down from older to younger generations?

In our modern era, people across generations are divided by conflicting values due to globalization, modernism, and technological advancements which impact the remembrance of national historical memory. Unfortunately, younger generations that overlook elder perspectives underestimate the devastation of traumatic time periods. Over the summer of 2019, I plan to use my penchant for portraiture to engage with Korean elders who experienced transformative, yet traumatic, events connected to the Korean War era, and increase the Korean youth’s appreciation of these monumental events. My project will join these portraits with the elders’ own statements in a public exhibition designed to generate conversations between the younger generation—high school and college-aged students—and the older generation—senior citizens. My project goals are to: (1) empower Korean elderly perspectives of historical national traumas, (2) bring visibility to the “Forgotten War,” (3) facilitate inter-generational understanding, and (4) illuminate ‘forgotten’ elder voices which are generally disregarded.

Research/Demonstrated Need
North and South Korea have been divided by civil war and historical, ideological, and political differences for decades. The Korean War, often referred to as “the Forgotten War,” marks a pivotal moment in Korean history that is unfortunately overshadowed by other world events. This project is derived from questions I raised in the Fall of 2017 while working as an English teacher at the Jongno Senior Citizen Welfare Center through CIEE, my study abroad program. My interactions with the elders in the English class have inspired me to question how national historic events are commemorated and how the perspectives of those who lived during those times serve to enrich our understanding of history. I believe that remembering histories of violence is crucial in achieving peace. If a peaceful society is one that seeks to understand why conflicts persist, it must recognize historical trauma and its impact on the present-day. While in South Korea, I wondered what kind of bridge existed to connect the Korean youths and senior citizens to facilitate learning across generations. It was evident that many of my same-aged peers didn’t have access to the stories that elders had shared with me. The discrepancy between generations, and the dismissal of elder perspectives is the driving force that propels my desire to question the generational divide I witnessed. I would like to approach this generation gap as a site for learning and sharing.

My project aims to examine history in a way that privileges voices that are not otherwise considered. I believe art can serve as a medium and a bridge to understanding people and how they connect with the world before and after experiencing national traumas in ways that words simply cannot perform. Portraiture can be used as a way to celebrate people, reminding them that they are important in the eyes of others. As Adrienne D. Dixson, a social science researcher, explains: “Through portraiture, researchers can demonstrate a commitment to the research participants and contextualize the depictions of individuals and events.”¹ Dixson views portraiture as being a blend of life history, naturalist inquiry, and ethnography. By recognizing how trauma affects its citizens and how this carries itself in an intergenerational way, we can make long strides towards humanizing people’s lived-experiences.

Preparation

While in high school, I organized a collaboration between my school and *The Memory Project*, an organization that collects hand-drawn portraits of displaced, orphaned, or neglected children from all over the world. My drawings from *The Memory Project*, found [here](#), and the artwork in my portfolio, found [here](#), focus primarily on portraiture which is foundational to my artistic interests. I have an agreement of partnership with CIEE for this project and I have remained in touch with the staff of Jongno Senior Citizen Welfare Center. Both are enthusiastic about assisting with my project upon my return to Korea.

Majoring in American Studies and concentrating in Asian American history has been helpful to me as my academic work has consistently relied on oral history methodology. I have conducted interviews with various individuals including scholars in the field of Asian American studies, Korean American transnational adoptees, and my grandparents. It has led me to appreciate the diverse voices that are overlooked, but valuable nonetheless, and has propelled my desire to create platforms for unseen voices to be heard. Ultimately, this project will bridge together my interest in identity-consciousness, intergenerational trauma, psychology, oral history, and my personal commitment to community engagement.

Timeline & Plan of Action

I have divided up my project into four components:

**Part I – Initial Research & Art Production** (Jan 10 – May 31)

During this time, I will review oral history methodologies and produce a series of sketches to develop a routine of art production that will prepare me for the demands of producing portraits in Korea.

**Part II – Portraiture & Story Collection** (June 1 – July 14)

Once in South Korea, I will visit the Senior Citizen Welfare Center on a weekly basis to interview Korean elders and arrange portrait drawing sessions. I plan to draw about 25 portraits. I will record conversations using a tape recorder. This audio collection will capture the voices that will be incorporated into the digital archive.

**Part III – Exhibition** (July 15 – August 4)

The Senior Citizen Welfare Center will provide a room where the exhibition will be held. I will use CIEE’s connections with high schools and universities in Seoul to connect with teachers, as well as leaders of student-led college organizations. I will edit, label, and scan each portrait before they are exhibited. After the exhibition, the physical portraits will be framed and given to my portrait subjects. These drawings may serve as personal mementos for their individual stories.

**Part IV – Creation of Online Database** (August 5 – August 31)

I will create an online database that captures the portraits and stories collected from my project so that the project is publicly accessible after the physical exhibition.

Assessment/Reflection

The goal of this project is to increase the visibility of Korean elders who lived through the Korean war era and help young people remember pivotal moments in Korean history. I believe my portraits will help elders be seen, heard, and empowered to share their experiences before, during, and in the aftermath of the national traumas they lived through. I will have feedback sheets available at the exhibition to gauge people’s reactions to the artwork and the stories they engage with. Additionally, I will collect their contact information at the exhibition to gather follow-up information such as their response to the digital archive. I will contact high school teachers and student-led college organizations after the exhibition to elicit feedback from their students or members about the remembrance of Korean history after being exposed to my project. Their feedback and comments will also be included in the digital archive I create. Through this project, I hope to transmit stories from older generations so that younger generations can access this rich archive of memories.