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Asian American Heritage Seeking: Personal Narrative Performances of Ancestral Return

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Asian American Heritage Seeking: Personal Narrative Performances of Ancestral Return

A Thesis Presented

by

PORNTIP ISRASENA TWISHIME

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2018

Communication

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DEDICATION

To Mary Sahlin Israsena na Ayudhya,
my mother and inspiration.

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This thesis was crafted and only possible through the labor of many.

Thank you to the members of my thesis committee. Professor Kimberlee Pérez continually offered me generous and warm guidance throughout the course of this project. Her attention to detail, wisdom, and care are written across these pages and extend far, far beyond them. Professor Richard Chu spent long afternoons with me contextualizing the experiences described in this project within the larger, ever-changing, historical, political, and social contexts of Asian America. His commitment to student and community development is unmatched. Professor Claudio Moreira graciously challenged me to lean into the contradictions and complexities of critical inquiry. His concern for representing the Self and Others was a guiding light for this project.

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ขอบคุณมากค่ะ

ABSTRACT

ASIAN AMERICAN HERITAGE SEEKING:

PERSONAL NARRATIVE PERFORMANCES OF ANCESTRAL RETURN

MAY 2018

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Asian American belongings, migration patterns, and transnational identities are largely constructed in the United States as static, unidirectional, and invisible. Asian Americans complicate these constructions through the practice of ancestral return. In this thesis, “ancestral return” is constituted through one’s participation in a university study abroad program to a specific place to where one traces her heritage. I use “return” not necessarily to account for a form of reverse migration; rather “return” here names the multiple, sometimes contradictory kinds of return, including “return” to a place that one has not yet been. This project examines how Asian American identities are constructed, disrupted, and transformed when Asian Americans traverse borders, time, and imaginaries. I use a performance ethnography and personal narrative performance methodology to center the memories and experiences of Asian American women who have practiced ancestral return. Personal narrative performances theorize Asian American belongings, migration patterns, and transnational identities within the context of complex and contradictory practices of ancestral return. This work contributes to the theorization of personal narrative performance as well as a growing literature on the return mobilities of the Asian American second-generation and beyond.

Keywords: personal narrative performance, Asian American, transnational belongings, identity

PREFACE
LUCKY NUMBER



Figure 1. Pieces of my Thammasat University uniform
Photographed by Porntip Israsena Twishime พรทิพย์ อิศรเสนา ณ อยุธยา
Bangkoknoi, Bangkok, Thailand, 2012

“Pick a number! Lucky number.” Uncle Kenny begged me for lucky numbers every time I stood at the counter hoping he would offer me something to eat. I only did this when my dad was out of sight, when he was in the back of the restaurant cooking. Uncle Kenny always offered, “What you want ma luk?” In exchange for my lucky numbers, I would eat rice with veggies and some mystery sauce—always spicy. No matter how many times my parents scolded me for ordering food at the restaurant, I still repeated this exchange with Uncle Kenny. Five random numbers for a warm meal. One day my parents would try to explain to my siblings and me that Uncle Kenny wasn’t really our uncle. He was not related to us, and neither were any of the other Thai people we called uncle, auntie, sister, or brother.

“Only lucky number!” he would insist. Here, at Uncle Kenny’s counter, I learned that Thailand was a place. A place that was very different from where we lived in northwest Ohio. It is where our “real” uncles, aunties, cousins, and grandparents lived. We needed money to get there. My parents told me that our family only had enough money to send Dad to Thailand for special occasions. I guessed, then, that one of those “special occasions” was when my grandmother died since that was the last time Dad went to Thailand. My mom never went to Thailand even before my parents had children. All of her family lived in the United States, but we rarely saw them either. They never visited us, and we were seldom invited. Uncle Kenny promised that, if he won the lottery with my lucky numbers, he would pay for my whole family to go to Thailand. With this in mind, I told Uncle Kenny the first numbers to pop into my head as I stood on the tips of my toes trying to see him over the counter. I never picked lucky numbers.

After my parents divorced, my siblings and I moved to Arkansas with our mother and I learned Thailand was a place that many people in Arkansas did not know existed. Classmates, teachers, and random strangers would ask, “You’re Thai?... So, you’re from Taiwan?” My

siblings and I became geographers of Asia—we had to explain and show the people around us where Thailand is and how it is different from Taiwan. In Arkansas, there were no Thai people that we called uncle, auntie, brother, or sister. There were a few Thai restaurants in Arkansas, but we did not know the people who worked there, and they did not know us. As a family, we ate our dinners at home because Mom could barely afford our grocery bill. Even eating McDonald's was a luxury for us.

One time my dad came to visit my family in Arkansas and we decided to take him to a Thai restaurant in the area. At first, I was mad at him because he pretended not to be Thai. Given the histories of regional migration, empire, and colonialism in Southeast Asia, this is something he could potentially get away with. There are some seventy different ethnic groups in Thailand, which means there is no typical Thai phenotype or mode of embodied recognition in the way there might be within some cultures. His body, then, may not necessarily signify as Thai to other Thais, but as ambiguously “Asian” in a U.S. context. There is further the way that bodies signify in relation to one another. In this instance, my father's body in relation to the white mother of his children, his racially ambiguous children, further shifts its racial signification. But, if my father wasn't recognized as Thai by other Thai people, it meant that I wasn't Thai either. I was exhausted from trying to prove that I was Thai to my classmates. My body, like my siblings' bodies, while it might in some contexts pass as white, is most often read and signifies as non-white, by body and affect, as many non-white, racially ambiguous bodies do.

Dad tried to comfort me by saying, “I want to see if they have good Thai food na luk. If I speak Thai, they will cook differently.” My father knew that for Thai people in the United States, belonging and recognition circulate through language more than through their racialized bodies. At the end of the meal, my father gave up his cover to the Thai waitress and they began speaking

Thai. My mother, my siblings and I couldn't understand what they were saying, and that impressed me even more. In an instant he *became* Thai—he only had to speak Thai. The restaurant staff glowed when Dad introduced us as his family. “So beautiful na! Best of both worlds,” the waitress said, looking right at my mother. Unlike my dad, I never had to pretend to not be Thai. At school I was Taiwanese, and at a Thai restaurant I was white. There was no cover for me to blow. For *me* to *become* Thai, if I can and ever do, unlike my father who need only speak Thai, I perform rehearsed narratives of racial, national, and familial relations of my Thai father and white mother. The narratives include how I can speak a little bit of Thai, but not fluently like Thai people, but yes, we did speak some Thai at home. And no, I had not (yet) been to Thailand. It would be another six or seven years before I arrived in Thailand. Luck did not follow me to Arkansas.

I wept the entire flight from Istanbul to Bangkok. It was early morning when our plane landed, and I had dreamed of this moment for nearly twenty-one years. I was finally traveling to the unfamiliar land that my father chose to leave many years ago. The heavy tears that fell from my eyes were not tears of joy. They were tears of guilt. Guilt that I was (becoming) mobile—transnationally, and socio-economically. While my family struggled to pay rent and the electric bill in Arkansas, I was on an international flight to study abroad. My college experiences were already affording me some of the many opportunities that would provide stability. I found a job on campus that paid \$10 an hour when the minimum wage was only \$7.25! I had access to the internet without having to take AOL trial disks from the neighborhood Wal*Mart. Financial aid covered the cost of a laptop. There was no chance of being evicted from the dorms since my program provided a housing stipend. Because I lived on-campus, everything I could possibly need or want was available to me within walking distance. And yet, all of these luxuries also

distanced me from one of the few things that had always been stable in my life—poverty. The more I worked toward my degree and career, the more I felt alienated from my family.

I purchased my flight from Memphis, Tennessee—the closest international airport to Little Rock, Arkansas—to Bangkok, Thailand with funds from my university. I booked a one-way ticket. I had only enough cash to purchase a one-way flight and I wasn't sure when or how I would be able to buy a return ticket. Two weeks earlier, I stood at the corner of my internship building in Washington, D.C. and I told my mother on the phone that it was impossibly selfish for me to accept the scholarship to study abroad in Thailand. Lying, she reassured me, “You have to go. I don't know how, but, together, we will find a way to buy you a return ticket. You have to go to Thailand.” My mother always wanted my siblings and me to know our paternal family and to embrace our Thai identities even if our Thai father was largely absent from our lives. College became my lucky number.

The immigration officer opened my U.S. passport and then looked up. In the bathroom, just moments before, I wiped away my tears and feigned my best smile. Part of me was hoping that the officer would either nod or smile at the recognition of my Thai name. Another part of me was hoping desperately that he wouldn't speak Thai, thereby reminding me that I couldn't speak Thai very well. The officer did neither and flipped through the pages to find my visa. I walked away, both confused and relieved, with my Thai visa stamped. Why didn't he greet me? I wondered. I expected him to say, “Welcome home!” as I had seen in movies where a diasporic subject or mixedrace character returns to open arms and is embraced, recognized, and belongs. This was my homecoming for gods' sakes! It was supposed to be the place where I would no longer have to explain why my name is Porntip, or how to pronounce it; here, it would be obvious. I would belong, be recognized, known and seen. I would no longer be asked questions

about “authentic Thai food” because I could ask all of my own questions in the university’s Thai cooking class. I would no longer be responsible for explaining the geography of Asia. I would lean on my father’s family to cultivate a sense of belonging in Thailand. I imagined that Thailand had been awaiting my return, just as I had been waiting for my arrival, and that I would be welcomed home. I was finally here. I was finally “home”—the place where I was supposed to belong. The moment the sliding doors of the Suvarnabhumi Airport opened, I gasped for breath. I was unprepared for the rude awakening of the hot, humid Bangkok air. The man I had just met, who kindly greeted me at the airport, turned to ask what it was that I had forgotten. “Nothing, I have everything, uncle,” I said.

The first day of class in the Thai Studies program at Thammasat University did not go well for me by any standards. For starters, I arrived late to class because I couldn’t figure out how to close the buttons on my university uniform. When my aunt took me to purchase a university uniform the previous week at a market in Banglamphu she didn’t know that I wouldn’t know how to work the clasps on the uniform buttons. And I didn’t know that I didn’t know either. In Thailand, button-down, collared uniform shirts do not come with buttons. Each university has its own buttons—almost like cuff links. You must purchase the shirt, the shiny cuff link-like buttons, and the fasteners to pin your shirt closed through the button-less button holes. My aunt and I threw all of these items into a brown paper bag when we purchased them, and I didn’t think to open it until the morning of class. I opted to live alone so my aunt was not there to help me that morning. And it was this button fiasco that made me miss the ferry that would take me across the Chao Praya River and finally to the university.

My first class was *Thai Language 1* and I arrived more than twenty minutes late. My heart beat in my chest as I slowly opened the classroom door. I was hoping the door would lead

me to the back of the classroom, so that I could sneak in unnoticed. When I peeked into the room I saw thirty heads turned toward the front of the room, toward me, at the board, standing right next to the professor. Channeling the only Thai apologetic protocol that I knew at the time, I pressed my palms together just above my chest, thumbs touching my lips, and bent my knees to bow toward the professor. I said to her, สวัสดีค่ะอาจารย์ ขอโทษค่ะ—“Hello Professor. Please excuse me.” I felt every set of eyes looking at me grow wider and wider. And that quickly, I killed my chances of making friends in that class.

Later in the semester, during a “field trip” to the neighboring food market, a classmate, who was actually also a student from a university in Arkansas, casually mentioned to me that the reason why most of our fellow American students don’t like me was because they see me as a show-off, a “cultural American,” who is just trying to be “local.” His words hurt me. I wasn’t hurt because I was surprised to learn that my American peers didn’t like me. I already knew that from the whispering, the missed invitations, and all the off-handed comments. What hurt me was that they still—as they did in Arkansas—did not see me as a Thai American, but as an American who only longs to be Thai. I was hurt, and I felt ashamed. I realized that they were, in a very complex and deeply painful way, somehow right.

Over my eight-month stay, the Thailand that I had imagined was not the Thailand I came to know. I had to reconcile those two realities and it would take time. I made a promise to myself. I would only return to Thailand under two circumstances: the first, if my siblings asked me to go with them, and in that case, I would limit my stay to one month at the longest. The second, if my father wanted to retire or be repatriated after death. In the five years since I left Thailand, neither circumstance has presented itself. I have also come to rethink my promise. I am leaning into the contradictions and complexities of living and experiencing the world as a

mixedrace Thai American woman. I am no longer asking Thailand for belonging. And I am no longer asking myself to belong to Thailand. I am learning that luck and belonging is something, somewhere, somehow beyond.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION TO HERITAGE SEEKING AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

I arrived in Bangkok, Thailand just before the New Year, where I would spend the next eight months. It constituted my final semester of college and the following summer. As part of my major, I could take a number of upper-level political science, international studies, and language courses. It was fairly easy for me to convince my advisors to approve courses on Southeast Asian politics, economics, cultures, and histories since my university offered a very limited selection of courses on Asian and Asian American studies. Behind the formalities of studying abroad, I had my own motivations for going to Thailand. My father was born there and lived there until he moved to the United States as an adult. It was my first time to meet anyone from my father's family. It was my curiosities about the unknowns—the unknown of my father's life in Thailand, the unknown of how he got from Bangkok to Ohio, the unknown of me not being able to fully communicate in Thai, the unknown of everyday Thai rituals, foods, and practices—that crafted, in my mind, a very particular, even exotic imagining of Thailand. An imagining that always included my belonging. Therefore, studying abroad in Thailand was more than a semester away, a broadening of my horizons, a CV line, and fun classes. It was an opportunity for me to live in Thailand for an extended period of time, to come to know the place my father calls home, and to consider my identity as a “mixedrace” Thai American in Thailand (Williams-León and Nakashima, 2001, p. 10).

I had always imagined my journey to Thailand as a kind of return, both a physical return, as well as an emotional and psychological return to my family history, and therefore, what I thought of as my “true” Self. Through this ancestral return to Thailand, however, I experienced exactly how complex and contradictory imaginations of the Self are. This project is a collection

of personal narrative performances that take Asian American ancestral returns through study abroad as extraordinarily complex practices with extraordinarily complex meanings. The primary question guiding this project is: In what ways do ancestral returns through study abroad construct, disrupt, and transform Asian American identities? That is, I take not only the study abroad experience as my theoretical concern, but also the ways in which the experience interacts with Asian American identities across social, relational, and structural worlds.

Through personal narrative performances, this project centers the memories and experiences of Asian American women who have studied abroad in their ancestral homelands. These ancestral returns are significant because they draw our attention to and expand our understandings of three key issues in Asian American studies: belongings, migration patterns, and transnational identities. This project is interested in how belongings function in Asian American students' motivation for studying abroad and in (re)constructing Asian American identities. What motivates Asian American students to study abroad in an ancestral homeland? Is it a desire for belonging and/or a lack of belonging in the United States? In what ways do these experiences impact one's identity? And, does heritage seeking produce or construct alternate or additional layers of belonging? This project also looks closely at the relationship between Asian American migration patterns and ancestral return. What can we learn about the changes in Asian American migration patterns over time? What is the meaning of Asian Americans "returning" to Asia in the context of the dominant discourses of Asians generally migrating in a single direction—toward the West and away from the East—and in this instance specifically to the United States? Finally, this project conceptualizes ancestral return as a practice of Asian American transnational identities. One does not have to cross borders to practice a transnational identity, but what happens when contemporary generations of Asian Americans actually cross

borders—real and imagined—by visiting their ancestral homelands through study abroad programs?

Ancestral returns are also significant because Asian American students use study abroad to trace and learn about their heritage. “Traditional” study abroad programs are located in Western Europe; a mere eleven percent of U.S. study abroad students study in Asian countries, compared to the fifty-five percent that study in European countries (Institute for International Education, 2016). Instead of visiting with family or going alone, Asian American students travel to ancestral homelands through an institutionalized study abroad program. Why? What motivates and influences Asian Americans to choose their ancestral homeland as a place to study abroad? Though it is not the primary focus of the project, I attend to the function and role that the academic institution plays in facilitating these ancestral returns because they differ significantly from a family visit or a personally organized trip.

This project is also political. It draws from and contributes to traditions of Asian American studies that changed the trajectory of knowledge production about Asian Americans (Espiritu, 1992). The first studies on Asians in the Americas were conducted by social scientists who wanted to document “the experiences of Asian immigrants in seeking to explain their tumultuous impact on American society” (Kurashige and Murray, 2003, p. 1). The “findings” have been used throughout U.S. history to justify racism against Asian Americans in everyday life, popular culture, performing arts and literature, and legislation. In the late nineteenth century, Asian immigrants across the American West were driven out of towns by white mobs and labor unions, and were lynched in masses (Lee, 2015, pp. 93-94). During World War II, both *Time* and *Life* magazines ran special stories using eugenics to help readers distinguish between Asian friends and Asian enemies (ibid, p. 254). Asian immigrants were the first racial and ethnic

groups to be barred from entering the United States; collectively, Asian immigrants faced more than six decades of exclusion and immigration restriction through federal laws such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Geary Act, and the Barred Zone Act. In the 1960s, Asian American studies was born when activists of the Third World Liberation Front reframed the “Oriental problem” as a problem of white supremacy. Asian American activists rejected being called “Orientals” and named themselves “Asian Americans” (Kurashige and Murray, 2003, p. 1). Activists became scholars, and by the 1990s, Asian American studies had all the features of an academic discipline. This project carries on the pan-Asian/Asian American traditions and activism of the 1960s that draws our attention to how race continues to function and emerge in the lives of Asian Americans within a rigid Black/white racial binary both in and beyond the United States (Espiritu, 1992). This thesis makes the political move of generating knowledge about Asian Americans for Asian Americans by centering Asian American identities, experiences and narratives. This project’s contribution, however, extends beyond Asian American studies and is situated more broadly in American studies. As Lisa Lowe (2015) argues, a study of Asian American identities is also a study of how immigration, race, and globalization function in the contemporary United States (pp. 5-10).

In the remainder of Part I, I outline the conceptual, theoretical and methodological framework for the project and discuss how I carried out the project. First, I define heritage seeking within the context of the U.S. study abroad program. I bring heritage seeking in conversation with scholarship on return migration and ancestral return and argue that ancestral return through study abroad is a form of return migration that has been undertheorized. In the following section, I frame ancestral return as performance and discuss the theoretical significance of personal narrative performance. Then, I relate ancestral return to three key issues

in Asian American studies: belongings, migration patterns, and transnational identities. Finally, I discuss the methodological and analytical theories and processes of personal narrative performance.

Heritage Seeking and Study Abroad in the U.S. Academic Institution

Racism can surprise students expecting a warm welcome.

Beatrice B. Szekely, 1998

I first learned of heritage seeking through coincidence. I had recently graduated college and took my first job in a study abroad office at a public, metropolitan teaching university in the south. A few months into my work, I was recruited to review scholarship applications for a federal study abroad scholarship program. Before each reviewer was granted access to the applications for review, we had to participate in a webinar series on how to read and rate the application materials. One of the most important criteria was that students proposed a study abroad program that “fit well” with their academic and career goals. I distinctly remember noting that “heritage-seekers” were not to be penalized for their desire to study abroad in a country of their heritage, as long as the program also “fit well” with their articulated goals. I presume they had to tell us this because readers would likely dismiss heritage seeking alone as a “personal” rather than an “intellectual or academic” reason or justification for studying abroad. The webinar went on to give an example of Chinese American students studying abroad in China to learn more about their heritage. It was then that I realized my own experience was exemplary of the webinar, given that a few years earlier I applied for and received the same scholarship to study abroad in Thailand. Before that moment, I had no idea there was language available to talk about my experience as a “heritage-seeker” or as a “heritage-speaker.” I was unaware that people were

generally skeptical of heritage seeking as a scholarly pursuit and that there were people who resisted this line of thinking by offering scholarships to heritage seeking study abroad students.

After learning about the concept of heritage seeking as a categorical reason for studying abroad, I turned to the literature on heritage seeking. Nearly all written work on heritage seeking scholarship in international education points to a publication titled, *Seeking heritage in study abroad* by Beatrice B. Szekely (1998). It took me several years to find the publication because Szekely's writing, which defines heritage seeking for the professional field of international education, is tucked away into a three-page "sidebar" in the 1997-1998 *Open Doors Report on International Education Exchange*. The Institute for International Education (IIE) has published this report annually since the 1950s. The *Open Doors* report is funded by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs in the U.S. Department of State, and quantitatively tracks the flow of incoming and outgoing students, scholars and faculty in the United States. There have been no official or institutional attempts, as far as I have been able to locate or identify, to track the number of heritage seeking students.

In "Seeking heritage," Szekely (1998) defines heritage-seekers as students who "select a study abroad venue because of family background—national, religious, cultural or ethnic" (Szekely, p. 107). She offers a brief, critical overview of the history of the U.S. study abroad program. In the early-twentieth century, study abroad was a program designed primarily for wealthy students at top-ranked American universities who studied in England, Scotland, Germany, and Italy. Universities presumed that students would have a cultural kinship with their hosts. I wonder, then, if the original study abroad program was actually a practice of heritage seeking and potentially a precursor to the suspicion around Asian Americans and other people of color participating in heritage seeking studying abroad programs. Eventually, these programs in

Western Europe led to the development of the junior year abroad model, where students would spend their third year of college abroad. Due to the sheer cost of studying abroad at this time, study abroad was limited almost exclusively to white, upper-class Americans. After WWII, however, the U.S. government seized the political opportunity that came with sending more of its young people abroad. As part of its postwar foreign policy efforts, the federal government established programs that would send students abroad to blatantly support U.S. nation building through “people to people” diplomacy. Through these programs students become regional/area “specialists,” studied languages of strategic interest to the U.S. government, and represented the United States abroad as private citizens. Since then, the federal government has developed a particular interest in sending students to places beyond Western Europe, given the shifts in its foreign policy priorities. Today, there are a number of federally funded programs that prioritize sending U.S. citizens to locations that are of particular, strategic interest to the federal government, such as Fulbright Fellowships, the Critical Language Scholarship, and Boren Fellowships.

Additionally, Szekely argues higher education institutions emerged as a “mass enterprise” around the same time that the U.S. government began funding programs for students to study abroad in regions of particular political interest to the nation (ibid, p. 124). With more people of color attending college, she argues, a noticeable number of previously underrepresented students were also studying abroad (ibid). In her exploratory research, Szekely describes several different accounts of heritage seeking: African American Muslims studying in Egypt; Spanish language heritage learners studying in Mexico; and Korean American adoptees studying in South Korea, among others. She concludes by raising a number of questions about the implications of study abroad as a site through which students seek their heritage. What will

be the role of study abroad in maintaining long-term cultural identity with the host country? Do family relations, demands or expectations play a role in the selection of a study abroad host country?

Szekely's questions remain unanswered by scholars, educators, and administrators across disciplines, institutions, and governmental as well as non-governmental organizations. Though not formally addressed, Asian Americans embody, experience, and communicate about Szekely's questions through their participation in heritage seeking study abroad programs. A gap, however, persists in the literature about heritage seeking experiences, particularly when it comes to Asian American heritage seeking. This project addresses and contributes to the dearth in the literature, in part through drawing our attention to the structures and discourses that construct Asian American heritage seeking practices in the first place.

Since Szekely's publication, what literature that has addressed heritage seeking has been primarily addressed to professional international educators—hosts, advisors, and administrative study abroad staff—and focuses on the generalities of heritage seeking, rather than the specificities of Asian American heritage seeking (see David Comp's annotated bibliography and the AEHE Higher Education Report, 2012). This thesis is more theoretical in scope than previous studies on heritage seeking, locating Asian American heritage seeking within and across theoretical and methodological literature of performance studies, Asian American studies, and scholarship on return mobilities.

Heritage Seeking as a “Return Mobility” and as “Ancestral Return”

The diasporic subject can never return to her/his 'origins.'

Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West*

Whereas there is a dearth of studies on Asian Americans and study abroad, scholarship on return migration peaked in the 1970s after Bovenkerk's (1974) book-length essay theorizing different types of return migration. Among the types of return migration Bovenkerk addresses is "ancestral return"—what he defines as an individual's return to their country of origin. In his quantitative, statistical study, Bovenkerk dismisses the "Back to Africa" movement and the "return" of the Jews to Israel as "'return' that is not return" because they do not neatly measure up to his fascination with birthplace, nationality, and ethnic origin (Bovenkerk, 1974, p. 19). Scholars today disregard this approach to studying return migration: "what is important, we assert, is the emic perspective of the migrants themselves; if they believe they are 'returning' to a 'homeland' to which they have an emotional and historical connection, then it is the ontology rather than the statistical measurement of return which is the overriding criterion" (King & Cristou, 2011, p. 452). The publication of Bovenkerk's work coincides with a European economic downturn and "large-scale return flows of labour migrants [within Europe] back to their countries of origin" (ibid). Scholarship of the 1970s focused primarily on European regional return migration patterns and almost exclusively on returns of first generation immigrants. King and Christou (2011) describe the 1980s and 1990s as "a lull in the scholarly output on return migration," but the turn of the century, and the rise of identity politics, brought with it "a resurgence of interest" and the reconceptualization of return migration through mobility, diaspora, and transnational studies (p. 452).

A major theoretical concern for return migration scholars has been what constitutes a "return." Long and Oxfeld (2004) theorize *return mobilities* as a broad category encompassing several different types of return—from "a physical relocation of the migrant with the intention of staying for some time, maybe permanently, in the place of origin" to "a broader concept which

includes return migration and repatriation... but which can also be imagined or provisional,” including short-term visits (p. 4). Despite the resurgence in scholarship on return migration, little attention has been given to the return of those in the second- and third-generation and beyond because they are often assumed to be traveling with relatives from the first-generation (King and Christou, 2011). Paired with the limited scholarship on heritage seeking, this thesis contributes to the literature on return mobilities, linking it directly to heritage seeking experiences by later generations of Asian American immigrants. Heritage seeking is conceptualized here as a return mobility; it is a means through which Asian American students (and others) are able to physically traverse borders and cross time and imaginaries by “returning” to an ancestral homeland regardless of whether they had previously ever physically been to their ancestral homelands.

A second theoretical concern is where heritage-seekers go when they make their return. In this project, I use Andrea Louie’s term “ancestral homelands” as a way to account for the various relationships heritage-seekers have to the specified place they physically travel to and trace their heritage (Louie, 2004). In *Chineseness Across Borders*, Louie studies the experience of American-born Chinese traveling to China through the “In Search of Roots” program—a program co-organized by Chinese and Chinese American cultural organizations that takes American-born Chinese to mainland China for ancestral homeland visits. Louie uses the terms “ancestral homelands” and “ancestral villages” to refer to the places that American-born Chinese trace their ancestry, as immediately as their parents’ homelands/villages or further to the homelands/villages of earlier generations (ibid, p. 41). The terms are useful for conceptualizing the place to which heritage-seekers physically go on their study abroad programs. I traveled to an

ancestral homeland—Bangkok, Thailand—the place my paternal family has made their life together.

The term “ancestral homeland” accounts for the different relationships Asian American heritage-seekers may have to their ancestral homelands. “Ancestral homeland” is not conceptualized here as a romanticized place or even a place to where one can ultimately arrive. Instead, the term acknowledges the complexity and messiness of “origin” stories, as well as the labor and in/accessibility of tracing, knowing, and traveling to one’s ancestral homeland. Unlike me, other Asian Americans and Asians in the U.S. may have previously visited their ancestral homelands on one or more occasion, as children and/or as adults, before their study abroad experience. Others may trace their ancestral homeland much further back in time. Asian American historian Erika Lee traces her Chinese ancestry seven generations (Lee, 2015, p. 391). Yet still, given the history of displacement, empire, colonialism, and genocide across Asia-Pacific, there are Asian Americans who, like many others in the United States, cannot trace their ancestry to particular places. The term “ancestral homelands” in my project holds the weight of this complex—real and imagined—web of homeland and ancestry politics.

Ancestral Return as Performance: Theoretical Framework

The story depends on every one of us to come into being. It needs us all, needs our remembering, understanding, and creating to keep on coming into being.

Trihn T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*

This thesis attends to how Asian American identity is constructed, disrupted, and transformed when Asian Americans study abroad in their ancestral homelands. For many of us, knowledge about our ancestral homeland comes not from our direct interactions with it, but through relations, communities, media, and shared practice, so while the “return” may actually

be an initial visit, it is also a gesture of expanding our knowledge through place. In order to account for the intricacies, complexities, contradictions, and multiple meanings of these journeys, I define ancestral return as and through performance. Performance here refers to the Self in the everyday. Performance of the Self in everyday life is a disciplinary and theoretical framework that takes into account structures of culture that produce and inform social identities (Madison & Hamera, 2006). Performance links the social and the structural to the embodied and the relational. Ancestral return is a performance that is deeply personal and fundamentally political, and when understood as and through performance, it recognizes and underscores how social, relational, and structural components interanimate Asian American identities. This thesis, then, is simultaneously an intentional (re)turn to the performance of ancestral return, as well as a performance itself. In this section, I outline the theoretical lens of performance by tracing performance studies through woman of color feminist theories of the body and identity.

Performance studies, as a paradigm, (post)(un)discipline, and field, takes the politics of knowledge production as a primary theoretical concern (Conquergood 1985, 1988, 1991, 1998; Denzin 2003; Madison and Hamera 2006, Madison 1998; McKenzie 2001; Pelias and VanOosting 1987). In *Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance*, Conquergood (1985) argues, “all performance has ethical dimensions,” especially performance that engages difference (p. 2). In mapping the ethics of performative stances, Conquergood proposes “dialogical performance” as a “genuine” and ethical performative stance—a stance that “struggles to bring together different voices, world views, value systems, and beliefs so that they can have a conversation with one another” (ibid, p. 9). Dialogical performance speaks to and with Others, not for Others. It conceptualizes the ethnographer, as an active performer, who also makes meaning with Others at the site of research. The function of

dialogical performance is to generate questioning, debating, and challenging one another, as a means to create knowledge.

I understand “Asian American” as an identity as a particularly interesting and important site for dialogical performance because it is an identity that is inherently conflicted. Asian Americans are often simultaneously constructed as already assimilated and therefore invisible, and as perpetual foreigners, outside of the American imaginary, who do not participate in U.S. cultural production (Hoang, 2015). Given the perspective of the dominant culture, Asian Americans are constructed as a monolithic group, and different from (white) Americans. But, as Lisa Lowe (1991) reminds us,

“from the perspectives of Asian Americans, we are perhaps even more different, more diverse, among ourselves: being men and women at different distances and generations from our ‘original’ Asian cultures—cultures as different as Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, Indian, and Vietnamese—Asian Americans are born in the United States and born in Asia; of exclusively Asian parents and of mixed race; urban and rural; refugee and nonrefugee; communist-identified and working class” (p. 27).

Acknowledging these differences, dialogical performance among and between Asian Americans, then, is a site of expansive knowledge, one that allows for the emergence of the intricacies, complexities, contradictions, and multiple meanings of heritage seeking to surface. Dialogical performance is a theoretical and methodological framework that resists dominant and normative ontology of Asian American identities by recognizing that they are not unchanging, but rather, dynamic, complex and evolving. Rather than touting static determinations or definitions, through its commitment to an ongoing dialogue, a dialogical performance generates knowledge that provokes further knowledge. It is an open rather than a closed loop. That is, I use dialogical performance in this thesis to foster dialogue for and beyond this project. The personal narrative performances featured in Part II illustrate and emphasize the political work of generating knowledge and making meaning together.

Dialogical performance is located in the practice of critical cultural studies and politics. In a move toward the critical rethinking of ethnography, Conquergood (1991) explains “critical theorists... are committed to the *excavation* of the political underpinnings of all modes of representation, including the scientific” (p. 179, emphasis in the original). This project takes up the *excavation* of knowledge creation by acknowledging and honoring the bodies and experiences of Asian Americans who have studied abroad in their ancestral homelands, and therefore recognizes that the creation of such knowledge is political. Tracing “the double fall of scientism and imperialism” in *Rethinking Ethnography*, Conquergood charts four intersecting themes for a critical cultural politics of ethnography: (1) The Return of the Body, (2) Boundaries and Borderlands, (3) The Rise of Performance, and (4) Rhetorical Reflexivity (ibid, p. 180).

The Return of the Body is a critique of those ethnographies that favor abstracted theory and analysis over bodily experience. The return here is an epistemological and paradigmatic shift that privileges the body both *in situ* and in analysis, and “shifts the emphasis from space to time, from sight to vision to sound and voice, from text to performance, from authority to vulnerability” (ibid, p. 183). Boundaries and Borderlands draws our attention to the functions, insecurities, and consequences of boundaries. Conquergood, in response, offers an epistemological centering of borderlands that allows us to rethink “of identity and culture as constructed and relational, instead of ontologically given and essential” (ibid, p. 184). The Rise of Performance emphasizes the paradigmatic turn from the universal to particular people and their practices; “performance-centered research takes as both its subject matter and method the experiencing body situated in time, place, and history” (ibid, p. 187). Performance is also a tool for decentering the “visualist/textualist bias of western intellectual systems” by developing multiple meaningful ways of knowing (Conquergood, 1998, p. 26). Finally, Rhetorical

Reflexivity notes the central relationship between knowledge and power, which is what Conquergood argues led to the politicization of ethnography. Ethnographers, no longer “shielded by the mask of science,” are aware of the rhetorical and political power associated with their research (Conquergood, 1991, p. 193). This approach to ethnography goes beyond the call for dialogical performance; it turns ethnography toward a critical cultural politics of the body, borderlands, performance, and reflexivity. It turns this project toward a critical cultural politics of Asian American bodies, the East-West borderlands, ancestral return as performance, research as performance, and (self-) reflexivity.

If the function of dialogical performance, then, is to resist conclusions, and if the function of rethinking ethnography is to unsettle epistemological dominance, what outcomes can we expect from a project about Asian American heritage seeking as performance? First, in *Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research*, Conquergood (1988) argues “the most radical promise” of performance studies is its ability to acknowledge and attend to multiple, simultaneously different ways of knowing; it pulls “the pin on the binary opposition between theory and practice” (p. 145). In other words, performance-centered research can be logical and creative, practical and experimental, concrete and abstract, empirical and hypothetical. “This embrace of different ways of knowing,” Conquergood stresses, “is radical because it cuts to the root of how knowledge is organized in the academy” (ibid, p. 146).

This project offers a perspective from the *outsider within*; grounded in Black Feminist Thought, the outsider within brings experiential ways of knowing into the research process and uses experience “as a valid source of knowledge for critiquing sociological facts and theories” (P.H.C., 1986, p. S30). Patricia Hill Collins (1986) calls this “an excitement to creativity”—an opportunity to create new knowledge that from other positionalities may not (or cannot) be

known by others (p. S15). It is a deliberate turn to the body, how it is positioned, and what it knows. Through this view from within, from the body, my fellow Asian American heritage-seekers and I have access to the hidden, the indirect, and the silence outsiders may not be able to observe because we ourselves participate in the hidden, the indirect, and the silence. Chicana Feminists Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (2002) name this “a theory in the flesh”—a theory that accounts for our physical realities and acknowledges the contradictions of “naming our selves and telling our stories in our own words” (p. 21). By creatively attending to the complexities of heritage seeking as ancestral return, as return mobility, and as performance, we generate knowledge about Asian American experiences by, for, and with Asian Americans. The reconfiguration of academic knowledge production about Asian Americans is theoretical and political. Further, this maneuver, Teresa Córdova (1998) argues, makes the University a better place because it reveals how power functions in the creation of knowledge and the academy (p. 20).

Secondly, this project is designed to be a dialogical coperformance text, one that brings “audiences back into the text, creating a field of shared emotional experience,” and invites each of us to witness, reflect, and act upon the social critique (Denzin, 2001, pp. 15-16; Denzin, 2003, p. xi). Coperformance refuses the separation and hierarchy, the unidirectional and asynchronous conceptualization of communication and performance, as it takes into account the polyphonic and relational processes of meaning making that is performance and speech. In other words, it is not the performer who speaks to a listening audience. Rather, the performer and audience are constantly communicating and making meaning with one another. Through the sharing of personal narratives, in particular, we come to understand our Selves better and we methodologically invite audiences to consider representations of the Self in a particular social

context. Trinh Minh-ha (1989) reminds us that “the story depends upon every one of us to come into being” (p. 119). There is no story without bodies. Bodies tell stories, bodies hear stories, and bodies analyze stories (Langellier, 1999). This thesis acts as an invitation for audiences to participate in the analysis—a kind of collective, collaborative analysis—of the social world. Bryant Keith Alexander (2000) theorizes this process as “generative autobiographical performance”—a collaborative process of transformation through a combination of “audience reflexivity, reconstructed memory, synecdochial relationships, affirmative aesthetic of unification, and intertextuality” (p. 100). Such a collective, collaborative analysis activates Norman Denzin’s (2003) *politics of resistance* and D. Soyini Madison’s (1998) *politics of possibility*. The performance ethic of resistance shows “how specific policies and practices affect and effect their lives” (Denzin, 2003, p. 27).

This project shows how the practice of heritage seeking, and related policies, affect and effect the lives of individual Asian Americans. The performance ethic of possibility “seeks to understand how power and ideology operate through and across systems of discourse... [and is] rooted in the concepts of care and shared governance” (ibid, p. 20). From a performance perspective, the possibility, argues Madison (1998), is that social critique—in this project, the collective, collaborative analysis—can become social transformation. The politics of possibility extends the reach of this work by not only describing how heritage seeking impacts those who practice it, but also by placing heritage-seekers in a particular moment in time, exposing how power and ideology function through Asian American heritage seeking, and therefore, providing a possibility for transforming how power and ideology function. Transformations may exist as both transformations of social understanding of Asian American belongings, migration patterns, and transnational identities, as well as material transformations that are informed by social

transformations. For example, the rethinking of migration patterns as multidirectional, and never complete, can materially inform how we process, consider, issue, and seek national citizenship or other immigration statuses. This project ultimately opens new possibilities for understanding and being in the world.

Personal Narrative Performances of Ancestral Return

I came to Hong Kong not because I was Chinese, but because I was not Chinese enough.

Q.M. Zhang, *Accomplice to Memory*

Drawing on traditions of performance ethnography and personal narrative performance, this project centers the experiences and perspectives of Asian Americans through co-created narratives about ancestral return. Personal narratives are everywhere around us. They are part of our everyday lives. Performance studies provides a framework for understanding these narratives and for understanding their function in the social world. In this project, performance turns our attention to how narratives of Asian American belongings, migration patterns, and transnational identities are formed, performed, and reformed. As Langellier (1991) argues, personal narrative performance “*constitutes* identities and experience, producing and reproducing that to which it refers” (p. 128, italics in the original). Therefore, in addition to considering the structures that construct identities, we must also consider how personal narrative performances also both “do” and “undo” constructions of identity. By creating stories about Asian American experiences, we cannot escape discourses of power that surround the body—race, gender, sexuality, class, dis/ability (Langellier, 1991; Minh-ha, 1989; Moraga and Anzaldúa, 2002). Personal narrative performance, instead, attends to discourses of power.

Personal narrative performance emerges from the performative turn that Conquergood (1991) describes as a critical cultural politics of the body, borderlands, and reflexivity. As an

embodiment of a critical cultural politics, personal narrative performance “radically contextualize[s]” experience through the narrator’s voice and body, through an ongoing dialogue between the narrator and the characters, as well as through an ongoing dialogue between the narrator and the audiences (Langellier, 1991, p. 127). It situates the everyday within “the forces of discourses that shape language, identity, and experience” (ibid). By radically contextualizing ancestral returns as performance, we illuminate the powers that shape discourse about Asian American belongings, migration patterns, and transnational identities.

Asian American Belongings, Migration Patterns and Transnational Identities

Gradually we began to be visible, although not necessarily seen the way we wished.

Then we had to discover what it meant to be in the light.

Helen Zia, *Asian American Dreams*

By centering personal narrative performances, I argue Asian American ancestral returns are sociopolitical moments which encapsulate three key issues in Asian American studies: belongings, migration patterns, and transnational identities. In this section, I briefly outline each of the three key issues and raise questions for each issue this project contemplates.

Central to the inception of Asian American studies in the Third World Liberation Front with Black and Latinx activists, Asian American belongings continue to interest scholars today. Scholarship on Asian American belongings largely focuses on the deeply contradictory experience of simultaneous exclusion and inclusion (Park, 2015, p. 16). “These definitions have cast Asian immigrants both as persons and populations to be integrated into the national political sphere,” Lowe (1996) explains, “and as the contradictory, confusing, unintelligible elements to be marginalized and returned to their alien origins” (p. 4). On the one hand, Asians in the U.S. are viewed as models of assimilation—commonly referred to as *the model minority*. The model

minority myth, made evermore popular by the Pew Research Center (Taylor et al, 2012), ties the assimilation of Asian Americans to morality via its “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality. Once unassimilable low wage laborers and the objects of exclusionary immigration laws, Asians are now “*hyperassimilated*”—“enjoying high educational achievement, good (white) neighborhoods, and interracial marriages to whites” (Kim, 2015, p. 12, italics in the original; Park, 2015, p. 16). A seemingly positive representation of Asian Americans, the model minority myth erases the differences and disparities among Asian Americans. It does not account for those who live in poverty, have limited access to social capital and higher education, and the intense racism many Asian Americans face today. It is also used to compare Asian Americans with other racial groups, most commonly African/Black Americans, and with white Americans who feel threatened by Asian American success (Lee, 2015, p. 375). On the other hand, Asians in the U.S. are viewed as ultimately unassimilable—commonly referred to as *perpetual foreigners*. In order for the model minority myth to function and prosper, Asian Americans must be and remain Othered. Erika Lee (2015) argues, “Americans formed their own type of Orientalism,” as Asians migrated to the U.S. and were deemed “backward, submissive, and inferior” (pp. 6-8). As perpetual foreigners, Asians can never be Americans because Asian Americans are perpetually tied to “an Orientalist drama that requires they play the outsiders repeatedly, all in an effort to establish their legitimate role as insiders” (Park, 2015, p. 17).

These two projects—the model minority myth and the perpetual foreigner—can be collapsed into what Park calls the “paradoxical nature of American citizenship, in which the state presents itself as a democratic, unified body where all subjects are granted equal access, while it also demands differences—of race, class, gender, and locality—be subordinated in order for those subjects to qualify for membership” (ibid). That is, in order for Asians to be “American,”

they must be and remain Othered, but not to the extent they are exotic, Oriental, or unassimilable—they must be able to perform both Otherness and Americanness. This raises an important question for Asian American heritage-seekers. If the nature of one’s citizenships and belongings is based on their subordinated “Oriental” difference, does an ancestral return offer different, possibly liberated, citizenships and belongings? Critical of romanticizing the ancestral homeland, this thesis extends our understanding of Asian American belongings by contemplating the function of belonging in the practice of heritage seeking. What role does belonging take in the motivation for and the experience of ancestral return for Asian Americans? Is non-belonging in part a catalyst for ancestral return? And, what kinds of belongings does it offer or refuse?

Immigration histories and migration patterns are central to Asian American studies and to American studies more broadly. We cannot fully understand race and immigration in the U.S. without acknowledging and contemplating the generations of histories of those who have come from Asia (Lee, 2015). Immigration in the United States is largely framed as a “push-and-pull” phenomenon; that is, desperation supposedly pushes people out of their homelands, and the U.S. pulls them in, offering its “American Dream” of economic opportunity, democracy, and freedom (ibid, p. 4). This, of course, is only part of the story. The grand narrative of the United States as a “nation of immigrants” is dominated by normative, assimilationist, Eurocentric, transatlantic stories of those who came to the U.S. through Ellis Island, masking the array of transpacific migration patterns of peoples from Asia. The narrative of immigration, bound to the nation-state, does not account for multidirectional migration experiences and distorts the role that the U.S. plays in Asian/American migration patterns. It erases the Chinese Exclusion Act and the Barred Zone Act and downplays U.S. empire and military involvement across Asia and the Pacific. Therefore, this thesis focuses on “migration patterns,” which instead do account for

multidirectional migration experiences and expose the role that the U.S. plays in Asian/American migration. In other words, migrants and migration patterns illuminate the complex, structural and social relationships between Asian Americans and the U.S. nation without distinguishing between “legal” immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented immigrants. These distinctions, as Eithne Luibhéid (2001) argues, “are imposed by the state and general public on migrants in order to delimit the rights that they will have or be denied, and the forms of surveillance, discipline, and normalization to which they will be subjected” (p. xi). It is through these distinctions, then, that the U.S. is able to maintain its grand narrative of immigration and justify its calls for assimilation and political and military involvement in Asia.

Asian American scholars generally agree that there are four major overlapping stages of Asian migration patterns to the United States: pre-exclusion, exclusion, postwar, and post-exclusion (see S. Lee, 2015; and E. Lee, 2015). Each stage is irrefutably marked by the economic, social, and political factors of the times. Many of the earliest migrants from Asia came to the U.S. to obtain wealth and to return to their homelands. The majority, however, never returned, but settled in the Americas for a variety of reasons (E. Lee, 2015, p. 109). Today, depending on a number of factors, such as socioeconomic and immigration status, Asian Americans are able to return to Asia—both temporarily and permanently (ibid, p. 358). The fact that (some) Asian Americans are able to travel to Asia today is significant, argues Khu (2001, p. xi). Not only do Asian Americans have the funds and time to travel to Asia, but they are also choosing to use those means to travel to Asia. This thesis further develops Khu’s argument by noting that the circumstances under which Asian Americans travel to Asia is also significant. Asian American heritage seeking through study abroad is a practice that has been both unaccounted for and understudied. The limited number of studies that I have located on Asian

American heritage seeking through study abroad are two unpublished master's theses (Doan, 2002; Rubin, 2003) and one conference presentation (Bond, 1998). I attribute this gap in part to the hyperinvisibility of Asian Americans within a Black/white racial binary. As Sharon Holland (2012) argues, "we cannot get away from the Black/white binary while thinking through the work of racism" (p. 7). Though the Black/white binary does not necessarily account for non-Black people of color, non-Black people of color in the U.S. are constituted and understood through the Black/white binary (see especially Sharon Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism*, 2012). Furthermore, the Black/white binary largely constructs homeland politics, diaspora, and longings for ancestral return as a primarily Black or African American issue. This project in no way underestimates the significance or importance of these issues in Black and African American communities. Instead, this project considers how race—and more specifically, white supremacy—in the U.S. is produced through a Black/white binary to maintain structures of power.

Even in scholarship about return migration, as I discussed earlier in *Heritage Seeking as a "Return Mobility"* and as "Ancestral Return," there is no mention of Asian Americans participating in heritage seeking programs through study abroad as a return migration practice. In this thesis, I deliberately connect the migration patterns of Asian Americans with the practice of ancestral return through heritage seeking study abroad programs. What is the relationship between migration patterns and ancestral returns that are facilitated by academic institutions? How does this relationship inform our understandings of Asian American migration patterns in the twenty-first century? And, what can we learn about how race constructs belongings and identities through migration patterns and practices?

Transnational approaches to Asian American studies continue to be a heated debate in the field. Some scholars argue a transnational approach to studying Asian American issues “denationalizes” Asian American studies, displacing the U.S. nation’s role in Asian American problems with classism, sexism, heterosexism, and racism (Duong, 2015, p. 234). Others argue the importance of a transnational approach to Asian American studies is that it critiques both U.S.-centrism and other forms of nationalism within a given local and global context (ibid). Despite the ongoing debates about using a transnational approach to study Asian American issues, scholars generally agree that Asian American identities are transnational in nature. Transnational Asian American identities are marked by “the intricate mapping of social experience across axes of time and space,” a contemporary condition of “interconnectivity between people and places” (ibid, p. 232-233). Scholars note that this contemporary ontology of “here” *and* “there” challenges the notion of assimilation, and the dichotomy of becoming “American” or not (ibid, p. 233; Lee, 2015, p. 11).

Erika Lee (2015) warns, however, “not all immigrants are transnational”; there are a variety of factors—gender, class, immigration status, religion, education, and income—that influence one’s ability to carry out a transnational identity and life (p. 358). For example, today Muslim-identifying Asian Americans (or those who are racialized and assumed to be Muslims) may be considered suspect or a threat for engaging in transnational activities that other Asian Americans practice, such as sending funds home or making frequent trips to the homeland. This is one of the many examples in U.S. history demonstrating how Asian American identities are fragile and are subject to surveillance.

One does not have to cross national borders, however, to live a transnational life. Transnational activities range from the consumption of cultural products—media, cosmetics,

foods, healthcare, clothes and accessories—to flexible family relations, to strategic citizenship, and temporary and permanent return migrations (Kurashige and Murray, 2003). Lee argues, “to understand transnational immigrant experiences is to understand what it means to be American in a global age” (ibid, p. 359). As Asian American scholars across numerous disciplines continue to theorize and prioritize research on identities, we must attend to the ways in which Asian Americans are practicing their transnational identities because these practices reveal how power and ideology materialize in the everyday lives of racialized people across borders. Among those practices are ancestral returns through study abroad programs. In this thesis, I link the practice of heritage seeking to larger questions of transnational Asian American identities. What does the heritage seeking practice tell us about how Asian American identities are constructed? And, centrally here, what role does the physical “return” take in (re)constructing, disrupting, and transforming transnational Asian American identities?

Method

This thesis centers the experiences of Asian Americans who make ancestral returns through U.S. study abroad programs. I refer to my fellow Asian American heritage-seekers as “co-performers.” As discussed in the theoretical framework, personal narrative performances function as both the “data” and the “analysis.” Personal narrative performances are crafted in various forms. One form is the personal history narrative, theorized by Norman Denzin (2001) as “a reconstruction of a life based on interviews, conversation, self-stories, and personal experience stories”—it is “the story of a life” (p. 61). Personal history narratives locate people in a specific place, a particular moment in political and social history, that connect us “to others, to community, to morality and the moral self” (ibid, p. 60). These are the stories we tell about ourselves and our relationships to the social world. I elicit and craft personal history narratives as

performance to *describe* an individual's life in order to *explain* and *critique* the social world, which is to recognize that personal narratives are situated within and draw from cultural discourses *and* embody experience and memory (Langellier and Peterson, 2006). The analytical explanations and critiques are made at two levels. The first level of analysis occurs *in* the performance between my co-performers and me—together, through dialogue, through memory, through storytelling, we explain and critique our experiences within various social worlds. The second level of analysis occurs *between* the performance and the audiences—as a copformance text, audiences are invited to participate in the process of critique. These multi-layered, collaborative analyses establish a politics of possibility (Madison, 1998); they not only describe how ancestral return impacts those of us who practice it, but they also illuminate how power functions across these experiences and what possibilities there are for transforming that power through these experiences.

I worked one-on-one with five Asian American women co-performers to create five personal narrative performances about ancestral return. My position as the leader and a co-performer for this project is grounded in my own experience as an Asian American woman who studied abroad in my ancestral homeland. I have made what I take to be an ethical and political decision to share parts of my personal histories with my co-performers as they share theirs with me. Unlike traditional qualitative research interview methods, performance ethnography and personal narrative performance centers and insists upon the relationship between the researcher/interviewee/narrator/audience, and in fact, further understands storytelling as performance (Conquergood, 1988; Langellier and Peterson, 2006). Alongside my co-performers, we, as Asian American women, generate knowledge about Asian American belongings, migration patterns, and transnational identities through dialogue and creative, performative

writing. Pieces of my personal history narrative are weaved together with pieces of my co-performers' personal history narratives, as “generative autobiography”—a collaborative, performance narrative form that uses the autobiographical to make social and cultural critique (Alexander 2000).

On November 9, 2017 I put out a call for co-performers. First, I emailed the Director of the Asian and Asian American Studies Certificate Program at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst (UMass), requesting that my email be passed along to subscribers of the Five College Asian and Asian American Studies listserv. My email was then sent to faculty, staff, and students at Smith College, Mount Holyoke College, Amherst College, Hampshire College, and UMass who are interested in Asian and Asian American issues. The second email I sent was to the UMass Asia and Pacific Education Abroad Advisor, requesting that my email be passed along to students who recently returned from study abroad programs in the Asia-Pacific region and those currently abroad.

My name is Porntip Israsena Twishime and I am a graduate student at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. I am working on a project that centers the experiences of Asian American students who use study abroad to learn about their heritage by studying in an ancestral homeland. My goal is to better understand how the heritage seeking experience shapes one's identity as an Asian American.

I gave an example:

When I was in college I studied abroad in Thailand. It was my first time to visit Thailand, and one of the reasons I chose to study abroad in Thailand was because my father grew up and lived there until migrating to the United States. Like other study abroad students, I wanted to learn about Thai culture, language and society, but I also wanted to see where

my father lived and to interact with my family. After I returned to the U.S. and started unpacking my own experience, I became interested in broader questions of how heritage seeking shapes our identities as Asian Americans.

Unsure if there would be any takers, knowing only twelve percent of the undergraduate student population at UMass is Asian American, compared to the seventy-three percent of white students, I was anticipating and hoping for at least three people to respond (U. Diversity Matters, 2017). Within two weeks, seven Asian American women from different backgrounds contacted me by email—eager to learn more about the project. Five individuals, all who choose to be called by their own names, rather than the traditional practice of using pseudonyms, agreed to meet with me for a conversation about our experiences as Asian American heritage seeking study abroad students.

[Emily]: I identify as Chinese American, and this past summer I studied abroad in Beijing and participated in a language program to learn Chinese, which I did not speak before coming to college. Though I have traveled to China quite frequently in the past, this summer was the first time I stayed in China for more than a couple of weeks and also the first time I traveled there without a Chinese-speaking relative.

[Sangha]: I'm a current college freshman of mixed Korean and Vietnamese heritage and have recently studied/worked abroad in Korea. I can definitely relate to what you wrote about using the experience abroad to learn about heritage. If you're still looking for participants, I'd love to hear a little more about your project.

[Alicia]: I saw that you are looking for a student who went to study abroad in a country of their heritage? I went to study abroad this past summer in Hong Kong which is an area near where my parents are from. Let me know if my experiences can help you on your research.

[Julia]: I also studied abroad in Thailand, but I was in Chiang Mai instead of Bangkok. My mother is from Udon Thani, Thailand. Happy to answer any questions at all!

[Ludia]: I was really excited to see the information about your project because I am a Korean American utilizing study abroad to learn more about my heritage. I decided to stay in Korea for as long as possible to deeply explore what it means to be a part of the Korean diaspora. Right now, I'm on month 5 out of 6! I was touched to see that your project highlights the stories of Asian Americans who go abroad to further navigate our multifaceted identities.

I did not approach my interview conversations with these women as a search for any sort of “truth” about ancestral return or heritage-seeking study abroad programs. As folklorist Jeff Todd Titon (1980) explains, the function of telling a story about one’s life is not to serve as proof, but as an act, a performance, of recollecting; “the life story tells who one thinks one is and how one thinks one came to be that way” (ibid, p. 290). I approached storytelling about ancestral return as a performance of who we believe ourselves to be as Asian American women who intentionally crossed—real and imagined—borders for the sake of being in a physical place to which we trace our ancestry.

It is intentional on my part to center narratives about ancestral return specifically through study abroad programs in order to understand the roles that U.S. academic institutions play in facilitating and arranging such visits for Asian Americans. Very few universities and study abroad program providers, however, offer programs in countries that are not considered “safe” by the U.S. Department of State, and/or are unable to accommodate American (read: white, middle-class, English-only-speaking) students. That means, of the Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian second- and third-generation migrants who are coming of age and attending universities in the United States, few, if any, have the opportunity to study abroad in their ancestral homelands. The same can be said for Pakistani, Nepali, or Bangladeshi Americans, and even eighth-generation Filipina/o Americans, among others. Even though I attempted to identify co-performers from pan-Asian American backgrounds, it is not surprising that the project focuses more heavily on East Asian ancestral return. Four of the five narratives are performances with women who made an ancestral return to East Asia. This, of course, points back to the very role institutions play in crafting ancestral returns and is further discussed through the personal narrative performances.

The first interview took place on November 17, 2018 and the final interview was completed on December 8, 2017. The interviews lasted from approximately forty-five minutes to an hour. I prepared the same four questions ahead of time as a starting point for the interviews, but intentionally left the rest of the interview unstructured so as to invite my co-performers to share their own narratives of ancestral return through storytelling (see Appendix for interview questions). The interview process was intentionally constructed to be dialogical and collaborative. Even as I prompted questions to my co-performers, each in turn also asked me questions. All interviews were audio-recorded with the explicit permission of the co-performers.

Each meeting was different from the others. I booked the wrong room for two meetings. One person was unable to find me. A couple of the conversations felt rushed. Another one went twice as long as we had planned. Three of the five interviews were carried out in-person. The in-person interviews were booked-ended by Skype interviews. One day, I had back-to-back meetings and got flustered. With one co-performer, I felt embarrassed when I realized that we met six months earlier at an art show opening, where I introduced my work and said “fuck.” I felt like an imposter trying to navigate multiple identities as an “artist” and a “researcher” by moving a relationship from a public art gallery to a private, one-on-one interview. In each encounter, though, infused with the authority of the “the researcher,” I was vulnerable and present to my vulnerability. My own embodied experiences of vulnerability and authority are important sites of relation and knowledge production of copformance. After saying goodbye to each co-performer at the end of the interview, I immediately used free-writing, both handwritten and typed, to generate reflections and notes on the process.

Before I started crafting the personal narrative performances in Part II, I took several weeks to listen to the recordings and to read my written reflections. I listened for connections and missed connections. I listened for the different roles I was playing—researcher, interviewer, working-class, Asian American woman. I listened for “good,” “powerful” stories. I listened for feelings. I listened for how to contextualize belongings, migration patterns, and transnational identities. I listened for pain. I listened for how desperate I was to connect with other Asian American women. I listened for similarities and differences across our experiences. I listened over and over again. An important part of the writing process was for me to free-write my thoughts and reflections, and to do it often. At no point did I transcribe these interview conversations, although occasionally, word-for-word dialogue does appear in the personal

narrative performances. Instead, I focused on the process of moving “from experience, from a previous conversation, from an interview... to a new experience, conversation, script”—one that draws our attention to critical analyses of the social, the relational, and the structural (Langellier, 1999, p. 137). Through this process, I came to see that these narratives are not “just stories” about ancestral return, but are, in fact, narratives about structures and discourses that order racialized and gendered Asian American belongings, migration patterns, and transnational identities through and as ancestral return (Minh-ha, 1989; Langellier and Peterson, 2006). As I transitioned into writing the personal narrative performances, I sought to reflect this finding in the text and to invite further analysis through audiences’ reading and engagement with the performances.

I began writing the personal narrative performances in January 2018 and they were completed by the end of March 2018. Originally, I represented my analysis as two, simultaneous dialogues—a dialogue between me and my participants, and another between me and myself. I zoomed in on key issues raised in the interviews and used my written reflections as a starting point for crafting the narratives. By the final draft, I had added our bodies, our feelings, and our imaginations to those dialogues in order to create a more literary narrative, to “radically contextualize” the narratives (Langellier, 1999, p. 127). Langellier (1999) argues that “when we move between narrative and literary performance or between narrative and scholarly discourse... we do not leave our bodies behind to enter a separate realm of aesthetics or academia but rather extend and transform embodiment” (p. 140). Therefore, these personal narrative performances take the experiencing, racialized, female body as the primary site of knowledge as well as the site through which I present critiques of the social, relational, and structural worlds.

My own experiences of listening then, is an important part of this process in other ways as well. Each woman, sharing her experience with me, triggered in me “memories, images, and glimpses of my own lived experiences” (Alexander, 2000, p. 97). Alexander frames this triggering as form of “audiencing” to indicate a specific position within an engaged performance activity (ibid). In the autobiographical telling of each woman’s experience, I *audienced* her personal history narrative. I assumed specific positions within an engaged performance activity—that is, the telling of her life experience, the telling of who she thinks she is and how she thinks she came to be that way. From these stories, I crafted personal narrative performances.

CHAPTER II

PERSONAL NARRATIVE PERFORMANCES OF ANCESTRAL RETURN



Figure 2. My mother holding me in public at a shopping mall
Photographed by an unknown mall photographer
Toledo, Ohio, 1992

All My Neighbors—Sangha on South Korea and Vietnam

“I think all of my Asian American friends in Northampton, Massachusetts are adopted. I’m pretty sure *all* of them are.” Sangha begins, telling me a story. A story that she is not confident she remembers herself. It is a story that her parents have told her over and over. The memory is not quite clear, but the story is.

“I was really little when Smith College was offering free Vietnamese lessons for kids. My parents signed me up and we went. Everyone else there was a Vietnamese adoptee. All of their parents were white. We were the only Asian American family there. My parents tried to take me back the second week. Yelling and crying, at the age of six or seven, I wouldn’t go. My parents asked me why I didn’t want to go. They asked me, ‘Are you not having fun? Do you not want to learn Vietnamese?’”

Curious about why Sangha didn’t want to go to the Vietnamese lessons, I lean in. I sit a little taller. I look at the moving image of myself in the corner of the computer screen and then realize that my eyes are pointed to the bottom-right corner instead of at her. I quickly look up and into the camera. I want to make to eye contact with Sangha. I want her to know that I am listening to her story. I never actually know how this supposed to work through video chat. If we both look at the camera instead of at each other’s eyes on the screen, how do our eyes ever meet? I look at her on my screen and try to imagine her as a child, as a six- or seven-year-old girl crying because she doesn’t want to go to the Vietnamese lessons at Smith College. I look at her now and she is no longer a little girl. She is a woman, a student of color, at another small, liberal arts college in Massachusetts. Sangha’s voice changes, even though she knows the story very well.

She tells me, “Through my crying fits, I asked my parents if I was adopted too. It’s almost as if to be Asian American where I grew up meant that I had to be adopted. My father is Vietnamese, and my mother is Korean American. We were the only Asian American family I knew of growing up. The first image that comes to mind when I think of *home* is the home that I grew up in in Northampton. I had a good childhood. I was lucky that my parents did a good job educating me about my Asian American heritage and also making sure that I was proud to be Asian American. I think a common experience for Asian Americans is to be ashamed of their difference. That was my experience to a certain extent just because Northampton was so white, and because I didn’t really know any other Asian kids. But I had my parents in the background giving me an opposite narrative, so I was able to make a home in Northampton and I came to accept my difference as an Asian American. I had a strong sense of my Asian American identity, which means that going back to South Korea for me was not about discovering my identity but about reinforcing it.”

“When I went to South Korea though I was kind of unconsciously expecting that I would find *my people* there...” When Sangha says “my people” I immediately recognize the skepticism in her voice. She tells me with the slightest change in her voice that even she distrusts her own desire, her own longing, to find her people. I smile at the camera, at her. I gesture to her that I see her, that I know what she means. I understand the contradiction.

“I thought I was going to find everything that had been missing from my life in Northampton. I thought I was going to meet other people who identified with ‘*Asianness*.’”

I can’t help it and a sarcastic question comes out of my mouth. “Did you find what you were looking for, Sangha?” There is a grin on my face. I knew the answer before I even asked. She already told me when she revealed her skepticism a moment ago.

“I didn’t.” She says plainly. “I came to realize there is a difference between *Asianness* and *Asian Americanness*.”

When Sangha says this, I begin rethinking my own life. I begin to wonder what exactly the difference is between Asianness and Asian Americanness. Where it starts and where it ends. Have you ever heard a Thai person refer to themselves as Asian? Usually you hear them say Thai, and even then, they are pretty specific. Hmong, Thai-Chinese, from Hill Tribes or Isarn. At what point does one become Asian? Was your dad Asian when he was in Thailand? Or was he “just” Thai? Was he both? What about when he came to the United States? Did he choose to call himself Asian American the way that you and others might refer to him now? Is there a process for becoming? Asian? Or Asian American?

Do you remember the stories your mom used to tell you about how people couldn’t—maybe wouldn’t—believe that you were her children? Like Sangha, you almost think you can remember these stories—stories about transracial adoption. One “flashback” in particular comes to your mind. You are young with 90s bangs, cut straight across your forehead, and two black pig tails stick straight out from behind both of your ears. You sit in the seat in the front of the red K-Mart cart, while your brother—older by two years—jumps around in the back of the cart. You don’t get to jump around. You have to wear a little plastic seatbelt. A white woman with a round belly who carries your younger sibling reaches past her belly to push the cart. A white woman pushes a cart with her Asian children. You see her. Your mother is kind and beautiful. With a smile on her face, you hear her say in a gentle voice, “No, they’re not adopted.” You wonder now, were you Asian or Asian American then? And now?

I ask Sangha what she thinks. She looks at me through the screen for a moment, and then she tells me that I’m asking her an answerable question. We both laugh and she gives an answer

anyway. “I think the main distinction between *Asianness* and *Asian Americanness* is this: *Asian Americanness* is situated in opposition to or right next to *just Americanness* and whiteness. By saying you’re Asian American, you’re saying that you’re somehow different than white Americans. You’re saying, you’re American but your culture is not the same as the culture that we see everywhere around us in the United States. Whereas, *Asianness* may have some of the same aspects of culture, traditions, mindsets, values, and practices as Asian Americanness, but it is not immediately set up as being different from whiteness.”

There is a pause between us. I am impressed by what Sangha tells me. I see what she means when she told me that her parents educated her about her Asian American identity. I feel a twinge of jealousy. My parents never talked explicitly about race. The only related thing I can think of from my childhood is that my siblings and I were taught to say that our dad is Thai and that our mom is American. But there was no discussion of how American was used as a synonym for white, or the historical contextualization of either an Asian or a (white) American identity (and certainly no discussion about a mixedrace identity). Sitting with my jealousy, I ask Sangha, “How did you come to realize this? To figure out all of this Asianness/Asian Americanness?”

“Well...” she says, “I have another story, an anecdote. I’ve been to South Korea four times now and I’ve been to Vietnam once. The trip to Vietnam was pretty straight forward. It was a family trip with my parents and my paternal grandmother. We simply met with relatives and visited the country. My trips to South Korea are a little more complicated. The first time I went to South Korea it was very brief—only four days—and it was all sightseeing. The following summer, I returned to Korea to participate in a program called the Fulbright Junior Internship program. Then, I returned again the following two years to work with Fulbright in various ways. Are you familiar with Fulbright?”

Fulbright? I think to myself. How could you forget? The application process was infuriating and downright discouraging. In the fall of 2014, you tried to explain what you meant by “performing” your Thai identity to your letter recommenders. It was not an issue of them understanding what you meant by perform. They understood the concept of performing an identity. But they did not believe you that you did it in Thailand. Performance is for the stage—not the everyday. “You don’t perform your ethnicity. You are your ethnicity.” They explained to you. “You should find another word to use instead of perform. You’ll never get a Fulbright to conduct research in Thailand talking about ‘performing’ your Thai identity.” You replaced perform with some other word and you were not awarded a Fulbright anyway.

Worried about oversharing, I tell Sangha, “I *kind of* know about Fulbright, but I’m not at all familiar with the Junior Internship Fulbright.”

She nods her head, as if she gets this response often. “That makes sense because I think the Junior Internship program is specific to South Korea. It coincides with a training for those who were selected to teach English in Korea on a Fulbright grant. For the training, the on-site Fulbright team brings in Korean children ranging in age from eight to eighteen years old for an English-immersion program that the trainees teach. As an intern, I was essentially a staff member for that program. I say all of this because I think my experience with study abroad is different than most because I had a very controlled program that operates in English by a U.S. government organization that is only in Korea. The interns were made up of about half Americans and half Koreans. I think I learned more about Korean culture through the program because I was living, eating, and working with Koreans who were my age for three weeks.”

Before I realize it, I am thinking about P’Joh—a close friend of mine in Thailand. We were not lonely in Bangkok, but we were loners. We were loners together. Part of me believes

we connected so quickly, so deeply because we were both in Thailand as students who wanted to learn more about our Selves and our family histories. P’Joh came to Thailand from Sweden, and like all Thai people do, he had a cute nickname. Joh is not his birth name. It comes from จิงโจ้ and it means kangaroo.

I am smiling at the computer screen and I ask Sangha, “Were there other Korean Americans in the program?” I hope that for her sake she had friends like P’Joh when she was in South Korea.

“The first year I think that I was the only Korean American. The second year there were a few other Korean Americans. And by the third year, I think almost everyone was Korean American, which brings us back to my anecdote. It takes place during the second year that I was a leader for the Fulbright program. I remember this very clearly. We were playing a game, a kind of ice-breaker. It’s called *All My Neighbors*. It’s a game to help people get to know each other better. You can play it one of two ways. You can either gather everyone in a circle or you can have people form two lines with each line facing the other. We were doing the second one. In this version, there is a person who stands in the middle and initiates the game by saying, for example, ‘All my neighbors who wear glasses, cross the ocean.’ At that point, everyone who wears glasses will ‘cross the ocean,’ running from one line to join the other.”

“We were going through the motions, shouting dumb stuff to one another. ‘... anyone wearing blue. ... anyone who likes dogs.... anyone who has dogs.’ People are running across the room, and back and forth. And then, someone says, ‘All my neighbors who are Korean, cross the ocean.’ I wasn’t playing the game, but I was facilitating and watching. At this point, I wondered what I would do, as a Korean American, if I were playing. Would I cross the ocean? I mean, I had to physically cross the ocean to get here. And then, one of the Korean American interns tried

to run across the ocean and one of the Korean interns actually, physically stopped her. It's not that the Korean intern was angry or anything. She simply thought the Korean American intern had made a mistake and repeated, 'anyone who is KOREAN, cross the ocean.'"

My heart races as Sangha tells this story. I watch her eyes and her arms move around the screen as she relives this story with me. I wonder how she felt witnessing this moment. Listening to it, I feel almost like there is a heavy rock sitting on the middle of my chest. We give each other time to take in the story, to breathe.

Then, Sangha says, pointing to her chest, "I took this as a really powerful moment. It made me think to myself... I think of myself as Korean and I'm only half Korean, but people who live in Korea might not see me that way. Witnessing this experience is how I really came to see the differences between *Asianness* and *Asian Americanness*. And still, it's not that simple. Again, I'm half Korean, half Vietnamese." Struggling to find the language to finish her thought, Sangha hesitates. "Umm... I don't think there is a word for... ? I'm not biracial. I'm just Asian, but there's no word for being two types of Asian. And, no one can really place me. I'm not immediately placeable as anything, which I think is common for Asian Americans in general. This feeling of in-between. In the United States, I already felt like I was somewhere in the middle. You know? I wasn't fully American in the same way that non-Asian American people my age were. But I think going to Korea multiple times and spending time in Korea has made me feel even more in the middle than I felt before. While I love Korea, every time I go there, I am reminded of how American I am."

Recognizing myself in Sangha's loss for words, I ask her about how it feels for her to be in-between. She explains, "I take it as a positive even though it can be very frustrating. I certainly don't wish that I wasn't Asian American. I see it as a really positive thing that gives me

authority to speak about different issues. It makes me more interesting. It's the source of a lot of my academic and career interests—being Asian American. But at the same time, it can be a little tough.”

I chime in and ask, “And, what exactly does Asian American mean to you?”

Laughing, Sangha calls me out again for asking another complex question. We both wait for her answer. I look at her on the screen. She looks away. I see her chest decompress as she exhales and says, “Umm... one thing it represents for me is community. It represents a way to connect with other Asian Americans. Of course, it's based on assumed shared experiences and knowledge. Another thing for me is that I often feel like I have to defend the Asian American experience or speak on behalf of Asian Americans, which is something that I think a lot of people of color experience.”

Remembering what Sangha said earlier, I add, “Asian American is an identity that was—and in many ways still is—created in relationship to whiteness. Right? As we've said, our experiences are not monolithic. Asian American identity is always evolving and changing in relation to so many factors around us, which, in my opinion, means that we have power to change what Asian American means. We have the power to tell our stories, to generate knowledge with each other.”

It feels like we are finally get somewhere. Sangha continues, “I also think that what Asian American means to me changes depending on where I am and in what context I'm thinking about it. For example, I'm currently a freshman at a predominately white college, as most small liberal arts colleges are, and so I feel very *Asian* American—emphasis on Asian. Whereas, when I'm in Korea I feel very *Asian American*—emphasis on American. And, I find

that in both contexts I am challenged by what people think about *Asianness* and *Asian Americanness*.”

A rush of excitement overcomes me. I see that so many parts of our conversation had been fragmented because we were unable to articulate or even find simple language to have a conversation about our shifting identities. But in this moment, I realize we are doing exactly that. We are creating and using language—together—to talk about the experience. “I think you’re exactly right, Sangha!” I say with joy, almost shouting. “The more that we share our experiences and perspectives with one another about being Asian American, we realize how infinitely complex identity is. I mean, even the concept of Asian American as a ‘community’ is tied to so many assumptions, has a lot of deep complexities, and in no way means that we experience the same things, or all agree on things, or all think the same way. By documenting our stories, we generate knowledge about our differences and make space for valuing the ways in which we, Asian Americans, are different—beyond just not being white.” Sangha smiles at me. I smile back, and somehow, we figure out how to make eye contact through the screens. We both know that this conversation does not resolve the tension between *Asianness* and *Asian Americanness*, but it feels that we have unlocked something important, something meaningful, something powerful.



Figure 3. Corner of the ศาลา¹ in the center of my father's family compound
Photographed by Porntip Israsena Twishime พรทิพย์ อิศรเสนา ณ อภัย
Banglamphu, Bangkok, Thailand, 2012

¹ ศาลา: Thai noun pronounced *sala*, meaning a Thai-style open-air pavilion or gazebo.

Express Train to Guangzhou—Alicia on Hong Kong, China, and Venezuela

Alicia tells me, “There’s an express train from Hong Kong to Guangzhou.” But she never took that train. She did not have papers—the Chinese visa—she needed to board the train. Hong Kong was the closest she could get to her parents’ homeland. She says this matter-of-factly, as if it was no big deal to her. I do not believe her. I do not believe her because we are both here to talk about what this meant for her, how it impacted her, and I do not believe her because I know that we are both trying to maintain a distance. The two of us are in a room alone. We are sitting at a table in the shape of a square. We sit at different corners and there is an empty chair between us. A palpable emptiness fills the room. Until we choose not to let it do so.

“I always wanted to see Guangzhou,” Alicia continues, “to see my parents’ side, to see where they come from. They never returned to Guangzhou after leaving for Venezuela, where I was born, and I never had a chance to see what their home looks like or what my Asian roots look like. My parents, they never told me about their experience in Guangzhou. Struggle, for example. They would say, ‘Back then, we were poor.’ That’s it. End of story. But they never told me how hard they lived or how much they suffered. When I was abroad I saw little pieces of it.” And just like that, she ends her story. She shifts, like her parents, to something easier to tell.

“Honestly, the main, main reason for choosing Hong Kong was to get experience and to take a political science class since I’m a political science major. The second reason for going to Hong Kong was to experience my Asian culture and to see what it looks like over there.”

I decide it is time to test the waters, to see where we can go with the topic of ancestral return, to see if we can push away the emptiness. I abandon my notes—literally pushing them to the side—I look directly at Alicia and ask, “Yeah? And what did you find?”

Laughing—perhaps from discomfort, perhaps from my awkwardness, perhaps from the room’s palpable emptiness, or perhaps from her own memories—Alicia explains, “It was definitely different in Hong Kong than in Venezuela or the United States. At home, I speak Cantonese, which is the language people speak in Hong Kong. Actually, when I first told my parents that I was going to Hong Kong they were worried for me!” Alicia smiles when she says this, and the room immediately feels different from the laughter and the sharing of this memory about her parents. We both readjust our Selves in our seats. I turn my head and raise an eyebrow, asking why her parents were concerned. Alicia continues, “The Cantonese my parents use and taught me is elementary, so they were afraid I would have a hard time communicating in advanced Cantonese in my Hong Kong classes. I mean, imagine if you used elementary English vocabulary here at UMass?! It would be difficult. But being able to speak Cantonese made me feel more comfortable communicating with people over there. So... at least I knew the language. But... I had the chance to speak with elders there and to visit places where my parents used to visit.”

Now, we are both doing it. We are both dancing around the topic of return. I nod my head, hoping Alicia is willing to say more. She returns to why she could not go to Guangzhou while she was studying in Hong Kong, “I didn’t know that I needed a visa. My aunt who lives in Guangzhou was able to come visit me in Hong Kong. She took me to see the places that my parents used to visit when they would come to Hong Kong. Seeing that my parents lived in a shack—or like a village—made me appreciate more. You know? Venezuela is not the most developed or best place either... but compared to what my parents had, Venezuela was a lot!”

Sitting at the table, Alicia uses her arms to demonstrate how her aunt showed her around Hong Kong. She begins filling the empty space. She mimics her aunt ““And here... Your mom

and dad... Back then...’ Most of what my aunt showed me was all about my mom. My aunt is my mom’s sister. But she knows my dad and mentioned him often. It was actually my dad who expressed excitement about me visiting my relatives in Asia when I told my parents that I was going to Hong Kong. My aunt explained to me that my parents visited Hong Kong for fun when they were newly married. She also told me that shortly after my parents married in Guangzhou, they went to visit my grandmother who was living in Venezuela. They ended up staying there and that’s how I was born in Venezuela. It wasn’t until when I was older that my parents told me why they stayed in Venezuela. They said they wanted to try to make a better living.”

As she tells this story, Alicia looks somewhere else, somewhere beyond the room. The story has obviously carried her elsewhere. She looks at a wall, but I don’t think it is the wall that she sees. Bringing her attention back to the room, she looks at me and I offer a soft smile. Alicia begins imitating her aunt again. Her hands go up in the air again and she shouts, “‘Yeah, this is the street food your parents would eat.’ Apparently, there’s a very specific bun that used to be my parents’ favorite treat and according to my aunt, they used to always fight over it.”

We both laugh thinking about the sentiment. I look at Alicia and our eyes meet—they lock momentarily. I suddenly remember that this is probably the third or fourth time that we have met. I realize that she knows more about me than I know about her. The first night you met Alicia was at a local gallery, where a piece of your art was recently on display. As always, you arrived late to the opening, and you were surprised that so many people, so many Asian Americans, came out to the gallery. You saw your Selves. One in the crowd and two on the wall—there are three of you in the same room. Two black and white portraits of your body and the body you stand in. Before you know it, the curator has asked all of the artists to come to the front for an impromptu Q&A session. You felt unprepared and tried to hide. A dear friend called

on you and you had no choice but to go forward. You are asked to talk about your art making process and what the piece means to you. You cannot remember what you said other than that “confronting your demons is really fucking hard.” That night Alicia thanked you for your art.

Our eyes are still locked, and I see moisture creeping in the corners of Alicia’s dark eyes. I try to imagine what I look like swallowing my tears, as I watch her swallow her tears. We both feel some kind of pain, but we both do what we can to avoid it. We swallow our tears. Quickly, Alicia takes us back to Hong Kong. “The study abroad program brought us to many different museums—history museums—exhibits of Hong Kong in past years. And, to see the growth of the city in just a short period of time was shocking. It’s crazy how much it changed! It went from very poor to mass development.”

Immediately, photographs from a book that I recently read about the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong flash one after the other in my mind. I am not able to say anything, but I see Alicia is waiting for something. The room is no longer empty—it is flush with emotion. With as much energy as I can possibly muster, I can only add, “Yeah, it’s a really hard and painful history.”

Alicia looks at me, trying to pick my Self up, and says, “Parts of *me* changed, too though. I learned a lot about myself. Before going to Hong Kong, I was exposed mostly to my Venezuela, Latina side, and in Hong Kong I was exposed to my Asian side. And, I came to accept a kind of code-switchin’ between the two cultures. At home in Venezuela, it was all Cantonese language and family culture. But when I was in school it was all Venezuelan; we were speaking Spanish and I was exposed to Latina culture. It was like a mix. On the weekends, my friends and I would go to a small kind of Chinatown to hang out with other Chinese families, so I had some exposure to my Asian side. But it wasn’t *traditional* ‘cause most of us were born in

Venezuela. Those from the first-generation Chinese in Venezuela, like my parents, are mostly from Guangzhou—like my family—or Taishan—Taishanese people. I never thought to ask them about their lives in China. I didn't know the history at that point. It was just our everyday life.”

I begin thinking about my everyday life in Ohio, as a child. To quite the contrary, your everyday life was begging for information about Thailand from your dad. Where do you go on your long trips away? Did you buy this Hello Kitty backpack in Thailand? I thought Hello Kitty was from Japan? Why does everything else you bring home have elephants on it? Do they have McDonald's in Thailand? Do Thai people eat rice every day? How do you say “chicken” in Thai? Since you can't vote here, do you vote in Thailand? What does Grandma look like? Do you have any siblings? Does that mean we have aunts or uncles? Do we have cousins? Did you learn kung fu when you were a kid? Karate? How do you say “Grandma” in Thai? How do you say “I love you” in Thai? Why did you move to Ohio from Thailand? Your dad mostly gave you one-word answers, except for with the last question. Why did you leave Thailand? You never got an answer—it must have been easier for him to ignore the question than to tell you his truth.

Whatever his truth is.

As I sit with Alicia, and the room grows smaller, I hear her say “home” to mean “family.” I hear her say “home” to mean “Venezuela.” At some point, I stop and ask her, “What does what home mean to you?” She has no easy answer. “The concept of home is complicated for me.” Alicia says, “I don't really remember this, but my mom used to tell me that back in Venezuela, as a child, I used to ask her if I can go visit her home. And, she used to tell me, ‘it's really far away.’ At the time, I didn't understand what she meant so I would beg her to take me to her home, so I can see what it looks like. When I was in high school I used to tell my parents a lot that I wanted to visit their hometown in Guangzhou and my dad was excited that I wanted to go.

Even though my family left Venezuela and moved to Boston when I was nine, Venezuela is still my home-home. It's where I grew up. It's where my childhood friends are."

A specific friend comes to mind. "One of my closest friends from my childhood school is also named Alicia. And she's Chinese, like same—well, Taishanese. Whenever we hang out, we used to speak to each other in Cantonese with some Spanish dialogue. But all of my other friends were Venezuelans, so it wasn't a great exposure to my Asian side, my family's side. People would tell me, 'You look Chinese... but you speak Spanish... and you have this Spanish, kinda Latina side to you.' Then, they would always ask me, 'What about your Asian side?' And I thought to myself, that's true. I want to know more about my Asian identity. Eventually, I came to see these 'sides' of me as meaningful and unique. I am able to move in and out of cultures—from Venezuelan and Latina to American and even Chinese cultures. I learned that different people and who I'm surrounded with give me different experiences and ways of being. Part of the learning experience in life is to engage, is to question what you are learning."

Alicia is moving in her seat as she says all of this. This time she is not imitating her aunt, but enthusiastically telling me what she thinks about the world and her place in it. It happens again—I see Alicia's eyes swell with puffiness. Instead of pushing away our emotions, this time I move us toward them. I ask her, "How did it feel to all of the sudden learn all of this? Hong Kong history, family history, your multiple Selves?"

She looks down for a moment and then looks at me. She admits to me, "At first it was kind of shocking and scary. It's almost like an illusion. Is this true? Am I dreaming right now? It was all so sudden... or everything kind of happened at the same time and in a short time period. Meanwhile, I had two classes to keep up with and the program activities itself. I kept thinking to myself 'Damn! This is how they lived.' I couldn't get it out of my head. It all came at once. Even

though it was very difficult to experience, I still take this a good opportunity for me to learn about myself and my parents.”

Exhaling, Alicia says, “You know? There was another girl in my program from Taiwan who wanted to learn more about her great-great-grandparents who were from Hong Kong. I thought it was nice to have someone else with me who was trying to explore their...” her sentence trails off, unsure of how to finish her sentence, “identity. Someone gave my friend an address of where her ancestors used to live. A friend and I went with her to the address to see what we would find. It was generations ago. Of course, everything had changed, and her family no longer lived in that area. But there was a restaurant or some cafe nearby that had been there since the time of her grandparents. We talked with them in their cafe.”

As she tells me this story, I remember a similar situation. Rounding the corner to your compound, waiting for the gate to open, the security guard/receptionist has a big, goofy grin on his face. You recognize the expression and blush. You already know what’s coming. “Guess who called five times na luk?” he coos. As he says this, you roll your eyes obnoxiously. Again, you already knew what this was about. Before you can say anything—as he always does—he teases you that “Daddy” called five times while you were away. Everyday your dad calls you. He calls for different reasons. Sometimes he calls to check and see how you’re doing. Other times he is relaying information about how he is doing—he’s getting old, remember? But mostly, he calls because he remembered something that he used to enjoy in Bangkok and now he wants to you to experience it too. Take last week for example. He gave you walking directions from the house he grew up in to a noodle shop five or six blocks away. When you showed up for lunch, the shopkeepers laughed, saying that the place closed decades ago. Now, you’re in your room—the

evening variety show is on and the open door lets in the cool air. You explain to your dad that you will try to find that shop again tomorrow.

Alicia's father similarly made recommendations about food, hangouts, and special shops. "Once my parents stopped worrying about me going to Hong Kong, my dad started writing down all the places he wanted me to visit and all the foods he thought I should eat. I think they were the places and foods that he missed. But, I couldn't find most of them!" We both erupt in laughter at the common experience of not being able to find many of our parents' recommendations. Suddenly, our conversation about the absence of these cultural products in our lives turned serious.

"When I got back from Hong Kong I told my parents how much I appreciated them and their journeys even though I don't understand all of it. And it made them emotional." Feeling that this would be our last chance in this conversation to confront the demons we brought into the room, I ask Alicia one more time, "How did it feel for you that your parents were emotional about your decision to study abroad in Hong Kong?"

Alicia takes in an enormous inhale and very slowly exhales before saying, "Seeing my parents emotional, kind of made me emotional. That moment..." She pauses mid-sentence for another deep breath. "You know? I don't really see my parents being emotional, so actually seeing it, is hard for me. I don't know how to talk to them about it. But that moment was a great experience because I realized that I still have so much to learn from them." And like that, the room was no longer empty.

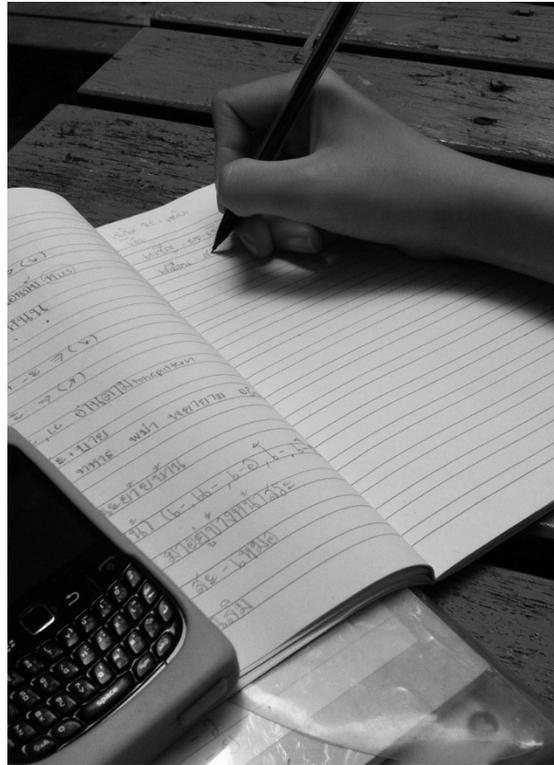


Figure 4. Me completing my Thai writing homework with the help of P'Hem
Photographed by Supichthip Jarueksoontornsakul สุพิชญ์ทิพย์ จารึกสุนทรสกุล
Thammasat University, Bangkok, Thailand, 2013

“Back to (Part of) My Roots” —Julia on Thailand

“Nobody thinks that I’m a Thai citizen—like EVER!” Julia proclaims with a big smile on her face. Full of energy, I laugh and nod, telling her that it happens to me too. I am not surprised that this is where we start. We met just moments ago, and I think we startled each other. In my call for co-performers, I said that my father is from Thailand. And in Julia’s response to my call, she said her mother is from Thailand. Neither one of us knew the other was mixed, that the other parent was white. Right before showing up at the meeting room, we passed each other in the hallway and made eye contact—unsure if she was who we were looking for—we broke eye contact immediately. Minutes later, when we met in the room, we made eye contact again. I could tell that we both did not expect the Other to look the way she does, to be who she is, to be so similar to and yet immeasurably different from our Selves.

Julia continues, “I got Russian... Japanese is very common... Korean... I got everything except Thai, which is fine. I’m very used to that here in the U.S. as well. There was one instance that I always tell people about. Have you been to the Death Museum in Bangkok?”

Without thought, my body immediately jumps out of my seat. “What?! No, I’ve never even heard of it.” I tell her. Little bumps begin to creep up my arm and I give her a look. I think about all the ghost stories my dad used to tell me, and Thai people’s general caution around death. She can easily read my discomfort and confesses, “Yeah! I regret it so much...” Still incredulous, I want to make sure that I understood her correctly. “DEATH museum? ...in Thailand?” I repeat. I am convinced that such a museum is impossible. It’s not that I think she is lying, but I do not believe her until she says, “Yeah, it’s by one of the big hospitals in Bangkok... Siriraj, I think.”

“WHAAAT?!” I ask her. “I used to live just two blocks from Siriraj and I walked by everyday on the way to school. I had no clue there was a death museum in the area. Ahh!” Almost shrieking, I cue her to carry on with the story. I feel slimy, and from the way her body twists and turns in her chair, I think Julia does too. She explains, “It was awful. Preserved. Dead. Stuff. I don’t recommend it.” She is shaking her head with wide eyes. “All of the people who wanted to go were feeling sick afterwards and I told them we shouldn’t have gone in the first place.”

Still totally creeped out and wondering if this is the story that she said she likes to tell everyone, I mutter, “That’s so strange…” and I give her another look that says please get on with the story. She takes the hint and continues, “Well, anyway, you know how foreigners in Thailand have to pay expensive entry fees and it’s always cheaper for Thai citizens? Something like 200 versus 80 Baht?” Knowing exactly what she is talking about, I nod and I realize she hasn’t gotten to the real story yet. “Well, I’m a Thai citizen.” She declares. “My mom got me a บัตรประชาชน—a Thai ID. And, I thought, oh cool, I brought my Thai ID with me and at least I can get a discount at the Death Museum. So, I approached the receptionist, and I asked, in Thai, if I’m a Thai person, how much is the entry fee? The receptionist looked at me. Again, we were speaking in Thai back and forth! And in disbelief, he asks me, ‘You’re… Thai?’ Julia rolls her eyes and I crack up in an act of solidarity and commiseration.

She laughs too, and goes on, “I tell him I have my Thai ID and passport, and he asks me to show him. So, I do. I’m standing in front of him at the counter. He is literally holding my Thai passport.” Julia is almost acting out the scene at this point. She pretends to hold her passport open in one hand, and “He looks at it and then he looks at me. I’m telling you, Porntip, I look like my passport photo! But he really couldn’t put it together. My friends are laughing in the

background. I mean, I wouldn't forge a passport just to get a couple of Baht discount at the Death Museum! Then, the receptionist asks for a second ID—meaning the บัตรประชาชน! I couldn't believe it, but I took it out and then he took another thirty seconds comparing it to me.” Now Julia pretends to hold two documents in her hands. Exhausted, but energized from telling the story again, she says, “In the end, he finally gave me the discount.” Laughing at her own story, I am incredulous—no longer at the thought of the Death Museum, but—because our experiences were so different. She wants to know about my story too, and I want to share it with her, but I feel overwhelmed by how quickly we are connecting. The pace of our conversation is faster than I can keep up with. Julia radiates a fun, positive energy. I try, anyway, to keep up.

“Wow! That's so interesting!” I exclaim. “Our experiences are very different. Nobody EVER”—I over-enunciate EVERRR—“asked me for an ID. I would just walk into the Grand Palace and nobody stopped me. My partner would have to walk around to the other side to pay the entrance fee of however much Baht. Ya' know? Then, we would meet up on the other side. No one questioned me or anything.”

Julia takes her turn to be incredulous and says, “REALLY?!”—over-enunciating REALLLLLLLY. I tell her, “Yeah! I mean...I could never be *full* Thai but nobody directly questioned if I was Thai. Maybe because my name and my family name are Thai? They're both very recognizable for Thai people.” Julia jumps in, “That's how I knew you were Thai in the email!” I nod and say, “But still... I wasn't walking around with a nametag or anything. Strangers would just come up to me so excited that I am ลูกครึ่ง².”

² ลูกครึ่ง: Thai noun pronounced *luk krueng*, meaning mixedrace person—usually used for children with one Thai parent and one white parent. It literally translates to “half child.”

“Yeah, ลุงกุง!” Julia beams. “Rarely, would I get ลุงกุง. And when someone did call me ลุงกุง it was a big moment for me! It always surprised me.” When I see how happy Julia is that I mentioned ลุงกุง I am falling in love. It is not a normative, romantic love, but the kind of love you feel when you are understood. I realize in that moment how desperate I am to connect with Julia—the first and only ลุงกุง I have met since living in Massachusetts for the past three years. I am so desperate that I try, as you do when you are falling in love, to keep up with the person I am falling in love with. I explain, “For me, at first, it was very meaningful to be called ลุงกุง. You know? I went to Thailand with a mentality that I would finally find *my people*.” I use my fingers to make air quotes when I say, “my people.” “And I loved that people recognized me. I loved when Thai people called me ลุงกุง. When it happened, I felt like they saw me. “My people”—air quotes again—“recognized me. But as time went on, I would get frustrated because I could never be *full* Thai. I was always *just* ลุงกุง.”

Julia picks up the conversation. “It doesn’t take much... it’s hard to offend me. But this was sort of a negative experience for me. I mean, I’m used to it. People here don’t know what I am.” I try not to laugh when Julia says this because she is being serious, but I cannot help it. I sarcastically ask, “Yeah, Julia, *what* are you?” She laughs too and shouts, “I’ve gotten that so many times! I’m fine with explaining.” I roll my eyes and ask, “You already have a script?” Julia points at me and says, “Exactly, I honestly do. I already have an explanation. My mom is Thai. My dad is American. My mom would speak Thai to me... This and That.” She recites in a singsong voice. Then Julia continues, “At this point, I am used to it. And I’m always prepared with an explanation. I was never angry or upset at Thai people because I know that they were

innocent or that they were just shocked to know that I am Thai. But I was shocked at how in Thailand people are so up-front about it and how I would get questions all the time.”

“It’s a constant there! Right?” I remember.

“Yes! One day I counted six different people—strangers—brought up my mixed identity to me. This wasn’t my first time to travel to Thailand, so it wasn’t totally surprising. I had been there several other times before to visit family. My mom is from Udon Thani in Isarn so we would visit often or go to Thailand for vacations. The big thing with this study abroad trip was that it was my first time to be in Thailand alone. I studied in Chiang Mai.”

Remembering the one week I spent in Chiang Mai, I ask “Isn’t it beautiful? Were you at Chiang Mai University?” I learned that Julia, unlike me, is not a big city person, so she was thrilled to know I took a week away from Bangkok to visit the Northern Province. She replies, “I love it! It’s gorgeous there. Yes, I was at Chiang Mai University. So not only was I away from my parents, but I was also pretty far from my family in Thailand. This was a really new experience for me. In the end, I’m really glad I decided to study abroad in Thailand. I think I grew in ways that I wouldn’t have elsewhere. I was actually torn about whether I should study in Thailand or Ireland. I knew I wanted to go ‘*back to my roots.*’” Julia uses her fingers to make air quotes when she says go back to my roots. She explains, “My father is Irish and English, and my mother is Thai. But my parents—especially my mom—wanted me to go to Thailand. We actually took a summer trip to Ireland as a family to nudge me into choosing Thailand. My dad has a lot of friends in Thailand because he served in the Peace Corps. My parents were excited for me and were excited to travel to Thailand again to drop me off at my program.” Jokingly, Julia adds, “I think my parents wanted me to go to Thailand, so they could have a good excuse to go and visit with their friends once I started school.”

This is the part where the one who falls in love realizes that not everything is the way it seems. Julia and I have some similarities, but I realize that we are incredibly different. Of course we are. We do not experience the world in the same way because we both have one Thai parent and one white parent. It is not our only identity marker. In fact, we are more different than we are alike. I think to myself, I know your secret. It's not really a secret. It's more of a lie. At this point, it's so familiar that it just rolls off your tongue with ease. I saw your lips twitch last week after you said it over a glass of wine. You know that it is a lie. "My family owns a Thai restaurant in Ohio." Over time, you have become conscious of this lie and you have changed it at various times. "I grew up in a Thai restaurant." You told yourself this was not a lie. It is not not-true. At some point, you still felt dishonest, so you changed your lie again. "My dad is a Thai chef." You held onto this for years. You like the way it sounds. But, eventually, you realize Chef is a title—one that is mostly reserved for white men. Your dad was not a Chef. He was a cook in the back of a Thai restaurant and now he is out of work.

Julia moves on and tells me about her classes at Chiang Mai University. "One of the classes I took was Thai Civilization—like Thai history—and I certainly took it because I wanted to learn about my culture. I was actually motivated by wanting to learn more about Thailand instead of going through it like any other class. I think I definitely had more motivation than some of my classmates. Maybe they didn't have the extra push that I had. I also took Thai Reading and Writing. I was a brat about it when my mom tried to teach me to read and write Thai as a kid. In Chiang Mai, I had a great teacher. Now I can read and write Thai and being able to read and write Thai is one of the most rewarding things."

I also took Thai language classes when I was in Bangkok and Julia's words choke me. You could only write three Thai words when you arrived in Thailand. In middle school, you

emailed your aunt asking her how to write your name in Thai, and then you looked up how to write “love” and “dad” on the internet. For years you traced those bubbly letters not knowing how to read them. พรทิพย์ รัก พ่อ You memorized their shape and wrote them everywhere—on birthday cards, in the snow, on scrap pieces of paper. When you returned from Thailand you wrote a letter to your father in Thai and mailed it to him from Arkansas to Ohio. A few days later, he calls you and asks who wrote it for you. You explain that you learned how to read and write while you were in Bangkok. He doesn’t congratulate you. He doesn’t say he loves you. Why would he? The next time you are “home,” you see the letter—framed—and on display in the living room. You want to cry, but you don’t. You will not see the letter again until the glass is cracked, and you are crying because your father has just attempted suicide.

The room is still full of Julia’s upbeat energy. Its genuine, easygoing outlook on life is intoxicating. I listen as she speaks. She passionately controls the room. “I have this clear memory. My friends and I went to Phetchaburi for a quick weekend trip. Two of the friends I was traveling with were in my Reading and Writing class, and we were practicing our Thai alphabet by reading the license plates as they pass by. We were kind of excited about our progress, that we could recognize and identify the letters. Then we went to a restaurant—a really small restaurant. The menu had English, but it also had Thai. I remember very clearly reading จานเดียว for the first time. I couldn’t believe I read it. I was so happy in that moment to simply read ‘single plate’ on a menu at a small Thai restaurant. It was the first word that I read on my own. I took a picture of the menu to remember the moment. It was so satisfying. My mom taught me to speak Thai, but I chose to read and write Thai.” When she says this, I give into Julia’s powerful positivity. I breathe slowly and calmly, and I think about my agency and my responsibility to my Self and to Others.



Figure 5. Me showing P'Hem a photograph of my parents that my father gave to me
Photographed by Supichthip Jarueksoontornsakul สุพิชญ์ทิพย์ จารีกสุนทรสกุล
Bangkoknoi, Bangkok, Thailand, 2013

An Eighth Visit to China and to Consciousness—Emily on China

“This was my eighth time to visit China,” Emily explains to me. I try not to hide my shock. Eight times! I think to myself. “But it was my first time to go without my family,” she adds. You picture your family traveling to Thailand. They would probably have to close the restaurant. Who else would cook? You momentarily imagine your parents are together and you pretend that they’ve won the lottery. It doesn’t work. Even in your imagination, the stars cannot align. You cannot imagine your family having the ability to travel to Thailand—not once, and certainly not eight times. I start to wonder what Emily thought when I told her that this was the first and only time that I was able to go to Thailand, and that I went alone. I decide not to ask her what she thinks. Instead, I ask about her childhood.

“When I was younger I refused to speak Chinese at all.” She says with a smile and a hint of embarrassment. I smile back, asking her why. “I guess it was because I had an inner fear that I would sound stupid or something. I’ve been exposed to Chinese language all my life, but I didn’t have much practice speaking until I studied abroad in Beijing. My parents wanted me to learn Chinese, but I hated going to Chinese school when I was a child.” I give her the same smile and she knows that I am waiting to know why. Emily explains, “The big issue for me was that my white friends from school didn’t have to go to Chinese school. I didn’t understand why they didn’t have to go. It was also very embarrassing because I had friends that I went to Chinese school with, but they were more advanced than me. I was in the lowest level, so I was studying Chinese with kids that were younger than me. I hated that feeling! It was so embarrassing! I quit shortly after we moved from Virginia to Texas when I was about seven or eight years old.”

When Emily mentions her childhood move to Texas I breathe a little easier, I settle back into my seat. I tell her that I lived in Arkansas for a little more than ten years, and we bond over

relocating, resettling, and readjusting to life here in Massachusetts. Emily's bubbly, metro-Southern personality and rainbow hair put me at ease. My internalized class insecurities no longer seem as significant.

Finishing her story about Chinese lessons as a child, Emily tells me, "When we got to Texas, my parents re-enrolled me in Chinese school. I don't know if they did it on purpose or what, but they enrolled me in the beginning level again, so not only was I repeating the same level, but my classmates were even younger. It was not a good experience for me..."

I remember that Emily told me earlier that she went to Beijing specifically to learn Chinese. I ask her, "How did your parents feel when you told them you were going to study Mandarin in Beijing?"

"They were obviously really happy!" Emily shouts with an infectious smile. "My parents always wanted me to learn Chinese. They were really disappointed that I quit Chinese school when I was a kid. At home, my sister and I speak in English to each other and with our parents. My parents speak to each other in Shanghainese even though they're both very fluent in English. I can understand a lot of Shanghainese but I'm not good at speaking it. It's a really complicated dialect of Mandarin. I feel like me learning Chinese has definitely helped me to pick up more of what they say to each other. Basically, my main goal in Beijing was to learn Mandarin. I wanted to be able to communicate with my family that is abroad because they don't speak English."

Emily tells me about a relationship she developed with an uncle during her study abroad program. "I actually have an uncle who lives in Beijing. So before I went, I messaged my cousin, his daughter, who is studying at USC and I asked her if she thought I could meet up with her dad. From there, I started meeting up with him and he would invite me and my friends for dinners—a

very Chinese thing to do—just inviting a lot of people to eat fancy food.” She laughs again, and I can see how much she cherishes these memories and this relationship.

Emily pauses and gets serious. She does not look at me, but past me, and says, “It was interesting because I had never talked to this uncle before. Because I couldn’t. You know? Because my Chinese wasn’t good before coming to college. And so, the fact that I was actually able to communicate with him is stunning.” When she realizes that she lost herself in her own train of thought, Emily snaps out of that moment. She shifts the conversation right away, “I don’t know if people in Thailand have something like this, but in China we have a messaging app that everyone uses...”

I cut in, knowing exactly what she is talking about. I say, “Yeah. WeChat?” I laugh, and I realize that I am mirroring Emily’s laughter. I tell her, “I have lots of Chinese friends, so I have WeChat too!”

“Exactly!” She says, happy that I know what app she is referring to. “So basically, I was only able to communicate with my uncle because of WeChat. The app has a feature that allows you to send voice messages back and forth. You don’t have to text or use Chinese characters. It’s really interesting being able to communicate in Chinese over voice messaging.”

I pause to think about what Emily is saying. “You were able to communicate using voice messaging through the app because it doesn’t require reading and writing? Which means you were able to practice speaking and listening to Chinese while also developing a relationship with your uncle.” Emily nods her head yes, and I remember how difficult it was to try to communicate in Thai without knowing how to read Thai. I say, “Reading and writing Chinese is another level!”

Emily agrees without hesitation. “Yes, and that reminds me! On the first night that I was in Beijing, my roommate and I went to a Chinese shopping center to have dinner. It was like a mall with a bunch of restaurants in it. We kept walking around the food court area—going from restaurant to restaurant looking for a place that had a menu with pictures because we couldn’t read any of the Chinese characters!” She tells the story enthusiastically. Her arms are in the air. She has an enormous smile on her face.

“My roommate and I were mainly just confused, and it was awful. It was our first night and we were hungry. We didn’t know what or how to order. Flash forward to the end of the program,” Emily throws her arms forward to gesture skipping into the future. “Eight weeks later—we could go to practically any restaurant and read any menu. By the end, my friends and I could order anything! This was really important to me because it allowed me to adjust to the food culture. I think food is an important venue for getting to know any culture. Being able to read Chinese menus helped me really get into Beijing culture.”

Completely absorbed by her story, remembering the process of becoming slowly able to read Thai menus, I chime in, “I also remember when I could start reading Thai menus... It changed my life!”

Laughing in agreement, Emily continues the conversation. “It was funny because sometimes I would walk around with a white friend or something and then people would go up to me and speak Chinese to me to try to relay information to the white person. But actually, when this would happen, sometimes I would be with a white friend who spoke better Chinese than me. It was kinda awkward!” By this point, Emily and I are in a groove of reading each other’s body language and laughter. I give her a look that wonders how she felt about that situation, and she

responds, “I sort of expected it since I’d been to China before and because China is so homogenous. Everyone assumes I’m Chinese.”

Without stopping her, I pause for a moment. I wonder if Emily thinks Chinese people are wrong to assume that she is Chinese. I realize there are many ways she could potentially answer this question. Before I can ask her, Emily is already telling me another story.

“One thing I didn’t expect, though, was this one guy on the street, who came up to us and started talking. I told him that I’m from America and he asked, ‘Aren’t all Americans supposed to be blonde haired and blue eyed?’” Emily’s eyes meet mine. I see her holding her breath. I think she is wondering how I might respond to this. I wonder how she did respond to this. We read each other’s bodies, and at the very same time, we both burst into laughter at the absurdity of the question. She goes on to finish her story, “I never really thought about my Asian American identity until coming to college and studying abroad in China. I mean, you don’t really read about Asian American history in textbooks. Literally, none of my middle school or high school teachers ever addressed that. But during my first semester of college I was in a first-year seminar, called Reading Asian American. We read a lot of literature by Asian Americans and scholarly work on Asian America. We talk about a lot of things. You know, what is Asian America? And, how do Asian Americans fit into the U.S. Black-white paradigm? So this is when I really started thinking about myself. I thought, for the first time, *Oh? Who am I? And how am I different from my parents who were born in China?*”

She admits that she is still thinking through these questions. “I still don’t know if I have the answers to those questions yet, but I definitely feel like Asian Americans are in a unique position, where they’re caught ‘between two worlds.’” She draws air quotes with her fingers around “caught between two worlds.” I always cringe when I hear this—or its inverse—“the best

of both worlds.” My body curls into itself and my face turns sour. Emily does not miss my look of disgust.

“You know?” Emily says sarcastically, as if she is trying to convince me. “Asia *AND* America.” She repeats, emphasizing being caught between Asia *AND* America. I roll my eyes. She giggles because we both know that she was just teasing me. When she smiles she says, “And that’s just awkward because I consider myself American, but not all Americans would look at me and necessarily think that I’m American just because we have an ‘Asian exterior.’”

Right when Emily says *Asian exterior*, I cringe again. Your life in the South is on your mind: “DO YOU SPEAK CHINESE?!” he jumps out of his seat, leans across the aisle, and shouts in your face. Shocked, stunned, you are speechless. You are sitting alone. But you are not alone on the bus. Your brother is sitting in the seat right in front of you. He is older—two years older. And he is furious. You are both young and confused. Your family recently relocated to Arkansas after being evicted for the second time in Illinois. You think you already hate this place. And right now, you hate the kid that just screamed at you. It’s your second week at this new school and you’ve already learned that trying to politely explain that “We’re not Chinese. We’re Thai” isn’t useful because here Thai and Taiwanese are the same thing, which means you actually are Chinese. The next thing you know, your brother lunges forward—into the boy’s face—and shouts, “DO YOU SPEAK AFRICAN?!” This resolves nothing.

As I recover from this memory from fifteen years ago, I find I have missed minutes of whatever Emily is saying. I listen for context and rejoin our conversation. I catch her mid-sentence. She says, “You know what I mean?” I think no, but I realize it was rhetorical. She continues, “The term Asian American itself is very political. I mean, there is a difference

between saying, 'I'm Chinese American' or saying, 'I'm Shanghainese American' and saying, 'I'm Asian American.'

I follow her and wholeheartedly agree, "Yeah! When I'm talking to other Asian Americans I don't introduce myself or talk about myself as an Asian American. It's only really when I'm with white people or other, non-Asian people of color that I refer to myself as 'Asian American.'" Emily is nodding her head passionately.

"Yeah!" She shouts, "It's much easier to just say 'I'm Asian American,' then have to explain or teach people about Asia. I mean, Asia is big!" She throws her arms up and shows me how big Asia is. I laugh.

"Asia is HUGE!" I counter, thinking "big" isn't big enough.

"It's like sixty percent of the world's population!!!!" Emily says quickly.

"This is something I've been thinking a lot about lately," I confess to Emily. "Who is Asian American? Who gets to be Asian American? We often only think of East Asian Americans as Asian Americans, but as you said, Asia is so big. There is so much difference among us. It's important for us to acknowledge and keep those differences in mind. But, for political purposes, organizing under a pan-Asian political identity is key. I mean, getting Asian American issues on anyone's political agenda is hard enough! We're nearly invisible! Forget trying to get anyone to care about Thai American issues!" I declare matter-of-factly.

"Yeah, that's true!" Emily says.

Emily's fast-paced energy is exhilarating. It gets me going! Feeling frustrated at the irony of adopting an Asian American political identity to feel visible, but still feeling totally invisible in U.S. politics, I carry on. "I've also been reflecting a lot on who gets to study abroad in a place where they can trace their heritage to. I mean, off the top of my head, I don't know of any

programs in Vietnam. But there are a number of study abroad programs in China, South Korea, and Japan. I was hoping to include experiences from South Asians in this project too since there are several programs in India, but I've had no response."

Emily pauses before she speaks. She explains, "You know, I went to a private high school and there were only three East Asian Americans in a class of thirty-one people. Our class also had South Asian Americans. But people took the three of us East Asian Americans as model minorities—they bought into that stereotype of Asians. Here's the interesting thing: I don't think it applied to the South Asian American students. Coming to college and studying abroad prompted me to think about these issues and to consider the differences within Asian America. Before my first-year seminar, I never thought about my Asian American identity." I picture Emily showing me again how "big" Asia is. Her arms are spread wide open and she smiles. Her arms cannot stretch far enough for her to show me exactly how "big" she imagines Asia to be. As she is showing me, I think, she is also showing her Self.



Figure 6. View from the back of a crowded public passenger boat taxi
Photographed by Porntip Israsena Twishime พรทิพย์ อิศรเสนา ณ อยุธยา
Chao Phraya River, Bangkok, Thailand, 2013

A Labor of Return—Ludia on South Korea

“It’s so strange that it’s almost over. For the past few weeks, I’ve been counting down until the end of classes,” Ludia tells me in a gentle, reflective voice. She has been in South Korea now for a little more than five months. She has less than three weeks left of her time there. Through the computer screen, I can feel the celebratory spirit in her voice. Ludia celebrates the end of her six-month journey, but not without reflection. “Classes are almost officially over. It’s funny because I’m happy but I also feel kind of sad that everything is coming to a wrap. Once finals are completely over, I’ll only be here for like one more week or a week-and-a-half.”

Talking about the end takes Ludia back to the beginning. She remembers, “During the first part of my stay in Korea, I was really in what I call a honeymoon kind of phase. I was so excited! I didn’t feel any of the culture shock that you hear about when you’re abroad. But, eventually, it hit me. And I was in shock for what seemed like a very long time.” I watch Ludia tell the story of her first weeks in Korea—she is thoughtful and critical of herself. She tries to map out her experience for me, but I have a feeling that she is actually doing it for herself. I imagine her standing above it, at a table with jigsaw puzzle pieces scattered about. Ludia slowly, mindfully narrows in on a single piece, picks it up, and looks at the broken image on that one piece. When she is ready, but not before, she places it perfectly next to another. One by one, she sees the complex image that the puzzle forms when its individual pieces are put together.

“People couldn’t understand how or why I was experiencing culture shock. They would say, ‘You have family here... You can speak the language... You look the part.’ But I think the shock wasn’t about that. It was different. It was forcing myself to”—Ludia pauses to correct herself—“Or being forced to realize that I can’t be a part of the community here in the way that I want to. That I can’t belong the way that I want to belong.” I hold my breath when Ludia says

this. This is the first time for me to hear someone articulate what I have felt about Thailand for so long—the words I have not been able to say. I listen for more. My eyes are glued to the image of Ludia on the screen in front of me. She says, “So that’s something that I had to get over. I say ‘get over’ because for a long time I held onto the hope that I could be a *fully* Korean person, which is something I’m realizing time and time again that I cannot choose to be or choose to do. I can’t even perform it because I’ll slip up and people will find out that I’m not from here. That just my parents are from Korea... That I am an American person coming to my parents’ home country.”

I feel pain in my body. My chest aches and my eyes feel like they are swelling. It gives me a headache. I can hear my heart throbbing in my ears. I want to hide this pain from Ludia. I hold back the pain. I tell myself this is “just” an interview. This is not about me. Ludia is talking about her Self. I take a deep breath and I simply tell Ludia, calmly, coolly, nonchalantly, “What you are saying resonates with me.” She looks directly at me through her camera. And I think to myself, “Damn, I’m glad that we are meeting by video chat instead of face-to-face.” The screen lets me believe there is a bigger, impenetrable distance between Ludia and me.

Awkwardly, she says, “I’m so glad!?!” like she is asking a question. Still looking at me, probably through me, Ludia explains, “I’ve felt alone for so long and I kept thinking that I must be the only one who feels this way.” Before I know it, listening to Ludia, I have changed my mind. I wish we were together. I want to sit next to Ludia. I want to listen to her. I want her to know that she is not the only one who feels this way. I do not want her to feel the way I felt—the way I feel. She asks me, “Were there other Thai Americans in your program? And did you get their perspective on things?”

“Well, yes there were a few.” I tell her, but it is more complicated than that. I try to explain. “There was another mixed Thai-white student in my program. His mother is Thai, and his father is white. I actually met his parents when they visited him in Bangkok. We didn’t really hit it off. I guess, I wrongly assumed that we would be friends because we were both mixed, but that wasn’t the case. Then, there were a few others. Their situation was a little bit different from mine, but we became friends. They are Hmong—an ethnic minority in Thailand. Actually, Hmong people live across Southeast Asia—not only in Thailand, but also in Laos and Cambodia. Those that live in Thailand generally live in Northern Thailand.”

I feel unprepared to explain to Ludia how and why the Hmong came to the U.S. as refugees in the 1970s, and that many still struggle today with resettlement issues. I feel inadequate and skip over the entire history of U.S. empire in Southeast Asia. Instead, I tell her, “Our program was in Bangkok, which is very far from where the Thai Hmong live. Bangkok, as a place, is also significantly different from the place that my friends trace their ancestry. But, in a way, my friends still considered themselves to be studying abroad in a ‘country’ they trace their heritage to even though they are descendants of ethnic minorities within that country and beyond that country. Does that make sense?” I ask Ludia. I don’t want to confuse or bore her. Most people are not interested in and are bored by Southeast Asian history, especially those who are not Southeast Asian themselves, and I am very aware, as I always am, that I am talking with an East Asian American. I tell her, “You can see how quickly this gets complicated...”

“Wow!” Ludia says. She is not bored, but interested, and continues the conversation. “In my case, it seems like other Korean Americans here that I know don’t even think about these things.” She pauses with her mouth open. She looks truly surprised to know that there are other Asian Americans who feel the way she does. I make an effort to open up. I want to open up. “If

I'm totally honest," I tell Ludia (and myself for the first time), "part of this project is about me coming to accept that I can never be the Thai person that I imagined myself to be and that I think my dad's relatives in Thailand imagined me to be." Ludia is nodding and encourages me to go on. So, I do.

"Right? Because my family in Thailand knows my dad—as their brother, as their son, as their uncle—then, I show up as his child. First, I'm mixed. Then, I'm American. I'm not who they imagined me to be. And, I wanted desperately to be that person—their niece, their granddaughter, their cousin. I wanted to belong in Thailand and to my Thai family." As I say this out loud, I wonder where the words and my courage are coming from.

"Don't get me wrong," I say. "I had really meaningful moments in Thailand that I wouldn't trade for anything. But I am still coming to terms with two things. One, I'm not the person I imagined myself to be. And two, it's okay. I don't have to be that person. It's been five years now and looking back I can see that many people, including my relatives, saw me for who I was and accepted it. But it was actually me who continued this internal struggle of allowing myself and others to narrowly understand Thainess as only one static thing."

I sit back in my chair and exhale. Ludia offers me a warm smile. I can see she is thinking about something. She says, "For me, when I'm with my family members here in Korea, I don't feel like a foreigner. But when I'm out with other English-speakers—mainly other exchange students—I notice and feel Koreans noticing us, which makes me feel like a foreigner. It's those little everyday moments that get to me because then I realize I'm lumped in with all other foreigners, which makes me feel really self-conscious. At other times I feel like a language exchange partner because Koreans want to practice their English with me. But with my relatives, I feel like a family member. This is what I think I wanted to return to. You know? This is the

third time I've been to South Korea. I wanted to return to my family. They've made me feel like I'm home, but I don't talk to them about these multiple identities that I experience while I'm here in Korea. For example, not a lot of people came here to learn Korean language—even the basics. There is an expectation that I will order and translate for everyone in the group that does not know Korean.”

As soon as Ludia says this, I have a flashback. Forget it! You tell yourself. Eyes on the road. You have ten minutes tops until you can get out and walk the rest of the way home. After a semester of awkward, missed eye contact and snide remarks, you accept an invitation to ride home together with fellow exchange students from your Thai cooking class. Normally you prefer to walk, but it was the first time they invited you to do anything. In class today, you actually cooked, and the kitchen is significantly farther from home than the classroom so transport makes the most sense. You agree to split the cab. Your fellow exchange students hail the taxi. At once, they push you to the front window and you are prompted to explain to the taxi driver where you all live. Before you speak, you coach yourself into submission and calmly say, สวัสดีค่ะลุง ไปสะพานปิ่นเกล้าได้ไหม ต้องข้ามสะพานนะคะ You explain that you all live on the other side of the bridge. You have to cross it to get home. When the kind man agrees to carry the five of you, you climb in—window seat. You stare out the window as they make their evening plans that do not involve you. You promise yourself that you will never agree to another one of their invitations again.

Ludia has similar experiences. “When we go to a restaurant I am expected to read the whole Korean menu and then order for each person because they're uncomfortable. They order on their own when they're not with me, but when I'm around I'm expected to do that labor. Interestingly, this also happens with Korean friends that I've made here. It's different, but my

Korean friends constantly ask me to compare Korean culture to American culture. This happens all the time. And then, all of a sudden, someone will say, ‘let’s practice speaking English!’ I’ll be looked at to correct each person and to offer suggestions on alternative ways one can say the same expression.”

“That’s exhausting! And yeah! That is definitely a form of labor.” I agree.

“Yeah, translating can be so frustrating. I don’t think I’ve articulated it as labor until our conversation. Now that I’m saying it out loud with you, I realize that I’m just sick of performing all of this labor. I just want to have fun! I’m not having the kind of fun people expect you to have when you study abroad, which made me realize study abroad for us is not the typical study abroad experience.”

Fun? I try to think about the fun I had when I was in Thailand. Do you remember the most fun you had in Thailand? There is a video of it somewhere. I wish you could see it. It’s a hot early summer day in Bangkok and you are riding รถเมล์—a public bus with no air conditioning. I can’t even tell the story without smiling. Nothing spectacular happened that day on the bus but you were so happy. You, P’Hem, and the bus driver are the only people on the bus. You sit in the back row, and like most summer days, there are drops of sweat across your face. The bus comes to a stop—Bangkok traffic. You lean your face out of the window to catch some air, but it does not help. The air is humid, and you begin to sweat even more because the bus has stopped. But now that the bus is still, you can hear the song playing on the bus driver’s personal radio. You recognize the song—something that rarely happens. It is มั่ง by Tor Saksit—a song you learned from a CD your aunt sent you for your sixteenth birthday. You sing, and the driver turns up the volume. The bus starts moving again. You sing out the window and into the

streets. P'Hem starts to record. The wind blows the sweat off your face and you smile. You sing and dance until the end of the song. P'Hem is happy to see you so happy.

Ludia is still holding a puzzle piece that bears a broken image of labor. She picks up another and holds the two pieces together. The second piece is a broken image of institutions. She wants to see if they somehow connect. She tells me, "I think I actually realized that our heritage seeking experiences are different than non-heritage-seekers' experiences when I was talking to my friend. Whenever we're together I always end up ordering and translating for us. Her company is nice, but our time together is so laborious. I kept telling her that I can't wait for the semester to be over so that I can live my life here as a non-student. And she said something to me that was really eye-opening. She said, 'I see where you are coming from. I understand that you have a life here apart from being a student, but I came here as a student. If I wasn't a student, I would have no reason to be here.' That stuck with me. I hate that I came off as if I was devaluing her experience as a study abroad student here in South Korea, but my conversation with her made me realize that my stay here is more than just as a student studying abroad. I'm here figuring out who I am and where I come from—even though I wasn't born here."

I lean a little closer to the computer screen. I don't want to miss where Ludia is going with this. She says, "In one sense, I'm not 'returning' to anything here. Nothing here belongs to me. But, my experience here is so valuable because even if I wasn't a study abroad student, I'd still have so much here beyond the structure of a study abroad program." She looks at me, almost as if to ask me if I felt the same way. I did. And, we begin a conversation about mental health as Ludia pieces together labor, institutions, and culture.

She remembers and tells me about her first encounter with the mental health industry in South Korea. "At the beginning of the semester, I saw a flyer in a university bathroom stall that

read in Korean: *Do you feel like you want to die?* Then, they gave a website for suicide prevention. Mental health is largely only understood as preventing suicide. And that's it! This is one thing that I don't appreciate about being here—how mental health is not taken seriously whatsoever, especially considering the stress that Korean students experience in general regarding pressure from school. Even my study abroad program, for example, doesn't do a good job of supporting students on an emotional basis. I really hope and wish that study abroad programs would create infrastructure for helping students like us understand our heritage because it impacts our experience in the program differently than others. Did your program have anything like that? Mine doesn't."

"Nooooo..." I say.

"See, I think we're completely overlooked as a student population." Ludia laments.

"I think you're right. Shortly after I came back from Thailand, I graduated and then immediately started working in international education. I went to various conferences during my time in the field—almost four years—and let me tell you, heritage seeking is not really on anyone's radar, let alone a priority."

"Really?? What is on their radar then?" Ludia wants to know. I take a moment to think about it. "Umm... Safety. Risk. Money. Getting more 'non-traditional' students to study abroad. And by 'non-traditional' students they generally mean anyone who is not a white, middle-class woman who wants to study abroad in Western Europe—typically Spain, Italy, and the U.K. They want different kinds of students to study abroad to different locations. Think of your classic 'diversity' pitch in any higher ed institution right now."

I vaguely remember some research about heritage seeking as we talk. "Even the research that does exist on heritage seeking is very limited. The work I have seen is mostly about Black

and African American students going to West Africa. On the one hand, I think this research is specific to Black and African American communities because of the histories of slavery and ongoing oppression in the United States. Asian American migration patterns are very different—more often than not, I would guess that many of us are able to trace our ancestry to a particular country or people group. In that way, we are privileged, and the politics of our ancestral returns is quite different than the politics of many people in Black and African American communities who travel to Africa—the continent—as their ancestral homeland. On the other hand, I think this research raises very similar questions that we are talking about now... about ancestry, diaspora, longing, and our imaginations of home.”

When I say “home” Ludia holds the last piece of her jigsaw puzzle in her left hand. “Yeah, I came here to South Korea wanting to find *home*.” She holds the last puzzle piece in the palm of her hand. She knows exactly where it fits, but she still gives it the same attention she gave every other piece. She tells me, “Then, I realized that South Korea isn’t home. But once I realized that this place isn’t home—and that it won’t be home—I felt more comfortable. In other words, I think that the moment I accepted being here as a foreigner—which was really, really hard to come to terms with—I was more comfortable. It literally took me until my last month here to come to this understanding and to this conversation with you.” Ludia places the final piece into her puzzle and takes one step back to see the measure of what she has created.

EPILOGUE

RETURNING STILL

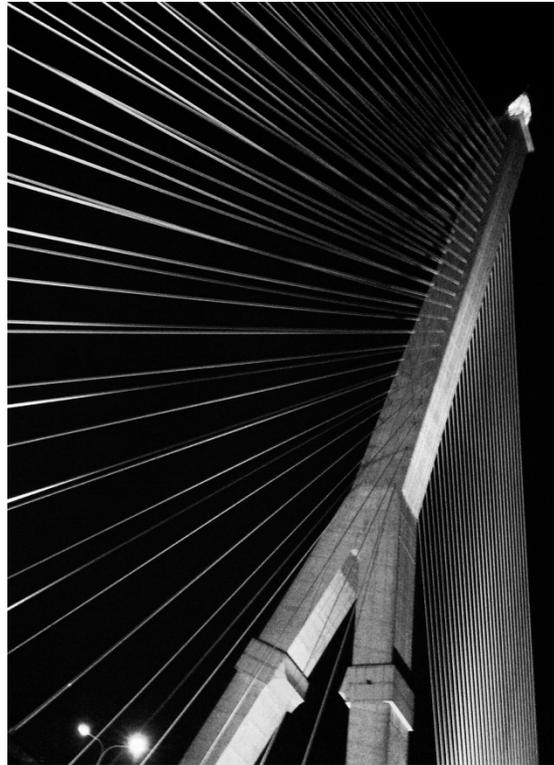


Figure 7. Central tower of the Rama VIII Bridge สะพานพระราม 8
Photographed by Porntip Israsena Twishime พรทิพย์ อิศรเสนา ณ อัญญา
Bangkok, Thailand, 2013

My older brother sits next to me and doesn't say a word. This is unlike him. My younger two siblings and I sometimes joke that he is too talkative and that he is by far the loudest in our family. It is usually true, and we love him for it even when it infuriates us. But right now, he is quiet. He doesn't try to stop me. He doesn't try to get me to talk. He just sits beside me while I sob. At some point, he holds me until I can catch my breath again. We are sitting on our mother's bed. It was the only place I could cry in private—or at least thought I could cry in private. My mother and my siblings moved to another rental house in another city while I was in Thailand. I did not have a bed at “home” after moving into the dorms, so I wasn't really expecting any sense of privacy. When I moved into the dorms it was understood in my family that I had “officially” or permanently moved out of the house, even though my university was only fifteen minutes away. I was not familiar with this home yet, but this, of course, was a familiar feeling for me.

Mom was in the kitchen cooking, and so I figured her room to be an appropriate place for me to be alone for a few minutes. At first, I was alone. One tear turned into an unexpected, unending flood of tears. Her bedroom is close to my brother's and he must have heard me choking as I tried to catch my breath. I wanted to lie down in my mother's bed but every time I laid down, I couldn't breathe because my nose was running from crying. So, I sat there. Weeping. And, then I was no longer alone. When my brother walked into the room I didn't look up. I knew who it was when I saw his feet in the doorway. He sat next to me and said nothing. I held onto him and paced my breathing. I don't know how long it took but eventually I calmed down. I felt like I was outside of myself, watching myself, while simultaneously feeling everything inside myself. I sat for some time between my brother and my mother in silence. She had joined us in her room. And just before we left the bedroom, my brother whispers to me, “We

all think you are brave for having gone to Thailand and for coming back. I don't know if I would have had the courage to do it. I know it was hard for you. I can see it.”

I could see it, too. When I was in Thailand I learned how to pronounce my name correctly for the first time. I was twenty-one years old and I had been mispronouncing my name my whole life. I didn't even know that I was mispronouncing my name. I had pronounced it so many times for Others in the U.S. that I never considered whether I was saying it “correctly.” Khru Sunisa, my Thai language teacher, was the person who taught me how to pronounce my name. She was also the person who laughed in my face when I first introduced myself to her. Two months into my stay, two Japanese friends, who were also students in the Thai Studies program at Thammasat University, told me about a Thai language school they attended in Silom, Bangkok. The three of us agreed that the university's language class was for beginners and only covered a basic “survival” Thai. We were all more interested in learning as much Thai as possible during our stay. They took me to Silom so I could meet their teacher and ask about pricing. We took the river boat taxi from Tha Maharaj to the Taksin Bridge, where we rode the BTS Skytrain all the way to Sala Daeng near Silom.

The elevator took us up to the thirteenth floor and we entered a small study center decorated in blue. Khru Sunisa was at the front desk and wore a smile. My two friends arrived just in time for their afternoon classes and they slipped into their classrooms. I sat in the chair next to the front desk and looked around the room as Khru Sunisa organized herself. She pulled up the schedule for the Thai February lessons. คุณชื่ออะไรคะ she asked me—“What is your name?” Happy that she asked me something that I would have no trouble answering in Thai, I tell her with great excitement, ฉันชื่อพรทิพย์นะคะ—“My name is Porntip!” Without hesitation, Khru Sunisa bursts into laughter. She is very kind, very lighthearted, and is the kind of person

who laughs often. When she realizes I am not laughing and I do not understand why she is, she explains—now in English—that I should really learn to pronounce my own name. She kindly tells me, “When you say ‘Porntip’ the way that you do, it means that you are a man. But when you say ‘Porntip’ like this, it means you are a woman.” I feel humiliated. How could I have not known that the difference between the way my dad says my name and the way that I say my name was more than just a difference in accent, but also a difference in gender and meaning? How could I have lived in Thailand for two months without someone else correcting me? Khru Sunisa and I sat at the desk and practiced saying my name over and over until the next class began. I joined three other students and Khru Sunisa that evening for the first of many Thai lessons in Silom. I stayed late into the night with Khru Sunisa for additional, one-on-one tutoring to work specifically on my pronunciation.

When I got home I sorted through my email, watched *ละคร*³, and checked my bank accounts. Five thousand dollars! I never saw those numbers in any bank account before. I wondered what the people at the scholarship fund must have been thinking when they deposited this much money into students’ bank accounts. In an email I received two months earlier, in December, a representative of the scholarship told me that the five-thousand-dollar scholarship would be directly deposited into my bank account and that I would be fully responsible for managing the money. I sat in my apartment in Bangkoknoi staring at my computer screen, blinking passionately to make sure that the line item was real. It was real. I had five thousand dollars to my name—this was more cash than I saw either one of my parents have in their accounts at any one time.

³ *ละคร*: Thai noun pronounced *lakhon*, meaning a Thai soap opera.

Before leaving for Thailand I arranged to pay for my study abroad program after I received my scholarship money. In order for this to work, the study abroad company worked closely with my university's financial aid office to verify that my family's contribution, as determined by the Free Application for Federal Student Aid "FAFSA," was truly zero and that I relied entirely on federal aid and scholarships to attend school and to study abroad. The day after I received the scholarship funds, I received a bill from the study abroad company. In addition to coordinating with my university, the study abroad company also apparently coordinated with the scholarship organizers to confirm when I would receive my scholarship funds, so that they could bill me as soon as possible. The bill was twice the amount of the scholarship, and covered tuition, fees, on-site support, and international medical insurance, among other things. It did not include housing, food, daily living expenses, or a return flight to the United States.

I put off paying the study abroad bill as long as I could without incurring any late fees. I loved seeing five-thousand dollars in my bank account. It provided a sense of security, sure, but more than that, it was exhilarating even if the money just sat there! I received several email notifications reminding me my bill was due. On the last possible day, I turned over the five-thousand dollars to the study abroad company. I still owed the company another five-thousand dollars and some change, and I paid that with a credit card. Because I "maxed out" on financial aid by receiving the maximum amount of federal aid and scholarships, I was not eligible for student loans to study abroad even though I petitioned for a loan specifically to pay for this program.

I managed to live a life that I loved in Thailand and to buy a return ticket to the United States with a big thanks to fear. Fear can sometimes be a good instructor. A lifetime of fear of displacement, fear of hunger, fear of eviction, and fear of exposure has taught me to manage

what money I do have. The semester ended in May, and I was able to stay in Bangkok until August. The benefit of buying a one-way ticket is that you get to decide when you are ready to leave. The downside of buying a one-way ticket is that you can only leave if and when you have the money to do so. At the end of the semester, I realized that I had managed well the modest amount of money I saved from my campus job and D.C. internship. Rent was around a hundred dollars a month and I spent less than twenty-five dollars a week on food. Staying in Bangkok was more affordable than returning to Arkansas. I could no longer afford my Thai language classes in Silom, but I had gathered enough resources to continue studying on my own. I calculated I could stay until the end of summer—or mid-rain season in Bangkok—and still be able to afford a flight back to the United States. It was hundreds of dollars cheaper to buy a flight from Bangkok to Chicago, Detroit, Newark, or Atlanta than Little Rock, Arkansas. I booked my return ticket to Chicago for mid-August and my mother agreed to drive nine hours from Little Rock to Chicago to pick me up.

My last four months in Thailand were the most fun and the most rewarding. I was no longer a student. I had the time to meet whomever I wanted, wherever we wanted. Moving around the city was easy now and I had my favorite bus routes, walking paths, and transportation methods for particular destinations. My half-sister and brother-in-law arranged for me to do an internship at one of the Thai ministries and I worked on a number of exciting and challenging projects. I became the first Thai American to ever do an internship at that level in the Thai government. I stayed up late with friends and spent time in other people's homes. I enjoyed the hunt for meaningful gifts that I would bring to people I loved and missed. Together, with friends and relatives, I meditated for hours and made merit in different temples around the country. I spent an entire week at the home of a family who had moved from Arkansas to Chiang Mai in

Northern Thailand. I had the language confidence to engage with people on the streets, at the market, sitting next to me on the bus, and in passing. My partner, living in Arkansas at the time, joined me in Bangkok for the last two weeks of my stay, and in the end, we traveled to Chicago together.

Five years later, I am in my bed wide awake at three in the morning. I cannot sleep, and I do not want to sleep. It is three in the afternoon in Thailand. His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Rama IX of Thailand died almost one year earlier on October 13, 2016 at the age of eighty-nine. His body was moved to the Grand Palace, where Thai people and others from around the world came to mourn. For that year, I wanted to participate in the mourning. I talked with my father about his memories of the late King—the only monarch that he, I, and most Thai people knew in our lifetime. I hung more pictures of the late King around my home in Massachusetts, and I shared photographs of him with my friends. I talked about him often.

The monarchy's relationship to government, politics, and power in Thailand is very complex, contradictory, and sometimes volatile. But the communal outpouring of love and gratitude for the late King moved me. I laid in my bed at three a.m. watching the Royal Cremation at Sanam Luang—a five-day ceremony that was televised across the world. From the screen on my phone, I could hardly recognize Sanam Luang. It was a place I walked by and through often. I spent hours there waiting for my bus to carry me across the Pinklao Bridge to my home in Bangkoknoi. It was among my favorite paths home. As my partner sleeps quietly next to me in bed, all I hear is the slow cadence of breathing. I mourn. I mourn the passing of a generous and thoughtful leader. I mourn the political unrest and violence that Thai people live through and die for. I mourn the memories of my father who has not returned to Thailand in nearly twenty years. I mourn my desire to belong to Thailand and to Thai people. My eyes close

slowly, gently. I mourn the imaginations of home and belonging. And then, I drift into a deep, generous sleep.

APPENDIX

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Instructions: This interview guide consists of four “big picture” questions to ask during each semi-structured interview. These questions are intentionally crafted to be open-ended and broad to invite a variety of stories from individual co-performers. The interview is designed to take direction from the co-performer beyond these four questions.

(1) Interest in the Project

What came to mind when you first heard of this project?

(2) Where You Come From

How would you describe “home”?

(3) Study Abroad

Tell me about a defining moment for you during your study abroad experience.

(4) Asian American

What does Asian American mean to you?

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