

Assigning a Life-History Assignment in a course on the “Asian American Experience”

THE VALUE OF SELF-DISCOVERY AND CRITICAL REFLECTION ON THE
HYPHENATED IDENTITY

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From Joann Faung Jean Lee, on Asian American oral histories, 2008

“...as a twenty first century snap shot....a tapestry of tales reflecting their lives, experiences, hopes and dreams. Ultimately the spectrum of values—in education, family, work—form a remarkable mosaic of the Asian American experience” (as distinct from Asians living in Asia or the diaspora living outside the United States)

Objective of this conversation

- **To discuss the value of an assignment where Asian and non-Asian students inquire into their own life-story; that is, what does such an assignment achieve?**
- **I argue that discovering their histories allows for a critical and intersectional understanding of identity, by gender, history, socio-economic status, culture, and more, and for personal growth**
- **Participants at this conversation are invited to offer their critical comments, questions, and suggestions, and share their own experiences if they have used this pedagogical tool**

Preparing students for this assignment: readings, films

- *Balancing Two Worlds. Asian American Students Tell their Life Stories.* Andrew Garrod & Robert Kilkenny, eds. (2007)
- *Asian American X. An Intersection of 21st Century Asian American Voices.* Arar Han & John Hsu, eds. (2010)
- *Asian Americans in the Twenty-First Century. Oral Histories.* Joann Faung Jean Lee, ed. (2008)
- *All You Can Ever Know. A Memoir.* Chung, Nicole (2018)
- *Minor Feelings. An Asian American Reckoning.* Cathy Park Hong (2020)
- *Contemporary Asian America.* Min Zhou and Anthony C. Ocampo, 3rd ed. (2016)
- Several documentaries on Asian history in the U.S., life-stories, the refugee experience

General rubric for life-story assignment

- A semester-long assignment
- An approximately 5 page paper due on last day of class (for 25% of course grade)
- I begin the process early! I ask students to talk with (or e-mail) older generations in their family, to discover the history of their family, including coming to, and in, the U.S.
- This assignment is not a chronological account of their lives!
- I propose a focus around a theme, such as gendered differences in parental expectations; possible issues with non-cis-gender identities; educational pressures and aspirations; generational differences in religious and/or cultural values (performing to an Asian stereotype), experiences of racism and discrimination, to lose or retain a mother tongue

Some questions for students to consider

- Do we need 'origin stories'?
- Do such stories inform who we are, do they affect our sense of ourselves, and choices we make?
- Do our stories connect us with family, with older generations, and inform the generations to come?
- Can discovering our stories reveal issues we didn't know about (for better or worse)?
- How difficult can this be if one is adopted (e.g. into a racially different family)?
- What can be the consequences of an adoptee connecting with a birth family?

The short version, 2-3 weeks into the semester

- **Two weeks or so into semester, students present their early findings and thoughts in a 2-page essay, in 5-6 minutes, in class, to their peers, for suggestions and critical comment**
- **They share only what they feel comfortable about!**
- **I myself comment in detail on Canvas on each student's submission, with suggestions about how to better focus their paper**
- **This short version is not graded, and students can change the theme and focus of their paper as this develops**

The longer paper, an expanded rubric

- This is a difficult assignment to grade! My criteria (with some flexibility) are as follows:
- I require clarity in thinking, and good writing
- A focused paper, around a theme as far as possible, given that themes might overlap (e.g. gender and religious values)
- A page or so, at least, in conclusion should offer critical reflections on what (factually) they have learned of their history; whether this has changed their perceptions of themselves and/or of others in their families; whether they inhabit their identity, across difference, with greater awareness and possibly, comfort
- Locate reflections in structural underpinnings (political, historical, cultural, etc.), to give context to personal experience
- A brief reference to class readings, documentaries which resonated with students

Some outcomes

- **“I now know who I am” (female Korean American student, who would go on to intern in Congress twice, in 2020 with Speaker Pelosi)**
- **“It was interesting to learn about our classmates’ lives” (both Asian and non-Asian students, on class discussions, and the short 2-page presentation, fall 2020)**
- **“I have not made sense of the absurdity of my privilege as an American white man....It is ridiculous that I can go anywhere and feel unafraid....Ridiculous that there are not bombs whizzing above my head...ridiculous that I can write this essay and say that I have never had to think what being an American meant because no one ever questioned my status....I am not exceptional. I am lucky.” (A white, non-Asian male student, fall 2020)**

A Korean American female student concludes:

“By reading so many personal narratives on...racial and cultural issues that I similarly experienced, I feel more comfortable in my Korean culture. I finally feel that I have a community I can identify with, especially here in the U.S....I felt I had to create an identity that conformed into “American ideals.”All this did was make me feel like neither the world nor my family wanted me....I can utilize my experience [of gendered conflict in her family] to grow....My culture raised me; it is the foundation of whom I am. The way I choose to perceive my own experiences based on my own culture is my world and mine only.” (fall 2020)