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A Story of Stories: An Asian American Philosophy of Engagement



I am Indian American. That statement does not represent the amount of time and experience it has taken for me to break that to you. The identification came about through my just completed participation in Cornell's The Public Service Center Scholars Program. Two years ago, I began working as an employee for the 4H Urban Outreach Program here in Ithaca, New York, primarily in the teenager program. The teenagers identify as Karen, with a few identifying as Burmese. Their life stories would be characterized flatly as those of "refugees." Their families and many themselves fled genocide in Myanmar and subsequently lived in refugee camps in Thailand. Finally, they were resettled in Ithaca, which is when I came into the picture. I only bring up this extremely generalized narrative because the projects that we worked on centered around these heart-wrenching, but also formative experiences of theirs. The principal project among these was a mural representing their community right outside Shortstop Deli; it depicts this loosely three-part narrative. The mural artist who supported us artistically was Dan Burgevin, and the community organizer who supported us was Caleb Thomas, the co-founder of Ithaca Murals. We

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grew critical of how this narrative implicates us within society throughout this project, and what that means in terms of our purpose. I use “our” here because as much as I worked with them in exploring and making meaning of their stories, they did the same for me through the interconnections and disconnections between my narrative and theirs.

The theme of my subject position transformation from deep, painful internalization, to a broad, liberating and transnational identity binds my story. It is one that connects — or rather, reveals the connections — between India and America as well as a dual citizenship that I cannot revoke. It undermines the very individuality reflected in the term “subject position,” an action I understand as distinctly Asian American. Allow me to elaborate.

I was the immigrant parents’ dream in high school. The genuine gratitude I had for them to come to America induced it. I bet my reader is familiar with this story, so the mental work to understand the rest may seem meager. I had thought the same. Internal anguish was my first friend at Cornell. I was “pre-med” — in college — especially at an institution like Cornell University — our career paths *are* us. It wasn’t long before I received a few diagnoses when I made the step towards clinical treatment, again. Rigorous drug and talk therapy, the mental health professionals told me,



were the tools available to stifle the noise in my mind as much as possible. They were wrong. In

retrospect, the professionals who worked on me were not to blame; they were just doing their job as evidence-based practitioners.

Dr. Donald Ray Atkinson is an eminent “multicultural clinical psychologist”; his body of work includes a foray into the minds of Asian American college students. He found that students who were “most acculturated” were “(a) most likely to recognize personal need for professional psychological help, (b) most tolerant of the stigma associated with psychological help, and © most open to discussing their problems with a psychologist” (209). I cannot speak for the participants his study, but I can say that I absorbed Atkinson’s conclusions at the time; my care team probably read that article at some point in their training. I blamed my problems on Third World mysticism that had not yet progressed towards modern medicine. So, Atkinson’s study made me Asian American and, therefore, mentally deficient.

This mark is on the Asian refugee too. Aihwa Ong did an ethnography on Khmer refugees and their immediate roles as mental illness patients when they resettled in California. She shows how the state makes a “biopolitical subject”: “[T]he medical gaze” observes the biopolitical subject; it is a “disciplining mechanism that, by defining human life as facts or the body, establishes the normative identity and behavior of individuals... Thus while biomedicine is attending to the health of their bodies, it is also constitutive of the social, economic and juridical practices that socialize biopolitical subjects of the modern welfare state” (86). Their diagnosis was their Khmer-ness, and the doctors applied the appropriate treatment. Once again, Asian-ness and mental illness are made one and the same and contained in a body. Keep in mind that my decision to reference Ong’s work here is retrospective, as will become clear.

I did not read Ong to buffer the authority of Atkinson when I sought out “help.” I did not respond well to Zoloft or Wellbutrin and went off them both cold turkey. I would spend the whole hour of psychotherapy staring at my therapist blankly; the dull expression didn’t leave me even after I left. My situation was hopeless; I could not even improve. Any illness left untreated festers, to continue this accepted metaphor, and even with an outlook that has allowed me to write, I cannot think of any other way to describe what happened next.

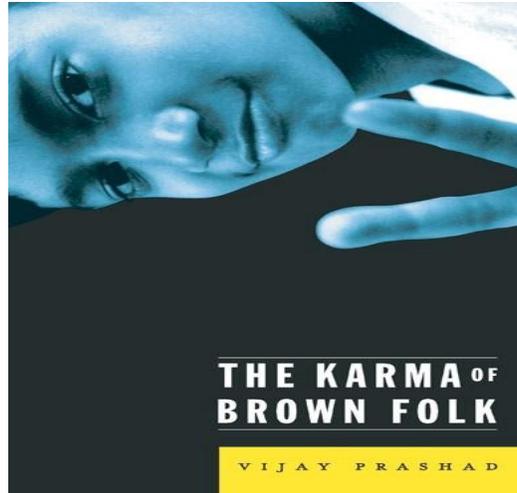
Towards the end of my junior year, I called the police and told them I wanted to kill myself. I was escorted to the ER still displaying a blankness that had grown more aggressive; I wanted to die because my soul already did. Coincidentally, this happened the same night Donald Trump was elected President, so the whole process from the van to going back home was a blur of melodramas.

My mental health leave was more traumatizing than anything else it had preceded. I am aware

that my story is one built of trauma from the ground-up, yet another ad vying for attention in the supermarket of grief. I, however, couldn't have written this without that groundwork (the past informs the present!) Once I was back to Cornell almost a year later, I was at my blankest, but not to indulge in escapism. The deepest marks had been erased; there was more space to make my own.

I had been accepted into the Public Service Center Scholars Program before I had left, so I re-met with Amy Somchanhmvong, its coordinator. She asked if I was interested in being a work-study employee for the 4H Urban Outreach Program as well as touching on the circumstances of the teenagers apart of the program. I said yes before her context got off the ground. The very act of interacting with people was to die for. Then I told Amy about my time at home, and how reading got me through it, especially Saleem Sinai, the protagonist of *Midnight's Children*. I felt what he was saying, and what he was saying spoke to me on a deeper level during a time when I rarely heard any outside voices. Amy encouraged me to explore these inklings of identity that arose within me and enroll in AAS (Asian American Studies) 2100: South Asian Diaspora, taught by my later major adviser, Viranjini Munasinghe, the director of the Asian American Studies Program as well as a Sri Lankan American. I bolded those inklings with every class. Many texts about the South Asian Diaspora directly informed who I thought I was, or if that reflection was even relevant — I had not even known that 'brown people' in America were, like myself, even considered a real part of America. Well, at least from this assertive angle.

The most important text I had read in the class was Vijay Prasad's *The Karma of Brown Folk*. Prasad let me know that I was racialized as a model minority, and my existence was used to maintain and perpetuate anti-blackness and white supremacy. He supports his thesis with an ethnography of me: a "young Asian child... like a pet animal, performs his or her brilliance... Many Indian American parents worry that their children will not inherit the values they themselves embody" (6). For the first time, I saw someone talking about my struggles within the context of having a context. I realized that my woes were not invisible, even if I had to take a college course to realize that, the epiphany held the same strength as any other. I did have a place in this country, albeit as the forever stranger. At least now, however, I realized I was not a stranger because of my "culture." Prasad cross-examines me, asking "how we [I] can live with ourselves [myself] as we are [I am] pledged and sometimes, in an act of bad faith, pledge ourselves [myself], as a weapon against black folk" (viii). Well, I certainly can't, and I won't. I am different, damn it. Brown folk be damned. As the enlightened Other, I diagnosed the other 'other' as racist, and I was to cure my "own people" with Prasad's word. My final paper for the class was a manifesto calling for all Asian Americans to racialize themselves *now*.



I had also started working with the teenagers that semester. While I was a radical, when I met with the teenagers on Friday, I struggled with initiating political discussion. They did not talk about the imperative racialization of Asian Americans, but the immediate struggles of their lives. They did not even identify as “Asian American,” an identity I had taken on just a few weeks prior. They are Karen. Although I had more of the means to connect with others, I still could not. As blinded as I was, I also had the foresight that it would be borderline offensive for me to hand out copies of my manifesto to them. How could I worship Prasad’s word, when it was clear that it did not translate in their lives?

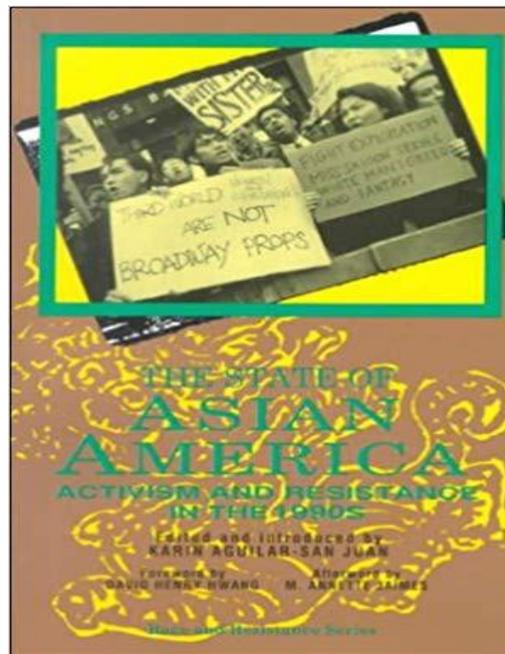
Things began to change in the next semester. It came with my participation in our Digital Stories project, one that the teenagers had been working, well before being acquainted with me. It was their individual life stories, told through a PowerPoint with an audio recording over a sequence of photos, their voices describing each one. I did one too. Being laid bare was extremely uncomfortable, but after it ended, the incredibly vulnerable and personal display laid the groundwork for the first real connection between the teenagers and me. We did this project together, and knew and told our own versions of our own stories to each other. I became more than the college volunteer that “comes and goes.”

Things got better. In that same semester, I took a course called AMST (American Studies) 4130: Service Learning for Democratic Citizenship: Literature of American Social Action Movements, taught by Darlene Evans, director of the Knight Writing Institute; it was required for all participants in the program. The course moved me towards a perspective that upheld grit, the stories and knowledge of people that have dedicated, and in the case of Martin Luther King Jr. and many others, lost their lives for their purposes.

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For the class, I had read *The State of Asian America: Activism and Resistance in the 1990s*, edited by Karin Aguilar-San Juan, a Vietnamese American scholar-activist. The anthology was composed of essays written by Asian American activists; there was also a recurring theme of transnationality, something that tied their struggles here to that of the people in their countries of origin. I read once again about the model minority myth, but this time the finger was pointed not at Asian Americans, but at the robust social and economic apparatus that birthed and nursed the model minority. It is an insidious myth that “belittle[s] the damage done by the discrimination we face, obscure[s] the complexity of our experience, and make[s] our contributions to the struggle against racism invisible” (4).



When I read this, I thought of our digital stories and their distinctly Asian American narratives, at least in how they could have easily been woven into the anthology. My digital story was inevitably the black sheep, but the theme of being Asian-looking people living in this country bound it with the teenagers’ stories, nonetheless. The American ideal of obtaining and emanating freedom was especially stressed. One young Karen woman in the community came to Ithaca and received an education to become a nurse; she went back to the Thai refugee camps to help, and she was cited as a role model in many of the teenagers’ digital stories. She inspired one of the teenagers that graduated this past year, who wishes to follow in her footsteps.

There are many critiques about how what the Statue of Liberty symbolizes is used to normalize oppression of marginalized peoples, but for the teenagers, her promise rings true and that matters.

We held an event at Center Ithaca, a community center that resembles a food court at a mall to present our digital stories publicly, it was called “Community Voices,” and other stories were shared that resembled ours in a way too, regardless of race, ethnicity or geographic journey. But still, mine and the teens’ resembled each other’s more so than with others. I am sure at least some of our audience members made the same connections. I know for sure that one viewer’s interpretation of those connections was through a different lens than mine. She was a black activist, and she said that it is great that Asians come to this country and succeed here, she said, but us African Americans have been struggling here for hundreds of years and don’t get anywhere; it just seems unfair.



I respected her perspective, but that does not require devaluing mine. For the first time, I responded with a voice that was both somehow collective and individual. Nerves made my articulation suffer, but I managed to say something about how the model minority myth is

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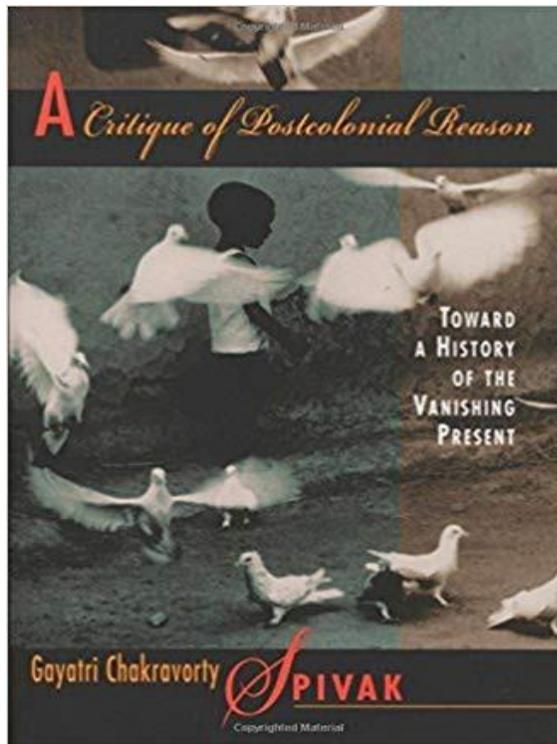
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something that structures the interconnected oppression we all face. I got the point across. She hugged me afterwards and thanked me for sharing my story.

I got my first boyfriend this past summer. I got my first ex this past fall. This piece is personal and I am an open person, but some things are just too personal to put on paper. It is suffice to say that my grades plunged as well as my commitment to 4H. I am better but am still recovering and will always be. The spark of hope I finally felt shriveled up and seemingly died. Such is life, I told myself, and yet the suicidal thoughts revisited me. So, I turned to God to save me this time. There is nothing wrong with that, but my foray into faith was selfish. Due to it, however, I can at least now testify that the mantra of ‘everything happens for a reason’ has something to it, at least to me. I started learning more about Hinduism, the religion I was raised in, but never immersed within. I asked my father about my own family’s spiritual history. Despite the rough patch, the importance of stories still persevered in my mind. My dad had a beautiful story of how, in his village, there is a temple dedicated to his great-great grandmother, and she guards its residents. The one he told of my mom’s side, however, was not one to relish. It had more of a nationalist flavor.

Whenever I visited her “village,” I gazed out into the expanse of mango trees as well as the workers picking them; Whenever I visited her “village,” I gazed out into the expanse of mango trees as well as the workers picking them; they all were and spoke Telugu, one of the languages my parents did not teach me because it might affect my English acquisition. Taking in the scene was as far as I would go in terms of reflecting on it. In my defense, I was just a child who barely understood my own existence. While I was in India, I simply counted down the days until I returned to my America. I had nothing to do with *these* people nor this country. Damn you India, you’ll never get me back. I was elated once our plane touched down on American soil and I was back home.

Four short months later, I had made that call to the police on the night of November 8, 2016. My right to write this paper within a broader effort to fight social injustice is sanctioned by social injustice. I dealt with this searing epiphany by throwing myself deeper into religion; desperation took on a more menacing form. Eventually and unsurprisingly, just a week after adopting the life of a sadhu I had a breakdown — an event that precedes everything worth mentioning in my life — in front of Troy Richardson, a professor teaching a course I took this past semester on philosophies of dispossession, of all things. He let me throw a lavish pity party in front of him and once I was done, recommended that I read Gayatri Spivak’s *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. Maybe it could give me some clarity. I checked it out from the library and read it like I did the Bhagavad Gita just that past week.



I could not, unfortunately, penetrate her writing. However, its final chapter, “Culture,” was relatively accessible. She says that “It is one of the painful imperatives of the impossible within the ethical situation that we have to admit that the interest of the migrant, however remote, is in dominant global capital. The migrant is in First World space” (382). Ever since I was born, upholding justice for myself and my family meant ascending the social ladder and amazingly interpreting the climb somehow as “ ‘resistance!’ ” (398). What I must do is not purify myself through my God — a sentiment which does come dangerously close to nationalism which Hindus and the diaspora have more than enough of — but rather embrace precarity and vulgarity. The binary of the Third and First World is proven false by virtue of my existence, a testament to the reality of complexity and the necessity to recognize it to reflect it. As an Indian American, the threat I pose to America is what I embody. That conclusion has already deeply affected the way in which I see and operate within the world. if you ask me what I am, even where I am ‘originally’ from — this question does not offend me — I will say “Indian American.” Resistance, to me, is resisting the narrative of resistance that has been handed to me. All I really want to do in my life

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is my utmost best to break the tradition of handing it down. It is a tradition dressed as “culture,” but it is more American than anything else.

Without even being conscious of it, I had discerned the complex, hidden interconnections between Amy and me, the teenagers and me, Asian America and me, a black activist and me, my parents and me and finally India and America and me.

All of these connections, as unscripted as they were, fertilized fresh soil for coalitional resistance that has not, for the most part, been gardened yet.

Of course, I have not completely shed the pretension of writing a philosophy of engagement centered around my own personal narrative, but that is an aspect of my perspective that I will always have to grapple with, reflect upon and learn from as long as I live. Just today, I asked an employee of a Subway I frequent whether she was Indian. She said she was Nepali as she averted her eyes, injecting a coldness into a seemingly innocent question. Speculation here would be inappropriate, but I can say that even if we are both “Asian Americans,” or let’s narrow it down to “South Asian Americans,” if we cannot grapple with, reflect upon and learn from our infinitely complex and dynamic personal narratives and identities, we will never see eye-to-eye. As romantic and innocent this sentiment is, take note that the teenagers’ past experiences do not resonate with the classic innocence of childhood, and they know well what happens when people of various groups cannot coexist. By the way, the philosophy of engagement I write here is not something I propose for Asian Americans, by Asian Americans, none of that, nor will I assert that it is ideal. But it is for me. Even with its universalizing tint, my philosophy of engagement was born in the gay Indian American housed in the subaltern. Despite social resistance for me to have a perspective, let alone its acceptability, it is one that would not have been born without access to a rigorous service-learning course housed in an Ivy League institution. A paradox, but like me and many others, it exists.

Some Concluding Notes

Mental illness, in my opinion, is real, in the same way a metaphor is. As someone who struggles with mental illness, however, ignoring an aspect of that construct which has a hand in distributing mental distress from the get-go does not help anyone. The learning I have recounted here has been by far the most effective mental health treatment I have tried. I did give one last try, however, and I am so grateful that I did. Interestingly, however, I only benefited from all of these interventions once I had healed my deepest scars.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is my lead mental tormentor. Every time a potential life

narrative sprouts in my head, a hurricane of deeply irrational worries and ruminations forms to destroy it. This vicious, violent cycle repeats indefinitely. Imagine how hard it was for me to write this piece. But I did, and I'm still here and I'm still doing my best to manage my mental illnesses. Existence is resistance.

Finally, this thought is my most important, since it were not for this person, none of these thoughts would have ever crossed my mind. That person is Amy Somchanhmvong. Amy is a local Taiwanese American scholar-activist that works at the Cornell campus and Ithaca at large, but mostly in the vibrant interstices between them. She is the co-founder of the Ithaca Asian American Association and the Associate Director of Community Service-Learning and Partnership at the Cornell Public Service Center, of which the Public Service Center Scholars falls within. Most importantly, to me at least, she is my mentor. She is the first person I mentioned in this paper, but also a solid testament to the linear narrative myth. She was with me every step of the way, up or down. She was also a pivotal actor in all the projects we worked with the teenagers on during my time with then. Almost every week throughout the past two years, she has spent the time to reflect with me in person on what I had been continually going through, session that would often last hours. Even though she did not make a show of it, I knew they took a big chunk out of her own working and personal life.

I do find that my former quirk of saying that I would have ended my life if it weren't for certain individuals comes across as a bit intense, but in light of what I have learned, I have come to a deeper conception of what I was trying to say. I feel that whenever someone feels discarded by this world, they are bound to resort to tactics of resistance that are no longer in my arsenal, suicide being one of them. I know I would resort to taking my life as an unintentional — or maybe intentional — protest against and exit from this world if I had never met her. Because of her, I do and will always have a place in this world, and that place is precisely at its edge. The amount of rejection I get from it going forward will now only motivate me further to hang on. I know this tribute might seem extra because I didn't receive an Academy Award, but the reality is that it cannot be extra enough. Her mentorship is the greatest honor and privilege I will ever receive.

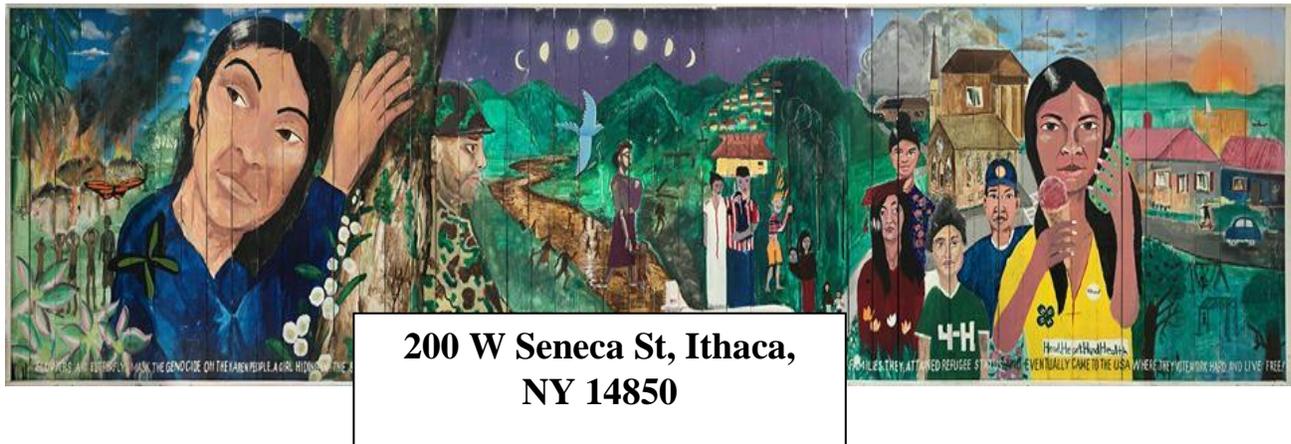
Thank you so much, Amy, from the bottom of my heart.

For a field called “youth development,” I had no idea how much development I would go through as its employee. In about three hours, I will head down to Northside Community Center, where I work with the teens every Friday, for the second to last time. A big part of why we did the digital stories and went through the process of reflecting on our life stories was to create the image of a mural that would represent the Karen community here in Ithaca. Finally, we will start painting it

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today. Like this essay, the mural is yet another record of our transformation, another example of a novel production that came about as a result. It says much more than I can write here, and that's how it should be.



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