SABRINA OH

THE LAST BEST PLACE

CASE STUDIES ON CONTEMPORARY ASIAN MIGRATION, DIASPORA, AND COMMUNITY BUILDING PRACTICES IN MONTANA

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS IN ASIAN STUDIES

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FOR MOM, KATY, HALMONI, AND HARABOJI

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Chapter One: INTRODUCTION

Many dawns and dusks of my 2018 summer were spent on Orange County-Los Angeles train commutes, and I spent much of that time either ungracefully dozing off or thesis topic brainstorming, both of which were probably induced by a mishmosh of transit ennui and the unwarranted anxiety of a looming senior year, my very last one. The thesis topic deadline certainly had a hold over me. Choked to muster up critical thought and then disappointed with my progress, or lack thereof, were a sequence of events all too frequent and frustrating.

Over time, I became entangled with the serendipity of the daily commute. Each ticket became a bid for catharsis and I, heavily dependent on the Metrolink to somewhere, sometime, somehow gift me with an aha moment.

The Orange County line stops – Buena Park, Fullerton, Anaheim, Irvine, Mission Viejo, to name a few – make for an immaculate suburban southern California starter pack. Incidentally, southern California suburbs are teeming with Asians and Asian Americans. As a second-generation Korean American born and raised in southern California and with a disciplinary focus on Asian America, naturally, I had both the resources and reason to pursue such topic. Yet, the jump I made felt unnatural, without aim, and too close to home for a robust academic paper.

I turned to camcording, a beloved pastime of mine, in the hopes that my videography would inspire. Alas, no closure: just shaky banal footage of cookie-cutter houses and palm trees. Suburban southern Californian Asian Americanism did not sit well with me, and I did not want to sit with the topic for an entire academic year.

On one serendipitous train ride home, I reevaluated: I would like to go somewhere I have never been. And fortunately, the beauty in brainstorming is that there is no binding contract. That very night, I conducted desk research on U.S. states with low densities of Asian Americans, and last on the list was Montana. Without a second thought, out of both thrill and desperation, I decided on Montana as my research site.

I have since set foot on what is in some measure the inverse of my personal experience. Riding this wave of inspiration, I knew that I wanted to not only meet Asian Americans in Montana but also take my pleasure in videography seriously through this opportunity.

The Last Best Place

The Last Best Place, one of the state's more recent endearments, is a study of contemporary Asian migration, diaspora, and community building practices in the state of Montana. Specifically, my research silhouettes Asian American-identifying individuals in Montana; their engagement with cultural, identity, and interpersonal politics; and the motives and means by which they seek and build community and notions thereof.

The nomenclature "Asian America," here, is bounded culturally rather than physiognomically. Notions of passing certainly warrant discussion, but it is my speculation that Asians in non-Asian communities engage in cultural and different ways of being, identifying, and relating. Then, the higher-order function of this thesis is to disorient, remap, and

reconceptualize the Asian American geography by way of uncovering individuals and communities in The Last Best Place.

My burning questions are seemingly elementary yet relentlessly at large: What is it like to grow up with people who do not look like me? How do these folks socially, politically, and culturally identify? What is a common Asian American moment, narrative, experience in Montana? How does the Montanan Asian American experience compare with other regional experiences (e.g., southern California)? Who are these Asian American folks? How did they get there? How do they seek and build community? Where, even, is Montana? At its core, my survey questions what is it like to not only simply be Asian but also be accepted as Asian in Montana.

Geographically, Asian America generally presumes California, the Northeast, sometimes the Midwest, Texas, Hawaii, and, if generosity permits, Georgia – rarely the Mountain West. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2017 population estimates, 89.1% of Montana's population is white, alone; 6.7% Native American; 3.8% Latino; 0.9% Asian or Pacific Islander; and 0.6% Black.[1] Montana is currently the state with lowest proportion of Asian-identifying folks. Yet, if Asian Americans are, indeed, a booming subset of the U.S. population, Montana presents an exceptional case. In addition, the paucity of Asian American scholarship on Montana and my personal unfamiliarity with it were all the more reason to confront them.

Roadmap

Chapter two surveys post-Vietnam historiographies of Asian America, the situation of diaspora in both Asian America and Asian American studies, and the contours and complexities of contemporary Asian American communities. Chapter three selects relevant historical backdrops to frame the lives of my informants which recount and recant existing narratives and histories. Chapter four organizes, contours, and details the methodological processes involved. Chapter five spatializes my research sites, Missoula and Bozeman, the purpose of which is to map and establish the grounds on which the places and faces of my study may come to life.

This qualitative study culminates in conclusions drawn from four immersive profiles based on the lives of four remarkable Montanan Asian American women: Michelle Nemetchek, Kaunou Vang, Emma Woods, and Wendy.[2] I probe each participant's arrival in Montana; what the participant considers to be turning points in their life, community, and experiences; the participant's perceptions of community; and, finally, the participant's perceptions of Asian American life elsewhere to frame and form these narratives. I then submerge in and emerge out of these accounts to make inferences and draw grander conclusions about contemporary Asian migration, diaspora, and community building practices in Montana.

First of many last words

I credit Jane Takagi-Little in *My Year of Meats* by Ruth Ozeki as one of my

[1] "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Montana." Census Bureau QuickFacts. Accessed September 25, 2018.

[2] I use the pseudo-name Wendy to protect the informant's anonymity.

thesis muses. I was introduced to the character in Professor Hsu's Asian American literature course, and though fictional in nature, both plot and Jane have since markedly inspired my academic interests.

By trade, Jane is a documentarian for *My American Wife!*, a Japanese television show sponsored by an American meat-exporting business, but my predilection for the novel lies in off-script Jane, an Asian American woman with uninhibited thoughts and feelings. She braids the show's script through the documentation of her own serendipitous experiences in, reactions to, and insights from her travels across America and, incidentally, places with low densities of Asian Americans.

Likewise, I deem not only the life stories of my informants but also my authority critical to the pages of this thesis, and just as Jane dips in and out of the script, so too have I. I have additionally produced a documentary, which synthesizes footage collected on my camcorder during my visit to Montana to enliven the contents of the written thesis.

Poeticism cheapens life, but my time in Montana was unforgivingly rich. One of the richer moments was when a cowboy at the Oxford Café, a local saloon in Missoula, had asked what I was on the run from, to which I jokingly responded "reality." He responded that it was a good thing to run from and soberly asked where I was from. I hesitantly responded. To my relief, he laughingly remarked that everyone's from somewhere else in Montana. I then complimented his boots and left the bar for a quick look at the gaudy jukebox.

Such eat-pray-love moments fortuitously filled my time in The Last Best Place, where I also traversed interminable miles of incredible terrain, bought a pair of overalls and cowboy boots, and, at moments, simply *belonged*. Going somewhere I have never been has been fulfilling and, at times, trepidatious; I cannot lie. Yet, the trepidation stems from neither the overwhelming vastness of Montana nor the logistics of thesising but bearing witness to a seed of an idea on a commute home pan out to be one of my grandest projects yet. It is my hope that I do justice to not only the voices of Asians and Asian Americans in Montana but also a vision and voice of my own.

Chapter Two: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter surveys post-Vietnam historiographies of Asian America, the situation of diaspora in both Asian America and Asian American studies, and the contours and complexities of contemporary Asian American communities. I explicate the ways in which my research reviews particular implications and locates blind spots in the literature as they relate to contemporary Asian migration, diaspora, and community building practices in Montana.

Post-Vietnam historiographies of Asian America

Whether certain narratives take precedence over others in the history of Asian America and Asian Americans is not up for debate, I contend, simply because they do. These narratives frequently concern and imagine a coastal urban history of Asian America, which is not to say that they so uncritically do. In fact, this point of contention offers an opportunity to reappraise pre-existing narratives and appraise those unfrequented. At the same time, I contend that the dominant narratives of Asian American histories, old and new, carry exclusionary tendencies, which strike at the very core of this study. Then, this survey is not at the expense of but, rather, in response to the privileging of Asian American urban history itself. *The Last Best Place* reworks those unfrequented Asian American narratives into an ever-working history of Asian America and recovers them from the limbo of areas for future study. In this manner, Scott Kurashige's "Race, Space, and Place in Asian American Urban History" is the gateway through which I survey post-Vietnam Asian American history onwards, by reason of the contemporary interests of my study, in care of Sucheng Chang's *Asian Americans* and its up-to-date counterpart, *A New History of Asian America* by Shelley Sang-Hee Lee.

Kurashige establishes that the field of Asian American studies was largely born within urban settings during the Asian American movement of the 1960s and 1970s, one of the reasons being that campuses like San Francisco State and the University of California at Berkeley were home to Third World Liberation Front student strikes, were located in urban centers, and had significant Asian American student populations.[3] Then, urbanism as a "constitutive rather than coincidental or residual factor in the rise of Asian American studies" buttresses Kurashige's claim that "Asian American urban communities provided much of the purpose and content for the field during its formative stages of growth."[4] To be fair, I acknowledge that "[t]he early development of urban history left little space for consideration of Asian Americans."[5] In bearing out this claim, Kurashige explicates the reasons for the exclusion of Asian Americans in the fields of mobility and ghettoization studies, "[S]everal factors militated against the inclusion of Asian Americans in mobility studies of the industrial era. Asian immigrants were concentrated on the

[3] Kurashige, Scott. "Race, Space, and Place in Asian American Urban History." *The Oxford Handbook of Asian American History*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016, 374.
[4] Kurashige, 374.
[5] ibid, 375.

West Coast, and they were largely excluded from blue-collar industrial work and labor unions."[6] Likewise, "Asian Americans were largely absent from the ghettoization studies not because they were immune to segregation and discrimination but primarily because such studies, focused on urban centers of the Northeast and Midwest where Asian populations were relatively small, generally viewed race as a bipolar black/white construction."[7] Kurashige continues,

> [A] new interest in urbanism began to develop in response to several developments during the 1990s. First, a whole generation raised in the suburbs began to question the 'vanilla' character of suburban culture. Second, owing partly to this return of youth to the cities, the cyclical nature of investment, and the economic restructuring caused by the rise of the information sector, a new wave of urban renewal emerged during the Clinton years. Third, scholars and citizens have become increasingly critical of the social costs of urban sprawl for our fragile ecology and for human relations.[8]

Yet, in light of these developments, is this new interest in urbanism to say that ruralism and, even, suburbanism are not deserving of interest? It is precisely at this juncture that I take issue with an Asian American history premised on the geographic concentration and visibility of Asian Americans, their migratory patterns, their mobilization of capital, and so on. The issue with which I take is not necessarily a dialectical matter of visible-versus-invisible but one of (over)due coverage and treatment of Asian bodies, identities, and communities in places across America yet to be recorded and/or traversed. In their ostensible nothingness, places in isolation are equally abundant with character and prolificacy – all the more reason to remap and revitalize the body and borders of Asian America. That is all to say that small populations matter, but their smallness often downplays the existence of assimilation and experiences thereof.

Despite the fact that Chan's *Asian Americans* is more or less dated for the purposes of this study, her contribution to the literature has set a precedent for not only the history of Asian Americans but also past, present, and future historiographies thereof. In particular, Chan bookmarks the surge of new immigrants and refugees during the late 1970s as its own chapter in which she argues, "Refugees aside, even the more predictable flow of Asian immigrants has been generated by the political relationships that the United States has developed with the countries of origin."[9] As such, Chan traces the vectors of contemporary Asian migrants from their respective sending countries to the United States with a concentration on the political forces at play. However, effective coverage and treatment of contemporary Asian migration requires a consideration of the entirety of individual trajectories, though varying and multiple, and should not only address migrant experiences upon arrival in the United States but also anticipate anxieties about their futures.

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[6] ibid, 375.
[7] ibid, 375.
[8] ibid, 382.

[9] Chan, Sucheng. *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History*. Boston, MA: Twayne, 1991, 164.

That is not to say that Chan is ineffective in her coverage and treatment of contemporary Asian migration.

Indeed, Chan discusses Asian Americans in terms of socioeconomic status, politics, education, and culture, the prompt of this discussion being: "[W]ill Asian Americans work alongside their multiethnic neighbors to bring about a more egalitarian society in the United States?"[10] Chan addresses, "Intrepid Asian immigrants have proven their ability to resist oppression and to survive. Whether or not Asian Americans can now become full participant in American life depends in part on their own willingness to channel some of their energies into public service – activities that improve the larger commonweal."[11] Though noble in effort, Chan's treatment of Asian immigrants and the Asian American category, here, is rushed. First, that "intrepid Asian immigrants have proven their ability to resist oppression and to survive" presumes that assimilation is a discrete, one-time process. Frankly, it is not. Second, that assimilation depends on Asian Americans' willingness to channel some of their energies into activities that improve the large commonweal not only is untrue, as this study goes to show, but also pigeonholes Asian Americans as necessarily political, which is limiting to the Asian American category and interpretations thereof. Instead, my research finds more merit in the study of being and *being accepted* as Asian in America: What is it like to be and be accepted as Asian in Montana? In America?

Lee brands *A New History of Asian America* as a fresh and up-to-date history of Asian America and, in theory, is more attuned to the needs of this study. Like Chan, Lee bookmarks post-Vietnam refugee migration as its own chapter but, unlike Chan, considers more than just the political dimensions and nuances of this epoch in Asian American history including the contemporaneous American conscience, American lives, and ethnic identity and solidarity among Southeast Asians.

Though Lee's historiographical politicization of Asian Americans in her ensuing chapters is well founded, these chapters are lacking in discussions of interpersonal politics, identity politics, and community building. Nonetheless, Lee does include discussions about the spatialization of Asian America and placement of Asians in America in light of the changes in U.S. immigration policy since 1965. In terms of the spatialization of Asian America, Lee writes, "The movement and appearance of Asian businesses to the suburbs has both reflected and contributed to a wider geographic dispersion of Asian American communities and the 'suburbanization' of Asian America."[12] Then, what about the ruralization of Asian America? Moving forward, Lee *places* Asians in America in terms of educational performance and socioeconomic status. However, I argue that more productive and high-priority than plotting Asian Americans onto the axes of success and failure is a due remapping of the Asian American geography altogether.

Asian diasporas

The many moving parts of and takes on the term diaspora overwhelm, but

[10] Chan, 188.
[11] ibid, 188.

[12] Lee, Shelley Sang-Hee. *A New History of Asian America*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2014, 325.

my concern lies in not so much which conceptualizations are best or most applicable, as such do not exist, but, rather, enhancing a few through my study. In this manner, this section surveys and looks to the introduction of Parreñas and Siu's *Asian Diasporas* as both guide and stepping stone in my application of the term.

In situating diaspora as both a working definition and an ongoing, contested process in Asian American studies, Parreñas and Siu are certainly critical of the theoretical possibilities and limitations of the term but take issue with "overdefining it and thereby restricting its flexibility as a theoretical tool."[13] As such, Parreñas and Siu broaden current discussions of Asian diasporas to not circumvent associated "tensions, inequalities, and conflicts" but confront them.[14]

"[D]iaspora, as an analytical category of discussion and debate, only gained significance in Asian American studies in the early 1990s,"[15] which was in large part due to "demographic shifts in the Asian American population combined with [contemporaneous] technological advancements and global economic changes,"[16] which then "made the concept of diaspora particularly meaningful to the study of Asian America."[17] With any paradigm shift comes both promise and concern, the latter of which Sau-ling Wong well articulates. "Her 1995 article served as a wake-up call to Asian Americanists about the possible pitfalls of what she has coined the 'denationalization' of Asian American studies, or the displacement of the United States as the field's proper unit of analysis."[18] In Wong's eyes, "a diasporic approach with its ethnic-specific premise and homeward gaze threatens the panethnic coalition-building spirit of Asian American studies."[19] In hearing and hammering out Wong's concerns, Parreñas and Siu, in contrast, "wish to expand [the emphasis on homeland-Asian American ties] by proposing Asian diasporas as a research agenda that encourages… comparative analysis of different ethnic diasporas, both in terms of their two sets of ties and in terms of their interaction with one another in specific locations."[20] However, as Wong suggests, such agendas "may lead to the disembodiment of Asian American constituents, diffusing their political potential as a people who claim America as home and whose political commitments should be locally and nationally defined,"[21] a concern that warrants further pursuit and deserves resolution. In the same spirit of Parreñas and Siu's forward drive, this study dials back discussions and debates of diaspora, as both phenomenon and experience, to local and, more importantly, experiential terms.

In their introduction, Parreñas and Siu also make sense of *being* diasporic and *to be part of* a diaspora, "Being diasporic is 'to know one's homeland and place of residence intimately but neither be wholly of either place.' It is this process of continual displacement that serves as

[13] Parreñas, Rhacel Salazar., Lok C. D. Siu, and Tobias Hübinette. *Asian Diasporas: New Formations, New Conceptions*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007, 7.
[14] Parreñas and Siu, 6.
[15] ibid, 3.
[16] ibid, 3.
[17] ibid, 3.
[18] ibid, 4.
[19] ibid, 5.
[20] ibid, 6.
[21] ibid, 5.

our springboard to categorically situate Asian migrations under the rubric of diasporas."[22] According to Parreñas and Siu, being diasporic is a matter of interstitiality, which certainly invokes questions of belonging, but before all else, that being diasporic is to neither be wholly of either place denies even the possibility to be wholly of *both* places. In other words, if one is neither here nor there, is it possible for one to simultaneously be in both places? Furthermore, their cursory categorical situation of Asian migrations under the rubric of diasporas abstracts the reality of diasporic Asian bodies. This study, instead, works toward what it looks, feels, tastes, sounds, and smells like to embody diaspora – working out the diaspora *from within* – to articulate what it means to embody it. Parreñas and Siu continue,

> To be part of a diaspora is to reference one's relationship and belonging to some larger historical cultural-political formation – a people, a culture, a civilization – that transgresses national borders. It is a way of reformulating one's minoritized position by asserting one's full belonging elsewhere. It seeks to redefine the terms of belonging. In focusing on its liberating potential, however, scholars of diaspora have often deemphasized the negative and confining aspects of diasporic identification. [We] [offer] a corrective to this tendency and [insist] on examining the marginalizing forces that work to produce and sustain diasporic formations.[23]

In like manner, this study sheds brighter light on the negative and confining aspects of diasporic identification. Nevertheless, being part of a diaspora gratuitously implies relationships and belonging of some sort. Thus, this study gives equal weight to both what it means to belong and what it means to *not* belong. In addition, this study distinguishes belonging from being – that belonging is a form of being and that being is not necessarily a form of belonging.

Belonging to and longing for a home, real or imagined, that one once had and/or never had is characteristic of the diasporic experience. Parreñas and Siu cogently express,

> Indeed, the question of home serves not only as a source of anxiety but also as a site of creativity and refuge. It is both a place one left behind and a place one currently inhabits. 'Home' is situated in both as well as somewhere in between. Being diasporic involves the simultaneous affiliation and disidentification with both the place one occupies and 'back home.' These two seemingly contradictory forms of relating to home, in fact, emerge from and are constituted by the marginal inclusion of diasporic subjects to both places.[24]

It is then precisely the home situated in between the place left behind, real or imagined, and a place one currently inhabits that this study enters. Home as in between the in-between is a titillating notion but remains relentlessly at large. Consequently, this study wishes to best materialize the rather impalpable

[22] ibid, 12.
[23] ibid, 13.
[24] ibid, 14-15.

interstitial home as well as forms of relating to and identifying with it.

On sight, the predicament about Asian diasporas, diasporic bodies, and experiences of diasporization rests in their everythingness and everywhereness, but it is precisely by virtue of their everythingness and everywhereness "that the framework of Asian diasporas offers a rare but sorely needed opportunity for communities in marginalized or intersectional areas of study,"[25] such as Asian diasporas in Montana, "to assert their presence."[26] At the end of the day, "[diaspora] is as much an embodied experience as it is a way of understanding one's personhood."[27] That is, diasporas are real and lived, and it is this study's intent to best service them.

Contemporary Asian American communities

If the predicament about Asian diasporas, diasporic bodies, and experiences of diasporization rests in their everythingness and everywhereness, then the predicament about Asian communities, or the concept of community as it stands for that matter, rests in their somethingness and somewhereness. Again, my concern here lies in not so much which definitions and understandings of community are best or most applicable but, rather, substantiating Võ and Bonus' claims in their introduction of *Contemporary Asian American Communities* through my study.

Before all else, it is critical to note that "[c]onnections within and among communities may not be solely ethnically or racially determined,"[28] and "territorially defined communities can often exceed their physical boundaries and have overlapping elements located within and outside neighborhoods."[29] Furthermore, Võ and Bonus' "envisions communities as both territorial sites or geographically delineated formations and socially constructed entities; as such, these communities are based on relations of similarities and differences and on relations that extend to multiple networks across locations and interests."[30] More specifically, they envision that "Asian Americans' experiences of group formation cannot simply be generalized as instances or ideal-typical societal arrangements… [and] may be far more complex and nuanced than, and qualitatively different from, the experiences of more dominant groups to fit neatly into any of the specific binary categories" and, in their envisioning, echo "Gary Okihiro's contention that 'a simpleminded assertion of race or ethnicity as a central phenomenon of Asian American communities is no longer adequate, nor will an "instinctual" basis for ethnic solidarity and identity suffice.'"[31] While this study subscribes to their line of thought, my research refocuses on the processes of group formation, rather than group formation itself. In addition, my research re-questions and addresses Okihiro's contention: If not for an instinctual basis for ethnic solidarity and identity, then what?

On a refreshing note, Võ and Bonus recognize that

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[25] ibid, 13.
[26] ibid, 3.
[27] ibid, 13.
[28] Võ, Linda Trinh, and Rick Bonus. *Contemporary Asian American Communities: Intersections and Divergences*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002, 9.
[29] Võ and Bonus, 9.
[30] ibid, 3.
[31] ibid, 6.

> [m]any young people are more adept than their elders at manipulating the new technology to create and sustain complex social relationships, changing the process by which culture and identity are transmitted from one generation to the next. The emerging processes affect Asian American cultural representations, expressions, and practices in multiple spaces… Given these conditions, how do we think about Asian American communities in their generalities and particularities? How do we understand the ways in which cultures are created, changed, sustained, and reformulated?[32]

Perhaps, what makes contemporary Asian American communities uniquely contemporary is the activity and visibility of Asian Americans in the cyberspace today. That Võ and Bonus make a point of this fact is not only fashion-forward but also auspicious. In like manner, this study posits and ventures the frontiers of cyberspace as a (community) site for cultural representation, expression, and practices.

Võ and Bonus cogently conclude,

> For us, Asian American communities manifest themselves in everyday spaces, geographic and social, where Asians reside, work, and carry out their social and political activities. They are evident in the relationships and interactions Asian Americans have with one another and with people of all ethnic and racial backgrounds. And their constant reformulations suggest different spaces and visions that attempt to braid local experiences with connections that extend into the regional, the global, and the transnational.[33]

In all, conceptualizing and contextualizing communities in the everyday is at the heart of my study. As I see it, the Asian American community is best defined in terms of experiences of the everyday. However, more important than defining the body and borders of the Asian American community and sincerer to the aims of this study is understanding the means and modes by which Asian Americans in Montana and beyond relate or do not relate to and, by extension, identify or do not identify with community.

[32] ibid, 15.

[33] ibid, 19.

Chapter Three: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

In terms of contemporary Asian immigration to the United States, the political, economic, and social forces that push and pull, voluntarily and involuntarily, between origin and destination countries dictate the stipulations under which movement and settlement transpire. Because post-1965 narratives are as much about their sobering complexities as they are about their seeming possibilities, this chapter selects relevant historical backdrops to frame the stories and lives of my informants which recount and recant existing narratives and histories. After all, Asians and Montana do not meet by accident.

Yet, the task of historicizing contemporary Asian migration, diaspora, and community building practices in Montana, let alone the Mountain West, is troublesome because of the unavailability of extensive narratives and histories, specific to the region, from which to recollect. At the end of the day, the stories and lives of my informants unearth and reproduce new narratives.

Urban, coastal, and tech-based migrations

The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 has been marketed under benevolence to family reunification and acceptance of immigrants of color, which makes for an easier sell to not only unrelenting nativists but also the American popular imagination. On the contrary, the harder sell is an unforgettable economic agenda. I depart the arbitrariness of the act's provisions and, instead, glaze over the economics as not necessarily the bottom line but an explanatory tool in the mechanization of the post-1965 movement and settlement of Asian bodies.

According to the economics of immigration, the decision to move, as with most decisions, is a cost-benefit analysis in which one moves if their wages abroad less their moving costs – that is, the costs of transportation and transition – are greater than their wages at home. It is often the case that the variable of moving costs is one in which the taxing reality of migration is most real and lived. Sensibly, to minimize these costs, post-1965 Asian immigrants gravitated towards their peoples, pre-existing networks, and ethnic enclaves, where resources and opportunities were more or less guaranteed. They brought with them their heads, hands, and feet; organized economic activity; and revitalized the urban enclaves such as New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles.[34] Lee points out, "Perhaps more striking than the revitalization of established Asian urban enclaves was the emergence of new ethnic economies where few Asians had lived or worked before, namely in the suburbs" such as Richmond, Flushing, Monterey Park, the San Gabriel Valley, Orange County, South Pay, Houston, and Orlando.[35]

The 1965 legislation was about the demand for skilled labor as it was about its sweeter provisions. After all, the economics of immigration is labor economics. Lee records,

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[34] Lee, Shelley Sang-Hee. *A New History of Asian America*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2014, 324.
[35] Lee, 325.

> In the United States, the restructuring of capitalism in the second half of the twentieth century saw, in addition to the decline of heavy manufacturing, the rise of the informational age, which has entailed product to process-oriented production and the flexibility of labor and capital. With the growth of high technology jobs in Silicon Valley and elsewhere, Asian immigrants helped fill labor demands for everything from engineers to assembly line workers.[36]

Yet, this is merely the demand side to the story. On the other hand, the supply side is an indelible self-fulfilling prophecy of seemingly harmless stereotypes about Asian Americans. Asian immigrants tended science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) because of not only the demand for high-tech labor but also STEM, as a universal discipline, is a fair measure of human capital endowment and, by extension, an accessible point of entry to economic opportunity. At any rate, for post-1965 Asian immigrants, region-specific and tech-based migrations are accordingly and inextricably linked.

Post-Vietnam refugee migration

With the end of the Vietnam War, "the influx of almost a million refugees since 1975 has further swelled the number of persons of Asian ancestry in the United States" in which three-quarters have come from Vietnam and the rest from Laos and Cambodia.[37] Chan writes,

> The post-1975 outflow of refugees reflects developments in Vietnam, Kampuchea, and Laos since Communist governments came to power, as well as the legacy of 30 years of warfare, which not only killed hundreds of thousands – perhaps millions – of able-bodied people, but also demolished cities, destroyed farmland, denuded forests, poisoned water sources, and left countless unexploded mines.[38]

Unsurprisingly, suffering outstayed its welcome in the life after death. "Refugees could leave the centers once they found sponsors who promised to provide them with food, clothing, and shelter until they could fend for themselves. The sponsors also agreed to help the refugees find jobs, to enroll their children in school, and to ease their traumatic entry into American society in other ways."[39] The belligerents of war and the entropy of global politics vandalized the homes and homelands of resident-turned refugees, whose livelihoods, moving forward, would hinge on a sponsorship program *sponsored* by Americans themselves. Yet, the inflow of post-1975 refugees in the United States was a product of not the benevolence of American sponsors but that the cost of staying home trumped the cost of moving to foreign lands, the latter of which has proven to be mountainous itself.

"While the socioeconomic backgrounds of Southeast Asians were diverse, as refugees many experienced downward mobility in the United States, skewing the entire population in the lower

[36] ibid, 323-324.
[37] Chan, Sucheng. *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History*. Boston, MA: Twayne, 1991, 152.
[38] Chan, 157.
[39] ibid, 156.

sectors of the economy."[40] The post-1975 American labor market experienced a surge in the supply of low-tech labor, which ran counter to the post-1965 demand for high-tech labor. Skills along with dreams about economic stability and mobility were consequently lost in translation, for the transference of human capital from agrarian life to a post-industrial one was a process that strayed far from undemanding. As a result, the post-1975 refugee migration contributed to and affirmed the unmistakable existence of a pool of working class Southeast Asians in America by which the lustrous manufactured image of East Asians meeting the post-1965 demand for skilled labor has often eclipsed.

Korean adoptees

In her discussion of the post-Vietnam refugee migration, Chan argues that the flow of Asian bodies is "generated by the political relationships that the United States has developed with the countries of origin."[41] Along the same vein, I would also add that the flow of Asian bodies is generated by the economic relationships that the United States has developed with the countries of origin. The birth of South Korea's international adoption program in the 1960s and its returning revival in the 1980s make for an unequivocal case in point.

"In 1961, Korea's modern adoption law passed, laying the foundation for the most efficient institutional framework of international adoption unsurpassed in the world… International adoption was integrated into the country's family planning and labor export programs to decrease the numbers in an over-populated country."[42] "South Korea, more than any other Asian country, has since 1962 actively promoted emigration as part of its population control program. The government recognizes that emigration contributes to economic stability."[43] Then, in the 1980s, under the presidency of Chun Doo Hwan, "[i]nternational adoption was now directly linked to the expansion of the emigration program, and through a process of deregulation the adoption agencies were allowed to engage in profit-making businesses and to compete with each other to track down unrestricted numbers of 'adoptable' children."[44] After cycles of phasing in and out, "[o]ver half a century of international adoption from Korea has produced a population of altogether 160,000 adopted Koreans,"[45] and "of the 160,000 adopted Koreans, two-thirds or 100,000 have ended up in the United States."[46]

Korean adoptees have been dispersed under the economic agenda of globalization, pitting them against elusive questions about physiognomics and identity, racial, cultural, and interpersonal politics. In fact, these very questions confront the basis on which Asian America defines itself. The narratives and histories of the Korean adoptee experience certainly complexify but, in any case, rethink, revise, and refresh the construct of the Asian American category altogether.

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[40] Lee, 280.
[41] Chan, 164.
[42] Hubinette, Tobias. "Asian Bodies Out of Control." *Asian Diasporas: New Formations, New Conceptions*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007, 180.
[43] Chan, 151.
[44] Hubinette, 180.
[45] ibid, 182.
[46] ibid, 182.

Multiraciality

The growing and evolving demographic mix per contemporary Asian migration patterns has naturally modified the ways in which bodies mix and match. Read: interracial love. According to Lee,

> the 2000 Census was very revealing in how significant the mixed-race population had become as a subset of Asian America… According to the census, 10, 242,998 people identified themselves as entirely of Asian race [3.6 percent]. Additionally, another 1,655,830 people identified themselves as being part Asian and part one or more other races.[47]

Lee continues, "The growth of mixed-race Asian Americans and mixed-race Americans more generally has also given rise to broad discussions about race in America, whether or not the categories we rely on have much relevance anymore and if this population's presence means we are truly on our way to a post-racial society."[48] Though the topic of a post-racial society lies outside the purview of this historical overview, like Korean adoptees, the narratives and histories of the multiracial Asian American experience certainly complexify but, in any case, rethink, revise, and refresh the construct of the Asian American category altogether.

Remarks

Asian Americans stand the test of time, yet nemesis to the Asian American category is time itself per our increasing differences and, even, similarities. At the same time, increasing differences and similarities are only natural and inherent to the nature of ubiquity, and our ubiquity has shed (hyper)visibility onto just that – our ubiquity – but that is not the end of the story. It has sparked and continues to spark undue fear and hatred of Asian Americans that deny and withhold us from our multiplicity, individuality, and dynamism, rendering these traits, at times, *invisible*.

Paradoxically, polarizing performances of Asian Americans frequently have been a conveniently available topic for national conversation. The media force feeds exoticized success stories to, then, contrive and emphasize failures. For its August 31, 1987 issue cover, *Time* plastered an image of Asian-passing students modeling "scholarly" props. Twenty-four years later, readers of Amy Chua's *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* shifted sensationalization to those Asian American whiz kids' ruthless mothers. For every whiz kid, there is a tiger mother.

In 1978, the U.S. Department of Energy hired Wen Ho Lee to improve the U.S. nuclear arsenal. In 1999, a federal grand jury accused Lee for selling U.S. secrets to China. For every techmaster, there is an evil scientist.

It goes without saying that Asian American highschoolers in Irvine have a remarkable matriculation records. Read: HYPS – Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Stanford are common destinations. Yet, why does my imagination of Asians at America's colleges and universities include the unsettling images of Seung-Hui Cho, the perpetrator of the Virginia Tech shooting? For every Ivy League admittee, there is a school shooter on the loose.

For every pleasurable Asian woman, there is a creepy Asian man; for every English-speaker, there is an accent;

[47] Lee, 347.

[48] Lee, 348.

for every tolerable yellow body, there is an unsavory brown one; for every prizewinner, there is a nuisance. A basic lack of appreciation for our everyday prolificacy as producers and consumers, as autonomous agents is, for lack of a better word, underrated.

As we straddle paradoxes left and right, naturally, it becomes increasingly difficult to escape them. Our sprawl and spread certainly complexify the debates, discussions, and the future of Asian America. With reason, dominant narratives and histories follow the numbers, but fair coverage and treatment of the histories of peoples and persons across the American geography must consider even the negligible statistics.

As discussed in chapter two, the Asian diaspora in America produces an urban-versus-rural dichotomy. It implies movement from urban origins to (sub)urban destinations. There is seldom room for the rural. Asians may not abound but undeniably exist in the Mountain West. For this reason, I strongly subscribe to the notion that there is no single embodiment for the Asian American experience. This is arguably what makes the history of Asian America incredibly alive, beautiful, and, oftentimes, overwhelming.

Recognition of the diverse gamut of multiple, individual, and dynamic stories is an underrated yet necessary next step. In strange and exciting times, this recognition creates room and opportunity for Asian Americans to explore, stretch, and deepen our notions of community and the self and offers a peace of mind about our dancing differences and similarities.

As mentioned in chapter one, this qualitative study culminates in conclusions drawn from four immersive profiles based on the lives of four remarkable Montanan Asian American women: Michelle Nemetchek, Kaunou Vang, Emma Woods, and Wendy. I probe each participant's arrival in Montana; what the participant considers to be turning points in their life, community, and experiences; the participant's perceptions of community; and, finally, the participant's perceptions of Asian American life elsewhere to frame and form these narratives. I then submerge in and emerge out of these accounts to make inferences and draw grander conclusions about contemporary Asian migration, diaspora, and community building practices in Montana.

Chapter Four: METHODOLOGY

This study is, at heart, primary qualitative research, and though ethnographic in nature, this study is not a de facto ethnography. Erring on the side of caution, I am careful to hastily render this study, which draws conclusions from a series of four individually unique narratives extracted from a one-time, four-day field trip to Montana, an ethnography. In other words, this study does not necessarily satisfy the preconditions and subtleties of a formal ethnography, but that is not to say that this study does not apply characteristically ethnographic techniques and language. For instance, I refer to all participants as informants in care of *The Ethnographic Interview* by James P. Spradley to transfer subjectivity from researcher to informant, the informant being a source of information and a "[teacher] for the ethnographer."[49]

This chapter organizes, contours, and details the methodological processes involved. To walk through these methodological processes, I organize this chapter into four sections: (1) *Preliminary data collection phase one: locating informants*; (2) *Preliminary data collection phase two: the phone interview*; (3) *Fielding: the in-person interview*; and (4) *Post-field: data processing and analysis*.

Preliminary data collection phase one: locating informants

Locating informants was the primary objective of the first phase of the preliminary data collection stage. Acting on hearsay and rough desk research on Montanan cities with the highest Asian population counts, I landed on Missoula, host to The University of Montana (UM), as my base site for sampling. In early September of 2018, I contacted professors, student organizations, and the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center at UM to connect me with Asian American-identifying folks who either were raised or have lived in Montana for five-plus years. Over the course of the month, I enlarged my sampling radius to capture the cities of Butte and Bozeman and, as such, contacted employees at the Mai Wah Museum and Korean restaurant Whistle Pig Korean, respectively. Snowball sampling was the primary technique by which I collected my initial sample of informants.

In terms of form, I conducted all correspondences in English over email and/or Facebook Messenger. In terms of content, each correspondence included a brief self-introduction, the premise of my research, and my contact information. I routinely and repeatedly followed up with no-shows until I had secured at least fifteen promising informants. By early October, I had been in active communication with fourteen informants, all of whom had agreed to move forward in the process.

Preliminary data collection phase two: the phone interview

In the second phase of the preliminary data collection stage, I conducted phone interviews with the fourteen informants, individually, whom

[49] Spradley, James P. *The Ethnographic Interview*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1979, 25.

had agreed to move forward in the research process in early October.

To achieve the objectives of this study within the parameters of ethical standards and practices, I have held and continue to hold both my research and myself as researcher to the following principles:

- Consider informants first,
- Safeguard informants' rights, interests, and sensitivities,
- Communicate research objectives,
- Protect the privacy of informants,
- Do not exploit informants, and
- Make reports available to informants.[50]

In this way, I prefaced each phone interview with a quasi-contract stipulating a set of (anti-) rules as follows:

- Tangents are fair game;
- The tone of the phone interview is casual;
- The informant may discontinue the phone interview at any point during the call;
- The extent of personal content is at the full discretion of the informant; and
- With the consent of the informant, recording of the phone call is solely for note-taking purposes.

To standardize and give structure to the phone interview across all informants, I created an index of five open-ended "anchor" questions, which were built around the governing question of the study: What's it like being Asian in Montana? The anchor questions are as follows:

1. How did you and/or your family arrive in Montana?
2. How do you define, find, and engage in community?
3. What do you consider to be turning points in your history, community, and experiences?
4. How, if you ever did, did you perceive yourself as Asian (American)?
5. What are your perceptions of Asian American life elsewhere (e.g., southern California, popular culture, etc.)?

On average, the duration of the phone interview ranged from thirty minutes to an hour. After each interview, I cataloged informants' respective names, identifying ethnicity, age, source contact, the Montanan city in which they formerly resided, and the city in which they currently reside. I then flagged those currently residing in Montana to sift out those who would not move forward in the process, the next stage being the in-person interview.

From the pool of seven informants who currently reside in Montana, I determinedly pursued four informants – Michelle Nemetchek, Kaunou Vang, Emma Woods, and Wendy – whose narratives take the form of the ensuing case studies. The criteria for selection lie in the informant's demonstrated willingness to participate in both the study and documentary, but that is not to say that the voices of those not currently residing in Montana would be discounted. In fact, these voices have since informed the angle from which I approach this study and strengthened the robustness of the post-field data analysis. It was not my intention to select a strictly all-women

[50] Spradley, 34-39.

sample, and this neither is a coincidence nor takes me by surprise. One possible explanation is that Asian women traditionally assimilate better than Asian men per readymade identities for Asian women. Nevertheless, I accept that an all-women sample inevitably skews my data.

Fielding: the in-person interview

The in-person interview was the primary objective of the fielding stage, but in reality, I plunged into the field as soon as I boarded my connecting flight from Portland to Missoula. In mid-October, with a brimming carry-on luggage and a loosely structured itinerary, I set foot in the state of Montana – two days in Missoula, one day in Bozeman, and one last day in Missoula.

The structure and procedures of the in-person interview closely resemble those of the phone interview's in the second phase of the preliminary data collection stage. The difference, however, lies in the means and modes of data collection. The fielding stage demanded meticulous attention to the space and time allotted to me during my visit to Montana. To insure an immersive experience of my own, I visited the spaces towards which my informants gravitated (e.g., restaurants, bars, markets, stores, family gatherings) and spent at least five hours with each informant. Of the five-plus hours allotted, I allocated an hour to the more or less structured in-person interview and the remaining time to, for lack of a better phrase, hanging out.

Prior to the in-person interview, I presented each informant with an informed consent form, spelling out the stipulations of my research study. (See Appendix A: Informed Consent Form.) To collect data and footage for both my research and documentary, I camcorded each informant's in-person interview. While hanging out and with the consent of my informant, I intermittently camcorded meaningful and meaningless moments for my documentary, albeit forms of data in and of themselves. All things considered, the fielding stage not only required but also heightened my hyperawareness of the position of power I occupied as researcher and documentarian.

Post-field: data processing and analysis

During the post-field data processing phase, I transcribed on-the-record audio files with the expeditious help of Temi, an online transcription service. The post-field data analysis phase concerns the coverage and treatment of real and lived experiences and how I, as a researcher, enter and exit them. Though "[e]very ethnographic description is a translation[,]"[51] "[p]eople everywhere learn their culture by observing other people, listening to them, and then making inferences. The ethnographer employs this same process of going beyond what is seen and heard to infer what people know. It involves reasoning from evidence (what we perceive) or from premises (what we assume)."[52] In this way, I submerge in and emerge out of these accounts to make inferences and draw grander conclusions about contemporary Asian migration, diaspora, and community building practices in Montana. In these asides, I braid through the voices of those contacted during the phone interview stage, scholarship in Asian American studies, and a voice of my own.

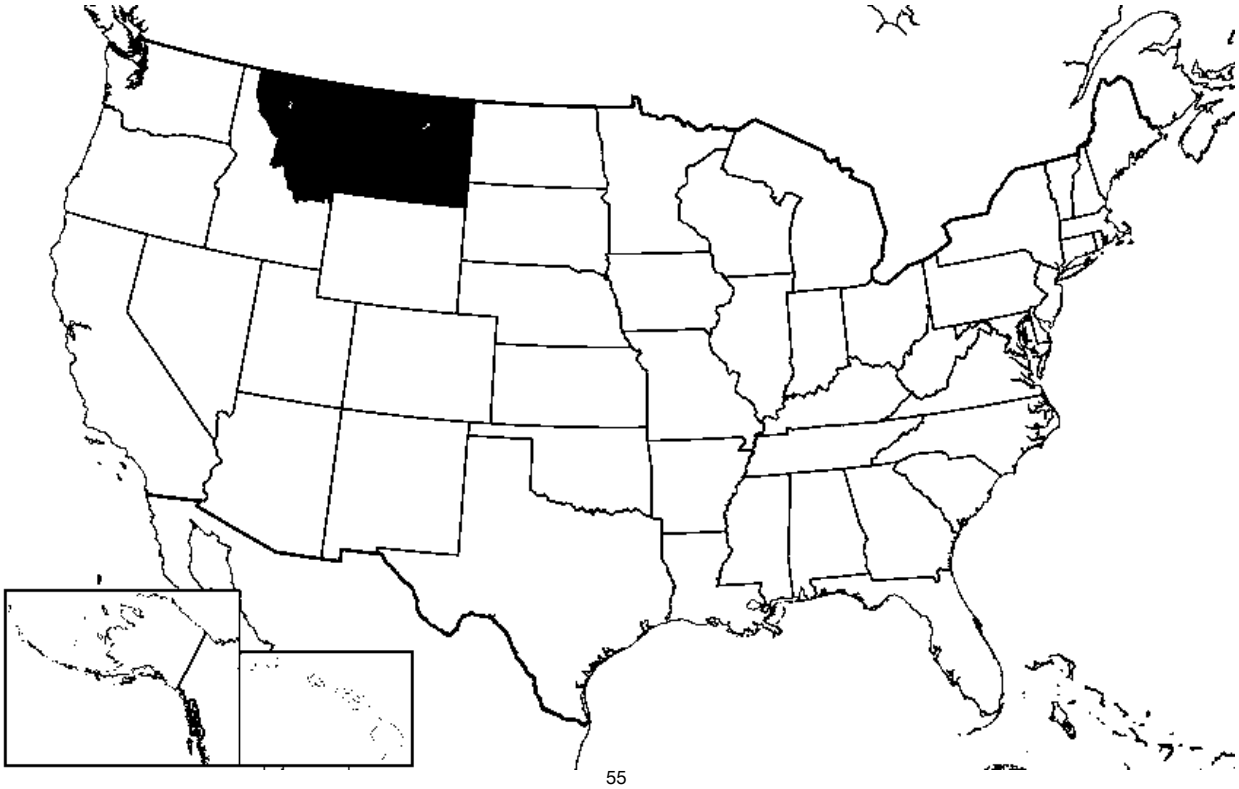
[51] ibid, 22.

[52] ibid, 8.

Chapter Five: PLACE STUDIES

The question "where is Montana?" is a common and valid one in my experience, and as I see it, questions of where, in general, are best answered in terms of borders. Fourth largest in area and third least densely populated in the United States,[53] the state of Montana is bordered by Canadian provinces British Columbia, Alberta, and Saskatchewan to the north; and Wyoming to the south, both Dakotas to the east, and Idaho to the west. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2018 population estimates, Montana has a population of 1,062,305.[54]

In this way, this chapter is a spatialization of my research sites, Missoula and Bozeman, the purpose being to map and establish the grounds on which the places and faces of my study may come to life. For each place study, I chart general demographic statistics as they relate to my research.



[55]

Map of Montana, United States

[53] "United States Summary: 2010, Population and Housing Unit County, 2010 Census of Population and Housing." United States Census Bureau. Accessed December 22, 2018.

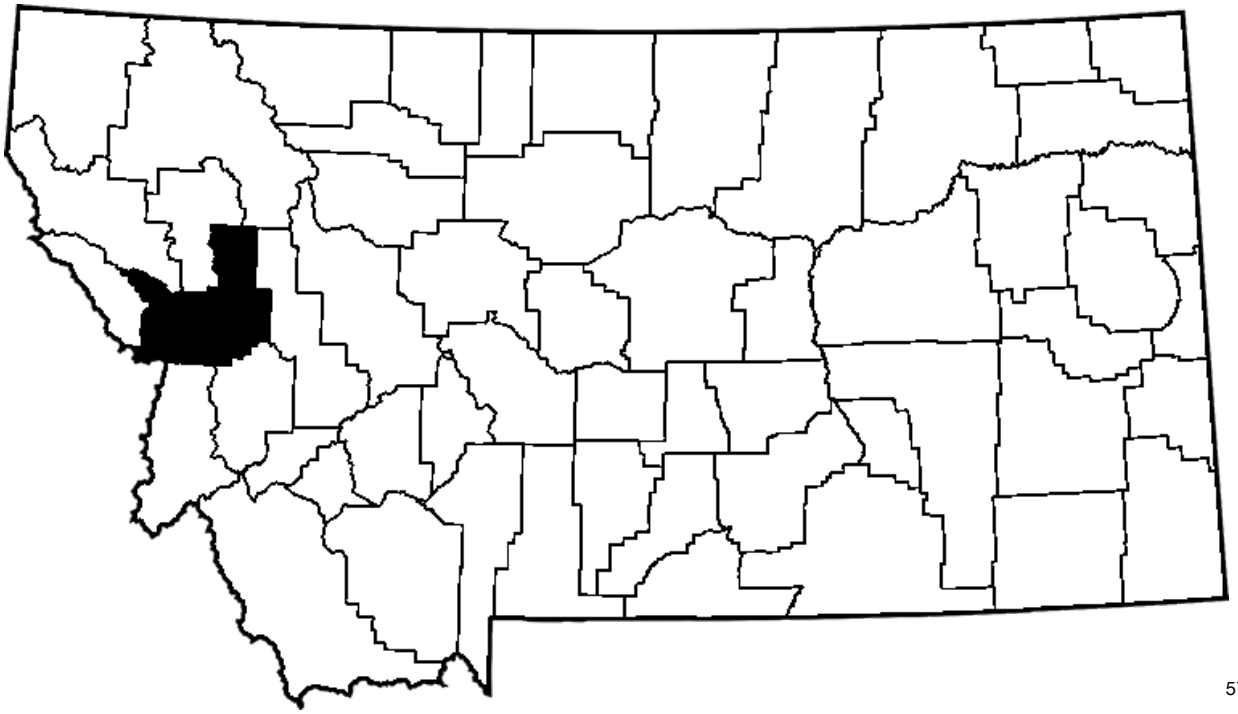
[54] "Montana: Population estimates." U.S. Census Bureau. Accessed February 28, 2019.

[55] "Map of the United States with Montana highlighted." The National Atlas of the United States of America. Accessed December 23, 2018.

Missoula

During the phone interview phase of the preliminary data collection stage, I would occasionally trail off into personal things-to-do-in-Montana inquiries in the hopes of filling a vacuous itinerary. Dreaming up an itinerary for my field trip to Montana was, to say the least, an overwhelming task. In one phone interview, my informant's charming conception of Missoula lulled some of my anxieties to sleep, "I like to envision Missoula valley as a nest because you're surrounded by mountains. Whenever I'm like, 'What should I do?,' there's this hike called the M. When I was going to the university, luckily it's right next to the mountains. It's the most popular hike. I'd always climb it just to realize that this is my nest, but I'm supposed to grow out of it. That's how I like to envision Missoula."[56] This charming description of Missoula continues to resonate with me.

Not to my surprise, mountains handsomely envelop the city of Missoula, a nest in its own right. However, to my surprise, Missoula is visibly blue – a hippie town by virtue of being host to The University of Montana (UM). One of my points of contact describes Missoula as "the Berkeley" of Montana. The following are general demographic statistics as they relate to my research.



[57]

Map of Missoula, MT

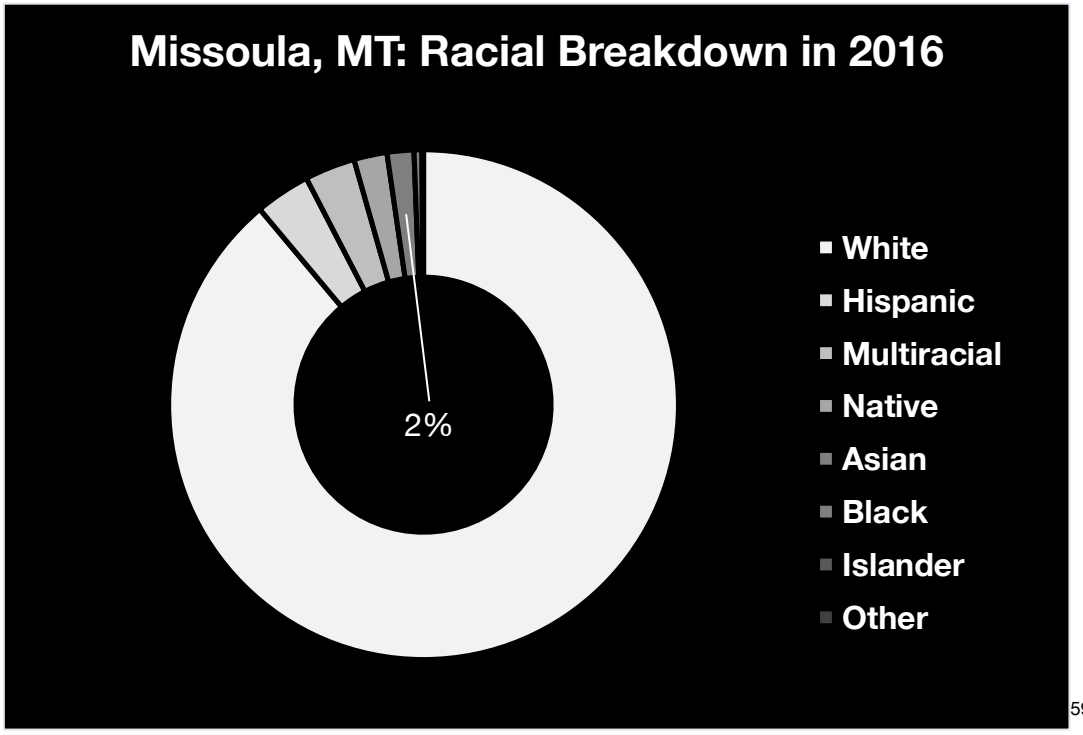
[56] Oh, Sabrina. *Phone Call_IV_10.02.2018*. Preliminary data collection phase 2: the phone interview, 2018, wav.

[57] "Missoula Metropolitan Area." The National Atlas of the United States of America. Accessed December 22, 2018.

Missoula, MT: General Demographics in 2016		
Population	**Median Age**	**Median Household Income**
70,117	32.5	42,389
Poverty Rate	**Number of Employees**	**Median Property Value**
19.30%	38,417	241,000

[58]

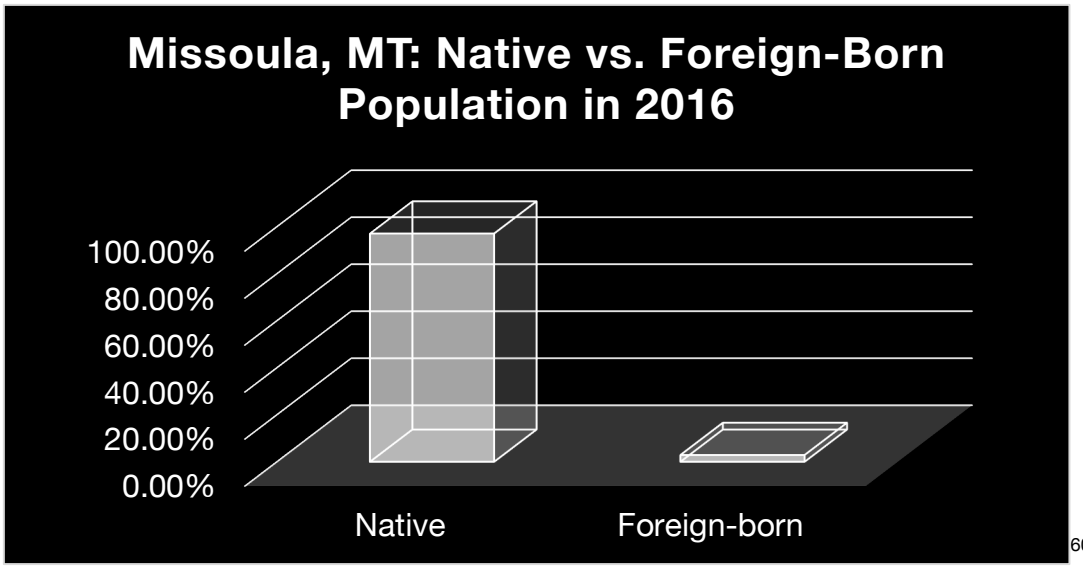
Data visualization by Sabrina Oh



[59]

Data visualization by Sabrina Oh

[58] "Missoula, MT." Data USA. Accessed December 21, 2018.
[59] "Missoula, MT."



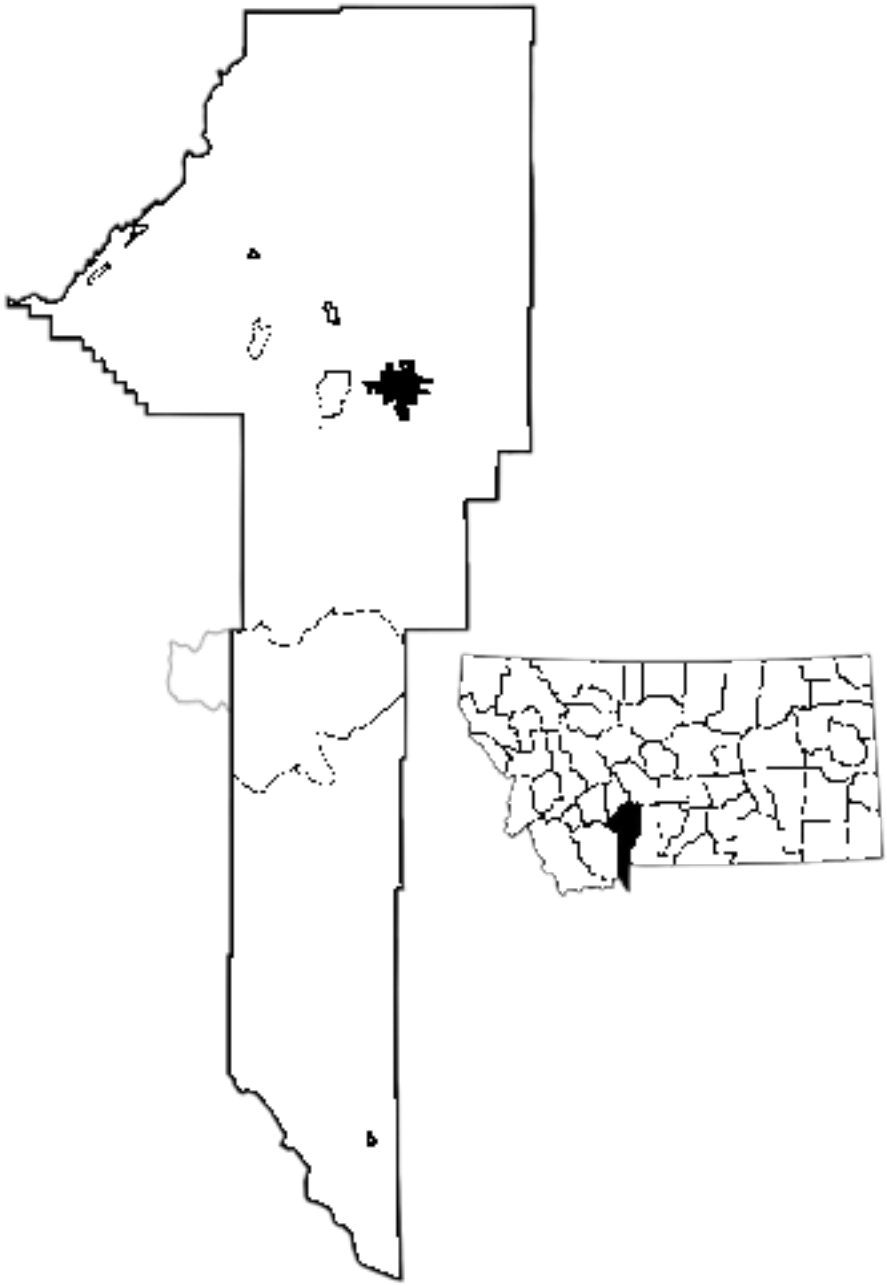
[60]

Data visualization by Sabrina Oh

[60] ibid.

Bozeman

The same point of contact who describes Missoula as Montana's Berkeley parallelly describes Bozeman as the state's Palo Alto. Relative to Missoula, Bozeman is geographically flatter. Home to seasonal retreats, celebrious ski resorts, and the Department of Education's favored Montana State University (MSU), Bozeman boasts a comfortable lifestyle and comfortably slower pace of life.



[61]

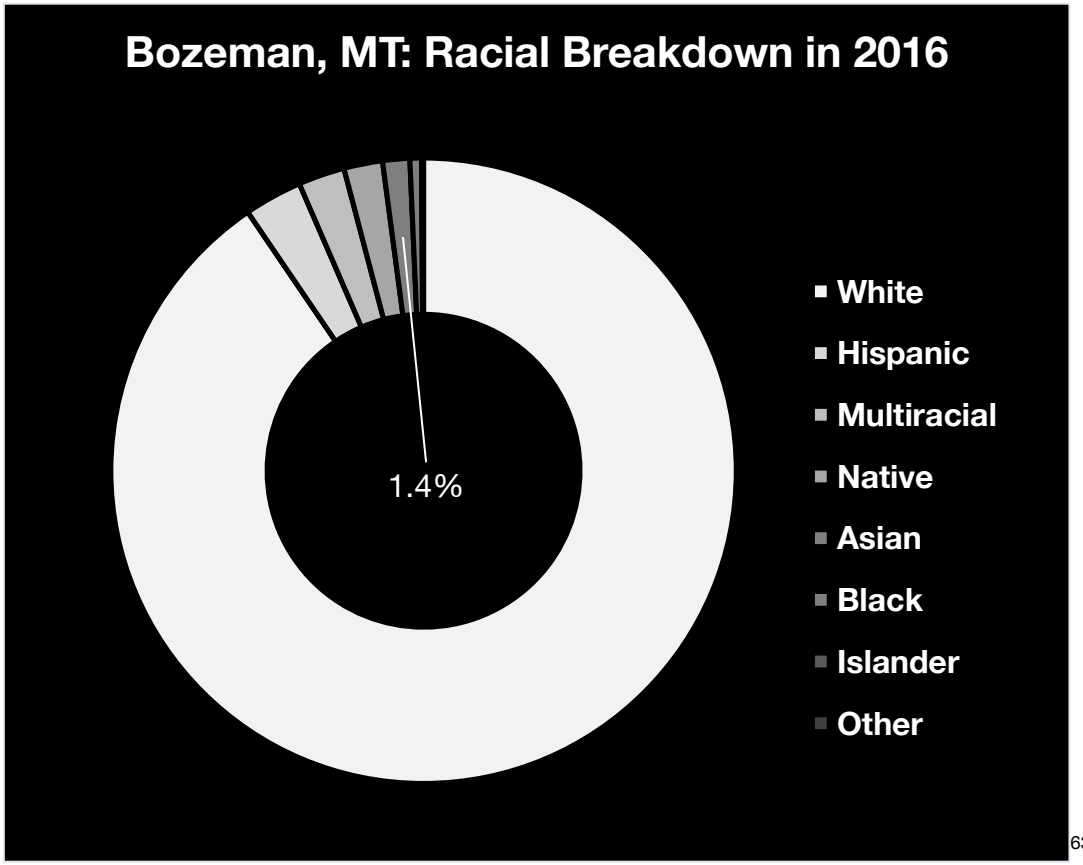
Map of Bozeman, MT

[61] "Location of Bozeman, Montana." The National Atlas of the United States of America. Accessed December 22, 2018.

Bozeman, MT: General Demographics in 2016		
Population	**Median Age**	**Median Household Income**
41,761	27.9	48,612
Poverty Rate	**Number of Employees**	**Median Property Value**
20.7%%	25,145	278,700

[62]

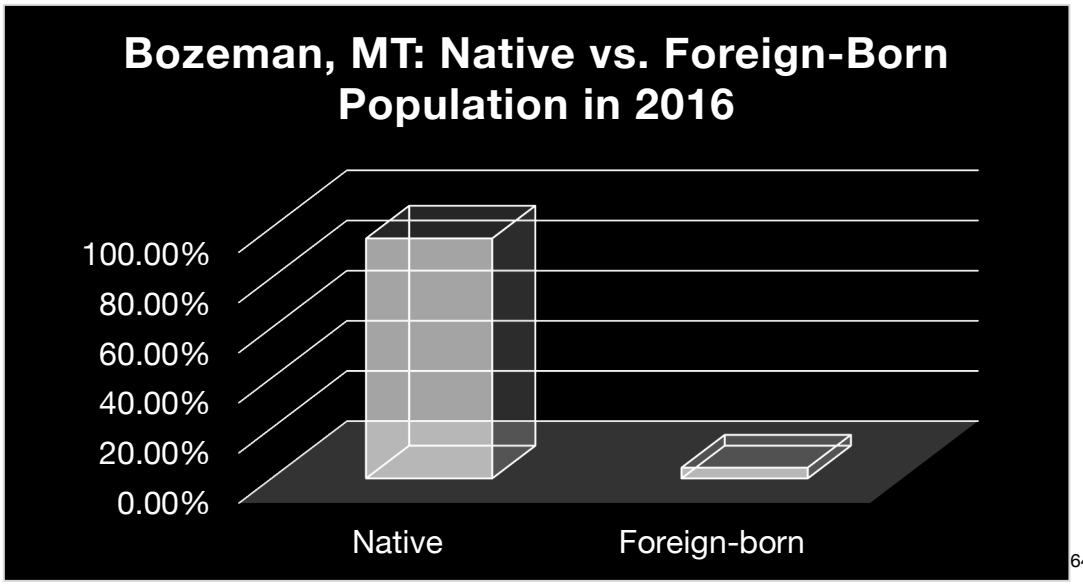
Data visualization by Sabrina Oh



[63]

Data visualization by Sabrina Oh

[62] "Bozeman, MT." Data USA. Accessed December 22, 2018.
[63] "Bozeman, MT."



[64]

Data visualization by Sabrina Oh

[64] ibid.

Chapter Six: MICHELLE

An unassuming Friday night brewed in the college town of Missoula. I arrived fifteen minutes early to my dinner only to be turned off by the visage of disheartening storefronts and lobby spaces on Front Street, but I still peered. In one particular lobby, a tacky scroll painting hung on one wall, and across the room boasted a cardboard cutout of Elvis Presley. My smirk gave way to an eventual smile.

I made plans to meet Michelle and her wife at The Top Hat per Michelle's suggestion, "This is a classier place with a stage. Huge bar, great mixed drinks, lots of great food. I think they're playing bluegrass that night, if that's your kind of thing. The owners organize most of the concerts that come to Missoula. If you enjoy the nightlife, I recommend here."[65] The establishment's arcadian signage, brick exteriors, and sidewalk chalkboard easel took me back to the old towns of Orange County, but my efforts in reminiscing were brutally drowned out by a nearby toddler's tantrum.

To my relief, the couple soon arrived. On sight, Michelle sported a cargo jacket, combat boots, a messenger bag, and a discernable coolness that I have envied since I can remember. But before I could put a name to the face, we were snaking through the bar, settled on a table, and caught up on our lives. And so began my first of many speed dates in Montana.

Born in Canada and raised in Missoula, Michelle Nemetchek is a 24-year-old graduate student in the biochemistry program at the not-too-distant University of Montana (UM), though science fairs have taken her across the States and abroad. She is the oldest of six children and was homeschooled until her proficiency in mathematics exceeded her mother's. In 2017, she married and moved out with her high school sweetheart, whom, is a total sweetheart herself. Michelle's wife is white.

Michelle identifies as biracial; her mother is of Chinese descent, and her father is white. In an earlier email correspondence, Michelle wrote to me, "[B]y most measures, I'm your average white girl. I actually don't look that Asian (lacking the stereotypical epicanthic folds and all) so I'm constantly being mistaken to be Native American. It's funny how similar the ethnicities can be."[66] She continued, "So other than meeting my grandparents a handful of times, I've never had much experience with Asian culture. I would love to call and chat with you if you are still interested, but I don't have much of a story and wouldn't want to waste your time."[67]

I swiftly messaged her out of her apprehension, that her biraciality would by no means disqualify her from my project but very well enliven it, and my persuasion proved successful. In her agreement of participation, Michelle sent me an attachment of a poem, titled "Hong Kong, Born and Raised," she had written for *The Oval*, UM's first undergraduate literary magazine, in 2015. With it, she added, "I don't have many memories of my

[65] Nemetchek, Michelle. "Missoula." Email, 2018.
[66] Nemetchek, Michelle. "EmpowerMT." Email, 2018.
[67] ibid.

grandfather, but I cherish the few I've got."[68]

> Frying green onions and garlic in a pan
> my knife slices through pork and hits wood.
> I dust with Chinese five spice; sizzling and sweet over flames,
> it can turn away many unseasoned tongues.
>
> When young, I would run below kettles and pans,
> metal clapping against metal,
> and wafts of seared pork in my grandfather's restaurant.
> He would slip me a twenty, and my mother
> would argue for him to keep the cash.
>
> "He doesn't brush his teeth," she said.
> "And never taught me to brush my own, either."
> When we moved the rest of her college
> books out, it was Chinese New Year. I asked him
> to translate the woven red-string decorations.
> "That good look sign," he said. "Good luck an' money."
> He sent us home with tin boxes of mooncakes - sweet bread
> and a golden egg yolk moon, a glazed shell around the edge.
>
> When I first smoked, it only smelled like Grandfather:
> cheap beer, sweet pork, and fried rice every December.[69]

After dinner, the couple and I walked over and under a few bridges to make our way to the Honors College Lounge, somewhat of a second home to Michelle. There, we reoriented ourselves over energy drinks and tea and resumed conversation about our life stories.

Michelle's grandparents immigrated from a fishing village near Hong Kong to Vancouver, Canada. Her grandfather consequently took the name Ken and, with his wife, opened a Chinese restaurant, "as all Asians do,"[70] Michelle added. Ken and his wife had three children, all of whom worked at the mom-and-pop restaurant. Their one and only daughter, Michelle's mother, worked tables and washed dishes. She eventually went on to meet a white man at church in Yellowknife, a cold village with a large Inuit population in the Northwest Territories of Canada. The two dated for six months before they decided to get married, start a family, and move to the United States.

By trade, Michelle's father is a programmer, so the on-call nature of his work plotted the family across the States – Salt Lake City, the East Coast, North

[68] ibid.
[69] Nemetchek, Michelle. "Hong Kong, Born and Raised." *The Oval* 8,1 (2015): 23. Accessed February 8, 2019.
[70] Oh, Sabrina. *Field Interview_NM_10.18.2018*. Fielding: the in-person interview, 2018, wav, 00:03:00.

Carolina, Helena – before settling on Missoula. Michelle's mother was a stay-at-home mom, but her say in the decision to move carried equal importance and utilitarianism. "You know my grandparents grew up in China where you don't really value women as much as men, and they had that kind of mentality, and so my mom really hated that her brothers were valued a lot higher than her,"[71] reflected Michelle. "She'd always mention that each of them got married, and for their weddings, they got so many gifts from our grandparents, but then for her wedding, she got nothing."[72] Michelle speculates that "part of her mother kind of rebelled against some of those principles that she learned growing up. That's part of the reason why she married a white man that grew up in rural Canada, and then she decided to move out to a state where there's no Asians that she's ever talked to or hang out. She's just basically by herself out here."[73]

Michelle's mother's intergenerational conflict was, at heart, a mismatch of family and tradition, both of which rejected her, so she, too, rejected them and embarked on an extensive trajectory of self-deculturation. Consequently, Michelle herself does not speak Chinese. "I know maybe two words in Chinese, which are the names of grandfather and grandmother. I know *gonggong* and *popo*, which even my dad would always make fun of," said Michelle. "My dad doesn't think very highly of Asians either, so he'd always tell us, 'That's why your grandmother smells so bad because her name is poopoo.'"[74] That Michelle grazed the topic of her father's racism towards not only Asians in general but also his in-laws was, to say the least, surprising. The topic re-opened a can of worms about the dynamics of interracial love, specifically between a white man and an Asian woman: Can it satisfactorily exist? If so, how? More importantly, how do their children receive this love or lack thereof?

Leaving the can ajar, I probed Michelle's history with her grandparents, to which she responded, "I've rarely spoken to my grandmother because she only speaks Chinese for the most part, but the two phrases that she knows in English are the phrase 'I love you' and 'husband.' I remember walking around the house as a little kid, and she'd always be like, 'I love you! I love you!' That's the only way she could speak to us."[75] She continued, "'Do you have a husband yet?' I'd always be like, 'Nah, nah, grandma. Not yet, not yet," to which Michelle now answers with a laughing "never."[76]

In my observation, the stakes of proficiency in one's mother tongue and other forms of cultural performance in an Asian-white biracial household are low and, in some cases, nonexistent, but Michelle sets high standards for herself. Cultural reclamation, for instance, is a balancing act that demands considerable self-discipline and sensibility, as Michelle cogently expresses,

> The small amount of Asianness I do feel I express through food. I really like Asian kinds of food. I really like going to get bubble tea when we go to the next largest town over. My wife and I really love grabbing all the little Asian snacks that we can

[71] Oh, 00:06:00.
[72] ibid.
[73] Oh, 00:06:30.
[74] Oh, 00.07:30.
[75] Oh, 00:08:00.
[76] Oh, 00:08:30.

> find, and then we go to bigger cities that do have Asian markets, but we don't have anything like that here, and so it's really a treat that I like going to but stuff that I've never grown up having, so it is hard because then you come across the thoughts of you know. 'Since I'm only half Asian, how Asian am I really?' And because I'm going to these places and eating these foods a little bit later in life. I have to decide, 'Is this really a part of who I am? Or am I just doing this just because I'm filling some kind of hole that's not even there? Am I just taking someone else's identity and putting it on top of my own just because my genetics happen to be that way?'[77]

She continued,

> Especially in a place like America where we think that so much of our identity is built by ourselves and not because of our families or anything… You know, that's the big American Dream is that it doesn't matter where you're from or what social class you're from – that you are your own person and that you are building up this new slate that is clean. It's really hard to realize exactly how much of that is you because you wanted to be or if you're stealing someone else's culture. It's a super hard thing to grapple with.[78]

Michelle's rumination possibly strikes at the core of Asian American identity politics: If identity is performance, the script reads well – authentically – for some more than others. Alternatively, Michelle fills in the blanks. An upbringing that actively discourages Chineseness left and right seems mutually exclusive with the formation of a cultural identity, yet, at the same time, it gives all the more reason for one, be it by the power of diaspora or a ringing hollowness. But even in Michelle's case, the archetypical Asian American story – the one about lunchbox moments, whiz kids, tiger moms, and math – checks out.

Incidentally, Michelle was homeschooled by her mother, whom strictly lives by math and the Bible. By the time Michelle had outmatched her mother in long division, her mother had no option but to pass the buck of educating her daughter to the public school system, where Michelle was taught "evolution and lies."[79] Michelle recounted,

> I wasn't allowed to do any extracurriculars at school. I remember just begging her to let me join speech and debate. I remember the day that I reached out to her because I was a senior in high school at that point, and I was like, 'Please, I just want to do one extracurricular, and this one will be such a boost to my self-esteem. Just let me spend eighty bucks so that I could go on trips and just write things.' I remember how torn I was when she was like, 'You have too many feelings about this. So definitely not. Focus on school, and that's it.[80]

Needless to say, Michelle's mother kept Michelle's personal life on a short leash. Among other things, her mother's homophobic suspicions called for a ban on, first, sleepovers and, eventually,

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[77] Oh, 00:11:00.
[78] Oh, 00:12:30.
[79] Oh, 00:17:00.
[80] Oh, 00:18:30.

hangouts altogether with Michelle's then friend and now wife.

The series of misguided events culminated in what was Michelle's ultimate act of rebellion: a wedding invitation on her father's car, to be taken or to be left. In the end, Michelle's parents did not attend their daughter's wedding, and although Michelle is no longer in contact with her mother, their relationship equipped Michelle with a remarkable language of precocity and grace. Michelle reflected, "She definitely showed the good side of being rather strict with your kids, but as I've moved out of the house and grown up, I've learned to balance both."[81]

For Michelle, queerness and scientific interests primarily motivate friendships and community building, but when her Asianness counts, food is her ice-breaker. She said, "I associate with the few Asians that come to school on campus and will have our little tips. Like me and this one other Asian guy make the best little buns – the Asian buns that you put meats and stuff – and we always say that we make them the right way and that everyone else makes them incorrectly."[82]

Michelle finds cultural community in not "Asian buns" but the exclusivity and intimacy shared with the Sophia Yoos and Samuel Lims of The University of Montana, albeit few in number.[83] Life at Vassar works in similar ways. During one particular lunch in the College Center, my friend and I scoffed at a white student picking up her salt and vinegar chips with chopsticks. We guessed that she was probably listening to Fiona Apple or the like, at which point we admitted that her chopstick skills were more impressive than ours would ever be. Weekends at Vassar are spent not blacked out at Asian frat parties (mostly because they do not exist at Vassar) but lollygagging at the nearby 7-Eleven after a day of putting off work in favor of four-person acid trips by Sunset Lake. The Asian population at Vassar is numbered, but we make do.

All community considerations aside, Michelle understands full well that there is no single embodiment for the Asian American experience,

> It is hard because initially when you reached out to me, I was thinking how hard it would be to be an Asian because of racism because people will definitely pick out Asians and say slanderous words or treat them differently. And that kind of racism I haven't experienced because, even though I look maybe kind of mixed, I don't look outrightly Asian. And so any racism that any Asians may experience in a place like Montana, which is very few of them, is something I haven't really experienced because most people will accept me as just another kid or just some other white girl that likes hip hop music. I don't have the exact same experience as everyone else.[84]

As it turns out, Michelle is a self-proclaimed Ye stan. In response, I leveled with her about my love for Ye to then exchange our theories on the cultural figure, which were more or less similar. In the buzz of it all, I felt a little less foreign to Montana and Montana to me, about which I confided in Michelle. She assured me, "People can really get to know each other

[81] Oh, 00:19:00.
[82] Oh, 00:09:30.
[83] Sophia Yoo and Samuel Lim are the names of two of my closest friends at Vassar.
[84] Oh, 00:03:00.

anywhere. It's not even a racial thing. It's not something that's based off of music taste. I mean there's people out there that can get along no matter what in this political climate."[85]

It was at that moment that Michelle endowed me with the answer I never had but most needed: Everything is everywhere. She continued, "Even people that listen to country music who live in bumfuck nowhere out in Montana, I bet you'd get along with really great."[86] Whether I would make the effort to get along with these folks was out of the question, but the possibility of it amused me.

Michelle will always call Missoula home, a place where she cannot go to the store without running into people she knows, teachers she has had, students she has taught. She added, "I appreciate that level of community, and it's really fun to catch up with people I haven't seen in years. I love it. I think I'll always come back to it even if I don't live here permanently for my whole life."[87] Naturally, the complacency of home has a shelf life, and in an epoch of young adulthood, Michelle's submission to the seductive possibilities of city life is especially fair and relatable. "You always think that in the city there's going to be people that I get along with, people that are interested in doing things, people that are ravenous for improving themselves, people with more personality than around here. There's a lot of that here. It's just I haven't found it yet."[88] Rest assured; no shots were fired at Missoula in the process.

To Michelle, "The Last Best Place," one of Montana's several unofficial nicknames, means space and lots of it. She elaborated,

> I think Montana is a place where you can appreciate how the world used to be before human beings were in it and that there are so many places here you can go where you're the only person for many square miles, which gives you solace. It gives you time to think and reflect on your position in the world and the tiny amount of power you have and that, even if everything in your life is going terribly wrong and you're super stressed out, that it's okay because the whole world is going to keep going on.[89]

Her interpretation was too trippy to be true, but then again, my first day in The Last Best Place had already come to an end. Trailing conversations cued the end of a long first night in Montana. I hailed an Uber and hugged the couple thank you and goodbye as if it were my last.

I was guided around town by Kaunou, another informant of mine, the next day, which was capped by an unplanned hangout-turned barhopping adventure downtown with none other than Michelle and her wife. I was heartened to find out that the three women were Big Sky High School and UM classmates, and I instantly learned that the community of Missoula truly cannot escape itself. Mountains encircle the fringes of town; two-way streets seamlessly merge into roundabouts; everyone knows everyone. Once in Missoula, always in Missoula – trite but true.

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[85] Oh, 00:08:00.
[86] Oh, 00:08:30.
[87] Oh, 00:11:00.
[88] Oh, 00:11:30.
[89] Oh, 00:17:30.

As the former classmates recollected and repieced their high school memories, I listened, anticipating moments of relatability. A few Cold Smokes in, we were talking boys, women, and collegiate shenanigans.

Chapter Seven: KAUNOU

The restaurant bill tug-of-war is the only public fight that my mother will put up, and I have fortunately, or unfortunately, learned her ways. As I jostled to pay for Kaunou's lunch at Wheat Montana, she hushed me with great motherliness,[90] "Don't worry. Just take care of yourself." Kaunou prevailed.

Born and raised in Missoula, Montana, Kaunou Vang is a 24-year-old woman of Hmong descent. She recently graduated from The University of Montana (UM) with a degree in psychology and is currently a bilingual tutor in the Missoula school system, where she works with second, third, and even fourth-generation Hmong American students. Kaunou is the second oldest of five siblings, the eldest daughter, and the first in her immediately family to be born on American soil. Kaunou means 'sun.'

According to Kaunou, the histories and memories of her elders' past are not up for discussion, but she pieced together what she knew. After the Vietnam War, Kaunou's parents, aunt, uncles, and grandfather relocated to refugee camps within their country of origin, Laos, where they applied for admission into the United States. Her grandfather's service in the Vietnam War helped the family's case, and having followed General Vang Pao's footsteps, Kaunou's grandfather's sister, aunt, and uncle in Missoula agreed to sponsor their relatives overseas.

Refugee camps allegedly prepared Kaunou's parents for an American life, but their preparation was in vain. To transition into a country that did not speak their language was a struggle, to say the least. "They didn't expect it to change so drastically, where the community centers were really at, how they were going to even provide for their kids, or even for themselves,"[91] said Kaunou.

Kaunou's parents work at the same factory. Her mother is a seamstress, who sews logos onto golf bags and shirts; her father performs manual labor. In addition, both Kaunou's immediate and extended families are farmers by trade and tradition. The Vangs own plots of land throughout Missoula, the grounds on which they have translated native agricultural practices and their language of economy into an economy of their own.

I spent my Saturday morning at the Missoula Farmers Market and Clark Fork Market, where Kaunou's relatives regularly sell their fruits, vegetables, and flowers of their labor. At the Missoula Farmers Market, I quickly bonded with one of Kaunou's cousins, whom fixes up cars as a hobby and, naturally, an aficionado of the *Fast and Furious* franchise. Kaunou's aunts and uncles offered me huckleberries, purple carrots, and plums. They spoke to me in Hmong, and all I could offer in return was a smile, nod, and a thankyou. At the Clark Fork Market, I met Kaunou's grandmother, a gracefully aged woman. Kaunou greeted and introduced me to a few of her tutees,[92] whom sat snug in the back of their father's Dodge pickup and occupied themselves with video games, while their mother sold at her stall.

[90] Kaunou is pronounced /ˈkōˈnōō/, but she accepts 'canoe.'

[91] Oh, Sabrina. *Phone Call_KV_10.03.2018*. Preliminary data collection phase 2: the phone interview, 2018, wav, 00:11:30.

[92] 'Tutee' refers to a person who is being tutored.

In the beginning, Kaunou's parents were, perhaps, too trusting of the American school system. In the classroom, Kaunou learned science, but when she came home, her parents expected her to know more: write checks, read cable contracts, and pay off bills on her family's behalf. Kaunou did both, but that is not to say that the learning curves were not steep. By seniority, the first and second children in a Hmong family traditionally bear the large burden of household responsibility, and especially as second oldest and eldest daughter, Kaunou took on a disproportionate share of burden. On the other hand, Kaunou's older brother took on none.

In Kaunou's words, her older brother is the "perfect child," whose exceptional performance in high school propelled him through UM's pharmacy program in exactly six years. He is loved by not only family but also the Hmong community in Missoula, but in the Hmong tradition, the be-all and end-all is not to become a pharmacist but to marry young, which applies to both men and women, well-established or not.

As a childless, unmarried, and single 24-year-old woman, Kaunou is, by Hmong standards, old. Needless to say, there is pressure. When she was younger, she wanted to get married, or so she was told, but now as a single and graduated woman, Kaunou appreciates being her own person.

> I accepted that there's always a good and a bad side. You can frown on the bad side and say the Hmong culture sucks because as a girl, you can't do anything at all. But then again, the reality is it's really not like that. If you find a good husband or if you find a good family, or if you yourself are a good person, you don't have to live that life. You have a choice now because we're not back in the Third World. We're not back in Laos where girls didn't have a choice. You have the freedom and the choice to choose now.[93]

The pressure to marry certainly exists, but marriage is no longer a priority.

In preschool and kindergarten, Kaunou understood that she looked different than her predominantly white classroom, and the fact of their differences was just that: a fact. Come middle school, some of her peers co-opted this fact to only miss their punchlines, or lack thereof. Kaunou recalled, "I was made fun of once for wearing glasses, but the kid that was making fun of me for wearing glasses also had glasses, so it didn't make sense."[94] Others told aimless stories. "You start making friends, and you start realizing. There's that stereotype that all Asians are smart, so I had this one classmate who thought I was smart. That expectation starts growing on you when I'm not really that smart. I don't even know what I'm doing," said Kaunou.[95] But to Kaunou's advantage, her reserved demeanor spared her the noise.

'Hmong American' is the easy answer. Kaunou currently identifies as 55% Hmong and 45% American, but she knows full well that such breakdown is moot and only grazes the tip of the iceberg,

> We seem like a myth. 'Like Hmong American? What is that? Where is that? How come we haven't heard

[93] Oh, 00:35:30.
[94] Oh, 00:29:30.
[95] Oh, 00:30:00.

> about that? If you're from Thailand, you're Thai. If you're from Laos, you're Laotian.' No. I'm Hmong, which is different from being Asian American. Being Hmong American in the Asian community is different from that. Being Hmong American is different from being Hmong, Laotian, or Thai.[96]

Hmong, Hmong American, Asian, Asian American, and American are all available options, but her difficulty lies in navigating their disqualifications and the irresolution of cultural identification, by and large. But perhaps, it does not have to be that difficult. 'All of the above,' 'undecided,' and 'not applicable' are also available options, or simply, Kaunou enjoys country music and loves her Hmongness.

For lunch, Kaunou walked me through her experience with Hmong fashion, her entry point to Hmong history and culture, over hearty Wheat Montana subs and bread bowls. After lunch, I requested a stop at Rockin' Rudy's for souvenir shopping, but I got more than I bargained for. Rockin' Rudy's was no souvenir shop; it was kitsch heaven. Although I found the establishment's sense of humor overdone, I still indulged. Its comprehensive incense and records collections took me by surprise, and so did the Yo-Yo Ma poster tucked away in one of the store's many corners. A taxidermied bear sported provocative anti-Trump gear. Ironic toys and Bob Ross pins awaited customers at checkout. Punk women tended the cash register.

Kaunou's reserved demeanor also proves sparing in family settings, in which gendered Hmong norms often manifest. Tradition says, 'Listen to the elders,' which Kaunou does, but that is not to say that she lacks a sense of justice. Kaunou cautioned, "You can let the lecture go on for an hour, or you can let the lecture go on for three hours."[97] She continued, "We just let the elders go on, and then after that, we're just like, 'Okay, cool.' And then we just do our own thing."[98] Kaunou's cousin begs to differ. Kaunou explained,

> In the Hmong culture, if people hand out to you beer, then you're supposed to accept. But the boys only hand out beers to the boys, or the men only hand out beers to the men. Never to the women, never to the girls. So my cousin will be very outspoken about that. She will hold her can of beer and complain. She'll be like, 'How come no one is opening my can of beer for me?'[99]

Kaunou noted that her cousin was an exception, but the Vang girls admire their cousin from afar. In the Vangs' case, gendered norms that are irrevocably linked to time-honored traditions are challenging to combat because culture is culture and family is family. A personal sense of justice will have to wait sometimes.

Saturday night in Frenchtown was a cousins-only affair, to which I was invited. With a population of less than 2,000, Frenchtown is fifteen minutes northwest of Missoula by car. Unpaved, unlit roads lined the farmlands and ranchlands of Frenchtown residents until they merged into amorphous driveways.

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[96] Oh, Sabrina. *Field Interview_KV2_10.19.2018*. Fielding: the in-person interview, 2018, wav, 00:00:00.
[97] Oh, 00:23:00.
[98] Oh, 00:22:30.
[99] Oh, 00:23:30.

Upon my arrival, I was greeted by some familiar faces. As the oldest woman of the cousins vigorously prepared twenty-plus servings of spam *musubi*,[100] I joined Kaunou and her older cousins at the dining table, where they discussed the logistics of Sunday's cow sacrifice. Meanwhile, I scanned the living and dining room walls that hung a series of family portraits and gold paper altars. In the basement, the younger cousins watched *Journey to the West*, but one by one, they trickled into the dining room and returned a verdict of boring. They practiced their Milly rock, while I learned that 'hella' was not a uniquely Californian term. The rest of the evening was small talk, throughout which I was distracted by the sight of a box of poppy seed muffins on the kitchen countertop: Costco exists in Montana.

There are three distinct spaces in which Kaunou finds community. First, Missoula is a community in and of itself. She recalled, "I know that if I need help with anything, I can just knock on someone's door and just ask them for help, and they're more than willing to help. In the winter, my car got stuck in the snow, and I couldn't get out. A truck driver drove by and saw and helped me get out."[101]

Second, the Hmong community, family included, in Missoula has been and will always be her stronghold. Growing up Hmong in Missoula, Kaunou did not see the need to forge friendships outside the family. Her friends are her family, of which there are many.

Third and relevantly, the Internet. Kaunou connects with Hmong-identifying folks in Spokane and Seattle on Facebook, where cross-city Hmong festivities are often facilitated. Kaunou also finds fellowship with Native Americans with respect to their overlapping shamanic practices, spiritual healing methods, medicinal herbs, and harvest festivities. Connecting these dots, Kaunou acknowledges that there is, indeed, solidarity between Native American and Hmong folks in Missoula, specifically their relationship and engagement with the land and spirituality.

To Kaunou, the deer that frequent her backyard, their droppings on her lawn, and the warnings of wildlife on the occasional hike are reminders: Montana is not our home. The Last Best Place keeps her on her toes.

Despite the ups and downs of the Hmong community and bipolar weather conditions, Kaunou loves Missoula. Yet, she is drawn to the potentiality of places like Oregon and California, where she aspires to be not a teacher but a resource, which she has been and will continue to be. On the other hand, her mother has her opinion on Kaunou's westward aspirations, among other things, in fear of having to bear the burden of household responsibility alone, a rational fear in and of itself. However, Kaunou's days of being a buffer are over, so she looks outward and forward.

From the Clark Fork Farmers Market, Kaunou and I walked to A Carousel for Missoula. As we stood in line, my knees grew weak at the dizzying sight of the high-speed carousel, but they grew even weaker at the sound of teenage white girl politicking at its most viscious behind me.

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[100] Spam *musubi* is a block of rice topped with grilled Spam wrapped in dried seaweed laver. The food originates from Hawaii.

[101] Oh, 00:52:30.

The teens, Kaunou, and I got on our horses of choice, and the carousel began to gain momentum, but as we reached full speed, I was suddenly hit with a wave of poignancy. The circumstances of two twenty-something-year-olds on a merry-go-round were simultaneously innocent, cheesy, and tragic. As Kaunou determinedly grabbed for the faded color rings, she was the Phoebe to my Holden, except I was on the carousel. As we spun into infinity, life, at least in Missoula, seemed stranger than fiction.

Chapter Eight: EMMA

After a mesmerizing three-hour bus ride from Missoula to Bozeman, I was dropped off at the monstrous parking lot of a Walmart Supercenter because two hundred miles of inexhaustible terrain were clearly not enough for me. The Supercenter was simultaneously macho and majestic. Four wheelers dominated the space; freshly plowed snow atop parking islands reflected blinding light; white mountains backdropped the mammoth establishment. Missoula felt a country away, and I had already begun to miss it.

I was instructed by Emma, my third and only Bozemanite informant, to meet her at the supercenter, so I stayed put. Each passing vehicle was fair game, but soon enough, an SUV crawled by and came to an agile halt. Without hesitation, Emma hopped out of the passenger seat, hugged me, and threw my suitcase into the trunk. Of course, she knew who I was and I, her. Emma's ornate nose ring, holographic fanny pack, and balayage hair extinguished my fear of sticking out like a sore thumb. As my *jeong* for Emma began to incarnate,[102] Bozeman began to feel a little less foreign to me.

Emma Eun-bee Woods is the 33-year-old restaurant owner of Whistle Pig Korean in Bozeman, Montana. Born in Daegu, South Korea, Emma was adopted when she was three-and-a-half years old and subsequently grew up on Cape Cod, Massachusetts with two blue-eyed, blonde-haired older brothers. By necessity, her Asian American sensibility came at a young age. Obsolete "ching chong" jokes and unwarranted *nihao*'s from older men were reminders of not who she was but the fact of her indubitable difference. Furthermore, the adoption agency through which Emma was adopted advised the family to not hide but acknowledge that their child was different and that her differences warranted pride, but this was a more fortunate case.

Emma's family friend was also a Korean adoptee, two years Emma's junior, and grew up with two older brothers on Cape Cod. However, their styles of upbringing and personal trajectories were divergent. The old-school adoption agency through which Emma's friend was adopted instructed the adoptive family to deprive their daughter of her Korean identity in the name of assimilation. As a full-time ballerina, Emma's friend was eventually sent to a private boarding high school for dance, where she struggled with a string of identity crises and emotional breakdowns. Emma commented, "That's nice to think that the world would work that way. Of course, then once a child goes out into the real world, people are going to be like, 'You're different. Something is different about you."[103]

Emma's father and stepmother were coincidentally in town during the time of my visit. Emma's father treated the entire family out to a magnificent steak dinner. I grew very fond of Emma's

[102] *Jeong* is a Korean concept that has no direct translation to English. It usually refers to the affection, attachment, compassion, community, and sympathy that a Korean person bears for another Korean person.

[103] Oh, Sabrina. *Phone Call_EW_09.27.2018*. Preliminary data collection phase 2: the phone interview, 2018, wav, 00:23:00.

stepmother, who raved about her dachshunds and latest reads, laughed about cat farts on the car ride to dinner, and boasted her recent T.J.Maxx purchases. Her stepmother's brashness was as refreshing as it was endearing. She reminded me of my favorite grandaunt, Eunjoo Halmoni: without filter, chatty, and big-hearted.

In the nineties, Emma and her family attended annual "Korean culture camps" programmed for adoptive families in the Massachusetts area by the Korean Students Association at Wellesley College and Harvard. The camp's offerings included Korean cooking lessons, Taekwondo lessons, and the opportunity to commingle with fellow Koreans. Emma graduated high school as the only student of color and attended the not too distant Wellesley in 2004, where she studied economics and East Asian studies. "I loved it there. I want to say like Wellesley was 40% Asian, so it was a big difference going there – to finally be around all women and the majority of which were all minorities,"[104] said Emma. Her best friend and then roommate was a Taiwanese American woman from Maryland. Their weekends at Wellesley were spent foraging for Taiwanese and Korean food, and they studied abroad together in China. Emma's friend served as Emma's maid of honor, and as of today, the two remain best friends.

In 2008, Emma began an untimely career with Bank of America's wealth management division in the Bay Area, where she was shortly prompted with an ultimatum: relocation to Florida or a severance package. Emma said, "I decided that I really didn't like it that much. I really hated working at a desk, and at the time, it was the financial crisis, so everyone was freaking out."[105] Emma took the severance package and moved to Korea, her first time back since she was adopted. What was supposed to be a year of teaching English in Seoul became three, coincidentally, in Daegu, where she was born and, several years later, would meet her husband.

As Emma narrated her life story, she, at times, narrated mine: Korean by blood, economics and Asian studies at a Seven Sisters college, the lemons of working in finance, and a recent discovery of a new home in Korea. There was relatability, convergence, and a cosmic familiarity.

After three years in Daegu, Emma moved to Denver, home to Emma's husband, but the post-Korea blues got the best of her. Emma continued, "I missed Korea, where no one really questioned what I was doing."[106] The reverse cultural shock was real. "It was a little weird to go from everyone kind of looked like me to, all of a sudden, 'Oh, I'm a little bit different.' And I worked at a bank, and there were just some weird crazy old people and weird comments like, 'I don't know about your immigration status.' I work at a bank! Of course, they would check that,"[107] laughed Emma. She hated Denver.

Emma's husband graduated from Montana State University (MSU), where he was forever smitten by Bozeman. He pitched Montana to Emma, but she objected. However, on one fortuitous weekend, the couple attended a college friend's wedding in Bozeman, where Emma was charmed by its cute downtown and seventies-Denver-like vibe. Although

[104] Oh, 00:06:30.
[105] Oh, 00:09:00.
[106] Oh, 00:18:30.
[107] Oh, 00:18:00.

Emma was initially opposed to the arbitrariness of a place like Bozeman, the location was not at all random to her. Emma's uncle was a professor of etymology at MSU in the nineties, whom her father and brothers would visit in the wintertime. In addition, Bozeman was more diverse than home in Cape Cod; Bozeman was what Emma had expected Denver to be; and a hike in some of Montana's most celebrious mountains was just a ten-minute drive away from downtown. The best expectation was no expectations.

The couple moved to Bozeman six years ago, and counting. Emma's Pepperidge Farm-like house reflected her sense of humor: a larger-than-life *gochujang* tin can in the garage, a "HAUL ASS" poster plastered on the wall by her washer and dryer, an oasis of succulents crowding the dining room window sill, three cheeky cats, cowboy stripper printed pillows, and a traditional Korean doll watching over a display of rocks. Shortly after my arrival, we sipped on La Croix and mused at the sight of her cats playing in the snow in her backyard.

Emma's culinary interests took her to the kitchens of fine dining restaurants in Massachusetts, where she worked through high school and college. Emma said, "I've just always loved cooking. I always wanted to work in kitchen."[108] Bozeman was in many respects, a clean slate for Emma, where she resumed her culinary career as kitchen manager at a Middle Eastern restaurant owned by a white woman and inspired by the recipes of her husband's Iraqi heritage. At a rather opportune time for Emma, work called the owner's husband to Ohio. Consequently, the restaurant's owner closed up shop and sold the lease to Emma and her husband. The couple took over the space, where Emma would cook the Korean appetizers and dishes of her memory for no longer just her husband but also the people of Bozeman.

Whistle Pig Korean is closed for business on Sunday, which was the day of my visit. Nevertheless, the hospitable couple invited me to their restaurant, where I was offered samples of Emma's *banchan* and kombucha, which, at first, seemed like an odd pairing, but the probiotic pairing, oddly, worked and had a distinctive Californian tang. I told her that the taste of her *banchan* reminded me of my mom's cooking. Dessert was Choco Pie. I generally prefer other Asian cuisines to Korean, but the food was good and lived up to the upbeat TripAdvisor reviews.

Emma's trajectory of assimilation is somewhat paradoxical. She assimilated into Bozeman, Montana by assimilating to Korean tastes, *foreign* tastes. To be Korean while being American and to meet cultural expectations while meeting the demands of the restaurant business are as inscrutable as they are laborious, but Emma manages with great joy and efficiency.

Googling "korean restaurant montana" was somewhat of a last-resort means of sampling during the earlier days of my research. At any rate, the first listed result was none other than Whistle Pig Korean's website, where it all began. I had my reservations about the Millennial-friendly Korean restaurant, but as it turns out, the co-existence of authentic, vegan, vegetarian, and gluten-free offerings did not detract from the authenticity of Korean cuisine and the heart and soul of Emma's cooking. Not to mention, the larger-than-

[108] Oh, 00:14:00.

life *gochujang* tin cans in Emma's garage made sense in their rightful context as re-purposed perilla leaf planters, and in their authentic glory, they signaled an undeniable sense of wit and thrift, which was not authentically Korean per se but authentically Emma.

Emma's trajectory, or any human trajectory for that matter, runs with and counter to the current of the spinned stories as we know them. Emma weighed in,

> The stereotype of being good at math and science is just what ended up happening. I was just a good student in general. I guess I just inherently became the quintessential model minority – being a good student, being good at math – despite the fact that my parents just wanted me to do well and be happy, but they weren't like, 'Get all A's.' I was the one that, if I got a B, I'd be upset and end up crying, but they were like, 'Oh, no, a B is fine. You're fine.' I don't know if that was just an inherent thing or if it's just me being a perfectionist on my own part.[109]

That the stereotype "ended up happening" is usually the case for the majority of Asians in America in both Asian and non-Asian households. Yet, myths seem to have no bearing on Emma. A grade of B upset her because she wanted a grade of A. She was a good student because she wanted to be. She enjoyed economics as much as she enjoyed cooking. She pursued both and decided that she preferred the latter. Her parents wanted her to do well and be happy, and so she did.

Emma's entrepreneurship and culinary capital are the engines of her community building practices in Montana. A Korean-owned Korean restaurant signals not only authenticity but also notions of family, notions of home, trustworthiness, and *jeong*. Korean professors at MSU consolidate by proximity; Korean women who are married to white men gather by commonality. In fact, Emma has adopted a "Korean mom," a Korean woman who moved to Bozeman in the mid-sixties and, like Emma, married a white man. The two indulge in weekly *kimchi*-making sessions, and mom is daughter's number-one patron. Whistle Pig Korean heals what cannot be healed, satiated, and quenched – the *han* of diaspora, memory, togetherness, and separation – by, even, the beauty of The Last Best Place. If Asian food makes Asian people legible, Emma is a facilitator. Emma makes Korean food accessible that makes Korean people legible in Bozeman. By extension, she makes *her* food accessible and *herself* legible from kitchen to table and with identity and passion.

To Emma, The Last Best Place is a beautiful place enjoyed by an increasing number of Chinese and Korean tourists, yet despite nature's cosmic possibilities, Emma is aware of its limitations. "I wonder if tourists will create more diversity – despite the fact that it is very white – that they would end up moving here and just creating another type of community. Sooner or later, I feel like it's going to happen just as the world gets smaller and smaller. I'd like to see a Koreatown or a

[109] Oh, Sabrina. *Field Interview_EW1_10.20.2018*. Fielding: the in-person interview, 2018, wav, 00:26:00.

Chinatown or having more ethnicities here,"[110] said Emma. That Emma envisions ethnic enclaves in Bozeman adds to the point that there is a communal aspect to being with people who are not white. Michelle craves Asian snacks and a city life. Kaunou's friends *are* family; she relates to Native American culture; her heart is set on the West Coast, where Hmong and other Asians are plentiful. Emma's crave for diversity is out of not loneliness but community.

As part of my personal tour of Bozeman, Emma and her husband drove me to the Hyalite Reservoir, which materialized what I had only seen on the labels of the bottled water in my life. Arrowhead and Crystal Geyser had nothing on the Hyalite. Yet, in all its glory, I just wanted my mom and sister to be with me, to see it for themselves.

After dinner, the Cape Codders and Emma's husband tuned in to the tail end of a Patriots game. Meanwhile, Emma and I opted for sisterly conversations by the fireplace and scrolled through photos of her past: her naturalization ceremony, her brothers' salad days, Wellesley shenanigans, and her wedding.

The Patriots won, so I took advantage of the family's high spirits and convinced Emma to screen the *Guy's Grocery Games* episode in which she starred. Everyone was more than convinced. They were proud.

I loved the episode. Emma was an impressive contestant, and grocery-games Guy was less hateable. Yet, I craved the repugnance of the *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* Guy I had grown to hate and love.

As I sat cross-legged around the hearth of Emma's living room and sipped on my La Croix, I asked myself: Could this be the home I had always longed for but never had?

[110] Oh, Sabrina. *Field Interview_EW2_10.20.2018*. Fielding: the in-person interview, 2018, wav, 00:03:30.

Chapter Nine: WENDY

As the Communist Party of China rose to prominence in the 1940s, Wendy's father left China for North Vietnam, where he met Wendy's mother and where Wendy was born. Wendy's father was of Chinese descent and her mother Vietnamese.

I met Wendy at the University Center. She was petite in size but walked with great certitude. Her sass, stature, low-pitched voice, and ironic sense of humor reminded me of my high school art history teacher. As Wendy munched on some crackers, I explained to her the premise of my research, but this was clearly not her first time. She is, indeed, a storyteller in her own right. This chapter is, at heart, the impressive life resumé of woman warrior Wendy.

By 1952, the Viet Cong's had a growing presence in Hanoi. Wendy's father worked under the Viet Cong as an interpreter for two years to see what its members were up to in North Vietnam, but enough was enough. As a result, Wendy's family, including her mother, father, her two brothers, and Wendy herself, relocated to the not-too-far Haiphong, but her father remained unhopeful. Then, he moved his family to South Vietnam, but that was the final straw. He looked to Laos.

The family's limited financial means could only insure Wendy's father's move to Laos, where a life for himself was not even guaranteed. Fortunately, he landed a job and remitted his earnings to his wife and children in South Vietnam, but the remittances never reached them. Wendy's mother decided it was time to join her husband. She gathered enough money to purchase four one-way tickets to Laos.

By the age of eleven, Wendy had already lost four years of schooling. Because her father was proud of his Chinese ancestry, Wendy was initially sent to Chinese school for two years until she reached a level of class in which not enough students were enrolled. The class was consequently cancelled.

Alternatively, Wendy's mother pushed for Catholic school, where Wendy studied French and began to take her studies seriously. Education was her one and only priority. Friends were but distractions; they were out of the question. "You cannot have it all,"[111] she remarked. However, the highest level of education offered at Catholic school was the middle-school equivalent. Nevertheless, Wendy passed a test to attend a French school in Vientiane, where she learned both French and English. There, friendships, too, were out of the question – not choice but by socioeconomic differences. The majority of her peers were the children of ambassadors. Although Wendy and her peers spoke the same languages in the classroom, outside, Wendy felt that she was not *enough* to be their friend.

In 1972, Wendy finished school but, again, did not have the financial means to pursue further education, even though she wanted to. She recalled that one "Chinese association" offered to finance her education, but she resisted, given her family's history with not one but two communist regimes.

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[111] Oh, Sabrina. *Field Interview_Wendy_10.19.2018*. Fielding: the in-person interview, 2018, wav, 00:06:30.

Instead, twenty-five-year-old Wendy decided to get married and start a family. “Had I paid attention to the Vietnam War, I would’ve waited to get married, even though I was an old maid,”[112] Wendy reflected. By 1975, Wendy had two sons and two reasons to leave Laos. First, their lives may have been in jeopardy. At the time, the couple worked for the U.S. embassy, but her husband was also a leader among the Vietnamese youth in Vientiane: a potential conflict of interest. Second, Wendy’s children were still young.

To leave the country of Laos as Vietnamese citizens was a costly mission. Exit and entry visas alike cost money that Wendy did not have. Nonetheless, a former employee of her husband’s, who had already left Vientiane, brokered a deal with the U.S. embassy to safeguard Wendy’s family’s exit. Without legal papers, the family crossed the Mekong River to, first, a U.S. air base in Thailand and, the next day, were flown out to refugee camps in the Philippines. Later, the family got word about a new refugee camp in Pennsylvania. The family was warned about the Pennsylvanian cold, but acclimatization was the least of the family’s concerns. “Other camps were unsanitary and dirty. The line to get food is not pretty,”[113] said Wendy.

Wendy’s husband’s nephew accompanied the family to the refugee camp in Pennsylvania, where the government issued identity documents and advised the family to join a refugee-related foundation. Meanwhile, a friend of her husband’s nephew’s found a sponsor in Missoula, but due to his beginner level of English, his friend requested that Wendy’s husband’s nephew accompany him in Missoula. Her nephew followed.

In Missoula, the local paper interviewed Wendy’s nephew. Soon, a family expressed interest in sponsoring his family. Wendy’s oldest son was two-and-a-half years old; her second was one-and-a-half; Wendy would give birth to her third son eleven years later. However, in the midst of locomotion, Wendy miscarried seven months into what was her third pregnancy. Wendy joked, “I’m a Fertile Myrtle. You touch me. Then I get pregnant.”[114] She attributed her miscarriage to the lack of information and resources for pregnant women in refugee camps. “In the refugee camp, before you get, they wanted to make sure that you don’t bring in any disease into the States, so they make sure that they x-ray you and give you shots, so I did not know all that. I think between the x-ray and the shot that I got, my third son then did not develop half of his brain,”[115] Wendy explained. Doctors said his survival was improbable.

In June of 1983, Wendy received news of her father’s passing but not until August. She was reassured to know that her father bought a plot of land with the money she had remitted, yet Wendy came to a standstill. By 1983, she was already an American citizen, and if she were to go back, she would risk jeopardizing her return to the States, so she remained.

Even before Wendy had her two sons, she always wanted a girl, but in 1984, she gave birth to a boy, her last child. She has since concentrated on raising her three sons in Missoula. Needless to say, her transition to Missoula itself did not come easy.

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[112] Oh, 00:09:00.
[113] Oh, 00:13:30.
[114] Oh, 00:17:00.
[115] Oh, 00:17:30.

Wendy's sponsor father gave Wendy's husband an ultimatum: Either work at a bank, let Wendy take the bank job, or take up an entirely different job. He ended up taking a job in Missoula's wood mills because of its good pay and family benefits.

After her first Labor Day in the States in 1975, Wendy landed a job at the aforementioned bank, where she would work as a proof operator for the next ten years. She loved numbers and was good with them.

In the 1980s, the bank underwent restructuring, and Wendy had to decide. In addition, the bank did not pay enough, and even after ten years of operation experience, she hit a ceiling, "They want somebody with that piece of paper, a college degree in order to put me up in a higher-up position."[116] Wendy's cadence signaled a sense of injustice. She continued, "They would rather keep a temporary employee than find a me a job."[117] But giving up was not in her nature.

Wendy tried another bank, but she was overqualified. For a change, her next employer was a credit union, but within her three years at the credit union, she was never offered a promotion. She said, "They would promote somebody white with no or less experience – a person who knows how to kiss ass. Excuse my French."[118] She concluded, "It's all about prejudice."[119] She spent the following two years in accounting, but the duties of an accounts receivable clerk did not suit her. After two years in accounting, Wendy returned to her first employer. She reminded me, "I do not give up."[120] She liked the people and knew the system, but nothing had changed. Five years later, she left the bank for good. In 1999, Wendy worked at a title company but was laid off in 2004 as a result of the housing bubble. Her retired husband was nervous, to say the least, but Wendy kept her cool. After all, temping was always an available and fine option.

At the age of fifty-seven, Wendy landed a job at a municipal court, where she currently works, putting her at forty-three years of work experience. "I did not know how worried my husband was until I said, 'I got a job!' He goes, 'Phew.'"[121] She emphasized once more, "I don't give up."[122]

All the while, Wendy was the mother of three growing sons. Her sons grew to understand that, although their mother may not have a formal education, she had a *sensibility*, for which her children have great respect. In terms of post-retirement plans, Wendy recently undertook helping young folks in Vietnam, Thailand, or Laos with their English pronunciation.

There are at most six Vietnamese families in Missoula. The occasional Vietnamese gathering was an opportunity for her sons to materialize and preserve the Vietnamese language. "I wanted them to at least keep the language – talk and converse – but I found it very hard,"[123] Wendy reflected. At the end of the day, Wendy stuck to her principles, "My idea was I don't want anybody to force me to do anything, so I do not do that on my children."[124] She reminded me, "I'm not like other Asian mothers. I'm very

[116] Oh, 00:25:00.
[117] Oh, 00:25:30.
[118] Oh, 00:26:30.
[119] Oh, 00:27:00.
[120] Oh, 00:28:00.
[121] Oh, 00:41:00.
[122] Oh, 00:41:30.
[123] Oh, 00:34:00.
[124] ibid.

Americanized. Or as my mom would say, 'I should've never sent you to French school! You became just like a Westerner!'"[125] said Wendy.

"I have to tell you a funny story,"[126] Wendy interjected. I was all ears. She continued,

> My second son, he worked for Disney for five years. The first two years he worked there, he goes, 'Mom, do you want to go to Disneyland?' because he can go for free. And I keep thinking I took them to Disneyland when we first got here. They were about six or seven years old. I didn't have money to take them to Disneyland again. Now that he has a job, he takes me to Disneyland.[127]

To me, her story was not as funny or ironic as it was allegorical. It was a story about intergenerationality, pride, hope, shame, and love. Whether Wendy believes in the American Dream, she seems to be living one and dreams about more: first, a Disney cruise and, second, Disney World.

To begin with, Wendy's engagement with the Vietnamese community was limited. In 1975, Wendy was the only Vietnamese woman with a white-collar job in Missoula, which sparked jealousy among Vietnamese folks, but she was unfazed, "Oh, I'm sorry. I'm busy. I have a job. I have two sons to take care for. I don't have time."[128] She remarked, "I'm willing to be friends with anybody, but if you don't like me, it's okay with me because I can speak English. I can find American friend. But I still eat Asian food at home."[129]

The paucity of Asians in a place like Missoula means a paucity of Asian goods at the store, but all Wendy had to do was ask for a catalog. Having brokered the expansion of Asian offerings at the local store, Wendy no longer makes the occasional grocery run to Spokane. At the same time, she still finds herself making requests when her friends make the trip out to Spokane. That is to say, the local store carries but evidently not enough.

To Wendy, Missoula is a compassionate and generous community, a place where she gives more than she takes. When her husband was laid off, a friend of Wendy's covered her sons' travel league soccer expenses. In times of crisis, her friends cooked meals for her. When she lost her child the year after she arrived in Missoula, the president of the bank, at which she worked, collected money from other employees to pay for her hospital bills and told them not to ask her when she was due. Come college applications season for one of her sons, his son's soccer coach accompanied her son on campus tours on the East Coast, all expenses paid. "That's what kind of community we have in town, besides the beauty of it and the cleanliness,"[130] said Wendy.

Wendy finds fellowship with the Hmong community in Missoula. The Hmong vendors offer her free vegetables at the farmers market, and in return, Wendy offers her homemade banana bread; the Hmong folks tease her that it is no good. In fact, Wendy's husband worked with Hmong folks at the wood mills, whom cordially invite the couple to Hmong New Year celebrations.

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[125] Oh, 00:52:30.
[126] Oh, 00:51:30.
[127] ibid.
[128] Oh, 00:36:00.
[129] Oh, 00:36:30.
[130] Oh, 00:43:50.

Although I did not get to spend as much time with Wendy as I did with my other informants, I spent my last evening in Missoula with her oldest son and her two granddaughters. Her son is a college admissions counselor, soccer coach, and the father of two precocious daughters.

His daughters are Asian-white biracial, and though three years apart, the school-aged sisters have converging interests in STEM and sports. I met the three at the DoubleTree's waterfront restaurant, where I indulged in pizza, wings, and DoubleTree cookies, while the sisters hashed out inventive sledding mechanisms.

After dinner at the DoubleTree, Wendy's granddaughters raced to the family van; Wendy's son and I walked. Along the way, Wendy's son waved hello to the mayor of Missoula, a former neighbor of his.

On the ride to the family's house, Wendy's son explained to his daughters about my research and reason for visit. He subsequently asked his daughters what they identified as. His younger daughter blurted "Chinese-ian," but she was only joking. She clarified that she identified as Asian American and is visibly tanner than her classmates. The older daughter said that she was proud of her Asian heritage but identified as American, though not a proud one, as she booed Trump and his forthcoming visit to Missoula.

Wendy's son and his daughters had me over at their place, where I played with their puppy, while the girls resigned to the triggering Sunday night rituals of homework, practicing the violin, and planning for the forthcoming week. Their self-discipline was admirable.

Before I left the family's house for the airport, where I would bum around to catch an early morning flight, Wendy's son packed me a gallon-sized bag of organic snacks. His older daughter also handed me a pack of her favorite gummies with juicy burst centers. I thanked the family, bade them farewell, and hailed an Uber to Missoula International Airport, my final destination.

To my relief, the seating area was vacant, but for safe measure, I laid claim to a seat by a glass-encased taxidermied bear. As I braced myself for a bad night's sleep, I charged my phone, scribbled notes into my field journal, reviewed some camcorder footage, called my mom, and popped a gummy. But to no avail, there was no burst, just juice. I grew sleepy.

Chapter Ten: CONCLUSION

Through lines

The Montanans I have met, seen, and passed do not dread a post-racial America but seem to be living in one. I am referring to neither the utopian bucolicism of The Last Best Place nor a color-blind society but a place where racial differences are, simply, acknowledged and a cause for neither war nor celebration. At the same time, I must acknowledge that all four women undertake adjustments, which in and of themselves acknowledge the existence of tensions, frictions, restrictions, and obstacles. Nonetheless, acts of solidarity and politicization are helpful, but they are, by no means, necessary. On the whole, the use of identity is not so much political as it is explanatory and instrumental in the everyday happenings of Asian Montanans. Where humans are far and few between and where natural life abounds, The Last Best Place nurtures reflection, conversation, and camaraderie. As it turns out, the Asian American sensibility in Montana is organic and as simple as "everyone is white, and I am not." When Asians in Montana hurdle the chagrin of lunchbox moments and dog meat jokes, they fall back on not hard feelings and polemical slogans but the healing power of friendliness. After all, what are a few microaggressions to an Asian living in Montana?

In spite of the fact that Michelle is a self-proclaimed hip hop aficionado and Emma's car radio bumps Lil Wayne, the lack of mention of Blackness or, more largely, the lack of a legible racial paradigm is noteworthy. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2017 population estimates, 0.6% of Montana's population is Black, alone,[131] trailing behind Montana's Asian population by 0.3%. Because Black bodies are out of sight and, thereby, out of mind, Asians in Montana are more familiar with and, in some instances, more proximal to whiteness than they are familiar with and proximal to Blackness. Nonetheless, even if these women did not grow up in a Black-and-white paradigm, they implicitly recognize one. In fact, an understanding of a white hegemony comes easy for Asian Montanans. All it takes is a supermarket run, a glance at a class roster, or spectating at a Saturday morning soccer game. That is to say, their sense of racial order certainly exists, but it is not extensive.

I must also acknowledge the significance and role of food in these women's lives in a way that does not feed into the popular American imagination of Asians and food. Foremost, food serves a functional purpose. Michelle consumes popular Asian snacks in the next town over for comfort. For Kaunou, her parents and relatives alike harvest and vend the fruits of their labor, for they are their source of income. Mass-produced musubi and Costco snacks fuel weekend cousin gatherings. Emma owns and runs a Korean restaurant to channel her culinary passions with the added benefit of cultural reclamation, or vice versa. Wendy was instrumental in importing staple Asian ingredients. Their production and

[131] U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Montana." Census Bureau QuickFacts. Accessed September 25, 2018.

consumption patterns are not necessarily remarkable but inscriptions of (cultural) identity, but the same can be said for most everyone: We are what we eat. At any rate, Asian Montanans continue to retrace and pave new Asian American foodways.

I personally think of community as persons held together by overlapping interests, perspectives, and experiences, but for (Asian) Montanans, community means commensalism, which is rarely seen and experienced in practice in the spaces in which I have inhabited. Acts of unconditional generosity characterized the Montanans who have made this project possible: their willingness to participate in my research, covered meals and drinks, housing and transportation, invitations to family gatherings, produce from the Missoula Farmers Market, guided tours, packed on-the-go snacks, souvenirs. In the midst of it all, there was familial love.

The Montanans' unconditional generosity also spoke volumes about their unquestionable diligence. Michelle arranged a reservation at the Honors College Lounge for the purposes of my visit; Kaunou's aunts, uncles, and cousins sold their produce at the farmers' market in the early hours of Saturday morning; Emma processed a catering order on a Sunday morning; one of Wendy's granddaughters practiced the violin on a Sunday night. Everyone kept time. Not to mention, my informants were all women in STEM. Michelle studies biochemistry; Kaunou majored in psychology; Emma worked at Bank of America; and the majority of Wendy's career was spent at a bank.

What unifies Asians in Montana is not their Asianness but Montana itself. Michelle looks outwards but anticipates her eventual return. Kaunou was born into a Hmong family that had, long before, sowed the lands of Montana with their hands and history. Bozeman called Emma at a friend's wedding, where she rediscovered her calling in the restaurant business, six years and counting. Woman warrior Wendy escaped the tribulations of war and is now grandmother to two bright Missoulian girls.

At the same time, there is always another life outside of The Last Best Place to either look forward to or look back on. The young women of Missoula imagine a city life and its possibilities. The older women's memories of the motherland, personal and political, are the engines of their ever-busy, resilient lives. At any rate, I am optimistic about the future of the Asian women of Montana.

The through lines that I have drawn about Asians in Montana are generally intuitive and unsurprising. But because much of Asian American history exists in an urban paradigm, this study is surprising in another respect. The towns of Missoula and Bozeman dynamically respond to Asian American culture, identity, and history. This study offers ways in which we may rethink the paradigms of Asian American studies, migration studies, and place studies as not perennial but ever-evolving.

The Last Best Place has seeded and nests these Montanan lives, and above all, it is their home, by chance, by love, and by birth. The Last Best Place is living proof that there is, in fact, more than enough space, for all of us.

Limitations and potential areas for study

First, it goes without saying that the stories I have told pale in comparison to the real and lived experiences of my informants. They are unwhole and lack dimensionality. Second, I acknowledge

that there is only so much I could learn from a round of speed dates in a four-day trip to Montana. Repeated field trips would have tremendously increased the robustness of my research. Third, the preliminary stages of my research fail to consider the ontological complications of the ingenuous question: "What's it like being Asian in Montana?" To capture the essence of the Asian American Montanan experience requires a basis of comparison and, ideally, folks with a transplant experience. Fourth, I recognize that my intuitive usage of the umbrella term "Asian American" is problematic and uncritical. A preface that contours and configures the term to better serve the intents and purposes of this thesis would have added clarity and intentionality in my usage of the term and, by and large, my research. Fifth, my sample lacks variation across all dimensions. In all fairness, Asian American-identifying folks are numbered in The Last Best Place, but with the appropriate resources and ample time, I envision a sample that includes brown bodies, men, non-binary folks, and the elderly. Sixth, Missoula and Bozeman, however Montanan in their own right, are not representative of the state of Montana and, thereby, qualitatively skew my sample. Seventh, Montana as a research site alone, however plentiful, is limiting. The Mountain West is a region that, still to this day, too, remains at large. Ergo, a broadened research site that includes the states of Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming would considerably increase the size and variance of my sample.

One potential area for future study is a qualitative panel survey of Asian American folks in Montana over an extended period of time. A second potential area for future study is a comparative qualitative study on Asian Americans and non-Asian people of color in Montana. This would potentially address the ontological complications of what it is like to be not only Asian but also of color in Montana. A third potential area for future study and area of personal interest is a qualitative study on the Asian diaspora and diasporic bodies in not U.S. states but non-Pacific U.S. territories such as Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Documentary

I have shot and edited a documentary film or, more genuinely, a travelog titled *The Last Best Place* to supplement the written component of my thesis. The filmmaking process immensely informed and inspired the writing process, and vice versa.

I collected footage during the fielding stage of the research process with my camcorder, occasionally with the accompaniment of an audio recorder. All edits were made on Final Cut Pro.

I was initially motivated by my desire to capture the truths and realities of Asian Montanans, but by the end of post-production, I found myself left with an hour-plus-long home video. In retrospect, the labor expended on the narrativization of nauseating handheld footage, the emulation of a grimy 90s VHS aesthetic, and oldie song selections was an extension of the homemaker in me – that is, my way of making a home in Montana, albeit retroactively.

I have learned just as much about filmmaking as a storytelling device as I have about Asian Montanans, and I have much more to learn about both. It is my hope that this film serves as both an audiovisual guide for and an audiovisual reproduction of the written thesis.

Last words

At the end of it all, I ask and re-ask myself: Why Montana? And part of the answer lies in the mystification of the unknown. The other part asymptotes a subconscious need to confirm that we, Asian Americans, are more or less on the same page. But as it turns out, Asians in Montana seem to be living in the next volume, or at least another one.

The Last Best Place was full of surprises to say the least. Missoula's strip malls were smaller than they appeared on Google Street View. Michelle's music diet consists of Ye, Eminem, XXXTentacion, and Lil Peep, while Kaunou does not mind country music. A cowboy boasted his prized Amazon parrot at the bar of the Oxford Saloon. I spent my Sunday morning making conversation and smoking cigs with an ex-convict. Emma's car radio strictly bumped Lil Wayne's *Tha Carter V* during scenic car rides through Bozeman. Even in the coziness of Emma's Pepperidge Farm-like neighborhood, I missed the grimy charms of the Oxford Saloon back in Missoula. Most surprisingly, not a single stranger questioned where I was *really* from.

On one particular Uber trip in Missoula, my driver and I struck up a garden-variety ride-sharing conversation, and as coincidence would have it, we shared the same provenance. He was born and raised in the city of Orange, a fifteen-minute drive from my hometown. Over the course of the trip, my driver divulged Missoula's shocking demographic statistics, but he seemed pretty unfazed. Whether southern California had its way, the degrees of separation between Montana and me were less than expected, and I never felt too far from home.

In fact, I have reached the conclusion that life in Montana is not radically different from life in southern California and life at Vassar, which can, in part, explain why Montana was an amazing time. Our trajectories are, by and large, more similar than they are different. They are as Asian as my high school classmates were and as well-versed as Vassar students are around *those* conversations, if not with more composure and respectability.

A few months ago, I journaled personal thoughts and feelings on Montana into a digital zine and spammed the feeds of my friends as a gesture of my self-aggrandizing generosity. Come late January, my sister, Katy, sent me a screenshot of messages that she had received from a classmate of hers. They read, "Hey Katy supppper random / But I just checked out your sister's zine… My mom and dad actually met in Butte, Montana! They were studying there and my mom had worked at a [C]hinese restaurant there in the late 80's! / My sister and my mom and I visited the place two summers ago!!" Being the insensitive older sister I am, I was quick to dismiss Katy's texts, but Katy had me at Montana.

Since the birth of this project, I have developed a cognitive bias for the word. Psychology calls this frequency illusion, but I am in denial. Montana has popcorned into classroom discussions, Friday-night kickbacks, and season seven of *Parts Unknown*, and when it does, Montana seems all around me. And as contrite as I was to have missed Katy's friend's story in the early days of my research, I was nevertheless elated, and as I read and re-read her messages, the world never felt so small.

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Appendix A: Asian Studies Research Study Informed Consent Form

The Last Best Place: Case Studies on Contemporary Asian Migration, Diaspora, and Contemporary Community Building Practices
Sabrina Oh '19 Vassar College | B.A. Asian Studies, Economics

You are being asked to take part in a research study of Asian migration, diaspora, and contemporary community building practices in the state of Montana. We are asking you to take part because you have lived in Montana for an extended period of time and culturally identify as Asian American. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

What the study is about: The purpose of this study is to hone in on isolated Asian American communities in the Mountain West by way of silhouetting Asian American-identifying individuals in Montana; their engagement with cultural, identity, and interpersonal politics; and the motives and means by which they seek and build community and notions thereof.

What we will ask you to do: If you agree to be in this study, I will conduct an interview with you. The interview will include questions about your history in and with Montana; what you consider to be turning points your personal history, community, and experiences; perceptions of community; and perceptions of Asian American life elsewhere. With your permission, I would also like to videotape the interview for a documentary that will supplement my written thesis.

Your responses will be published: The records of this study will be published by the Vassar College Library upon completion of the thesis. The researcher will share with you a draft of the thesis prior to submission. If you prefer, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a locked file; only the researcher will have access to the records. The same applies to the supplementary documentary.

Taking part is voluntary: Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. You may skip any questions that you do not want to answer. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time.

If you have questions: The researcher conducting this study is Sabrina Oh. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Sabrina Oh at saoh@vassar.edu or at 1-714-501-4850.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study.

Your Signature _____ Date_____

Your Name (printed) _____

In addition to agreeing to participate, I also consent to having the interview videotaped.

Your Signature _____ Date _____

Signature of person obtaining consent _____ Date _____

Printed name of person obtaining consent _____ Date _____

This consent form will be kept by the researcher for at least three years beyond the end of the study.