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Re-Imagining My History: Counter-Collective Memory and Filmic Documentation

Sitting at her work table inside the dimly-lit Archives room of the Penn Museum, Katherine “Kate” Pourshariati laments that she has forgotten to document most of her own family’s life. “Have you heard of the phrase ‘peddler’s children go shoeless’? It means that someone who is in a certain field somehow neglects their own self and their family. It’s really terrible,” she says. Kate has worked as a film archivist for the Penn Museum since 2006, collecting and curating films across various indigenous cultures and time periods. She and her husband, a Persian American, have lived most of their lives as filmmakers and sound technicians. Kate and I had met through a general board meeting for the Philadelphia Asian American Film Festival (PAAFF), where she prescreens documentary submissions and volunteers for the “Memories to Light” Initiative. She chuckles at her own ironic position as an archivist who has little documentation of her own family history. Yet, her sentiments seem to reflect something much larger: an ambivalent feeling, a nuance of a deeply human need to document our lives and our memories. Why do we document, anyway? What can documentation do for us that a recall of memory cannot achieve? Specifically, what role do documentations—such as film and home video—perform for underrepresented, minority communities? I frame these questions through the lens of collective memory, or what Maurice Halbwachs articulates as a “continuous current of thought, of a continuity that is by no means artificial…[but] conserves nothing from the past except the parts which still live, or are capable of living in the conscience of the group” (89). As Halbwachs highlights, collective memory is not of the “past,” but a product of the present. Both deliberate and accidental choices on what to remember and what to forget shape collective memory, which ultimately becomes the foundation of a community’s collective identity. Incorporating my fieldwork with PAAFF’s “Memories to Light” Initiative, I will outline an alternative approach to analyze what filmic documentations do for a community’s collective memory—namely, a non-representational theory that looks at the limits of film, but also characterizes documentations and the film festivals/community archives collecting them as processes that *activate* circulation, curation, and interaction among Asian American communities. This activation and analysis are critical to produce what I call counter-collective memories, or a community’s production of stories that complicate the homogenizing narrative a mainstream society projects upon communities of color. Counter-collective memories fill the silences and gaps of hidden and undocumented communal histories, ultimately allowing a more nuanced re-imagination of collective identity for a community.

I initially conducted my fieldwork through PAAFF’s “Memories to Light” Initiative, a collective storytelling project in partnership with the Center for Asian American Media (CAAM). The Initiative aims to collect, compile, and digitize home videos—8mm, 16mm, and super 8mm films—from various Asian American communities across the United States with the goal of making them accessible for public viewing. Focusing on the period between the 1920s and the 1980s, “Memories to Light” hopes to:

collectively and aesthetically construct shared social, cultural, and political representations of Asian America directly from the community itself. At the heart of this project is how collective memory can be amassed and sustained through interactive participation (CAAM Website).

A selection of the digitized home videos can be viewed online. These videos, largely portraying everyday slices of life, poeticize both Western-cultural occasions and Asian-specific events of families. Films feature children taking their first steps as a baby, an elementary student’s graduation, and even a Japanese American family’s New Year celebration with mochi pounding. These home videos, in Erving Goffman’s terms, offer a lens to Asian Americans’ “backstage,” or a space in which a person can recede from the usual norms and standards of an audience or public (44). Goffman describes the opposite as performances of the “front,” or activities “which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance” (19). This behavioral distinction, in the context of documentation, can be re-interpreted as the public “front” and the private “backstage.” Home videos—through its digital circulation—merges the two by allowing the audience of the “front” to see a “backstage” performance that is usually not available to them. Often, home videos are for private audiences; the social script embedded in these scenes functions mainly in the contexts of families, not of publics outside of the private sphere. Observers of this performance, however, change when the documentation becomes circulated beyond family members and finds a place in community archives such as CAAM and PAAFF. These digitized documentations derive its power from the way it normalizes the Asian American presence, as it offers an empathic gaze toward ordinary Asian American families by making a traditionally private performance publicly accessible. For the non-Asian American audience, “Memories to Light” disrupts the stereotypical depictions of Asian Americans as foreign and exotic through these filmed performances of the everyday.

My fieldwork for “Memories to Light” involved searching and doing outreach for home videos across the South Asian and Korean American communities in Philadelphia. I traveled to various organizations serving these respective Asian American communities, including Twelve Gates Arts, South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA), and Society of Young Korean Americans (SYKA). I also attended Korean churches and the Subaru Sakura Festival to expand outreach and interest among community members. Unfortunately, the search yielded only a few leads with no concrete home videos found during the search span of three months in Philadelphia. The problem was not that there wasn’t interest—many people, simply put, did not have home videos. Multiple factors played into my failed search. Majority of home videos that CAAM had collected in the west coast came from Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino communities, while very few were found among Korean, Vietnamese, South Asian, and Pacific Islander communities. This situation testified to the greater historical fact that for Korean and South Asian communities, mass migration to the United States and formation of families did not occur until the late 1980s and 90s—beyond the time frame that “Memories to Light” sought out for. Korean migration to the U.S. increased primarily in the early 80s and 90s, the time when South Korea faced a dictator president while facing a shift from an agricultural-based economy to an industrial one (Lee, 319). Particularly in Philadelphia, only a handful of 1st generation Korean Americans—usually students and professionals—migrated to the city in the 60s and 70s (Lee, 55). On the other hand, South Asian migration to Philadelphia increased more in the 80s, with Indians becoming the 7th largest foreign-born group in Philadelphia in 1990 (Singer, 8). The Indian population in Philadelphia particularly grew in the 21st century, bringing in a large number of high-skilled male workers and a good portion of female nurses from Kerala (Takenaka and Osirim, 10). Both South Asian and Korean migration histories of Philadelphia do not fully overlap with the time period that “Memories to Light” is seeking. Furthermore, that not enough *families* had formed by the 1980s reveals the way home videos pigeonhole a certain frame of memories, namely that of family representations. As the collection of home videos from the west coast demonstrates, the need to document the everyday largely comes from familial motivations and moments of family interactions. Recent migrants of the 70s and 80s to the east coast—particularly single men and professionals—do not have a reason to film regularly without rooted communal and familial relationships.

Unexpected personal difficulties further accompanied the search. As the only Korean American in the “Memories to Light” Committee, I attempted to tap into the Korean church network through my Korean American friends at the University of Pennsylvania. This was a logical choice to take for the search, as Korean communities in the U.S. have dominantly been constructed around churches. Particularly for Korean American college students, the nondenominational college church has offered the ultimate comfort zone for them to build ethnic communities (Abelmann, 43). Hoping to find some leads for home videos through the Korean church, I asked a couple of my Korean-American friends to link me to the local Emmanuel Church and Penn’s Grace Covenant Church. These friends, however, reacted to my request with reluctance. One friend, Julie A.\* (name changed for privacy), warned me, “I’d just be cautious about kind of going about it as gathering info for a documentary rather than religious reasons.” I quickly clarified that I was not going in to make “a documentary,” but was simply collecting home videos that Korean American families may have filmed on their own. The implications, however, were clear. To enter the Church space with the purpose of a film project translated to a form of invasion. Even if I was not actually bringing a camera to the church space, Julie S.’s sentiments carried a hesitancy that resonates with the uneasy presence and power of any camera: “To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them that they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed”—a statement that also applies to the potentially other-izing position of ethnographic filmmaking (Sontag, 14). What particularly surprised me was the way Julie S. implicitly labeled me as an outsider; my status as an agnostic Korean American denied me entry to a Korean-communal space that was coded as exclusively Christian.

“Memories to Light” Initiative’s focus on 8mm, 16mm, and super 8mm films came about as another limitation to the search. While attending a panel and symposium for SYKA and SAADA respectively, I sought out to ask individuals for any trace of home videos in their households. Many people responded that their families did have them. However, those videos turned out to be VHS videos, not the listed films that “Memories to Light” searched for. This prevalence of VHS parallels the history of recording technology; indeed, the material of film began to fall out of picture in the last quarter of the 20th century, with VHS becoming the more dominant form of documentation throughout the 70s to the 80s (Shiraishi, 1258). VHS was not only easier to use than traditional film, but also much more affordable. The question of who was able to afford expensive film became much more relevant when juxtaposed with VHS. A family had to be somewhat financially well to be able to own a film camera in the first place, automatically excluding certain working-class immigrant narratives and refugee communities that migrated to Philadelphia near the end of the time frame set out by “Memories to Light.” To be able to document a family’s life also requires some sense of financial and emotional stability, which impoverished and refugee communities may particularly lack. A similar limitation also occurred while searching for home videos at the Subaru Sakura Festival. This was an event that not only brought in Asian Americans, but also the wider public in general. Once again, very few Asian Americans had traces to these films, while a greater number of White visitors expressed interest to donating their home videos (they were quickly told that the Initiative only collected Asian American home videos). Already, historical patterns of migration, class statuses, and technological limitations privileged certain groups to be able to record and create such home video documentations more than others.

To consider these limitations of filmic documentation as elements of collective memory requires a shift in the theoretical focus. When treating these films as analytic frameworks, one must consider not just what the camera frame privileges, but simultaneously what is *not* being filmed. To think of merely the content and the representations depicted in these home videos fail to address the materialities and embodied actions surrounding the creation and collection of these home videos. Non-representational theory offers a framework concerning itself more with “mundane everyday practices that shape the conduct of human beings toward others and themselves in particular sites” and not simply the *products* of such practices (Thrift, 142). It is a theory that pays attention to “processes that operate before…conscious, reflect thought” and emphasizes the “necessity of not prioritizing representations as the primary epistemological vehicles through which knowledge is extracted from the world” (McCormack, 122). This theory can be applied to categorize filmic documentation as fluid *processes,* both human and material*.* These processes activate discourse, circulation, and interaction among public members that enable an altogether different form of community. The failed search within the South Asian and Korean communities changed my focus from “Memories to Light” to interviewing this alternative community—specifically, three figures from the Asian American film/archiving community in Philadelphia: Rob Buscher, Kate Pourshariati, and Samip Mallick. Rob Buscher has been the director for the Philadelphia Asian American Film Festival (PAAFF) since June 2014 and is a significant member of Philly’s Asian American film community. His work as festival director has involved planning the annual 11-day Festival every autumn as well as the multiple programming throughout the year geared towards artists, filmmakers, sponsors, and other communities of color. Samip Mallick is the co-founder and Executive Director for the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA), a community archive that digitizes documents such as films, photographs, letters, and oral interviews on the South Asian American experience. Lastly, Kate Pourshariati—as mentioned before—is the film archivist at the Penn Museum and a fellow volunteer for PAAFF. These three figures fulfill a variety of significant roles as part of the Asian American film community, testifying to how the processes, relationships, and actions of their respective organizations shape a community’s collective memory.

The non-representational frame must first be situated on a foundation of how archives and home videos validate communities of color. Michelle Caswell outlines the affective impact community archives have upon minority communities, terming it as “representational belonging” or providing ontological, epistemological, and social validation (33). Citing SAADA as her case study, Caswell argues that community archives validate the sense of being for marginalized communities and provide an empirical substantiation to prove and establish a community’s historical trajectory and presence. For SAADA, South Asian Americans affectively experience the community archive as countering “symbolic annihilation,” or the erasure, silencing, and mis-portrayal of marginalized minority communities in mainstream media (Caswell, 3). To see oneself reflected in an archive provides a basis for a community of color to feel that they belong and that their existence is part of a greater historical continuity within the mainstream society. Samip speaks along similar lines of what it means for him to create and work at SAADA:

I’ve connected with a lot of people who talk about how SAADA’s work has got them more interested in their own family stories and community stories and that’s really rewarding—the fact that people are now thinking more and more about their own stories…I didn’t grow up knowing these histories, so it makes me feel more connected...that sense of *rootlessness*—it’s one way to confront that. It’s to recognize the importance of our stories (Mallick, 2017).

Samip not only narrates his own emotional validation from understanding his South Asian American heritage and presence in history; he also engages in a new discourse among other newly-motivated South Asian Americans. The confrontation of “rootlessness” can be interpreted as an activated process to create a new counter-collective memory—an attempt to replace the silences imposed upon South Asian American history. What SAADA enables is a form of counterpublic, or a “space of discursive circulation among strangers as a social entity” that challenges the hierarchy of modern discourse (Warner, 120). Kate’s comments on what a digital archive enables align with this formation of a counterpublic:

The digital [archiving] has obviously the advantage that everyone can see it faster…the access is fantastic. People from all over the world are seeing these films…and they’re seeing like their town, their hometown, and they just love them. And we get beautiful comments from all around the world…of people just…so excited to see how their time used to look (Pourshariati, 2017).

While counterpublics are not necessarily communities, it engages an oppressed group of strangers in a shared discourse across space and time. Digitization, as Kate mentions, expands the power to enable such a discourse through its networked access. Along the same line of thought, the search for home videos activates a new discourse, an action that deserves as equal attention as the filmic documentations themselves. Rob articulates a similar message to that of Samip as to the purpose of “Memories to Light”:

“Memories to Light” campaign is kind of extension of the idea of Asian American cinema as a *movement*...when we look at the lived experiences and the histories of various Asian American communities that have been in this country…there is this entire counter-narrative to what mainstream cinema and mainstream cinema tell us...that we are perpetually foreign, that we don’t have roots in this country, that we’re not true Americans…when we have these types of artifacts from history to really show to the general public at large…this is when we can really start creating a dent in how people perceive our communities (Buscher, 2017).

This categorization of cinema as *movement*—an active process—once again puts actions into the forefront. What nonrepresentational theory underscores is precisely the way both the *failure* to find home videos and the *desire* to search home videos constitute themselves as actions of counter-collective memory building. Filmic documentation inevitably mediates these processes, allowing a new counter-discourse to be enabled in a community even without the content matter itself.

Institutional power has often overshadowed marginalized stories of communities of color and has been the perpetrator of historical revisionism and collective silence. Caswell distinguishes institutional “mainstream archives” from community archives, defining mainstream ones as “archival institutions that either do not collect materials created by marginalized communities or that do not involve the communities themselves in a decision-making capacity in collecting those materials” (11). Kate describes the Penn Archive as a “treasure trove,” as the Archive does not discriminate any records and collects all forms of marginalized histories. The Archive keeps these records available for when any scholar or figure may need to use them. However, the requirement for the Penn Archive is that one must seek the information out before even knowing that they exist. Samip adds to this by comparing SAADA and larger institutions such as the Penn Museum Archive:

Certain histories aren’t *priorities* for various reasons. Histories that are marginalized are not often priorities of large institutions, and is often dependent on the communities themselves to advocate for their stories and their histories...our primary focus is on the community history (Mallick, 2017).

Samip underscores that community archives like SAADA *curate* documentations of marginalized histories for people to first recognize that these histories exist. It initiates the epistemological and ontological understanding to further expand the discourse to know and record South Asian American stories. Broad, institutional archives, even when having these documentations of marginalized histories, may easily frame these histories out of the dominant picture with or without intent. Mainstream institutional archives, in Jacque Derrida’s words, are at once “institutive and conservative...revolutionary and traditional” (Blouin, 1). Samip adds an important self-awareness to both community and mainstream archives:

I do think that’s it’s important that large institutions…to be very self-critical on thinking about histories that are not reflected in their collections and for SAADA as well. We must be self-critical that we may have overlooked [certain histories] and work to sharing those stories…if we don’t do it, no one else will (Mallick, 2017).

Indeed, this ability for self-criticism becomes key not only to produce counter-collective memories for a community to recognize and embrace, but ultimately, to also stretch solidarity to other underrepresented narratives across communities of color.

The Asian American film community particularly enables a Pan-Asian identity that also spans a Pan-ethnic interaction across communities of color. Rob’s role as Festival Director has involved creating programs beyond just the *on-screen* experience, carrying out events such as music concerts, food tastings, visual arts exhibits, and performances. PAAFF not only serves as an avenue to showcase Asian American-themed films, but also aims to congregate different publics among diverse Asian Americans and across communities of color to be engaged in a shared discussion of Asian American narratives and histories. He states:

We find ourselves building bridges not just in the Pan-Asian community, but really looking out into other communities of color and the white majority...working with our sister festivals Black Star and PHLAFF [Philadelphia Latino American Film Festival]...one of the fundamental concerns has always been: how do we create true solidarity among communities of color and among the public at large? It’s not something that happens overnight…to have these conversations around things that are low-pressure like food, film, music—this is when we can sit down and have real *dialogue* in a way that’s not forced and natural (Buscher, 2017).

What Buscher highlights is the role of the Film Festival to activate discourse across a diverse group of audience members through seemingly mundane activities the Festival fosters. The Festival’s demographics have also shifted the past three years from around 75% Asian American audience members to 60%, showcasing the growing interest among people outside of the APA community. PAAFF as a practice becomes a source to activate dialogue, interaction, and interest in the same *physical* space while providing a venue to circulate Asian-American narratives and films. Kate comments in a similar line of thought: “It’s also multicultural within an Asian context. There’s a lot of Asian communities represented in the general body [of PAAFF].” As volunteer members of the general body, Kate and I have both observed the way a variety of Asian American experiences are represented not only in the film narratives, but also within the people working and volunteering for the Festival. PAAFF highlights diversity, inclusion, and a “shared racial fate” to mark the way PAAFF serves as a counter-hegemonic film festival and represents a significant part of the Asian American movement (Kibria, 946).

This interaction and circulation of discourse become key actions to understand the role of filmic documentation in producing counter-collective memories. Recently, SAADA has established a year-long initiative titled *Where We Belong: Artists in the Archive* to understand how collaboration between artists and archives can develop a new platform for marginalized narratives and communities. Samip speaks on this initiative:

We’ve always been thinking about how do we collaborate journalists, activists, and artists...by remixing or reimagining materials in the archive, artists can enhance their value …there is a lot of potential in thinking about how these artists and materials…*activate.* When you view a record in the archive, or read an article about it, or share it with someone, it is being activated. *It is being brought to life.* That’s what the artists are also doing. They’re activating the materials in the archive and bringing them into life in different kinds of ways. I think there’s a lot of potential not just by artists, but also activists, journalists, academics, and community members to bring these materials into people's’ lives (Mallick, 2017).

Samip’s words testify to the fact that filmic documentation not only enables an altogether different community to interact and collaborate, but also opens a channel to *re-imagine* a community’s collective memory. Re-imagination culminates the process of producing a counter-collective memory, as filmic documentation becomes interwoven with present actions to directly claim past marginalized histories in a new light. One musician-artist in SAADA’s initiative, Zain Alam, has combined a home video in the archive with his own Hindustani music and indie rock to create an altogether different affective medium to engage the experience of collective memory. This interactive transition from filmic documentation to art-making ultimately comes back to PAAFF’s main purpose: to recognize how artists and filmmakers creatively imagine narratives of their own Asian American communities to replace the homogenizing, narrow image of the model-minority myth and other harmful stereotypes.

Though “Memories to Light” for PAAFF is in no way complete or successful in the current time, this ethnographic project has revealed hidden nuances and histories behind filmic documentations themselves. Multiple theories of understanding documentation, narrative, and archive function under non-representational theory, which underscores processes and embodied actions behind filmic documentation and organization focused on film and archiving. As the three members of the Asian American film community have testified, PAAFF, SAADA, and the nature of filmic documentation enable new interaction, collaboration, and circulation that promote a Pan-Asian/Panethnic identity and a re-imagination of silenced and marginalized histories. These actions and processes, ultimately, become as critical for analysis and attention as much as the stories contained within the films.

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