

# RIPPLES

ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES PROGRAM NEWSLETTER

## In Search of the Japanese American Internment



Manzanar Cemetery Monument  
(Photos by Frances K. Chow)

### UMass Boston Students and Faculty Journey to LA's Little Tokyo and the Manzanar Internment Camp

Why search for the Japanese American internment? Much of what we, as Americans, have been taught about the internment is a very small and impersonal fragment of a much more complex experience. Hundreds of thousands of lives were affected — many of those who experienced the internment live with those memories today, and their children and future generations will have to live with that legacy. We must ask ourselves difficult and critical questions if we are to understand these events in our history. One of those questions should be: Have we learned from our mistakes?

In November of 2009, seven students from the honors class “WWII Internment of Japanese Americans,” three students connected to the Asian American Studies Program at UMass Boston, and faculty journeyed to California in search of the Japanese American internment. Over the course of four days, the participants had planned

and unexpected encounters and visited numerous historic sites. Each came away from the journey with some new insight and understanding.

After returning to Boston, the student participants presented their initial reflections to the university community on November 23, 2009. On February 24, for the Day of Remembrance, the three Asian American Studies students reflected on the experience once again with presentations about the internment and a photography exhibition of the journey. Here, those three students reflect on the experience in a little more detail.

This unique field study experience to Little Tokyo and Manzanar was made possible through the leadership of Dr. Paul Watanabe, at the urging of University Honors Program Director, Dr. Rajini Srikanth, and with the assistance of faculty participants Dr. Karen Suyemoto and Dr. Shirley Tang. Generous support was provided by the University Honors Program, the Asian American Studies Program, the Institute for Asian American Studies, and the Office of Provost Winston Langley at UMass Boston.

# In Search of the Japanese American Internment

Reflections from Laura Ng



Last November, I was one of ten students who participated in a pilgrimage to Little Tokyo in Los Angeles and the Manzanar internment camp in Owens Valley, California. Having grown up in Los Angeles, I was familiar with Little Tokyo and its historical significance. I had never been to the Manzanar internment camp, so I imagined that our visit there would have a more powerful effect on me than our visit to Little Tokyo. I also expected Manzanar to have a stronger impact on me because it is the actual site of internment and represents a grave injustice that was forced upon Japanese Americans because of anti-Asian racism. In the end, I was wrong because my experiences at both places turned out to be extremely meaningful.

On the second day of our pilgrimage, our group got a chance to walk around Little Tokyo and stop at important sites such as the Go For Broke Monument which was erected to honor WWII Japanese American veterans and the Japanese American National Museum which was established to educate the public about the Japanese American internment. Walking



through these sites of commemoration, we were fortunate enough to be able to meet and speak with several former



internees and Japanese American veterans. One woman in her eighties told us about how she and her family were sent to the

Santa Anita Assembly Center, a racetrack, and had to live in horse stalls where the stench of horse manure was

almost unbearable. We met another former internee and veteran at the Go For Broke Monument who told us he was on a journey to reconnect with people from his past. His reason for visiting the monument was to get a pencil rubbing of his cousin's name. His cousin had also served in WWII as a Japanese American soldier, but he did not get a chance to speak to his cousin before he died. Engaging with these individuals, people who lived through the internment, was really special and will stay in my memories for a long time.

Visiting the Manzanar internment camp also left a lasting impression on me. As we drove into Manzanar,



we had to roll our windows up when we got a taste of the desert dust that many of the former internees spoke about. Walking

around the mostly barren site, we could see that the dry desert ground was littered with rusted nails, glass shards, and ceramic fragments. We got another reminder of what an annoyance the dust was when the park ranger, who was giving us a tour of Manzanar, picked up a tin can top with small holes punctured in it. He told us that internees nailed these tops to the gaps in the barrack floorboards to block the dust that constantly blew in. We saw more attempts to resist the harsh and bleak environment when we were shown



the remnants of a garden built by internees. An empty pond was the only thing left, but the pond was lined with amazing faux wood logs which were skillfully carved from concrete. It was amazing to see the extent that internees went to in order to make their lives a little more comfortable. The last stop we made before leaving the camp was the cemetery where the iconic obelisk monument stands.

Several graves are located next to the monument, one even

**(Continues on page 4)**



With RIPPLES,  
we spread news in  
continuous movements of  
circles. We share the same  
center. All of us. Our  
work are circles within  
each other - staff, students,  
families, and communities.  
The transformation begins  
within ourselves, our own  
center. We make ripples  
by being fluid like water -  
as we are touched by,  
and touch, others.



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# In Search of the Japanese American Internment

belonging to a baby. Standing there, we were reminded that in the years that Japanese Americans were imprisoned, enough time had passed for both life and death to occur.



As a Chinese American/Asian American who has studied Asian American history, I am so grateful I was given the opportunity to visit sites related to the internment. I also appreciate the fact that I got to make the journey with other students and professors because they were the ones who encouraged me to engage with individuals, document my experiences, and reflect on the Japanese American internment. The pilgrimage showed me how important journeying to historical sites is, gave me a deeper understanding of the Japanese American internment, and inspired me to continue the fight against racism and injustice.

*Laura Ng is a first year student in the Historical Archaeology M.A. program and a graduate assistant for the Asian American Studies Program at UMass Boston.*

## Reflections from Charlie Vo



I got an email asking me if I wanted to go to Little Tokyo and then to Manzanar in the Fall of 2009. Go to Manzanar? One of the ten camps where over 110,000 Japanese Americans were imprisoned at one point? I really didn't know what to expect from going there or if I really wanted to go to such a notorious place where so many bad memories are stirred up for so many people. I did take that class on the WWII internment of Japanese Americans with Paul Watanabe and learned about the



*National Park Service Ranger Richard Potashin gave us an extensive tour of Manzanar on our second day there.*

horrible situations that society and the United States government put these victims into. It was another addition, in my mind, to the book of injustices in American history. I accepted this opportunity to go on this trip to Manzanar. I saddled up for this ride, carrying my backpack of necessities, laptop, and a digital camera. I went into this journey with a head full of expectations. I was expecting to meet different people with different stories. I was expecting to get an in-depth educational experience. I got far more out of the trip than anyone can imagine.

During this trip, I did something out of my normal behavior. I searched for answers among the populace of Little Tokyo, not knowing that I would get more than I expected. I walked around Little Tokyo that first night after dinner, full of eagerness, searching for the famous Go For Broke Monument near the Japanese American National Museum. There, I pondered in silence with Frances, a friend of mine who joined us on this pilgrimage, as we recorded footage in the night and looked for a specific name on the wall of Japanese American veterans, the name of a relative of a friend in Boston. We bumped into a couple who were highly involved with the Go For Broke Educational Foundation which highlighted their great interest in promoting awareness on the Japanese American internment in the U.S. I stood in front of the man as he stared at the American flag and the names on the monument as he talked about his situation. He was not interned himself because he was in Hawai'i at the time. His friends, on the other hand, were interned and lost almost everything. He felt obligated to spending the rest of his life educating others about the internment through the foundation. As I watched him, I saw his disappointment as he was left out of the internment but had to watch his friends suffer helplessly as families were torn apart. The feeling of helplessness could be seen in his eyes. Later, I would find it to be a common theme in how most people felt during the experience.

The next morning, I woke up at 6 a.m. and wandered around the plaza of Little Tokyo, exploring this



new place, and thinking about Manzanar. I stopped in front of a bakery to get a cup of coffee and sat down to enjoy some Japanese meat buns. I saw an old lady walking to the bakery. She then sat next to me. My camera with me, I sat there thinking about the night before. I soon found myself talking to the old lady named Yoshiko and found myself asking her about the internment. It was hard to get much information as she would always change the topic, going back to old sayings her father used to always tell her relating to the proper behavior of young Japanese women. Little by little, I managed to learn more about her. She



*Outside a bakery in Little Tokyo with former internee Yoshiko Yamada*

talked about her husband who served in WWII and a little bit of her own experience in the internment. She was separated from her family as she was allowed to leave the camps to go to college. Realizing that there were very few doctors in the camps and that the conditions in the camps were so poor, she was inspired to become a nurse. It was a struggle for her to talk about the internment; she would often change the subject. I realized that it was a hard topic for many people to talk about, and that there was more to the experience than just imprisonment for those years.

I found myself interviewing many people during the course of the trip, but the person who left the biggest impression on me was Hank Umemoto, a man who gave many years of his childhood to Manzanar. He gave us a tour of Manzanar on our first day there. As he talked about the conditions in Manzanar, the interviewees that I had met kept popping up in my mind. It made me connect some of his experiences to their faces. When



I get to know someone, then learn about the injustices they have faced, I start to feel some of the pain they have felt. Hank talked about the many aspects of camp life and the treatment of internees by soldiers guarding the camp. He told a story about his encounter with a soldier who pointed a gun in his face for cursing at them. There he stood, scared to death, but his biggest regret as an adult, he said, was his cowardice and helplessness at the time. Many people felt helpless or adopted an attitude of *shikata ga nai*, that it can't be helped. On the other hand, many people have come to the realization that something like this can be helped, and many have empowered themselves under this concept to educate and prevent further tragedies.

On our last day in Manzanar, everyone gathered in a circle around the monument and all reflected about the experience of being on this trip. We all grew a little more that day; we learned something that could only be learned by experience. We learned how to open ourselves up and to feel all of the different emotions of the Japanese American internees. All of the pain, coping, and mysteries that surrounded the trip were out in the open. My friends opened up as they talked about their journey to Manzanar. The internment is really directly connected to our lives. As we learn about



our society through different generations, we can comprehend each other better. It gave us all some closure and gave me something that couldn't be taught to me. Sometimes, you have to be there to learn about it. Not all of the world's knowledge comes from a book. I believe an experience like the one I had is definitely worth more than that one sentence on the Japanese American internment in U.S. history books.

*Charlie Vo is an undergraduate student majoring in Political Science and Asian American Studies at UMass Boston.*



# In Search of the Japanese American Internment

Reflections from Frances K. Chow



Manzanar. I recognized the name, but I had forgotten. That name has been somewhere in mind since I was in middle school. I remember reading a book in a language arts class about a place called Manzanar, a family, and the Japanese American internment. I remember that. I remember it made me very sad, but at the time I did not understand that it was a true story, that this was really a part of history. We always move on so quickly. How much did I really learn? Indeed, most of the history I was taught in school seemed very distant and irrelevant to present times. We did not delve into the Japanese American internment, or the Civil Rights Movement, or the Vietnam War. We could barely scratch the surface. I am fortunate to have learned more about the Japanese American internment than most because of the Asian American Studies courses I have taken at UMass Boston, and even more so to have been given this opportunity to go to Little Tokyo and to the Manzanar internment camp with two friends and fellow students and three professors whom I respect very much. I went to California, my first time in that state, with purpose. I was there to discover and experience something, though I could not anticipate what that experience would be or how it would make me feel and think.

The Asian American experience is one that I connect with deeply. Though our experiences are vast and varied, we share similar struggles in this country of foreigners who have forgotten that they themselves came from other lands. Regardless of ethnicity, the persecution of people based on physical traits becomes a shared experience. This, and because of the people I know who have been directly affected by these events, is why I take the internment personally.

My companions and I had an amazing and complicated journey together. We have been to many sites and met many people. All the while, I was trying to be aware of what my feelings and reactions were telling

me. I learned a lot from the other students on the trip — students from the honors program. Some of their perspectives helped me understand so much that is lacking in our education, namely, the ability to personalize history and to be empathetic. Others helped me see their gradual understanding of the injustices and implications of the internment. It is not enough to just learn the facts or to rely on the official textbook history. The voices of those who have lived it and are affected by its legacy offer a different and invaluable account.

I expected to meet people along the way, but the unexpected was truly eye-opening. In Little Tokyo, we met former internees and veterans who served in World War II. They lived it, and they are still living with those memories. It was heartbreaking to think of their suffering and to see and listen to them revisiting those times. The shame and indignity of being wrongfully accused and imprisoned was difficult for them to bear. And yet, I could see in their beautiful faces and in their good humor that they were strong and resilient. I carried their stories with me to Manzanar.



*Shirley Tang talked with WWII Japanese American veterans George Fujimori and Ken Akune at the Go For Broke Monument.*

We had to use our imaginations quite a bit at the site, as the internment camps were quickly dismantled after the last internees were released after the end of the war. Standing in the vast, dusty and bleak desert amongst remnants of building structures and gardens, I imagined row after row of barracks and guard towers with lights shining down and with soldiers pointing guns inward at us. I could not even begin to imagine the fear, anger, and despair the internees must have felt. Would they be shot if they walked toward the barbed wire fences? Why were they here? Would they ever be able to go back home? Would they ever see their families and friends again?

I found myself feeling extremely angry and frustrated often during our journey. It was in these moments that the professors were there to help me



understand what was said, what was not said, and the ways in which people cope with guilt and grief. I never could have reconciled my thoughts and the experience without them.

I confess, I came back to Boston with a strange melancholy. I was not ready to be back and to let go of the experience, partly because I could not fully grasp what the internees had to endure, what the world forgets or tries to hide, and the fact that very few Americans fully know their own histories. I could have stayed in Little Tokyo or in the desert for weeks, just trying to understand why things happen and how we let things happen. I came back wanting to talk about the internment, wanting to sit quietly and think, wanting to do something. But I found myself unable to put everything on hold. Even now, I look back on it with some restlessness. Perhaps I will return to the camps one day and reflect on it again. I know for certain that I think of the journey often, and I wonder about the people I have met.

I think back on the entire experience with a sense of longing, of wanting more. The internment of Japanese Americans occurred over half a century ago, but it is still very relevant to the world we live in now. Though it can be frustrating and painful at times to search for and dig up the unofficial histories/stories, I relish in it, in the grounded sensation of knowing as much of the truth as possible, and in sharing with others what I have learned. I am empowered and inspired by it. I am ready for more.

*Frances K. Chow is an undergraduate student majoring in Biology with a program of study in Asian American Studies.*

*All photographs included in this article were taken by Frances. If you would like more information or would like to see more photographs from the trip that were not included in this article, please contact [chow.francesk@gmail.com](mailto:chow.francesk@gmail.com)*



*The whole group posed for a photo with Hank (Henry) Umemoto after the tour.*

Congratulations to Dr. Paul Watanabe and the UMB Institute for Asian American Studies who were recently awarded \$68,852 from the National Park Service (NPS) for their proposed project, "From Confinement to College: Video Oral Histories of Japanese American Students in World War II." This is one of 23 new NPS grants announced in May and intended to preserve and interpret historic locations where Japanese Americans were detained during World War II. In 2006, Congress authorized a total of \$38 million in grants for the life of the program to identify, research, evaluate, interpret, protect, restore, repair, and acquire historic confinement sites. The program aims to teach and inspire present and future generations about the injustice of the World War II confinement and to demonstrate the nation's commitment since then to equal justice under the law. Paul's award was the only one in 2010 to go to an institution in the Northeast.



*(Photo by Peter Kiang)*

# Teaching Reflections

## On teaching “Introduction to Asian American Studies”

by Jon Iftikar

I think I have wanted to be a college professor since I was a sophomore in college. Fast forward ten years — through parental pressures, clouds of confusion, mini-migrations, life after death — and I came to Boston to make a go of it. Add two more years and I’m teaching my first college course, “Introduction to Asian American Studies.”

As I’m sure most teachers do, I brought my own experiences as a student and teaching assistant to my role as college instructor. I think back to some of my experiences as an undergraduate taking Asian American Studies at UC Berkeley and compare them with what I have seen here. In one of the introductory Asian American Studies courses I took as a student, I had a major writing assignment. As part of it, I interviewed my grandmother about her experiences in the internment camps during WWII. The experience was a good one in that I got to learn things about my grandmother that I didn’t know before, and it gave my grandmother an opportunity to talk to me about her life. I felt good about it. Then I got my paper back. I received a “C” or “C-,” primarily because I had failed to contextualize her experience within the general history of Asian Americans (i.e. cite to relevant laws or policies that were going on at the time). I remember thinking that my grandmother’s story must have had no value in and of itself, so I began to see my family stories and those of others with some doubt and disdain.

I also recall being taught that Asian American Studies is constantly fighting for its academic life, so as potential future Asian American scholars, we have the responsibility of proving that Asian American Studies is a legitimate academic discipline, not a group therapy session for Asian American students. (No crying allowed!) As part of that, I was exposed to some really great and exciting ideas and theories on race and society from some well known and respected scholars. These ideas changed the way I experienced the world. And I think back fondly to some of those moments when I actually saw something differently because my mind had opened up to that new way of seeing.

Years later, I came to UMass Boston and TA’d for Professor Kiang.

And there was a lot of crying.

My first reaction was, “Wait a second. There’s no crying allowed! Aren’t we supposed to be a serious



(Photo by Peter Kiang)

academic discipline?” But as the semester progressed, I learned that sharing and learning and growing came with the crying. I had to confront the biases that I had developed. And I learned that there is value in our stories — catharsis in sharing, building community through common experiences, and staking a claim on university spaces.

Last fall, I found myself teaching my own course. I thought of what messages about Asian American Studies I wanted to send. I received valuable suggestions from Asian American Studies faculty, staff and students. By semester’s end, I know I failed to make some points I should have, though I’m sure I succeeded in making some I wanted to. I think a major lesson I wanted to get across to students is that Asian American Studies isn’t just one thing. It’s law, education, health, and economics. It’s sad, angry, excited, and disappointed. It’s empowering and exclusionary. It’s academic theory jargon and personal narratives. But at its best, it’s flexible, fluid, and always trying to be better. As I told students in the Intro course, Asian American Studies is a process.

Nothing exemplifies that process-of-becoming better than the Asian American Studies Program at UMB. As one of the best Asian American Studies programs in the country, it (and the people affiliated with it) could easily become complacent. But it is always adding new instructors, new courses, and innovative ways of incorporating technology into the classroom, all while staying relevant to contemporary student and larger community needs and concerns. In the end, that’s also what I strive to do as an instructor. Society changes, we as individuals change, and Asian American Studies and our relationship with it changes as well. I know I’m going to be a different instructor a few years from now than I was last semester. Better and better, I hope.



# Reflections on Asian Women in the U.S. and their Under-representation in Leadership Positions

by Pat Neilson

As I reflect over the many years of my career as a drug abuse outreach worker, community organizer and higher education administrator, a common theme that has been of keen interest to me is the role of women in American society. As I completed my dissertation research in the under-representation of Asian



(Photo by Peter Kiang)

Americans in senior administrative positions in higher education, I realized that Asian Americans are seriously underrepresented, but Asian women are even less represented than men. So, this course that I taught solo for the first time in Fall 2009 (co-taught with Dr. Shirley Tang in Spring 2009) provided students and me with an opportunity to explore, examine, learn and reflect upon Asian women and their changing roles in the 150 or so years that they have been in the U.S.

The class, made up of students from Asian American Studies, American Studies and Sociology, represented a range of diversity including ethnicity, race, age and gender. Together, we analyzed and reflected on the changing roles and identities of Asian women and explored how work/labor, gender, race, and (im)migration have played a part in this history as well as in contemporary U.S. society. We examined in-depth Asian American women's roles in an increasingly globalized economy, as workers, as consumers, as mothers and as daughters of immigrant, refugee and transnational families. Asian women's work and labor struggles bring to the forefront critical challenges facing women — and men — in families (including, for example, childcare responsibilities) and in relationships (for example, domestic violence), pressing issues of human rights, racism and gender oppression, the impact of globalization, multiethnic and interracial alliances, and civic and political participation in the U.S.

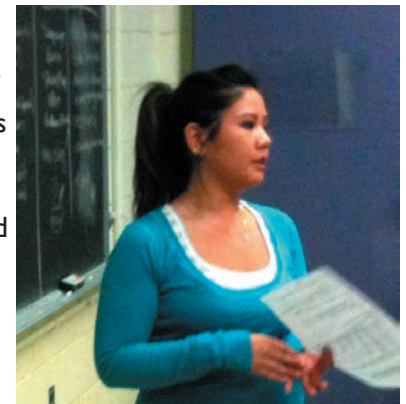
The semester course had a particular focus on exploring various aspects of leadership, particularly as it relates to Asian American women. We discussed the roles that students in the class can play in recognizing the spectrum of leadership qualities and characteristics that abound in the lives of Asian women in the U.S. But despite these exceptional qualities, Asian women are underrepresented in senior leadership roles in business,

government and non-profit organizations. We investigated why this phenomenon exists and considered ways to create solutions to the problem throughout the semester. The final project for the class was to synthesize their learning over the semester and incorporate their thinking into a grant proposal that would contribute to a solution to the under-representation of Asian women in leadership roles. The proposals were outstanding and may be considered for implementation in the near future!

## Peer Mentor Reflections on “Asian Women in the U.S.”

by Diane Nguyen

Peer Mentoring for the “Asian Women in the U.S.” class was one of the greatest opportunities I got to experience at UMass Boston. By sitting in the class for the second time, I absolutely learned more about the course material. Each time students had a reflection or made a comment in the course, I gained more



(Photo by Peter Kiang)

knowledge, even though it may have come from a different point of view and examination. It is even better than reading from a textbook because those reflections came from real life experiences. I would consider this class an in-depth class due to the learning of many particular focuses that are so important for individuals to be aware of. For me, it was exploring various aspects of leadership relating to Asian American women. Readings, panels, discussions in class are all things that are helpful to me because it constantly reminds me that we do have great Asian women leaders today who are good role models for young adults to take on their roles. Besides the learning materials from the course, as a Peer Mentor, I would like to thank Professor Neilson and others for giving me the opportunity to explore how it feels to take on a leadership role in a classroom.

*Diane was also involved as an intern for the State House — an internship organized by the Asian-American Women's Political Initiative.*

Having the opportunity to intern at the State House was a very different environment for a learning experience in my personal opinion. However, this internship did enable me to do many challenging tasks I've never been exposed to, such as being involved in administrative duties, assisting legislative staff in research, attending committee hearings, answering phones and

# Teaching Reflections

even having the chance to work on my own project for Representative Linda Dorcea Forry. However, by working in this kind of environment related to community issues and politics, I was able to build better relationships with the chairwomen, staff members, and other interns. This was a great opportunity to gain some career and working experience since I was a full-time student with a lack of time to work besides waitressing on the weekend for extra cash. However, the most important aspect out of this experience was that I felt by adding my image with other Asian Americans in the State House, the environment changes because as an Asian American woman I had the chance to learn and contribute to a place where there is definitely a lack of Asian American employees. In addition, it would be great to see in the future more Asian Americans running for office. Continuing with this internship can help many Asian Americans gain confidence, experience, and new learning opportunities. Knowledge is power! I would like to thank those who have pushed me and provided this opportunity to know what it feels like.

## On teaching “Comparative African and Asian Diasporas of the Americas”

by Christopher Fung

Before I begin, I need to tell you who I am. My name is Christopher Fung. I am a fourth generation New Zealand Chinese, my mother’s family is Jung Sing, my father’s family is Siu Hing. I was born in New Zealand, raised in England, and returned to NZ for high school and college just in time to take a very small part in the institutional phase of the Maori renaissance. I’ve also lived and worked in Honduras, China, the U.S. and Hawai’i. I now live in the Upham’s Corner area of Dorchester, the place formerly called Mattaponock by the Mattahunt nation who are among the indigenous hosts on this land. I am a culturally-hybrid person. I am a settler who stands with Native peoples, a diasporan, an islander, and a person of color.



(Photo courtesy of Christopher Fung)

I wanted to teach “Comparative African and Asian Diasporas of the Americas” because I think all students, but

in particular Asian American students, can learn a great deal from the experiences of other diasporans. Often, people get caught up in learning about their “own” group, which obviously, is an important task. But too often there’s a tendency to want to stop there. This course is an attempt to go beyond what’s comfortable.

The first reason this is important is that learning only about your own group doesn’t really equip you to understand other people. Many folk make the mistake of thinking that if you know your own story, then you know all you need to understand other people’s experiences.

The second reason is that by learning about other groups, we can better understand the major issue that people of color have to grapple with: white supremacy. This is not a question of automatically blaming all white folks for things that happened in history; some of the most effective critics of white supremacy are people who would be identified conventionally as white folks. In fact, white supremacy is a thought system that protects and enables systematic social and political advantage in this and other Western Hemisphere countries.

So, the course identifies and describes some of the ways in which white supremacy operates in different places in the Americas. This is because white supremacy isn’t one thing. It’s manifested in different ways such as residential segregation or differential hiring patterns or in-access to resources. Simply legislating against “bad” actions doesn’t destroy white supremacy; it just shifts the ground on which the same battle for privilege and domination gets played out.

The third reason is that if we want to build real multi-racial coalitions to address issues of justice and equality, then we need to recognize the issues that join us and *also* the issues that separate us. The great failure of the Civil Rights Movement was the inability of activists to anticipate the way different groups would be mobilized to fight against one another’s interests. So we have model minorities on one side being used to denigrate African Americans, and we have Black folks who support “English only” as a way to protect themselves against “cheap” immigrant labor. The solution to this problem is to recognize where these very real points of disagreement are and to work to find ways to work around or through those disagreements.

One way this might work is through the idea of place and shared concerns around places. Concern around issues like education for ones children, decent living spaces and safety can be places where we create common spaces and cause with one another. We should come from a position where we understand the need to learn about one another, rather than simply assuming that others are “just like” ourselves.



# Reflections on AsAmSt 420 Advanced Special Topics “Storytelling, Production & Performance”

by Widad Al-Edanie

All of us have stories, and all of us have experiences. Sometimes, it is hard to share personal stories. There are many reasons for that: we do not have the courage, we do not have the time, or we do not know how. How we share a story is really important, because knowing how to deliver a message makes it easier to find that courage and to find the time to do it. AsAmSt 420 Advanced Special Topics “Storytelling, Production & Performance,” a course taught in Fall 2009, developed our ability to deliver a strong and clear message with our written stories. The class graduated as storytellers. Giles Li, the instructor, is a known spoken word performer and a writer. He worked with the students throughout the semester to develop strong pieces of writing. He, in a powerful way, taught the structures of haikus, sonnets, ghazals and short stories.

Although Giles assigned interesting prompts, he always encouraged his students to come up with their own and write about them. The students gained the courage to write very personal stories that they did not allowed themselves to share with anyone for a long time. They began their poems in the class creatively, and with rich comments and suggestions from Giles, they rewrote them at home. Learning the art of revision was a great skill the students took from the class. Giles taught different steps that helped his students revise their poems. More than that, the students reviewed each other’s work. This act not only strengthened their pieces but created a social bond

between the students. They began to socialize with each other more than in any other class at UMass Boston.

The students who took the AsAmSt 420 class had the opportunity to write, revise, perform and publish their work. At the end of the semester, a group of them worked on themes. They published chapbooks and distributed them to the public. Some students even sold their books. Giles sent the chapbooks to different poets in the U.S., and the poets promised to review the work and send the students their feedback. Some students were thrilled to perform some of their pieces in different events that UMass Boston’s Asian American Studies Program hosted on and off campus. Students contributed in the Chinatown Storefront Library Open Mic in Boston on December 7, 2009. In front of a large audience, they performed their finest pieces. Other events the students performed in were at The Floating Rock Community Story and Poetry Sharing at The Floating Rock restaurant in Revere and at the East Meets Words Open Mic at the East Meets West Bookstore in Cambridge.



Giles Li at the Chinatown Storefront Library Open Mic  
(Photo by Anh Đào Kolbe)



Students performing at the  
Chinatown Storefront Library Open Mic  
(Photo by Anh Đào Kolbe)

## On teaching “Storytelling, Production & Performance”

by Giles Li

My career as a spoken word performer stretches back more than ten years, longer than I’ve held any job or stayed at any one school. I’ve only been married for four years, and I’ve been a father for just a couple of months.

What I mean to say is that I’ve played many roles in my life – and being a spoken word performer is one of the most consistent. But in recent years, I started to question my motivation – I could not deny that some of the fire I once held in my heart for performing had burned out. Was I just holding onto my identity as a performance poet because it had been a part of me for so long?

## Teaching Reflections

So when I was given the opportunity to teach AsAmSt 420 – a course focused on writing and performing spoken word – I figured it was perfect timing, as it would help fill me with the passion I once had for the artform and make it feel fresh and exciting as though I was a teenager again. In short, I had more than a little bit of a personal agenda coming into the class. I guess I was ready to grab ahold of the energy of college students and infuse it into my own work. I swear, it didn't sound so selfish when I was thinking it.

But as I began the process of planning and preparing for each week, it became very clear this was not about me at all. In front of me each week, there were 15 heads and hearts full of doubt, pain, fear, frustration, joy, and love – and it became our mission to bring some of that out each time we put pen to paper. It wasn't a class to learn to write good poetry; it was more like a class to learn to write pieces of ourselves we may not have known were there – if you can get your mind into that space, then the good poetry is easy.

When I was able to take my focus off myself and apply it to my students, I felt we were an unstoppable group – that there was so much force in our words that I was lucky just to have been a witness to it, much less a part of it.

Sad to say, I don't think I came to develop a stronger love for my poetry after all; but I developed a love for the poetry of my students that is much deeper than anything I could ever feel for myself.



Giles Li at the Chinatown Storefront Library Open Mic  
(Photo by Peter Kiang)

Several students share a sample of their poetry and their thoughts on the class...

“There were many aspects of the course that I found intriguing. Poetry, spoken word, and even songwriting were some of the things I had hoped to accomplish. I had little confidence speaking in front of a crowd and reciting my own work until I took the class. After completing my first ever solo performance, my confidence skyrocketed. I would have never been able to do that had it not been for the AsAmSt 420 course.”

Kevin Tan

when I lived with my uncle, it was always the same routine  
up bright and early, then breakfast, then read  
he always came down dressed in a suit with a tie  
how I admired and wanted to be like that guy  
he helped his community, his family, and friends  
was always there from beginning to end

now it's my turn to establish myself  
stand out from the rest, unlike a book from the shelf  
getting my feet wet in higher education  
networking with others to relay information  
cause I want to work all over the world  
so I can help every boy and girl

your work represents your name and your honor  
confidence in self will make you stronger  
so go for it all or don't waste your time  
if it isn't your best, you won't save no lives  
the life I once knew, I must say goodbye  
and now I dress in a shirt and tie



“The class really inspired me to articulate creatively and express myself. Poetry is freedom of words. There is no limit to creative writing. I really enjoyed the class. It gave me the confidence to continue writing.”

Chu Huang

It was the moment of truth  
Stored away and buried alive  
Feelings remain the same  
Locked up inside  
It's making you age  
older each day  
The wrinkles by your eyes  
are tired from tears  
Your skin grows pale  
from working so hard  
Each breath devoted  
to your daughter's cries  
Hers stay loud  
as yours remain unsound  
It gets draining over the years  
having to do it all on your own  
Money is at the back of your mind  
just trying to pay bills on time  
cuz you only prioritize  
your daughter before self  
Fighting against the world for the two of us  
It gets draining over the years  
having to do it all on your own without any support  
Mom, I can understand.  
I'm your daughter all grown up  
and I still cry late at night  
as I recall the day when I asked you the question  
what happened?  
Your eyes got all teary and voice short of breath  
Painful memories trapped within

No one understands.  
Right then and there  
my heart got stabbed seeing you this sad  
Never will I ever  
ask what happened again  
I'm never going to hurt you the way that he did  
Abandonment. Isolation. No trust at all.  
No one understands.  
Making friends isn't easy for me  
Longing to feel what love beholds  
But no  
That's not for me  
There's no such thing as "whole" to me  
I make relationships just to break them.  
You and me aren't the average family.  
I may not show it and it's hard for me to say  
Our broken relationship can be fixed.  
Mom, you are no longer alone.  
Having to make a living on your own  
I am grown with a mind of my own  
You ain't fighting against the world no more  
I'm here and I understand it all  
Cuz, I felt it too  
When he got up and gone

# Teaching Reflections

“The class was a window of expression for my soul. It was a great class offered to equip students with new tools to express themselves.”

Charlie Vo

## Diamond’s Reflection

Did I fall or did the world fall on me?  
My Jade cuffs shattered into shrapnel fragments  
Piercing the air with intensity  
Tears flow with super frenzy  
This confusion disturbs my inner sense  
A faint memory of my young innocence  
Reflect the shine, the jewels  
The excuses with fragments in the cup of my hand  
Remember those gifts?  
Those jewels?  
Pretty things in the light  
I only remember the times  
Diamonds lost their gleam  
With clashes of light in the sea  
But gold in memories  
Outshine sparkles in the sky  
Reminisce white boots for Christmas  
Given earrings for sickness  
I tear the shine from my eyes  
Crash, slam as my reflection shakes  
Trophy of Kings  
Piece in a museum  
Despise the cold ice  
My reflection cries  
Jewel inside  
Not your treasure to shine

“This was one of the best Asian American Studies classes I have taken since I came to this school.”

Philip Le

## Mousing Around

I remember when my family was still living  
On Robertson Street  
I still picture that one Sunday in my mind  
Everyone home spending that quality time  
I remember walking in that cold frigid kitchen  
Watching my dad sipping that dark sugarless coffee  
To get his day going  
I remember watching my mom prepare  
That large pot of spaghetti  
The aroma of the tomato filled the kitchen  
The sound of the ground beef sizzling  
Like a bunch of kids screaming  
And the roaring of the boiling soft pasta  
Bubbling in the hot pot  
When it’s all set and done  
I took that big first bite  
The flavors exploded around my mouth  
I just couldn’t wait to get another  
When the sun was down  
Night time coming round  
The atmosphere became frightening  
The floors were squeaking  
The mice were creeping  
My mom set the trap on the kitchen floor  
So they could sniff the bait  
And get whacked by the cold bar  
I will never know how it got in the kitchen  
Maybe it crept under the kitchen door  
But it was the last memory I had about my old home



“This poem is in reflection to my own love story. I enjoyed taking the class because it allowed me the time to write, which is something I love but “never have enough time” to do. I learned about new poets and forms of writing. It was truly an experience to perform in front of an audience, and I really loved the support from fellow poets and classmates.”

Linda Nguyen

### Pushing Limits

We lay side-by-side, watching the screen, hugging, bonding  
And if you asked me what happened in the movie, I'd tell you -  
Damn, I missed it. Because in my mind, I tell you - Sam, kiss me  
The night sky grows darker and time is slipping away from us  
I know better than to stay so late with you, I should be leaving  
But with every diamond shining, I make a wish - Sam, touch me  
You strip me bare of any sense of self-control, I reach my point  
I give into your succulent scent of sweet innocence, then take it  
And to your piercing brown eyes, I say with mine - Sam, love me  
Both bodies lay side by side, wrapped in sheets, breathing, feeling  
And if you asked me what happened, I'd tell you - damn, I missed it.  
Because in my mind, I think - Sam, again. And she agrees with me

“Giles is a dope poet and professor. His class was dope, too.”

Molly Higgins

### Ghazal for the Bay

What I'd give to travel your shores and not come back  
Only call me of your own free will — I'll run back  
I remember the scent of salt from your lips  
Taste the light basking on your warm-as-sun back  
I'll shoulder the blame, I stepped away from your vineyards  
But ever since I'm dreaming of your welcome back  
Like fruit left to rot uncollected past harvest  
They melt down to soil and on instinct turn back  
Are you waiting like lonely rock beaches? Don't smile  
Until winter when sand from the deep washes on back  
The dancers have drifted out of the hotel corridors  
No singer today can sing my song back  
Even the Castro stood empty this past Halloween  
what revelry now will tempt the throng back?  
Tell the server at Peets “Molly with two l's and a y”  
I'll fly through the fog and expect coffee with my welcome back



Student performers and friends supporting each other  
(Photo by Peter Kiang)

# Youth and Community Collaborations

## CAPAY 2009 Leadership Symposium

by Molly Higgins



CAPAY youth organizers  
(Photo by Peter Kiang)

The day before Halloween, over 100 high school students and educators packed the Campus Center for the Symposium, a one-day Asian American leadership conference. CAPAY has hosted the Symposium since 1993 to provide a forum for learning about Asian American communities, history, and current issues. The event is planned almost entirely by high school students.

This year, the Symposium theme was Xpress2Impress. The planning team picked the theme to emphasize the need to share our knowledge in ways that catch people's attention. Participants attended two workshop sets. The first set of workshops were issue-based, where youth and adult facilitators dropped knowledge about issues ranging from mental health in Asian American communities to the history of Southeast Asian refugee resettlement. The second set of workshops explored Xpression through mediums like hip hop dance and filmmaking.



Richard Sann leads the hip hop dance workshop  
(Photo by Frances K. Chow)

Jazz singer Joyce Kwon flew in from Los Angeles to help write a song parodying stereotypes, and local painter Sarah Nguyen coordinated a mural that represented our interlocking stories. All of the student art pieces were performed and displayed at our performance that afternoon.



Joyce Kwon leads the music workshop  
(Photo by Frances K. Chow)



Joyce Kwon with CAPAY youth  
(Photo by Peter Kiang)



Symposium youth participants present their mural  
(Photo by Peter Kiang)