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Inknography: A Digital Oral History Collection of Tattooed Asian Americans Challenging the Model Minority Stereotype

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Introduction

Inknography is a digital repository containing audiovisual material of tattooed Asian Americans. Containing profiles of twenty-two tattooed individuals of diverse Asian ethnicities, Inknography demonstrates the diverse American experience within the Asian community and empowers the many unique identities that Asian Americans have, which is not represented in mainstream media. The collection records the life histories and images of tattooed Asian Americans to challenge the visual image of the “model minority.” In this chapter, the creator shares a narrative on the creation and challenges in creating this digital collection.

My goal for Inknography was to create space for an alternative image of Asian Americans to the mainstream media. Tattoos provide information, like documents, containing unique information about one’s life and interests. By simply displaying tattoos, individual Asian

Americans are moving away from what is perceived as “normal.” *Inknography* is a digital oral history project which demonstrates how tattooed Asian American narrators are creating a new intersecting cultural identity and community and diverging from the history of Asian American stereotypes perpetuated by the media and society which continues to this day.

What Does Visual Representation Look Like?

Throughout entertainment, Asian women are portrayed as subservient and hypersexual while Asian men are seen as emasculated and desexualized. In general reference, even Asians are seen as one culturally and visually homogenous group, despite the fact that the term Asia represents forty-eight countries. In reviewing trending stories between 2016-2017, one sees the misrepresentation of Asians and Asian Americans.

In the middle of #OscarsSoWhite, a tag asking for equality in the 2016 Academy Awards nomination process, Chris Rock, comedian, paraded three Asian children on stage and introduced them as the Academy Award accountants. Then followed this skit with a tweet, 'If anybody's upset about that joke, just tweet about it on your phone that was also made by these kids.' While advocating for equality, Asians were made the punchline of a joke focusing on the stereotypical nerdy Asian model minority.

In January 2017, TV host, Steve Harvey hosted a segment about dating advice books noting *How to Date a White Woman: A Practical Guide for Asian Men*. Joking that the book was one page saying, “‘Excuse me, do you like Asian men?’ ‘No, Thank you.’” This nanobyte jab was suggesting Asian men are not attractive enough to date and perpetuated the stereotype that Asian men are not attractive and are desexualized.

In the same month, viewers of the Rex Tillerson confirmation hearing became upset when an assumed Asian woman took a cellphone picture of Tillerson's notes during a break. Online trolls and right wing fake news writers falsely identified the woman to be as Washington Post homepage editor, Doris Truong, then, reporter, Lisa Song, then Leslie Hsu Oh, photographer. This unidentified woman was labeled as a "spy." Jenn Fang of Reappropriate noted this was an example of the "Perpetual Foreigner" stereotype, which casts Asians as foreign, sneaky, disloyal, and unpatriotic.[1] Would everyone get just as upset if the woman was not Asian?

Other times, Asian characters are replaced by white female actresses. Scarlett Johansson as Motoko Kusanagi in *Ghost in the Shell* (2017). Tilda Swinton in *Doctor Strange* (2016) as The Ancient One. Emma Stone as Allison Ng in *Aloha* (2015). The moment one thinks the Asian community will get representation in Hollywood, characters of Asian identity are replaced with white female leads.

Outright racism and microaggressions are still a part of the Asian American experience. With the constant lack of inclusion of Asian American representation and the perpetuation of Asian stereotypes in mainstream media, it is difficult to find contemporary representation of the Asian American experience.

Significance of *Inknography*

According to the 2010 U.S Census, 4.8% of the population in the United States identify as Asian. From 2000 to 2010, the Asian population increased 43%.[2] With the population continuing to grow, it is important that their voices are captured and shared so one can understand the experience of the Asian American community in the United States.

While representation in mainstream media has been more inclusive recently of Asian and Asian American communities, their positions are largely stereotypical roles that are asexual, nerdy, and perpetually foreign. These roles are completely opposite of those who have tattoos. *Inknography* is the visual challenge to this portrayal.

Oral History Guide: "Ink" + "Ethnography" = *Inknography*

The oral history guide was created with a social constructionist lens focusing on how communication is an interactive process through which one understands the world and ourselves. The guide focuses on how people react and interact with people about race and their tattoos. Utilizing the ethnographic research method, the oral history acts as an ethnographic encounter and the video and photo recording of the interview as field notes. By being tattooed Asian American, narrators are creating a new intersecting cultural identity and community. Each oral history interview explored aspects such as balancing identities, handling microaggressions, perspectives in cultural representation, understanding the inspiration behind their tattoos, and reactions to their ink.

Originally, the collection was created for researchers to better understand the diversity within the Asian American community. The repository has received transcript requests from undergraduates conducting personal research about Southeastern Asian Americans and high schoolers creating oral history projects about the model minority myth.

Meet the Narrators

The narrators of *Inknography* represent the diversity of the Asian American community. They are teachers, designers, students, graphic designers, librarians, writers, behavior analysts, engineers, social workers, filmmakers, and artists.

Most of the narrators identified as multi-ethnic. Multi-ethnic narrators had a shared experience of the challenges of balancing multiple ethnic identities while also being American. There are expectations on them to understand both ethnic groups while still being American. For example, one narrator, Siobhan, who's Korean-Irish, was told she was not pretty because she was not really white. However, when she went to Korean language school, she was teased because she wasn't full Korean. The following are the few of the stories shared by narrators.

Meet Frankie

Frankie was born and raised in Manila, Philippines. She moved to the United States to attend Northeastern University to study psychology. When I interviewed her, she was attending Simmons College to earn a Master's of Arts in Teaching. As a writer and poet, she aspires to become a high school English teacher. Frankie thought about getting a tattoo for a year before getting her tattoo. After getting into a fight with her mom, she decided to get a tattoo to show her ability to control her own life. Her first tattoo is located on her arm was script that read "Bad Wolf." Inspired by British TV show, Doctor Who, "Bad Wolf" is a reference to an arc within the series. The reference, to her, means love can transcend time and space, revealing her optimist personality. When she got her second tattoo, she was publishing a lot of her materials. The hand represented how she controlled her destiny. Her third tattoo was a lettering that read "Sonder." Sonder expresses how each person is the protagonist of their own life and everyone has their own

rich, complex story. Her father got his first tattoo when she was 14 years old. Therefore, when she started getting tattoos, no one in her family was surprised and thought it fit her personality.

Meet Scott

Scott is a Los Angeles artist focusing on community arts, photography, and conceptual art. They identified as queer, gender neutral Japanese-Chinese American. At the time of our interview, Scott had seven tattoos referencing transportation. Their first tattoo was inspired by a panel in *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi of an abstract train track. Inspired by Satrapi's reflection, "I had survived a war, but a banal love story nearly killed me," which was accompanied with a comic panel of trains, the tattoo reminds them to see things in perspective. Scott's second tattoo was a series of three tattoos on their right arm, that they count as one piece of work, which shows the progression of Los Angeles counties freeway systems in 1950, 1960, and now. According to Scott, freeways are huge but invisible spaces that have deep history in Los Angeles that change and transform communities. Their third tattoo on their inner left arm is of the Sputnik satellite, which represents a fleeting moment and reflects on how even in space an object is stuck in an orbit. Scott's fourth tattoo is Cresques Abraham's compass rose from the 14th century Catalan Atlas, which expressed his love for maps. The Catalan Atlas marks the historical period where the map orientation was being altered. To Scott, the embellishment was a celebration of people making sense of the world. Finally, they have a series of Los Angeles freeway interchanges. During their examination of how to memorialize their grandfather after his death, Scott noticed that the memorial interchanges were cold, inhumane concrete spaces, but from the bird's eye view, they were beautiful. Scott's tattoos are very abstract and when just viewing them, one does not understand their context. For example, one stranger thought their Southern California

Freeway series was a tattoo of Texas. Besides enjoying the aesthetic of tattoos on the body, they are important reminders of things they care about.

Meet Leila

Deviance is an important part of Leila's narrative especially being queer and tattooed. During a trip to South Asia, she constantly heard how if she had not had short hair and tattoos, she would be prettier. At the time of the interview, she had received her green card in June 2015, but was previously an undocumented immigrant, an important identity she maintains since she moved to the United States when she was two years old. She recognizes she is part of an elite system of academia, as a Master's of Arts Gender and Cultural Studies candidate, but uses her body and existence as a resistance. Her tattooed brother took her on her 18th birthday to get her first tattoo. The "ohm" tattoo was first a representation to reclaim her father's Hinduism and reflect her spirituality. However, today, those meanings are not important to her. Instead the tattoo reflects a time in her life in which spirituality and meditation was very important. On her 25th birthday, she got her second tattoo of a snake wrapping around her arm. An image stuck in her head for seven years, she created an ethnically unique tattoo, so she designed a henna styled snake. Leila explained that snakes are misrepresented animals. They are seen as scary and vicious, however, snakes are actually really gentle and trusting while one holds them. She asked, "If you didn't have hands or legs, wouldn't you hiss at people?" After getting the tattoo, she realized people thought she was harsher than she really was. Her new tattoo created a visual protection from stereotypes of being a sweet and nice Indian girl. Tattoos got people in her surroundings to reevaluate their own prejudices.

Going Digital

Hollywood doesn't give voices to Asian Americans, so the community turned to harnessing Youtube, as seen in the stardom of KevJumba, Michelle Phan, Wong Fu Productions, and Awkwafina, to create content for Asian Americans. By going digital, I was allowed to share my project more broadly and gather a larger pool of narrators since my project was recorded in Los Angeles and Boston. *Inknography* utilized many different recording devices to accommodate the narrator or the interview environment including a Go-Pro Hero 4, MacBook Pro Garageband, an Olympus Digital Voice Recorder DS-90 with a Sony mic, and even an iPhone camera. The use of a Go-Pro was unconventional to record oral histories, however, it created quality footage and it was convenient for travel. I built the collection using Omeka with plugins such as COinS, CSV Import, Exhibit Builder, Search by Metadata, Simple Pages, and YouTube Import. I explored using free platforms such as Flickr and WordPress. Omeka was chosen because it gave the user the ability to explore the collection. I was successfully able to petition Simmons College SLIS to create an individual Omeka account and server space on my behalf for my thesis.

Cataloging Materials

Oral histories about tattoos, which are visual objects, make cataloging complicated. What if the narrator has tattoos in discrete places? What if the narrator is covered in tattoos? Then what if someone looking in at the repository only views the photos of tattoos but skips the oral history video? How do I give context to the oral history and images? It was very important that all digital materials in this repository has extensive metadata. I altered the Omeka Dublin Core system, which privileges digitized archival materials, to fit the needs of my collection. I had to create different standards for the oral history component and the photographs.

Oral histories are a collaborative actions, which gives power to subjects to describe themselves in their own terms. To catalog the oral histories, I focused on insuring the identities of my narrators were not compounded into being just Asian or Asian Americans with tattoos. The description field includes the identities each narrator noted. For example, Ashley's identities are: Taiwanese American, Female, First Generation, Book Nerd, Coffee Lover, Film Maker, Sex Educator, Pre-Vet, Bisexual, Feminist. For photos, I created descriptive subject headings to encompass the subject, artistic or tattoo style, inspiration, size, and location. I inserted the narrative context of tattoos into the tags. In Fig.5, Diana was part of the group in Cambridge, Massachusetts arrested for blocking the freeway during a Black Lives Matter protest. During the incident, she had her arm broken by the cops so she got this tattoo, well hidden, to commemorate the incident. Through tags, I tried to insert context to encourage users to listen to her oral history video.

Another challenge was the controlled vocabulary to describe tattoos, since they are pieces of art: different styles, there are stories behind tattoos, different sizes, placed anywhere. To create a controlled vocabulary, I worked with one of the narrators, who is also a tattoo apprentice to identify styles. Everyday people create metadata without realizing it when they use hashtags on for posts on Instagram and Twitter. I studied the way tattoo artists used hashtags on Instagram to describe and promote their work to harness a variety of perspectives.

Challenges

The term "Asian" encompasses many different ethnic groups, however, my narrator group, while extremely diverse, is heavily focused on Eastern Asian Americans. Many of my narrators were undergraduates or young adults; I was unable to get an inclusive age range of

narrators. I believe the lack of diversity is due to my recruitment plan. I decided to not actively approach people to join my project; I wanted people to approach me to talk about their tattoos or express interest in my project. This was important to me, because police departments often use tattoos to identify individuals for targeted investigation, often of activists, which was an issue I am very sensitive about especially when working with individuals involved in social justice advocacy. Due to time limitations and geographic barriers, I knew I did not have the time to develop the trust needed to embed myself into a community.

Inknography was a one-woman show. Therefore, twenty-two transcripts were impossible to complete in four months. It takes one hour to transcribe fifteen minutes of audio and it can be more than twenty pages of text. According to my narrator agreement, narrators were given the opportunity to edit their transcripts and audio materials. However, after I created three complete transcripts, I realized my response rate from my narrators was really low. Narrators would not review the audio or transcripts, they would skim over the video. I decided to stop creating transcripts to focus on metadata creation and analysis. *Inknography* is a thesis project, which I created while I worked part-time and went to graduate school full-time. In retrospect, I believe I should have hired an undergraduate researcher to help me produce transcripts to have a complete oral history digital project that would have been accessible to all viewers. In addition, a student assistant could have assisted me in creating timestamps for important subjects in each interview.

Conclusion

Discussing tattoos in academic spaces excites people. My project was often received with excitement and curiosity, reminding me of the circus freak shows tattooed people were featured in during the 19th century. Reactions range from people showing me their tattoos, asking about

the pain associated with tattoos, or people revealing how much they hate tattoos. However, this project really struck a chord with Asian American viewers as they have noted how it provides a counter narrative to the model minority stereotype, examines tattoos as art, and creates space to hear the stories behind the tattoos. Brandon, narrator and tattoo apprentice who assisted in the controlled vocabulary creation noted, “This collection is important. Talking and thinking about this project has allowed me to embrace self-expression through tattoos. No matter how taboo tattooing is, I realize I am not rejecting my Chinese-American culture. I am rejecting a myth.” Viewers have noted this collection highlights how badly the Asian American culture is stereotyped by mainstream media.

I am no longer collecting oral histories, but about every other month, I get transcription requests from high school students studying oral history, the model minority stereotype, or body modifications.

The Future

Balancing my professional life as an academic librarian with this project has become a challenge as it consumes time and money. Therefore, I needed to alter the project away from oral histories to strictly photo collection. This allows me more flexibility collecting images and less time consuming. During a trip to South Korea in September 2016, I photographed tattooed Asians around Seoul. Even in South Korea, where tattoos are illegal and parlors are literally underground, there was a thriving tattoo scene, demonstrating our human desire express one's

self through body modifications. I hope to continue photographing tattooed Asian Americans and collecting stories behind the tattoos, which builds on the foundation that Inknoigraphy created.

As Asian Americans, we are exposed to this idea that “we” should have tiger mothers and work in the STEM field. The reality is this is a constructed image of our communities: We do not have to fit anyone’s perspective of us. Tattoos have given some narrators the ability to intentionally express control over their lives and bodies. Others have used tattoos as reminders of significant ideologies to stay true to themselves, while others have impulsively decided that the aesthetic of the tattoo on skin was pleasing. I hope that this collection will expose viewers to an alternate visualization of the Asian American community, while allowing one to admire tattooing as an art form, and inspiring viewers to find methods to express themselves.

View collection at <http://slis.simmons.edu/inknoigraphy/>.

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Biography

Jesse Young earned a B.A in Art History at Cal Poly Pomona University specializing in Polynesian art. She received a M.S.L.I.S at Simmons College focusing in digital libraries and oral history. Presently, she is the Digital Initiatives Librarian at William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University. As a product of Chinese and Filipinx immigration to the plantations of Hawai'i in the 1880s, she hopes to continue preserving the diversity of voices within the Asian American community.

[1] Fang, Jenn. “#NotAllTheSame: Trump Supporters Troll Washington Post Editor Because They Think All Asian Women Are The Same,” *Reappropriate* (blog), January 12, 2017, <http://reappropriate.co/tag/lisa-song/>.

[2] U.S. Census Bureau. “The Asian Population: 2010.” <https://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-11.pdf>.