

“I Realized History Isn’t Some Old, Intangible Concept”: Lessons from an Asian American History Pop-Up Museum

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“WHY DO PEOPLE HATE history classes?” That is a common question I, like countless other history instructors, pose to my students on the first day of class. The answers are unsurprising. From a recent survey of my “Introduction to Asian American History” course, which I have taught at the University of California, Los Angeles in some iteration each year since 2016, one student declared there is “too much cold memorization,” while another lamented, “it’s just dates.” Their peers felt that history classes are “too disconnected” or, in other words, do not provide the space for students to “relate [content] to today.” Others began to gesture towards the Eurocentricity embedded in many classes: in their words, they present “no diverse perspective[s]” or, conversely, they “only show 1 perspective - the winner.” One summer session, I decided to take these misconceptions of the discipline of history as intellectually static and politically irrelevant head on, leveraging my concurrent experience teaching at both the university and high school levels.

In order to disabuse students of those assumptions, and inspired by the roots of the field of Asian American Studies and Ethnic Studies more broadly, I developed an experimental curriculum that centered

students as the producers of knowledge and as public historians. These processes offered them written, visual, and tactile ways to cultivate their fluency in the course's "enduring understandings." Curriculum scholars Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe argued that such understandings are the core, transferrable ideas that serve as the connective tissues for the vast amount of content knowledge of a class.¹ I had considered a service-learning approach, a longtime staple of Ethnic Studies classes that has gained recent popularity in undergraduate history curricula, as a way for students to develop authentic understanding through practice, but the time-intensive logistics of collaborating with an outside organization would not be tenable for a summer course.² Instead, the result was a new type of summative assessment for myself and my students: the campus's inaugural Asian American history "pop-up museum." Over the course of six weeks, students identified, contextualized, and synthesized filial or community artifacts into a two-week-long public exhibition at the campus's central Powell Library, along with a companion digital archive. This was feasible due to supportive librarian collaborators and interlocutors specifically tasked with building library/classroom partnerships; however, as the narrative to follow will show, modifications can be made to align with the resources available to an instructor.³

Gleaned from five different iterations of this novel assessment (executed in the summer sessions from 2017 to 2021), this article argues that the pop-up museum—and the scaffolds I designed to produce it—advanced students' content knowledge, while also deepening their understanding of the field of history and the radical significance of crafting a grassroots, publicly accessible archive.⁴ To illuminate the genesis of this project, I review critiques of traditional content-driven assessments, situate my teaching within the context of the Asian American Movement and the rise of Ethnic Studies, briefly explain "pop-up" culture as cultural and pedagogical currency, outline the collaborative process of building the museum and companion digital archive, and conclude with student contemplation on how this project reconfigured their understandings of past and the craft of recording and interpreting it. Throughout the article, I emphasize the different learning opportunities for students to revise their grasp of a topic to promote more nuanced, enduring understanding. Taken together, I hope to illustrate the generative linkages between Ethnic

Studies methods and secondary school teaching practices, including backwards design, Project-Based Learning, and visible thinking routines, that undergirded the pop-up museum.

Shaping the Curriculum

Frameworks for Curriculum Design and Assessment

According to Wiggins and McTighe, “Understanding by Design” involves a set of pedagogical practices emphasizing that learning is most effective when content, activities, and assessments are structured in a way for students to develop their long-lasting grasp of larger, transferrable essential or enduring understandings as noted above.⁵ Such “backwards design” helped me prioritize what historical events, movements, ideologies, figures, and other content to cover. In terms of essential *conceptual* material relevant to the field of Asian American Studies, my course worked towards student understanding of the following:

1. The construction of race and racial identities are social, political, and cultural processes that are comparative and relational to different groups and structures of power. They intersect with other axes of identity (e.g., gender, sexuality, class). As such, Asian Americans occupy spaces that range from oppressed to oppressor;
2. Transpacific migration—both voluntary and involuntary—is the result of varied push and pull factors, including war, empire, and global capitalism;
3. Minoritized people engage in acts of resistance and subversion through community-making, quotidian action, as well as mass movements;
4. Vexing contemporary issues result from and parallel older historical events that warrant our attention.

For the purposes of this article, however, I focus more on essential understandings centered around the *craft* of history from an Ethnic Studies perspective that served as the vehicle for students to make sense of the conceptual items above. As I detail below, Ethnic Studies began as an intellectual and politicized project to question the very foundations of how we understand the production of historical knowledge. To that end, I wanted students to leave my class understanding that:

1. Archives are contested sites of power over voice, representation, and memory;
2. Archives exist beyond traditional repositories of knowledge;
3. Every individual has the power to become a historian and “decolonize” the archive (in this context, incorporate subaltern and historically excluded voices);
4. “History” is more than the rote memorization of “facts,” but rather a dynamic process of uncovering, remembering, and analyzing that exists beyond the classroom;
5. Historical analysis is an interplay between primary and secondary sources (which must be evaluated for their intellectual relevance and reliability).

Although I had often introduced primary source analysis into my assignments, I wanted to use this opportunity to imbue students with a richer understanding of exactly what it is historians *do*, and *how* historians create meaning and knowledge within historically exclusionary or unequal epistemological spaces.

From the First Asian American History Classrooms to Project-Based Learning

Knowing what enduring understandings I wanted students to develop, I needed an appropriate set of channels for them to demonstrate their learning. To that end, and still mindful of the student stereotype that history classes are mere memorization, I needed to rethink the standard fare for assessments in large introductory classes—namely, the timed, bluebook-clad midterm and final essays. Such tests may evaluate students’ capacity to commit to memory and recall historical information, but they do not necessarily provide the space for students to cultivate *and* demonstrate their understanding of a given topic. As historian Nancy Quam-Wickham noted in her appraisal of the need to reconfigure the undergraduate U.S. history survey, when instructors design exams that privilege content, “Students often do not retain much of what they learned beyond the semester in which they took the course,” let alone leave the class with transferrable analytical skills.⁶

To do something different, I returned to the roots of Asian American Studies. Unlike traditional disciplines that sit as the cornerstones of a liberal arts education, Asian American Studies

(along with other Ethnic Studies fields) was forged from the flames of oppositional politics of the long 1960s.⁷ Within the contexts of urban rebellions, global anti-colonial movements, and a protracted war in Southeast Asia, Black, Indigenous, and other people of color coalesced around a shared Third World identity. It repudiated the manufactured allure of assimilation and expressed support for global political and economic liberation. Students advocated for a relevant education that centered their subaltern stories—historical narratives that revealed the experience of inequality and exclusion from power—as sites of inquiry and action. Within the Asian American Movement, rescuing such stories not only validated the experiences of generations of Asian Americans who had faced and resisted violence or outright exclusion, but also critiqued the taken-for-granted truths of U.S. history and post-World War II consensus discourses that saturated Eurocentric curricula.

Significantly, some of the first historians of the field were on-the-ground students themselves. Due to a lacuna of accurate scholarly works about Asian Americans, the earliest instructors in the field tasked their students with conducting oral histories and locating artifacts that could bring to light a “buried past,” to reference Asian American Movement scholar-activist Yuji Ichioka’s venerable work.⁸ Those student endeavors were so successful that their interviews, research papers, reflections, and even artistic and creative works formed the first classroom texts in Asian American Studies, including *Roots: An Asian American Reader* (1971), *Asian Women* (1975), *Counterpoint: Perspectives on Asian America* (1976), and *Letters in Exile: An Introductory Reader on the History of Pilipinos in America* (1976).⁹ This type of work, where students transformed their curiosities and interests into historical knowledge, inspired what I set out to accomplish for the museum as a way to help students gain the lived experience of doing history.

In more contemporary terms, that approach to teaching is widely known in K-12 pedagogical circles as Project-Based Learning (PBL). In their influential article, “Motivating Project-Based Learning: Sustaining the Doing, Supporting the Learning,” Phyllis Blumenthal and her fellow educational psychologists defined PBL as a “comprehensive approach to classroom teaching and learning that is designed to engage students in investigation of authentic problems.”¹⁰ PBL, when executed carefully and intentionally, emphasizes critical

thinking, communication, peer collaboration, and interpretation across disciplinary boundaries—tasks that resonated with some of the earliest pursuits of Asian American Studies and, more recently, history classrooms.¹¹

After generative conversations with librarian colleagues, I decided that a public history exhibition could best give students the tools to demonstrate their comprehension of the course's essential understandings. As McTighe and Wiggins argued, "Understanding is revealed when students autonomously make sense of and transfer their learning through authentic performance."¹² Although students would practice and execute the research skills required for any other history course, the learning-by-building aspect of the museum project would give them the opportunity to take ownership of their learning and understanding in a way that a conventional final exam could not. Logistically, finding the space to stage the exhibition was fortuitous since the rotunda of UCLA's picturesque Powell Library, an otherwise highly sought out exhibition and performance venue, was available due to the slower pace of campus activities during summers.¹³ Although this staging ground was unique to my experience, other creative venues could include exhibition spaces in student unions, art galleries, libraries, reading rooms, or department conference rooms. If space constraints are too prohibitive, my experience executing the pop-up museum during the COVID-19 pandemic is instructive. In normal times, students curated and constructed a museum and, secondarily, a companion digital archive. During the pandemic, when on-campus instruction was prohibited, students redoubled their efforts on the online space for their artifacts, which I discuss in greater detail later in the article.

Student Buy-In, or Why a "Pop-Up" Museum?

Within the historical moment in which those pedagogical quandaries confronted me, the "pop-up" phenomenon was in full force. Writing in *The Atlantic* in 2017, journalist Steven Johnson identified the genesis of "pop-ups" as an ephemeral, commercial marketing technique "for selling or showing off products, [that] first cropped up in the early 2000s." However, they have "since been applied far beyond traditional retail," as evidenced by the plethora of themed cafes and museums/installations that have popped up across

major metropolitan areas, including Los Angeles and New York.¹⁴ These spaces offer visitors worlds that are simultaneously kitsch, nostalgic, experiential, and immersive. Recent pop-ups include those fashioned around cultural touchstones that range from the television shows *Friends* and *Saved by the Bell*, to the character Hello Kitty, to rosé wine, ice cream, dogs, and dreams.¹⁵ Part of the indulgence of pop-ups are their highly curated (i.e., “Instagrammable”) photo opportunities that appeal to social media-savvy Millennials and Gen Z-ers who comprised the overwhelming demographic of my class.¹⁶ Lastly, the transitory nature of pop-ups lends itself to a type of cultural cachet that resonates with what is colloquially known as “FOMO”—the “fear of missing out” is a phenomenon embedded in social media culture that even education scholars have noted is a factor in student motivation.¹⁷

Although temporary museum exhibitions are nothing new, I wondered how to leverage the pop-up zeitgeist as a way to catalyze student interest in developing their skills as public historians or, to use contemporary social medial parlance, as “content creators.” The content, of course, was new knowledge for both the creator and the consumer. Further, tapping into the interactive quality of pop-ups, this project (i.e., collaboratively organizing and building a public history display) sought to elicit student investment through an appeal to tactile learning, a strategy that is often absent in undergraduate history curricula, but central to PBL and many Ethnic Studies classes. As the following section demonstrates, students gained or refined research and analytical skills that enabled them to produce a polished exhibition that stood at the literal center of campus and invited the public to learn from student-produced knowledge.

Scaffolding and Structuring the Pop-Up Museum

Understanding and the Power of the Archive

In my planning, I had to be clear with myself and my students that the goal of the project was never to build a pop-up museum for the sake of succumbing to a viral marketing trend (although I may have joked this was their opportunity to become a *historical* influencer). Rather, our pop-up museum represented the culmination of several weeks of research, analysis, and writing that students

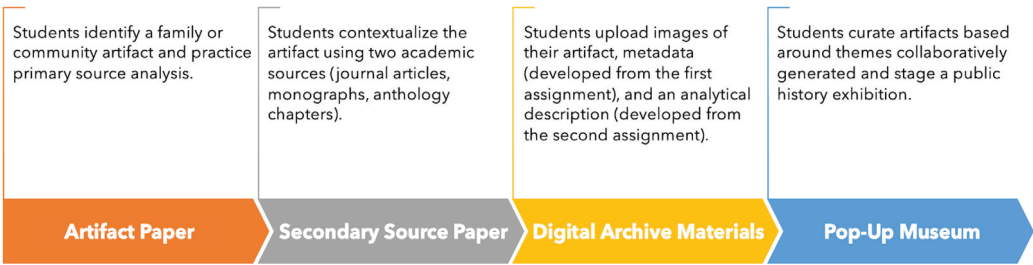


Figure 1: Course Assignments/Scaffolds

undertook independent of daily lectures and discussion of historical sources (**Figure 1**). Collectively, I emphasized, we worked towards developing a grassroots record of Asian American experiences to set into motion the course understandings concerning the potential to create alternative public knowledge and awareness.

To elucidate the importance of a student-generated archive in line with the essential understandings of the class, I began with a discussion about what archives are and how repositories of information structure how we understand the past and present. An abundance of critical scholarship exists that excoriates the relationship between power, the colonial nature of archives, and knowledge production. However, for the purposes of this lower-division general education survey (comprised almost exclusively of non-Ethnic Studies and non-history majors), an engaging TEDx Talk by Carnegie Museum of Art archivist Dominique Luster primed students to think about how the archive has historically silenced marginalized peoples, including Asian Americans. She noted, though, that a rebellious archive can also gather snapshots from the ground up to challenge long-established ways of understanding the past.¹⁸

I then partnered with several research librarians who exposed students to the array of artifacts available in our Department of Special Collections located at the Charles E. Young Research Library. This was important for students to experience the physicality of historical research: to hold literally the pieces of the past, as a way to subvert common student assumptions that history is the mere recitation of dates and facts. One year, to better understand the epistemic power of the archive, I taught students the insidious logic that justified the wartime forced removal and mass incarceration



Figure 2: UCLA librarian Courtney Jacobs discusses with students the holdings available at the Charles E. Young Research Library's Special Collections, Summer 2018.

of Japanese Americans; namely, military necessity and racialized doubts about the loyalty and treachery. Then, one librarian whose office specifically oversees campus and community engagement with Special Collections, pulled boxes from the influential Japanese American Research Project archives for students to bear witness to the lived experience of Japanese Americans behind barbed wire and to question the legal, political, and ethical dimensions of incarceration (**Figure 2**). In another year, a Special Collections curator created an activity for students to work through several different collections to practice primary source analysis. Most recently, due to the transition to online instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic, he developed a scavenger hunt activity for students to complete in Zoom breakout rooms that introduced students to the array of digital archives that document diverse Asian American experiences. Regardless of the particular details of each activity, students gained a greater understanding of how historical knowledge is documented, created, and, at times, challenged—which was necessary for students to begin the process of building our pop-up museum.

From a logistical standpoint, these resources reflect the circumstances of teaching at a large research university. Not all campus libraries and librarians, who are often stretched thin with their own responsibilities, have established relationships with faculty to integrate library and archival resources with classroom teaching. This may certainly be the case for secondary school teachers. If visiting a physical archive, whether on campus or at another institution, is not an option, my experience executing the museum in the pandemic illuminated a fairly accessible alternative. If we cannot bring students to the archive, we will bring the archive to the students; namely, through exposing students to the variety of pre-existing digital archives to demonstrate the vast ocean of historical fragments that can tell a story. For the Asian American history classroom, platforms including the Denso Digital Repository, the Vietnamese American Oral History Project, and the South Asian American Digital Archive, not to mention UCLA's own extensive Digital Collections, Calisphere, and the Library of Congress, were excellent starting points.¹⁹ Exposing students to a multiplicity of artifacts, whether through analog or digital means, was key so students could imaginatively think about what they might want to use as their contribution to the pop-up museum.

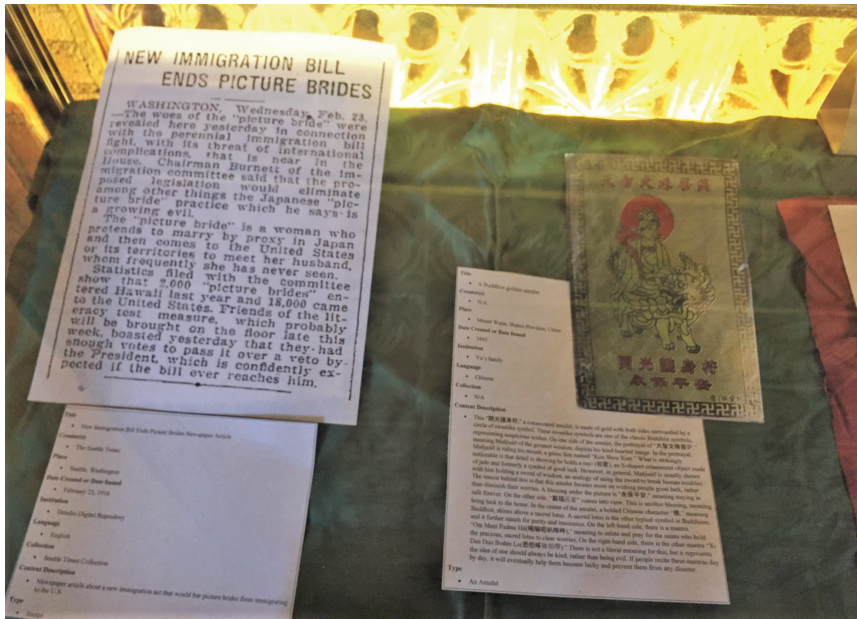
Identifying Artifacts and Contextualizing Evidence

The first stage of the pop-up museum required students to identify a germane artifact that could serve as a gateway to a larger topic or theme in the ambit of Asian American history. Because the vast majority of students are of Asian descent, they generally select an item from their family household. However, to avoid alienating any student (e.g., non-Asian American students, international students living apart from family, students who may not want to engage with past or ongoing family trauma, or students with privacy concerns), I emphasize that any primary source with a discernable connection to Asian Americans is permissible. Interestingly, several Latinx students have used a family artifact to explore historical intersections or parallels with Asian American history. For example, two students used Catholic icons to uncover the shared legacies of Spanish colonization on Latinx and Filipinx diasporas.²⁰ Meanwhile, other students have availed themselves of the wide variety of artifacts already digitized and available through the repositories mentioned above.



Figure 3: Sample family artifacts with accompanying metadata from the pop-up museum, Summer 2018.

The artifacts that students selected ran the gamut of possible ephemera that reflected the temporal and spatial contours of Asian American history (**Figure 3** and **Figure 4**). Family photographs were commonly used, as were household items, jewelry, and legal documents. Oftentimes, students drew upon larger pieces such as articles of clothing and textiles. Chinese American students often used ephemera related to festal situations, such as red envelopes or gifts from coming-of-age ceremonies. Reflective of the position of many Asian Americans as urban merchants, several students provided items related to family businesses. For example, one student used the business card for her family’s store that was affected by the 1992 Los Angeles Uprisings. Culinary and gastronomical items were also common, whether in the form of recipes or images of actual foodstuffs, as a long surviving link to pre-migration lives and cultures. Although people of Asian descent have resided in the U.S. for centuries, the contemporary population is largely the result of the relaxation of immigration laws in the 1960s, refugee migration



in the 1970s and 1980s, and neoliberal trade reforms in the 1990s. To that end, several students wrote about bilingual dictionaries, both in print and electronic forms, that their immigrant parents used. Furthermore, several students shared items related to the afterlives of the Cold War. Interestingly, in 2020, two Afghani American students each contributed documents related to their respective family's involvement in the Afghan-Soviet War. In a Zoom breakout room discussion, they met each other for the first time and discovered that their families had fought on opposing sides. Some students shared items reflective of their personal migration history, such as passports, resident alien cards, acceptance letters to study at UCLA, and even Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) paperwork, signifying some of the newest corridors of Asian migration to the United States.²¹ As a result, many students learned firsthand that their family histories were tied to larger structural events they may not have recognized without this project. Among students who used artifacts already digitized and archived, ephemera from the forced removal and mass incarceration of Japanese Americans, including

paintings or items related to the all-Japanese American 442nd Regimental Combat team, have been popular.²² Often, the choice of these items reflects the knowledge students already possess before entering my classroom and the abundance of items related to this chapter of history compared to other Asian American communities.

Student Assignments

For the first formal assignment of the term, students provided deep description of their artifact, using Kathryn Walbert’s “Reading Primary Sources: An Introduction for Students” as a guide.²³ If possible, students also had to articulate the most immediate historical contexts for the artifact—that is, their personal connection to the piece. Generally, this assignment has been the most straightforward and, for those students who located family artifacts, drew upon existing knowledge about migration history. In the first iteration of the museum, for example, two students separately wrote about Buddhist mala (meditation beads) and how they represented the solace their respective families found in spirituality amidst the hardships of migrating to a foreign shore.²⁴ This assignment is not graded, yet is formative in the sense that students practiced their primary source analysis and received feedback to help complete later contributions to a companion digital archive.

After I provided feedback on their first written assignment, students then situated their artifact within larger historical forces. To assist students in this task, they met another set of librarians who guided them through the intricacies of navigating the library catalog, the helpful research guide they created for the class, as well as the article databases commonly used in the humanities and social sciences. One of my longtime librarian collaborators even located an Asian American artifact in her home (a piece of ceramicware made in U.S.-occupied Japan) and modeled how to ask the right questions and find the answers within the vastness of the research universe. For instructors without access to research librarians to provide that level of instruction, I have found it relatively easy to teach these skills on my own, either synchronously or asynchronously. Using video recording applications like Zoom or Loom, one can demonstrate how to access research databases or library catalogs, execute keyword searches, etc., and then share the video file with students to watch on their own time.

After that training, I tasked students with locating two academic sources that contextualize their artifact. To push their analysis, students also had to articulate the extent to which their artifact reflects or diverges from established narratives in the field. For example, a Chinese American student located a photograph of an ancestor who came to the U.S. when the Chinese Exclusion Act still governed immigration policy. Initially, he only described the photograph within the context of his family history, but for this assignment, he widened the aperture of his inquiry to investigate the exceptional nature of how his family member circumvented the exclusion orders.²⁵ Meanwhile, a Korean American student was interested in exploring an English tea set his family has used for about twenty years. Although I had anticipated he would use those items within a more common narrative of immigration, the second assignment led him to explore the world of conspicuous consumerism as a byproduct of the ascendancy of South Korea's tiger economy and the enduring prestige assigned to Western goods experienced even in diasporic communities.²⁶ Given opportunities for formative practice and feedback in class, this assignment is graded, although I provided ample feedback on the finished product as well, in preparation for the next assignment.

As the second assignment demonstrated, an intellectual task for students was to become cognizant of *how* they challenged and extended their existing knowledge. It should be noted that as they completed the assignments for the pop-up, students also worked through secondary source readings, primary sources, and my lectures relevant to each week's topics.²⁷ Although these materials generally served to advance student comprehension of the conceptual essential understandings, I also used this information to reiterate that history is a constant process of uncovering new knowledge to revise the old. I incorporated visible thinking prompts from Harvard's Graduate School of Education Project Zero for small-group discussion, such as:

When it comes to Asian American activism, I used to think _____,
now I know _____, but I still wonder _____.

I framed how new evidence necessarily challenges taken-for-granted truths and, thus, how student participation in the pop-up museum would likewise serve to (re)educate the campus community.²⁸

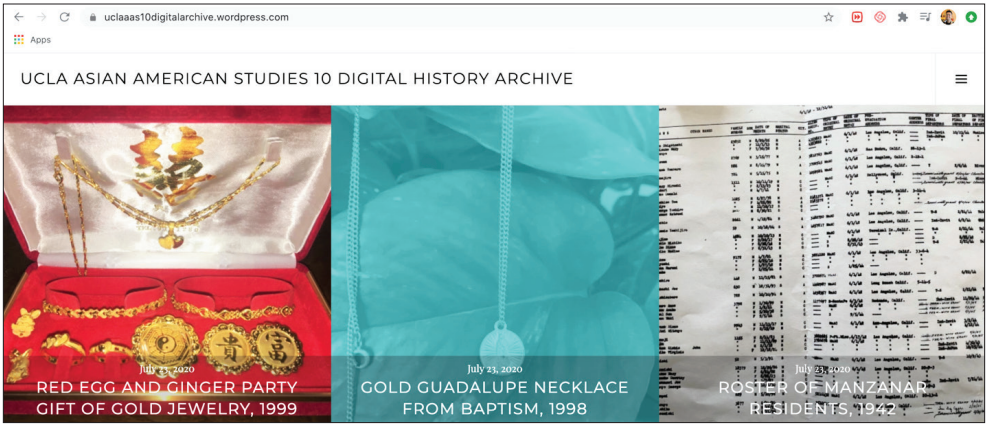


Figure 5: A portion of the homepage of the digital archive (available at URL provided).

Staging the Pop-Up Museum

The Digital Archive

Once students received feedback on the second assignment to contextualize the artifact, the process of actually building a museum exhibition and its companion digital archive began. Due to space constraints where we staged our exhibition, it has not been feasible to display every single student artifact. To ensure students felt ownership of the project and could still demonstrate public history skills, even if their artifact was not physically displayed, they all contributed to a crowdsourced companion digital archive. We used the free website builder WordPress to create a platform inspired by the 50 Objects/Stories: The American Japanese Incarceration project, as well as the work of historian Chrissy Yee Lau and her Cornell University students.²⁹ After I set up the site (available at <<https://uclaaas10digitalarchive.wordpress.com/>>), I enabled students' editing access to upload three main items concerning their artifact: images of it, metadata, and an analytical description (**Figure 5** and **Figure 6**).³⁰ I generated the original guidelines for metadata based off the first assignment. However, to develop an archive that describes artifacts in a more consistent, systematic, and refined manner, one of my librarian collaborators drafted a simple template for students to fill out for the second iteration

July 30, 2018

FILIPINA IMMIGRANT'S RECIPE BOX, 2000S



Metadata

Title

- Filipina Immigrant's Recipe Box

Creator

- Silma Dela Cruz

Place

- Honolulu, Hawaii; La Maddalena, Sardinia, Italy; Perris, California

Date Created

- Circa early 2000s – present

Figure 6: An excerpt from an individual entry in the digital archive.

of the project. The metadata fields included dimensions of an artifact that identified its title, creator, date of creation, language, subjects/keywords, and physical type and description. Through the analytical description, a brief three- to four-paragraph essay, students synthesized the historical linkages between their artifact and larger themes in Asian American history by drawing upon their secondary source research from the preceding assignment.

I allowed students the latitude to determine for themselves what aspects of the artifact they could highlight in their analytical descriptions, in order for them to pursue an interest of their own. For example, one mixed-race Chinese American student reflected on the jewelry gifted to her for a traditional coming-of-age ceremony, known as a red egg and ginger party. Her analysis focused on the significance of folk traditions in the Chinese diaspora, particularly for later generation Asian Americans. “As an Asian American,” she wrote, the items have “kept my Taiwanese family close even from across the globe.”³¹ However, another student writing about an invitation for the same ceremony held in her honor concentrated on the particular details of her family, noting that her artifact was “a snapshot of the Asian American struggle to maintain customs and traditions, but also of the evolving portrait of Asian America in the 21st century.” Reflecting her understanding of the politics of representation conjoined from her own research and class discussion, she pointed towards her fathers’ names on the invitation and continued:

The appearance of a same-sex, interracial couple in this [artifact] marks a departure from the two-dimensional image of a straight, middle class, able-bodied, monoracial East Asian-American that seems to dominate America’s perception of Asian-Americans. This [artifact] paints a multifaceted picture of Asian-American identity, and both maintains and redefines what it means to be Asian American in the 21st century.³²

Although all students had to demonstrate *how* to analyze a source, by empowering them to select *what* aspects of their artifact to explore, that intellectual ownership allowed them to cultivate a deeper command of certain aspects of Asian American history.

Meanwhile, students also used this portion to demonstrate how their understanding of a given topic changed over the course of their research. For example, one student wrote about a lapel pin of the flag for the erstwhile Republic of South Viet Nam. Passed down from her grandfather who was a high-ranking South Vietnamese

elite, she (understandably) initially approached the artifact from a perspective that privileged U.S. intervention to stave off the threat of Communism. After course readings and lectures on how radical Asian Americans viewed the U.S.'s wars in Southeast Asia as yet another imperialist venture that emboldened anti-Asian racism, this student produced a more nuanced description that acknowledged the complexities of the wars:

This artifact not only represents the history of the Republic of Vietnam, but also bridges the disparate perspectives that pertain to the history surrounding the Vietnam War. The U.S. involvement in the war spurred immense anti-war sentiment amongst Americans. However, their role would serve as a hope for freedom, but at a great cost amongst Southern Vietnamese citizens.³³

By having them constantly revising their understanding of their artifact as a product of a specific set of historical causes and conditions, I sought for students to develop a greater fluency in any of the conceptual essential understandings.

The Physical Exhibition

After students assembled the digital archive and possessed a systematic record of their research, we began the process of building the physical exhibition. Each student described in class, round-robin style, their artifact and the subjects/keywords they identified earlier as a part of their metadata. We did this in order to collaboratively generate themes to organize artifacts for the exhibition. Although they have varied over the years, some of the most consistent themes include the following items that align with or overlap across the course's key conceptual understandings:

1. Adaptation, settlement, and community building;
2. Cultural and social history;
3. Gender and sexuality;
4. Immigration law and foreign policy;
5. Inequality and resistance;
6. Labor and economics;
7. War and empire.

After I wrote the themes across the whiteboards of the classroom, students described their artifacts on a sticky note and posted it under whichever theme they thought was most relevant to their piece. I then

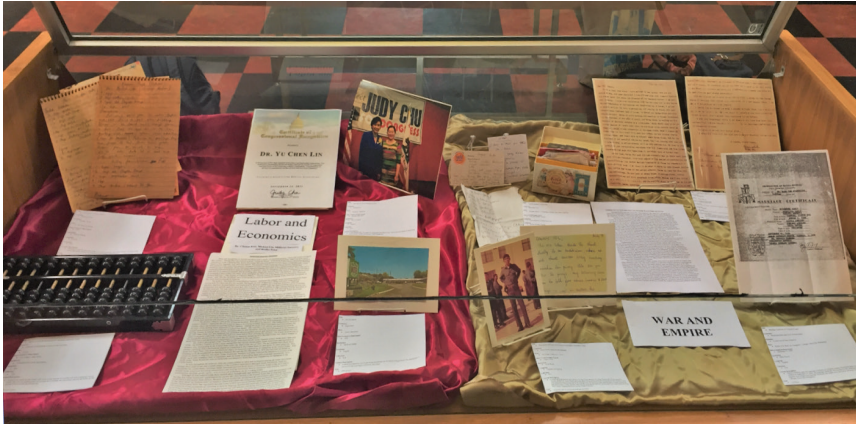


Figure 7: Display case, Summer 2018. The large blocks of text underneath the labels “Labor and Economics” and “War and Empire” are student-composed thematic descriptions.

required them to do a gallery walk of the entirety of the artifacts to re-evaluate and possibly re-situate their piece. This type of visible thinking routine encouraged students to grapple with the multiple connections between their artifact and the conceptual understandings. Once students created their thematic groups, they met outside of class to determine which artifacts they would feature in the exhibition. Students then collaboratively composed a description for their thematic group that explained the historical and/or contemporary connections between the artifacts and what they portended for the landscape of Asian American history.

For example, in 2018, one group working under the broad topic of “labor and economics” curated a collection comprised of family recipes that became the foundation for a mom-and-pop Filipinx American bakery, an abacus used by an immigrant Chinese entrepreneur, a photograph of a South Asian American-owned motel, and a commendation from U.S. Representative Judy Chu (who, coincidentally, taught some of the earliest Asian American Studies classes at UCLA) for a local acupuncturist (**Figure 7**). The group went on to describe how small businesses have been an avenue for economic empowerment among Asian Americans and provided valuable goods and services for ethnic communities that are unavailable in the mainstream marketplace. Yet, they also noted:

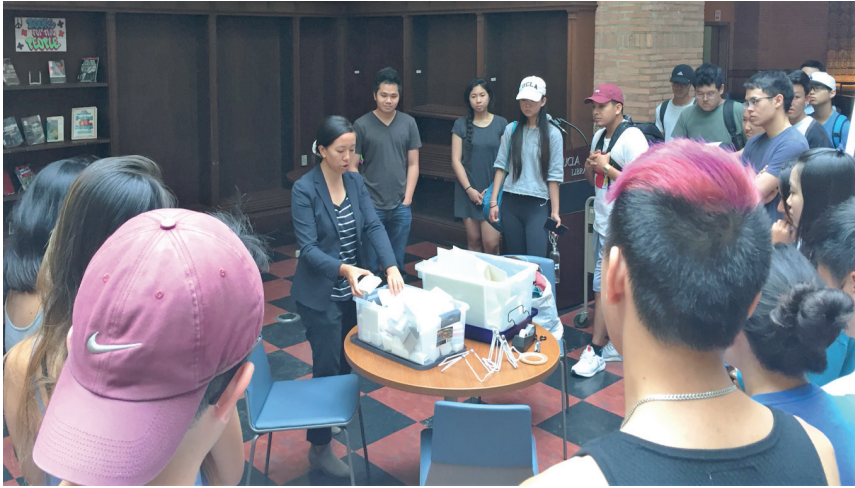


Figure 8: UCLA librarian Joanna Chen Cham explains to students how to mount items for their display cases, Summer 2017.

Though they may come to seek an “American Dream” of financial prosperity, achieving such a goal often proves to be a daunting task. Asian Americans, like other immigrants of color, have...faced discrimination based on their language, race, and other factors. This prejudice tends to prevent [certain] Asian immigrants from obtaining their preferred jobs, even if they possess education or work experience from their home nations.³⁴

This level of synthesis reflected on both student research on their respective artifacts, as well as course content on the segmented labor market of Asian Americans. Further, it required students to think through and articulate analytical connections in a way that is more long-term and purposeful than writing the definition of a term in a bluebook.

After students determined which artifacts they would include and printed out corresponding metadata, captions, and analytical descriptions using templates for consistency and professionalism, the penultimate class meeting took place at the library. There, staff members provided students with access to display cases and the various materials needed (stands, foam blocks, archival-quality adhesives, decorative fabric, cardstock, etc.) to stage our exhibit (**Figure 8**, **Figure 9**, and **Figure 10**). They guided students in

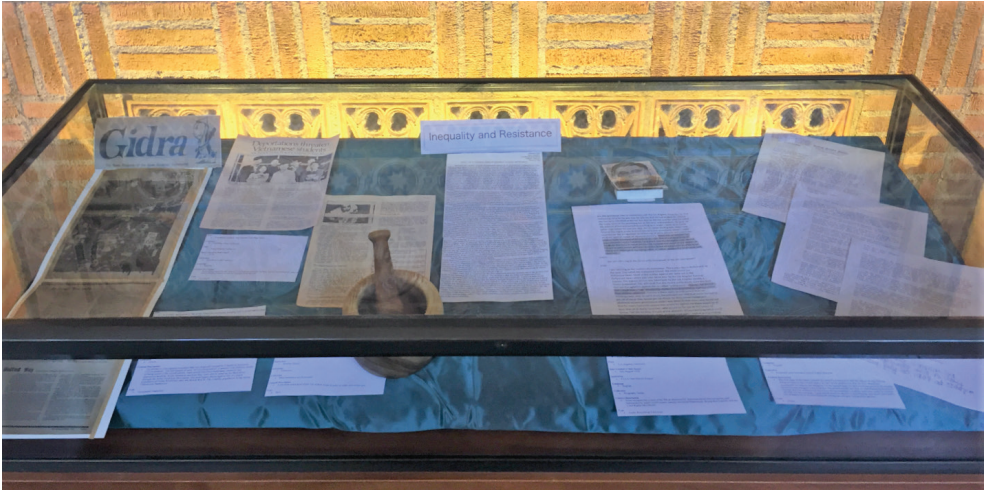


Figure 9: Display case, Summer 2018. Focused on the theme of “Inequality and Resistance,” artifacts included printouts of the radical Asian American Movement newspaper *Gidra* (accessed through the Densho Digital Repository) and a pestle and mortar as a sign of quotidian resistance to cultural assimilation.



Figure 10: Display case, Summer 2019. Focused on the broad theme “Asian Immigration to the United States,” artifacts included items brought from Asia to the U.S. such as a traditional Barong Tagalog shirt and a Chinese-language book, as well as photographs of a Japanese immigrant’s house.



Figure 11: Student spokesperson at the Summer 2019 pop-up “grand opening.”

organizing the display cases in a professional manner to ensure the artifacts and supporting material were not presented haphazardly.³⁵

On the last day of the class, students gathered at the library for the “grand opening” of the exhibition. With the assistance of staff from Powell Library and the Asian American Studies Department, I publicized the opening of the exhibit via social media, which, along with direct invitations to interested campus constituents, drew modest audiences. Each thematic group appointed a spokesperson to briefly summarize their artifacts and secondary research for the attendees, often using visual aids to entice them to explore the display cases further (**Figure 11** and **Figure 12**). The occasion is generally joyful as students showcase their hard work to the campus community. A few students have even invited friends, roommates, and family to witness their production. In this regard, the project reflects one of the benefits of PBL that Dominic G. Morais identified when he adopted the practice in his undergraduate history classroom: “a noticeable level of student motivation due to the project’s local [or in this case, personal] history aspects, as well as a sense of pride due to creating a concrete, viewable product.”³⁶ The affective experience of producing history for public education



Figure 12: Student spokesperson at the Summer 2017 pop-up “grand opening.”

and consumption is an aspect I wanted for students in order to demystify the historian’s craft and unleash the potential of building a grassroots archive.

Assessment

I assess student contributions to the digital archive and the pop-up museum in terms of their capacity to synthesize the individual story of their artifact with larger scholarly literature for a public audience. Although I lay out specific grading criteria for each assignment, I also assess how student work resonates with the essential understandings. For example, does their analytical description demonstrate the use of secondary sources to contextualize the artifact? Does it reveal an understanding of the contested nature of archives and archival collection? Do the thematic descriptions synthesize multiple artifacts and situate them within a larger narrative legible to the public? After careful feedback and often several one-on-one consultations, most students sharpened their research and analytical skills to exhibit a thoughtful awareness of the essential understandings of the course.

Limitations, Benefits, and Students as Metacognitive Thinkers

Limitations will invariably accompany any new classroom approach, and the pop-up museum was no exception. In terms of course planning, some students expressed concern over a dizzying pace that balanced lectures, reading quizzes, classroom discussion, and developing the project. In a course evaluation, for example, one student wrote, “there were topics and ideas presented in the readings that I would have liked to have expanded upon.”³⁷ Conversely, because of the lack of traditional assessments, at least one student critiqued the class as “much easier than even classes that I took during high school.”³⁸ However, this student may have conflated intellectual rigor with high-stakes assessments that test voluminous content. Institutionally, I had hoped to create a more permanent and visible online presence for the digital archive that capitalized on the official ucla.edu domain, but an information technology and computing staff member informed me that such websites were reserved for tenured and tenure-track faculty.³⁹ Structurally, a proverbial elephant in the (class)room is the scourge of academic integrity violations by international students.⁴⁰ The causes of cheating are complex and defy monolithic (often xeno/sinophobic) explanation, but examples of plagiarism had the potential to compromise the professionalism of our public-facing projects and defeat the purpose of the student-centered curriculum. To obviate the most egregious incidents, I have availed myself of Turnitin software and my own careful reading of student work juxtaposed with other factors, including attendance, participation, and performance on formative assessments.

Another limitation in regard to the adaptability of this project is that, due to a variety of circumstances, I have not yet tested it in my secondary school classrooms. However, the pedagogical goals are still transferrable, particularly for units that could incorporate some aspect of family history. For example, one of the units in my eighth-grade history classroom focuses specifically on Los Angeles history and requires students to uncover the push and pull factors that brought their families to the city. The pop-up museum could be adopted for these learners and slightly modified in a number of ways. The essential understandings would focus on basic nodes of L.A. history rather than Asian American history, while the concepts related to the nature of archives could be pared down to emphasize

what constitutes a primary source and how sources can be used to generate a historical narrative. Students would still need to locate and describe a family artifact, in this case, germane to their family's migration to Los Angeles. Whereas the second assignment for undergraduates required them to contextualize their artifact within scholarly sources, eighth-graders could draw from a pre-selected set of readings accessible to their reading and comprehension level.⁴¹ In terms of creating the digital archive, students would still need to write a narrative that explains how their artifact symbolizes a larger story of migration and connects to an aspect of L.A. history. Given my experience with tech-savvy Gen-Z eighth-graders, although they may require far more direct instruction, they could also upload their materials to a shared class WordPress or other preferred platform available through a school's learning management system. As for the exhibition space itself, that could range from the classroom to the school library. The benefits of having students continually build upon and revise their understanding—and using a deeply personal story to deepen their grasp of a larger history—would outweigh the additional level of modeling and instruction required for younger students. As differentiation and responsive pedagogy continue to dominate discussions of K-12 education, I hope to continue refining the museum for new classrooms.

Nevertheless, I have continued to utilize the pop-up museum in my undergraduate classroom due to the evidence of student growth I have observed. In lieu of a final exam, I originally asked students to write a four- to five-page essay that reflected on two course “themes” that resonated with them personally. Although many papers were earnestly insightful, the amorphous prompt allowed students to fall into the trap of merely regurgitating evidence assembled from readings or lecture. However, after educating myself further in the pillars of curriculum design, I shifted the prompt to require students to reflect explicitly on how their comprehension of the essential understandings of the class (in relation to content and historical skills) have developed over the span of six weeks. To support their argument, students had to draw from course readings and any of the scholarly sources they identified as a part of the pop-up project. Lastly, I asked them to conclude their essay by responding to the statement, “I am a historian”—in reference to the essential understanding about the potential for anyone to write history—and

describing what that means to them. What lay beneath these prompts was a deeper pedagogical desire for students to assess their own understanding with the hope that such intentional thinking across their assignments would fortify long-lasting knowledge. These were tasks made possible by a tightly focused curriculum where every assignment scaffolded another.

To that end, the pop-up museum advanced my goals of students grasping the power of archives, the dialectical process of historical research and analysis, and their own capacities to become historians. For some, their intellectual growth was immensely personal. One Chinese Cambodian American student wrote:

I found out that the lunchbox tin I used every day to pack my lunch in [was actually] a tin my family had bought in Thailand at their refugee camp. I had just thought it was a regular beaten-up tin, but it held a place within my family's immigration history and was a part of their journey.

The processes of inquiry and contextualization imbued in the student a new "mindset" about the practice of history that "has also given [her] a new lens to look through" when comprehending the historical qualities of mundane objects around her.⁴² Similarly, a mixed-race Japanese American student who had once lamented the perceived liminality of her identity, wrote about the trunks that accompanied her family from Okayama, Japan to Portland, Oregon and had remained there whilst the family was banished to a desolate concentration camp. She disclosed that after executing all of the steps of this project, "I believe I must make most conscious efforts beyond this course to inform myself further about my family's history and Asian American history." She even pledged to join the UCLA's Nikkei Student Union in the fall "to stay connected to this critical part of my heritage."⁴³

Meanwhile, others waxed more philosophical about how the process of generating a new archive of knowledge explicitly challenged their understanding of history:

I realized history isn't some old, intangible concept that I was unable to reach...My own history may not have an impact on the world (just yet!), but my own flesh and blood carries on the legacy of my ancestors, the stories of an immigrant family among others who endured hardship. Being a historian to me now holds the purpose of continuing this legacy and representing what my grandparents fought and struggled for.⁴⁴

Similarly, another student left my class understanding the power of history as a practice of reconfiguring existing knowledge and correcting historical silences:

By extension, history is also the process of breaking apart...structures of power and class embedded in our history books to view the experiences of the oppressed and silenced. Through this class, I learned that anyone who attempts to challenge these classic records of history and create their own archive is a historian.⁴⁵

Collectively, these responses support Morais's analysis of PBL curricula—namely, that students gain “multiperspectivity,” along with critical thinking skills and life-lessons.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, they also elaborate the enduring significance of the praxis of the Asian American Movement and Asian American Studies: centering oft-marginalized or excluded voices to simultaneously better understand oneself and establish a radical critique of existing structures of political or epistemological domination.

As these reflections attest, the curriculum for this class that culminated in the digital archive and pop-up museum required students to go beyond the obligation to *cover* material. Rather, the assignments set students on a path to *uncover* meaning, a process that Wiggins and McTighe argued is key for developing long-term understanding. I often joked to students that I knew, and ultimately took no offense, to the fact that the vast majority of them would forget the intricacies of the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 or the precise location of the 1871 Chinese Massacre in Los Angeles. But through developing historical analytical skills and the practices of public historians using an artifact of their choice, they would likely not only remember the historical contexts of their piece (and, for many, their family's migration story), but also understand the dynamic process of remembering and representing the past. I accomplished this through a curriculum that discarded the exam booklet and invited students rather to “inquire into, around, and underneath the content.”⁴⁷ Furthermore, through this approach, I was able to construct alternative assessments that, in line with the legacy of Ethnic Studies, developed student understanding through a praxis that encouraged *them* to unlearn, rethink, and, ultimately, take ownership of *their* education.⁴⁸

The pop-up museum has served as my intervention against the perceived shortcomings of history classes that my students articulated in the tableau that opened this article. By emphasizing the hands-on

labor of history and empowering students to become the historian in the public sphere, I hoped to demonstrate what the discipline can look like when there are indeed “diverse perspective[s],” and connections between the personal and historical are front and center. When I started teaching at both the university and secondary school levels, I never imagined the creative ways in which they could intersect. Yet, as this article has demonstrated, the knowledge I possessed from training in history and Ethnic Studies and the critical insights I gained as a classroom teacher provided the alchemy for a student experience that was intentional, authentic, and experiential.

Notes

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1. Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1998).

2. Edith Wen-Chu Chen and Glenn Omatsu, eds., *Teaching About Asian Pacific Americans: Effective Activities, Strategies, and Assignments for*

Classrooms and Communities (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); Emily E. Straus and Dawn M. Eckenrode, "Engaging Past and Present: Service-Learning in the College History Classroom," *The History Teacher* 47, no. 2 (February 2014): 253-266.

3. A useful resource for K-12 instructors interested in designing a student-driven museum is Linda D'Acquisto, *Learning on Display: Student-Created Museums That Build Understanding* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2008).

4. Although I have taught the overall project every year from 2017 to 2021, due to the mandate for distance learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2020 and 2021, it was not feasible to stage the in-person exhibition. Rather, I focused more attention on the digital archive and created classroom discussion opportunities for students to interact with each other and their artifacts.

5. Wiggins and McTighe, *Understanding by Design*.

6. Nancy Quam-Wickham, "Reimagining the Introductory U.S. History Course," *The History Teacher* 49, no. 4 (August 2016): 522; see also Sam Wineburg, Mark Smith, and Joel Breakstone, "What Is Learned in College History Classes?" *The Journal of American History* 104, no. 4 (March 2018): 983-993.

7. Russell Jeung et al., eds., *Mountain Movers: Student Activism and the Emergence of Asian American Studies* (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press, 2019). On the Asian American Movement that gave rise to the field of Asian American Studies, see Karen L. Ishizuka, *Serve the People: Making Asian America in the Long Sixties* (London, United Kingdom: Verso, 2016).

8. Yuji Ichioka, *A Buried Past: An Annotated Bibliography of the Japanese American Research Project Collection* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1974).

9. Amy Tachiki et al., eds., *Roots: An Asian American Reader* (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press, 1971); *Asian Women* (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press, 1975); Emma Gee, ed., *Counterpoint: Perspectives on Asian America* (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press, 1976); and Jesse Quinsaat, ed., *Letters in Exile: An Introductory Reader on the History of Pilipinos in America* (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press, 1976).

10. Phyllis C. Blumenfeld et al., "Motivating Project-Based Learning: Sustaining the Doing, Supporting the Learning," *Educational Psychologist* 26, nos. 3-4 (1991): 369.

11. Heather Lattimer and Robert Riordan, "Project-Based Learning Engages Students in Meaningful Work: Students at High Tech Middle Engage in Project-Based Learning," *Middle School Journal* 43, no. 2 (November 2011): 18. On PBL in the undergraduate classroom, see Quam-Wickham, "Reimagining the Introductory U.S. History Course"; and Dominic G. Morais, "Doing History in the Undergraduate Classroom: Project-Based Learning and Student Benefits," *The History Teacher* 52, no. 1 (November 2018): 49-76.

12. Jay McTighe and Grant Wiggins, "Understanding by Design Framework," Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development White

Paper, 2012, 1, <https://www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/siteASCD/publications/UbD_WhitePaper0312.pdf>.

13. For a sense of the space, see Figure 12.

14. Steven Johnson, "Why There Are Pop-Ups for Everything Now," *The Atlantic*, November 8, 2017, <<https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/11/popup-shop-corporate/545054/>>.

15. Amanda Hess, "The Existential Void of the Pop-Up 'Experience,'" *The New York Times*, September 26, 2018, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/26/arts/color-factory-museum-of-ice-cream-rose-mansion-29rooms-candytopia.html>>.

16. Christophe Haubursin, "Instagrammable Pop-Ups are Everywhere. What Does That Mean for Art?" *Vox*, September 19, 2018, <<https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2018/9/19/17878672/instagram-museum-art-pop-up>>.

17. Dorit Alt, "College Students' Academic Motivation, Media Engagement and Fear of Missing Out," *Computers in Human Behavior* 49 (August 2015): 111-119.

18. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London, United Kingdom: Zed Books, 1999/2007); Kirsty Reid and Fiona Paisley, eds., *Sources and Methods in Histories of Colonialism: Approaching the Imperial Archive* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Dominique Luster, "Archives Have the Power to Boost Marginalized Voices," TEDx Talks, June 29, 2018, video, 8:23, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XsNPIBBi1IE>>. Thanks to Courtney Jacobs for suggesting that talk.

19. Densho Digital Repository: <<https://ddr.densho.org/>>; Vietnamese American Oral History Project: <<https://sites.uci.edu/vaohp/about/>>; South Asian American Digital Archive: <<https://www.saada.org/>>; UCLA Library Digital Collections: <<https://digital.library.ucla.edu/>>; Calisphere: <<https://calisphere.org/>>; Library of Congress: <<https://www.loc.gov/collections/>>.

20. Tiffany Barba Soto, "Gold Guadalupe Necklace from Baptism, 1998," UCLA Asian American Studies 10 Digital History Archive, July 2020, available online at: <<https://uclaas10digitalarchive.wordpress.com/2020/07/23/gold-guadalupe-necklace-from-baptism-1998/>>. More broadly, see Rudy P. Guevarra Jr., *Becoming Mexipino: Multiethnic Identities and Communities in San Diego* (Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012).

21. To protect their privacy, students used scanned copies of these items for the museum and blurred out any identifying and/or sensitive information.

22. See, for example, an elucidation of a painting by Kango Takamura housed at UCLA in Janice Chen, "'It's Nap Time,' 1942-1945," UCLA Asian American Studies 10 Digital History Archive, July 2018, available online at: <<https://uclaas10digitalarchive.wordpress.com/2018/07/30/its-nap-time-1942-1945/>>.

23. Kathryn Walbert, "Reading Primary Sources: An Introduction for Students," *Learn NC* (2004), <<https://www.ncpedia.org/anchor/appendix-reading-primary>>.

24. Peter Guan, "Buddhist Beaded Bracelet, 1989," UCLA Asian American Studies 10 Digital History Archive, August 2017, available online at: <<https://uclaas10digitalarchive.wordpress.com/2017/08/01/buddhist-beaded-bracelet-1989/>>; and Alex Hua, "Modern Buddhist Mala, 2015," UCLA Asian

American Studies 10 Digital History Archive, August 2017, available online at: <<https://uclaas10digitalarchive.wordpress.com/2017/08/01/modern-buddhist-mala-2015/>>.

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26. Junho Choi, “Portmeirion Pottery, c. early 2000s,” UCLA Asian American Studies 10 Digital History Archive, July 2020, available online at: <<https://uclaas10digitalarchive.wordpress.com/2020/07/23/portmeirion-pottery-c-early-2000s/>>.

27. Shelley Sang-Hee Lee, *A New History of Asian America* (New York: Routledge, 2013) and, later, Shirley Hune and Gail M. Nomura, eds., *Our Voices, Our Histories: Asian American and Pacific Islander Women* (New York: New York University Press, 2021) served as the course textbook.

28. See “I Used to Think...Now I Think...,” Project Zero, Graduate School of Education, Harvard University, 2015, <<https://pz.harvard.edu/resources/i-used-to-think-now-i-think>>.

29. *50 Objects/Stories: The American Japanese Incarceration*, available online at: <<https://50objects.org/>>; Chrissy Yee Lau, “Towards a Pedagogy of Asian American Public History: Creating a Student Digital Exhibition,” *Southern California Quarterly* 98, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 275-296.

30. I recorded a brief “how-to” video using Zoom for students to reference if they were unfamiliar with the WordPress interface.

31. Essence Roark, “Red Egg and Ginger Party Gift of Gold Jewelry, 1999,” UCLA Asian American Studies 10 Digital History Archive, July 2020, available online at: <<https://uclaas10digitalarchive.wordpress.com/2020/07/23/red-egg-and-ginger-party-gift-of-gold-jewelry-1999/>>.

32. Corinne Leong, “Red Egg and Ginger Party Invitation, 2002,” UCLA Asian American Studies 10 Digital History Archive, August 2018, available online at: <<https://uclaas10digitalarchive.wordpress.com/2018/08/11/red-egg-and-ginger-party-invitation-2002/>>.

33. Phi Phi Do, “South Vietnam Flag Enamel Pin, 1949-1975,” UCLA Asian American Studies 10 Digital History Archive, July 2020, available online at: <<https://uclaas10digitalarchive.wordpress.com/2020/07/23/south-vietnam-flag-enamel-pin-1949-1975/>>.

34. Chance Kuo, Michael Liu, Millicent Navarro, and Radha Patel, “Labor and Economics,” Exhibition Description, Asian American History Pop-Up Museum, UCLA Powell Library, Summer 2018.

35. For instructors, especially in the K-12 setting, who may not have access to resources tailored to a library exhibition, see Mobile Museum Project, *Curating a School Museum: Teachers’ Handbook* (London, United Kingdom: Royal Holloway, University of London & Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, 2019).

36. Morais, “Doing History in the Undergraduate Classroom,” 67.

37. Student evaluation, Asian American Studies 10, UCLA, Summer Session A, 2019.

38. Student evaluation, Asian American Studies 10, UCLA, Summer Session A, 2018.

39. Adjunct faculty are excluded on the premise that their relationship with the university is temporary, and, therefore, lecturer-run websites do not effectively utilize limited university resources for bandwidth.

40. Teresa Watanabe, "As UC Santa Barbara enrolls more students from China, professors complain about cheating and English skills," *Los Angeles Times*, December 13, 2018, <<https://www.latimes.com/local/education/la-me-edu-uc-santa-barbara-chinese-students-20181213-story.html>>; Krishna K. Bista, "Academic Dishonesty Among International Studies in Higher Education," *To Improve the Academy* 30, no. 1 (June 2011): 159-172.

41. For example, area museums, periodicals, historical societies, and PBS affiliates offer varying forms of non-academic local histories.

42. Student final paper, Asian American Studies 10, UCLA, Summer Session A, 2020.

43. Student final paper, Asian American Studies 10, UCLA, Summer Session A, 2020. "Nikkei" refers to people of Japanese descent.

44. Student final paper, Asian American Studies 10, UCLA, Summer Session A, 2020.

45. Student final paper, Asian American Studies 10, UCLA, Summer Session A, 2020.

46. Morais wrote, "Multiperspectivity is defined...as a strategy of understanding that takes into account another individual's viewpoint along with our own...[M]ultiperspectivity is simultaneously a disposition in which individuals are able and willing to look at a situation from different perspectives." "Doing History in the Undergraduate Classroom," 61.

47. Wiggins and McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, 98.

48. Thank you to Alfred Flores for phrasing this so powerfully and effectively for me.