

EVENT TITLE: Writing Home: Using Family and Regional History to (Re)connect with Our Roots

Event Description: As recent events have demonstrated, Asian Americans are seen as perpetual foreigners in the U.S. Yet, owing to complicated reasons around migration, many of us also feel like foreigners in our countries of origin. We are five Asian American writers who have all sought to (re)connect with our cultural roots through writing about family and/or regional histories. In this panel, we read from our works and discuss how we use history to inform our fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.

Event Category: Multiple Literary Genres Craft & Criticism

Moderator Opening Remarks and Introductions:

Rita Chang-Eppig: Thank you all for being here virtually. We know that some of you are probably feeling a little Zoomed-out after two years of this pandemic, but we're really happy that AWP is offering this virtual option because a couple of us couldn't be at the conference physically. My name is Rita Chang-Eppig, and I'm a writer living in the SF Bay Area. My stories have appeared in *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, *Conjunctions*, *Clarkesworld*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The Best American Short Stories 2021*, and elsewhere. My novel about the woman who commanded the largest pirate fleet during Qing-dynasty China is forthcoming from Bloomsbury in 2023.

The idea for this panel came about because for the past few years I've been working on my novel, which takes place in China and Taiwan. And though I was born in Taiwan, my family and I have been here in the States since I was nine, so my memories of the place were vague. When I started writing this novel, I realized that I would not be able to do justice to the island and to its complicated history without being on the ground there. More than that, with all of the hate crimes against Asian Americans that were/are happening here, I found myself really wanting to feel a sense of home, which I wasn't finding in the States. So I flew back to Taiwan and spent a year there doing research, and the things I learned/experienced there really informed my book.

Now I'm going to turn the mic over to my fellow panelists: Jerome, Susan, Zora, and Preeti. Would each of you please introduce yourself and say a little about your own experience with researching family or regional history for your work?

Participant Opening Remarks:

Jerome Blanco: Hi, I'm Jerome Blanco. I'm a fiction writer, with my MFA from NYU. And my writing has appeared or is forthcoming in Literary Hub, Southern Humanities Review, Emrys Journal, The Margins, among other places.

I was born in the Philippines and moved to California when I was twelve years old. I've lived in the Bay Area and in the LA area for many years until moving to Buffalo, New York last year to be closer to my wife's family. When I moved to the States, I moved with my immediate family, but between 2010 and 2012, each of them—my parents, sister, and brother—have actually moved back to the Philippines. So my relationship and connection to the Philippines is very much a constant and living and active thing that I am constantly navigating. And that shows up a lot naturally in my writing. Additionally, a few years ago, a teacher and some friends all separately mentioned to me how I write about family in all my stories. And I didn't actually realize that until they told me. But it was absolutely true and very very obvious. So, thinking about family and connections to home across the Pacific is one of the things that's really at the heart of my writing.

Susan Ito: Hello, the name given to me at my adoption at 5 months old was Susan Kiyoko Ito, although I had another name before that. I was adopted by second-generation Japanese American parents, but I was born to a Japanese American birth mother and white father. I am a member of the Writers Grotto in San Francisco, and I teach in the MFA Programs at Mills College and at Baypath University. My work has appeared in Catapult, Hyphen, Growing Up Asian American, and other journals and anthologies.

As an adoptee, I have spent much of my life researching my own origins, learning about myself as well as my genetic family. I learned that my birth mother had been a child in the World War II internment camps, and after the war had been relocated to a small, white-only town in the Midwest. My research initially took the form of searching and meeting with her, and after I found her, trying to deepen my understanding of the story that led to my existence. In forty years of our relationship, she would not tell me who my father was, but in 2017, I learned his identity through consumer DNA testing and traveled to that Midwestern town to meet those relatives for the first time. He had died three years prior to my visit, but

his extended family welcomed me and I came to know this previously unknown branch of my family tree.

Zora Mai Quynh: Hi, I'm Zora Mai Quynh. My stories, essays, and fiction can be found in Ploughshares, Strange Horizons, Escape Pod, Vice Terraform, and in various anthologies such as Luminescent Threads - Connections to Octavia Butler. I am the winner of the 2021 San Francisco Foundation/Nomadic Press Literary Award and a finalist for the 2021 One Story Adina Talve-Goodman Fellowship. I am a contributing writer for all things South Vietnamese for diaCritics - a Vietnamese diasporic online journal.

I am a Vietnamese refugee and adoptee. I spent the majority of my childhood with my birth family of South Vietnamese heritage. I was adopted later in life by an African American mentor and adopted mother and her family so my experiences are very bicultural since I am closely connected to both my birth and adopted family. For many reasons, however, I also disconnected to both making me long for a deeper connection to origins and histories that evade me for a myriad of reasons.

I came to California as a toddler shortly after the Fall of Saigon right as Communist forces swept through South Vietnam. I landed into Santa Ana, California, a low-income, diverse city and immediately experienced race-based Anti-Asian hate crimes. This resulted in an automatic clamp down from my parents for whom the best coping strategy was silencing on discussions and representations of culture, language and history. This was coupled with a very contradictory message that we were losing our heritage which was stated in a term elders would call us - "mac goc" which just means that you lost your heritage but the way they'd say it made you feel guilty and terrible at the same time - but elders did not complement the accusation with embellishments on our history and culture. This, unfortunately, has left me with a real thirst for my heritage and culture - which I cannot really obtain from my family or, at times, my community. The strategies of silencing, unfortunately, have not changed in my family so to reconnect with my roots, I cannot so much use family - but rather invest in a great deal of historical, cultural, and political research about Vietnam in order to reconnect with my roots. This research is reflected in the stories I write.

Preeti Vangani: Hi, my name is Preeti Vangani. I am the author of Mother Tongue Apologize, a book of poems from RLFPA editions, selected as winner of RL India Poetry Prize. My work has appeared in Gulf Coast, Threepenny Review, The Margins and other journals and several anthologies. My poetry and non-fiction

are centered in grief from losing my mother, girlhood and familial relationships. I was born and grew up in the city of Mumbai. My paternal grandfather made Mumbai his home in the 1960s via Ajmer after having been displaced in 1946 (during India's partition) from Larkana in Sindh, a province now in Pakistan. While Sindh is not a physical region in independent India, Sindhi communities continue to grow, however lesser people in subsequent generations can speak our language or write in the script, which like Urdu, moves from left to right. Since millions of Sindhis have traditionally been entrepreneurs, and many like my grandfather had to start their life & trade from scratch after crossing the border, my ethnicity is very strongly linked to the pursuit of making money. That we are a class of shrewd and frugal businessmen is a thriving stereotype. In school I grew up hearing the joke, if you meet a sindhi or a snake in a lonely forest, befriend the snake. And the riddle, why are a sindhi's nostrils so big? Because air is free.

I came to San Francisco in 2016 after a career of 8 years in Consumer Marketing to study creative writing. In many senses I am considered a mini-traitor to my culture for having given up on money, stability, and a life immersed in commerce for the unpredictability of arts. In my poems and stories, while writing about familial relationships, especially the men in my family, I explore these aspects of our intergenerational relationship to money to get to the heart of who my beloveds are when they aren't engaged in trade or business.

Moderator: Great! I'd like to start off by having each of you read for about three minutes from your work.

Participant Readings:

Jerome: This is from a short story of mine called "Mister Green Pants," which is currently out on submission. All you need to know at this point is that the narrator, who is in middle school, and her sister, who is in high school, only moved with their parents to the San Francisco area a few months before. "Ate" means older sister in Tagalog by the way. In that time, they met this enigmatic white guy, who always happens to wear green pants, and who they have discovered is at work on building a mysterious teleporter machine in his living room. The narrator's sister is smitten by him. In this scene, the sisters are walking home from Mister Green Pants's apartment.

On our walk home, I asked Ate where he'd learned all this about astrophysics and engineering. She said he'd gone to MIT—a school even I recognized—but quit before he graduated. Apparently, they didn't understand the

things he did. Sometimes school holds you back, she said. That sounded stupid to me, but what did I know about this country? America was a place of possibility. If it weren't, why'd we come all this way? A man in bright green pants could be a genius if he wanted.

And a girl from Quezon City could be enamored with such a man. Ate had had boyfriends back home. Although none very serious as far as I could tell. She'd go out with her friends to the mall to meet up with boys from the boys' school. They'd play Dance Dance Revolution in the arcade and waste hours at the food court. Once in a while, she'd come home talking about one of those boys. And every so often, one of them would supposedly be her boyfriend, but I didn't know what that meant. She, her boyfriend, and those other friends did everything as a pack. In that sense, I could see how Mister Green Pants was special. None of those other boys—they were boys after all, just as she was a girl—compared to him.

"It's so different here," I said. "From home."

The wind blew cold, and I tugged my sweatshirt tighter around me. We never wore sweatshirts or jackets before we came to California. Here, the sky was like an air conditioner. People back home paid for air like this. In this place, you couldn't shut it off.

A tiny cloud escaped from Ate's mouth. She nodded in response to me. What else was there to say? We hadn't spoken much about the decision our parents made to uproot our lives. It had been a given: Girls, we're moving. And then we did. We trusted Mama and Papa. Everything would be wonderful. What a gift to live in the greatest nation in the world. And, in these past months, it wasn't as if we'd felt cheated or felt a promise unfulfilled. But we'd made landfall in a paradise without a map to show us where to go or how to locate ourselves in it. We hadn't known how much of it we'd have to figure out for ourselves.

I hooked my arm around hers, and we pressed into each other. At least a side of us each could be warm on the long walk home. We walked in and out of the glow of streetlights until we reached the apartment.

Susan:

A Small Crime

I'm not sure if I committed an actual crime during my junior year in college, but it felt like one. I stole a piece of myself. But I wasn't sure to whom it belonged in the first place.

I dressed that morning in my off-campus house in a tenty denim jumper with big pockets. I awkwardly applied makeup and tried to look like somebody's

wife. The only ring I had was a braided silver one with a moon face. It didn't look like a wedding ring, but I put it on my left hand anyway.

I drove to my appointment early, and stared at the sign outside – Finger Lakes Obstetrics & Gynecology. How had I put myself in this situation?

The month before, when I called the medical records department at New Rochelle Hospital, I had just received my adoption record with the name I had been given at birth. *From this day forward, the child Mika Yamada shall be known as Susan Kiyo Ito.* Mika. Mika.

I lied to the woman in the medical records department. “My mother passed away when I was small.” I crossed my fingers behind my back, like a lying child. “I heard that... that she had problems when she was pregnant with me. And now I'm pregnant and my doctor would like the records from my birth.”

She didn't hesitate. “Certainly. What is your obstetrician's name?”

“Oh. It's, um...” I grabbed the phone directory and flipped through the flimsy yellow pages. PHYSICIANS. “Wait just a second, sorry, it's...” OBSTETRICS & GYNECOLOGY. “Dr. Fogel. Dr. James Fogel.”

“And his address?”

I read her the Ithaca address from the phone book.

“I'll take care of it today. And what was your name again, Mrs...?”

“Ito. It's Ito.” Mrs. Ito? That was my mother. But I couldn't think. The room was darkening with late afternoon shadows. “But my name is Mika Yamada. Or it was, then.” I spelled it out, letter by letter.

“Got it!” Her voice was squeaky, like a woman who had swallowed helium. “You have a good day, now!”

The next day, I realized I had given her the address of this doctor I had never met. How would I get the records from *him*?

Now I was sitting in the parking lot, impersonating a pregnant woman, a married woman, an imaginary woman named Mika Yamada. I signed in with that name, waiting for an alarm to go off that shrieked Imposter, liar, thief. The receptionist gave me a clipboard, and I filled out the form with my fabricated life. Past medical history: UNKNOWN. I looked at the other women in the room, actual pregnant women, and wondered if they would keep their babies.

I waited. A nurse came to the doorway and called out “Mika?” She held a manila folder in her hand. It had new orange tabs on the side, color-coded with my mother's last name. “Please follow me.”

She slipped the folder into the wooden box nailed to the exam room door. "Take everything off, including your panties," she said. She handed me a blue paper gown and left.

I imagined what would happen next: I would undress. The doctor would enter the room, and examine me. Would I let him slip his gloved fingers inside me? Would I wait for him to tell me I wasn't pregnant at all, and then beg, naked, for my file?

I had assumed that James Fogel, MD, would be a kind, reasonable man. But maybe he would be angry. Maybe he would call the police. Maybe he was an adoptive father himself. What if he was like the adoption agency social worker who had held my fat file of paperwork, and only doled out a few crumbs of information?

I stood up and opened the door. I slipped the folder out of its box and pressed it against my chest, underneath my coat. I started race walking down the corridor.

I passed the receptionist. "I forgot something in my car," I said. "I'll be back in a minute."

I'd left the door to my Toyota unlocked. I threw the folder on the passenger seat, put the key in the ignition and backed up, making a harsh, violent sound on the gravel. I pulled into traffic and drove while my mother's name waited patiently on the seat beside me. I didn't stop to read it until I was twenty-two miles north of Ithaca. I didn't touch that folder, the chronicle of my birth, until forest and snow surrounded me; until I was sure that the Ithaca Police cars with their flashing red and blue lights were far behind me.

Zora: I'm going to read from this story, "Drink Brother for the Pain," which explores the relationship between two boys who are enemies in the Vietnam war - one from the South - the Nationalists - and one from the North - the Communist. The boys meet across a battlefield and realize that they were siblings in a past life when they were Cham, an indigenous ethnic group in South Vietnam who faced genocide by the Viet group - who then battled each other in a civil war during the Vietnam War.

<http://www.kwelijournal.org/fiction/2017/6/24/drink-brother-for-the-pain-by-zora-mai-qunh>

Preeti:

In the club, a remixed version of Duma Dum Mast Kalander comes on. My friend asks, “Oye Sindhi, isn’t that your people’s song?”

We were born from the Indus, swaddled
with tricks of trading textiles and saris.

Our line of fathers sang thanks to Jhulelal
the water-god — for being a trusted sales route,

for being root of life. We carried separation
on waitlisted tickets. Our history packed overnight

into overweight shoulder bags. Maybe, we are a hand-
woven zaradozi border of blood and money, one our ancestors

sewed but couldn’t wear. Maybe, a couplet in a script
leaping forward into blankness

دما دم مست قلندر

Forever arched in translation, our travelling
soles — a song of god and light that has survived

750 years. When our inheritance comes to be
observed not as a temple, but an amusement park

dance becomes a form of survival. When the DJ
scratches over *chaar charaag tere baran hamesha*

*May your shrine always be lit with four lamps, we
imagine our third-generation body as the fifth lamp*

and burn as we sway — our dried throats, the wick.
A small growing fire, our sky-pushing hands.

Over 2 million Sindhis were displaced from their homes during the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan

Unrewarding

From my father's cupboard,
I fish out the familiar purple tin,
heavy with his old coin collection.
Let his vintage piggy-bank waterfall
into a pyramid of silver on the bed.
Aanas, athanas, chavanis from when
a gallon of milk was a chavani. Sparkling
gold ginnis. My favorite though
is a one aana coin that he, still in school,
threw on the tracks to see what a fast train
would do to the penny. It is important I think,
for me to like this blanked metal, a little
crimped moon. Because it reminds me
that my father, the constant harbourer of hurry
and worry, the man who plots to leave
a room as soon as he enters it — once stood still
as a summer afternoon — back of his knees
sweating sweet, tapping his feet at the edge
of a railway platform to simply observe
the workings of pressure. Just as he sat,
rocking his chair, slow as a lullaby,
for three months and change by mother,
comatose in a non-AC hospital room.
By then he was done running
her memory back by purring the songs
she loved. By then, the only song
was him waiting and his resting
heart like an empty bucket poised
to be filled with the water of courage.
What is his exit strategy now? Where does
he hide his sorrow? Between the same
molars that once thickened as honeycombs
with mum's roti crumbles, deep fried
in sugar and ghee? Kutti — we call this
rich breakfast. And dad's salesman-superstition
is to absolutely eat kutti on the first
of every month. *Kutti on the tongue,*
he used to sing, *means Lakshmi will come*
chhan chhan chhan. Once, he sang

for more money. Once, he sang for more of mummy. Now, before work, he gulps down three Marie biscuits, a glass of milk. Rubs his belly says, *I am superbly full*. He knows he isn't. He knows I know he isn't. Fullness, his currency of consolation, his way of saying, I know we're grieving for your mother, but I don't want you to also grieve for my hunger.

Moderator: Thank you, that was wonderful. I'll be reading a brief excerpt from my novel. You don't really need to know anything except that Shek Yeung is the woman pirate commander. As a child, she was captured by pirates and sold to the "flower boats," which was the euphemism in that region for brothel. Cheng Yat is her dead husband and the former commander, and Buddhika is a member of an ally fleet known as the Blue Banner Fleet. In this excerpt, they are in Taiwan.

Excerpt here

Moderator Questions: Okay, I have some questions for each of you.

What are your research strategies?

Jerome: It might sound a bit simple, but I'd say my primary research method these days has been to listen better and more intentionally to my own family's stories and histories. Which is to say, I'm asking my parents and other relatives more questions about their lives and their parents' lives and other relatives lives. And I will say that I do recognize this access to stories is a privilege that some don't have.

I don't know if this is sort of sad and grim to say, but I think part of this process for me has been motivated as more and more of my older relatives have died. And this has definitely been a factor during COVID times as well. With more elder Titas and Titos who have passed in recent years, I hear these stories of family members remembering their lives. And I'm constantly struck by the lives they've lived and histories they've lived through. A few summers ago, I was in the Philippines at my parents' house, and one of my older relatives, who passed away just a few months ago, was talking about her experience of witnessing the Bataan Death March

during WWII, because her brother was one of the soldiers marching in it. And I was just struck by how wild that was, and how I did not know that until then. And it was such a vivid real picture of these events I've only read about in textbooks. I'm growing more and more aware that my parents, uncles, aunts, and other relatives also have such wells of their own stories, and maybe now I'm just paying attention better.

So a lot of things that I've taken as "givens" I'm trying to examine more. I'm asking my parents what it really was like for them to go through the hoops of the process of packing up their lives in the Philippines to move us here. I'm asking more detailed questions of what it was like to live during the Marcos years. And through learning about my family members' personal stories, those things necessarily open me up to learning about bigger themes, contexts, and histories that their stories were set against. For example, I somehow only learned very recently that my great grandfather was the Secretary of Foreign Affairs in the Philippines, which is sort of like the Secretary of State, and that he was a big part in getting the US bases and armed forces out of the Philippines. These kinds of remarkable stories and gateways to history are just there right under my nose, and I'm only really learning to ask and learn and poke and prod more.

Susan: My strategies have evolved over the past forty years, beginning with analog resources like paging through numerous paper phone books, posing as a pregnant woman to obtain the hospital records from my birth, making phone calls and obtaining tips and encouragement from various adoptee support groups. In later years, the Internet proved invaluable, especially with public records and sites like Ancestry.com and DNA sites. I have also researched the history of the Japanese American internment camps to learn more about my mother's experience. I went on a pilgrimage to one of the camps to embody and more fully understand that experience. I have hoarded and shredded every crumb of information she has ever shared with me, however reluctantly.

I am also investigating my adoptive parents experience as Japanese AMERICANS in New York City during the war; unlike the West Coast counterparts, they did not experience internment; however, their community leaders like doctors, ministers and businessmen were incarcerated on Ellis Island and I am writing a historical novel based on this experience.

Zora: Well...I try to ask my family questions subversively. Part of my family's unwillingness to share may come from the fact that they secretly know that I secretly am a writer. This makes them even more reluctant to share. Because I have

a passion for learning about South Vietnamese history - questions I ask are heard differently whereas my brother may ask a question and get an answer he may or may not really listen to, I will open a notebook and take copious notes and stare intensely at my mother during her story-telling to which she will stop sharing and ask me why I want to know. So in general, I wish that my research involved my family - but they are quite tight-lipped so I have to, like Preeti, ask tricky questions that involve something else like - ...so you had pigs when you grew up? And hope something will come out of that because I'm trying to catch my mother off guard. Or something competitive like ...so your sister was a better cook than you? Or your brother was your mother's favorite? Ironically, I learn about what my mother has experienced by eavesdropping on her phone conversations with her friends or other elders - but once she realizes I may be listening, she stops talking. Other elders share sparingly and very generally - like "it was a hard time." "What about it was hard?" "It was a hard time." "Okay but what about it was hard?" "Oh don't ask me anymore questions. Don't think about it anymore."

So really, much of my research involves trying to find obscure writings that have been lost in time or reading the dissertations of historians, living vicariously through their research my many past ancestral lives. In the body of Vietnamese history there are hundreds of books written in English, many of them by Americans who were Vietnam vets. I try to find those books that were written by Vietnamese authors, particularly South Vietnamese writers, who just want to share their stories - they may not be traditionally published - they may be self-published - or they may be books in Vietnamese that have either been translated or that I can translate myself to read. I look for the hidden texts because my hope is that they do not contain some of the adulteration that may occur via publication, state censorship, or other issues such as the rewriting of history by political forces.

Preeti: A lot of the narratives in my poems result from oral histories told to me by my grandfather. And some from his photographs that were taken in a pre-partitioned India. They have led me to writing several ekphrastic pieces. Films and documentaries often spark an image I can't get out of my head and it often becomes the trigger for a poem. I also see a lot of my world through the lens of my mother's absence, who passed away very young. So found objects have heavy emotional weight for me: my mother's diary of recipes she wrote in college for example, a book of hymns in Sindhi my grandpa always kept in his side drawer. I

love tracing the history of how these objects came to stay in their lives, and what windows they can open to the past.

Moderator:

How do you decide what history to include or leave out in your writing?

Jerome: It can definitely be tempting to put in all this information that you've worked so hard to learn. Especially when they are so fascinating, so fun, so unbelievable. But a general rule for me, I think, is to ask of those pieces of information the same thing you ask of any part of your writing. Does it serve the story? Does explaining a certain element of the Marcos Regime or the intricacies of the immigration process really do much for story you're trying to write? For your characters? For heightening tension? For adding conflict?

I actually had a story that Rita had seen an early draft of, where the protagonist is a kid hanging out in her uncle's restaurant. And I had a line in there explaining how the uncle was the dad's brother, who was their sponsor for how they got in to the US, etc. etc. Rita just said "you don't need this." Of course I didn't. This kid was telling the story of how her sister, who really missed the Philippines after their move, was obsessed with this white American guy. Nobody needed to know any details about how they immigrated, and the narrator certainly wouldn't have cared.

Susan: This is a really tricky thing, because I have been so compelled to write about my own and my mother's history, but she is absolutely adamant that I, and her experience of being pregnant with me, as well as my birth and relinquishment, remain a secret. Her immediate family was unaware of her pregnancy. I don't want to reveal her secrets, and at the same time our stories are inextricably entwined. I am unable to write my own stories without hers, and so I take pains to make her character and her situation as "non-identifying" as possible. This is an ongoing challenge and I think this is one reason this book is taking so long to write, because of my own deep need to tell the story and equal amounts of ambivalence.

With my historical novel, I have done extensive research about the World War II period especially through the lens of the Japanese American experience and I've had to really pick and choose which elements are important to the story.

Zora: I focus my writing on alternative histories, fiction that explores history, or historical essays so I am always trying to comb through the hundreds and thousands of dissertations by historians to pluck out history that I'm partial to.

For example, I'm currently writing a year long series of essays for DiCritics on dissident Vietnamese writers...and there is SOOOOOOO much information that maybe no one cares about anymore except for me and perhaps elders...like the political motivation behind some of Vietnam portrayal of history and its heroes in contrast to the South Vietnamese in the diaspora.

So the history that I often decide to include is marginalized or lost history. Much gets rewritten by political forces and so I try to go deep and pull ancient history that existed before it was recrafted by various political regimes - and I go with that history. I also try to go deep into a part of history you can't capture in history books. It's the type of history you can only find in memoirs when people speak about their personal experiences. For example, "Drink Brother for the Pain" is about two boys who could be friends or even brothers - but who are forced by ideology to be enemies. That's the type of history you only get if you read people's memoirs - so I search for memoirs on both sides of history - the victor and the loser - and not state sanctioned novels or fiction (Communist state sanctioned) but banned books written by exiled Vietnamese writers.

I try to hold on to those tidbits that relate to contemporary life - but that too is problematic because the history and the writing that I generate is also seen through my particular racialized lens as a South Vietnamese American growing up in racialized America. So when we look at history, we always have to be careful about how we understand, analyze, and present the historical information.

Another way is to look at tangential research on language and linguistics or religion or song lyrics. You can find more hidden history in analyzing these materials too. For example matriarchal language in Vietnamese language.

Preeti: Often the problem with oral histories, direct accounts from my family members, is that it comes with a certain amount of bias, even propaganda. So, I always have to have my ears open for how much is being said out of inherited privilege. After all, although my family was displaced, they are still caste and class privileged. Our history is not always innocent, so I have to often reckon with their internalized classist/casteist, even misogynistic undercurrents. Often we remember the things we do in a way that serves our survival best. A lot is lost in time, details

become fuzzy. So, although for my poems, I may start in historical fact or detail, what I am chasing is experience. And because there are a lot of gaps in reportage, I try to work the unknowing into the form. Where can what I don't know lead me? I love that the poet Jon Sands calls poets *emotional historians*. It urges me to think about how to write poems that are as multi layered and complex as our pasts.

Moderator:

What are some of your favorite books, by Asian American authors or otherwise, that make successful use of regional/family history? What do you find effective about the craft?

Jerome: I think of Elaine Castillo's *America is Not the Heart*. For the most part, the novel is about these Filipino immigrants rebuilding their life in the United States, in Milpitas, California. But before getting us there, she has a 25-page prologue in the second person that is this sort of whirlwind journey of one of the characters navigating life in the Philippines during the Marcos Regime. It's packed with so much drama and history and political tension, and it's the only part, if I recall that's set in the Philippines. We get this robust backstory that doesn't *feel* like it's just backstory, but it sets this powerful powerful emotional tone. And when we are launched into the main part of the book and life in the States, you can just feel the shadow of those first pages hanging over the rest of it.

Susan: I loved T. Kira Madden's book, *Long Live the Tribe of Fatherless Girls*. It has a very strong regional component of growing up in Hawaii as well as being multiracial Chinese, Kānaka Maoli write, and it also has a (spoiler alert) element of secret family members.

I think I'm very drawn to narratives about the biracial experience, since aside from being adopted, it has distinctly shaped me - but since my parents were both Japanese American, I never had that experience of seeing both of my sides mirrored in the way that most biracial people do, growing up with their genetic parents.

I have been inspired and moved by Alexander Chee's work, by Faith Adiele who is another mixed race author grappling with multiple identities, as well as Michelle

Zauner's *Crying in H Mart*, which I read and taught most recently. She really explores the significance of place in her own family, and after her mother's death, travels back to Korea which has such a deep role in her sense of identity.

Zora: One of the most difficult things to write about is child abuse, particularly if you are Vietnamese American and you're supposed to be the model minority - which is a mythology of survival. That is, the mythology of being the model minority or succeeding by pulling yourself up from your bootstraps or through meritocracy is a critical part of the coping mechanisms of many refugee populations. So writing something that tears that myth apart such as child abuse and mental health issues is very challenging. So my current favorite is Ocean Vuong's "On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous by Ocean Vuong."

In "On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous," Ocean goes into his family history which involves his mother and his grandmother's relationships with American soldiers and how they resulted in Amerasian children - him, one of them. Though he does not go deep into the history behind Amerasians in Vietnam and the difficulties of their lives - which may have exasperated his mother and his grandmother's mental health issues, *I know* as someone who has researched in depth the political, economic, and cultural history of his mother and his grandmother.

Preeti: Most recently, Victoria Chang's book, *Dear Memory* is an excellent collection that makes use of photographs, found objects and documents, that Chang explores to write poems. The book also contains several letters written to members of her family and others. This book sits at the intersection of grief, familial relationships and the act of writing itself. It is a multimedia exploration of grief. Through the epistolary form, the speaker is not only giving us a deep insight into familial dynamics but also telling us about her relationship with writing. So, it serves as a craft book but also (as Maya Philips says) is an excavation, a digging through the muck of society for an existential clarity, a cultural clarity and a general clarity of self. My favorite thing about this book is how often the sentences begin with 'I imagine' and 'I wonder'.

Moderator Closing Remarks: And I would recommend Charles Yu's *Interior Chinatown*, which features a powerful section toward the middle of the book that talks about the White Terror that occurred under authoritarian rule in Taiwan.

I want to thank all of my panelists for participating, and to all of you as well for attending. If any of you have any questions/thoughts about this panel, I encourage you to reach out to me through social media. I can be found on Twitter, as can my panelists. Thank you again!