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Mapping Community Mindscapes: Visualizing Social Autobiography as Political Transformation and Mobilization

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Mapping Community Mindscales:
Visualizing Social Autobiography as Political Transformation and Mobilization

by
Emily 周 Bluck

Submitted to Scripps College in partial fulfillment of the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Professor Thomas P. Kim
Professor Warren Liu

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Chapter 1

Sowing the seed.

“It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness”
-Karl Marx

“Who are you accountable to?” and “what is a counter-hegemonic thesis practice?” These questions echoed through my mind as I began my thesis project brainstorming. My first idea came in the form of a community-based art project with and for an organization that I had been working with on and off for the past few years, the Labor/Community Strategy Center. In my mind, this thesis topic was the answer to both of those questions. Not only did it express my accountability to the Strategy Center, the work that they do, and the amazing people whom I had met and worked with, but I also believed that working with them would function as a counter-hegemonic thesis practice as I was using my academic requirement for a more instrumental purpose that supported the work currently being done by progressive, working class, people of color communities in Los Angeles instead of simply using my thesis as yet *another* essay of academic and intellectual inquiry that merely serves the purpose of allowing me to graduate from college. However, this inkling of an idea fell through due to various temporal and spatial logistical obstacles, which can be a reality of community-based endeavors. So I sought a connection closer to home, closer to my heart.

Immediately upon arrival at Scripps College, the Asian American community became my surrogate family—my home away from home, beginning on move-in day, August 2008 when my Asian American “sponsors” knocked on my door to greet me and

assure me that they would be there to provide support whenever I needed them. The Asian American Sponsor Program (AASP), a Scripps organization that strives to mentor and provide academic, social, and emotional support to self-identified Asian Pacific Islander (API) first years, and later on the Asian American Student Union (AASU), another Scripps organization that retains a more politicized membership and fosters critical engagement with and critical consciousness around pressing issues that APIs face, grew to be more than a source of individualized support my first year, and more than a mere extracurricular activity or leadership experience I partook in my second, third, and fourth years at Scripps. They became my cornerstone, uniting the personal with the political as my framework, my foundation for understanding the world and myself. “We hope to love, encourage, support, and politicize our membership,” (AASU mission statement) could never ring more true.

Although recent graduates Candace Kita ‘11 and Emi Sawada ‘11 both completed their theses on AASU just last year, theoretically setting the precedent for AASU theses to come, it never actually occurred to me that I too could focus my project on AASU (partially because the two of them had adamantly rejected the notion of others making their theses out of AASU because of the intense conflation of work and play as well as the mental-emotional stress it caused them), but when it did, it just seemed right. Using my thesis to work with AASU was the perfect way to remain accountable to the organization that had nurtured me throughout college and engage in a counter-hegemonic thesis practice. My commitment to an AASU thesis project also helped to create my agenda, that is, to have my project build off of and exist in conversation with Candace and Emi’s theses while also establishing a standard for a continued tradition of AASU

members using their theses (and other academic projects or papers) to support AASU, its growth, sustainability, and future.

What transpired was a conceptual merging of Emi and Candace's theses, of collective autobiography and historical documentation with the revitalization of the AASU office space into a project that seeks to accomplish both in a way that is not simply a rehashing of those preceding projects, but rather contributes to their foundational work in a meaningful way by addressing some of the pressing needs of the Asian American Student Union community that are still yet unfulfilled. My project aspires to make (permanently) visible the social history of AASU that has been told and retold every year, almost to the point of making it urban legend, as well as the histories of its members and their families beyond AASU through their inscription upon the walls of Kimbo 92¹. Through a series of workshops beginning with one executed during the AASU fall 2011 retreat, members will add histories of personal and familial significance to the surfaces of our general meeting room, to be fully compiled into a visual map of our social histories and contextualized within the larger body of Asian American social autobiography.

To me, this thesis project is not simply a project of academic and intellectual inquiry, and it certainly isn't one merely for the sake of it being so. It is a community project that represents my and AASU's commitment as an organization to theory driven political praxis. I am primarily interested in how the project engages with a social knowledge of AASU's community history in conjunction with my understanding of

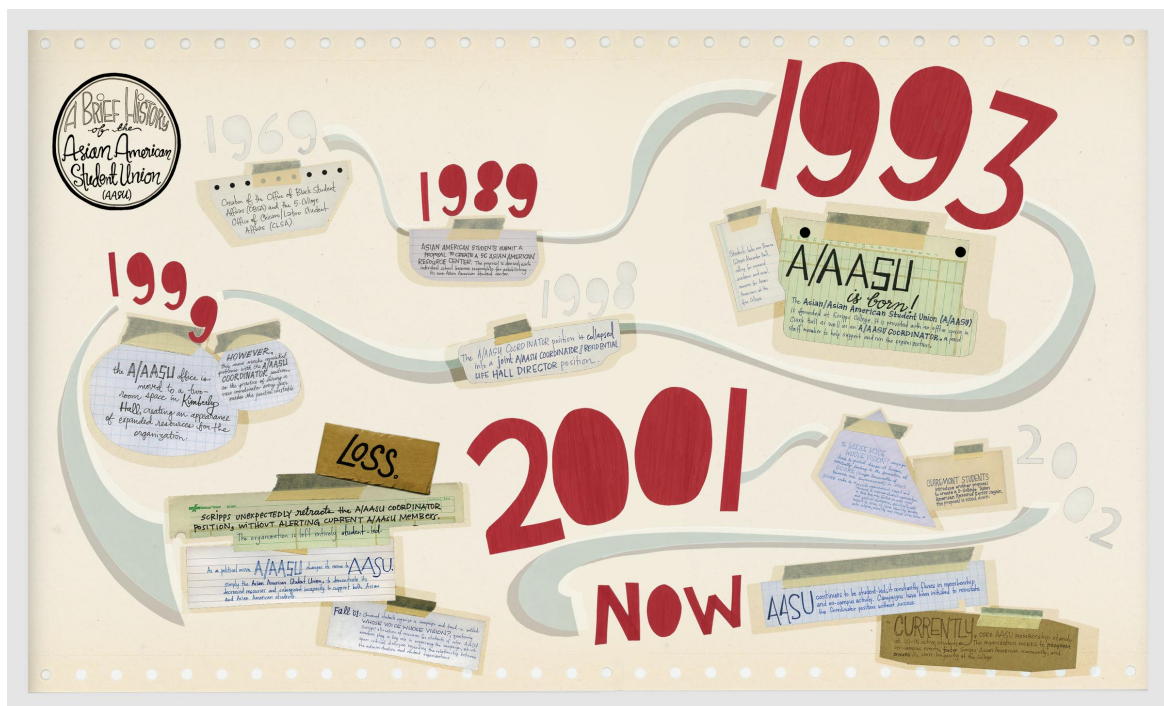
¹ "Kimbo 92" is the AASU office general meeting space located in Kimberly Hall room 92, directly across the hall from Kimberly 95, the secondary office space recently renovated by Candace Kita.

theories such as critical pedagogy, relational aesthetics, participatory art, community memory and more, to create a (hopefully) powerful and transformative project that will support AASU members and the organization's growth, sustainability, and vision. As such, although this project functions as my key to graduation, I hope that its impact will last far beyond this year's work. I hope it will inspire, nourish, and *organize* past, present, and future members of AASU. Because of the intentionality with which I approach my project, this paper should not be read as a defense of my artwork, but should stand in conjunction with the project itself to provide the essential social-historical context and theoretical background to the project I embark on.

Chapter 2²

Finding our roots.

Before I will go into the theories that shaped the body of my project, to truly convey the significance of a mapping of AASU members' social autobiography, I will delve briefly into the nebulous, mythic history of the Asian American Student Union.



Our history has been well documented when we have found it necessary, yet sparsely told when not (or at least when we do not recognize it as history or as a moment of crisis). However, the (highly) abridged version of our history—the one told and told again to new and old membership at least a few times during the course of each academic year—

² Most of the information in this chapter comes from three sources primarily drafted by students at the Claremont Colleges. The first document is “History of the Asian American Student Union and the Asian American Sponsor Program at Scripps College (1993-2001).”

³ Artistic abridged timeline of AASU’s history documented by Candace Kita ‘11

has been documented and printed into physical form by Candace Kita as a part of her *Make Manifest* studio art thesis project last year. Let me use this as a starting point for reiterating and expanding upon AASU's history as I understand it and as it is relevant to my project. I will begin with the first date noted on Candace's timeline and continue from there, situating AASU's history within the greater history of Asian American activism and institutions at the 5-C's to give a more comprehensive overview of the organization's political formation.

In 1969, as the Third World Liberation Front's student strike staged at San Francisco State University in November 1968 in demand of Ethnic Studies (as well as an end to the Vietnam War and much more) and ending in March 1969 with the concession of the College of Ethnic Studies, the Claremont Colleges instated the Intercollegiate Department of Black Studies and the Intercollegiate Chicano Studies Department, as well as the five-college (5-C) Office of Black Student Affairs and the 5-C Chicano/Latino Student Affairs office, (Asian American Community History and Experiences at the Claremont Colleges, 1). Asian American students were not granted similar departments and offices on campus. It was not until February of 1989 that Helen Park and other Asian American students from Pomona first submitted a proposal for at 5-C Asian American Resource Center, ("History & Timeline"). Although the Pomona administration was supportive of the proposal, the Council of Presidents eventually voted down the proposal declaring that Asian American students at the other colleges were "well adjusted, had high academic grades and high rates of graduation and therefore did not need these services,"(Asian American Community History and Experiences at the Claremont Colleges, 1) or that the colleges did not have the finances to support such a Center

(Yamane). The Presidents agreed that each college would be responsible for its own Asian American student populations and install organizations or departments as they saw fit.

The next year, in the fall of 1990, Pomona College decided to put on a production of Gilbert and Sullivan's comic opera "The Mikado," which provoked a series of protests and teach-ins to raise awareness of the racist, sexist, and Orientalist nature of the opera. The protests highlighted the need for a critical understanding of Asian American issues. This event became a pivotal moment in Asian American activism on campus, and led to greater institutional recognition of Asian Americans at the 5-C's, and specifically, the inception of the Asian American Resource Center (AARC) at Pomona College in the fall of 1991. The AARC started with only one hired staff person serving as the Director, but has since grown to have two full-time staff positions—a Director and Program Coordinator.

Two years after the Mikado Protest, another act of student activism took place in the form of the "Alexander Hall Takeover." On February 2nd 1993, students from across the 5-C's band together to occupy Alexander Hall at Pomona College. The Takeover involved over 100 students and was a response to Pomona College English Department's rejection of three African American finalists for a tenure-track faculty position, (Ward). Although it began as a fight for greater racial diversity among faculty at the five colleges specifically in defense of the three Black potential faculty hires, the memory of the event has become one of critical significance to the Asian American community because of how it directly began the development for an Intercollegiate Department of Asian American Studies (IDAAS).

In addition to inspiring the brainstorming for the eventual creation of IDAAS, the Alexander Hall Takeover lead to the institutionalization and name change of the Asian/Asian American Student Union at Scripps with its first part-time Program Coordinator in the fall of 1993. Our Dean of Students at the time, Barbara Bush, fully supported A/AASU and its members. Prior to 1993, the Asian/Asian American Student Union was known as AWARE: Asian American Women as Resources for Each Other. It is unknown just when AWARE began or who started it, but what is clear is that it was not funded by the Dean of Students and was completely student driven in its time, energy, and resources. As a newly instituted CLORG (club/organization), A/AASU was provided with an office space in Grace (now known as “Clark”) Hall where the Program Coordinator and A/AASU’s work-study members could hold office hours, meetings, and develop their programming agendas. During that same fall 1993, Asian American students at Scripps submitted a proposal to create the Asian/Asian American Mentor Program (A/AAMP), to support incoming self-identified Asian American first years. The mentor program was officially established in the spring of 1994.

A/AASU’s first Coordinator left after only her first year. This was just the beginning of a series of five short-lived A/AASU Coordinators. A/AASU had a new Coordinator every year or every other year up until 2000 when the Coordinator position was revoked. From what I have read of them, none of them functionally supported A/AASU in the ways that they had anticipated when members from the time had first received the position. However, that was not due to the fault of the individual Coordinators. It is clear in the more detailed historical documentation that the Coordinator position became significantly compromised over time due to added on

Residential Life Hall Director responsibilities. Let me skip forward from 1994 to 1999 when Scripps experienced a huge turnover in administration as the only major thing to note between 1994 and 1999 was that A/AAMP changed its name to Peer Assistance Leaders (PAL) for reasons unknown. With every turnover in administration, as a student, it is difficult to anticipate exactly how the new administrators will engage with your student organization. We recently experienced a turnover like the one in 1999 just last year for the 2010-2011 academic year. Unfortunately, the administrative turnover of 1999 did not treat A/AASU well.

The new Dean of Students, Debra Wood did not show the same commitment to Asian American students on campus as former Dean Bush had. Upon arrival, she decided to change the A/AASU Coordinator position from the original part-time position to a full-time, dual role Residential Life Hall Director/A/AASU Coordinator position. She also disbanded Peer Assistance Leaders and instituted a new program called the Multicultural Educators Program. Members of PAL met with Dean Wood to discuss the changes being made to their program, and convinced her to allow PAL to continue, not as the program as it was before, but renamed the Asian/Asian American Student Union Sponsors (A/AASU Sponsors—this name later was simplified to A/AASP for the Asian/Asian American Sponsor Program) and included as a subset of the main Peer Mentors for the general first year student body. That is, the new A/AASU Sponsors would have a primary mentorship group with students of all races and ethnicities, but would still find ways to cultivate relationships with first year self-identified Asian American students.

This emphasis on multiculturalism and the conflation of support for students of color with support for the entire student body along with the disciplinary role inherent in Residential Life positions indicated Dean Wood's complete lack of regard for the needs of students of color. She (as an institutional figure, not as an individual) was much more invested in supporting the neo-liberal agenda for diversity, which advocates that the marginalized students teach white students about their struggles, their experiences, and their cultures so that white students will be better able to compete for jobs in the global economy. The assumption is that in such an increasingly global world, white Americans will need to know the appropriate etiquette to interact and do business with people from other parts of the world like Asia, Africa, and Latin America. However, it may not have been a wholly terrible arrangement. According to Mandy Westfall, the A/AASU Coordinator from that 1998-1999 academic year (the fifth Coordinator in our history) the submerging of A/AASU Sponsors within the Peer Mentors actually proved beneficial in raising more awareness of A/AASU on campus because they then had more contact with all kinds of students and not just those who identified as Asian American. "Many of [the A/AASU Sponsors] appreciated the fact that they had a regular mentor group and also made contact with the Asian American students," (Westfall 10)

During this time of great change for A/AASU, came another unexpected shift. In 1999, the A/AASU office was moved from its location in Clark Hall to its current location in Kimberly rooms 92 and 95. This gave the impression that A/AASU was expanding when in fact the organization was struggling to remain afloat. Because Mandy's position was so compromised by its extra Residential Life duties, many believed that the Coordinator could not adequately support A/AASU. This portion of our

history is always retold in such a way to express AASU member's analysis of the two-room expansion of the A/AASU office as the Scripps administration's way of appeasing the A/AASU members with more space while covertly preparing to strip A/AASU of its resources. As such, in Mandy's second year as A/AASU Coordinator, the Dean of Students told her that the Hall Director/A/AASU Coordinator position would be removed. None of the A/AASU members were informed of this change. Outraged, A/AASU members met with Dean Wood to discuss their options. Dean Wood agreed to reinstate the Coordinator position as it had originally existed in 1998 without Residential Life duties and with a weekly stipend plus room and board, however when Dean of Students finally posted the job, it was significantly reduced in both hours and extra benefits. The Coordinator would no longer receive room and board with her position, nor would she have a weekly stipend. A/AASU members were infuriated. Plus, to add insult to injury, the job was only posted on the Claremont Graduate University website, not even on Scripps' website. Not surprisingly, they received very few applications, none of whom were suited for the position. The search for a new Coordinator under those parameters failed.

All of these events preceded the establishment of the Multicultural Resource Center (MRC) on Scripps campus in the fall of 1999. An official statement made by the Scripps institution in Part C, page 24 of the Campus Diversity Initiative Proposal Narrative to the Irvine Foundation concretizes the link between the termination of the A/AASU Coordinator position and the creation of the MRC.

After seven years of funding the [A/AASU Coordinator] position, Scripps reassessed the philosophical basis of this support. The College concluded that it was providing financial support to one organization comprised of students of Asian heritage when it endeavored to support all

underrepresented populations. Consequently, the College established the Multicultural Resource Center staffed by three full-time, trained professionals.

Then, in the spring of 2001, the Asian/Asian American Student Union changed their name to the Asian American Student Union (AASU) as a political statement to the Scripps administration. The drop of the first Asian in the organization's name was a symbolic declaration of the lack of resources the organization received from the Scripps institution to adequately support both Asian and Asian American students, two groups, which arguably have very different needs. Additionally, the name change from A/AASU to AASU was an important acknowledgement of the organization's ideological identity as a politically Asian American group. This speaks to the historical development and use of the term "Asian American" for progressive political agendas. Following suit, the Asian/Asian American Sponsor Program also changed its name to simply the Asian American Sponsor Program, ("WHEN FEELINGS ARE CAMPAIGNED").

Despite AASU's politically driven name change, Scripps pressed on with their mission to increase multicultural diversity on campus, and on June 25, 2001, Scripps media announced that the College had been awarded a three-year grant of \$800,000 from the James Irvine Foundation to "support efforts to create a strong multicultural academic and residential community, as part of the College's recently developed Campus Diversity Initiative," ("Irvine Foundation Awards Scripps College Grant to Fund Diversity Initiative"). \$800,000 is a substantial amount of money, however, from a student perspective, it remains unclear as to how those funds have gotten used since the College was awarded the funds as resources provided then and now 10 years later seem

remarkably similar.⁴ Nonetheless, what we do know is that the MRC was one of the main sites for channeling those funds. Well, the Multicultural Resource Center did not last very long for students of color, acutely aware of what “diversity” meant to the Scripps institution, banded together to fight for their rights as students to be provided adequate, culturally sensitive resources, and to not exist solely as racial tokens for the education of white students on campus. A/AASU members started up their own Asian American Studies course that year called ASAM199: “Color Conscious: Asian America against a Backdrop of Multiculturalism.” The course was entirely student-led and brought in big name Asian American guest lecturers from Southern and Northern California. (Sawada 82) Students had found a way to channel their frustrations into something tangible. They had found a way to get the word out about the College’s multiculturalist agenda and mobilize support from other students. Having gained momentum and allies, particularly from some of the Multicultural Educators who were critical of their own positions as Multicultural Educators and the administration, A/AASU prepared for an even bigger battle than ASAM199.

This battle was the “Whose Voice? Whose Vision?” campaign. Scripps had used *Women of Voice and Vision* as their 75th anniversary slogan in 2001, to which students of color responded “Whose Voice? Whose Vision?” (“WV?WV?”) in a teach-in they held in October 2001 at the Motley Coffeehouse to raise awareness of the issues that they face on campus. That was the first significant moment when students of color from different

⁴ One of the things that came of Emi’s thesis was an alum event held in the Spring of 2011, which flew in some of the alums who had taken part in the “Whose Voice? Whose Vision?” teach-in nearly ten years prior. Current members had the opportunity to discuss with them the similarities and differences in the amount and kinds of institutional support given to students of color. It was then that we found out we (AASU) are still struggling with the same issues that Asian American students had struggled with back then.

groups such as A/AASU, Wanawake Weusi (a CLORG for students of African descent), Multicultural Educators Program, and the Chicano/Latino Student Affairs banded together to fight for common cause on Scripps campus. Their protests forced the Scripps administration to reconsider the opening of the MRC, and thus SCORE, or Scripps Communities of Resources and Empowerment was born. Although SCORE was a still not the best alternative to the Multicultural Resource Center, it was still a more welcomed option for the students. In their minds, SCORE due to its framework of “empowerment” and “communities” could be more easily (politically) appropriated institutional space than the MRC, the name of which indicated its unwavering, neo-liberal framework.

The remainder of AASU’s history from 2002 until today is significantly condensed as members and administrators either neglected to document the years following our most intense period of struggle or failed to keep track of all of their files. From what I do know however is that shortly after the “WV?WV?” campaign, students from the 5-C student-run CLORG AASA, short for the Asian American Student Alliance composed another proposal for an institutionalized 5-C Asian American Student Center (AASC) on November 15th, 2002. This proposal was shot down almost immediately. Less than 24 hours after sending the proposal, the students received a letter from the Council of Presidents denying their demands. Instead, what arrived was the creation of the five-college Asian American Advisory Board, which was intended to be a temporary measure of support until a 5-C AASC was granted. However, it has lasted up to this day. Currently “Ad Board” as it is called acts like a “money bank,” distributing funds to various CLORG events throughout the year. They also are responsible for funding the fall retreats taken by the Asian American sponsor/mentor programs at each of the five colleges (including

AASP, AASP at Pitzer, AAMP at Pomona, the Asian Pacific Islander Sponsor Program at Mudd aka API-SPAM, and the Asian Pacific American Mentors aka APAM at CMC), as well as putting on a Spring Conference on Asian American issues, and API Graduation in May.

Then, at the beginning of the last academic year 2010-2011, Scripps experienced another huge turnover in its administrators. Yet fortunately this was a much happier experience than that which brought us Dean Debra Wood. Now our new Dean of Students, Bekki Lee, is a self-identified Asian American woman herself *and* an AASU ally. Additionally, our President, Lori Bettison-Varga is doing a lot of (active) work to support students of color including having intimate sessions with CLORG members to talk about their grievances and ultimately find ways to solve them. This year, with such support from the administration and long talks with Bekki Lee about AASU's need for a Coordinator, the College proposed a temporary, part-time position for a dual SCORE and AASU Coordinator! They went through a series of candidates, but for such a temporary position (only three semesters long at 16-hours-a-week with no benefits), we have not gotten candidates who would adequately fill that role. The administration seems to understand that it is not a very appealing position for people with more experience to apply for and has increased the position to 20-hours-a-week *with* benefits, and once again to 30-hours-a-week with benefits. Hopefully this will yield better results. This is where we stand now in our point in history.

Although this retelling of AASU's history has been a rather mechanical regurgitation of facts with some personal and communal analysis interspersed

throughout,⁵ I believe that it is important to acknowledge even the small bits of our history such as the rapid turnover of each of our Coordinators as a way of understanding the AASU of today. Each fact (or fiction) of this historical narrative reflects how AASU members and other figures mentioned in our history from the recent past have understood the role of the Asian American Student Union with respect to the rest of the Scripps campus which then informed just how much attention and intention was put into keeping AASU alive and functional.

Now, let's look back to Candace's timeline of AASU's history. I find it critical to note here that the timeline is completely structured around contested moments in our history, and that much of AASU's history from what I have recalled above is comprised of negotiations for space, time, and memory. These moments of contestation are pivotal components to the development and execution of my project. For instance, the shift from seeing the original AASU office in Clark (formerly known as Grace) Hall to seeing the Kimberly offices 92 and 95 as a locus for Asian American community development due to institutional eviction and dis/replacement (a place, which Asian American students had to fight to get in the first place), as well as the fact (myth?)⁶ that the school wanted to take away our space(s) in Kimberly to give to a Muslim religious group on campus is evocative of how the physicality of Asian American place and space has been historically contested on campus. The knowledge that it has been a struggle to acquire and retain an

⁵ Emi Sawada's thesis provides a much more comprehensive, beautifully woven narration—particularly of our biggest years of struggle.

⁶ Whether this was a real threat is will unclear to me. During my first year, I recall having been told by upperclass AASP and AASU members that the Dean of Students had planned on taking the spaces away during the summer before I arrived at Scripps. Yet for some reason she did not follow through. I cannot find any written documentation confirming that this exchange about the space between the Dean of Students and AASU members actually occurred.

Asian American place and space informs my project as I work to cement Kimbo 92 (Candace having already worked on Kimbo 95) as an AASU space by remodeling its surfaces. At the very least, it would make it more difficult for the institution to appropriate because of all the restorative work (time, labor, money) they would have to put into the two rooms to set it back to its previous basic, non-descript form. This is one form that our spatial agency can take. Having historically been dictated which physical locations we are permitted to occupy, this is a way of spreading our roots and taking claim of this room of historical and political significance to our community.

Another moment from our history that shapes my intent with the project is the Coordinator loss. Since the AASU Coordinator was retracted in 2001, AASU has repeatedly tried to work with the school to reinstate the position, however we were denied every time. One of the (many) reasons that the Asian American Student Union feels that we need a hired staff person to support the organization is due to the frailty of student-run organizations with such a high membership turnover. What we inherently lack due to the four-year turnover is a strong sense of institutional memory⁷. Because it is only possible for students to be a part of AASU for the duration of their time at Scripps (typically four years), and many students don't actually get involved until their 2nd or 3rd year, the first-hand memories of AASU with relation to the greater Scripps College institution that can feasibly be retained are limited. By collaboratively illustrating AASU's social autobiography and concretizing it on the walls of Kimbo 92, hopefully it

⁷ Institutional memory encompasses everything from an understanding of what and who have come before us, how to run the organization, what role work-study members play in comparison to non-work study, non-paid members, how to manage the budget, and much, much more.

will function to connect us to memories reaching far back and far into the future beyond the four-year student turnover.

As this project will support the documentation of the more recent AASU histories, it not only serves to chronicle, but it also acts as the vehicle for retelling our stories to future generations of AASU members. It is therefore inherently a pedagogical act of history making. AASU as an organization has long been engaged in pedagogical work through holding workshops on topics such as sexism and heterosexism in the media or on language and access to spaces, but it's pedagogical work became most visible through the AASU-designed course ASAM199. This project merely builds upon that historical work. And because the project includes moments of personal and familial significance, which stretch beyond the confines of the AASU historical map and connect us to historical events (e.g. World War II, the Korean War, 9/11, and more), the project also connects us to each other in the present through our pasts. However, I should make it clear that in mapping our collective histories, I am less concerned with the factual elements of our history/memory, and much more interested in how we experience and how we remember it. In that sense, the ambiguously real or mythic danger of having our space once again revoked to be given to a Muslim CLORG (club/organization) has an equally valid seat at the table of our interwoven histories due to its very real implications on how we conceptualize ourselves as Asian Americans at Scripps College.⁸

⁸ In fact, I remember having a rather intense, late-night meeting with AASU leadership and AASP leadership when I was co-head of AASP in 2010-2011 about the administration's appropriation of AASU materials, with a desk in Kimbo 95 functioning as the site of contestation. A letter we received from maintenance on September 2, 2010 at 9am prompted the meeting because it reflected (in our minds) the historical lack of respect the administration has had for Asian American students on campus, as well as

Grounding my thesis work in historical Asian American struggle with the Scripps College institution creates the scaffolding for understanding my thesis as a spatial, aesthetic intervention in the discourse of place, space, memory, and political identity formation on campus.

their mindset that they can give and take away our resources on a whim. Here is the email (continued at the bottom of the next page):

Good Morning Ladies:

On a tour of Kimberly, we noticed that there is a small desk in the north Kimberly office that I have a real need for in the new SARLO space. Considering that there is already another desk in your Kimberly space and you also have a desk in the SCORE office, I hope that you will be able to do without it. I would like to pick it up on Friday. Can you please have it cleaned out/off by then?

I appreciate your support.
-Melinda Jo

Chapter 3

Fertilizing the soil.

In the introductory chapter of my written thesis, I repeatedly allude to the notion of a “counter-hegemonic thesis practice.” Here, I find it necessary to define (cultural) hegemony and then counter-hegemony according to a Gramscian (with some Butler on disorientation thrown in) tradition of analysis and how my project fits within that framework before delving fully into the theories that drive this political project. Professor Thomas Kim once told our class that, “HEGEMONY = FORCE + CONSENT + CONCESSIONS,” (Kim). Namely, what he was trying to get us to understand was that hegemony is not simply the pure domination of a nation, a worldview, or a particular class of people, but rather that hegemony as Antonio Gramsci sees it is the capture of societal consent to being controlled through the proliferation and standardization of cultural norms. This is what we might consider “common sense.” Then, by this definition, counter-hegemony is the process by which a people or society is disoriented from the “common sense” ways of thinking, acting, being and is reoriented to an alternate understanding of the world that must continually disrupt power relations and notions of what is normative and good in society. I wish to highlight how hegemony must be *continually* disrupted and that the disorientation following disruption must be *sustained* in order to have meaningful impact. That said, the disruption does not necessitate a constant disruption, but rather one (or many) that can come in the form of a small,

momentary disturbance, that gets repeated, to varying degrees, throughout time.⁹ For instance by this definition, the Asian American Student Union acts as a counter-hegemonic space by providing counter narratives to the dominant discourse on diversity that is so pervasive at the Claremont Colleges. Additionally, at many of our meetings, we provide a discussion space where our members can speak critically about issues such as racism, anti-racism, patriarchy, feminism, heterosexism, queer versus LGBT, ableism, and much more. As I indicated before, my thesis project wishes to disrupt, disorient, and defend that disorientation through a visual social autobiography that will function to document our history, build community, transform AASU's members in a dialogical fashion, and mobilize them to political action.

Although this project engages in visual, pedagogical, dialogical history-making *inside* the walls of the AASU office space in Kimbo 95, and as such its context is bound to the specificity of the Asian American community at Scripps and the rest of the Claremont College Consortium, my work is situated within a *larger conversation* that brings together relational and pedagogical theories and practices of autobiography, the

⁹ I think this paper in itself is evidence of my struggle to break free of hegemonic notions of the artist-viewer roles as well as my struggle with the question “who owns this art piece?” I have oscillated between terming the art installation project in Kimbo 92 as “my project” and “the project” just within this paper. Although I thought to go back and choose one term over the other for the sake of consistency, I have decided to leave it as is because of how it so clearly reflects the fluid ownership over this project. Although I may be the instigator, the facilitator of the project's creation, I cannot be the end of the project. Drawing upon Candace's words, “While the spatial component may reach a final point of no longer being manipulated, the fact that so much of the work is based in community-building—a concept founded on continual process and has no definitive stage of completion—ensures that in at least some respects, the work will continue beyond a finite period of time,” (Kita 12). That is why we've chosen the icon of a tree to hold the structure for our social autobiography.

mapping of histories, art, and space and place, and are thus not isolated in its endeavors. Especially because this project builds upon two theses that came before it, it necessarily unites and complicates some of the theories that are mentioned there within. I will begin first with the conceptual drivers of this project and move on to the function and the form that the art installation in Kimbo 92 will take.

Emi's thesis clearly maps the historical origins of literary autobiography as created by, perpetuating, and embedded in neo-liberal, capitalist ideological discourse, and centers the daily life of the (white, heterosexual male) individual. The *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (originally titled in French *Memoires de la vie privée* or *The Private Life of the Late Benjamin Franklin*) is one such text that defines the canon. In Franklin's autobiography we see the development of self-reliance and the progress narrative through his daily documentation of his *scheme of order*. He meticulously outlines his routine for the day and reflects upon the improvement he sees through his disciplined schedule. For instance he writes, "I was surprised to find myself so much fuller of faults than I had imagined; but I had the satisfaction of seeing them diminish," (Franklin 93-94). This quotation illustrates the self-disciplined improvement, or individually motivated progress, that is assumed in western neo-liberal temporal frameworks. Similarly, in contemporary, popular, celebrity autobiographies there remains an expectation of not only progress, but also, as is expected within the arc of fiction, that the individual or character will overcome a struggle and come out on the other side better and much improved a person because of it.

In her thesis, Emi delves into how the neo-liberal framework can be read in relation to Marx's theory of alienated labor. For (queer) people of color whose stories do

not or often cannot conform to those expectation, the process of fitting one's own autobiographical narrative into the unyielding mold provided by neo-liberal agenda becomes something akin to the process by which workers are alienated from their labor. One starting point for my research was *Cartographies of Time*, which courses through the history of graphic representations of time in the spatially specific Western world. Although the book's authors seek to complicate the history of the timeline and posit that there were a number of innovators who critiqued and took note of the limits of linear metaphors of time, I find it necessary to discuss and connect the drive for the development of the timeline to neo-liberal autobiography and the alienation of (queer) people of color from their own histories.

Despite the many schools of thought around the methodology of representing time, according to Rosenberg and Grafton, "the key problem in chronographics, it turned out, was not how to design more complex visual schemes—the approach of many would-be innovators in the seventeenth century—but, rather, how to *simplify*, how to create a visual scheme to clearly communicate the uniformity, directionality, and irreversibility of historical time," (Rosenberg and Grafton 19, my emphasis). Here, I highlight the term "simplify" to stress how in emphasizing uniformity, clarity, we lose much of what might be considered "less important" moments in history for the sake of making it condensed. In an example using Shakespeares *Macbeth* to illustrate thematics of time as represented in literature Rosenberg and Grafton write, "Time, for Macbeth, exists only as it is recorded," (14). This statement becomes quite true in the context of the histories of (queer) people of color who have often not existed as the protagonists in Western, straight, white, male-dominated narratives. The saying, "history is written by the victors,"

when combined with the quotation on Macbeth can be read differently. If history and time are both things being documented, and victors (historically white, straight, men) are seen as the only people who have control over what gets documented, if we then insert (queer) people of color into where Macbeth is written in the first statement, we can understand that history (time), for (queer) people of color, only exist as it is recorded by the people historically in power. The process of neo-liberal autobiographical conformity and simplification requires much erasure of one's own history and unresolved struggles that the end product could never be an honest reflection of personal history. That is wherein the alienation lies. As (queer) people of color we are alienated by the form and the function of autobiography because of the strict tenet of progress inherent in autobiographical narrative and self-reliant ideology embedded within, which are not always accessible to us.

It has come to be the hegemonic norm that we think of time as passing linearly and that it can be documented in form by a single line of a pencil drawn across a paper with two arrows pointing into infinity on either end of the segment. Our history books bombard us with this diagram as the only possible option for relaying condensed historical information. This fact is important in thinking of how linear progress of history is sterilized. By sterilized I mean, stripped of humanity and invisibilizes the subjects while resting on a false sense of objective stability. Timelines as we know them seek to display designated "important" events that occurred during any given period of history. However, the timeline, while simple and efficient, strips the humanity of its subjects and rests on a false sense of objective stability.

Having an understanding of how the linear simplification of history acts to alienate and completely erase marginalized subjects from the process of history-making, I find myself making links back to my project's structural and functional form. As the community with which I create this project, is made up of self-identified Asian American women at Scripps College, I find it critical that the project does not reproduce those hegemonic standards of representing time visually and spatially. Because of this, I had been grappling for months over the question "how can we create a visual structure for AASU's social autobiography that is non-linear, and leaves room for infinite future additions to the design when the installation piece is confined to a finite physical space?" Only after facilitating one of my thesis workshops with AASU members, the icon of a tree came to me and it seemed to align perfectly with what I wanted to accomplish. Although one could argue that trees do grow in a vertical line, I see trees as growing not just vertically, but also growing sideways in girth. In my mind the growth and trajectory of the tree on the wall would mirror that of the AASU organization and its members. I imagine it will keep growing (literally and figuratively), spatially, historically, and politically as the organization and its members grow. As the organization grows stronger, so too will the trunk of the tree; as the group expands so too will its branches and leaves.

Incorporating autobiography into this analysis of the project's ultimate form, autobiography for Asian American subjectivities must find ways to struggle against hegemonic, neo-liberal, individualistic autobiography in senses aside from non-linear progress narratives. Emi discusses this in her thesis under the term collective autobiography. By drawing upon theorists such as Paulo Freire and Sidonie Smith who discuss autobiography as a form of resistance to hegemony or a fashion of performing

and articulating the self respectively, Emi theorizes (and practices) how Asian American collective autobiography can act in resistance to hegemony because it takes on a pedagogical function. Although what she discusses throughout her thesis as pedagogical resistance is Asian American “collective autobiography,” I wish to shift her language to *social* autobiography. By incorporating the theories of philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy with Emi’s agenda, we can see how his configuration of community as a way to resist hegemonic power, provides another way of imagining her thesis and the importance of the term social as opposed to collective. In *The Community Performance Reader*, Petra Kuppers infers of Nancy’s words that “storytelling, sharing language and myth-making are the offerings that allow the horizon of community to appear,” (Kuppers and Robertson 36). What Emi doesn’t specifically mention is the centrality of *community* in the ability for autobiography to transform into something not just collective, but *social* and become a form of pedagogical resistance. The difference between collective and social is not something of triviality. Although collective as a term typically carries with it a political tonality and it does indeed represent a grouping or a collection of different people, what I wish to highlight in the word social is its interactive nature. As illustrated by Kuppers, storytelling builds community, and what I’ve learned through working with and being a part of AASU is that it is also reflexive. Storytelling is a powerful way to lay the foundations for community. Once community exists, storytelling takes on the ability to become more than history-sharing in the moment, it can evolve into a powerful front for resistance as demonstrated in the “Whose Voice? Whose Vision?” teach-in of 2001. The social is inherently pedagogical in its dialectical existence.

In this sense, social is relational. To tie in concepts from Candace's thesis, we begin with topics in art of the relation between the artist, the art, and the viewer. Candace, like Emi, outlines a solid history of the development of "open work," which is defined by Umberto Eco who coined the term as art projects that "are brought to their conclusion by the performer at the same time as he experiences them on the aesthetic plane," (Kita 10). This understanding of art and its role in relation to the viewer is completely subversive to historical understandings of art-making as a private business and art as solely created by the artist and existing perfectly in isolation from human interaction. Historical definitions of art would indicate that a painting of an apple has the same existence when it is hanging in someone's home, viewed at a museum, or shown at a gallery. I am highly critical of this historical-autonomy of art for how it contains the creative arts to the bourgeois class of society. This "open work" concept is influential in the formation of my project because of how AASU's social autobiography cannot be completed until AASU members interface with the autobiographical structural installation—namely the painting of a tree. However, a bit later on in her thesis, Candace discusses Nicolas Bourriaud, theorist of relational aesthetics on whom I would like to spend most of my focus. Relational aesthetics sits at the crux of my project. Bourriaud coins relational aesthetics after examining the trends in the 1990's contemporary art world during a post-1960's civil right's movement political art world. During that time, artists and critics alike were poised to attack any art piece that wasn't overtly-political as "a depoliticized celebration of surface, complicitous with consumer spectacle," (Bishop 53). With his theory of relational aesthetics, Bourriaud adds new dimension to how we are to understand the political work of art.

Similarly to “open work,” relational aesthetics break from traditional bourgeois definitions of art as reserved for the private sector, and instead establishes that art of the 1990’s seeks to study “the realm of human interactions and its social context,” (53). It defines contemporary workings of art creating artworks that are entirely dependent upon the people, or more precisely the communities, that engage with it. Bourriaud finds that relational artworks actually transcend the notion that depending on the communities interacting with it the meaning of the artwork changes by actually working to *create* communities, even if only momentarily. However, Bishop in her *Antagonism & Relational Aesthetics* is quick to distinguish that Bourriaud is not refining a theory of interactive art, but rather aims to define relational art practices as a direct response to capitalist consumerism and the growing prevalence of impersonal interaction as computers networking technology becomes more central to peoples’ lives. He sees that the political needs of the times have changed since the radical militancy of the 1960’s. He specifically articulates, “It seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbors in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows,” (54).

Perhaps as you might recognize, Bourriaud’s theory of relational art provides powerful inspiration for the possibilities of the project installed in Kimbo 92. What I seek to accomplish with this project is to mobilize, to build community within AASU. Yes, AASU already has methods for doing that already, however I believe that through storytelling and through the possibilities of relational art, it could be all the more powerful. As these multiple elements of story-telling social autobiography and the art installation come to interact with each other, the possibilities for community building become so much more real. This will provide an in-built, in the walls mechanism for

recruiting and retaining membership early on in the year by facilitating interaction of the people each other and their own histories, with each other's histories. I only hope to be able to create the kind of dialogical exchange that Bourriaud speaks of with past, present, and future AASU members.

Before I wrap up the theoretical portion of my thesis, I must incorporate theories by human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan into the picture. His expansion upon common understandings of the terms space and place adds important dimension to how we can begin to think about social autobiography embodying a space. In *American Space, Chinese Place*, Tuan examines the differences between the terms space and place with respect to how people and communities interact with them and how they take on different meaning for different groups of people. Although I critique Tuan's generalized, boarder-line essentialist way of distinguishing between "Chinese place" and "American space," his analysis does speak to the ways in which American and other Western histories conceptualize their ownership of land and environment. Tuan defines Americans as having ownership of space. To him, space is the expanse of the horizon—space is freedom, mobility, and opportunity. This definition of space as ownership of the horizon has been a part of American history since its birth, envisioned and reiterated first through the Doctrine of Discovery¹⁰ and again in Manifest Destiny.¹¹ It is deeply imbedded in the American conception of self. In contrast according to Tuan, the Chinese have place. Place is a bounded location imbued with sentimentality. Place is stability for the Chinese people. He links the Chinese emotional connection to place with farm workers in China

¹⁰ A statement first issued by Pope Nicholas V that allowed the free taking of lands provided that the inhabitants of the land were not subjects of the Christian Church.

¹¹ A 19th century belief in the divine right that justified (white) American territorial expansion across the entire continent of North America.

who are tied to the land. Despite the fact that Tuan is discussing these concepts from the positionality of one who spent much of his life born and raised in China, his assertions in *American Space, Chinese Place* can shed important light onto the relationality of space and place in an Asian American context, that is what needs AASU members may have with regards to AASU office Kimbo 92. Tuan writes about the Chinese, “To understand the strength of [their] sentiment, we need to know that the Chinese desire for stability and rootedness in place is prompted by the constant threat of war, exile, and the natural disasters of flood and drought. Forcible removal makes the Chinese keenly aware of their loss,” (Tuan 1). Although the Asian American Student Union at Scripps has not had to face the threat of war, exile, and natural disasters, we have experienced the feeling of *risk* of “forcible removal.” Recall that I mentioned the possible revocation of the AASU office spaces in the history chapter of my thesis. This has made us, as a community, most territorial and emotionally tied to the physicality of the AASU rooms. In that sense, Kimbo 92 and 95 have become our place on campus. We are sentimentally tethered to their interiors like a security blanket to a child. However, the nature of AASU’s mission as an organization directly contradicts the sole desire for place and in fact invokes the necessity of space within that place. A prime example of this is found within our definition of “safe space.” During our meetings we typically establish some “safe space” ground rules so that people feel open to sharing experiences, thoughts, and opinions with others. One of the key components of AASU’s definition of “safe space” is that the space can be comfortable, but not *too* comfortable. That is, a “safe space” must be comfortable enough to allow people room and stability to explore, but it must also be *challenging* and

expose our members to endless possibilities. In that sense AASU, as an organization for Asian American women, bridges the sense of space and place.

This fact about AASU's conceptualization of the offices as both spaces of limitless opportunity and place of security and emotional sentimentality, guides how the social autobiography must interface with the walls, relate to the members and the stories that they have to share.

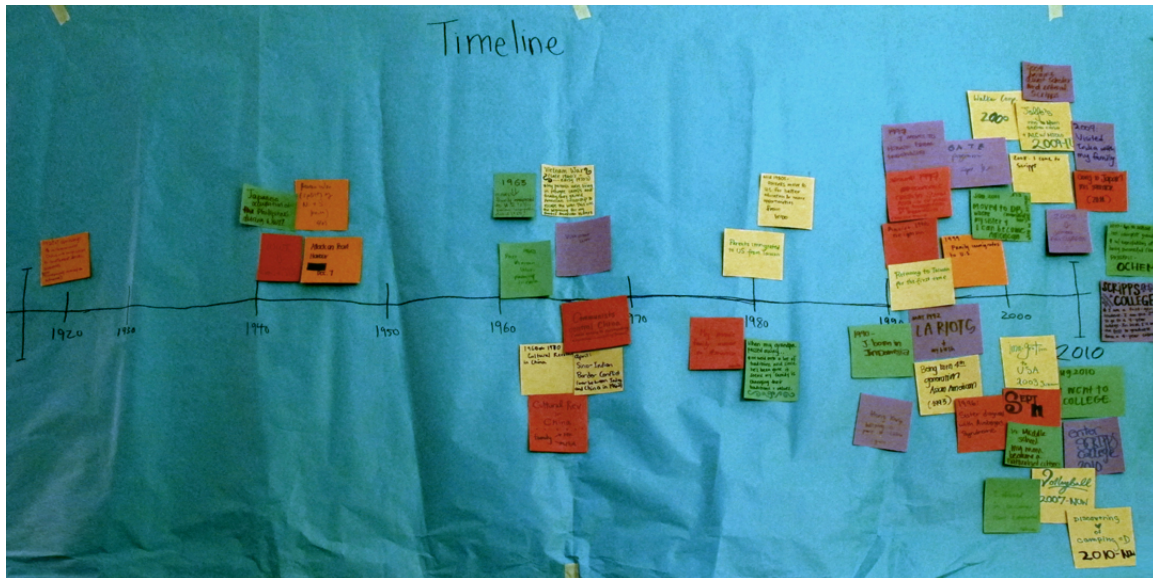
Chapter 4

Sprouting limbs.

To complete this project I held a series of workshops as a way to engage AASU members in thinking about concepts of space, place, nonlinearity, history and community. The first one took place in October 2011 at AASU's fall retreat. Current AASU leadership facilitated that workshop, titled "Discovering Family / Community," which functioned as an icebreaker activity for new and old members to get to know each other better. We brought out a large piece of blue butcher paper and taped it to a wall.



On the paper was a single, black line that stretched across the sheet with tick marks designating a new decade scattered along the line. We asked the members to take three small sheets of construction paper and write 2 personal events and 1 historical event that are important to their family and personal history. We then discussed as a group why we chose those particular events and how we see them connected to the events that other members chose.



The next workshop occurred during our general meeting time and location of 10pm in Kimbo 92 on February 26, 2012. This workshop was titled “Collective Life Collages,” and strived to get members to think about and participate in the project of documenting our histories collectively, visually, and non-linearly. AASU members were split into groups of three and given a single twelve by twelve inch sheet of paper upon which they could write, draw, or paste things. We also provided old magazines for them to cut up and use as inspiration. The products were beautiful. What was so interesting



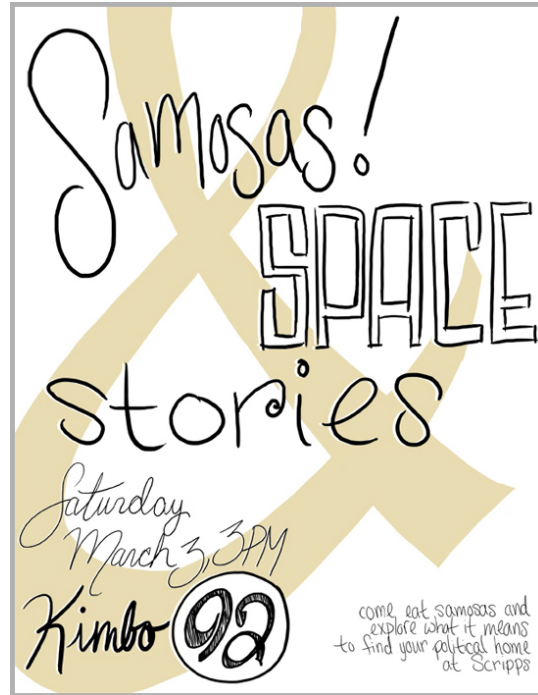
about the results was the narrative flow and the interaction of space within the boundaries of the single sheet of paper. Not one group depicted their experiences linearly, as was part of the function of giving a square canvas to work with. Groups also engaged with the space given very differently in thinking about how to combine their stories together. Some groups completely integrated their life narratives and pieced them into one story.



Other groups while remaining primarily spatially segregated on the paper (one member taking one corner of the paper, another a different corner, and so on), they did have pieces of their separate narratives come together and intermingle with each other. Either way, the collective life collages all read as one narrative style, and had viewers not known of the activity, they probably would not have suspected the art pieces to have been compiled by many different minds.

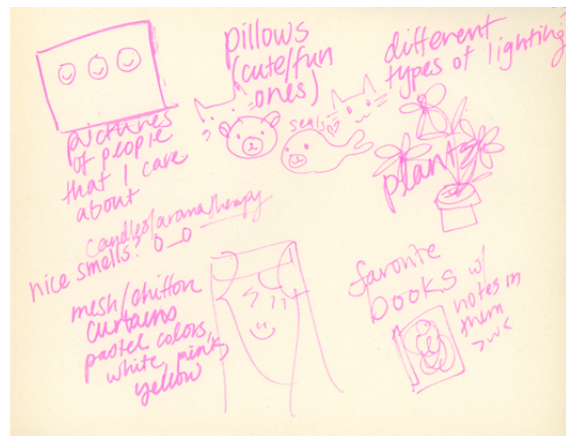
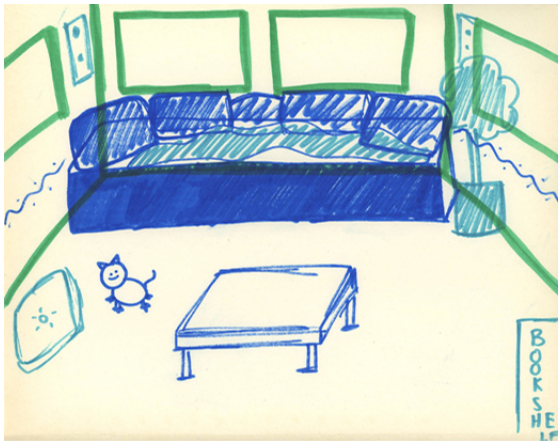
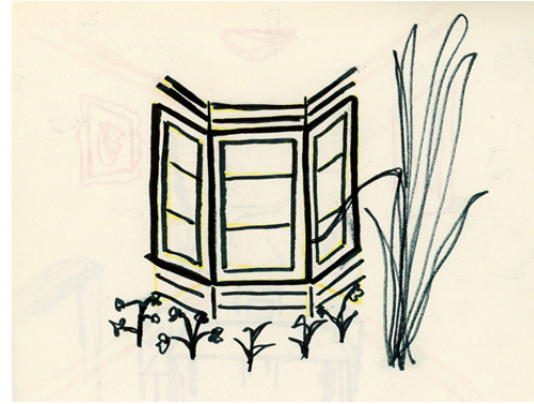
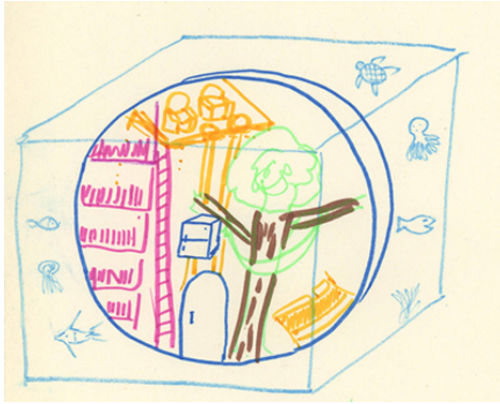
The third workshop entitled, “Samosas! Space & Stories” took place on March 3, 2012 at 3pm in Kimbo 92. The goal of this workshop was to shift the focus from (social) autobiographical narration and non-linear forms to space, place, and how we interact with them. The theories of human geographer, Yi Fu Tuan, on space and place were very

inspirational for this particular workshop. We began the workshop with a check-in question: “where do you feel most comfortable on campus (your response may transcend the present time or be a temporal response, not just a spatial one)?” After everyone had spoken, we engaged in a drawing exercise that provoked AASU members to think about questions like “what does home mean to you?” by having them draw a response to the



prompt, “If you had one room out of which to make your home, how would you make that room *be* home? If it were home, what would it look like? Imagine you could do anything with this room, what would you do with it? Think about the colors, the décor, the furniture, etc.” What came of this workshop is a greater understanding of how spaces make us feel and how spaces can motivate us, organize us political, or even cause us to feel disengaged and disempowered.





Then, on March 25th during our general meeting, Candace Kita came back to campus to co-facilitate a workshop with me to do a final wrap up of her thesis from last year and to support the process of my thesis this year. The workshop began with a check-in question and then moved into a “memory bank activity.” In this activity we brainstormed words that we associate with Kimbo rooms 92 and 95 and collective them

on a sheet of blank paper. After collecting around 20 words, we went around and shared the memories and experiences of the two spaces with each other. Candace used this moment to show members what the room had looked like before, during, and after her process of remodeling and remaking Kimbo 95. Then, we had AASU members draw their ideal vision of what the space could be in the next 2-3 years on pieces of paper with particular emphasis on actions that we can take to make our visions a reality. We then went around and shared our visions, collected the papers, and bound them into a booklet to be kept in the AASU office.

Not only did this workshop provide a great opportunity for new members to get to know Candace, it also served as a way for me to pull ideas for the final installing from the ideas members offered. Since it was so forward thinking, it was really helpful in generating plans to work with. Many members mentioned that they wanted photos to cover the walls, and because the visual is such an important aspect of memory and history recollection, I wanted to find a way to include that in the project, namely by having members bring personal photographs of AASU and hang them as part of the project. They would be integrated into the foliage of the tree. It was actually in this workshop that I was inspired to depict the social autobiography as a tree. Many members in the previous “Samosas! Space & Stories” workshop had placed plants and trees in their ideal rooms, and again in this workshop the idea of nurturing plants in the space of the AASU office came up. Since, as I mentioned before, the tree, in terms of its symbolic representation of growth, age, history, as well as its non-linear, organic form, worked so well theoretically with what I wanted to accomplish with the project, we decided to use that as the image for the final installation.

Chapter 5

Growing together.

I don't know if there will be a moment when I'll be able to say that my thesis project is finally complete. Yes, the paper is finished; yes, the installation is fixed on the walls of Kimbo 92. But the political work, the community mobilization, the bonds that it may build, that has yet to happen. Because this project's work hinges upon dialectical exchange and demands its own constant re-creation, until AASU members of the future deem it finished or the wall space gets overcrowded or members believe it obsolete, the work will never be quite complete. However, I do have some visions for how the project will carry on into the future once I am gone and cannot act as the facilitator of this art-making, history-making, community-making endeavor.

As part of the project, and as inspired by a current member who expressed her discomfort with Candace having remodeled the space because of how it makes her feel as if she cannot change anything about the remodeled room for fear of ruining Candace's hard work (despite the fact that she has already graduated), I have written a note for possible ways of interfacing with the project from using it for workshops, engaging the negative space of the wall not filled by the body of the tree to create new paintings and new narratives, or even painting over the entire piece completely. I had originally imagined the project to act as the initial new member introduction to AASU. During the first meeting, new and old members would have the opportunity to put their histories on the tree. I still believe that this has a lot of potential for if one actually sees *themselves*

and *their histories* as a permanent part of the space, it is possible that they might be more inclined to make AASU their home away from home.

Nonetheless, the future and continuity of the project is left entirely in the hands of AASU's current and future members. No matter what becomes of it, I have confidence that it will be exactly what AASU wants and needs.

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