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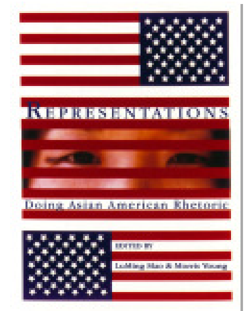

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ASIAN AMERICAN RHETORICAL MEMORY AND A "MEMORY THAT IS ONLY SOMETIMES OUR OWN"

Haivan V. Hoang

We have a memory of water. Ankle deep, back bent by the sun, verdant fields. Shallow basins, eyes sealed with tears, ornate cathedrals. Salt water shrouds, lips cracked, silent flotillas. We have a memory of water. A memory that is only sometimes our own.

Barbara Tran, Monique T. D. Truong, and Luu Truong Khoi, *Watermark: Vietnamese American Poetry and Prose*

Memory (the deliberate act of remembering) is a form of willed creation. It is not an effort to find out the way it really was—that is research. The point is to dwell on the way it appeared and why it appeared that way.

Toni Morrison, "Memory, Creation, and Writing"

The willful desire to claim a "memory that is only sometimes our own," the unremitting imperative to rearticulate cultural memory, is fundamental to Asian American rhetoric.

In early March 2000, a struggle over memory—who remembers, what gets remembered, and to what effect—pressed Asian American activists to protest against Senator John McCain's reference to "gooks." While campaigning for the Republican presidential nomination, McCain recalled his years as a Vietnam War prisoner of war and referred to North Vietnamese soldiers as "gooks." Criticism of his use of a racial slur ensued, and the news media that followed McCain's Straight Talk Express bus gave the story brief treatment. Was McCain repentant? No, he was entitled to his memory and speech. The *New York Times* quoted him on February 18: "I will continue to refer to them in language that

might offend some people here, because of their beating and killing and torture of my friends. I hated the gooks and I will hate them for as long as I live." A few more days passed before he apologized, but the apology felt delayed, even reluctant. When the Straight Talk Express bus rolled into southern California's Little Saigon in March, an Asian American student activist organized a protest in order to counter McCain's racialization of the Vietnamese prison guards. What was at stake was a contest over cultural memory—a struggle between McCain's understanding of "gook" as a personal memory (and perhaps also a nationalist one), on the one hand, and the activists' recall of the word from cultural memories that have effectively racialized Asians and Asian Americans, on the other.

The Asian American need to *re*member the American imaginary with Asian American peoples is poetically declared by the Vietnamese American writers of *Watermark*: "We have a memory of water" (Tran, Truong, and Khoi 1998, 224). If we understand that the Vietnamese word for "water" (*nuóc*) also means "nation," the declaration becomes a claim to not only a Vietnamese American memory, but also a national memory. Quite simply, memory is central to Asian American rhetoric, a rejoinder to the persistent forgetfulness that displaces Asian Americans from commonplace understandings of what is American and also an opening up that fosters the "willed creation" of Asian American solidarity. Asian American rhetorical memory, then, has most often articulated *counter*memories that destabilize and then reconstitute the American subject.

And yet, even though it is clear that activist racial projects since the 1960s and '70s yellow power movement have been about recovering and claiming entitlement to cultural memories, important questions remain: What is the nature of a *rhetorical* memory in Asian American cultural production? What recollecting practices could Asian American speakers and writers use to shake up an objective notion of cultural memory and also appreciate the lived realities that make up Asian American history?

In this essay, I wish to throw light on the ways the protest and, more importantly, the protest organizer Duc's later recollection of the conflict register larger concerns surrounding rhetorical memory: the conditions that call up Asian American rhetoric, the struggles over entitlement to memory, and the strategic and layered recall of past Asian American experiences. Duc, then a local university student who belonged to a political student organization called the Vietnamese American Coalition

(VAC), told me about the protests in an interview during my 2002 ethnographic case study of VAC's activist rhetoric.[1]

As he wove together the "gook" utterance amid multiple cultural memories, the fabric of his memory work became important to making meaning of the utterance. Notably, what makes his performance of rhetorical memory possible is earlier advocacy for Asian Americans' right to participate in cultural memory work. In what follows, I begin with a discussion of the renewed interest in memory within Asian American studies and rhetorical studies since the 1960s and, drawing on this rhetorical heritage, I then read Duc's narrative closely. By studying his rhetoric as a performance of long-embattled claims to memory that have been building momentum in the last half century, we can glimpse the ways rhetorical memory shifts in relation to changing racial constructions of Asian Americans. These shifts are not simply about archaeological shifts to different memorial *objects* but, more so, the epistemological shifts that guide the *practice* of how to remember. In this post–civil rights movement moment, as Duc's recall so aptly illustrates, Asian American memory production involves threading together plural memories among plural *loci* and cultivating a related appreciation for *copia.* To be sure, such rhetorical production of Asian American memory is instructive to our understanding of memory as rhetorical art and social engagement.

RENEWED INTEREST IN THE RHETORICAL ART OF MEMORY

Memory is surely no stranger to rhetorical or related cultural studies. In fact, with the oft-cited "social turn" of the 1960s, memory saw renewed interest from rhetorical studies, ethnic studies, literary theory, philosophy, anthropology, history, and sociology.[2] The inquiry has grown, in part, as a result of concerted efforts to lend value to marginalized

1. The interview with Duc is part of a larger ethnographic case study conducted in the spring and summer of 2002; see Hoang (2004). (The study received IRB [Institutional Review Board] exemption approval, and all participants signed informed consent forms. While pseudonyms are used for the participants, the VAC students suggested that I use the actual name of the student organization.
2. For a discussion of the development of memory in classical Greek and Roman rhetoric, medieval monastic culture, and the mimetic memory of modern scientific inquiry, see the following: Yates 1966;. Havelock 1986; Carruthers 1990; Reynolds 1993; Crowley 1993; Francoz 1999. Moreover, memorial recovery has generated inquiry across the humanities and social sciences: in Asian American studies, Chan 1991; in African American literary studies, Fabre and O'Meally 1994; in anthropology, Climo and Catell 2002; in history, Nora 1989; Kammen 1997; Matsuda 1996; and in philosophy, Margalit 2002.

voices and to complicate dominant histories: What memories have been suppressed? Which memories are legitimated and why? For the Asian American movement in the 1960s and '70s, the conscious remembering of past Asian American realities played a large part in that historical moment's activism, and it is on the shoulders of these activist scholars that Asian Americans like Duc and I stand. As important as the movement's memory work has been to our understanding of Asian American racial formation, these early approaches to memory problematically tended less toward the rhetorical and more toward what Sharon Crowley describes as "methodical memory," or the modern preference for objective representation (1990). Such methodical memory ironically risked reifying racial categories while critiquing that same racialization. Still, these and related energetic efforts to "dwell" are important, as they have resulted in fruitful inquiry into the practice of rhetorical memory in the decades since the 1960s.

Early Activism for Asian American Engagement in Cultural Memory

Not surprisingly, calls for cultural memory were prominent in the Asian American movement, which was more broadly about claiming a politicized Asian American identity that challenged the juridical, pseudo-scientific, and cultural racialization of Asian American bodies—named Mongol, Oriental, Asiatic, and yellow peril—reiterated in the United States at least since the nineteenth century. The 1960s appropriation of the race-based identity "Asian American" marked an unprecedented coalition whose formation, in turn, led to a political rhetoric. For the movement's activists, the purpose of recollection was to attend to past Asian American realities as well as challenge the persistent forgetting of the historical processes that have made Asian Americans a racial Other. After all, as Jacqueline Jones Royster and Jean C. Williams argue in "Histories in the Spaces Left," exclusionary histories distort our "interpretive frameworks" (1999, 564); Asian Americans continue to be read as the "foreigner-within" (Lowe 1996); our contributions to America are made inconsequential; and racial injustices are obscured by constructions of Asian Americans as race-neutral ethnics.[3]

Early in the movement, Asian American memory work was about challenging distorted representations of history and recovering Asian

3. Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994, chapter 1), for example, discuss the difficulties in attending to ethnicity in the United States without recognizing historical processes of racial formation.

American experiences. *Roots: An Asian American Reader,* published through UCLA in 1971, was one early effort at this kind of recovery (Tachiki, Wong, and Odo). A collection of sociological and historical academic essays as well as a “contemporary expression of the Asian American condition by the people themselves,” *Roots* was meant to be read as “a documentary of our time” (vii). Editor Franklin Odo wrote that *Roots* signified the dual purpose of “going to the ‘roots’ of the issues facing Asians in America” and discussing how “our ‘roots’ go deep into the history of the United States . . . [to] explain who and what we are and how we became this way” (vii-viii). He continued, “Disregarding or misinterpreting the background of the particular group is one of the most important reasons for the failure to make meaningful changes in the ethnic community” (ix). The emphasis on uncovering “roots,” recording a “documentary collection,” and making accurate interpretations suggests that the editors would tell the *real* story. Similarly, over a decade later, Elaine H. Kim’s 1982 *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* was another first—the first book-length entry into Asian American literary scholarship—that was to remove distortions from cultural memory. Asian American literature, she explained, must be understood within “sociohistorical and cultural contexts . . . because, when these contexts are unfamiliar, the literature is likely to be misunderstood and unappreciated” (xv). Such statements presuppose that there is a true understanding and appreciation of Asian American literature.

Memory in *Roots* and *Asian American Literature* was to serve as a corrective to the prevailing dismissal of Asian American culture, but in this way, both Odo and Kim risked adopting not a rhetorical but a modern understanding of memory. The problem with a modern social realism approach to Asian American culture is that such approaches may reify an authentic and unchanging Asian American identity and history and thus trouble the writers’ critique of existing overdetermined constructions of Asian Americans. Sharon Crowley’s *The Methodical Memory: Invention in Current-Traditional Rhetoric* (1990) is instructive in understanding the prevalence of modern memory. She explains that only in relatively recent history has memory become arhetorical, an objective representation of past reality. During modernism, rhetorical practices were heavily influenced by efforts to advance scientific inquiry and reason, and memory assumed a positivist epistemology. Memorizing began with sensory perception, recall entailed accurate investigations of reality, and language

would accurately translate the memory. Perhaps because *Roots* and *Asian American Literature* were firsts, an appeal to modern representation could be attributed to the need to strategically legitimize such perspectives within academe, especially when Asian American studies was in its infancy. Or perhaps such texts only appeared to offer true representations because there were few to no related texts against which one might destabilize the category of Asian American. Regardless, these early subversions of cultural memory offered a crucial springboard for the growth of an Asian American *rhetorical* memory that would seek not simply to uncover, but moreover to articulate cultural memories and to interpret the ways such articulations mediate our understandings of memories.

Rhetorical Memory and an Appreciation for Copia

Indeed, as many scholars across disciplines have engaged in memory, it has become clearer that the concept of memory as a rhetorical art requires deeper understanding. Memory, according to anthropologists Jacob Climo and Maria Catell, is marked by "imprecision of concept" and "lack of theoretical development" (2002, 5). Moreover, rhetoricians John Frederick Reynolds and Kathleen Welch separately contend that the art of memory requires clarification in terms of its form, production, interpretation, and social life (Reynolds 1993a; Welch 1993). Long before the modern emphasis on scientific inquiry, classical rhetoricians had heralded memory as the custodian of all the canons of rhetoric. By juxtaposing the unlikely pairing of classical and medieval rhetoric, on the one hand, and Sucheng Chan's 1991 *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* and David Palumbo-Liu's 1999 *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier*, on the other, I suggest that we might arrive at a working understanding of rhetorical memory in general and Asian American rhetorical memory in particular.

While most students of the western rhetorical tradition call to mind ancient mnemonic exercises when considering memory, it is important to understand that the art of memory was selective, crafted, and textured. Mary Carruthers's *The Book of Memory*, a study of medieval monastic memory and its classical rhetorical heritage, offers an impressive theoretical articulation of memory's social life. To begin, the practice of gathering memories started with introspective investigation, which Albertus Magnus called "the 'tracking down' (*investigatio*) of what has been 'set aside' (*obliti*) through and by means of memory" (Carruthers 1990, 20). Such recollection calls up not the real-world referent but the

memorial symbols, thus relying on a complex system of signification. "Because it recalls signs," Carruthers writes, "reminiscence is an act of interpretation, inference, investigation, and reconstruction, an act like reading" (25). And an act like writing.

But this only began the process that made memory public. Gathering memories was a composition process, refined through copia and suitability to the occasion. Copia, in particular, was the measure of good memory, referring to the abundant layering of memories. The point was not, as in modernism, to retrieve a single accurate memory. Rather, copious recollection meant weaving together memories in order to produce a plural and textured composition. Finally, "[p]ublic memory," elaborates Carruthers, "is a needed ethical resource for its contents to complete the edifice of each individual's memory" (1990, 185). Just as the public would complete the individual, individuals had the civic and moral responsibility to share their memorial compositions in public realms. This meant that, in composing, rhetors should tailor memorial compositions for their intended audience and speaking occasion. The social nature of memory was basic to medieval rhetoric, for "[a]n author who does not share his work and launch it, as it were, into the stream of literature is thought to be guilty of a sin against community" (208). Memory, then, was essential to the creating and sustaining of cultural heritage and community identity. In sum, the art of memory was traditionally about thoughtfully investigating memorial signs, interweaving memories, and thereby engaging the public to which one belonged.

For scholars like Sucheng Chan and David Palumbo-Liu, Asian American recollection has proceeded with an investigation of memorial traces across not only mental loci but the cultural sites tied up with Asian American history. The term "cultural memory," for Winifred Horner, refers to the institutions that house memory (e.g., libraries, schools, popular media) (Reynolds 1993a, 11). But given our histories, Asian American scholars have grown increasingly interested in the national and transnational sites that become sites of cultural memory. Chan's *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History*, for instance, illustrates the ways Asian American rhetorical memory is mapped onto the cultural sites of migration. Rather than begin the Asian American history with the commonplace of immigration experiences in the United States, she recenters the history on the emigration-immigration hyphen and cautions that her narrative is "an interim effort" and "interpretive"; the history thereby creates an opening for additional memorial work (1991, xiii-xiv).

Palumbo-Liu's *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* more emphatically focuses on memorial practices that migrate among national and transnational cultural sites. He writes, "[T]he role of memory becomes increasingly significant, as individuals and groups trace their relation to place, even as those traces may be covered over or erased, overlaid with different memories or claims to possession, as well as with memories and histories from different lands that have been brought over as part of the psychic makeup of dispossessed peoples and which constitute an irredactable perceptual grid through which the diasporic landscape is read" (1999, 218).

The attention to multiple places with historical layers invigorates the production of *plural* memories, and this "irredactable" performance of copia gives texture, dispelling the authority of any single memory. In fact, Palumbo-Liu suggests that it is this preference for copia that makes architect Maya Lin's design of the Vietnam War Memorial so powerful; that is, "the abstract memorial rejects the literalizing and therefore stabilizing and codifying function of the realistic memorial" (1999, 252).

Together, the memorial work practiced among these Asian American scholars indicates a shared interest in rememorializing Asian American racial formation in the United States and, at the same time, provides a glimpse into the complexity of memory work. The memorial imperative among "yellow power" activists led to authentic representations of Asian American experience that could offset a naturalized conception of Asian Americans as foreigners. But as Morrison emphasizes, memory is a deliberate act—not only recovery but also production, *copious* production. For Asian Americans, whose histories are formed through the transnational ties among Asia and the United States, an investigation into memory entails journeying through the cultural sites of memory (whether those sites are institutions, specific locales, or nations) and knitting together these memorial traces; this memory work weaves together Asian American heritage. Moreover, Asian American rhetorical memory, the *copious* (even if contradictory) investigation across cultural sites, demands tailoring to particular social conditions and moments. It is this rhetorical art that we see among the Asian American activists in the "American Gook" protest.

RECOLLECTING "GOOK" THROUGH ASIAN AMERICAN MEMORIES

Recollecting "gook" critically requires an investigation into how past uses of the sign could impact its present (and future) meaning, and

the Asian American activist leading the protest was armed with both an Asian American studies background and rhetorical agility. Duc was an undergraduate student at a southern California university when, in 2000, newspapers were reporting that Senator John McCain, a contender for the Republican presidential nomination and a former Vietnam War POW, was initially unapologetic about calling former North Vietnamese prison guards “gooks.” An apology did in fact come. *Washington Post* writer Rajiv Chandrasekaran reported on February 28: “‘I will continue to condemn those who unfairly mistreated us,’ McCain said. ‘But out of respect to a great number of people whom I hold in very high regard, I will no longer use the term that has created such discomfort. I deeply regret any pain I have caused . . . I apologize and renounce all language that is bigoted and offensive’” (2000). The apology and the protests that followed embody competing readings of the cultural memories surrounding “gook,” and this is evident in the sharp disparity between McCain’s representational memory and Duc’s rhetorical memory.

No doubt, McCain’s reliance on a modern representational understanding of memory directly contrasted with Duc’s stated belief in the creative capacity of memory and the ways memories require critical interpretation. McCain composed memories in order to represent his experiences, calling up memories of war (recalling abuses), camaraderie (remembering his military friends), and new alliances (listening to South Vietnamese POWs memories). By recollecting his military service in the war and objecting to the abuses he endured, he effectively created alliances with U.S. veterans as well as many anticommunist Vietnamese Americans who shared his disdain for the North Vietnamese military. To a large extent, his rhetoric worked, in that his controversial statements were treated briefly, and in fact, an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, one day after the protest, proclaimed, “Little Saigon Opens Arms for McCain; Vietnamese Americans Dismiss His Use of Slur,” noting that the senator was “flanked onstage by nearly a dozen former Vietnamese soldiers who also were POWs” (Marinucci 2000).

It is worth noting, however, that while McCain’s statements were rhetorical in terms of speaking to the cultural expectations of his audience, his treatment of *memory* was positivist. The apology and his “straight talk” mantra indicate a modern representational conception of language. That is, McCain adopted a modern epistemology, one that thwarted the possibility of his understanding the rhetorical construction and impact of his utterance. With his brand of “straight talk,” he suggested that “gook”

was an objective signifier that referred only to specific prison guards who imprisoned him for five and a half years, not all Asians. He could maintain his "hate" because his apology suggested that the problem was his audience's "discomfort." Rather, I would argue that the problem went beyond the immediate exchange between speaker and audience—the problem was that each iteration of a racial epithet continues to reproduce a culture in which racializing is the norm. McCain, however, believed that the word applied only to the intended referent (specific prison guards) and to his personal memories, but for activists, the use of "gook" was tangled up in a cultural memory of American racial violence. Neither McCain's apology nor his recollection of military service acknowledged the legacy of racism and racial violence cued by the word. Asian American activists were jarred by McCain's insistent use of a racial slur, so when the senator's campaign visited southern California's Little Saigon (the largest Vietnamese American community in the country), Duc had marked "American Gook" on T-shirts and organized a protest rally.

In contrast to McCain, who characterized "gook" in purely modern representational language that recalled his war trauma, Duc recalled the word's copious meanings. Duc fervently recounted his memory of the "American Gook" protest in an interview for me two years later in 2002. By then, he was a fourth-year undergraduate majoring in political science who had been active in the Vietnamese American Coalition for several years. As a poet, a political science major, and an Asian American student activist, he understood that to remember is to create, and Asian American rhetorical memory played into the copious ways he traced past uses of "gook."

Duc began his account by recalling how he, then a student leader in VAC, had difficulty persuading other officers to challenge McCain. In this telling, he placed the word "gook" among multiple memorial traces, ranging from McCain's utterance to hate crimes that took place in 1982 and 1996, from the Vietnam War to California's Little Saigon community.

Duc: I went up to the cabinet members, and I said, "Oh, please be out here, you know, we need the numbers." And cabinet members, mostly guys, said, "We have an intramural basketball game that night." So, they can't be out there, right? Because they're playing an intramural basketball game.

HH: How did you describe this issue to them? Or did they already know?

Duc: They pretty much knew. And if they didn't, I told them that, you know, it's, it's wrong. We can't allow a public figure, any public figures, anybody that has influence upon people to use that kind of language, to use the term so casually.

And to convince our community that gook equals communist?

Because it does not. And how Vincent Chin was killed because of racial slurs and anti-people-of-color sentiment? Thien Minh Ly, you know, our own Vietnamese American brother who was killed. And how racial slurs dehumanize people and lead to hate crimes.

If VAC claims to be a political organization and represent the community, we *have* to be out there.

The word "gook," like most words, has many memorial traces that index past uses and varied signification. But what makes Duc's discourse an instance of rhetorical memory is his persuasive stitching together of a series of seemingly disparate moments and cultural sites. Each recalled moment or site contributes to a memorial composition whose sum is greater than all its parts and whose effectiveness becomes a catalyst for the group's response to McCain.

To begin, Duc called up McCain's "gook" utterance in order to reread its rhetorical impact. What McCain overlooked was what the Asian American protesters knew too well: memory confers significance on signs, especially charged ones like "gook." By identifying McCain as a "public figure," Duc not only commented on the reach and authority of McCain's speech, but also read the public figure as embodying the state, itself a site of cultural memory. McCain's representational approach to language results in a "memory that is only sometimes our own," and, in this way, the state is a site that contains struggle over cultural memories. Duc then presented a series of fragments ("*and* to . . ." ; "and how . . ." ; "and how . . .") that place the meaning of "gook" in other sites and thus destabilize McCain's statement that "gook" referred only to the North Vietnamese soldiers who kept him imprisoned.

Turning from a focus on a McCain-centered memory of war, the fragment that follows foregrounds the Vietnam War but shifts the emphasis from military conflict to the present-day Little Saigon community: "*And* to convince our community that gook equals communist?" For many in the diasporic community, "communist" signaled not simply the soldiers who imprisoned McCain but the phantom object of resentment

in Little Saigon. The result was that McCain had many supporters in Little Saigon who did not know about, who forgave, or who condoned his use of "gook" to describe the North Vietnamese. Veterans of the South Vietnamese military literally stood beside him onstage during the political rally. In fact, some attendees cathected so strongly with McCain they spat on Duc and his fellow protesters, yelling, "Communist!" an incident I'll detail in the next section. But by centering the Vietnamese American community within this war reference, Duc recentered "gook" within the cultural memory of the Vietnamese American immigrant and American-born community, and he argued that this local ethnic community needed to reject such racializing language. This memorial trace begins to unseat the primacy of McCain's memories without necessarily disregarding his experiences.

Threading together these traces of "gook" into the memories of McCain's rhetoric and the diasporic community, Duc's memorial investigation turned to two other uses of racial epithets against Asian Americans, hate crimes where racial epithets aggravated and even encouraged interracial violence: the murders of Vincent Chin in 1982 and Thien Minh Ly in 1996. Vincent Chin was a victim of hate crime memorialized in the documentary *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (Choy 1988). In 1982, in the midst of anti-Japanese attitudes resulting from the depressed auto industry in Michigan, a white employee from Chrysler and his son beat a Chinese American man to death with a baseball bat. The documentary introduces the conflict as beginning with the murderers' comments about Chin's race, which they erroneously assumed was Japanese. The more recent case of Vietnamese American Thien Minh Ly, in 1996, was also a hate crime framed by racial epithets. Gunner Lindberg and his friend beat, stomped, and stabbed Ly, a twenty-four-year-old who was rollerblading near a community tennis court in California. Greg Hernandez's "Grisly Account of Ly Killing Believed Penned by Suspect" in the March 7, 1996, issue of the *Los Angeles Times* reported that Lindberg wrote in a letter to a friend in prison, "'Oh, I killed a jap a while ago" and detailed how he had killed Ly. Hernandez continues, "In a four-page letter filled with casual mentions of birthday plans, a friend's new baby, and the need for new tattoos, Gunner J. Lindberg may have also laid out a murder confession that led police directly to his door in their search for the killer of the 24–year-old Ly."

Duc layered these racially motivated crimes in his recall of McCain's "gook" statements and thereby foregrounded the ways language racializes. These threads point to the violent anger directed against Asians

and Asian Americans, as in Chin's case, and the casual dehumanizing of Asians and Asian Americans, as in Ly's case. Moreover, the threads of these memories weave back into McCain's own anger against the North Vietnamese "gooks" and his own casual use of the racial slur. Those who have seen the documentary *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* know that the atrocities of Chin's murder resulted in a national Asian American movement, indicating that racism was a national phenomenon and not the aberration of two men. The trial against Chin's murderers resulted in a three-year probation and a $3,000 fine. The ease with which two men could beat to death a Chinese American and get away with it sparked a national controversy, eventually leading to a civil rights case against the men, but both were exonerated. By alluding to this famous case, Duc invoked the Asian American activism that grew out of the trial and activists' efforts to organize against injustice.

The fabric of his recollection knits together traces of a public figure's rhetoric about war trauma, the Little Saigon community's ambivalence over Vietnamese communists, and the place of "gook" within cultural memories of hate crime—all of which seamlessly lead to Duc's final critique: "how racial slurs dehumanize people and lead to hate crimes." The composition therefore calls up a troubling association between racial slurs and hate-driven racial violence, an association that recasts McCain's war trauma in terms of the dehumanizing effects of "gookism" in the Vietnam War. According to Asian American movement scholar William Wei, the term was first used during the Philippine-American War (1899–1902) to name Filipinos with no mix of European heritage. Later, "the appellation has been applied to Haitians, Nicaraguans, Costa Ricans, and other people of color, but since the Korean War it has been used mainly by U.S. soldiers to denigrate Asian people. It implied that they were in the Vietnam War to prepare soldiers to psychologically maim and kill Southeast Asians, according to some Asian American veterans" (1993, 38). "Gookism" encouraged a psychology of racism and racial violence, but the increasing popularity of "gookism" in the late 1960s helped awaken an Asian American critical consciousness.

With this memory of "gookism," we are left with a troubling understanding of McCain's utterance, which Duc suggests continues the hateful racialization of Asian Americans. As Duc explained, "We can't allow a public figure, any public figures, anybody that has influence upon people to use that kind of language, to use the term 'gook' so casually. And to convince our community that 'gook' equals 'communist' because

it does not." He was concerned that a public figure's use of a racial slur could perpetuate ongoing normalization of racializing language. Largely ignoring the memories of Vietnamese Americans and other Asian Americans, he argued, would harm our communities, aggravating the anger, violence, and dehumanization of Asian Americans. Indeed, Duc was not alone. In the March 5, 2000, issue of the *New York Times*, Anthony Ramirez writes that the controversy "flared and faded within a few days," but critiques of McCain's statement continued online. For instance, Ramirez quotes Jocilyn Dong's post to an Asian American journalists forum, "The English language is rife with words to express a former P.O.W.'s feelings toward the men who tortured him . . . [b]ut the slur he's sticking to is the racial one. Not one that zeroes in on the unconscionable cruelty of his enemies, but one that expresses hatred of 'differentness'—skin color, facial features, culture." And he cites a participant in another online forum who asked whether there would be a greater public outcry if McCain had fought in Somalia and used racial epithets to refer to Somalian soldiers.

Duc's protest against McCain's utterance teaches us that rhetorical memory can account for how the memorial sign had recurred within plural contextual memories and how writers and speakers frame signs within these contexts. Imploring his peers to take action, Duc juxtaposed copious memorial traces that decentered McCain and McCain's part in authorizing harmful conceptions of Asian Americans. This composition traversed memorial sites that are significant to historical processes of Asian American racial formation: McCain's statements on the 2000 campaign trail; the internally conflicted Little Saigon community; racial hate crimes against Vincent Chin and Thien Minh Ly; racialization during the Vietnam War; *and* the university site where Duc persuaded his peers to act. Importantly, the memorial traces did not cancel one another. Their simultaneous part in the composition worked to destabilize the primacy of any one memory. At the nexus of student activists and a prominent politician, bullhorns and mass media, grassroots protest and electoral politics, this case of Asian American rhetorical memory makes palpable memory's inseparability from ideological and social concerns. What divided McCain's perspective from the Asian American protester's perspective was not necessarily the simple question of whose memory was "right"; rather, the protest happened due to struggles over memorial entitlement and also conflicts between their understandings of memory as representational or rhetorical.

ENGAGING THE PUBLIC WITH MEMORY

As important as these memorial investigations were to recasting McCain's reference to "gooks," what mattered most to Duc was engaging the Vietnamese American community. Reflecting on the protest, he told me, "We were there to educate them." Whereas Duc began discussing the protest by focusing on the argument he offered to his peers in the Vietnamese American Coalition, he then turned my attention to the dramatic events of the protest. In addition to employing copia through his memorial investigation of the word "gook," he now employed copia by reframing the event in plural ways, each time calling attention to social interaction. His first account of the protest is framed by a conversation with his student organization and located at an educational site. His copious recounting continues with multiple frames and thus takes us to three other cultural sites of memory, all literally offstage: the protest site in Little Saigon; the site of the activists' discourse community; and the street-side contact zone of activists, opponents to the activists, and the police. These memorial reframings and Duc's movement among the cultural sites highlight the importance that he placed on social engagement and shared cultural production with his audience.

Duc's memorial account traveled to a different cultural site with each reframing, first as the persuasive dialogue with fellow VAC students discussed above. Drawing on the same memorial premises, he then reframed the narrative as a persuasive speech event in the Little Saigon rally:

> I spoke in Vietnamese on the, on the bullhorn . . . to the people at the rally, and I was explaining it to them in Vietnamese. I was saying how this term is unacceptable, how terms like this lead to hate crimes and murders, and I brought up Thien Minh Ly. I brought up how people can't tell the difference between a Vietnamese commie, or, or VC, and you or I.
>
> They were listening. They were listening. And we were rallying, too. I got, I got the bullhorn, and I was like, "Are you a gook?" to those people who were there to support McCain. And they were actually on our side. You know, we were rallying, you know?

Moving from the first site of the university student organization, he called attention to the protest site as a dynamic engagement. With the university site, Duc spent relatively more time arguing about investigating "gook" as a memorial sign, and he framed all this with an explanation

of VAC officers' need for politicization. By contrast, with the protest site, Duc spent relatively less time on the premises of his argument and more time on the audience's participation. By stressing he was speaking Vietnamese in the excerpt above and several other moments in the interview and by stressing the audience's involvement, Duc emphasized that his argument was not directed at McCain so much as it was directed at the Vietnamese community members who had shown up in support of McCain. He was encouraged by community members' support for the protesters' efforts, being informed of what McCain had said and being persuaded that it was harmful. We experience not just a shift in our lens but a shift in audience.

Then, he moves us *within* the discourse community of his fellow Asian American activists when recalling a conversation he had with a disillusioned friend:

> And another thing I remember from that was a friend of mine. Everyone was really upset at the reaction from . . . the people who were Vietnamese American who went to rally in support of McCain. And one of my friends got so upset, and he, he was telling me that we just need to wait until they, being older Vietnamese Americans who don't understand or whatever, to die. And I was like, my God.

Here, Duc turned away from his audience to a fellow protester, distracted by his friend's missing the point of engaging the community. The friend, he told me, believed that only when the first-generation Vietnamese Americans—those who support McCain and continue to resent communists—die out will the entire community progress. Duc's response is telling:

> That made me very angry. That made me extremely angry. And I was trying to tell him, "No. That's not it." Because we were there to educate them, you know? We were there to educate the community. We didn't know the media was going to be, like, swarming around us.

Through these triply reframed accounts, we understand the multiple participants involved in this event: Duc and other activists, VAC student leaders, Vietnamese American community members, and a disillusioned friend. McCain, in fact, has little agency in these accounts and retreats into the background of Duc's telling. What mattered most to Duc was building solidarity with the Vietnamese American community.

The focus on offstage cultural sites decenters McCain's onstage presence, suggesting that Duc was more interested in community activism *for* the community rather than *against* McCain. For Duc, the protest was about the social effect of McCain's "gook" utterance. The community members present could respond in at least two ways: McCain and his audience would read "gook" as something innocuous, what a patriotic war hero and political authority had uttered. Or, Duc and fellow activists meant to foster social involvement, a dialogue between themselves and the Vietnamese community, in order to claim agency over the memorial sign of "gook" and its historical resonance. He urged that Asian and Asian Americans had historically been tangled up in "gookism," and, moreover, he was trying to share the memorial traces of "gookism" with the ethnic community. As philosopher Avishai Margalit aptly explains, "The significance of the event for us depends on our being personally connected with what happened, and hence we share not only the memory of what happened but also our participation in it" (2002, 53). In this sense, Duc aimed to increase community members' participation in claiming agency over "gook" as a sign with a memory. These ideas came to a head in the final cultural site within his account: a contact zone among Duc and fellow activists, opponents to the activists, and police.

In a dramatic conflict between Duc and an audience member who opposed the Asian American students' activist stance, memory became a cultural affair where Duc's purpose was to have the community jointly call attention to the harmfulness of the term "gook." Duc explained that some opposition members in the audience had started calling him and fellow protesters "communists," with the rationale that if they were opposing McCain, a former prisoner of war, then they must be communists. With the protest taking place in the commercial center of Little Saigon, to which people had fled because of North Vietnamese persecution and violence, the allegation of being "commies" had heavy consequences. The crowd became violent, pushing the protesters into oncoming traffic:

Duc: All of a sudden, it became a whole crowd of people. I don't know h—. All of a sudden, just instantly. They started *pushing* us. And then, like, a lot of my friends kind of protected me as I continued to speak. *(laughs)* And . . . and I was continuing my little spiel.

Yeah, and then we started chanting, you know. And then they continued to push us. And they poked us and they pinched us and people spat on us and they threw stuff at us.

And they pushed us into oncoming traffic on Bolsa Avenue.

And at the same time, while that was all happening—When we first started rallying, you know, all the cameras are pointed onto the stage, onto that media press thing up high, I guess bleachers or whatever. . . .

And all of the cameras turned around. And all of a sudden, it was a mixture of people poking us and spitting on us and throwing stuff at us and yelling at us and saying we were commies and going like that *(shoots an angry stare).*

HH: In English or in Vietnamese?

Duc: In Vietnamese *and* in English. I spoke in English, too. And we weren't all Vietnamese Americans, you know. There were Japanese Americans, Filipino Americans, you know. There were Chinese Americans.

HH: Mostly college students?

Duc: Yeah, mostly students from [the university]. And a lot of people I didn't even know who got the flyer and, "Hey, you know, totally, we'll be out there" and whatever. And they showed up.

And they pushed, they pushed all of us. Some guy got arrested for, he was running, running at me to knock me over, whatever. He didn't get me, but a cop arrested him. And then we started chanting, "Do not arrest him."

HH: Why is that?

Duc: My reason was he just didn't understand. He was my same age, you know, and we could easily talk to him and he could easily understand us and easily identify why we shouldn't allow McCain to use this word or to be unapologetic about using it.

Despite the fact that a man was charging him, Duc remained steadfast in his intention to communicate with rather than defeat those who disagreed.

In this cultural site of memory, the police, though trying to protect the activists, indicate the challenges of memorial production within social structure. The police function to impose discipline, a paradigm that could not account for Duc's hope for an opening, a space to deliberately compose memory. The shifts among the cultural sites of memory—university, Little Saigon protest, activist community, and the policed society—present the complexity of Asian American memorial production within social conditions. Moreover, when Duc's recollection moves among these sites of memory, he underscores his attention to

social engagement. The protest did receive brief media attention, but its departure from news accounts was quick. In any case, Duc explained that the point of the protest was to engage fellow Asian Americans in the making of memories, to compose more textured and socially responsible American cultural memories; he did not anticipate the media attention. Bringing up memory was a way of inviting participation, involvement, and solidarity among the Vietnamese and Vietnamese American community. The struggle here was about Vietnamese American and other Asian American student activists literally placing their memorial practices center stage, where only silenced memories and McCain's racial epithet had previously been recognized.

TOWARD A "DELIBERATE ACT OF REMEMBERING"

Defining an Asian American rhetorical memory requires a deep analysis of sites where Asian Americans have refashioned memory in response to histories, representations, and experiences. The "American Gook" protest and other performances of Asian American rhetorical memory suggest that the rhetorical art of memory is wedded to the social conditions in which that art is practiced. Asian American rhetorical memory thus entails investigating the memory traces that emerge from Asian American cultural sites. In composing Asian American memory, writers and speakers contribute to an American cultural production. Margalit describes this social involvement in memory as a mnemonic division of labor, where what is important is not just the memorial referent but participation in the memorial activity (2002, 51–53). Memory, then, is not just about legitimated recovery of marginalized experiences. Rather, rhetorical memory is a process of participation in a wider cultural production. Toni Morrison's reflections on her writing capture this sentiment:

> My compact with the reader is not to reveal an already established reality (literary or historical) that he or she and I agree with beforehand. I don't want to assume or exercise that kind of authority. I regard that as patronizing, although many people regard it as safe and reassuring. And because my métier is Black, the artistic demands of Black culture are such that I cannot patronize, control, or pontificate. In the Third World cosmology as I perceive it, reality is not already constituted by my literary predecessors in western culture. If my work is to confront a reality of the West, it must centralize and animate information discredited by the West—discredited not because it is not true or useful or even of some racial value, but because it is information

> held by discredited people, information dismissed as "lore" or "gossip" or "magic" or "sentiment." (1984, 388)

In the "American Gook" protest, Duc's purpose also went against this kind of "patronizing"—an attitude reflected in the disillusioned student's comments that they should wait until the older oppositional generation died. He composed memories in order to invite further memorial production, significant for social engagement, thereby working toward copia and destabilizing cultural production. And because each community member's memory is necessarily partial, such participation in memory presumes a spirit of cooperation and provisional memory work.

Reviving the art of memory matters: memory is a complex art that entails critically interpreting a sign's past and varied utterances, selectively weaving memorial compositions, and sharing cultural memories to foster social engagement. Asian American rhetorical memory, in particular, reveals how intricate layers of cultural memories are recollected into compositions and how the textured meanings that emerge from this copia foster social involvement and community solidarity. When rhetorical memory disappears, we should be wary. As Kathleen Welch warns, "It is crucial to an understanding of western literacy at this millennium to recognize that the disappearance of memory and delivery is not a benign removal; rather, it is part of a larger movement in the United States to pablumize the humanities in general and to vitiate writing in particular by behaving as if it were a mere skill, craft, or useful tool" (1993, 18). For Asian Americans, who are so often disregarded by mainstream American history, making our own memories is a critical answer to Jacqueline Jones Royster and Jean C. Williams's call to write in the "spaces left" and to resist the primacy of officialized narratives. By no means are the Asian American activists' memorial acts at the McCain protest representative of all Asian Americans, but this instance of rhetorical memory does point to the challenge broadly faced by Asian American rhetorical memory: to strategically construct collective identity, challenge racial injustice, and generally participate in American civic life.

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