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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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PERSPECTIVES

EXTRACT: LOCATING INDIGENEITY IN IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCES

By Adriel Luis

When the first major wave of Chinese people voyaged to the United States in the mid-19th Century, their collective journey was not yet a tale about belonging somewhere. It was about extracting resources—namely gold. Beckoned by the rush for mining this precious metal, early Chinese in America saw California as “Gold Mountain”—a trove of a certain element high in

local value that could be exchanged for money to be sent home to China, where the miners would eventually return. But because of economic circumstances, the complexities of transportation—and because this is just how diaspora unfolds—many Chinese did stay. The Gold Rush was followed by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, a decree that these “guests” had no permanent



*View from atop Tsoodzil (Mount Taylor, New Mexico) during filming for ‘Ways of Knowing.’
Image by Carmille Garcia, courtesy of Bombshelltoe.*

place in the fabric of American society.

But exclusion has a funny way of seeding stories of belonging, and a new immigration story emerged. *The Chinese Must Stay*, Yan Phou Lee's 1889 pronouncement that a Chinese person could indeed see oneself as American, echoed through the civil rights and ethnic studies movements of the 1960's and 70's where terms like *Chinese American* and *Asian American* became a part of the lexicon. I was born in California a century after the Chinese Exclusion act. I am not a descendant of a civil rights activist, but as a Chinese American I have inherited the struggle to belong.

I am not a descendant of a gold miner, but—as I recently came to understand—I have also inherited the legacy of resource extraction.

In 2017, I began frequenting New Mexico to work on a documentary entitled *Ways of Knowing* about the complex histories that connect Navajo Nation and the nuclear industrial complex. Led by Lovely Umayam, a nuclear policy analyst (and my partner), the film is part of a larger response to formal nuclear sectors, which have systematically ignored the Indigenous people and communities of color most intensely affected by nuclear processes such as resource extraction and



*Open pit uranium mine in Grants, New Mexico circa 1968.
Image via United States Department of Energy.*

weapons tests worldwide. Throughout the Cold War, over 1,000 uranium mines were established throughout Navajo Nation, and thousands of Navajo mined this substance critical to nuclear weapons and energy. Today, Navajo and other First Nations people continue to suffer the repercussions of this history through cancer, birth defects, and poverty. Yet, even for those whose families did not have direct encounters with uranium mining, a trauma reverberates throughout all of Navajo Nation: mountains and landscapes that have long been sacred sites holding deep spiritual and ancestral memory have been left blighted. Some are even marked as

restricted areas due to their high levels of toxic radiation.

As I speak with people from this region, it becomes ever more apparent that the America they know is not the same one my parents and grandparents were introduced to upon arrival: Sunny Dooley, a storyteller and co-producer of our film, reminds us that Mount Taylor's enduring name is Tsoodzil and that it sustained thriving ecosystems and civilizations for eons before it was designated as a uranium well or national park. Navajo activist Janene Yazzie is careful to note that her home of Lupton, Arizona is not actually where



Chinese Gold Miners in California. Pen and ink drawing by Roy Daniel Graves, 1889-1971.

her people are from, despite it being within an hour drive from Navajoland.

In such moments, I think about growing up with the politics of my Asian American identity, which adamantly center a very American sense of belonging. This is in part because immigrants and their descendants' Americanness is so often challenged that in order to survive we must dig our heels into the ground. When asked, "Where are you from?" we have trained ourselves to straighten our shoulders, make unwavering eye contact, and say, "I'm from here, dammit!" For Asian Americans, this directive applies no matter where you are in this place we call the U.S. Whether in California where I was born, New York where I moved to, or Washington, D.C. where I now live: "I'm from here." My time in New Mexico has

upended my relationship to this claim for obvious reasons. There is no way I am going to approach Native American communities insisting that I'm *from here*. For the first time, I've truly had to face that even my own indignance is framed by whiteness. As a Chinese American, I embody a term that was first uttered to insist our belonging. This belonging was born out of a sense of entitlement that depopulated a continent.

I do not fault my grandparents for not considering Native Americans when they immigrated from Hong Kong in the 1970's. Nor do I fault my parents for not raising me to be aware of the Ohlone people who were intentionally displaced by the rise of the California Bay Area. For this, I give the same justification that others use to shrug off the injustices of the past: they didn't



Illustrating the tensions that rose when Chinese people began establishing themselves in the U.S., Uncle Sam is shown here leading them back to China with what was perceived as a suitable inducement. Image circa 1880s.

know any better. That said, I can't help but long for an alternate history where Chinese settlers consulted tribal elders upon arrival, honored the sacredness of the mountains instead of exploding them with dynamite, and considered that the gold in the earth was there because it was meant to stay there undisturbed. Were these lost opportunities attributed to an immigrant's ignorance of geography and history? Did these people have a respect for their own land that did not seem to apply to that which they arrived upon? In New Mexico, the Navajo miners are understood to be both purveyors and pawns of history, and perhaps I can see my own predecessors in a similar fashion. To be an immigrant is to play the hand you're dealt, and in the United States that hand is settler colonialism.

This re-investigation of my state of belonging might beg a question any ethnic studies freshman would cringe at: *Then why don't you just go back to where you came from?* This exercise first

leads me back to Hong Kong, where my family participated in yet another complex history of conquest and displacement, then to my "native" Taishan, a distant village that none of my blood relatives call home, and to which I have never been. To consider resetting roots there would be disingenuous, based more on aspiration than memory. If my ancestors had an intimate connection with that land, that thread was broken decades ago. Indigeneity, in my relationship with it, requires a continuous connection between a people and a land, of which three generations of absence cannot be bridged.

Rather than going back to where I "came from," then, I think it is more productive to reframe concepts that, in my journey to belonging, I learned to reject. I can learn to understand my immigrant experience in relation to Indigeneity as opposed to Westernism. Resting my Americanness on a history of vexed arrivals forever suspends me between inevitable-invader and perpetual-foreigner.



Downtown night scene of Taishan taken from the top of Tongji Tower, Taishan, Guangdong, China, January, 2016. Image courtesy of Zhuiyi302 (CC BY-SA 4.0).

But if I recognize the depth of this land’s history and humbly ask to be welcomed in, I can see “not being from here” as an ongoing process of becoming familiar. Assimilation can be less about losing myself in exchange for favor in a social system powered by Indigenous erasure, and more about internalizing the knowledge and practices that have been the foundation to this place since long before my people called it home. And because I have already spent ample time manicuring my answer to *Where are you from?* I can shift my focus to *Who is from here?* (an inquiry that I am practicing everywhere I go, and to which tools such as Native Land have proven to be indispensable). While the past cannot be undone, the future can be approached with restored intention—and this is true no matter where we go.

This quest for belonging is deeper than Americanness, and even identity itself. In the Southwest, I hope to frame my immigrant history as one where outsiders came from afar to not just extract, but ultimately, to contribute; one where we arrived and didn’t simply aspire to blend in to things as they were, but sought intimacy with a more enduring foundation. And one, finally, I can learn from and improve on in the present.

Note: Some of these reflections were originally shared during Adriel Luis’ presentation, “What is Indigeneity to the Immigrant?” at Elemental Talks & Dialogue on Land, Water, Air, and Fire hosted by Miss Navajo Council in Window Rock, AZ on October 31, 2017.



Filmmaker Kayla Briët prepares to interview Navajo storyteller Sunny Dooley for ‘Ways of Knowing.’ Image by Carmille Garcia, courtesy of Bombshelltoe.

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About the Author

Adriel Luis is a community organizer, artist, and curator who believes that our collective imagination can make a reality where we all thrive. His life's work is focused on bridging artistic integrity and social vigilance. He is a part of the iLL-Literacy arts collective, which creates music and media to strengthen Black and Asian American coalitions, is creative director of Bombshelltoe, which works with artists to highlight marginalized communities affected by nuclear issues, and collaborates with dozens of artists and organizations through his curate and design engine, Phenomenoun. Adriel is the Curator of Digital and Emerging Practice at the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, where he advocates for under-served communities to be treated and represented equitably by museums and institutions. He and his team have been curating Culture Labs—an alternative to museum exhibitions, built on community-centered beliefs.

Adriel has recently curated shows at the Smithsonian Arts & Industries Building in Washington, D.C., the Asian Arts Initiative in Philadelphia, and an abandoned supermarket in Honolulu. His writing has appeared in Poetry Magazine, the Asian American Literary Review, and Smithsonian Magazine. He has spoken at the Tate Modern, Yale University, the National Museum of African American History and Culture, and the China Academy of Fine Arts. His performance venues include the Brooklyn Academy of Music, SXSW, the John F. Kennedy Center, and the American University of Paris. He has a degree in human sciences from UC Davis in Community and Regional Development, with a focus on ethnic studies.

Adriel is based in Washington D.C., has lived in New York and Beijing, but has never forgotten his roots in the California Bay Area. More information about Adriel and his work at <https://drzzl.com>.