

New Errands

The Undergraduate Journal of American Studies



Volume 9, Issue 1
Fall 2021

The Eastern American Studies Association and the American Studies Program at Penn State Harrisburg are pleased to present the fifth issue of New Errands, an online journal that publishes exemplary American Studies work by undergraduate students.

Seeking to develop the next generation of Americanists, New Errands' mission is both to provide a venue for the publication of important original scholarship by emerging young scholars and to provide a teaching resource for instructors of American Studies looking for exemplary work to use in the classroom.

New Errands will be published semi-annually, after the end of each academic semester. The goal of this timetable will be to collect and publish essays produced during the previous term, so that they can be made available as quickly as possible for use in the following term. We encourage both self-submission by undergraduate students and nominated submissions by instructional faculty. They must have an American focus, but can employ a variety of disciplinary methods across transnational fields. Submissions can be emailed as Word documents to: newerrandsjournal@gmail.com.

Essays can be of any length, but they must have a research focus. Any visual images should be placed at the end of the manuscript, and tags should be placed in the text to indicate the intended placement of each image. Manuscripts should conform to Chicago 17th edition author-date guidelines. Endnotes should be utilized for substantive content.

This volume includes essays in both Chicago style citation formats (notes and bibliography and author-date) as a pedagogical tool and a mark of change in the journal's format.

New Errands Staff:

Managing Editors—Timothy David Smith and Sean Edward Dixon

For further information about the Eastern American Studies Association and the EASA undergraduate honors society, please visit: <http://harrisburg.psu.edu/eastern-american-studies-association>.

A Message from the Editors—

New Errands is proud to present papers that demonstrate exciting new directions in American Studies, including a mixture of the outstanding papers submitted by undergraduates from around the United States. The papers in this edition have been selected because they represent exemplary undergraduate research into American Culture, History, and Folkloristics; each demonstrates an appreciation for and critical understanding of the field of American Studies.

New Errand's goal is to encourage undergraduates to passionately pursue research into American culture. By publishing the exceptional work of undergraduate students, it is our hope here at New Errands to support and encourage future scholars in their research related endeavors. It is an honor for us to continue to publish truly remarkable undergraduate research.

In putting together this issue, we were fortunate to collaborate with Dr. Anthony Bak Bucitelli and students from his courses in folklore studies. We encourage faculty to communicate with the New Errand's graduate staff as we work together to create quality opportunities for undergraduate students to feature their writing.

Timothy David Smith and Sean Edward Dixon

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FOLKLORE STUDIES IN DIGITAL WORLDS: AN INTRODUCTION

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Three of the essays presented here were originally written in longer form for an upper division anthropology course for undergraduates that I taught as a visiting faculty member in the Folklore Program at the University of California, Berkeley in the spring of 2021. The course, entitled “Folklore in a Digital World” was intended to “introduce students to the study of folklore, or the traditional practices and performances of everyday vernacular life, through the study of folklore and digital technology.”

This final project for this course offered the students wide latitude to conduct an original research project that connected folklore studies to digital technology. The responses to this broad prompt were largely fantastic; the students produced a wonderful array of work that looked at narrative, belief, art, customs and other forms of folklore in a wide range of online spaces, as well as how offline traditions integrate mobile devices or other forms of digital technology. After the end of the term, I invited several students who had done the most ambitious and exemplary work to submit revised and pared down versions of these essays for publication in *New Errands: The Undergraduate Journal of American Studies*. As such, the works published here are condensed versions of much larger projects; they present the basic arguments and conclusions of each project in a shorter, more generalized form, and so should be read in that manner.

What draws these three studies together, besides their general excellence, is their shared concern for the dynamics of interaction in online spaces. Each focuses on different online spaces, each of which have unique sets of conventions for how users can interact with one another and what kinds of interactions are counted as acceptable and successful. Moreover, each focuses, in its own way on the terms under which these groups come together to form a sense of identity that can underwrite their online activities.

Nicolette Baghoomian in her essay “The Virtual Validation of Occulture,” for example, argues that members of the Reddit forum (or “subReddit”) r/Astralprojection are “bonded together through the common practice of astral projection but also the beliefs and narratives that the group shares.” Focusing on how the community engages in boundary work, Baghoomian demonstrates how users polices the limits of belief and narrative within the group, how they actively engage with evidence and argumentation to counter non-normative expressions, and how they assess the role that mass media forms play in both the cultivation of interest in astral projection and the increasing numbers of non-normative believers that appear in these online spaces.

Similarly, Tina Zhen’s essay “Web Sleuthing: Collective Intelligence in Practice,” focuses not only on the way in which information is gathered and shared in “web sleuth” communities online, but also how members of these groups assess the impact of “true crime” media in promoting their work. Applying theorist Pierre Lévy’s concept of “collective intelligence” to her

study of the subReddits r/RBI and r/Unresolvedmysteries, Zhen argues that sharing affordances of Reddit along with the group's practices of presenting, examining, and debating evidence produces a "democratic" and "bottom-up" structure for the production of knowledge that allows the group to sometimes produce new insights into existing evidence.

Finally, Fanny Liu's "Facebook Folklore: Subtle Asian Traits During the Age of Covid-19" examines the use of image macros or "memes" within the discourse of an online group for diasporic Asians during the period of increased anti-Asian racism that has followed the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Focusing on the Facebook group, Subtle Asian Traits, one of the largest online spaces in which people of Asian heritage from around the world interact, Liu shows how users posted and discussed memes about Asian foods in particular, in order to engage in "mutual care, vernacular discourse, and cultural expression as a way of coping with or even combatting increased scrutiny and aggression around Asians and Asian cuisine."

Running from the maintenance of group boundaries, to the social production of knowledge, to the use of traditional forms to engage in sustaining care against outside injury or incursion, these essays offer a fascinating and suggestive set of possibilities for the study of folklore and digital technologies, by demonstrating the complex relationships between the development and use of traditional forms, the development of vernacular social interactional structures, and the underlying shared beliefs and values that sustain them.

THE VIRTUAL VALIDATION OF OCCULTURE

Nicolette Baghoomian

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One of the effects of modernity and globalization has been argued by some scholars to be the creation of a worldwide “marketplace” of cultural, spiritual, and religious practices (Roosvall, p.80). Certainly, the worldwide web has added to the dissemination of information and knowledge from across the globe. Spiritual and religious practices that used to be relegated to the “foreign,” far off, or “exotic,” have now become more accessible to be shared on the internet. The accessibility of a wide array of different spiritual and religious practices has led to a digital and physical culture of “pic n mix” where seekers can “shop” for new spiritual or religious practices to augment their self-identities and belief systems (Campbell p.67). Although some scholars have argued that this has led to a “commodification” of religious and spiritual practices (Roosvall p.79), others have argued that this has led to more “individualized” practices which are more reflective of “lived religions” and not institutionalized narratives (Berger and Ezzy, p. 501). One “symptom” of modernity and the “digitization” of religious and spiritual practices has been the divorcing of religious and spiritual practices from institutional or canonical contextual traditions. Christopher Patridge uses the terminology of “occulture” to describe a syncretic mixture of occult, pagan, esoteric practices, folk medicine, paranormal theories, etc. ... which are all then co-opted by the individual to create new, eclectic belief systems that feed into personal narratives and conceptions of self-identity instead of the “meta-narratives” of institutions (Robertson, p. 8). Scholar Venetia Robertson has described this new syncretic mixture of beliefs and practices as, “These concepts have been detached from their original context, which is often historical and foreign, and have become floating signs in the

multimedia of mass culture” (Robertson, p.8). The detachment of beliefs and practices from their original historical and foreign contexts has led to practices that used to be tied firmly to cultural traditions such as meditation, lucid dreaming, divination practices, alternative healing systems, astrology, and now even astral projection; to become reduced to just being decontextualized practices to further an individual’s self-discovery and self-identity. Astral projection, in particular, as an “out of body” experience has become “severed” from its’ religious and cultural origins of being a fundamental tenant and practice of indigenous shamanistic practices, such as Tibetan Buddhism, Inuit angakkuq practices, Miao folk religion, and other cultural and historical traditions. Now, astral projection has been defined as being a phenomenon where the “soul leaves the physical body” and can then “travel to other places, worlds, or dimensions” and interact with a wide variety of deities, spirits, and characters within what has been termed as the “astral plane,” (Pavlina, p. 24). Astral projection is an out-of-body phenomenon that has been transformed from being a practice that could only be accessed through wider cultural institutions of shamanistic and religious practices, to just being a tool or skill to learn. Similar actions have taken place with lucid dreaming being transformed from a Tibetan meditative practice to a modern, Western tool of self-discovery.

Although many would argue that modernity has “stripped” cultural, religious, and spiritual practices of their original functions, I would argue that it has not completely transformed these traditional practices, functionally and socially. Although these practices have become removed in some cases from traditional closed religious/spiritual practices, they still generate folklore, group narratives, and group identities; albeit now in different contextual circumstances. The internet has added tremendously to the formation of new folk groups and communities based solely around these “New Age” spiritual practices. One such example is the

Reddit forum of r/AstralProjection which boasts up to 187,000 members. This forum has no linkages to institutional religious or spiritual movements but instead treats the activity of astral projection as a phenomenon of its own. Users on the forum come from a wide variety of different ethnic, racial, religious, spiritual, and geographic backgrounds but all share the common interest and belief in astral projection as an out of body phenomenon. Although the Reddit forum moderators and group members argue that they have no “official” canon of astral projection beliefs, I argue that the members of the r/AstralProjection forum have informally formed a virtual folk group that has created “acceptable” folk narratives, beliefs, and opinions to be posted and discussed onto the forum board. Even if there are no religious or cultural institutions to “monitor” or create taboo topics for group members to avoid, there are still the informal “folk” mechanisms of creating “normative” narratives of astral projection and “non-normative” narratives and explanations for the proliferation of these “non-normative” accounts.

To begin, within the academic discipline of folklore studies, Elliott Oring supplies the definition of narrative as being, “... another word for story. Narrating is a method by which an experience is transformed into a verbal account” (Oring, p.121). The majority of the online posts that were posted to the Reddit r/AstralProjection forum can be further broken down from being posted, textual narratives to being personal narratives shared through the internet. Sandra Stahl defines personal narratives as being the following, “The personal narrative is a prose narrative relating to a personal experience; it is usually told in first person and its content is nontraditional,” (Stahl, p. 20). Many of the personal narratives that I observed on the r/AstralProjection forum were told in the first person and utilized nontraditional themes of trying to explain or tell a story about the personal experience of astral projecting. Although, even if there is some variation amongst different personal narratives of astral projection, a majority of

the stories are still informed by and held together by the larger beliefs and narratives of the folk group of astral projectors online. Erwick and Sibley explain this by writing, “Even the most personal of narratives rely on and invoke collective narratives - symbols, linguistic formulations, structures, and vocabularies of motive - without which the personal would remain unintelligible and uninterpretable. Because of the conventionalized character of narrative then, our stories are likely to express ideological effects and hegemonic assumptions. We are as likely to be shackled by the stories we tell (or that are culturally available for our telling) as we are by the form of oppression they might seek to reveal,” (Erwick and Silbey, p. 212). Therefore, it can be seen that even if certain personal narratives of astral projection may have some “unique” or “nontraditional” elements to these stories, they are still largely informed and made sense of by the collective narratives of the group online.

As has been stated previously, the r/AstralProjection forum is bonded together through the common practice of astral projection but also the beliefs and narratives that the group shares about astral projection. The personal narratives that are posted onto the forum board are largely informed through the larger network of folk beliefs and group narratives posted to the forum, shared, and agreed upon by group members. Thus, it can be inferred that there are acceptable or “normative” personal narratives and perhaps unacceptable or “taboo” narratives that the larger online group would reject. Rejection of a personal narrative by a group can be seen as functioning to “solidify” the acceptable group narratives by serving also to create more in-group cohesion and unification amongst folk group members. Thus, it can be hypothesized that if the r/AstralProjection group were to be confronted with a “nonnormative” taboo personal narrative, then members would respond negatively to the poster and narrative. Of course, then, the larger question can also be inferred to be what exactly are the acceptable or normative folk beliefs and

personal narratives of this online community? Additionally, on the opposite end of this question, what can then be inferred to be a taboo or nonnormative personal narrative within this folk group? How does the group make sense of these non-normative narratives?

Some common themes emerge in narratives posted to the forum. These include seeing orbs of light, feelings of body vibrations/ “buzzing” before out of body experiences, visiting other worlds/places, and coming into contact with neutral or positive entities. Many of these motifs seemed to be informed through New Age books, esoteric sources, and previously read personal narratives from other astral projectors. For example, some users talk about how they had read about buzzing before projection and so had that expectation. Although there is no “institutionalized” tenet or beliefs of astral projection, the practice of the folk group is still informed and supplemented by materials like New Age publications or collected esoteric beliefs. When a user posted to the Reddit forum about having visited a “purple palace,” various other group members, in the comments, confirmed having also visited the same palace during astral journeys. The personal narrative being validated by other members of the community reporting having had similar experiences created a “consensus of approval” of the purple palace as being a legitimate location within not only the astral plane but also the accepted folk beliefs on the forum board.

Many group members agree on the “legitimacy” of certain astral projection phenomena as being indirectly confirmed through various members having had the same or similar experiences. Others reported that having “spiritual leaders” of the practice confirm certain narratives or practices helped aid in their self-explorations of astral projecting. A third growing proportion of the forum became interested in astral projection and validated the practice through

media such as books, television series, or movies. One user posting on the forum expressed interest in the practice through a Netflix television series called “Behind Her Eyes” which seems to be a psychological thriller that utilized astral projection throughout the series. In a study done by Helen A. Berger and Douglas Ezzy on the role of media representation on spiritual practices, they found that positive portrayals of magic and neopagan identities aided in constructing a “networked sociality, characterized by individualism, ephemerality, intensity, and technology” (Berger and Ezzy, p.512). The same concepts have had salience in the astral projection community, as positive media representations of astral projections lead to more interest in the topic and therefore a greater growth and interconnectedness of the community, a “networked sociality,” (Campbell, p. 66).

As the r/AstralProjection forum has continued to grow due to such means as more media representation, the individualism of post-modernist spiritual practices, New Age spiritual practices, and popular media attention to the practice of astral projection, there has been an influx of new users on the forum board. Although the r/AstralProjection forum has always been quite large, the new “boon” of users has caused new posts, and therefore, new narratives for the forum members and moderators to deal with. Although a majority of the “first-time posters” were met with friendly welcomes and advice for questions being asked; this was not the case for all posters.

In cases where non-normative users made claims that went against the general views of the group, such as claiming to have made contact with or have been possessed by demonic entities, these tend to be very controversial. Forum users might respond with interest, but might also express skepticism, discuss the possibility of mental illness, or explain why these views

were inconsistent with the group's beliefs. At times groups members have also forcefully argued that giving too much attention to such non-normative views might repel those who would otherwise be interested to learn more about astral projection. Interestingly, some of justifications offered against non-normative views involve appeals to scientific understanding, such as ideas drawn from psychology or neuroscience, alongside appeals to what they consider authoritative writings on astral projection, such as those by Robert Monroe and William Buhlman, some posts also include prompts for these non-normative users to seek professional psychological help.

On the forum, users can express support or opposition to posts using the affordances of the site. Clicking “up” or “down” arrows will increase or decrease the visibility of a post, and users can also give “awards” (which generally cost money to purchase) to posts that they find to be particularly helpful or captivating, or that they agree/support powerfully. In general, posts that uphold the basic views of the group against such non-normative views receive significant attention and positive praise.

Users have sometimes noted with amazement the growing popularity of Astral Projection as an accessible spiritual practice. They observe that, largely through media attention, it has moved from beliefs expressed in a few books and by a few practitioners to a large-scale and widespread media phenomenon. These ideas speak to the notion of globalization and accessibility of esoteric knowledge and practices in the modern world with the help of the media and the internet, especially (Roosvall p. 80).

However, with this tremendous growth, adherents have also become more aware that non-normative believers may increasingly enter into community spaces as well. The growth of the forum, mediatization of astral projection, and the proliferation of mentally ill/fear-mongering

people are given as rationalizations for the appearance of non-normative personal narratives on the forum. These comments made by both users align with Katelyn McKenna and Kelly West's comments on ingroup reactions to aberrant or taboo behavior that does not align with the group's core narratives. They state, "...people develop strong feelings of affiliation and ingroup solidarity (and accompanying outgroup discriminatory behavior) ...That is, people tend to overvalue the ingroup and denigrate the outgroup..." (McKenna and West, p.945). New members attempting to "infiltrate" the "ingroup" of the r/AstralProjection community can be seen as perhaps a threat to the "ingroup solidarity" by trying to create or advance socially unsupported astral projection narratives.

Even though the users of the r/AstralProjection board assert that they do not have an "institutionalized" or official canon of acceptable narratives or folklore, it seems as though users are more likely to base their working knowledge and narratives of astral projection off of the narratives shared by more experienced astral projectors. Although astral projection can be described as an "experiential" and highly personal experience, it would appear that users debate who has the privilege to assert the legitimacy of their narratives on the forum. Users who report "fearful" experiences are negated and seen as falsifying their experiences and negated through the countering of "spiritual leaders" or practitioners who have been projecting for longer.

The Netflix series, "Behind Her Eyes," and other shows were also commonly discussed as the cause for more "noobs" (slang for newbies) infiltrating the forum and causing concern. In Berger and Ezzy's work on the role of mass media on young witches' self-identities, they found that many witches critiqued the role of media in creating "glamorized" versions of witchcraft as a spiritual practice (Berger and Ezzy, p. 506). Additionally, they state that "Both Bird's (2003)

and Davison's (1983) observations of 'third-person effect' demonstrate people often report that the media does not affect them, although they suggest it does affect others," (Berger and Ezzy, p. 506). This observation corresponds to views expressed on the Reddit forum, which suggest that "noobs" are more prone to the "third-person effect" and falling for the glamorization of astral projection through consuming visual media about it. Therefore, the rationalizations of taboo narratives are also pushed onto the media as having a role in the onslaught of new users on the forum but also the appearances of "deviant" narratives. Some forum users also attribute this to the onslaught of users unable to tell the difference between reality and fiction.

Although in their study, Berger and Ezzy found that mass media can create positive narratives and attention about certain spiritual practices, it can also do the opposite. Ezzy and Berger interviewed many young neopagans who complained about the "glamorizing" of Wiccan practices due to media such as movies and television shows (Berger and Ezzy, p. 508). Similarly, users on the r/AstralProjection forum complain of mass media "trivializing" their own spiritual and phenomenological practice of astral projection. It was interesting for me to note the ambivalence of users of the forum responding back to the narratives created by the institutionalized, mass media. Some users offer positive takes on media helping to contribute to the growth of the forum. While other users react negatively to the attention brought by mass media on astral projection.

Although there are many topics discussed in this subreddit, my focus in this essay has been on the "explanations" and in-group reasoning offered for the deviant narratives appearing on the forum. To reiterate, users seemed to rationalize these non-normative narratives by placing their explanations on the proliferation of mentally ill, fear-mongering people "spamming" the

forum, people who refused to listen to the accepted knowledge by long term astral projectors, or even the waves of people influenced by mass media, such as the new Netflix series, “Behind Her Eyes.” Users tended to offer more positive interaction to narratives, as stated previously, that seemed to correlate with New Age sources, experienced astral projectors/spiritual leaders, or phenomena that many users had experienced and could offer validation to. Perhaps many would argue that the r/AstralProjection forum is a “conglomeration” of a mix of different spiritual, esoteric, and religious beliefs; I would point out instead that users seem to be quite unified in affirming their ingroup statuses of belonging to the forum and practicing astral projection through personal narrative posts. Although the practice of astral projection itself has become divorced from its esoteric and cultural origins, the online groups that it has created have supplemented this by creating their social interconnectedness based on digital, personal narrative validation.

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WEB SLEUTHING: COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE IN PRACTICE

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Towards the end of the 20th century, the internet has made information more accessible than ever before. People have found places—networked spaces and communities—where they belonged and engaged with activities that aligned with their passions and interests. Among the many spaces that exist on the internet, web sleuthing has, in recent years, gained an increasing number of participants. Web sleuthing refers to the way ordinary people interact online to engage in activities such as collecting and analyzing clues, pointing out details in a case, matching missing person’s reports to unidentified bodies, and theorizing who the perpetrator is in order to attempt to solve a case. It is important to note that most of what web sleuths do is entirely unrelated to the official investigations that criminal investigators and detectives perform, though web sleuths often rely on the information provided by police departments or official law enforcement organizations. To many people, the term “web sleuth” is synonymous with armchair detective, “cyber detective” or “digital vigilante.”¹ Many web sleuths take part in web sleuthing not because they gain any sort of compensation—whether that is fame or money—but because they genuinely view it as a pastime.

Web sleuths investigate a wide variety of criminal law-related cases. This variety ranges from frauds, terrorism, and unidentified body cases to homicides and property offenses. In a study conducted by Birmingham City University researchers and professors, from their sample of 97 web sleuthing-related news articles, they found that 26.4% of these news articles reported on homicide cases, while 20% reported on property offenses. The third-largest percentage,

12.7%, was for news articles relating to terrorism, followed by 10.9% of articles emphasizing missing person reports.² This study provides us an idea of some of the most popular case types that web sleuths participate in.

In this study, I will analyze how web sleuths interact with each other to collectively participate in the attempt to solve a case, how they make meaning out of their surroundings, and what true-crime entertainment's impact is on such processes. I focus on two forums or subreddits in particular: Reddit Bureau of Investigation (r/RBI) and Unresolved Mysteries (r/UnresolvedMysteries). r/RBI (Reddit Bureau of Investigation) is a Reddit thread with 459,213 members as of early May 2021; it is described as a space where members can use "the power of the internet to solve real-world problems."³ Described as "A subreddit dedicated to the unresolved mysteries of the world," r/UnresolvedMysteries has over 1.4 million members.⁴ For the purpose of guiding the direction of my research, I formulated three research questions. These three questions are: (1) How do web sleuths build upon new information other fellow web sleuths have found? (2) How does true-crime entertainment encourage web-sleuthing and vice versa? (3) What impacts does web sleuthing have on actual cases (i.e., the victim, the victim's family, the suspect) as well as the web sleuth themselves?

In recent years, web sleuthing has become a popular hobby for many because it not only acts as a challenging "puzzle" that regular people can solve but also because true crime entertainment has played on a 'contemporary wound culture' to attract an audience who view gore and violence as a form of entertainment. In Mark Seltzer's *Murder/Media/Modernity*, he defines true crime (i.e., true crime entertainment) as a minor genre in which the facts of an actual criminal case are portrayed as crime fiction.⁵ In his words, true crime stems from 'contemporary

wound culture' because it is a culture of commiseration—that is, he believes that “... If we cannot gather in the face of anything other than crime, violence, terror, trauma, and the wound, we can at least commiserate...[because] this is, as it were, the model of nation as support group.”⁶ Wound culture, thus, describes how our society is attracted to terror, violence, and gore because it creates a space for people to sympathize with a case's victim and their families, to analyze the aftermath of a crime, and to observe those involved in the case as informal investigators. When Seltzer mentions that true crime serves as “the model of nation as support group,” he is arguing that wound culture, or otherwise described as a culture of commiseration, allows those that have a similar interest in true crime to act as a form of support group for one another.

In discussing Seltzer's interpretation of true crime entertainment, Elizabeth Yardley et al. highlight some of the major changes that have occurred in this field, the main one being the ability for viewers to become witnesses or active participants. Because the platforms in which true crime entertainment has historically been released have become progressively more interactive (e.g., Reddit, Twitter, YouTube, etc.), those who were once simply viewers are now able to share their opinions with people with similar interests. In Yardley et al.'s words:

Audiences now have considerably more participatory opportunities when it comes to [true crime] infotainment – they can post a comment on an online news article, tweet about a television programme using a hashtag or join one of the multiple online communities established to discuss and debate particular cases. They are able to produce their own critical or counter-representations even if they have little in the way of formal media production training. They can investigate even if they aren't trained investigators.

It can be argued that the affordances of networked media have combined with wound culture to create a new form of active, performed and embodied witnessing.⁷

A majority of audiences who then take up these participatory opportunities earn the label of “web sleuths.” In this manner, web sleuths can move on to become active meaning-makers in two possible timelines: during the development stages of a case or during the aftermath.

As the platforms where wound culture is shared become more interactive, audience members (i.e., participants) begin bouncing ideas off each other; the acts of theorizing and debating are frequently seen in true crime online communities. This is where Pierre Lévy’s concept of collective intelligence comes into play because participants often cooperate with each other to discover new information. As mentioned in an interview with Pierre Lévy, collective intelligence is “...the opposite of artificial intelligence. It is a way to grow a renewed human/cultural cognitive system by exploiting our increasing computing power and our ubiquitous memory.”⁸ After all, Lévy believes that “No one knows everything, everyone knows something, all knowledge resides in humanity.”⁹ Taking this theoretical concept to inform his writing, Henry Jenkins’ book *Convergence Culture* begins with a discussion of how viewers of Fox’s *Survivor* work together to spoil, or predict, the last people standing on this survival show. Jenkins states that because each fan “...had their own history of how they became a spoiler,” their background knowledge oftentimes helped them become beneficial contributors to the overall “spoiling” community; it expanded their “...individual grasp by pooling knowledge with others...”¹⁰ In a similar sense, the practice of web sleuthing is another example of collective intelligence in practice; web sleuths try to solve cases by sharing their knowledge and contributing with other fellow web sleuths.

Both r/RBI and r/Unresolved are collaborative platforms. In both posts and comments, members share additional links or recommendations to media or texts that others can visit and read. As stated by Lévy: “The majority of our symbolic systems are inherited from the age of static writing and mass media. Hyperlinked social media and videogames are the forerunners of the symbolic revolution ahead.”¹¹ To contextualize this statement, Lévy is arguing that collective intelligence is a social phenomenon that is occurring now more than ever because of the affordances that these networked communities provide to us. These two subreddits are exceptional examples of how information can be layered upon each other through the sharing of links and other sources.

Additionally, Jenkins mentions how each participant’s background knowledge and experiences allow them to contribute to the overall community, and thus, are able to contribute to the collective intelligence.¹² Some participants on these forums use their previous job positions to build credibility and add to the discussion. For example, a user might share their credentials to attest to the validity of a previous comment.

Through the affordances (i.e., inserting or embedding hyperlinks) Reddit provides, coupled with the fact that users of Reddit come from all walks of life, it is apparent that web sleuths can indeed become active meaning-makers in the process of solving a case, as Yardley et al. argue. Reddit users of these forums participate in collaborative web sleuthing and gather information through platforms like NAMUS, Wikipedia, other Reddit boards, YouTube channels, documentaries, and other online forums. Online spaces like Reddit, YouTube, and Facebook allow the audience to directly comment on conversations that are unfolding right

before their eyes. And even in platforms where commenting features are not available such as streaming services (e.g., Netflix, Amazon Prime, etc.) or Wikipedia, people often find themselves transferring the information they learned onto more interactive communities. This demonstrates Yardley et al.'s point that true crime entertainment is currently shifting into a new age—an age where audiences are encouraged to discuss, dissect, and speculate around cases rather than passively absorbing the content they are shown.¹³ True crime entertainment continues to be popular in non-interactive settings like the streaming services mentioned above because wound culture plays on the audience's desire to synthetically witness a crime—that is, “witness the witnesses” while sitting “...peacefully at home and, out of a hundred details, [they] can choose those to linger over which offer a special thrill.”¹⁴

While Jenkins' discussion of spoiling—predicting what happens next and sharing this with others—is an example of collective intelligence, he also mentions that “...spoiling is a more compelling practice because the way knowledge is produced and evaluated is more democratic.”¹⁵ In this case, the act of web sleuthing is also democratic because it empowers participants by allowing them to use new kinds of powers which emerge from participating in knowledge communities. Participants have complete autonomy over how they wish to interact with others in the same community; in a word, everybody has a say. Web sleuths share information by commenting under each other's posts as well as creating their own unique posts.

Yardley et al.'s argument that true crime infotainment has grown to include more participatory opportunities is once again proven by my observations of this community. The ability to comment whenever and whatever these participants wish to say is a clear example of the democratic practice that Jenkins mentions. Additionally, each user's personal background

(i.e., careers, personal experiences, cultural heritage, etc.) allows them to uniquely contribute to such communities, thus, making collective intelligence a reality.

Although Jenkins and Yardley et al.'s articles praise the emergence of the affordances that social media has allowed web sleuths to participate in—to allow them to be more interactive than ever before—Seltzer's piece argues that modern wound culture, which perceives public violence and mass death as a theatre for the living, is a “kind of parasitism.”¹⁶ In other words, while some find entertainment out of true crime media, others, particularly the victim's friends and relatives, may be disturbed by it.

Members of web sleuthing communities generally agree that true crime media portray web sleuths in a positive light, often acquiring critical clues that law enforcement may not have previously been aware of. From the perspectives of these web sleuths, true crime media seems to be on their side which further encourages their participation. It also promotes this online community to others who may not be entirely familiar with it.

The key observations of this essay are that participants often utilize their ability to embed hyperlinks or simply copy and paste links into their comments to share knowledge with other fellow web sleuths. Because the internet has made these online communities so accessible, different people with unique experiences can all become a part of them. With a combination of individual skills and knowledge from these people, online communities become the perfect place to cultivate collective intelligence because everybody can share their voices. Aligning with Pierre Lévy's theoretical concept, collective intelligence, in this case, is a “form of universally distributed intelligence, constantly enhanced, coordinated in real-time, and resulting in the effective mobilization of skills.”¹⁷ This was very clearly seen when people held conversations to

dispute facts using the comment section on Reddit. They used their personal, prior knowledge to correct or inform others.

It is apparent that web sleuths view their practice as beneficial to ineffective or unobservant law enforcement. Rather than allowing police and law enforcement to disseminate critical clues for cold cases, web sleuthing as a practice of collective intelligence encourages a bottom-up approach. In Lévy's words, "I just had to reverse the top-down fall of intellectual light from the heights of the divine onto humanity. In the new algorithmic medium, collective intelligence would emerge bottom-up from the multitude of actual human knowledge."¹⁸

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FACEBOOK FOLKLORE: SUBTLE ASIAN TRAITS DURING THE AGE OF COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has sparked significantly increased incidents of xenophobia, racism, and discrimination against people of East Asian appearance and descent. Initial investigations done in Wuhan, China, where the virus first appeared, suggested that bats were responsible for the initial outbreak. This led to a slew of anti-Asian memes across social media that portrayed Chinese people as bat eaters and Asian food as being “dirty.” In response, this research paper investigates how the online Asian diaspora community has used social media to engage in mutual care, discourse, and cultural expression amid increasing scrutiny and aggression around Asians and Asian cuisine. Specifically, it identifies and analyzes food memes and posts created and shared to the Facebook group, Subtle Asian Traits (SAT). This research aims to not only analyze the posts themselves as a form of folklore, but also investigate what role they play in the construction of group identity and cultural dialogue within SAT during Covid.

SUBTLE ASIAN TRAITS AND FOLKLORE

Social media, particularly Facebook groups, have long been a platform for sharing folklore. One particular Facebook group, Subtle Asian Traits (SAT), is focused on sharing content that relates to being and/or growing up in the Asian diaspora. Given its affordances as an Internet space, Facebook has provided the group the ability to form a community transcending international borders and boundaries, and thereby linking the diaspora. With around 2 million members worldwide, it is one of the world’s largest Asian online communities (Subtle Asian Traits 2018).

By sharing a stable racial and cultural identity, SAT diaspora group identity begins to solidify among group members. SAT was first created by a group of Asian-Australians as a joke to share their experiences of growing up as second-generation Asian-Australians but has since grown to give members all over the globe a platform to share the unique intersectional experiences of being Asian while living in Western, English-speaking countries. It has become a repository of “a universal (East) Asian experience” and a space that normalizes and validates Asian diaspora struggles (Abidin and Zeng 2020).

According to folklorist Alan Dundes, folk refers to “any group of people who share at least one common factor” (Dundes 1977). According to this definition, the group members of Subtle Asian Traits, when considering their shared pan-Asian cultural experiences, can be constituted as a folk group. Group members are mostly second- or third-generation Asians living outside of Asia, who sometimes struggle to find a balance between their Asian and Western cultural identities. Although there is a representation of many different Asian ethnicities, posts are usually focused on East Asian experiences because a majority of members are of East Asian descent.

When considering Subtle Asian Traits members as a folk group, posts shared to the SAT page are then considered folklore. According to Lynne McNeil, folklore exists as a form of cultural expression without the anchor of institutional culture (McNeil 2013). Social media groups like Subtle Asian Traits are a participatory form of web use where vernacular and institutional agencies hybridize into complex new communication processes (Howard 2008). The noninstitutional, or the vernacular of the everyday, are posted onto an institutional platform—Facebook. Although the posts on Facebook must follow the technological affordances and

general format of Facebook posts, the materials of the posts themselves fall outside of institutional reign. Posts are vernacular, human-generated, and non-institutional; they are folk-produced. SAT posts express shared cultural knowledge and beliefs. Within the group, stories and experiences are passed along from member to member. Memes joke about times when someone has struggled with assimilation, marginalization, or othering. As more members share, like, and comment on posts that they find relatable, group identity is constantly being affirmed and reaffirmed. If you didn't grow up sharing these culturally specific quirks, it would be hard to identify or even understand the folklore shared by group members. The delicate complexity needed in order to understand SAT humor expresses the subtle meanings behind every post. Hence, the "subtle" of Subtle Asian Traits.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

Although the Subtle Asian Traits page is mostly dedicated to sharing jokes, memes, and other forms of humor, ever since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been an increase in posts discussing incidents of racism and xenophobia (Subtle Asian Traits 2018). The coronavirus, which first appeared in Wuhan, China, caused a global pandemic with high rates of infection and death. As a result, there has been a significant increase in the number of incidents involving xenophobia, racism, and discrimination against people of Asian— especially East Asian—appearance and descent in the west (Giuffrida and Willsher 2020). Fear and paranoia increased substantially. Initial investigations suggested that bats were responsible for the initial outbreak of the virus (Croucher et al 2020). This led to a slew of anti-Asian memes across social media that portrayed Chinese people as bat eaters and Asian food as being "dirty" (Fernando 2020).

Asian diaspora researchers Crystal Abidin and Jing Zeng have seen SAT become a platform where group members collectively try to deal with the pandemic and the consequences of what they term #COVIDRacism (Abidin and Zeng 2020). To extrapolate on that research, this paper investigates further how the online SAT community has used social media to engage in mutual care, vernacular discourse, and cultural expression amid increasing scrutiny and aggression around Asians and Asian cuisine. Specifically, it aims to identify and analyze food memes and posts created and shared to the Facebook group. This research aims to not only analyze the posts themselves as a form of folklore but also investigate what role they play in the construction of group identity and cultural dialogue within SAT during Covid.

ANALYSIS: SAT FOOD MEMES AND FOOD-RELATED POSTS

A bulk of Subtle Asian Traits posts are memes, and a majority of those memes reference Asian food in some sort of way. Although SAT members have diverse ethnic backgrounds, many members are brought together by using one of the most universal and accessible languages of all: food. Typical food memes reference an obsession with boba (a popular drink consisting of milk tea and tapioca pearls), eating Korean bbq, and/or a love of rice and sushi (Subtle Asian Traits 2008). Food memes are often posted to the group, and an influx of group members will like, comment, and/or share the post. These food items are some of the more popularized and even stereotypical food items linked to Asian cuisine in offline settings, that have trickled into online spaces as well. However, there have been many food memes that highlight the Asian foods that have not been ingrained into popular and mass culture, and which are also highlighted in this paper.

With food stigmas at an all-time high, having been amplified by the pandemic, why do SAT members continue to post food memes? The answer is a mixture of engagement in cathartic vernacular discourse, expression of cultural identity in a safe space, and the desire for mutual care to cope with Covid-related stresses. Researchers Abidin and Zeng describe how members of SAT have utilized social media to collectively cope with the rising prejudice against Asians through “Catharsis, Escalation, and Problem-solving” (Abidin and Zeng 2020). Food memes, in particular, allow members to have a safe haven surrounded by similarly affected people, to engage in discourse about racial prejudices against Asian food, as well as to freely post about their culture’s foods and foodways.

SCROLLING TO COPE: MUTUAL CARE

One of the most significant aspects of Subtle Asian Traits is its function as an online community hub. Because members share a general Asian identity, it is easy for group members to feel at ease in a time where prejudices and hate crimes are on the rise. Admin for Subtle Asian Traits does their best to maintain a “safe space” by constantly moderating and removing inappropriate posts (Subtle Asian Traits 2018). Many members feel that they can openly share their experiences of xenophobia, racism, or discrimination openly and receive support and mutual care from group members.

Originally, when the pandemic first began, Subtle Asian Traits was still being used mostly as a meme and joke page. For the most part, moderators wanted to keep the page humorous, light, and fun (Abidin and Zeng 2020). However, as incidents of targeted Asian hate crimes began to rise, members began to turn to the SAT page as a place for help, resources, support, and even venting. When user posted about experiences of people asking them, “Do you

eat bat?” or other incidents of microaggressions or outright harassment, members often jump into the comment section to try to offer their support. Many members send their love, support, and sympathies, but others are angered by and critical of the childish behavior of people who would engage in these kinds of racist activities. Nevertheless, the bulk of comments were geared toward mutual care. People wanted to know how they could provide help to someone who was facing racism because of Covid-19.

The SAT platform can clearly be used as a space for finding mutual care from community members who are similarly suffering from xenophobia. With Covid-19 painting Asians as bat-eaters, food memes and posts on the SAT page shifted into posts that celebrate how Asians— especially Asian parents and elders— use food as a language of love. The posts themselves are an act of caring towards the community.

Reaffirming Asian food as something valuable and not “dirty” allows members to have a sense of comfort and belonging. In one food meme, an SAT member apologizes for telling their mom they wanted “white people lunch” and now acknowledges all the effort that went into making their Asian lunch every day (Figure 1). Of the numerous SAT posts concerning food during the Covid-19 pandemic, many have talked about food as a labor of love given freely from their families.

Under these posts about how Asian families express their love through nontraditional or nonverbal cues, comments are filled with emotional support and recognition: heart emojis and



Figure 1. Food meme of white kid lunch vs. your lunch, posted with an apology.

members' own experiences of food in connection with love and family. These messages of care and comfort provide counter-narratives to popularized ideas that Asian food gives people coronavirus, that Asian food is dirty, or that all Asians eat bats, dogs, and/or cats. Scrolling through these posts, and the comment sections that follow, give SAT members a refuge to speak about their own happy and loving experiences with food and builds a support system that affirms and uplifts their culture's foodways.

VERNACULAR DISCOURSE AND EXPRESSION

Members of Subtle Asian Traits are mostly diasporic Asians, who have been traditionally and systematically ignored by mainstream Western discourse. Asians are not only socially ostracized in real life, they are also minorities in cyberspaces. For Asians to be able to congregate in Subtle Asian Traits allows them to express vernacular discourse as a form of catharsis. Kent Ono and John Sloop characterize vernacular discourse as “speech that resonates within local communities...[It] is also culture: the music, art, criticism, dance, and architecture of local communities” (Howard 2008). The vernacular is when communication is marked as “an authority alternate to the institution (Howard 2008).

While mainstream, institutional media highlights incidents of xenophobia, racial slurs, harassment, and hate crimes, SAT works by highlighting individual feelings of anger, frustration, and fear. However, SAT admins will almost always shut down posts that start to get *too* political for the moderators. Indeed, any posts that mentioned eating bats or any other kind of racist remarks were blocked from the group, revealing the limitations of SAT as a space for discourse (Abidin and Zeng 2020).

However, a set of food memes arose from the group that subtly invites a specific kind of vernacular discourse. Specifically, the memes humorously depict a deeper frustration around racial tensions between Asians and other races. A year of Asian-targeted hate has forced group members to grieve, fear, and anger. These incidents have had Asians reevaluating all instances of racism and forcing them to speak up and raise awareness of the racial tensions that they face in society. Many memes point out that other races love, appropriate, or capitalize on Asian foods without acknowledging the history and culture behind the food (Figure 2 and Figure 3). In Figure 2, a child is seen scrunching her face and humorously looking overall confused and incredulous. Paired with the caption, “when you see those white kids who made fun of your packed lunch during middle school eating at a korean restaurant 8 years later,” it is meant to poke fun at the attitudinal shift in acceptance of Asian foods by other races. Other races, like the “white kids” being referred to in the post, have the power to change their opinions on Asian food whenever it suits them.



Figure 2. Meme of a young girl scrunching her face over a bowl of cereal.

Likewise, the post in Figure 3 is meant to jokingly invite criticisms about the British treatment of Indian food. The post pokes fun at Britain for naming Chicken Tikka Masala as one of its national dishes (Figure 3). Comments are filled with laughter, disgust, incredulity, and mockery about the “colonization” of Tikka Masala, a food that has its historical roots in India, and point at a larger dissatisfaction with the way other races treat Asian foods. During a time where Asian restaurants, including Chinese and Indian restaurants, are closing at significantly higher rates than non-Asian restaurants, the post and reactions to the post explore the funny but very real ways in which the Asian food industry is being, and will continue to be, impacted by Covid and Covid racism (Fernando and Mumphrey 2020 and Kim 2020).



Figure 3. Meme of Britain naming Chicken Tikka Masala as one of its national dishes along with a Khalid music video still and the lyrics, “So you’re still thinking of me”.

I argue that these food memes and food-related posts invite vernacular discourse because they raise criticisms about race relations that resonate within the SAT community, especially at a moment in history where racial tensions are at an all-time high. Many variations of the quote, “Love our people like u love our food,” have circulated the social media page since news of Asian hate and violence have increased throughout the pandemic. But there is still skepticism whether the “reverse-racism” of blaming white people is truly meaningful discourse. In *Subtle Asian Traits*, Asians have all the power to criticize and laugh at others, especially those groups who have a history of cultural appropriation, that they may not openly express on other platforms as freely. They are given the opportunity to engage in discourse and cultural dialogue amongst

themselves about what they do or do not find acceptable when it comes to other cultures eating, appreciating, or commodifying their food. Whether or not this discourse will prove to be beneficial or harmful remains to be seen.

CULTURAL EXPRESSION AND PERFORMING AUTHENTICITY

Food memes function to normalize the experiences of cooking and eating as an Asian person living in a Western country and create a sense of a unified Asian community. The memes are used as a form of cultural expression and to communicate group affiliation. During Covid-19, when many Asians are feeling fearful or unsafe being associated with East Asians, food memes that celebrate Asian food signal shared cultural identity and generate camaraderie, comfort, and community. SAT is filled with a convergence of funny memes and stories about missing stereotypical Asian foods that have become limited since the pandemic, like “Kbbq, AYCE hotpot, dim sum, Indomie/Maggi, and boba” (in the vernacular of SAT members) (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Meme of bulldozer labeled “drinking bubble tea with 0% sugar” pushing massive cargo ship labeled “eating late night supper, KBBQ, maggi mee, double mcspicy with ice milo.”

Similar to the African American cultural tradition of “signifyin(g)” as a means of performing racial identity online, the Asian diaspora within Subtle Asian Traits perform their identities through displays of competence and knowledge in their usage of memes and humor (Florini 2013). Understanding the joke provides a sense of cultural belonging and camaraderie.

When a meme jokes about the Asian dish stuffed bitter melon as being something to fear, based on the number of likes for the post, thousands are able to relate (Figure 5). Without cultural knowledge about what the dish is, the meme would be confusing and unintelligible. By posting a certain Asian food without explaining the cultural context, members are performing their authenticity through displays of insider cultural knowledge. When members show that they understand without needing an explanation, through likes, comments, and tags, members signal that they belong in the same racial group as well, expressing their cultural background.

As Anthony Bak Buccitelli observes in “Performance 2.0,” Facebook posts can be considered a performance that allows participants to engage in numerous forms of communicative interaction (Buccitelli 2014). There is some level of performance involved when navigating the SAT space, in a kind of performed authenticity. Because posts are heavily moderated to include only relevant topics surrounding Asian identity and culture (Subtle Asian Traits 2018), users who want to post memes or other jokes into the page must “perform” their Asian identity to receive admin approval for their posts. When a member of SAT posts about dim sum (an Asian brunch cuisine that has become extremely popularized among SAT members), they know that it is an act of “performing,” or showing that they belong in the group and that their post should be approved. Yet,



Figure 5. Meme: “I fear no man. But that thing...(showing an image of stuffed bittermelon)...it scares me.”

members are still able to convey their cultural authenticity despite the act of putting on a performance. Evidence of authenticity comes from other members being able to relate to posts, consequently liking, commenting, and tagging others to share. When one SAT member posted about missing dim sum during the pandemic, over 19,000 other SAT members who liked the post showed that they were able to relate, with over 6,000 members leaving comments as well.

According to folklorist William Bascom, the four functions of folklore are to (1) entertain, (2) validate culture, (3) educate, and (4) maintain conformity (Bascom 1954). Subtle Asian Traits' food posts certainly aim to amuse, express cultural beliefs and identity, as well as educate and perpetuate certain images about what it means to be Asian. Food memes, by definition, are humorous, but the format of the SAT page also promotes digital and cultural solidarity through authentic cultural expression. The more it is spread and repeated, the more it becomes ingrained in SAT culture and believed to be truth. These posts serve to validate the cultural experiences that members have, as well as educate others who are less familiar. As more members see peripheral friends and acquaintances in the comments tagging each other, the affirmation that the content of a post contains valid aspects of culture begins to multiply, serving to maintain conformity to that cultural belief or idea. It is a process and performance of affirmation, validation, and cementing cultural beliefs, actions, and words.

CONCLUSIONS

Ergo, the identification and functional analysis of food memes/posts shared to the Facebook group Subtle Asian Traits clearly reveal how the community engages in mutual care, vernacular discourse, and cultural expression as a way of coping with or even combatting increased scrutiny and aggression around Asians and Asian cuisine. The ability to relate to others and freely share

stories and discourse that go against the grain reinforces group identity and sense of community. In an age of Covid, where xenophobia is at a high, it was inevitable that Asians would turn inwards to members of their own community to engage in cultural dialogue that provides access to resources and protection. Subtle Asian Traits is not a perfect space, and there are certain limitations to how it can function, but in general, it has been an invaluable resource for members of its community. With rates of Covid-19 infections and deaths falling, and the world gradually returning to a new “normal,” it will be interesting to see how Asians from all over the world continue to use Subtle Asian Traits for cultural dialogue and to see how SAT continues to evolve as a platform.

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WOMEN TO BE REMEMBERED: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF GLADYS BENTLEY AND BUDDY KENT

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INTRODUCTION

Do people mean anything? To put it another way, does everyone suffer a little from the desire to be remembered by humanity? Gladys Bentley and Buddy Kent were memorable people, and they wanted to be remembered, but their stories were complex, and they wanted to control the narrative. Bentley, a black blues singer, already had fame that would link her to an era of music that inspired everything that came after it. Kent, a Jewish exotic dancer, told her interviewer she couldn't imagine anyone wanting to hear her story. Yet, Bentley left only a memoir essay in *Ebony* magazine and an unpublished, lost autobiography, and Kent left two interviews with the Lesbian Herstory Archives. What we have left of these two women's stories are piecemeal evidence of their contributions in pushing American culture into new ideas of performance and gender expression.

The United States in the 1920s and 1930s pushed cultural boundaries, especially in New York City. Women became more independent. They bobbed their hair to symbolize their newly gained freedoms, and the stock market crash of 1929 could not stop the tide of the rapidly changing club culture of New York City where women such as Bentley and Kent were beginning to redefine themselves. When no one had money, these performers' finances remained in the black from their shows. Outside of their careers, Gladys Bentley and Buddy Kent had striking similarities in the general atmosphere of their lives. For starters, both Gladys and Buddy left

home right after high school. Gladys found her way to Harlem.¹ Buddy found her way to the Village.²³ Bridging the gap from the so-called “pansy craze,” when gender bending performances were not far from the norm, to the conservative umbrella of the McCarthy era, Gladys Bentley and Buddy Kent illustrate the *avant garde* cultural push that bloomed in New York City in the 1920s to 1930s, but also the different reactionary responses to the sudden rise of conservatism that came with post-WWII America's desire for stability. Their stories illustrate the peak of cultural fascination with queer culture to Kent's bold decision to remain out in her public life and Bentley's protective one to release her recanting memoir essay in *Ebony* during the times of the Lavender Scare in the pre-Stonewall era.

GLADYS BENTLEY

Gladys Bentley was born in 1907 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She claimed her mother never loved her—even as a baby she had to be nursed from a bottle by her grandmother because her mother refused. Her parents wanted a boy but received a girl. This led to her beginning “to hate [her brothers] as [they] grew up.” She stole “their suits” and wore “them to school.” Bentley's parents fought with her about her clothing, condemning boys' clothing but finally agreeing on a skirt and blouse as opposed to dresses. Bentley found that eventually she “began to feel more comfortable in boys' clothes than in dresses.”⁴

In primary school, she did not run around at recess, but helped her teacher with classroom chores. Bentley stated in her memoir essay for *Ebony* in 1952:

But I remember one person who did appeal to me in those love-starved, lonely, elementary school days. She was one of my teachers. During recess, I stayed in the class

and helped her, dusting and arranging things on her desk, cleaning blackboards.

Sometimes she would let me comb her long, beautiful hair. In class I sat for hours watching her and wondering why I was so attracted to her. At night I dreamed of her. I didn't understand the meaning of those dreams until later.⁵

This childhood crush ended as her parents moved, pulling Bentley from that school.

In 1923, Bentley was sixteen and tired of being stifled at home; she thus fled Philadelphia for New York City, where the Harlem Renaissance was in full bloom. She played piano at rent parties at the beginning to earn an income, but eventually moved to the world of the clubs. Despite her extensive career, there is no account of how Bentley learned to play the piano whether from an instructor or from her working-class family. Prohibition in the United States made Harlem a haven for people who wanted a drink. The laws were not enforced as often in Harlem as in the rest of New York City, creating a gathering place for people in clubs, like the Mad House where Bentley first began to play. Bentley's first interview as a piano player for Mad House began with the prospective employer informing her that the establishment was looking for a male pianist. Bentley merely replied that it was "no better time for them to start using a girl."⁶ Obviously, Bentley was a hit. She banged the piano and drew crowds every time she played. Later, she went on to headline at the Clam House, which on maps soon became labelled as "Gladys' Clam House."⁷ Soon after, in 1928 and 1929, Bentley caught the eye of a Broadway agent and recorded and released eight record sides.⁸

Gladys Bentley entered Harlem during the blues age, when black artists and businesses thrived in Harlem, and black musicians were booked in the clubs around Harlem, as well as in other parts of the city. Bentley played the Cotton Club, the Clam House, and became a regular

performer at the Ubangi Club. She was known not only for her gender-bending dress--billed half the time as 'Bobbie (Butch) Minton' and the other half as 'Gladys Bentley'—but also for... In a 1936 *Afro American* article, Bentley is described as “mannishly dress[ed]” and as “prancing about....deliver[ing] her prize number about ‘Nothing Now Perplexes Like the Sexes, Because When You See Them Switch You Can’t Tell Which is Which,’”⁹ a clear indication that Bentley’s sexuality had no ties to her performance pseudonym. In the 1940s, she was referred to as ‘Butch Minton’ in a promotional poster for Mona’s club in San Francisco.¹⁰ The names Gladys Bentley and Bobbie “Butch” Minton were used interchangeably during her career in which she became celebrated for her gender-bending parodies of popular hits from the era complete with lewd lyrics and serenades to the female audience members.¹¹

Bentley never hid her sexuality. In Harlem during the 1920s, most performers “hid their same-sex relationships” instead of featured them on stage, but the blues “opened the gate” for sexual fluidity.¹² The lesbians of the Harlem Renaissance were only ‘out’ at rent parties and buffet flats (extravagant apartment parties devoid of social decorum) which were held in private homes, away from the public eye.¹³ Bentley, however, maintained her queer persona publicly even as she played the “iconic gay speakeasy the Clam House.”¹⁴ Other performers were also challenging gender norms, for example, Ethel Waters never flaunted her lesbian sexuality but also never denied it--but Bentley remained the first proudly ‘out’ lesbian in a culture that saw anything other than heterosexuality as taboo.¹⁵ In 1929, she unabashedly, and famously, proclaimed to have married not only a woman, but a



Figure 1. Gladys Bentley in her white tuxedo from *Ebony* magazine: “I am a Woman Again” (1952).

white woman, during her time in Harlem.¹⁶ Long before *Loving v. Virginia*, and ninety years before *Obergefell v. Hodges*, Bentley was boldly asserting her rights. Whether Bentley said it for the headline, or said it for sincerity, her words stand as a synecdoche to her sexuality as well as the openness of New York City in the 1920s.

Gladys Bentley did follow the expectations of blues performers, but in an unconventional way. It was expected of female blues performers to deviate from traditional feminine roles of the 1920s, and Bentley delivered on that convention with her on stage flirtations and dress. Bentley donned a slightly more masculine la Garconne aesthetic both on stage and off. This was a style that grew in popularity in the 1920s, noted for its short-haired looks and its more androgynous frames made from the clothing pieces.¹⁷ Bentley's stage costume was famously a white tuxedo-- pants, shirt, tails, and top hat.

BUDDY KENT

Long before she was known as Buddy Kent, Malvina Schwartz was born in 1921 to Jewish immigrant parents in Manhattan. She grew up moving around New York, mainly living in Manhattan with her parents, two brothers, and her sister. Her family was poor--Kent remembered that one of the homes she lived in did not have its own bathroom—but they were exceptionally close. She later admitted that she was not out in her public life not because of her family -- she had “accepting parents,” but because of her job in mammography.¹⁸

Her dad was a carpenter, so Kent learned to handle tools at a very young age. School was her whole world as a teenager in the 1930s--playing basketball and swimming. On weekends she visited her aunt in New Jersey where she learned horseback riding and completed household

chores as she kept her aunt and uncle company. Toward the end of her teenage years, she began to help her uncle at his bar, and in 1935, at the age of fifteen, she joined Drum Corps and i went on hormone therapy because, according to her general practitioner, she “lacked female hormones.”¹⁹ During her interview, Kent reflected on this period, noting that with her “knowledge of the body now” she believed she would have “sorted [herself] out” eventually.

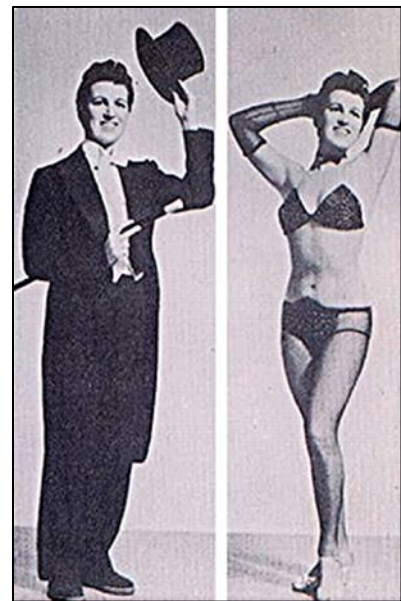
Kent refused to wear dresses to school. Her mother agreed to men’s dress shirts and navy skirts that had a slit sewn in to feel more like pants. In her interview with Joan Nestle late in her life, Buddy Kent reminisced about her first crushes on teachers as well as a fling when she worked at a summer camp. In high school in the mid-1930s, Kent would sneak off at night to go to the gay bars in Greenwich Village, a neighborhood in Manhattan on the Hudson River known for its gay bars and clubs. Her mother would bribe her sister to ““follow her”” as she “was in the Village, visiting the bars.” Kent read *The Will of Loneliness* at eighteen and remarked that it was one of the foundational books helping her figure out she was gay. Later in life, Buddy told interviewer Joan Nestle that both her sister and two brothers knew she was gay.²⁰

Buddy Kent grew up in the 1930s, hardly noticing the Great Depression because she had always been poor, moving around so her dad could find work. In 1937, when she graduated from high school, she knew college was not an option. While she fantasized of one day becoming a gym teacher, she went straight to Greenwich Village. Her first job was for AT&T. In those days, they did not hire lesbians and “didn’t hire Jews.”²¹ AT&T hired roller skaters to run the messages from station to station. Born Malvina Schwartz, Kent knew her name was ““too Jewish”” and thus changed it to Buddy Kent. Although the job at AT&T did not stick, the name Buddy Kent did.

Kent moved on from being a roller skater at AT&T to start working as a bartender at the lesbian club Ernie's in Greenwich Village. She polished her trade as a bartender until one night the police came in. The manager took the police into the back²² room, most likely paid them off, and the only cover that was blown that night was that Buddy Kent was a woman behind the bar, and women were not allowed to bartend after midnight in those days. Her manager accepted those restrictions, and for a while, Kent bartended until midnight and then socialized at the club after her shift.

Starting in the 1920s and continuing until 1969, the majority of the gay and lesbian bars and clubs in Greenwich Village were controlled by the New York Mafia. The police received bribes to turn a blind eye to the alcohol during Prohibition, but also to the patrons that frequented the establishments once alcohol became legal and homosexuality illegal. Ernie's and nearly all of the clubs Buddy Kent would perform at during her career would have ties to the local Mafiosi.²³ This Mafia protection did not grant the performers a blank check, but it acted as a deterrent. The police still arrested and institutionalized gays and lesbians, but also would hit the bars and clubs where it hurt—their liquor license.²⁴

Buddy Kent's performance debut happened because of a scheduling accident. Too few acts had been scheduled for the club one night in the late 1930s to early 1940s, and the manager turned to Kent asking if she could do anything. Kent performed a quick tap dance routine she remembered from high school, and



*Figure 2. Buddy Kent in her Fred Astaire suit (left) and her lingerie (right) as part of her strip act from Hugh Ryan's *The Three Lives of Malvina Schwartz**

the manager put her on stage.²⁵ She began her routine dressed in her white tuxedo, “Fred Astaire” style, stripping down to women’s lingerie by the end of her act.²⁶

Kent began her career doing an “Afro Cuban” dance routine. Though there is no other mention of this style of act in her tapes. Kent was certainly influenced by that style of dance and used it in her routine, not with the thought to take from the black culture she was influenced by, but to turn it into her own act the same way she was “always going to musicals so [she] could steal [the dancers’] steps.”²⁷ She attended three dance classes per week, sprinkling in college academic courses in hopes of becoming a gym teacher. There was an afternoon nap, and then it was off to the club for work that night.

Kent wore her sexuality on her sleeve by the standards of the 1930s. The fashion style of la Garconne, built on from the 1920s la Garconne,--complete with slicked back hair, straight leg pants, suit jacket--with its androgyny became a facet of lesbian fashion in the 1920s and 1930s.²⁸ Kent donned this look both onstage and off. According to Dr. Lisa Davis, “everyone” wore those styles of suits when dressing up.²⁹



Figure 3. Buddy Kent (left) in a blazer with slicked back curly hair under the arm of a girl with a similar haircut and a blazer. From Ryan's Three Lives of Malvina Schwartz.

In 1937, Buddy Kent entered Greenwich Village to begin what would be a prolific club career. That same year, Gladys Bentley saw her days in Harlem waning. She moved out to San Francisco to perform at clubs under billing for both her pseudonym Bobbie ‘Butch’ Minton and her real name. This means Buddy’s trips uptown to Harlem and

down to Atlantic City would have missed Bentley perform, and Bentley never performed at the Savannah Club, the only black gay club in Greenwich Village.³⁰

World War II broke out, and in 1942, Buddy Kent joined the Service like many young women at the time. She was 21 in Basic Training. The Army Band needed brass, so according to Kent, who played the trumpet, the band received the “best food.” Buddy Kent was stationed in San Francisco, and it was “very gay.”³¹ San Francisco, like New York City, was a haven for the gender bending, stereotype defying queer community. When she had weekends off, Kent removed her army uniform (which was not standard) and sneaked off to the clubs to see the performers. The queer members of the Service feared the “blue discharges” that were issued to service members found to be ‘sexual deviants’ which included all homosexual behavior. While not dishonorable, this would strip them of any of the veteran benefits they would have received given any other discharge.³² The service member would be put in isolation, interviewed by a psychiatrist, and then discharged with documentation they were a homosexual.³³ Even as a member of the WAC (and before that the WAAC), female service members could be subject to the blue discharge. The WAAC had its own regulations for “appointment, enlistment, promotion, discipline, training, uniforms, pay, and discharge,” but the WAAC deferred to US Army regulations if the WAAC had no guidelines.³⁴ The blue discharge was one such instance. Despite “serv[ing] well for approximately three years as an officer in the WAAC and WAC” one woman from Columbus, Ohio “broke” when “another WAC suddenly attracted [her].”³⁵ The former officer’s “brief affair with another woman..led to her forced resignation, a bad discharge, and the resulting hardships.”³⁶ The bad discharge being a blue discharge. Despite the risk, Buddy Kent frequented Mona’s Club 440 which was the exact club Bentley was frequenting as a performer.³⁷ But despite this overlap, there is no evidence that Kent ever saw Bentley at Mona’s.

After her time in the Army in 1946, Kent returned to New York City to continue her performance career. Kent booked her first performance at Club 181 as a chorus waiter.³⁸ She ended her work night at Yank Sing's Chinese restaurant or Reuben's as "everybody who is anybody in showbiz would appear there;" she "cruis[ed]" the Copacabana and the Latin Quarter clubs on her night off because it was what you did.³⁹ Show Business was about the connections one made, and the entertainment industry kept lesbians like Buddy and Gladys employed. Even during her glamorous career, Kent worked to evade the antagonism "of the vice squad for being a transvestite ('masquerading' as a man)."⁴⁰ Kent went on a drag tour circuit with Kicky Hall and Jackie Howe in Atlantic City, New Jersey as a novelty act. Hall and Howe became very close; Hall served as Kent's manager. Kent considered Howe her "closest friend."—after their time in Atlantic City the two of them always lived in the same building until Kent's passing.⁴¹

From Atlantic City, Hall got Kent into the Moroccan Village club and then booked as a novelty act at the straight club Jimmy Kelly's, billed as "Bubbles Kent, Exotic Dancer." Kent still entered the stage dressed as a man—either the Fred Astaire or the Indian routine, and the Wall Street men of the club loved it. When most performers were only employed there for three months, Kent was booked for a year.⁴²

BENTLEY AND KENT AND THE SHIFT TOWARD CONSERVATISM

The Post-World War II landscape for the fledgling gay and lesbian community went from one of virtual acceptance in the bubble of the Big Apple to one of serious scrutiny. Gladys Bentley felt this atmosphere of disdain, intimately, and as a response she tried to remake herself by publishing an autobiographic essay entitled "I am a Woman Again" in *Ebony* magazine's August 1952 issue. Most historians, notably Eric Garber, have taken the article with a grain of salt.⁴³

This was the same woman who claimed an interracial marriage in 1929!⁴⁴ At face value, her article reads like a woman asking to be forgiven, to shed her past in favor of ‘the correct way.’ She found Jesus. At her time of death, Bentley was working to become an ordained minister. What she would have done with that certification might be the most intriguing counterfactual rabbit hole one could dive down: would she have married queer couples once McCarthy was dethroned? Would she have become a preacher as a side career alongside her performances?

Bentley’s *Ebony* article reads like a Hail Mary to avoid the Lavender Scare, to avoid the blacklists, to avoid the scrutiny from the House Un-American Activities Committee. Commonly referred to as the McCarthy Era, the House Un-American Activities Committee not only sought to root out communism from the government (and from the private sector by extent) but also homosexuality. McCarthy claimed that homosexuals were “bad security risks because they were easily subject to blackmail.”⁴⁵ A year later, the Senate continued their investigations, publicly stating that in the previous ten months since July 1950, “there had actually resigned 1057 employees who had been determined to be homos.”⁴⁶ The sensationalism surrounding the hearings and the investigations brought gay people under vast scrutiny, especially once the idea of ‘homintern’ filtered through the newspapers. ‘Homintern’ was a play on the phrase ‘ComIntern’ which stood for Communist International, a push under Stalin’s regime for Communism to go global. The word “conveyed the idea of a global homosexual community, particularly in the literary and artistic world” which emphasized the so-called dominance gay people had over the radio.⁴⁷

Gladys Bentley was in the hot seat. Her career was built on her open homosexuality. She was known for her iconic top hat and tails. If she did not want to be labelled as part of the

‘homintern,’ she had to act. Her *Ebony* article mirrors the American cultural portrayal of homosexuality in the early 1950s...almost too perfectly. Americans, especially Senator Joseph McCarthy, believed that homosexuals “were psychologically disturbed” from childhood issues like ostracization and being sheltered.⁴⁸ Bentley noted in her memoir that she was ostracized by her own mother who “wouldn’t even nurse [her]...for six months,” as well as by her peers.⁴⁹ Bentley even turned to medical terminology as a doctor cited that her “sex organs [were] infantile” and prescribed her a hormone therapy treatment.⁵⁰ This was a treatment that was known at the time “to be worthless and ineffectual.”⁵¹ Whether Bentley wrote the piece “to salvage her floundering career” or to preserve her job, and her image, the fact remains that she disappeared following the publication of her article, her fame never returning to what it was during the pre-war years. American society could no longer handle “a strong, uncompromising, Afro-American bulldagger.”⁵² That meant that Gladys Bentley would attempt to not be remembered as such, but to be remembered as the blues singer who was cured by modern science.

Contrarily, Buddy Kent hit the highest point of her career during the Lavender Scare of the 1950s-1960s. Kent co-owned the Page Three club (opened in 1954) in Greenwich Village with Jackie Howe and Kicky Hall, with support from “the usual mafioso”⁵³ of course.⁵⁴ In Kent’s own words, “we were working for ourselves and getting a little bit of the gravy.”⁵⁵ The Page Three pulled crowds from all the clubs Kent, Hall, and Howe had performed in during their early drag careers. They were “a success from the first week.”⁵⁶

There was no tale of any fear of persecution or of a potential raid of her club. In her interview she mentioned her friend Yetta Cohn being taken in for questioning by the House Un-

American Activities Committee, and a raid on the Club 181 in 1949 prior to her move to the Page Three. During the raid, she had no fear for herself; it was a regular thing. The police raided the club; everyone stayed put; the police went to the back with the managers where they were paid off, and off they went on their way. When 181 was raided, Buddy's sister was there, and she was a student at NYU at the time. Her sister panicked, and Buddy helped sneak her out through the kitchen.⁵⁷ While federal employees were investigated and interrogated and forced to resign, Buddy maintained her open homosexuality well into the 1960s, when disco killed the clubs. It was only then, not police raids in search of disorderly conduct, not friends testifying before the Senate committee, but disco, that made Buddy consider 'retirement' and a transition from the glamorous world of nightclubs to the stable work-a-day world of to being an X-ray technician.⁵⁸ Buddy only had positive things to say in her interview about the high life of a performer. Dance classes in the early afternoon, down to the clubs for work, and when she was off work it was mingling with the patrons, buying drinks for everyone, and when someone was down on their luck people would buy drinks for them. Today the topic of sex-work (work that focuses on sexual liberation, like the strip-tease portions of Kent's performances) is still considered controversial; that Kent worked to de-stigmatize it in the 1940s and 1950s was truly groundbreaking.

Gladys Bentley went on to perform one last time in 1958 on Groucho Marx's show *You Bet Your Life*. In 1960, she died of "complications of the flu," and her autobiography '*If This Be Sin*' was never published.⁵⁹

IN LOVING MEMORY: HOW WE REMEMBER THEM

Most of the scholarly work of these two individuals focus on their careers. Bentley was tied to the blues and Harlem and Kent was tied to her Mafia owned clubs of Greenwich Village. However, little research had been done on the personal lives of these two women, and the real lives of these people beyond their careers. Even in her interviews Buddy Kent did not dwell too long on her family and childhood. Journalist Hugh Ryan noted this disparity in his chronology of Kent's tapes with Nestle and her subsequent interviews with Dr. Lisa Davis: "Buddy's life as a performer was only one small part of who she was, but it's the best-documented part because that's where her life intersected with the lives of straight people, who had money." Her life as a performer was all that would be remembered of her, not her personal life where she was in a loving relationship for nine years. She never said the name of her lover, during her interviews, nor the names of others that came after. The only time the name of a lover was spoken was in reference to a tattoo Kent had on her thigh of a heart with Evelyn's first initial inside. Kent would name the famous people and other drag stars that paraded into the clubs, but never uttered her brother's name or the names of those close to her. She wanted to remember and be remembered for the glamor days.

Bentley only gave her childhood a couple paragraphs of gloss over--and even that is done more to explain why she became a lesbian than to tell the tale of her youth. It seems unjust to close these women's stories, to hit stop on the tapes, and be content with the same analyses of Bentley's career repeated over and over again.

Both women thrived in the *avant garde* sanctuary of New York City when culture pushed forth new ideas of performance and gender expression. As the culture of the United States shifted to one of hostility toward homosexuality and non-stereotypical gender expression, Gladys

Bentley strategically retreated while Buddy Kent found refuge in the clubs of Greenwich Village that were still under Mafia control. Hugh Ryan compared LGBT history to a game of telephone because of its Hansel and Gretel bread crumb-like structure, piecing together stories and records from word of mouth or the few sources formally interviewed.⁶⁰ More research needs to be done on both these incredible women. The game of telephone needs to continue. Gladys Bentley and Buddy Kent should be remembered beyond their boundary pushing careers, for their boundary pushing lives

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NOTES

- ¹ Gladys Bentley. "I Am a Woman Again." *Ebony Magazine*, digitized by Queer Music Heritage Foundation (August 1952).
- ² During the research process, historian Lisa Davis consistently referred to Buddy Kent and Gladys Bentley by first name. At first it was presumed Davis chose a more informal way to refer to Kent because the two knew each other personally over the time the Lesbian Herstory Archives were collecting documentation within Greenwich Village. The informal reference continued as Davis discussed Gladys Bentley, as if reminding historians and researchers that these women were people who lived, had friendships. The decision also implies a sense of acquaintance and community when talking about Bentley and Kent's extraordinary lives. Thank you to Dr. Lisa Davis for her invaluable aid in accessing sources related to Buddy Kent as well as providing input into the research process. Another thank you is necessary to Dr. Mark Metzler Sawin for his role in developing the concept for this research project as well as his later role in the revision process.
- ³ Nestle, Joan. "Buddy Kent: Biographical Interview for Lesbian Herstory Archives." *Lesbian Herstory Archives*, digitized by Dr. Lisa Davis, January-February 1983. File 1. Buddy Kent did only two interviews during her lifetime. The first was in 1983 with historian Joan Nestle as part of Nestle's project the Lesbian Herstory Archives which collected biographies of the lives of pre-Stonewall lesbians for prosperity. The 1983 interview was digitized by historian Dr. Lisa Davis, who also interviewed Kent in 2006, when doing research for her book *A Study in Mink* (2011).
- ⁴ Gladys Bentley. "I am a Woman Again."
- ⁵ Ibid. p. 4
- ⁶ Ibid. p. 5
- ⁷ Eric Garber. "Gladys Bentley: the Bulldagger who Sang the Blues." *Outlook* (1988). p. 62. See the image on page 61 for a map of the clubs in Harlem where the Clam House is labelled as 'Gladys' Clam House.
- ⁸ Moira Mahoney Church. *If This Be Sin: Gladys Bentley and The Performance of Identity*. (2018) (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/4706> p. 7

- ⁹ “Here’s What Happens At Harlem’s Famous Ubangi Club: Writer Lets You Spend a Night in Gotham Hot Spot.” *Afro American*, re-printed in “Gladys Bentley Early Magazine and Newspaper Articles 1936 to 1944,” Queer Music Heritage, 8 February 1936. <http://queermusicheritage.com/bentley3-1936.html>.
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- ¹⁶ Haleema Shah. “The Great Blues Singer Gladys Bentley Broke All the Rules.” (2019).
- ¹⁷ “Women’s Clothing.” University of Vermont (2011).
- ¹⁸ Joan Nestle. “Buddy Kent: Biographical Interview for the Lesbian Herstory Archives.” Lesbian Herstory Archives, digitized by Dr. Lisa Davis, January-February 1983. File 1. Buddy Kent did only two interviews during her lifetime. The first was in 1983 with historian Joan Nestle as part of Nestle’s project the Lesbian Herstory Archives which collected biographies of the lives of pre-Stonewall lesbians for prosperity. The 1983 interview was digitized by historian Dr. Lisa Davis, who also interviewed Kent in 2006, when doing research for her book *A Study in Mink* (2011).

¹⁹ Nestle. File 2.

²⁰ Ibid. File 3. Buddy Kent did not elaborate beyond her admission that she had the classic “crushes on teachers” as a child. However, she does go into detail about her first affair with a coworker at a summer camp in the same file.

²¹ Ryan, Hugh. “The Three Lives of Malvina Schwartz.” Longreads, *Hazlitt Magazine*, Penguin Random House, 12 October 2016. <https://hazlitt.net/longreads/three-lives-malvina-schwartz?src=longreads>.

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²³ For a more in-depth overview of the New York Mafia’s involvement in the opening of the gay bars and clubs that would make Greenwich Village famous during the first half of the twentieth century, see Phillip Crawford Jr’s *the Mafia and the Gays* (2015). Using the recently released FBI files and cases brought before the New York State Liquor Authority, Crawford Jr details the timeline of each of the Five Families’ involvement in the bar scene.

²⁴ Garber. *Spectacle in Color*.

²⁵ Joan Nestle. File 1.

²⁶ Lisa Davis notably utilized the phrase “Fred Astaire” to draw upon the image of the film star and dancer, adding an elegance to Buddy’s description. Buddy also utilizes this description of her own dancing act in part four of her digitized interview with Joan Nestle in 1983.

²⁷ Joan Nestle. File 1.

²⁸ See Lisa Davis’ “The Butch as Drag Artiste” from Joan Nestle’s *the Persistent Desire* (1992) for a more complete discussion of the links between the la Garconne look and stereotypical lesbian fashion.

²⁹ Ibid. pg. 45.

³⁰ Joan Nestle. “Buddy Kent: Biographical Interview.” (1983). File 2.

³¹ Nestle. File 3.

³² Ibid. File 3. See the rest of Nestle’s interview or Hugh Ryan’s *When Brooklyn was Queer* for a more in-depth conversation about the Army and the blue discharge. It was filed under Section 8, Undesirable Traits and Habits, and the discharged person would not return home in uniform but be given a set of civilian clothes. It was as if that person never joined the Service. Buddy Kent would describe in her interview that it was more often a detriment because it listed that person as a known homosexual.

³³ Nestle. File 4.

- ³⁴ Bettie Morden. *The Women's Army Corps, 1945-1978. Army Historical Series. (1990).* P. 5. Morden's work is published by the United States Army detailing the history of the WAAC which later became the WAC. This work does not specifically mention the blue discharge or even homosexuals in the WAC.
- ³⁵ "Letter from a Columbus, Ohio WAC Officer." "Form of Discharge," *YANK: the Army Weekly*, 16 November 1945.
- ³⁶ Allan Berube. "Rights, Justice, and a New Minority." *Coming Out Under Fire: the History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two*. University of North Carolina Press. 1990. P. 237. See the full chapter for a more in-depth look at the consequences and subsequent Congressional Committee debate over the blue discharge.
- ³⁷ "Gladys Bentley and Miss Jimmy Reynard."
- ³⁸ Lisa Davis. (2015) "Buddy Kent, aka Bubbles Kent, Exotic Dancer."
- ³⁹ Joan Nestle. File 2.
- ⁴⁰ Davis, Lisa. "The Butch as Drag Artiste."
- ⁴¹ Joan Nestle. File 1.
- ⁴² Joan Nestle. File 2.
- ⁴³ Eric Garber. "Gladys Bentley: the Bulldagger who Sang the Blues." *Outlook* (1988). p. 62.
- ⁴⁴ "Richard Perry LOVING et ux., Appellants, v. COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA." No. 395, digitized by Legal Information Institute, Cornell University, 12 June 1967. This Supreme Court case decided that the Fourteenth Amendment included discrimination of marriage, meaning that as of this case, interracial marriage was legal in the United States.
- ⁴⁵ Cecil Holland. "Pro-Communist: Service, Shapley, Schuman, Duran Named at Hearing." *Evening Star*. 1950.
- ⁴⁶ Louis Lautier. "Capital Spotlight." *Arizona Sun*. 1951.
- ⁴⁷ David Johnson. *The Lavender Scare: the Cold War Persecution of the Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government*. 34-35.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 35.
- ⁴⁹ Gladys Bentley. "I am a Woman Again." *Ebony* (1952). P. 3.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 4.
- ⁵¹ Eric Garber. "Gladys Bentley: the Bulldagger who Sang the Blues." *Outlook* (1988). p. 62.

⁵² Ibid. p. 63. Bulldagger defined as a masculine lesbian, synonymous with colloquial contemporary terms like butch.

⁵³ Lisa Davis. "Buddy Kent, aka Bubbles Kent Exotic Dancer." *West View News* (2015).

⁵⁴ Nestle.

⁵⁵ Hugh Ryan. "The Three Lives of Malvina Schwartz." (2016).

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Joan Nestle. "Buddy Kent: Biographical Interview for the Lesbian Herstory Archives." (1983). File 4.

⁵⁸ Lisa Davis. "Buddy Kent, aka Bubbles Kent Exotic Dancer." *West View News* (2015). See Nestle's interview with Kent (File 4) for an anecdote of the WAC training Kent in X-ray technician work while stationed at Fort Dix.

⁵⁹ Giovanni Russonello. "Gladys Bentley." (2019).

⁶⁰ Hugh Ryan. "The Three Lives of Malvina Schwartz." (2016).

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ORIENTALISM AND THE DISPROPORTIONATE RATES OF FILIPINO NURSE DEATHS FROM COVID-19 IN THE U.S.

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Today in the United States we are seeing high rates of Filipino nurse deaths from Covid-19. Establishing the causality of this problem is very complex and yet events and ideologies of the past undoubtedly color human relations today. History and ideas from the past must be used to contextualize the death toll within this group of nurses. The imperialist theories espoused by authors such as the Earl of Cromer, Thomas Macaulay, Rudyard Kipling, and Max Weber encouraged Euro-Americans to colonize the rest of the world and impart their claimed superiority of language, industry, religion, and culture on the so-called barbarous regions on the world to “civilize” them, which in turn supported and spread the view that people dubbed “Orientals” were inherently inferior to Westerners. These prejudices – those held by some individuals and those which are a part of a systemic problem of privilege - continue to be carried by Americans of the twenty first century and have manifested in the gatekeeping of higher-paid, flexible nursing jobs for American nurses and only lower-paid, more strenuous positions available for immigrant nurses. Orientalist structures and the legacy of American colonialism in the Philippines have made it so Filipino nurses only find positions in the U.S. with tougher conditions which has made them particularly vulnerable to the risks of the coronavirus.

SECTION ONE: A BRIEF HISTORY OF U.S. - PHILIPPINES RELATIONS

United States - Philippine relations commenced in the Spanish-American War (April 1898 - December 1898).¹ The conflict resulted in American expansion overseas with a populace at

home in favor of educating the population of the Philippines through various means, including the creation of nursing schools with American curriculum. Despite policies aimed to assimilate the Philippines, many Americans believed Filipinos were inferior as seen in laws which denied them certain rights.

Widespread public support for American intervention in the conflict between Spain and its colony, Cuba, can be largely attributed to two men: Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst, whose newspapers battled for attention and sales. In *American Colossus*, H.W. Brand explains, “at substantial expense Pulitzer and Hearst had installed new printing equipment that allowed them to produce papers for the masses; now, to attract those masses, they required stories with an emotional immediacy ordinary news often lacked. Atrocity tales from Cuba—whether reported honestly, embellished, or fabricated—served perfectly.”² As such, the American public was primed for U.S. intervention in Cuba, as were American investors in the sugar industry. Despite that a notable size of the United States’ population favored intervention, a newly sworn-in President (1897), William McKinley, remained hesitant, citing a recently recovering U.S. economy and horror at his own experience with battles in the Civil War as deterrents.³

The Commander in Chief made several attempts for a diplomatic resolution. To ease tensions, the Spanish government approved a U.S. request to dispatch a naval vessel off the coast of Cuba.⁴ The end result was war. Only a month after docking at Havana harbor, the *Maine* (the American naval vessel) lost 266 members of its crew due to an explosion and the proceeding fire.⁵ There was a long contested dispute over the cause of the explosion; ultimately the incident was chalked up to an act of war, despite the fact that the captain had dubbed it an accident.⁶ It

was no surprise that the story spread like wildfire through newspapers; Hearst's paper titled the story with the words "Remember the Maine and to Hell with Spain!"⁷ Again McKinley pursued a diplomatic route to no avail; in mid-April of 1898 the president requested from Congress the authority to end hostilities in Cuba and establish a new government there through the use of the United States' military and naval forces.⁸ Thus began what John Hay, the Secretary of State, called a "splendid little war."⁹ The conflict was not contained in Cuba; U.S. marines seized control of the capital of the Philippines, another one of Spain's colonies at the time.¹⁰

American victory in the Spanish-American War in 1898 came with the acquisition of overseas territories, including the Philippines.¹¹ The Treaty of Paris, which officially ended the war, declared that Puerto Rico, Guam, and Cuba would be surrendered to the United States and the Philippines was purchased from Spain for \$20 million.¹² The greatest irony of gaining these colonies lies in the fact that the United States entered the war supposedly to aid Cuba in its fight for independence against Spain. The United States' colonization of the Philippines (1898-1946), justified to itself through white man's burden theory, implemented a rule of *benevolent assimilation*, a term coined by McKinley explaining America's rationale for colonizing the Philippines, which included the establishment of nursing schools with American curriculum, teachers, and training.¹³

The biases Americans had against Filipinos can be seen in light of Orientalist binaries exposed by Edward Said and the same binaries perpetuated in "The White Man's Burden" by Rudyard Kipling and the Earl of Cromer's theories on European intellectual superiority. An example of imposed inferiority of Filipinos was published in an issue of *Boston Sunday Globe* in 1899.¹⁴ The clipping illustrates a before and after of U.S. influence on Filipinos, in which the

native Filipino would exchange his “war club” for a baseball bat. In the drawing Filipinos are depicted in gross stereotypes. Similarly, the White man’s burden was perpetuated in other popular media. The cover of a *Judge* magazine issue published in 1899 was a cartoon of President McKinley bathing a Filipino depicted as a baby in the waters of “civilization”.¹⁵ A result of these influences was how Americans perceived Filipinos: uncivilized, dirty, and unintelligent. Additionally, media perpetuated a necessity to adequately educate Filipinos which allowed the United States to use resources from the Philippines; in this case the natural resource extracted by colonialism was human capital in the form of nurses.

For some though, the large territorial acquisitions were in contrast with American ideals of freedom from tyranny inscribed in their history and Constitution. Carl Schurz, a prominent Senator at the time correctly predicted that “the Filipinos fought against Spain for their freedom and independence...They will fight against us.”¹⁶ Andrew Carnegie outright challenged McKinley’s assumptions that “American civilization” could benefit Filipinos; he wrote: “has the influence of the superior race upon the inferior ever proved beneficial to either? I know of no case in which it has been or is.”¹⁷ The editor of the *Nation* and the *New York Evening Post*, E.L. Godkin, also criticized the idea of an American empire (even if for very different reasons than Schurz) saying annexation would lead to:

The sudden departure from our traditions; the absence from our system of any machinery for governing dependencies; the admission of alien, inferior, and mongrel races to our nationality; the opening of fresh fields for carpetbaggers, speculators, and corruptionists; the un-Americanism of governing a large body of people against their will, and by persons not responsible to them; the entrance on a policy of conquest and annexation

while our own continent was still unreclaimed, our population unassimilated, and many of our most serious political problems still unresolved; and finally the danger of the endorsement of a gross fraud for the first time by a Christian nation.¹⁸

Godkin's protest exemplified two strains of anti-imperialism thinking that often overlapped within America; firstly, that the U.S. had no business expanding its borders to overseas territories, and secondly, that the country should not seemingly wreck its purity by introduction of "alien[s]" and "inferior[s]" into their populace. The latter demonstrates what sorts of prejudice and racism was to await Filipinos should they move to America: anti-Filipino sentiment.

Despite protests, the United States assumed the label of empire as they expanded their territory overseas; many within the country felt they ought to act a certain way to compete with the other large Western empires which had already conquered many territories and claimed them as colonies.¹⁹ One key strain of imperialist thinking heavily influenced the United States' interests in creating an overseas empire: the white man's burden theory. The "White Man's Burden" is a poem written by Rudyard Kipling, a British writer, published in 1899, right after the Spanish-American War. The poem was not the first iteration of pro-imperialist sentiments or Orientalist stereotypes; it drew upon them and vividly expressed contemporary ideas in support of imperialist expansion. The message of his poem was two-fold: first, he welcomes the United States into a league of imperialist states, and secondly, he speaks to all Euro-Americans to remind them of their duty to civilize the world through colonization.

"The White Man's Burden" urged the United States to "civilize natives" through Western cultural and intellectual superiority, but it is also important to remember that Kipling's poem is a mere reiteration of imperialist and Orientalist views which already existed. Kipling explained

that by creating colonies Euro-Americans could “fill full the mouth of famine and bid the sickness cease”.²⁰ He told Westerners it was their duty to correct the barbarous state of the countries they conquered, and many Americans listened. Albert Beveridge, a Republican from Indiana who had visited the Philippines, was one American who articulated white man’s burden sentiments saying:

It is elemental. It is racial. God has not been preparing the English-speaking and Teutonic peoples for a thousand years for nothing but vain and idle self-contemplation and self-admiration... he has made us the master organizers of the world to establish a system where chaos reigns. He has given us the spirit of progress to overwhelm the forces of reaction throughout the earth... it [the Philippines] holds for us all the profit, all the glory, all the happiness possible to man.²¹

Beveridge’s statement contains the influence of several key imperialists theorists in its combination of supposed racial, language, and religious superiority and self-imposed responsibility to civilize the assumed savages. Another example of the influence of these theories was expressed in December of 1898, when McKinley issued the Benevolent Assimilation Proclamation which explained how the United States would go about ruling the Philippines.²² The title “Benevolent Assimilation” is rhetoric parallel to the thinking in “The White Man’s Burden”. In an interview conducted in 1900 for *The Christian Advocate*, a New York-based newspaper, McKinley gave an interview sharing his thought process in colonizing the Philippines.²³ When considering what to do with the colony America had purchased from Spain McKinley thought:

(1) That we could not give them back to Spain - that would be cowardly and

dishonorable; (2) that we could not turn them over to France and Germany - our commercial rivals in the Orient - that would be discreditable; (3) that we could not leave them to themselves - they were unfit for self-government - and they would soon have anarchy and misrule over there worse than Spain's was; and (4) that there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God's grace do the very best we could by them, as out fellow-men for whom Christ also died.²⁴

There are numerous imperialist theories apparent in McKinley's line of reasoning. In his first two phrases, McKinley makes clear that no other European country should preside over the Philippines. Of course, a non-European country as their ruler is not considered, for there was an assumption that they too would be barbarous rendering it impossible for them to properly educate Filipinos, and since other European nations are the competitors of the United States, they cannot be given another colony with rich natural resources. In the final part of the statement, McKinley references Christianity, the proper assumption being that the Filipinos should be converted to Protestantism, ignoring the fact that the Philippines had already been "Christianized" by Spain into Catholicism. The Anglo-American assumption that Protestantism is the "true" or "right" faith can be seen in light of Max Weber, a German sociologist's, work: "...we are dealing with the connection of the spirit of modern economic life with the rational ethics of ascetic Protestantism."²⁵ Here we see the intersection of capitalism and religion as tied to imperialism. McKinley's words also reflect the duty of Euro-Americans as explained by Kipling; he says "there was nothing left for us to do" referencing the burden Westerners thought they had to bear (despite no one but themselves asking them to) to civilize the East. Sure enough, the policies America implemented in the Philippines were to convert "...sullen peoples, half devil

and half child” into “manhood”, as Kipling urged.²⁶

The call to action demanded by Kipling’s poem did not just influence American presidents though. It found fame in major advertisements in the United States. Pears Soap, founded by Sir Andrew Pears in 1807, published several racist advertisements.²⁷ On September 20, 1899, in an issue of *Harper’s Weekly*, a New York City-based political magazine, Pears Soap featured an advertisement that read “the first step towards lightening the white man’s burden is through teaching the virtues of cleanliness. Pears Soap is a potent factor in brightening the dark corners of the earth as civilization advances”.²⁸ The ad also features a United States naval officer washing his hands. The message is clear: the Navy was a key force in winning the Spanish-American War, and now it was the duty of American armed forces to stay in the conquered territory and ensure the U.S. could “civilize” the people there. It can also be interpreted that part of the process of “brightening the dark corners of the earth” included modernizing the Philippines and introducing them to capitalism and commercialism. As Weber claimed, only in “...modern times the Occident has developed...a very different form of capitalism which has appeared nowhere else: the rational capitalistic organization of (formally) free labour” which meant the Orient could only be introduced to “rational capitalism” by Westerners.²⁹ Pears Soap serves as a cultural artifact which demonstrates how widespread pro-imperialist narratives had become in the U.S. and how white man’s burden theory was expressed in not just political speeches but also in popular culture targeting the military and business.

It is important to understand the roots of “The White Man’s Burden”, and that Kipling’s language and prejudice in the poem were not just his own invention but centuries worth of racism built on binaries of the East and West created by Orientalism. In his book *Orientalism*,

Edward Said describes Orientalism as “...a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, ‘us’) and the strange (the Orient, the East, ‘them’).³⁰ The binary of “familiar” and “strange” was not the only binary constantly perpetuated; many harsher and racist binaries stemmed from Orientalism. One can observe some of these binaries in the accounts of Earl of Cromer, who played a central role in British colonization of India and Egypt³¹; he describes Orientals as having a tendency to “agree with anyone to whom they may be talking to...which is the chief distinguishing feature between the illogical and picturesque East and the logical West.”³² This sentiment will lend itself to the argument that Orientals could only be civilized and properly educated with the English language, industry, and science. The popularity of white man’s burden theory is notable since Cromer’s writings and position in Egypt coincide with U.S. colonization of the Philippines. White man’s burden theory must be viewed in light of the language describing the East used by Orientalists (self-dubbed scholars of all that was not Europe). By characterizing the East in negative terms, one could follow a thread of logic that would point out that the positive opposites would then have to describe the West. These binaries account for and are used as justifications for the colonial relationships that would transpire from Orientalism. In other words, since people in the East were described as lazy and stupid, it was only the people of the West who were hardworking and endowed with natural intelligence, that could save so-called Orientals and bring them to a higher level of civilization. Binaries created by Orientalism were the foundation for the white man’s burden theory. Said explains the common assumption that the “subject races did not have it in them to know what was good for them” and that “...the Oriental becomes...an example of ‘Oriental’ mentality, all for the enhancement of the ‘authority’ at home.”³³ Kipling was a firm believer in the popular feeling that Orientals were helpless barbarians that only the West could

civilize.

But what was to come of the policy of Benevolent Assimilation that relates to the disproportionate number of Filipino healthcare worker deaths by Covid-19? The construction of nursing schools in the Philippines.

SECTION TWO: A SHORT HISTORY OF FILIPINO NURSES IN THE UNITED STATES

Benevolent Assimilation came with the promise of safeguarding Filipino liberties and bringing education and infrastructure to the country; the undertaking included the construction of ten nursing schools in less than ten years.³⁴ All students in these nursing schools were required to learn English and were taught by American teachers.³⁵ For Westerners, the only logical way to properly assimilate Filipinos into a medical profession was through the U.S.'s superior language and medicinal techniques. Building nursing schools was just one of many means in which the United States aimed to establish Western institutions which, supposedly, would eventually aid Filipinos in self-governance. There were many Americans who believed the "...Anglo radical advantage of long experience in self-governance advocated tutelage and supervised 'radical uplift,' due to their belief that institutions could be used to shape character."³⁶ Thomas Macaulay, a British politician deemed responsible for incorporating Western education in India, also believed in the superiority of Anglo-institutions. He argued that Indian languages "...contain[ed] neither literary nor scientific information" and that Indians could not "...be educated by means of their mother tongue."³⁷ While Macaulay does not discuss the Philippines in his work, he still perpetuates an Orientalist philosophy that is extended to all peoples of the East. The assumptions that arise out of Macaulay's writings is that no Oriental could be educated by their own languages or practices and in order to be civilized, they would need to learn

Western techniques using the English language. Under the policy of Benevolent Assimilation, learning these unquestioned superior techniques and language would make the Philippines more respectable. In her book, *Empire of Care: Nursing and Migration in Filipino American History*, Catherine Ceniza Choy explains that “American medicine, they [Americans] believed, would transform Filipino bodies into a people capable of self government.”³⁸ So under the premise of being a friend of the Philippines, the United States assumed a contested policy to (further) assimilate Filipinos to Western culture. The effects were not all negative, and as Choy concedes, many Filipino lives were saved with the introduction of additional medical resources. The positive effects, however, can skew the narrative into one of “American exceptionalism” ignoring the exploitation of Filipino nurses that followed.

In 1941 the United States entered WWII which created a sudden need for large numbers of nurses at home and abroad.³⁹ To fill the shortage, the U.S. government sponsored nursing education programs and enlisted close to 200,000 American women into the profession.⁴⁰ This government aid did not last long. Four years later, at the end of the war, the United States cut the programs like the Cadet Nurse Corps, which financially aided women into becoming nurses.⁴¹ Naturally, countless American nurses, seeing they were no longer highly valued by their government, quit which left a shortage of nursing professionals in hospitals. A cheap solution to these losses was to seek labor from abroad, and lucky for the United States, they already knew where to get nurses trained under an American curriculum. A “temporary visitor’s program,” called the U.S. Exchange Visitor Program (EVP), was created which allowed Filipino nurses to come to America to live and work.⁴² In just ten years more than 10,000 Filipino nurses became participants of EVP.⁴³ “By the late 1960s, 80% of exchange participants in the United States were from the Philippines, with nurses comprising the majority of Filipino exchange

visitors.”⁴⁴ Leaving one’s home and all one has ever known is no easy feat, but many Filipinos were seeking better opportunities after the country endured devastating effects of “centuries of oppressive colonial control and their own World War II battles,” and despite that the Philippine’s economy was stable in the 1950s and 60s, wages for most people were quite low.⁴⁵ Many nurses applied for EVP because “...[salaries] as an exchange nurse [were] higher than her earnings as a nurse in the Philippines, enabling her to help her family financially.”⁴⁶ The possibility of securing money coming in from abroad became a particularly important factor in Filipino nurses’ decisions to seek opportunities in America when Ferdinand Marcos became president of the Philippines in 1965.⁴⁷ During his dictatorship there was an economic recession with high rates of unemployment. In order to combat this, the government urged nurses to seek jobs abroad so they could send back money to support their families and also advertised Filipino labor to other countries.⁴⁸ Other institutions which sought to urge Filipino nurses to work abroad included travel agencies and labor unions.⁴⁹

In 1965, the United States Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act. The legislation ended a quota system that had previously limited the number of non-Western European immigrants eligible to apply to stay in the United States and increased the number of visas available to persons of each country.⁵⁰ A key component in the history of the Philippine-American relationship is that the Immigration and Nationality Act gave visa preference to immigrants with special skills, like nursing.⁵¹ Labor unions and travel agencies saw the opportunities in these new immigration provisions and targeted Filipino nurses with ads urging them to apply for visas hoping to fill nursing shortages.⁵² After arriving, Filipino nurses confronted a lack of options in nursing positions, only finding work in entry level jobs. Despite discrimination, Filipino nurses continued to apply for visas, for even if they “earned a fraction of

U.S. nursing salaries with their stipends, the amount was often greater than their salaries in the Philippines.”⁵³ The realities of employment discrimination that Filipino nurses face can be seen in light of the history of imperialism and Orientalism which affected not only the treatment of colonized people in the colonies, but the general perception Europeans and Americans developed about all so-called Orientals wherever they found them. Long-standing prejudices and sentiments of superiority made Westerners feel it was valid to place foreign workers in lower positions with lesser pay.

The culminating effects of the American imperial legacy in the Philippines with the Philippine government’s own promotion of Filipino labor has resulted in the Philippines becoming the “...largest exporter of nurses in the world. Nearly 20,000 nurses leave the Philippines every year.”⁵⁴ When Filipino nurses arrive to work in the United States, the jobs they find are largely concentrated in bedside and critical care which comes with long hours and can leave them vulnerable to infections.⁵⁵ For example, many Filipino nurses “...ended up at inner-city and rural hospitals that had the greatest difficulty recruiting staff, often working the least desirable jobs and shifts, including, in the 1980s and ‘90s, on the front lines of the Aids epidemic.”⁵⁶ Filipino nurses have also been on the frontlines for other modern health crises including SARS and Ebola.⁵⁷ The long history of the exploitation of Filipino nurses continues during the Covid-19 pandemic.

SECTION THREE: THE HIGH RATES OF FILIPINO NURSE DEATHS FROM COVID-19 IN THE U.S.

Filipino nurses are in high-risk jobs like bedside and critical care because those are lower-paid jobs with worse working condition which White nurses do not have to endure, for the most part. Job gatekeeping can be seen in light of the lasting effects of Orientalism and writers like Cromer,

Kipling, and Weber, whose theories dehumanized Eastern people, placing them lower than Westerners in a hierarchy, the long-term effects of which result in discrimination in employment positions in the U.S. today. The current effect of that long-term discrimination is a disproportionate number of deaths by Covid-19 among Filipino nurses employed as healthcare workers in the U.S.

The history of Filipino immigration is undoubtedly intertwined with racism and prejudice. Anti-Filipino sentiment in the U.S. did not end after the initial colonization period; it took shape in various acts of law and mob inflicted violence. The Cable Act of 1922 punished women of U.S. citizenship for marrying “aliens” by permanently revoking their citizenship.⁵⁸ While *Salvador Roldan v. LA County* provided a seeming victory in declaring that Filipinos were not affected by anti-miscegenation laws, only a few years later anti-Filipino sentiments were mobilized to change legislation so that Filipinos would be in the category of “non-White,” and thus ineligible to marry whites.⁵⁹ Systemic racism towards Asians can also be seen in the 1790 Naturalization Law, which disqualified all those classified as “non-White” for U.S. citizenship.⁶⁰ These restrictions on naturalization were not fully repealed and replaced until the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 became law.⁶¹ In certain states like California and Washington, Alien Land Laws prohibited Filipinos from owning property.⁶² Anti-Filipino sentiments also emerged in direct violence. In 1930, a Filipino Club in Stockton, California was bombed.⁶³ As recently as 2017, racism toward Filipinos surfaced in the vandalism of the Little Manila Center in Stockton during Filipino American History Month.⁶⁴

In 2018 one-third of all immigrant-registered nurses were from the Philippines.⁶⁵ Even though Filipinos only account for 1% of the American population they make up 7% of the

healthcare workforce.⁶⁶ As discussed before, the jobs they occupy within that workforce come with increased risks which have made themselves evident in the tolls Covid-19 has taken on Filipino nurses. In March of 2020, a mere three months into the global pandemic, at least thirty Filipino healthcare workers had died in the New York-New Jersey region alone.⁶⁷ This figure continued to rise and by August 30, thirty percent of 193 registered nurse deaths of Covid-19 were Filipino.⁶⁸ The devastating effects of the pandemic on the Filipino community are further revealed when one looks at numbers in states that were hit particularly hard. For example, in California, (which has had a total of 3,742,059 Covid-19 cases compared to New York's 2,046,322 and Florida's 2,233,510, and is the state with the highest number of Covid-19 related deaths⁶⁹) Filipinos make up 18% of all registered nurses.⁷⁰ Additionally, many Filipino victims of coronavirus are not the generally vulnerable persons of old age or with pre-existing conditions; they are young hospital staff members getting sick solely because of the increased risk their job puts them in. The jobs include positions in nursing homes, ICU units, surgical units, and acute care units.⁷¹ At the end of 2020, CNN reported death tolls compiled by National Nurses United: in September the union found 67 of 213 (31%) registered nurses who died of Covid-19 were Filipino, and in December the proportion was 74 of 245 (30%).⁷² These numbers should be seen in light of the high concentration of Filipino healthcare workers in critical and bedside care, but one should also consider the amount of protection nurses were given against Covid. In an interview with CNN, Zenei Cortez, co-president of National Nurses United recounted an instance where nurses were not given enough protective equipment (PPE); immigrant nurses would often feel hesitant to speak up and confront their employers out of fear that their employer could "...revoke their work permit and send them back to the Philippines."⁷³ The immigration status of Filipino nurses is often closely tied with their work. For example,

Jennifer Bulaong immigrated through a recruitment agency which provided her with a three-year contract during which she was required to work 5,200 hours in whichever hospitals the agency placed her before she was able to permanently reside with her family who had immigrated before her.⁷⁴ Bulaong's experiences align closely with that of many Filipino nurses. Rosem Morton, who immigrated to the U.S. at age 17 and is also a nurse, recounted that, "the way we've been programmed is (that) we want to go to America because this is how we'll make it, this is how we will better our lives. Not the narrative that America also needed us to be here."⁷⁵ Diane L. Wolf and Yen Le Espiritu, two University of California professors in sociology and ethnic studies, respectively, point out that "...colonial heritage produced a pervasive cultural Americanization of the population, exhorting Filipinos to regard American culture, society, values, political system, and way of life as superior to their own."⁷⁶ Here lies an outstanding influence of imperialism. Terror at deciding between work safety and their job shows how Filipino nurses see themselves in racial and ethnic hierarchies that the United States built.

The fact that Filipino nurses are a disproportionate number of healthcare worker deaths by Covid-19 must be seen in light of the legacy of American imperialism which trained Filipino nurses with their own curriculum and relied on them to fill hospital vacancies in the United States and the relationship the Philippines later pursued which encouraged Filipino nurses to seek work in America. When asked about the disproportionate rate of Filipino healthcare worker deaths Jennifer Nazareno, co-founder of the Philippine Health Initiative for Research, Service, and Training at Brown University's School of Public Health, put it plainly: "...Philippine-trained nurses were disproportionately in the ICUs, the emergency rooms, in long-term care facilities such as nursing homes, compared to White, US-trained nurses. They were therefore much more exposed to Covid-19."⁷⁷ As of March 2021, Filipino nurses made up just 4% of all nurses in the

United States but have accounted for 31% of all nurse deaths from coronavirus.⁷⁸ It is not a coincidence that Filipino nurses are bound in high-risk jobs; it is due to schemas of Orientalist and Imperialist ideas which were absorbed by both Filipinos and Americans.

CONCLUSION

Why were Filipino nurses so highly concentrated in more dangerous healthcare jobs which made them acutely at risk for the effects of Covid-19? The lasting legacy of Orientalism presents itself in anti-Asian racism. According to Frank Shyong, columnist for the LA Times on diversity diaspora: white, American nurses are considered to be superior in education and in race which makes them less than keen to take up healthcare jobs with more risks and lower pay like bedside and critical care, so instead those positions are among the few open to immigrant nurses.⁷⁹ The belief that Euro-Americans were inherently superior to the rest of the world has been perpetuated over centuries, and continues to influence relationships between Americans and Filipinos. In the specific case of Filipino nurses in the U.S., part of that legacy is their high death rates throughout this pandemic. These prejudices distort the perceived value of Filipino nurses, leaving them vulnerable to discrimination.⁸⁰ Bigotry against Filipino nurses should be understood through the history of imperialism and the perceptions of people from the East that came with it.

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² H.W. Brands, 512.

³ Ibid, 513.

⁴ Ibid, 514.

⁵ Ibid, 514 - 515.

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¹⁴ Pimentel, Benjamin. "Images of Racism / How 19th Century U.S. Media Depicted Filipinos, Other

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¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ H.W. Brands, 523.

¹⁷ Ibid, 523 - 524.

¹⁸ Ibid, 523.

¹⁹ Ibid. Ratification of the Treaty of Paris was highly contested in the Senate. Many senators, like Carl Schurz felt that acquiring additional territories outside of the continental land mass would be a threat to the character of the nation. Brand remarks in his book that “all the senators and the myriad pundits understood that taking the Philippines would make an empire of the American republic.” One representative went as far as claiming that annexation was “...a scheme for colonial empire, and to place on the throne in this country William McKinley, President of the United States, Emperor of the West Indian Islands and of the Philippines.”

²⁰ Rudyard Kipling, “The White Man's Burden,” McClure's Magazine 1898.

²¹ H.W. Brand, 526.

²² “The Spanish-American War in Motion Pictures.” The Library of Congress. Accessed April 27, 2021. <https://www.loc.gov/collections/spanish-american-war-in-motion-pictures/articles-and-essays/the-motion-picture-camera-goes-to-war/the-philippine-revolution/?fa=original-format%3Afilm%2C%2Bvideo>.

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²⁴ “Manifest Destiny, Continued: McKinley Defends U.S. Expansionism.” HISTORY MATTERS - The U.S. Survey Course on the Web. Accessed April 28, 2021. <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5575/>. While I could not find the original source for this interview, the same quote is included in chapter 20 of H.W. Brand's book.

²⁵ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing Company, 1998) 27. The influence of Weber's work should not be undervalued, as he is largely cited as one of the most important theorists for social theories and research in modern Western society.

²⁶ Kipling.

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- ²⁹ Weber, 21.
- ³⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books A Division of Random House, 1979), 43. Said was a professor at Columbia University and a widely respected intellectual in the field of postcolonial studies. He offers a unique perspective from his time in his criticisms of Orientalism.
- ³¹ Patrick M. Kirkwood "'Lord Cromer's Shadow': Political Anglo-Saxonism and the Egyptian Protectorate as a Model in the American Philippines." *Journal of World History* 27, no. 1 (2016): 1-26. Accessed May 9, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43901822>.
- ³² The Earl of Cromer, *Modern Egypt* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1908) 7.
- ³³ Said, 44.
- ³⁴ Christina Thornell. *Why the US Has so Many Filipino Nurses*. YouTube. Vox, June 29, 2020.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yw8a8n7ZAZg>.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Kirkwood, 4.
- ³⁷ Thomas Babington Macaulay, "On Education for India" (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 198-199.
- ³⁸ Catherine Ceniza Choy. 2003. *Empire of Care : Nursing and Migration in Filipino American History*. (Durham: Duke University Press), 20. Accessed May 1, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central. Choy is currently a professor of ethnic studies at the University of California at Berkeley. She is cited as a specialist in the following topics: Asian American History, Gender, Migration, Nursing, and Philippine and Filipino American Studies, making her an especially important voice to consider while examining U.S.-Philippine relations.
- ³⁹ Thornell.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² Choy, 62.

⁴³ Thornell.

⁴⁴ Choy, 65.

⁴⁵ Thornell.

⁴⁶ Choy, 62. This quote refers to a story of a single Filipino nurse but represents a common thread. It's also important to note that the story is of a woman. While not all nurses are women, they make up the overwhelming amount of nurses. In 2014 women made up a little over 90% of all registered nurses in the United States, and while men have gradually entered the profession in higher numbers, it is nowhere near the rates of women. In 2019, women will be almost 89% of registered nurses in America (Frédéric Michas. "US: Gender Distribution of Registered Nurses." Statista. Ströer Media, May 3, 2021. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1227142/distribution-of-registered-nurses-in-the-us-by-gender/>.) The fact that nursing is a profession dominated by women adds an extra level of discrimination and hardship for Filipino nurses to work through. It has been well documented that nursing is an undervalued profession overall because it's considered to be a women's job.

⁴⁷ William H. Overholt, "The Rise and Fall of Ferdinand Marcos." *Asian Survey* 26, no. 11 (1986): 1137-163. Accessed May 1, 2021. doi:10.2307/2644313.

⁴⁸ Thornell.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ "Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965." US House of Representatives: History, Art & Archives. Office of Art & Archives. Accessed May 1, 2021. <https://history.house.gov/Historical-Highlights/1951-2000/Immigration-and-Nationality-Act-of-1965/>.

⁵¹ Gene Demby and Shereen M Meraji. "Code Switch: Why Are We Here?" NPR. NPR, March 31, 2021. <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/982878218>. While addressing the Act, president Lyndon B. Johnson said, "those who can contribute most to this country - to its growth, to its strength, to its spirit - will be the first that are admitted to this land."

⁵² Thornell.

⁵³ Choy, 69.

⁵⁴ Thornell.

- ⁵⁵ Ibid.
- ⁵⁶ Nina Martin, Bernice Yeung. “‘Similar to Times of War’: The Staggering Toll of COVID-19 on Filipino Health Care Workers.” ProPublica, May 3, 2020. <https://www.propublica.org/article/similar-to-times-of-war-the-staggering-toll-of-covid-19-on-filipino-health-care-workers>.
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- ⁶⁵ Thornell.
- ⁶⁶ Yeung and Martin.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid.
- ⁶⁸ Agnes Constante. “With Largest Share of Migrant Nurses, Entire U.S. Filipino Community Hit Hard by COVID-19.” NBCNews.com. NBCUniversal News Group, August 27, 2020.

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/largest-share-migrant-nurses-entire-u-s-filipino-community-hit-n1237327>.

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⁷⁰ Constante. Filipinos as a whole have made up disproportionate rates of Covid-19 deaths in California. They comprise 25% of the state’s Asian population and 35% of aforementioned Covid-19 deaths. High Filipino death tolls have been partially accredited to chronic health problems in Filipino communities such as asthma and diabetes, but that pattern in itself should be examined through other means in which people from the Philippines have been oppressed once arriving in the United States.

⁷¹ Tiffany Wong. “Little Noticed, Filipino Americans Are Dying of COVID-19 at an Alarming Rate.” Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles Times, July 21, 2020. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-07-21/filipino-americans-dying-covid>.

⁷² Shoichet.

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⁷⁴ Econar, Fruhlein C. “For Generations, Filipino Nurses Have Been on America's Front Lines.” *CNN*, Cable News Network, 8 Oct. 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2021/10/health/filipino-nurses-cnnphotos/>.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Espiritu, Yen L, and Diane L Wolf. “The Paradox of Assimilation: Children of Filipino Immigrants in San Diego .” *The Paradox of Assimilation: Children of Filipino Immigrants in San Diego -- Yen Espiritu - Research & Seminars | Migration Dialogue*, University of California, Davis Campus., 1999, <https://migration.ucdavis.edu/rs/more.php?id=50>.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Frank Shyong. “Column: Filipino Nurses Battled Discrimination to Work in American Hospitals. Now They Fight for PPE.” Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles Times, May 18, 2020. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-05-18/filipino-nurses-in-socal>. After the surge of Filipino

nurses between the 1960s and 1980s, opponents to the immigrant labor force imposed several discriminatory acts to secure their superiority on the workplace ladder. Filipino nurses who sought to secure visas found test requirements and fees rapidly changed making it near impossible for them to take qualification exams. The nurses that did qualify were given entry level tasks like janitorial duties when they arrived in the United States.

- ⁸⁰ Recent findings of discrimination against Filipinos in the health care industry include a 2010 complaint filed by the California Nurses Association against Pacific Medical Center for “systematic discrimination against the hiring of Filipino registered nurses” (Victoria Colliver. “Nurses Accuse Pacific Medical Center of Bias.” SFGATE. San Francisco Chronicle, February 11, 2012. <https://www.sfgate.com/health/article/Nurses-accuse-Pacific-Medical-Center-of-bias-3255630.php>.) and the uncovering of the “lack of state regulation denied health and safety protections for home care workers”, a field in which many Filipinos work (Katherine Nasol and Valerie Francisco-Menchavez. “Filipino Home Care Workers: Invisible Frontline Workers in the COVID-19 Crisis in the United States.” The American Behavioral Scientist. SAGE Publications, March 17, 2021. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7969854/>).