

Asians at Virginia Tech: Recovering an Institutional History of Asians in Appalachia through Intra-Institutional Networks

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Abstract: This Recoveries and Reconsiderations essay discusses the Asians@VT project, which documents a history of Asians and Asian Americans at Virginia Tech and the greater Southwest Virginia region. This essay discusses the context, background, outcomes, and implications of the project, which was developed through an independent study with six undergraduate students who engaged in archival research and oral history interviews. In doing so, it describes an example of feminist pedagogical practices for re-visioning rhetorical education. It also makes the case for intra-institutional collaborations that include administrative professional faculty in cultural and community centers.

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Tags: Asian Pacific Islander Desi American, APIDA, Asian American, Asians@VT project, Appalachia, Virginia Tech, Cross-Institutional Networks, Cultural and Community Centers, Archive, Archival, Oral History, Southwest Virginia, Recoveries and Reconsiderations, South Asians living in the diaspora, Feminist historiography, AAPI

What Is the Asians@VT project?

Asians@VT (<https://asiansatvt.omeka.net/>) is a digital archive of historical materials including recordings of oral history interviews that documents a history of Asians and Asian Americans at Virginia Tech (VT) and the greater Southwest Virginia region. A collaboration among a group of six undergraduate students and the two authors of this essay—a research and teaching

faculty member, and an administrative professional faculty member—Asians@VT uses Omeka and Timeline.js alongside the methods of archival research and oral history interviews with alumni and faculty. In doing so, this project recovers and reconsiders the contributions of Asians and Asian Americans who were physically present and engaged within Virginia Tech and its surrounding communities. The university is also located in what the Appalachian Regional Commission has identified as Appalachia. As a result, we understand this project as contributing to ongoing efforts in Appalachian Studies to document a record of people of Asian descent—amongst other minoritized populations—in Appalachia, a place that is commonly imagined as homogeneously white and socio-economically disadvantaged (Allen, Avashia, Cabbell, El-Amin et al., Hayden, Kwong, Thompson, Troutman, Turner and Cabbell).

This project was guided by feminist rhetorical historiographical approaches as it focuses on recovering the history of a minoritized group. It was also methodologically informed by Terese Guinsatao Monberg's "Listening for Legacies, or, How I Began to Hear Dorothy Laigo Cordova, the Pinay Behind the Podium Known as FANHS" as it attempts to engage in feminist rhetorical listening through oral history "To go beyond what is immediately visible and documented ... [through] what Jacqueline Jones Royster calls 'a habit of critical questioning, of speculating in order to make visible unnoticed possibilities, to pose and articulate what we see now, what's missing, and what we might see instead'" (87). Like Monberg and other feminist scholars, this work is grounded in a desire to account for diverse knowledges and forms of labor—or community contributions—to our understandings of institutional histories, to rhetorical theory, to understandings of Appalachia, and to knowledge about Asian American communities more broadly. In other words, we intentionally sought to consider how Asian Pacific Islander Desi Americans (APIDAs)¹ at Virginia Tech not only contributed to the university in direct and apparent ways, but also "behind the podium"—as they have worked to support, make possible, and enable our ongoing presence. This project also involved "strategic contemplation" as theorized by Royster and Kirsch, as we deliberately took "the time, space, and resources to think about, through, and around our work" (21), as we sought to "see and hold contradictions without rushing to immediate closure, to neat resolutions, or to cozy hierarchies and binaries" (21–22), and as we intentionally recognized that the work we were doing relied on the ongoing work of Asian/Asian American and other minoritized people. We were open to learning what we would learn through the research process, as opposed to having specific benchmarks in mind.

1 We sometimes use Asians, Asian Americans, and APIDAs interchangeably; however, we want to underscore the complexities of these terms, which represent diverse groups of people with highly heterogeneous histories and experiences that must be recognized. For instance, Desis (South Asians living in the diaspora) don't always consider themselves under the rubric of Asians, and at times, Pacific Islanders do not want to be grouped with Asian Americans because of complex colonial histories. Pacific Islanders are also generally recognized as marginalized and differently affected by some common anti-Asian stereotypes. It is challenging to find a term that fully reflects the diverse and heterogeneous experiences of this complex group of people. APIDA underscores the complexity of trying to recognize the diverse histories and experiences of this large and unwieldy group. We are not trying to replicate a white supremacist system and we want to acknowledge this complicated history that cannot be resolved in this paper if it should even be resolved.

In addition, this project was informed by not only feminist research methodologies but also feminist pedagogies—it looked beyond the traditional classroom to at times overlooked learning spaces, it centered the concerns and interests of the students who participated in the project, and it contributes to the growing scholarship of feminist collaborations such as the work by Judy Wu and Gwendolyn Mink about the “trailblazing legislator Patsy Takemoto Mink, best known as the legislative champion of Title IX.” Moreover, in the vein of Monberg’s pedagogy of “recursive spatial movement” and “writing as the community” paradigm, our project positioned the Asian American students we worked with to “move *within* their own borders or communities, so they might listen for the deeper textures present in the place(s) they might call ‘home’” (22). We also co-taught this independent study as women whose pedagogy aligns with feminist practices through continued collaboration and communication with each other and encouraging shared spaces and shared visions without competitive or hierarchical power dynamics (Sano-Franchini, Sackey, and Pigg). In other words, we didn’t assume the tenured faculty member should take the lead on things or that the person in student affairs should take a back seat in a research project. We understood that everyone had equally important contributions to make to the project, and that every voice mattered. This is recognized in the fact that we had a contributions page especially devoted to the students, whose profiles appeared at the top of the page. Finally, we allowed for considerable flexibility when we all had to pivot online due to COVID, which started at the middle of the semester; we understood the need to recognize work and personal life balance during a time when many of us had other urgent matters as well as challenges to navigate as the pandemic brought on anti-Asian hate incidences. This was a difficult time for many of us in the Asian American community as so many of us—especially East and Southeast Asians—felt anxieties about being randomly targeted for physical attacks and harassment.

This Recoveries and Reconsideration essay outlines the context and background for this project, the process used to engage in this recovery work, and the outcomes and implications of implementing this project, as opposed to focusing on the content included in the digital archive. We hope that by doing so, this essay will encourage readers to consider how this project might serve as an example that can be adapted for their own institutions, in their own efforts to recover much-needed histories that support APIDA visibility and inclusion.

Context and Background

Asians@VT was developed in Spring 2020, while we were both faculty at Virginia Tech, a research intensive predominantly white institution in the mid-Atlantic and Appalachian region. Asian American students made up over 10 percent of the undergraduate student population, making them the largest racialized minority group on campus. At Virginia Tech, like in many institutions of higher education, APIDAs are not considered underrepresented due to the lack of data disaggregation, thereby causing this minoritized population to be underserved and under-resourced, not to mention ignored and at times erased from local histories. Moreover, in some instances, Asians

and Asian Americans are not even perceived as minorities, even though they are! As a result, there has been limited attention dedicated to APIDA students' needs and concerns not only in the university curriculum and student support services but also in terms of institutional narratives and histories. In this context, it is not surprising that the history of APIDAs at the institution was not visible to a vast majority of students, faculty, and staff who came into the university. Thus, we were compelled to instigate and encourage the documentation of APIDA contributions.

When we first came together to discuss the idea of working on a history of APIDAs at Virginia Tech, Jennifer Sano-Franchini was an associate professor in the English department, and Nina Ha was the director of the Asian Cultural Engagement Center (now the APIDA + Center). Nina invited Jennifer to serve as a Faculty Fellow for the Asian Cultural Engagement Center (ACE Center), a position that was made possible through the generosity and support of the Office for Inclusion and Diversity. We wanted to collaborate on a project that would bring attention to the history of the APIDA community at Virginia Tech ever since Nina began her role at VT in Fall 2019. Jennifer's interest in recovering Asian and Asian American institutional histories extended from her experience doing archival research on Asian American contributions in NCTE and CCCC (Sano-Franchini, Monberg, and Yoon), and from working with APIDA students on a library exhibit at Virginia Tech. At a previous institution, Nina had experience assigning oral history projects in the classroom, particularly with respect to gathering digital narratives of Japanese Americans who had experienced U.S. mass incarceration during World War II. Therefore, this collaboration that combined archival research with oral histories felt seamless. When we had the chance to co-facilitate an independent study with interested and motivated students, we were excited to do so. Being able to bring attention to primary sources and uncover the stories of the APIDA community is important for encouraging all members of the university community to recognize APIDA contributions to the community, as well as to re-contextualize their own positionality even if they are not APIDAs themselves.

We recruited six undergraduate students from a variety of disciplines—accounting, political science, math, computer science, Asian studies, and journalism—who were active in working with Nina and at the ACE Center. What compelled all of us to implement and complete this project was a shared desire to not only document but also uncover/highlight this history of a heterogenous APIDA community that is oftentimes overlooked or perceived as invisible. As many of the students note on the [Asians@VT](#) website, a large part of their desire to participate in this project was to create and document otherwise forgotten and excluded histories. In this way, we centered students' interests and concerns through a feminist pedagogical framework. For example, Kenny Nguyen conveyed, "The project has taught me the importance of having our organizations continue to keep adequate records and documentation properly archiving them for reference and research purposes for future generations. If the lived experiences and struggles of our community are painted to be illusory, then through documentation and archival processes, we are able to **solidify their place in reality**." Kenny's comment profoundly highlights how processes of documentation affect

not only who is viewed as part of “reality” but also how organizations might conduct their work in the present and future. Underscoring Kenny’s observations is Algae Ngo who wrote, “I hope that this project will spark a stronger drive towards archiving and documenting the presence of AAPIs at Virginia Tech to further establish ourselves and our experiences as an integral part of this university’s history.” Throughout this process, the students insisted on creating a space of belonging that was not temporary; rather, the timeline and archival materials that they uncovered and re-stored, especially in a virtual format, allows for continued documentation and recordkeeping of an APIDA presence that cannot be erased.

Identifying students who wanted to participate in this project underscored the value of having an Asian American studies curriculum since all six of the students had previously taken the Asian American History class and/or the Asian American Experience course that had been offered at VT. Through their engagements in either one or both of these classes, the students understood the value of desiring to know more about APIDA contributions and the local histories of APIDAs living in Southwest Virginia. What was also beneficial about these students’ disciplinary backgrounds was that they were also evenly divided into what projects they wanted to cover—three of them chose to work on archival research and three of them participated in the interview process.

Developing the Project through an Independent Study

In this section, we discuss the logistics of developing this project, as well as the challenges we experienced as we navigated institutional structures for making this work possible. Because the existing university curriculum at the time—as well as our teaching and administrative assignments—did not include a course on Asian American feminist recovery work, we developed an independent study cross-listed in English and Sociology, through which the students could receive academic credit for working on this project. First, however, we needed to navigate the institutional process for approving the independent study for students from several different colleges and majors. Having students from across the university meant that there were multiple forms that needed various signatures including not only the students’ academic advisors, but also the chairs of their respective departments and the deans from both the students’ majors as well as that of the credit-granting college! When students were majors of different colleges from our own College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, those signatures needed to be gathered in person and not electronically. Therefore, Nina literally had to walk from department to department and building to building to gather original signatures, which was both time-consuming and cumbersome. Additionally, we needed to develop justifications for how the independent study aligned with their major plan of study. Thus, we developed a syllabus that outlined the following learning objectives:

With successful completion of this undergraduate research, students will:

- Understand basic tenets for engaging in historical research in Asian American rhetoric.

- Discuss concerns relevant to oral history and/or archival research, including textual imperialism, archives as institutionalized knowledge, and the rhetorics of curation.
- Apply feminist historiographical methodologies to a research project documenting a history of Asians at Virginia Tech and in Southwest Virginia more generally.
- Analyze historical artifacts and narratives through a feminist rhetorical framework.
- Explain the connections between local events and larger sociopolitical movements.

Through these goals and given the students' diverse skillsets, we worked together to walk through the process of curating and analyzing interviews or archival and academic materials, including but not limited to Virginia Tech yearbooks, its student newspaper, *Collegiate Times*, and other local news articles, published histories, and other resources. The independent study was assessed on a Pass/Fail basis because the project encompassed a variety of skillsets that didn't necessarily lend itself to traditional methods of assessment. In addition, we believed that this option would encourage students to be driven by their own interests and engagement in the project itself, and not be concerned with the pressures of traditional grades, which can lead to students feeling that they need to do what we, "the teachers," wanted them to do.

With feminist historiographical theories and pedagogies in mind, students were encouraged to consider the rhetorical implications of the telling of history; how histories both enable and limit the possibility of community, as well as how the telling of history is epistemological and imbued with implications for power, privilege, and marginalization. We began the semester by assigning readings from *Asian Americans in Dixie: Race and Migration in the South*, including the introduction and a chapter by Brandzel and Desai that centers on the context of Virginia Tech, as we believed these works would provide important context for the project on which we were embarking. In addition, we examined existing histories of minoritized groups at the university that were created through Special Collections at the University Libraries. To better frame this project, we reached out to campus partners such as Katrina Powell, who was leading [VT Stories](#), an effort to collect "stories, memories, tall tales, tragedies, and triumphs of all members of the Hokie community," Jessica Taylor from the History Department who specializes in oral histories, Anthony Wright de Hernandez whose job was to cultivate and acquire materials for the Newman Library's Special Collections² and Corinne Guimont, also part of the Newman Library and whose focus was on creating a digital record using such applications like Omeka. Having supportive and engaged collaborators is necessary when considering the creation and implementation of a student-led research project like the one that we proposed and fulfilled. That people's expertise were varied and coming from different disciplines and backgrounds was vital. This project was transdisciplinary, diverse, and intentionally multimodal. Moreover, it was important to us to draw on existing university resources and

² Anthony Wright de Hernandez reached out to Nina when she started working at Virginia Tech in 2019 requesting that she donate materials about APIDAs since Special Collections had so little documentation by and/or about APIDAs. Thus, this feminist historiographical project helped with the curation and accumulation of this knowledge

expertise to support this project and its goals, and to create networks that would raise awareness about the project and the need to include Asians and Asian Americans in institutional histories and historical work more generally.

Conclusion: Outcomes and Implications

Upon looking back at this project, there were many challenges as well as celebratory moments that all of us shared. Through [Asians@VT](#), we learned that students of Asian descent had been attending Virginia Tech for more than a century. The first documented Asian student that we found in the archive was Mozaffar-ed-din Khan, who enrolled as an international student from Teheran [*sic*], Persia in 1914. We noted how this was not long before women were first allowed to attend classes full time at the university in 1921. It was also almost four decades before the university enrolled its first Black student, Irving L. Peddrew III in 1953. The first Asian student whom we could find evidence of having graduated from the university was Tien Liang Jiu from Hong Kong; he graduated with an electrical engineering degree in 1924. The first South Asian student we found evidence of was a graduate student who attended VT in 1948, Chittaranjan Ishverlal Almaula from Bombay. The first Asian international and woman student to enroll at the university in 1950 was Yvonne Rohran Tung from Hong Kong. Taken together, this history of Asian international student enrollment demonstrates the slow process by which Asian men from different ethnic backgrounds, and then Asian women were admitted to the university over several decades. At the same time, there is much we have yet to learn, including the history of domestic Asian American students at VT.³ We found ourselves feeling hope, anticipation, interest, and disappointment simultaneously as we came to learn how much was still missing from our history of Asians at VT.

In addition, while we began this project meeting in-person at the ACE Center, our project was disrupted as the COVID-19 pandemic started midway into the spring semester. These circumstances forced us to reconsider new ways to approach our methodologies as we all had to pivot to working online as we negotiated new ways for students to take classes as well as for instructors to teach courses, all the while trying our best to get work completed despite many obstacles and restrictions. In the case of the students who were researching in the Special Collections of the library, they now had to find source materials virtually. For the students who had conducted oral histories in-person, they now had to do so via Zoom or other online applications. During this time, both students and faculty had to manage all of this alongside health, caregiving, and other con-

³ We understand that the [Virginia Tech shooting](#) may be the only fact some people know about VT given the magnitude and media coverage of this event; however, we believe it's important to highlight the wide range of things that Asians at VT and in Southwest Virginia have been doing for a long time. In other words, we do not want this event to overshadow the important contributions that have been made by APIDAs at VT and in Southwest Virginia more broadly. In addition, the shooting continues to be a point of trauma for the VT community, making critical conversation about the topic difficult. In addition, although the Special Collections included archival materials related to the shooting, those materials often didn't focus on the APIDA experience. Thus, we did not include the archival materials from this event

cerns; as a result, our focus necessarily shifted away from the project to an extent.

Still, what we noticed while planning and implementing *Asians@VT* was the importance of intra-institutional partnerships—in this case, tenure-track faculty and student support units. Despite the varied ways in which institutions of higher education can be quite siloed and can even deter unique opportunities for collaborating, we recognized the value of creating these transdisciplinary and intra-institutional networks. For instance, Jennifer’s background in rhetoric and the digital humanities nicely complemented Nina’s background in Asian American studies and her professional relationship with Asian American students from a wide range of disciplines, not to mention that of our collaborators in history, the libraries, and the digital humanities. Together, we created a project that was informed by several disciplinary perspectives that no one of us could have created on our own. As our unique teaching styles and pedagogies came together, it became clear to us how it is important to think “outside the box” about whom we might partner with, and the value of considering intra-institutional partnerships, especially between traditional research and teaching faculty and those in cultural and community centers. In addition, this intra-institutional setup meant that our “classroom” was not only at the ACE Center, which served as a kind of meeting hub, but also in the Intercultural Engagement Center’s conference room, the university archives, and interview meeting spaces. This cross-campus spatial arrangement was not just functional but also pedagogical as it meant that students were able to lay claim to these predominantly white spaces and the institutional resources that are available to them. Several students observed this point; for instance, Jessica Nguyen noted that she hopes “our research inspires more groups to see the value in utilizing resources VT Special Collections has to offer.” The students who worked on the project were able to gain firsthand experience in terms of how the university libraries, as an example, is a space that can enable communities to establish our presence and place in the university’s history. Moreover, this engagement, we believe, teaches students about the politics of place-based narratives and that they have the agency to intervene in institutional white supremacist narratives through historical research. We encourage others to consider similar kinds of feminist intra-institutional partnerships as a way of establishing the presence of invisibilized and marginalized groups on their own campuses.

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