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Remote Community-Building During the COVID-19 Pandemic:
Vigilant Love's Solidarity Arts Fellowship

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Asian American Studies

by

Joseph Richard Tsuboi

2022

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Remote Community-Building During the COVID-19 Pandemic:

Vigilant Love's Solidarity Arts Fellowship

by

Joseph Richard Tsuboi

Master of Arts in Asian American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles 2022

Professor Valerie J. Matsumoto, Chair

Started in 2019, Vigilant Love's Solidarity Arts Fellowship (SAF) is a six-month long program for Japanese American and Muslim American young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 who desire to build transformative relationships, receive political education, and participate in multi-disciplinary arts and creative expression workshops. Therefore, the SAF program is a unique opportunity for youth of color to engage in creative, healing justice frameworks to develop deeper understandings of personal and family histories, and to resist larger structures of Islamophobia and white supremacy. When the COVID-19 pandemic presented programming difficulties to hosting SAF retreats in-person in 2020, the Vigilant Love team adapted the SAF program to virtual and hybrid modalities, maintaining the program's core missions while also creating a system of care for SAF participants who experienced heightened stress during the

pandemic. In this case study, I draw on interviews with SAF alumni and the Vigilant Love leadership team to examine the ways that the SAF program not only pursued its goals for inter-spiritual and multi-ethnic community-building but also reveals needed alternative models for youth of color leadership development by grassroots community-based organizations.

I argue that within the current landscape of non-profit and grassroots community work, Vigilant Love's Solidarity Arts Fellowship offers a timely model of youth-centered organizing, inspired by themes of interracialism and "serving the people" from the Asian American Movement and the Third World Left. Promoting accessibility through hybrid, online retreats and ensuring community care through mindfulness and creative-expression activities were a few of the ways that the Vigilant Love facilitation team responded to recent moments of precarity and stress. This case study considers how a community-based organization has sought to build "solidarity" and "community" through an accessible youth-centered program revolving around queer and trans-affirming politics, sustainable mentorship pipelines, and deep political education for their constituents.

The thesis of Joseph Richard Tsuboi is approved.

Keith Lujan Camacho

Jennifer Jeehae Chun

Valerie J. Matsumoto, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2022

This project is dedicated to my obāchan, Aiko Kageyama Tsuboi.

In this world, we continue to do our best to find routine in small joys. また頑張ろうかね。

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At the end of my first year of my MA program, I pivoted from my initial research intentions of documenting family history because of the emotional hardships of conducting oral history interviews with aging family members while caregiving. While I am still interested in highlighting the domestic labor of single and widowed Japanese American women in Los Angeles during growing global capitalism in the 1970s and 1980s, this project may take shape in a future academic setting. In spring 2021, I gravitated to what felt good, among the few things that brought new joy and passion during the COVID-19 pandemic. To process my own family situation, I saw my experience in Vigilant Love's Solidarity Arts Fellowship from January to June 2021 as a potential research project and I proposed this new idea to my academic mentors on the organization's healing effects on BIPOC youth.

Thank you to the Asian American Studies Department and Asian American Studies Center at UCLA for supporting this work and my time during the past two years. Immense gratitude goes to my thesis committee: Dr. Valerie Matsumoto, Dr. Keith Camacho, and Dr. Jennifer Chun. Thank you to the Asian American Studies faculty whose courses I had the pleasure of taking: Dr. Eryn Lê Espiritu Gandhi, Professor Sophia Cheng, Dr. Lucy MSP Burns, and Dr. Victor Bascara. Thank you to the Asian American Studies Department staff who supported my time at UCLA: Wendy Fujinami, Greg Pancho, Kylin Sakamoto, and Sarah Chee.

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Lastly, thank you to my biological and chosen families. I hope we may all find healing and rest in our lives.

PREFACE

In the fall of 2020, I entered UCLA's Asian American Studies Master's program amidst unprecedented virtual-learning realities necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. On top of this new learning environment, the world that I knew was crumbling around me. The murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor called for global solidarity with Black communities and for daily anti-racist practice, including in-depth assessment of my own position of privilege.¹ Before starting the MA program, I worked in a longstanding Japanese American non-profit youth-services organization, in which I struggled to provide needed youth development programs and internship opportunities, while also facing the limitations of the scarcity mentalities that continue to drive Japantown and Little Tokyo community leaders into isolationist thinking and practice.² Graduate research in Asian American Studies provided me with a familiar sense of academic structure and also time to produce accessible knowledge for the communities to whom I am committed. Yet, attending three-hour-long Zoom classes in the confines of my Los Angeles apartment and sheltering in place had their own limitations. Truly, I missed in-person community. I wondered if it would be possible for grassroots organizations to maintain organizing work and community-building efforts during the pandemic and I wondered how I could become involved without the same pressures I had faced in Japantown.

¹ Author and activist Ijoema Oluo has said so well on their Twitter account, "The beauty of anti-racism is that you don't have to pretend to be free of racism to be anti-racist. Anti-racism is the commitment to fight racism where you find it, including in yourself. And it's the only way forward." <https://twitter.com/ijeomaoluo/status/1150565193832943617?lang=en> .

² What I mean here is that deep, nuanced histories of dispossession and forced removal in the larger Japanese American community, stemming from the World War II mass incarceration, continue to shape how Japantown and Little Tokyo non-profit organizations provide programs and services to their communities. As a program coordinator, I felt both rewarded in enhancing a collective cultural pride for younger Japanese American college students and extremely burdened by the lack of personnel, funding, and emotional breaks from this work.

Fortunately, for an “Assessing the Field” assignment in Professor Keith Camacho’s graduate seminar on “Historical Perspectives on Asian and Pacific Islander American Communities,” I looked to Vigilant Love (VL), a Los Angeles-based grassroots organization founded in the wake of the 2015 San Bernardino shooting.³ Initially a coalition formed by Japanese American and Muslim American femme and queer activists, VL intended to provide safe community spaces for processing and healing, and to protect the safety and justice of communities impacted by Islamophobia and violence in the greater Los Angeles area.⁴ In that fall quarter, I interviewed VL co-founder traci ishigo and learned about their vision for VL as an organization that pushes the field of Asian American studies to envision and to practice cross-community solidarity. In a time of constant uncertainty during the COVID-19 pandemic, I was impressed by how VL offered a vibrant, flexible model of adjustment to the pandemic, finding ways to continue their organizing work by utilizing new technology and virtual platforms. I learned that much of VL’s organizing model is rooted in relationship-building. Activist, writer, and healer adrienne maree brown calls for, “facilitating deep small transformations that pick up and echo each other towards a tipping point, organizing based in love and care rather than burnout and competition.”⁵ In times of crisis, which are often felt as an everyday embodiment under the conditions of white supremacy and U.S. imperialism long before the COVID-19 pandemic, communities of color must rely on interpersonal and community care. Moreover, when the world around us feels overwhelming, doomed, and shaped by politics and endless news cycles, who can we rely on for care?

³ The 2015 San Bernardino shooting reignited hackneyed Islamophobic tropes around terror and violence within a white, conservative city in the periphery of Los Angeles.

⁴ “Who We Are,” Vigilant Love, (Accessed June 8th, 2021), <https://www.vigilantlove.org/who-we-are> .

⁵ adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategies: Shaping Change, Changing World* (Chico: AK Press, 2017), 54-5.

INTRODUCTION

In this project, I focus on Vigilant Love's Solidarity Arts Fellowship (SAF) as a lens through which to examine contemporary methods of youth leadership development and community-building between the program's inter-spiritual and multiethnic participants. To do so, I consider how the SAF program, and its host organization Vigilant Love (VL), is a continuation of relationship-building efforts between Japanese American and Muslim American community leaders in the Los Angeles area post-9/11, as well as a return to fundamental organizing politics from the Asian American Movement and the Third World Left. By embracing creative expression and arts-based healing justice frameworks and by upholding queer, femme, and trans-affirming politics, the SAF program is a departure from youth-service programs produced by national and legacy Asian American youth-service non-profit organizations.⁶ Interviews with SAF alumni revealed how the SAF program centered care and adaptability, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, and these interviewees expressed creativity and passion for continued participation in the VL organizing network after their program's completion. In effect, Vigilant Love introduces grassroots community organizers and youth activists to models of multi-ethnic and inter-spiritual relationship-building as a means to combat racism, Islamophobia, and state-sanctioned oppressions. This case study examines how VL pivoted to meet the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic through adaptation to virtual programming and it pushes the field of Asian American Studies to promote cross-community relationship-building as a vital tool to solidarity.

⁶ As Soo-Ah Kwan and Mimi Nyugen state, the “‘non-profit industrial complex’ to refers to the institutional linkages and practices through which the nonprofit sector is called upon to fill (or at least to manage) a void as neoliberal capital recruited the welfare state to transform into a market actor.” (Mimi T. Nguyen and Soo Ah Kwon. “Nonprofits, NGOS, and ‘Community Engagement’: Refiguring the Project of Activism in Gender and Women’s Studies and Ethnic Studies,” *Barnard Center for Research on Women*, Scholar & Feminist Online Journal, Issue 13.2, Spring 2016, 3).

Vigilant Love's History, Structure, and Values:

The organization Vigilant Love (VL) was founded in 2016 by Sahar Pirzada and traci ishigo, who first met while coordinating a youth development program called “Bridging Communities” for Japanese American and Muslim American youth while working at the Japanese American Citizens League Pacific Southwest (JACL-PSW) district chapter and at the Council of American Islamic Relations Los Angeles (CAIR-LA). They continued to work together, including organizing a cross-community vigil on the steps of the Japanese American National Museum in Little Tokyo in response to the rise in anti-Muslim and anti-refugee sentiments, hate incidents and conservative backlash in the greater Los Angeles area in December 2015. Taking place in the same week as the San Bernardino attack, this vigil fueled the birth of the Vigilant Love organization.⁷

Pirzada and ishigo worked closely with Los Angeles-based Japanese American activists who had begun their work in the Asian American Movement of the 1960s and 1970s and continued to build relationships with Muslim American community leaders after the 9/11 attacks. Given their activism during the Japanese American Redress and Reparations movement and ongoing involvement with Nikkei for Civil Rights and Redress (NCRR), Kathy Masaoka and traci kato-kiriyama supported the formation of VL to fill a gap in Los Angeles for solidarity-based community organizing that focused on resisting Islamophobia.⁸ For these four founding

⁷ On December 2nd, 2015, a mass shooting occurred at the Inland Regional Center in San Bernadino, California, killing 14 people. Muslim Americans across the United States braced for potential Islamophobic reaction after it was revealed that the two attackers were Muslim. Muslim community leaders asserted that “irresponsible reporting by media outlets and Islamophobic rhetoric from politicians fuel[ed] fears of their faith,” especially after increases in harassment in the United States after the November 13th attacks in Paris by the Islamic State in Iraq. (Wilson Dizard, “Muslims fear increase in Islamophobia after San Bernardino shooting,” *Aljazeera America*, December 3rd, 2015, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/12/3/san-bernardino-islamophobia.html>).

⁸ NCRR’s “Who We Are” page on their website states, “In 2000, the Los Angeles Chapter of the Natoinal Coalition for Redress/Reparations (NCRR) decided to adopt its non-profit name, Nikkei for Civil Rights

members, the surveillance and incarceration of Japanese Americans before and during World War II directly connected to structures of racial profiling, xenophobic policies, and incarceration of Muslims in this country. Together, these leaders were drawn to the importance of linking these two histories, honoring Japanese American elders and their legacies of intergenerational resistance, while “directly building out tangible pathways for cross-communal solidarity and healing today.”⁹ Kathy Masaoka affirmed, “We learned about each other through Iftars (breaking of Ramadan fast) and going to Manzanar [Incarceration Center]. We stood together against scapegoating and police surveillance, and we supported each other at vigils and protests. VL became the way to commit ourselves to continue and grow that solidarity with other communities as one organization.”¹⁰ VL now supports initiatives based in arts, healing, civil rights, inter-spirituality, direct actions, and political education workshops.

Regarding organizational structure, the VL staff team is guided by a multi-ethnic, intergenerational, inter-spiritual Steering Committee (SC), as well as partners from impacted and allied communities. Their SC includes organizers, artists, attorneys, policy advocates, and healers who identify as a migrant, queer, Muslim, Japanese American and Asian American.¹¹ At this time, Vigilant Love does not have a permanent, physical organizational home, so the majority of meetings take place online, over Zoom, through email communications, or at members’ private residences. In addition, the VL team conducts outreach through email listservs

and Redress, with the same acronym, NCRR. The new name better reflects the ongoing work of NCRR: active participation in the broad areas of civil rights as well as continued commitment to redress for Japanese Americans and Japanese Latin Americans.” (“About NCRR,” Nikkei for Civil Rights and Redress, 2003, <https://ncrr-la.org/about.html>).

⁹ “Meet Sahar Pirzada and traci ishigo of Vigilant Love in Little Tokyo.” *VoyageLA*, August 6th, 2019, <http://voyagela.com/interview/meet-sahar-pirzada-traci-ishigo-vigilant-love-little-tokyo/> .

¹⁰ Mike Sonksen, “Transformative Solidarity: Bridging Communities Through Vigilant Love,” KCET, May 25th, 2021 <https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/transformative-solidarity-bridging-communities-through-vigilant-love> .

¹¹ “Job Description: Vigilant Love Programs Coordinator,” email correspondence, Oct. 29th, 2021.

and social media, mainly through Instagram; I have included various flyers and examples of online communications in the appendix. The remote nature of this work enabled creativity for online educational workshops and programming, as discussed in later chapters. Integral to their organizing efforts, Vigilant Love's core values include:

- *Art Activism*: the importance of uplifting the arts in our activism and community organizing
- *Shura (Consultation)*: the importance of all our decisions to be collective and informed by community experiences
- *Relationship Building*: the key to building successful and long-lasting movements
- *Healing Justice*: the need to center healing practices in anti-racism and anti-Islamophobia work
- *Transformation*: the urgent need for individual and systemic change that moves away from systems designed to harm us and instead creates meaningful pathways to healing and liberation
- *Anti-Oppression*: Anti-racist, abolitionist, queer & trans affirming, and anti-Zionism¹²

Throughout this project, I attempt to locate how VL as an organization is connected to the longer legacies of the Asian American Movement and the Third World Left, which were inspired by Black Power to mobilize political action beyond just consciousness raising. Scholar Laura Pulido states, "One of the things that made Black Power so compelling to other people of color was its multidimensionality. Unlike the civil rights movement, which focused on gaining access to the white world, Black Power addressed the multiple sources of domination that

¹² Ibid.

affected oppressed and colonized people. Black Power was simultaneously about racial pride, self-respect, self-determination, and, in some cases, self-defense and economic well-being.”¹³

In similar ways, VL’s core values are multi-dimensional: by using arts and political education as key tools for transformation and healing; by embracing intergenerational and horizontal leadership from experienced artists, activists, and community leaders to foster an environment of alternative knowledge-production; and by seeking interconnectedness between the various lived experiences of its constituents to build genuine relationships over time. Through its programming and direct action, VL serves Muslim American, Japanese American, South Asian American, Buddhist, Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC), multi-racial, queer, non-binary, and femme individuals – individuals and groups who embody the effects of U.S. empire, enslavement and forced labor, incarceration and deportation, state surveillance, racism, and Islamophobia. On an organizational scale, VL seeks not only to raise consciousness on these intersectional identities, but also to foster respect and love for ourselves and for fellow people of color impacted by similar oppressions. In addition, like the Asian American movement and Third World Left, VL harnesses the concept of self-determination, or creating the necessary conditions outside of state provision, to envision solutions for our communities’ safety, mental health, and survival in the present and future.

Placing VL within a landscape of youth-service non-profit organizations in southern California affords a better understanding of the stakes of VL’s work. As I analyze in Chapter 1, before its official founding in 2016, VL leaders worked closely with Nikkei for Civil Rights and Redress (NCR), the JACL, and CAIR to create cross-community youth programs in Los Angeles. At that time, Los Angeles-based Kizuna had been creating a pipeline of leadership

¹³ Laura Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left: Radical Organizing in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 91-92, <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520938892> .

programs for Japanese American youth, including a statewide college internship program in collaboration with the Japanese Community Youth Council (JCYC) in San Francisco Japantown and the Japantown Community Congress of San Jose.¹⁴ For Muslim American youth, CAIR has run statewide youth-empowerment programs, such as the Muslim Youth Leadership Program and the Muslim Gamechangers Network.¹⁵ VL has relied on physical community spaces in Little Tokyo, such as at the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center (JACCC) and the Japanese American National Museum (JANM), to host in-person workshops and events.

Both Japanese American and Muslim American organizations in Los Angeles have created youth-development programs for their respective audiences that gear towards “professionalism.” For example, Kizuna describes its Nikkei Community Internship as the “best opportunity for college students to build networks, professional skills, and make an impact in the Japanese American community” by placing them in legacy Japanese American and Asian American organizations in Little Tokyo and Japantown.¹⁶ A definition of professionalism is adopting the cultures, practices, and ideals of these institutions and using post-graduate labor to fill labor demands through this “community-engaged internship.” My thesis project considers how statewide and national organizations, such as the JAACL and CAIR, and legacy Asian American organizations founded during the Asian American Movement, such as NCRP, have supported the formation of contemporary grassroots organizations like VL in certain ways, while also revealing bureaucratic and political impasses within their non-profit status. The experiences of VL’s founders within these organizational spaces prior to 2016 shaped new visions of horizontal leadership structures that could better allow for cross-community youth engagement

¹⁴ “The Nikkei Community Internship Program,” Kizuna, 2022, <https://gokizuna.org/programs/internship>

¹⁵ “Youth Empowerment,” CAIR San Francisco Bay Area, 2022, <https://ca.cair.com/sfba/what-we-do/youth-empowerment/>.

¹⁶ “The Nikkei Community Internship Program”

and for “youth development” fellowship programs that center alternative forms of skills and “professionalism.”

While VL continues to hold Black Power tenets, the organization departs from the patriarchal leadership of the Third World Left that has persisted within subsequent restructuring of non-profit institutions. VL’s co-founders Kathy Masaoka, traci kato-kiriyama, traci ishigo, and Sahar Pirzada – femme, queer and non-binary, working-class or migrant, Asian American, artists, activists and healers – have created an organization based on multi-racial, queer-affirming, and anti-oppression ideals, as well as on their previous activism and experiences within larger non-profit institutions. As Pulido affirms, queer and femme people of color have “introduced a more collective leadership style that often promotes greater democracy” and they “tend to invest in development of rank and file, develop more collective approaches to decision making, and foster greater collaboration between organizations.”¹⁷ Women, femme, queer, and trans people of color have played important, and oftentimes overshadowed, roles in movement work, from the Asian American Movement and Third World Left into the present, and their long-term dedication to activism is one of the connecting threads to early liberation movements. VL leaders and their “femtorship” represent a departure from other southern California non-profit organizations, in which some of these leaders gained prior experience, to advance politics inclusive of VL’s audience.¹⁸

¹⁷ Pulido, 229-30.

¹⁸ I use “femtorship” – feminist mentorship – to describe the alternative strategies that BIPOC queer and feminist leaders have developed in professional spaces in which gender and racial identities are often tokenized and in which whiteness and patriarchy are privileged. Femtorship provides multi-generational mentorship not only for women but all individuals who seek to advance and sustain feminist and queer-affirming epistemologies within professional spaces. My project recognizes as femtorship the lasting impacts of radical women and femmes of color and *shura*, or consultation, from long-standing activists and community leaders who shaped Vigilant Love’s formation. Femtorship presents a way for Asian American non-profit and community organizations to center the collective wellbeing of, and to sustain leadership development for, their queer, trans, and BIPOC community members.

In my interviews, race, ethnicity, religion, spirituality, gender, sexuality, and generation emerged as significant components of identity. Japanese American participants' use of specific terms reflected the importance of generational identity. *Issei* is the term for first-generation Japanese migrants and is used generally for those who migrated before 1924. Post-World War II migrants from Japan are *shin-issei*, the prefix "shin" meaning "new" in Japanese. *Nisei* are second-generation U.S.-born children of *issei* and were children or young adults during World War II. *Sansei* are third-generation Japanese Americans, the vast majority born after World War II, *yonsei* are fourth-generation, and *gosei* are fifth-generation Japanese Americans.¹⁹ *Nikkei* is a broader term for Japanese migrants and their descendants outside Japan that includes Japanese Latin Americans and Japanese Canadians.²⁰ Some Japanese American interviewees identified common cultural religious affiliations, such as Buddhism. Some Muslim American interview participants identified their ethnic or racial identities, such as South Asian or Pakistani.

In addition to race and ethnicity, the religious and spiritual identities of VL's constituents place progressive perspectives, such as queer-affirming politics, within VL's core values. Sylvia Chan-Malik asserts that intersectional experiences of religion, race, gender, and sexuality are tied to place, naming explicitly how expressions of "U.S. Muslim feminism" are "critical strand[s] of gender justice discourses of U.S. women of color, alongside Black feminism, women of color feminism, and womanism in the United States."²¹ Chan-Malik's scholarship speaks to the transnational, queer, and feminist lived experiences of my interview participants, first- and second-generation Muslim American women who have created their own interpretations of spirituality, activism, and gender justice in the diaspora and outside of more

¹⁹ "Issei, Nisei, Sansei, Yonsei," Densho Encyclopedia, 2022, <https://densho.org/terminology/#issei> .

²⁰ "Nikkei," Densho Encyclopedia, March 19th, 2013, <https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Nikkei/> .

²¹ Sylvia Chan-Malik, *Being Muslim: A Cultural History of Women of Color in American Islam*, (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 184-5.

mainstream and traditional religious community spaces. I also consider how three Muslim American interview participants reference concepts of fate and destiny as guiding them into certain organizational, career, and community pathways. In addition, VL's audience includes progressive Japanese American Buddhists who desire to integrate their religious and spiritual identities into their activism that traces back to the radical histories of spiritual resistance during World War II. One Japanese American Buddhist interview participant contemplated how his familial affiliation to Buddhism had previously shaped conservative interpretations of his religious engagement, prompting his participation in the SAF program. Thus, VL represents how progressive politics are inclusive of religious and spiritual identities, tending to multidimensional desires and aspirations of activist, feminist, queer and trans members.

Overall, Vigilant Love is an inter-spiritual, multi-generational advocacy group of artists, activists, healers, and writers who came together amid Trump-era politics to dismantle systemic Islamophobia by working towards futures of shared health and safety and building long-term relationships amongst Muslim Americans and Japanese Americans. traci ishigo explained, "I want to see abolition, healing justice, and a community that cares for each other deeply in the face of systemic, cyclical violence. We need each other to achieve all three aspects of this vision, and I'm always learning how our relationships are the lessons and glue to keep us going."²² Vigilant Love is rooted in deep cross-cultural friendships, guided by longtime activists and community members, and presents an organizational model for reciprocal solidarity between

²² Sonksen.

groups through arts-based healing. After all, the name “vigilant love” conveys the idea that solidarity is an intentional act of love.²³

The Solidarity Arts Fellowship:

Initiated in 2019, Vigilant Love’s Solidarity Arts Fellowship (SAF) is a six-month program, and one of VL’s central projects that builds upon the decades-long commitment of Muslim Americans and Japanese Americans to create coalition.²⁴ From 2019 to 2022, VL has hosted 58 Solidarity Arts Fellows from southern California and the San Francisco Bay area, including the cohort of fellows at the time of my project’s completion. The first 2019 cohort was able to meet in-person for the entirety of their program, the second 2020 cohort met in-person until March 2020 when shelter-in-place orders were announced, and the third 2021 cohort met entirely over Zoom. In January 2021, I began the fellowship program, meeting bimonthly on Saturday afternoons for four-hour retreats on Zoom with 17 Japanese American and Muslim American university students and young adults based in the Los Angeles and San Francisco Bay areas. Our meetings were facilitated by VL co-founders traci ishigo and Sahar Pirzada, as well as VL’s operations and communications coordinator Mehak A., VL community organizer Yazan Za3za3, and interdisciplinary artist organizer traci kato-kiriyama.²⁵ Retreat activities, all virtual,

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ The “Liberatory Lineages: Unpacking and Resisting Anti-Blackness” political education and action series is VL’s other main virtual program that runs as a four-part series in the fall, usually. The Bridging Communities Iftar is a Ramadan celebration each spring and is also VL’s largest community fundraiser. VL’s organizing department offers political action workshops; its main campaign is the #ServicesNotSurveillance initiative that seeks to “address the racialized profiling and surveillance of Muslim patients in therapy, social work, and school counseling.” VL’s communications team creates “rapid response” opportunities by email and social media action for VL’s audience to engage in smaller, localized actions, such as calling Los Angeles city council members or signing onto initiatives against city policing.

²⁵ In the fall of 2021, Sahar Pirzada announced that she would be moving from her position as co-director of Vigilant Love to a member of VL’s steering committee to share organizing knowledge from her over

included a pilgrimage to the Manzanar Incarceration Center, the Bridging Communities iftar to break the Ramadan fast, arts-based healing practices, teach-ins, and discussion sessions with inspirational community leaders, such as Kathy Masaoka and Brother Shakeel Syed (See appendix for full schedule).

The SAF program aims to help fellows “gain life-changing relationships that strengthen one’s path and trajectory in challenging oppression, and nourish one’s commitment to developing possibilities for healing and liberation.”²⁶ Through facilitation, political education, and mentorship from experienced leaders/activists/artists from Muslim, Japanese American, Black, Indigenous, and people of color communities, the SAF program embodies VL’s core values for individuals to commit to inter-spiritual and multi-ethnic relationship-building as a means towards anti-racism and anti-Islamophobia.

The SAF program promoted practices of breathwork and mindfulness to foster psychophysiological comfort for participants and to facilitate connection between the mind and body, especially in a remote context. Breathwork, or conscious breathing, is a component of mindfulness and meditative practices. VL facilitators routinely began retreats or re-entered retreat workshops with a few minutes of guided breathing, often counting to a certain number while inhaling and counting down while exhaling. Mindfulness is the more general practice of guided meditation and breathing, often led through a slowing down of breath, scanning the body

five years of co-directorship. In response to this significant shift, the VL team re-organized their leadership model to include more opportunities for horizontal leadership. At the beginning of 2022, the VL team shifted to a four-person co-directorship: Gayle Isa was hired as the Director of Organizational Development, traci ishigo is the Director of Programs and Healing Justice, Yazan Za3za3 is the Director of Community Organizing, and Mehak A. is the Director of Communications and Development. This adaptation is emblematic of how the organization has grown and transformed over the past six years under the care and hard work of the founding co-directorship of traci and Sahar.

²⁶ “Solidarity Arts Fellowship,” Vigilant Love, 2022, <https://www.vigilantlove.org/solidarity-arts-fellowship-1> .

for points of tension, and recognizing passing or lingering thoughts.²⁷ Because many of the SAF retreat workshops activated memories of family migration and settlement traumas, wartime experiences, and the effects of state-sanctioned violence and persecution of communities, especially those of certain religions (e.g., Buddhist Japanese American during World War II and Muslim Americans in the post-9/11 era), it was necessary for VL facilitators to use breathwork and mindfulness to begin retreat activities. My interview participants referenced breathwork and mindfulness practices as effective, memorable ways the VL facilitation team cared for the 2021 SAF cohort, especially amidst heightened stresses and social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In contrast to Los Angeles-based youth development programs that adhere to more traditional models of professionalism through internships, the Solidarity Arts Fellowship program's political education, healing justice, and arts-based curricula allows for sustainable, collaborative transformation for young-adult fellows. While there were inherent limitations to achieving the same quality of connection that could take place during in-person community-building retreats, during the COVID-19 pandemic the SAF program provided inter-spiritual and inter-racial relationship-building that strengthened fellows' commitment to each other and to challenging cyclical oppression. In many ways, the SAF program represents new models of "professionalism" and "networking" through VL's core values of arts-based healing and intergenerational cross-community care.

Literature Review

²⁷ Many clinical psychologists have produced scholarship on the benefits of slowing down the breath to access the subconscious and unlocking sensitive areas of memory not typically accessed through typical forms of talk therapy. (J. Scott Young, et. al. (2010), "Breathwork as a Therapeutic Modality: An Overview for Counselors" *Counseling and Values*, vol. 55, 113-125, <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-007X.2010.tb00025.x>).

To situate Vigilant Love’s organizational history and its current activism within larger histories of Asian American and multi-racial community-based organizing, I drew on the 2018 ethnobiography, *NCCR: The Grassroots Struggle for Japanese American Redress and Reparations*, produced by NCCR and the Asian American Studies Center at the University of California, Los Angeles. This ethnobiography presents testimonies by Japanese American activists of the Redress and Reparations movement in the 1970s and 1980s, who today rally against the deportation of Latinx migrants on the U.S.-Mexico border and in support of reparations for descendants of Black enslaved peoples. Importantly, the book includes timelines on the actions by NCCR’s “9/11 committee,” whose members actively sought relationships with Muslim American community leaders, to establish a working framework for how Japanese American and Muslim Americans solidarity efforts continue today.²⁸ The intimate relationships that NCCR’s 9/11 committee built with Muslim American religious leaders in southern California eventually created pathways for programmatic efforts to foster “cultural understanding” and youth leadership development. In many ways, NCCR’s text is a community storytelling project that offers a model for other grassroots organizations to document moments of connectivity and solidarity between their constituents.²⁹

The concept of intergenerational trauma and the effects of the Japanese American incarceration are helpful to grasping how significant traumatic events in history may allow for

²⁸ Nikkei for Civil Rights and Redress, *NCCR: The Grassroots Struggle for Japanese American Redress and Reparations* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press, 2018), 379-385.

²⁹ Another documentation project is the South Asian American Digital Archive’s (SAADA) *Our Stories: An Introduction to South Asian America*. Hamid Khan, the Pakistani American organizer of the Stop LAPD Spying Coalition, has documented the post-9/11 pan-South Asian efforts by the South Asian Network (SAN) to organize for South Asian, Muslim, Arab and immigrant rights in Los Angeles. SAN’s organizing actions can be seen as a community-building project that parallels NCCR’s efforts, revealing a vibrant network of grassroots activism against state surveillance, incarceration, and deportation in southern California. (Hamid Khan, “Organizing for Immigrant Rights in Los Angeles,” in *Our Stories: An Introduction to South Asian America* eBook edition (2021)).

greater understanding between seemingly disparate communities of color, such as Japanese American and Muslim American youth within the SAF program. According to psychologist Donna Nagata, cultural trauma “occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a traumatic event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking memories forever and changing their future identity.”³⁰ In her article, “Processing Cultural Trauma: Intergenerational Effects of the Japanese American Incarceration,” Nagata examines the efforts by Japanese American incarcerated individuals and their descendants to process “collective trauma” through activism during the Asian American Movement and the Redress and Reparations Movement, and, on an individual level, to rid themselves of “model minority” stereotypes that were assigned to Japanese Americans by media and popular discourse. Yet, many younger generations of Japanese Americans still grapple with the intergenerational traumas of parents and grandparents due to silence and an extreme sense of shame for being Japanese American during World War II. Amber Johnson and Kira Hudson Banks assert the necessity for community-based organizations to center “healing justice” frameworks, or “how we can holistically respond to and intervene on generational trauma and violence, and to bring collective practices that can impact and transform the consequences of oppression on our bodies, hearts and minds.”³¹ Therefore, the introduction of certain tactics, such as breathwork,

³⁰ Donna K. Nagata, Jackie H. J. Kim, and Teresa U. Nguyen, “Processing Cultural Trauma: Intergenerational Effects of the Japanese American Incarceration,” *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 71, no. 2 (2015), 360.

³¹ Amber Johnson and Kira Hudson Banks, “This Is What Healing Justice Looks Like: Healing Justice Must Breathe Back Life into our Communities with Structural Changes that Eliminate Barriers to Access,” *Essence*, May 25th, 2021, <https://www.essence.com/health-and-wellness/healing-justice-health-equity-social-justice/>.

mindfulness, and other grounding activities in the SAF retreats, by the VL facilitation team proved to be useful ways to cultivate a relaxed and embracing space for Japanese American and Muslim American participants, especially over virtual gathering.

I am interested in the ways that Nagata's understanding of intergenerational and collective trauma can be applied to Muslim, South Asian, and Arab Americans after the September 11th, 2001 attacks. Many of my interviewees were toddlers or young people in 2001 and must reckon with the legacies of Islamophobia and "War on Terror" that haunt their communities today. What similar pressures did they face to assimilate and rid themselves of individual markers of "the other"? How does this contribute to a forced collective silence regarding mental health needs? Donna Nagata's research helps connect the histories of trauma between Japanese American and Muslim Americans and, importantly, the concepts of healing and healing justice as nonlinear processes that require collective effort and solidarity across multiple generations over time.

My thesis focuses on the ways that VL facilitates relationship-building and arts practices as central tenets to cultivating multi-ethnic, intergenerational, feminist, and queer spaces. Paulo Freire promotes the idea of such interpersonal dialogical organizing to break down systems of segregation between marginalized communities. Moreover, "understanding dialogue as a process of learning and knowing establishes a previous requirement that involves an epistemological curiosity about the very elements of the dialogue."³² This framework is integral to VL's programming because horizontal dialogue or discussion between facilitators and program participants, continuous curiosity to ask questions and to seek points of mutual understanding,

³² Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2005), 18.

and trust built over time are important tools to develop shared political and interracial solidarity against larger systems of oppression. Through deep storytelling by community elders and experienced activists and “pair-sharing” discussions with fellow cohort members, the SAF workshop activities deeply embody the idea that sharing one’s story *and* listening empathetically are means to developing and sustaining personal and political relationships.

Relatedly, “solidarity” is a central concept of VL’s mission and intentional language choice in the organization’s programs like the Solidarity Arts Fellowship. I view VL’s solidarity efforts through the feminist lens of Nadine Naber, who explains that moments of crisis often necessitate empathy, mutual understanding, and joint struggle for various communities of color under interconnected forms of U.S.-backed oppressions. Naber states that “the aftermath of September 11th expanded the possibilities for coalition building among activists engaged in homeland struggles in the diaspora (such as Palestinian or Filipino liberation) ... [while] it also affirmed historical polarizations of class, religion, citizenship, particularly among communities targeted by September 11th related bias, hate violence, and governmental policies.”³³ Moreover, the aftermath of September 11th re-activated political bases within Black, Latinx, Asian American, and other marginalized communities who have been and continue to be targets of U.S. government surveillance, incarceration, and deportation.

Shedding light on this re-politicization process in Asian American communities, anthropologist Karen Ishizuka documented how the anti-Vietnam War movement in the 1970s activated a pan-Asian American political identity that has persisted through the later decades of the 20th century and into the present. Writing on the importance of arts and creative expression as

³³ Nadine C. Naber, “So Our History Doesn’t Become Your Future: The Local and Global Politics of Coalition Building Post September 11th,” *Journal of Asian American Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3, (October 2002): 217-218.

a means of building collective power throughout the Asian American Movement of the “long sixties,” Ishizuka said:

“With [the] language of words, pictures, and music we [Asian American activists] unleashed a torrent of posters, poetry, photographs, newspapers, visual art, songs, theater, dance, and film that gave shape to the explosive energy and impassioned power of the moment. Together these cultural productions not only reflected a new consciousness, they created a new culture – of resistance and renaissance – that became the heart of Asian America.”³⁴

In response to growing anti-Vietnam War sentiment, Asian Americans developed a collective political consciousness through various artistic means and created a “new culture – of resistance and renaissance” for the next generations of Asian American activists/artists (or “artivists”).

Ishizuka underscores the deeply political origins of the arts to rally Asian Americans. I am interested in the ways that Vigilant Love, an organization founded by Asian American activists, continues to produce arts as political cultural material. Moreover, I view the SAF program as not a neutral, solely “fun” program; it is deeply political, informed by the ways that state-sanctioned oppressions have activated – and continue to spur– creative responses to unite intergenerational Japanese American and Muslim American peoples.

The works of Naber and Ishizuka have provided a nuanced understanding of solidarity, a concept that is often overused and reduced to simplistic meanings. In Naber’s words, “coalition building is a power-laden process where differences of race, class, gender, and nation are constantly transformed and reproduced.” Furthermore, it “require[es] an understanding of historical commonalities and differences” and a “willingness to forge political unity with a

³⁴ Karen Ishizuka, “Arts of Activism,” in *Serve the People: Making Asian America in the Long Sixties*, (London: Verso Books, 2016), 133-4.

variety of struggles against racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, colonialism, and imperialism, despite differences in the benefits or repercussions of supporting one struggle as opposed to another.”³⁵ Thus, solidarity is not a static form; it requires risk and effort on the part of marginalized individuals to listen to and understand each other. While I use the term “solidarity” more liberally in my thesis, Naber’s analysis reminds me that there is always a stake in these individual relationships, as well as the collective spaces we choose to participate in, when we build together for the purposes of anti-racist and anti-oppression work.

Related to Naber’s analysis and pertinent to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, mutual aid and interracialism are important concepts of care for communities of color impacted by the legacies of state violence. In 2012, Grace Lee Boggs said, “... instead of focusing directly on the issue of health *care*, [U.S.] political discourse centers on health *insurance* programs that have more to do with feeding the already monstrous medical-industrial complex than with our physical, mental, and spiritual health.”³⁶ A decade later, communities of color continue to navigate the failures of the U.S. government healthcare system to provide adequate means of care, economic survival, and hope through the continuing pandemic. Grace Lee Boggs’s critique of U.S. healthcare provides resonance to the current stakes of VL’s programming. The need for mutual aid programs places additional pressure on VL to create organizing spaces that also offer comfort and healing. I use Boggs’s analysis to argue that “care” is not a neutral term or concept; communities of color cannot rely on or expect that the state will guarantee care for our physical, mental, and spiritual health. Instead, we must build networks of care and aid within and alongside direct-action activism.

³⁵ Naber, 219.

³⁶ Grace Lee Boggs and Scott Kurashige, “Revolution as the New Beginning,” in *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), *ProQuest Ebook Central*, 13.

Themes from the Asian American Movement’s grassroots organizing models are important for understanding the long histories of VL’s organizing values. For instance, Daryl Maeda introduces the concept of interracialism from the “long sixties” when young Asian American activists saw themselves as part of Third World people who were “systematically subjected to capitalistic exploitation” under white supremacy and developed collective efforts to align themselves with Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities in city centers such as Los Angeles. In addition, Asian Americans adopted the “self-determination” logics of the Black Panther Party to “serve the people” by developing political organizations on college campuses and in ethnic communities to care for the elderly, youth, and others in the margins.³⁷ Grace Lee Boggs and Daryl Maeda remind us that because communities of color have been historically exploited under interconnected systems of oppression and left unprotected by inadequate governmental welfare, they have had to develop their own systems of care, education, and provision to survive in this world. Thus, I see the SAF program as an extension of this interracial “serve the people” model because VL leadership have crafted intergenerational political education workshops, carved out space for arts-based healing justice activities, and centered storytelling for interracial and inter-spiritual solidarity.

Recent creative scholarship ties present-day issues of xenophobic racism during the COVID-19 pandemic to historic structures of anti-Asian exclusion and xenophobic racism. The New York City-based Asian American Feminist Collective (AAFC) created *Asian American Feminist Antibodies: Care in the Time of the Coronavirus*, a zine that “offers a way to making meaning of the coronavirus crisis through long-standing practices of care that come out of Asian American histories and politics...” by “bringing together first-hand accounts and analyses

³⁷ Daryl Joji Maeda, “Interracialism, Internationalism, and Intersections of Race and Gender,” in *Rethinking the Asian American Movement*, (New York: Routledge, 2012), 107-8.

from...health and service workers and caregivers on the frontlines, students, people living with chronic illness, journalists, and organizers.”³⁸ The contributors present anecdotes on the intersections of gender, labor, class, and disability within Asian America, which are tied to the embodied legacies of U.S. imperialism, capitalism, and patriarchy that have affected femme Asian Americans. Thus, storytelling can serve as a means for liberation as AAFC’s contributors provide intersectional frameworks, stories, and resources for the future. Similarly, my SAF narrators also work to document their routines of care and survival through arts and activism during the pandemic. This zine has also provided historic context on the roots of xenophobia in health care, testimony about encountering racism during the pandemic, and resources for community care and wellbeing.

The intersection of xenophobic racism and public health offers important historical context for the ways people of color have navigated the COVID-19 pandemic and the resurgence of anti-migrant violence. The zine’s section on “Public Health and Xenophobic Racism” presents how the constructions of “Asian-ness, the banned, the barred, [and] the excluded ‘Asiatic’ [have] historically been in flux as the U.S. state determines barometers for inclusion and exclusion. Further, racialized regulations around mobility and migration marks certain people as unfit and unwell, or dangerous and unwelcome.”³⁹ Xenophobia has shaped public health discourse, rendering Asian Americans as the perpetual other, potential carriers of foreign disease, from the 19th century to the present-day attacks on Asian bodies during the COVID-19 pandemic. I am interested in how the construction of the Yellow Peril, initially targeting Chinese and Japanese

³⁸ Salonee Bhaman, Rachel Kuo, Matilda Sabal, Vivian Shaw, and Tiffany Diane Tso (editors), “Care in the Time of the Coronavirus” in *Asian American Feminist Antibodies: Care in the Time of the Coronavirus*. Asian American Feminist Collective, (2020), <https://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/wlpanalyses/9/>, 3.

³⁹ Bhaman, et. al. (editors), *Asian American Feminist Antibodies: Care in the Time of the Coronavirus*, Asian American Feminist Collective, (2020), <https://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/wlpanalyses/9/>, 5.

migrants in the late 19th century, transfers to South Asian, Arab, and Muslim Americans as “dangerous and unwelcome.” This interconnected xenophobic racism constitutes potential common ground for Asian Americans and Muslim Americans to understand shared histories of exclusion and violence and to create interracial pathways to combat xenophobic public discourse in the present.

Valerie Francisco-Menchavez’s scholarship on Filipinx transnational migrant communities has informed my understanding of “multidimensional care,” or the familial and non-biological threads of care on which migrant families and communities of color rely, during and after transnational labor migration under global capitalism and with increased access to digital technologies. In *The Labor of Care: Filipina Migrants and Transnational Families in the Digital Age* (2018), Francisco-Menchavez assesses how social reproductive labor and care work shifts from adults to children, “from migrants to family members left behind.” She also discusses how “the advancement of technology through personal computers, video software, and web-based social networks” can make possible quick, intimate interactions between family members who live transnationally.⁴⁰ This framing is relevant to Muslim American interview participants who grew up in Arab countries and are first-generation university students in the United States and participants who engaged in activist work abroad. During the pandemic, these individuals may face increased geographic and emotional distance from loved ones or from transnational community bases that informed current political work. I wonder how the uses of Zoom and social media have supplemented these familial connections through diasporic and multi-ethnic community gatherings with non-biological family. How effective were Vigilant Love’s efforts to

⁴⁰ Valerie Francisco-Menchavez, *The Labor of Care: Filipina Migrants and Transnational Families in the Digital Age*, (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 11.

promote care for Muslim American and Asian American individuals by providing online spaces for gatherings, such as breaking Ramadan fast together on Zoom, instead of in isolation?

Lastly, the field of Indigenous Studies has also informed my project regarding the uses of oral history interviews. Shannon Speed's *Incarcerated Stories: Indigenous Women Migrants and Violence in the Settler-Capitalist State* (2019) centers the voices and experiences of Indigenous women migrants from Central America and Mexico; most helpful for my project is Speed's call for "critically engaged activist research" that "combines critical analysis and overt commitment to an engagement with our research participants that is directed toward some form of shared social justice goals in a way that is doubly accountable."⁴¹ Thus, my interview process not only builds upon local archival projects about contemporary Japanese American, South Asian American, and Muslim American activism, but it also locates Vigilant Love within existing and emerging organizing spaces as a critical grassroots organization that utilizes practices of artistic expression and creation for anti-Islamophobic and anti-racist work. Furthermore, the SAF program represents a model of care and community investment, especially during a pandemic crisis, showing how VL has harnessed these tenets to create a transformative political space for Japanese American and Muslim American youth-leadership development.

Methodology

I conducted oral history interviews with nine alumni of VL's SAF program between the ages of 18 and 24, as well as conducting interviews with two of VL's co-founders. Altogether, I interviewed five Japanese American and four Muslim American SAF alumni. Two of the nine interviewees – Miyako Noguchi and Yuki Torrey – represented the 2020 SAF cohort, during

⁴¹ Shannon Speed, *Incarcerated Stories: Indigenous Women Migrants and Violence in the Settler-Capitalist State* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 8.

which the in-person retreats moved to online Zoom format in March 2020. I interviewed seven members of the 2021 SAF cohort: Noor Al Riyami, Kelsey Ichikawa, Noor Ahmed, Devon Matsumoto, Uzzy Alloo, Eo Hanabusa, and Nimrah Aslam. Altogether, the 2021 cohort comprised 17 individuals in total, including me. All alumni were in southern California or the San Francisco Bay area, including San Jose, at the time of the interview. In addition, I conducted Zoom interviews with Kathy Masaoka, longtime Japanese American activist and VL co-founder, and Sahar Pirzada, Muslim American activist and VL co-founder.

According to oral historian Donald Ritchie, “ideally, interviews should take place face-to-face in order to make interviewees more familiar with their interviewers and to allow interviewers to monitor the interviewees’ reactions.”⁴² I had hoped to conduct as many interviews as possible in-person, in safe outdoor spaces convenient for the interviewees and adhering to social-distancing protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ultimately, due to interview participants’ comfort levels, availability, and geographic distance (five lived in the Bay Area), I relied on Zoom for seven of the nine SAF alumni interviews. I also used Zoom to conduct the two interviews with the VL co-founders. Although this may have initially appeared to be a set-back, I discovered that, during a time of stress and uncertainty, conducting interviews on Zoom allowed for increased comfort, control over one’s space, and focus between my interview participant and me.⁴³

I conducted these eleven interviews between early September and late November 2021. Interviews lasted between one to two hours in length, with an average length of one-and-a-half hours. I recorded all interviews and used the artificial intelligence (AI) service Otter to house and

⁴² Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* (Cary: Oxford University Press, 2014), 98-9.

⁴³ Ritchie affirms that in this digital age some younger people may prefer electronic communication rather than talking in-person, though his 2014 text cannot attest to greater use of video technology during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ritchie, 99).

to transcribe my audio recordings. Before conducting the interviews, I prepared two question guides (See appendix). One was geared to the VL co-founders who helped shape my understanding of the organization's history and mission as well as their visions for the SAF program during the pandemic. These questions pertained to the importance of cross-community programming between Japanese American and Muslim American youth, the structure and substance of the SAF program, how these leaders/facilitators prepared to adapt to online programming during the pandemic, and any obstacles they faced when navigating youth facilitation during a time of crisis.

The set of questions for the SAF alumni asked them to reflect on their reasons for applying to the program in the fall of 2020, lessons they learned in the program between January and June 2021, and their takeaways and commitments to VL since completing the program. I also asked how virtual gathering affected their participation in the program. For instance, did technology allow for more connection during the program because of the stresses related to COVID-19 around them and how did it affect the SAF retreat activities? Or did the remote format increase "Zoom fatigue" and hinder people's motivation to continue meeting online? Because I had spent six months online with these SAF fellows, I had gained a sense of their individual political passions, career aspirations, and future commitments to VL after the program would end. In many ways, the skills applied within the SAF program to facilitate relationship-building, including vulnerable storytelling and empathetic listening, served as vital practice for my oral history interviews.

Overall, this MA thesis mainly aims to document the impacts of the virtual SAF program during the COVID-19 pandemic and to assess how the program influenced the lives of fellows. I

argue that the SAF program provides a contemporary model of youth-development programming that carefully tends to the creative aspirations of, mental health of, and solidarity between youth of color. In chapter one, I draw on interviews with VL co-founders Sahar Pirzada and Kathy Masaoka to document the less-recognized linkages between Asian American Movement organizations, such as NCRR, and VL by highlighting the importance of women and femme people of color leadership. Chapter two highlights the lived experiences of several of the 2021 SAF cohort, revealing how the COVID-19 pandemic sparked SAF participants' interest in building community in a time of social isolation. The third chapter contemplates the possibilities and limitations of Zoom and other digital media as a means of sustaining connection among the SAF constituents and introduces the types of activities that fellows participated in during online Saturday retreats. Lastly, chapter four explores the SAF alumni's visions for future possibilities of connection, after spending several months developing relationships online and then facing the question of how to gather outside the facilitated environment of the SAF retreats.

CHAPTER 1

A Brief History of Japanese American and Muslim American Inter-Community Gathering in Los Angeles

“We cannot grow without our roots.”

– A reminder by organizer eli tizcareño during Vigilant Love co-hosted Liberatory Lineages:
Unpacking & Resisting Anti-Blackness workshop on November 3rd, 2021

To understand the current work of Vigilant Love, it is important to retrace the geopolitical events and structures that impacted Muslim American and Japanese American communities in the wake of the September 11th, 2001 World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks.⁴⁴ It is also important to document the conversations between Muslim American and Japanese American communities on Tongva land (Los Angeles) to give credit to the individuals who have devoted their activist careers to solidarity through relationship-building, rather than simply looking at cross-community gathering at the organizational level. What follows is a brief history of the conversations and gatherings over the past two decades that cemented a bond between progressive Japanese American and Muslim American individuals and their networks. This history is vital to understanding early efforts and necessities for coalition, the evolution of inter-spiritual and inter-community youth programming on Tongva land, the bureaucracies of local non-profit organizations, and the foundation for Vigilant Love’s creation.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ It should be noted that even before 9/11 pan-South Asian organizations, such as South Asian Network (SAN) in Los Angeles, were already working on combatting the national security surveillance apparatus established after the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing (Khan, *Our Stories*, 649).

⁴⁵ In no way is this following timeline a comprehensive history; for the purpose of this project, I attempt to capture the shared stories from and the individual efforts by Vigilant Love co-founders and from members of the Nikkei for Civil Rights and Redress (NCR) 9/11 Committee.

On September 28th, 2001, on the steps of the Japanese American National Museum (JANM) in Little Tokyo, members of Nikkei for Civil Rights and Redress (NCRR) joined local Muslim American community leaders in a candlelight vigil in memory of the lives lost on September 11th. The late Lillian Reiko Nakano, sansei incarceration camp survivor and civil rights activist, spoke. “I feel so badly for the Middle Eastern peoples of all communities who are now the targets of this same kind of hatred and violence as a result of the tragic events,” Nakano said. “Sixty years ago, we heard very little from our government leaders and the general public to caution against this.”⁴⁶ She referred to the climate of fear and paranoia faced by Japanese Americans after the December 7th, 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor and the instantaneous scapegoating of Japanese nationals and Japanese Americans that would lead to the incarceration of 120,000 people, two-thirds of whom were U.S. citizens. This vigil represented an immediate activation by Nakano and fellow NCRR members to rally and join Muslim Americans in a time of uncertainty and fear of further state surveillance. It also motivated NCRR members to form a 9/11 Committee to understand the concerns of Muslims, Arabs, and South Asians in this country, who might face targeting by the government and others seeking scapegoats.⁴⁷ This September 28th vigil provided a starting point to think about the implications of crisis: What happens to communities that “look like the enemy” in times of war, international conflict, and ongoing U.S. empire-building? What are the concerns and needs of communities in the diaspora – those currently facing demonization and those who have experienced similar scapegoating before, despite their legal status and protected rights as “U.S. citizens”?

⁴⁶ “Lillian Nakano, a Leader in Redress Movement, Dies at 86,” *Rafu Shimpō*, March 6th, 2015, <https://rafu.com/2015/03/lillian-nakano-a-leader-in-redress-movement-dies-at-86/> .

⁴⁷ “About NCRR,” Nikkei for Civil Rights and Redress, 2003, <https://ncrr-la.org/about.html> .

Dr. Maher Hathout, the late Muslim Egyptian American activist and leader in Los Angeles' Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), declared, "We just have to get to know each other."⁴⁸ On December 8th, 2001, members of the NCCR 9/11 Committee organized with the MPAC to hold an iftar, or the breaking of Ramadan fast, at Senshin Buddhist Temple in Little Tokyo. Attendees were asked to bring food to share that honored halal dietary rules. This informal and private gathering began a dialogue between the two communities as well as a sharing of cultures and experiences, through monologues by Reverend Mas Kodani and MPAC's Salam Al-Marayati and through performances by traci kato-kiriyama, Jude Narita, and Denise Uyehara.⁴⁹ What was striking about this inaugural inter-ethnic, inter-spiritual iftar was the willingness of community leaders to break out of insulated cultural spaces to develop relationship through the arts and food.

In the same vein, Kathy Masaoka of the NCCR 9/11 Committee explained that her group of sansei activists, who had previously rallied their parents and the older generation of incarceration survivors during the Redress and Reparations Movement of the 1970s-1980s, "just went out in teams" to meet with Muslim American organizations to get to know their community leaders.⁵⁰ On May 19th, 2002, NCCR and MPAC sponsored a friendship picnic at Sierra Vista Park in the town of Sierra Madre, a Muslim American enclave in Southern California, and many Japanese Americans and Muslim Americans attended the event.⁵¹ Later in the year on November 16th, 2002, a second "Break the Fast" program was held at Senshin Buddhist Temple. Reverend

⁴⁸ Kathy Masaoka (VL co-founder), interview by author (on Zoom), November 11th, 2021.

⁴⁹ Nikkei for Civil Rights and Redress, *NCCR: The Grassroots Struggle for Japanese American Redress and Reparations*, (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press, 2018), 380. See also "Breaking Fast' with Muslims," Nikkei for Civil Rights and Redress, 2001, https://ncrr-la.org/news/breaking_fast.html.

⁵⁰ Kathy Masaoka interview by author.

⁵¹ *NCCR: The Grassroots Struggle for Japanese American Redress and Reparations*, 380.

Masao Kodani described the similar threats Japanese American Buddhists faced as “suspects” of Pearl Harbor and a document was created to pledge sustained coalition efforts. In the introduction of the document, representatives of NCRR, MPAC, and Senshin Buddhist Temple declared: *“We American Muslims and Japanese Americans shared many values and commitments, among them reverence for the dignity and honor of every human being. Our communities represented by the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) and Nikkei for Civil Rights and Redress September 11 Committee pledge to further strengthen our dialogue to promote peace and justice in the community and safeguard our civil liberties.”*⁵²

Through inter-cultural and inter-spiritual gatherings in informal, private settings with low political stakes, NCRR, MPAC, and spiritual leaders took seriously the need to continue cultural and spiritual traditions, and to jointly remain proud of their identities, despite fears of scapegoating and surveillance.

Since the first two “Break the Fast” iftars, an inter-cultural, inter-spiritual iftar has been held every year. They have grown to include a greater number of participants from various communities of color and have featured panels of inter-spiritual leaders as well as performances of dance and music. These iftars have rotated between locations that reflect the various spiritual homes of Japanese American Buddhist and Muslim American communities – from Senshin and Higashi Hongan-ji Buddhist temples, to local mosques, and, during the COVID-19 pandemic, to Zoom.⁵³ A physical space for in-person connection and for exchanging cultural practices – through food, dance, spirituality, music, etc. – was, and still is, important for establishing comfort and trust between Muslim American and Japanese American community members.

⁵² “‘Breaking the Fast’ event held,” Nikkei for Civil Rights and Redress, 2002, https://ncrr-la.org/news/11_7_02/4.html.

⁵³ Kathy Masaoka interview by author.

Further, from the post-9/11 climate of fear to the ongoing scapegoating of the “Asian other” during the COVID-19 pandemic, NCRR and MPAC’s efforts to facilitate cultural exchange not only signify the respect and friendship cultivated over two decades between these two communities, but also suggest the necessity of inter-spiritual, multi-ethnic coalition as a refuge in times of crisis.

The annual NCRR and MPAC-initiated iftar has had many implications, sparked by the conversations and visions for future coalition in these exchange gatherings. Notably, these ideas have rippled into larger community events and to local non-profit organizations with youth-focused programming. On April 24th, 2008, the Council of American Islamic Relations (CAIR) announced that members of its Los Angeles chapter would join Japanese American community leaders on the annual Manzanar Pilgrimage. Soon after, NCRR members traveled across Southern California to speak at mosques and community centers about their experiences and to express their thoughts on why the Manzanar Pilgrimage might offer a sense of belonging and catharsis for Muslim Americans.⁵⁴ The pilgrimage to the sites of forced Japanese American incarceration became a symbol of unity under state oppression for these two communities. Kathy Masaoka reflected upon her friendship with the Islamic Shura Council’s Brother Shakeel Syed, whom she met on a Manzanar Pilgrimage and who rooted his commitment to cross-community learning and youth-programming in his wishes for his children to experience intersectional political education with fellow communities of color.⁵⁵ Efforts to include Muslim American individuals at the Manzanar Pilgrimage serve not only as a means for political education about the World War II incarceration of Japanese American and subsequent histories of the surveillance and forced detention of targeted communities, but also to visit with others a physical

⁵⁴ *NCRR: The Grassroots Struggle for Japanese American Redress and Reparations*, 383.

⁵⁵ Kathy Masaoka interview by author.

site of trauma through which audiences may feel new or unearthed feelings of sadness, grief, mourning, and empathy.

The NCRR 9/11 Committee spearheaded efforts for engagement between Japanese American and Muslim American youth with support from local organizations in southern California. In February 2009, NCRR joined in partnership with the JACL, CAIR, and the Islamic Shura Council to launch the “Bridging Communities Program” to engage Japanese American and Muslim American high school students to learn about each other and their respective cultures.⁵⁶ This partnership was important because it allowed community leaders to sit down and plan out the Bridging Communities curriculum specifically for Japanese American and Muslim American youth that would serve as a template for the Solidarity Arts Fellowship college-age program. Bridging Communities workshops and activities were mainly held at the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center (JACCC) in Little Tokyo or at the Los Angeles CAIR office, with visits to Higashi Honganji Temple and local mosques and walking history tours in Little Tokyo. To facilitate interactions between Japanese American and Muslim American young people, Interfaith Youth Alliance Dr. Kamal Abu-Shamsieh coordinated outreach to families, JACL’s Craig Ishii brought games and interactive activities, and performance artists traci kato-kiryama and Nobuko Miyamoto led tactile arts and body movement activities, such as stretching, dance, and other forms of performance movement. Kathy Masaoka recounted efforts to observe Muslim cultural and spiritual practice, ensuring that halal food was consistently provided and that physical interactions across genders were limited.⁵⁷ The initiation of the Bridging Communities high school program represents the ways that Los Angeles-based community leaders secured funding from local non-profit institutions to provide a special

⁵⁶ NCRR: *The Grassroots Struggle for Japanese American Redress and Reparations*, 383.

⁵⁷ Kathy Masaoka interview by author.

opportunity for Japanese American and Muslim American youth to get to know one another. Kathy Masaoka and the NCRR 9/11 committee were instrumental in transforming the earliest “Break the Fast” iftar gathering at Senshin Buddhist Temple into the institutionalization of an inter-cultural, inter-spiritual program for Japanese American and Muslim American youth.

However, to write about the development of the Bridging Communities program as a seamless, all-embracing narrative would ignore the tensions that arose before and throughout the duration of program. First, some Japanese American parents were reluctant to enroll their children in multi-ethnic programs. Kathy Masaoka has explained that sansei, or third-generation Japanese Americans, are hesitant to lean into the discomfort of recognizing the privileges awarded by forced assimilation tactics or may “shy away” from confrontational politics; many do not want to get too “touchy-feely” through breath- and movement work and somatic practice, often used in grounding moments to enter a space of vulnerability and empathy for self and other. Lastly, they often silo themselves in heteronormative Japanese American spaces away from other communities of color in order to “preserve their culture.”⁵⁸ These factors, she believes, have trickled down to the fourth and fifth generation of Japanese Americans because their parents hesitate to allow their children to interact with Muslim youth and would rather steer them toward heteronormative, intra-ethnic activities, such as Japanese American basketball, Boy Scouts, and youth activities in Japanese American Buddhist temples. It took trusted relationships with NCRR members to persuade some sansei parents to put their children in the Bridging Communities program.⁵⁹ Kathy’s personal reflection about these generational and cultural tendencies distinguishes a progressive, empathetic, and willing Japanese American group who

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

understand more readily the importance of a Bridging Communities program or the “Break the Fast” iftar. She also warns Japanese Americans, and other communities of color who have experienced collective trauma in the past, of the dangers of (forced) assimilation, of jettisoning cultural and ethnic pride, and the adoption of conservative, rigid values to preserve ethnic siloes.

The difficulties in maintaining the Bridging Communities program illustrate both the limitations of some established community institutions and the need for new organizational models, which gave impetus to the formation of Vigilant Love. From the 2009 beginning of the program, shifts in staff membership within the host organizations created tensions in shared political beliefs. The Bridging Communities program was implemented because of funding by 501c3 non-profit organizations: JACL Pacific Southwest chapter and CAIR the Los Angeles chapter. But, due to tensions around curricula ownership between the organizations that crafted the Bridging Communities program, there was a struggle to find an institutional home for the Bridging Communities program after its first few years.⁶⁰

VL co-founder Sahar Pirzada, a Pakistani Muslim American who developed activist strategies for gender equity when working at the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), encountered similar institutional limitations when she returned to California in May 2015 and onward.⁶¹ Sahar states that mainstream Muslim American non-profit and religious spaces have struggled to include the multiplicities of Muslim identities, such as advocating for queer, femme, and non-Sunni Muslims.⁶² Yet, despite these institutional – and perhaps generational and patriarchal – obstacles, Sahar remained hopeful of what could be: “It was really

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Sahar graduated from U.C. Berkeley in 2012, moved to Singapore to work as a training executive at AWARE, and then returned to California in May 2015 to work as a youth development manager at a Muslim American political organization.

⁶² Sahar Pirzada (VL co-founder), interview by author (on Zoom), November 19th, 2021.

important to me that there [would] be a physical community space where we can just be authentically Muslim without fear of isolation, ostracism, or de-politization.”⁶³ Sahar provides a reminder of the stakes of this type of organizing work and of its connections to Asian American Women’s Movement values; ethnic and spiritual organizations must continue to interrogate reproduced gender, class, and other oppressive norms so that they serve the full spectrum of experiences under a “Muslim American” or “Asian American” umbrella.

Sahar’s commitment to hope and to envisioning femme, queer, and progressive community spaces connect directly to Asian American women activists of the 1970s. Susie Ling wrote about Asian American women activists’ commitment in that time to discussing the “triple oppression” of racism, sexism, and capitalism/imperialism away from both male leaders of Third World Movements and white feminists. Therefore, to build “sisterhood” meant not just consciousness-raising and dialogue, but also the provision of social services under “self-determination” logics. An example of this political action was the implementation of the Asian Women’s Center (AWC) in Los Angeles in July 1972 by Asian American college women, including leadership by its eventual director Miya Iwataki, to offer educational, reproductive, childcare, and mental healthcare resources for Asian American women. The primary concern of AWC was to “develop a viable alternative for Asian women through [its] program areas and to provide women with the tools to organize for change” because federally and state-funded social services, including programs on campus, did not provide material resources for the full needs of Asian American women.⁶⁴ Of course, the discourse around “sisterhood” must include the needs of non-binary and queer people, too, but earlier “serve the people” models from Iwataki and

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Susie Ling, “The Mountain Movers: Asian American Women’s Movement in Los Angeles,” *Amerasia Journal*, vol. 15, no. 1, (1989): 59-60, <https://doi.org/10.17953/amer.15.1.f78445r807283lr3>.

Asian American women activists are still relevant today, especially in the ways that grassroots organizations struggle to sustain permanent, physical homes (The AWC was forced to close in 1976 due to "complex financial, personal, and organizational factors, as well as government cutbacks to social services."⁶⁵ And, since its founding in 2016, VL has not had a physical institutional home). I draw upon this larger history because over the past five decades women and femme people of color have remained committed to providing community services that fully care for their people's needs, despite the challenges to doing so.

In many ways, the Bridging Communities high school program provided interaction between Japanese American and Muslim American youth, while also engaging needed conversations between mainstream Japanese American and Muslim American non-profit institutions and their leaders. The program also revealed ideological differences within the non-profit industrial complex and the logistical difficulties in sustaining inclusive, progressive operations that reflect the multiplicities of Japanese American and Muslim American constituents.⁶⁶ Both Kathy and Sahar recognized these potential restraints and they remained hopeful in their visions for coalition. With fellow femme organizers in the Los Angeles area they began to ask: What values were needed to address intergenerational traumas, issues of forced assimilation mechanisms, and constant threats of state surveillance? What liberatory frameworks around gender equity, multifaceted queerness, and anti-racism and anti-oppression would allow for the many identities under the umbrella of "Japanese American" and "Muslim American" to find political and spiritual homes together?

When the threats (and later successes) of Trump-era electoral politics ignited direct-action responses in the Los Angeles area in 2015, Sahar turned to coalition-building. She heeded

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Nguyen and Kwon, "Nonprofits, NGOS, and 'Community Engagement.'"

demands by Black Lives Matter (BLM) Los Angeles and other Black liberation movement groups asking non-Black Muslims and non-Black people of color to come together. During this wave of direct action, Sahar met traci ishigo, who was involved with Asians for Black Lives; the two coordinated times and places to rally together on the streets and protest Trump-era policies.⁶⁷ In response to the San Bernardino shooting, Sahar, traci, and their activist networks joined the Interfaith Gathering, Solidarity Walk and Candlelight Vigil on December 10th, 2015 to process the recent attacks and to protest proposals to bar Syrian refugees and Muslim migrants from entering the country. This vigil was organized jointly by the JAACL Pacific Southwest chapter, NCCR, CAIR, the Muslim Public Affairs Council, the Advancing Justice Los Angeles chapter, and the Tuesday Night Project.⁶⁸ Direct political action and the in-person interfaith vigil prompted traci, Sahar, Kathy Masaoka, and traci kato-kiriyama to sit down and to envision a grassroots organization that reflected their inter-spiritual and multi-ethnic activist and artist passions.⁶⁹ This coalition became Vigilant Love.

Nowadays, because Vigilant Love does not have a permanent physical institutional home, the organization operates within a network of longstanding Japanese American organizations based in Little Tokyo that offer physical and generational support. For example, the Japanese American National Museum hosts VL workshops, the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center has hosted retreats, and Nikkei Progressives has offered political education workshops from previous NCCR members. Youth-services organizations, such as Kizuna and CAIR-LA, continue to offer youth-development programs for their respective Japanese

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ “2015 Compassion – Not Islamophobia,” Nikkei for Civil Rights and Redress, https://ncrr-la.org/news/12-09-15/Compassion_Islamophobia_release.html (Accessed May 30th, 2022).

⁶⁹ The ways that these activists and community leaders used the momentum from collective direct actions to envision a new grassroots organization is reminiscent of the practices of interracialism, self-determination, and “serve the people” logics that Daryl Maeda has discussed.

American and Muslim American youth. Yet, it took individual efforts from VL's co-founders to create a new multi-racial and inter-spiritual space to support the growing needs of VL's base. Today, VL has developed new relationships with abolitionist, gender equity, and reproductive justice organizations that strengthen its core values.⁷⁰ What seems most significant about this history is the role played by individuals such as Kathy Masaoka who laid the foundation for cross-community relationship-building for VL to continue building horizontal partnerships with newer progressive organizations.

⁷⁰ These include Palestinian Youth Movement, Heart to Grow, Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative (ARC), and Muslims for Just Futures.

CHAPTER 2

Envisioning Community Care during the COVID-19 Pandemic

One of the ways that VL supports cross-community relationship-building and youth development is through the Solidarity Arts Fellowship (SAF). After completing two previous iterations of the SAF program from 2019, VL called for applications for their third 2021 SAF program through email communication in October 2020 (See appendix). The call for applications occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic's early period of self-isolation, when California residents were asked to practice strict precautions and did not yet have access to vaccines.⁷¹ For this third iteration of the program, the VL team sought Muslim Americans and Japanese Americans aged 18 to 24 years old who wanted to deepen their “understanding, awareness, and greater solidarity among [their] communities through transformative leadership development, arts-based organizing, and virtual field trips.”⁷² Despite the remote nature of the program, which was announced during a time in which the United States saw the first large peak in rising COVID-19 cases, my fellow 2021 cohort members expressed excitement about deepening their political and community-based opportunities through the SAF program. At the same time, in addition to seeking these goals of the program, the 2021 cohort identified specific conditions of the pandemic that affected their mental health and sense of identity, family, and community.

In this chapter, I explore how 2021 SAF cohort members were attracted to the SAF program, which called for an openness for fellows to learn about histories of oppression and

⁷¹ Richard Proctor, “Remember when? Timeline marks key events in California’s year-long pandemic grind,” *Cal Matters*, March 4th, 2021, <https://calmatters.org/health/coronavirus/2021/03/timeline-california-pandemic-year-key-points/>.

⁷² Vigilant Love Team, “Apply Now: VL’s 2021 Solidarity Arts Fellowship Program!”, email correspondence, Oct. 12th, 2020. (See flyer in appendix.)

surveillance on communities of color with each other and with VL facilitators. These participants viewed the SAF program with excitement as a starting point to building a world rooted in cross-community political education, or what I am calling curricula on the full and accurate histories of communities of color that are strategically not taught in institutionalized school settings. I argue that because the SAF program already supports fellows' growth and vulnerability in expressing personal and familial experiences of trauma over the six-month curriculum, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic may have unlocked intergenerational tensions, as well as new emotions, about the failures of state provision/protection in times of crisis. Moreover, throughout the 2021 program, fellows dreamed of the material changes they would want to promote community care in the future, such as bringing arts-based and creative organizing processes into other parts of their lives, expanding their sense of community and "home," and seeking greater "femtorship" through VL's close-knit network of multi-ethnic, multi-spiritual, abolitionist, activist, and healing leaders.

As the majority of the 2021 fellows were in university or college students at the time of the program, some expressed a shared desire to develop their knowledge about fuller, relational histories of communities of color to better understand contemporary solidarity efforts. Two 2021 SAF cohort members, Devon Matsumoto, a yonsei Buddhist from Sunnyvale, California, and Noor Ahmed, a Pakistani Muslim American also from Sunnyvale, expressed a sense of frustration about the lack of joint-struggle knowledge in their education. This feeling also couples a time in which students faced the difficulties of learning and seeking classroom community as classes were moved to virtual settings. Devon, a social worker and a member of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) national chapter, said that the community-building aspect of learning about other marginalized groups' experiences, "not from [the]

academic [or governmental] levels but from community members themselves,” was a central goal in his application process. Further, the mainstream Asian American organizations, such as the JACL, Devon had participated in instill notions of individualistic acclaim of nisei and sansei Japanese American male political figures for their activist backgrounds.⁷³ In many ways, organizations such as the JACL rely on this form of pedestalizing older generations of leaders, who are heterosexual men non-coincidentally, to preserve a limited memory of movers and shakers during the early aftermath of World War II. Yet rather than embracing the histories of interracialism, collectivism, and Third World solidarity of the Asian American Movement and the long sixties, this epistemological tactic gatekeeps how younger Japanese American/Asian American youth can pursue “social justice” activism and careers without the pressures to adhere to the backdrop of “worthy” Japanese American political figures. In other words, Devon’s political aspirations as a young Japanese American Buddhist and social worker reveal the obstacles of dominant discourses about *how* Japanese American activists are remembered: individually and in fewer numbers, overlooked by the government and national organizations and oftentimes those who are straight and male.

Devon’s background in these Japanese American institutions prompted his search for grassroots community spaces that centered healing. On November 6, 2020, Devon attended an event co-sponsored by VL called “Rage and Refuge: Continuing the Resistance of our Ancestors,” a community gathering held after the 2020 presidential election to remind participants that “our ancestors are with us in the resistance against Islamophobia and state violence.”⁷⁴ “Rage and Refuge” represents a grassroots community need to process how electoral

⁷³ Devon Matsumoto (SAF alumni), interview by author (on Zoom), November 2nd, 2021.

⁷⁴ “Rage and Refuge: Continuing the Resistance of our Ancestors,” Vigilant Love Network For Good Event Site, November 6th, 2020, <https://vigilantlove.networkforgood.com/events/24314-courage-against-the-machine>.

politics and a two-party system cannot allow for full celebration of democracy until all the needs of fellow queer, trans, Black, Indigenous People of Color (QTBIPOC) communities are met. This event was the first time Devon had seen multi-organizational partnerships between VL and other politically-aligned Muslim American, Japanese American, and BIPOC organizations around the concept of healing justice. During a small group session, Devon expressed his interest in learning more about state-surveillance, and VL co-founder Sahar Pirzada encouraged him to apply to the SAF program to deepen his understanding of systemic surveillance of communities of color: from the Japanese American incarceration, to the Cold War attack on Chinese American “communists,” to the implementation of COINTELPRO, to the “War on Terror”, and beyond.⁷⁵ Devon’s interaction with Sahar cemented his commitment to advancing his passionate search for education on coalition-building, advocacy for mental health in Asian American communities, and inter-spiritual histories of resistance. During the early COVID-19 pandemic, Devon pushed beyond the pedagogical borders of the spaces he had known, challenging his own assumption that ethnic studies programs and Japanese American non-profit ‘social justice’ organizations were the sole spaces in which to learn about progressive history.

Noor Ahmed pinned the reason for her application decision to a single interaction: her reading of John Hamamura’s 2006 novel, *Color of the Sea*.⁷⁶ During social isolation in the early pandemic, Noor read the protagonist’s reckoning with the aftermath of war, imperialism, and torn-allegiance to nation-states as connected to her own understanding of Muslim American community experience through time, and contemporarily, to the rise of coalition around the Black Lives Matter movement in the summer of 2020.⁷⁷ *Color of the Sea* became a window for

⁷⁵ Devon Matsumoto interview by author.

⁷⁶ In brief, this coming-of-age novel follows a young Japanese American teacher, born in Hawai’i and raised in Japan and California, and traces the effects of World War II on his life and relationships.

⁷⁷ Noor Ahmed (SAF alumni), interview by author (on Zoom), September 20th, 2021.

Noor to understand both Japanese American history and to place her Muslim American identity within the current political moment: “In order to feel liberated, we have to be part of liberation movements of others because the work doesn’t stop when I’m free,” Noor said.⁷⁸ Therefore, the pandemic activated Noor’s readiness to join multi-ethnic community spaces that connected her commitments to Black liberation, empowerment of her Muslim American identity, and understanding of Japanese American histories. Noor ultimately applied to the 2021 SAF program and cites this coalescing as fate, or *kismet*; she said, “Just like destiny, little things in life happen when there is no rhyme or reason.”⁷⁹

Noor’s description of *kismet* provides a sense of hope for community-building among youth of color who have shared political and creative values and may not know each other yet. To be clear, it was not simply the pandemic and the conditions of the state that prompted Noor’s, and other fellows’, decisions for cross-community solidarity; rather, it was also an alignment of shared values that may have brought them together through a longer history of intergenerational and cross-community activism. After 9/11, Muslim, Arab, and Middle Eastern communities in the United States and transnationally sought greater understanding of the “heterogeneity of histories shaped by intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and nation, [while also] exposing histories of European and U.S.–led colonialism and neo-colonialism in the ‘Middle East.’”⁸⁰ Nadine Naber’s discussion of solidarity between and with targeted Muslim, Arab, and Middle Eastern communities after 9/11 affirms this difference between state violence activating coalition versus the collective agency by targeted individuals and communities of color who

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Naber, 218.

actively seek deeper understanding of intersectional identities and sustainable connection to support each other against state violence.

While Devon and Noor expressed visions for collective and structural needs for cross-community understanding and connection, other SAF participants looked locally to assess and expand their sense of “community” and “home.” Nimrah Aslam, a queer Muslim American from the South Bay area in northern California, said that the pandemic brought up feelings of “being lost” and “navigating losses again.” Nimrah wanted to “find [herself] again and find [herself] through connecting to community members.”⁸¹ Because of the time away from a university setting, greater social isolation, and more time spent at work or home with immediate family, Nimrah sought greater social opportunities with fellow queer Muslims and queer people of color at the time of her application to the SAF program. Nimrah said, “What was really great about [the SAF program] was [the opportunity] to reconnect with Muslims that [affirmed] queerness.... The fact that I would be able to connect with Muslim people who might be queer themselves or who believe in queerness and its entirety – that was something I was really excited about.”⁸² This desire for connection calls for Freirean dialogue, to create “a process of learning and knowing that invariably involves theorizing about the experiences shared in the dialogue process.”⁸³ While theorizing about lived experiences was not a direct goal of the SAF program, the process of speaking one’s truths aloud and allowing space for curiosity, affirmation, and understanding is. When Nimrah speaks to “finding herself again,” perhaps this means to be embraced, understood, and uplifted by fellow queer people of color with shared political aspirations through storytelling.

⁸¹ Nimrah Aslam (SAF alumni), interview by author (via phone call), October 10th, 2021.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Freire, 17.

Similarly, participating in the 2021 SAF program during the pandemic brought to light a sense of longing for transnational participants who had – and still are having – difficulty visiting families in Arab home countries and had to rely on technology to restore feelings of “home.” Noor Al Riyami, a first-generation Muslim Omani Egyptian American and a graduate student at the University of Southern California, described how her undergraduate years were her first experience living in the United States and the first time living away from her immediate family. She spoke about missing culturally and spiritually homogeneous spaces, while also appreciating her newfound spiritual curiosity and development of critical thinking away from home:

“Growing up in Oman, I didn’t have any ethical or moral dilemmas.

Ramadan was always happening at the same time – we were fasting at the same time, and I didn’t have to worry about having to change my schedule. The schedule changed for us as opposed to me adapting for it... And [there was] a fine line between what is cultural and what is religion [Islamic teaching]. [Here,] being able to distinguish the two has been difficult yet being able to question [them] again has been important especially because growing up, there was a lot of hesitancy about questioning your faith.”⁸⁴

Noor speaks to her childhood and familial environment in which she did not have to make choices about her religious participation; it was already built into her environment and she grew accustomed to these routines. When Noor settled in Los Angeles as a young adult, she faced difficulty in creating a new religious commitment in the absence of dominant Arab and Muslim cultures. Valerie Francisco-Menchavez, whose analysis of transnational community care challenges the idea of a singular nuclear family as responsible for care, asserts the importance of

⁸⁴ Noor Al Riyami (SAF alumni), interview by author (on USC campus), October 11th, 2021.

the labor and care of both biological and fictive kin.⁸⁵ Noor's anecdote is important because she reveals her development of curiosity and the right to question previous norms of her upbringing to discover independent, multi-faceted spiritual spaces.

Nimrah's and Noor's lived experiences led them to apply to the 2021 SAF program. Nimrah was drawn to the SAF by her craving for community, a non-biological "made-community" that requires constant searching for belonging and nurturing of intersectional identities. While cherishing her family and friends in the South Bay area of northern California, Nimrah recognized that she had to push herself to find fellow queer Muslim individuals and allies who would support her full self. Lastly, as the pandemic restricted movement – both physical and emotional – into spaces that centered intersectional identities, Nimrah and other young activists became eager to find political spaces for refuge. Ultimately, Noor was impressed by the multi-disciplinary nature of the SAF program: "It sounded incredible to me to meet people around my own age who were brought altogether to create a family-like environment, while also discussing heavy topics. Yet, also making sure that nurturing each other."⁸⁶ When envisioning sometimes intangible concepts such as community and family, Nimrah and Noor Al Riyami voiced clearly what they wanted and needed during the pandemic. Their ability to envision and call for community spaces that allow them to feel belonging reflects their creativity.

Lastly, in regard to applicants' desires within the SAF program, individuals sought ways to apply VL's organizing values to their respective extracurricular activities and paid work. This appealed to Eo Hanabusa, a shin-nisei and yonsei from Santa Clara, California who is interested in interdisciplinary solutions to combat the settler-colonial histories of botany and conservation

⁸⁵ Valerie Francisco-Menchavez, *The Labor of Care: Filipina Migrants and Transnational Families in the Digital Age*, 5.

⁸⁶ Noor Al Riyami interview by author.

in U.S.-colonized places such as Hawai'i.⁸⁷ Eo described the early pandemic as a time of reckoning, feeling stuck in the “objective” limitations of STEM studies and wanting to apply a critical lens to broader Japanese American history and their own family history. They saw the SAF program as a creative, community-oriented opportunity to expand their work, perhaps closing the gaps between “community” and “science.”⁸⁸ Eo’s story exemplifies the ways in which SAF fellows often wear more than one hat, as “community leader,” “activist,” or “artist.” The SAF program has afforded Eo a space to define their career trajectory by building community with fellow BIPOC queer scientists, or those navigating other STEM fields, which shows how adaptable and flexible the SAF program can be for many. Further, while crossroads are often thought of as fraught, directionless moments in young adults’ career paths, Eo demonstrates how a time of pandemic opened space for evaluation, creativity, and reflection in the search for work.

The hope of finding mentorship and developing professional relationships through VL’s leadership also proved to be significant reasons for applying to the SAF program. Uzzy (Usmaan) Alloo, a Muslim American from the San Francisco Bay area, applied to the SAF program seeking mentorship and inspiration from Muslim political leaders; Muslim American political representation is an important issue to him. Uzzy explained, “Growing up [in the Bay area], there was little to no representation for us. It is hard finding people to look up to who are similar to me, and I struggle with that.”⁸⁹ Uzzy particularly cited the failure of electoral politics to include enough representation of Muslim American individuals, especially in the Bay area.

⁸⁷ Eo identifies with post-war Japanese migrant experiences through their mother’s side of the family, as well as pre-war Japanese American experiences through their father. See my introduction section for more information on these terminologies.

⁸⁸ Eo Hanabusa (SAF alumni), interview by author (on Zoom), September 27th, 2021.

⁸⁹ Uzzy Alloo (SAF alumni), interview by author (on Zoom), October 18th, 2021.

Uzzy has found inspiration in the work of Zahra Billoo, executive director of the Council on American Islamic Relations, San Francisco Bay Area (CAIR-SFBA), who has advocated for Muslim American empowerment through legal services and community organizing since 2009.⁹⁰ His admiration of Billoo may have spurred Uzzy to invest his time and energy in other city centers like Los Angeles, closer to where he attended university at UC Riverside, and to enter the networks of Muslim American political action in southern California.

Uzzy's return to southern California is linked to his own family and its connection with the Asian American Movement; his cousin's husband's father was Chris Iijima, a lawyer, educator, legal scholar, and musician in the group Yellow Pearl, with Nobuko Miyamoto and Charlie Chin.⁹¹ This relatively distant yet interconnected family history inspired Uzzy's interest in the SAF program, which, as mentioned earlier, is part of the legacies of the Asian American Movement. Uzzy's motivations for applying reflect all the aspects discussed in this chapter: he wanted deeper political education, he sought greater community connection beyond what he knew in the Bay area, and he was inspired by VL's grassroots political leadership to try to address the lack of representation of Muslim leaders in electoral politics

Overall, the interviews with Devon, Noor Ahmed, Nimrah, Noor Al Riyami, Eo, and Uzzy revealed how applicants were considering the SAF program as a significant venture in their early adult lives. A common thread connects these cohort members' various reasons for application to the 2021 SAF program: in a time of uncertainty about how long the COVID-19 pandemic would last, these individuals continued to have hope and dreams of a community space that would support their unique being. As a part of VL's body of political work, SAF applicants'

⁹⁰ "Zahra Billoo: Executive Director," CAIR California, 2022, <https://ca.cair.com/sfba/member/zahra-billoo/>.

⁹¹ Uzzy Alloo interview by author.

desires for cross-community connection reveal a need for young Muslim Americans and Japanese Americans to deepen their understanding of respective community histories and to find ways to heal within contemporary systems of violence and neglect. As I discuss in the next chapter, their participation in the program relied on their remote inclusion through Zoom, a technology/digital platform that became essential for group communication during the pandemic. Their initial aspirations for the SAF program met new challenges and new opportunities.

CHAPTER 3

Solutions for Care: Zoom as an Online Community-Building Space

When reflecting on the 2021 SAF program, VL co-founder Sahar Pirzada mentioned the ways that VL facilitators channeled care and compassion during each Zoom retreat. Sahar said:

“There’s a lot of disrupting the ‘normal’ Zoom life that helps with the fatigue. We would do grounding with breath or rajio taiso – that was one of my favorite things to look forward to... Even gentle reminders from [VL facilitators] to prepare for these Zoom sessions was such a big part of the [VL] culture. If we’re going to do this virtually, let’s also be intentional about how we’re taking care of each other and be compassionate about the fact that Zoom fatigue is real.”⁹²

Sahar’s words highlight the techniques used by the VL team to combat the challenges of isolated political work on Zoom by creating inviting, energizing spaces.

In times of political and pandemic crisis, VL leaders prioritized the wellbeing of their program participants. Back in the summer and fall of 2020, activist communities responded to increased media attention to white supremacist violence in the United States through community gatherings and vigils. Because of the limitations of in-person gatherings due to COVID-19 restrictions, Zoom and other online modalities became a space for processing what was happening outside of our quarantined walls. Zoom became a space to express feelings of anger, sadness, grief, and rage towards the failure of the U.S. government to protect BIPOC, low-income, unhoused, elderly, immunocompromised, and disabled communities against the

⁹² Sahar Pirzada interview by author.

COVID-19 public health crisis. Zoom became a space to gather collectively against the rising anti-Black, anti-Muslim, and anti-Asian violence.

Amidst greater social isolation during the pandemic, Vigilant Love responded to the need for collective gathering, cross-community solidarity-building, and space for healing through Zoom workshops. Vigilant Love offered a four-part political education workshop series called “Unpacking Anti-Blackness (UAB) in our Non-Black Families & Communities” in September and October 2020.⁹³ In partnership with the Palestinian Youth Movement, American Friends Service Committee, Nikkei Progressives, and Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation (TRHT), VL created a virtual community space to unpack and undo anti-Blackness in our families and communities through teach-ins and small group reflections.⁹⁴ These workshops reflect how, even before the 2021 iteration of the SAF program, VL leadership began experimenting with the transition to online gathering while still maintaining their core values, such as anti-oppression community education and relationship building.⁹⁵

In this chapter, I expand on the ways that the VL team experimented with Zoom to continue their organizing models creatively and with care for Solidarity Arts Fellows. When entering the fully online 2021 SAF program, these fellows expressed both social anxiety and hope for creativity with each other. They developed new relations to their own creative processes

⁹³ This program’s name has been updated to “Liberatory Lineages: Unpacking and Resisting Anti-Blackness.”

⁹⁴ “Unpacking Anti-Blackness in our Non-Black Families & Communities,” Vigilant Love email communications, September 2020.

⁹⁵ In my first year of graduate school, I attended these workshops to seek activist and healing justice spaces outside of the classroom and to understand the type of activism to which VL is committed. The UAB program facilitators spoke on the specific yet interconnected histories of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian communities in this country and historic context for solidarity, reminding me of Daryl Maeda’s scholarship on interracialism and internationalism. In addition, the seamless nature of their online presentations, followed by facilitated small group discussions, left an impression about how cohesive and inviting online political education workshops can be.

through body movement, poetry and spoken expression activities, writing and journaling, and other tactile art activities. In addition, fellows expressed how participating in the SAF fellowship allowed the multiplicities of their intersectional identities to shine, even when they discussed online-workshop reflections with family members in the context of living at home during the pandemic. Ultimately, these fellows developed individual and collective creativity by showing up on Zoom and committing to the SAF program, which were also means of combatting “Zoom fatigue” and the disruption of pre-pandemic “intricate human communication methods” that rely on in-person interaction.⁹⁶ A six-month virtual capsule of relationship- and trust-building, the 2021 SAF program left participants wanting more – wanting deeper in-person connection to return to conversations and political intentions made with each other that had been limited to initial virtual interactions.

The 2021 fellows discussed how, in the beginning of the program, Zoom intrinsically created an anxiety or nervousness about the self, in addition to meeting others for the first time. Kelsey Ichikawa, a yonsei from Fremont, California, described feeling nervous and skeptical when initially meeting strangers on Zoom; even before the first retreat in January 2021, she was self-conscious about how she might be perceived online.⁹⁷ Eo Hanabusa, introduced in the previous chapter, also felt apprehensive about collective body movements on Zoom because they

⁹⁶ “Humans use a range of precisely timed vocalizations, gestures, and movements to communicate, and they rely on precise responses from others to determine if they are being understood.” Recent scholarship on “Zoom fatigue” points to the ways that tiredness, anxiety, and worry result from overusing virtual videoconferencing platforms because oftentimes this technology is not completely synchronous. There can be slight delays when a person performs an action and when other participants observe it, causing our brains to work harder and restore synchrony. (Brenda K. Wiederhold, “Connecting Through Technology During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 Pandemic: Avoiding ‘Zoom Fatigue,’” *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking*, vol. 23, no. 7 (November 7th, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2020.29188.bkw>).

⁹⁷ Kelsey Ichikawa (SAF alumni), interview by author (on UCLA campus), September 23rd, 2021.

did not think they were “much of a mover.”⁹⁸ As Zoom gatherings have become normalized in organizational and institutional settings over the past two years of the pandemic, Kelsey’s and Eo’s initial ambivalence about Zoom and online gatherings, especially those like VL’s programs that invite vulnerability and risk by the fellows, remind us of the emotional boundaries in place when organizations first began to transition from in-person to remote programs. Thus, for fellows like Kelsey and Eo to feel affirmed in their creative and expressive processes online, the VL team had to utilize facilitation styles that would ease participation in the Zoom settings.

Members of the VL team, traci ishigo and traci kato-kiriyama (t.k.k.), strove for greater transparency in their facilitation through clear, direct communication to the 2021 fellows. Kelsey gained trust that she was entering a supportive fellowship when traci ishigo sent all fellows a digital welcome packet that included participants’ biographies and headshots, information about VL as an organization, retreat schedule and logistics, and contact information for the facilitation team. Traci continued to provide continuous email reminders with agendas about what fellows should expect for upcoming retreats throughout the entire 2021 program.⁹⁹ Kelsey’s candid reflection before joining the SAF program reveals a shared anxiety about the nature of Zoom, especially in this early period of the pandemic. The VL team helped mitigate some insecurities by providing transparency about the SAF program and its fellows.

t.k.k. facilitated exciting new body movement activities on Zoom. For instance, during the two-part opening retreat on January 16th and 17th, 2021, VL facilitators asked fellows to write about a family member or mentor figure who “made it possible for [us] to be here today,” a prompt that was followed by a small-group discussion in Zoom break-out rooms. When everyone returned to the larger session, facilitators asked, “If you could place that person, community, or

⁹⁸ Eo Hanabusa interview by author.

⁹⁹ Kelsey Ichikawa interview by author.

group of people on your body, where would that be?”¹⁰⁰ Fellows responded by going around and making a gesture as response, embracing their heart, heads, arms, and other parts of the body. This activity was grounding, providing preparation for the day’s activities, because fellows were able to express through written and somatic forms gratitude for inspirational people and groups in their lives, especially if fellows had not seen or been in contact with them due to the pandemic. It was also a means for Japanese American and Muslim American fellows to introduce their family histories or to reference cultural, religious, and political groups that might resonate across various lived experiences, one of the goals of the program.

Similarly, at the beginning of the second retreat on February 13th, 2021, traci ishigo used a body movement practice familiar to some Japanese Americans to energize the fellows.¹⁰¹ *Rajio taiso* (or “radio calisthenics” in Japanese) is based on a morning radio program that broadcasts a set of warm-up exercises along with music in Japan.¹⁰² This practice has crossed oceans and trickled down among generations of Japanese Americans who maintain this morning routine. For instance, before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center (JACCC) in their Little Tokyo courtyard offered a public rajio taiso program for all ages to promote good health and socialization.¹⁰³ traci ishigo shared “Radio Taiso Quarantine Edition” YouTube video series to acclimate fellows into our retreats.¹⁰⁴ Devon Matsumoto remembered how he grew up with the morning practice at the Japanese American cultural school he attended in the summer and described how the few minutes of body movement energized him

¹⁰⁰ “6-month fellowship program schematic – VL SAF 2021,” Google Spreadsheet created by VL team, October 2020.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² “The Japanese Morning Exercise Routine - Rajio-Taiso,” *Japan Kuru*, March 29th, 2020 <https://www.japankuru.com/en/culture/e2263.html> .

¹⁰³ “Rajio Taiso,” JACCC, 2021, <https://www.jaccc.org/rajio-taiso> .

¹⁰⁴ JasonEngTV, “Radio Taiso Quarantine Edition,” March 24th, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgsh5vP54BM&t=1s> .

and got his blood flowing before sitting on Zoom for many hours.¹⁰⁵ Thus, the VL team reintroduced body movement activities that were familiar to some of the Japanese American members of the cohort and that could be done over Zoom altogether. These body movements were another creative function to combat overuse of computer screentime and “Zoom fatigue.”

Eo Hanabusa reflected that these various body movement activities enabled them to tap into their body and to ask themselves how they felt and what parts of their body might need to move around. Eo, who had labeled himself as someone who “doesn’t move for the fun of moving,” was able to simultaneously process and release emotions through body movement.¹⁰⁶ They discovered a connection between themselves and their body, finding joy in the process and a feeling that these online SAF retreats could be safe spaces to express themselves. Eo’s reflection illustrates the importance of creative tools for solidarity: these body movement activities cultivated a sense of courage to take risks, as well as safety and trust by the group of fellows and VL leadership that they could, in fact, express themselves together.

While some participants were able to find new mindfulness through breathwork practices in the SAF retreats, one also expressed ambivalence about the perhaps appropriative nature of mindfulness practices.¹⁰⁷ As mentioned in the introduction, VL facilitators often began retreats with a few minutes of guided breathing, counting to the number five when inhaling and counting down to one when exhaling. They devoted about five to seven minutes to mindfulness to scan the body for any stress, using breathwork to soothe and slow down the nervous system.¹⁰⁸ In response to breathwork activities that were presented in the opening portions of retreats, Devon said, “I’m going to be honest. I’m not really one for mindfulness practice, coming from this

¹⁰⁵ Devon Matsumoto (SAF alumni), interview by author (on Zoom), November 2nd, 2021

¹⁰⁶ Eo Hanabusa interview by author.

¹⁰⁷ See my definitions of breathwork and mindfulness in the introduction.

¹⁰⁸ “6-month fellowship program schematic – VL SAF 2021.”

Buddhist sort of lens of how mindfulness has been appropriated by capitalism and Western cultures.”¹⁰⁹ He drew attention to the awkwardness and discomfort that practicing Buddhists might experience in inter-spiritual spaces, even when surrounded by other Buddhists, and criticized the appropriation of Asian spiritual practices in the United States. Future conversations with members of the VL network may be needed to review how mindfulness practice is used. While this practice can be beneficial to grounding online community spaces, it is important to consider how practicing Buddhists view contemporary iterations of these practices.

In addition to body movement expression, the SAF program promoted many forms of creative expression when t.k.k. led fellows to pursue collective poetry and body movement expression through the latter half of the 2021 SAF program. During a retreat in March 2021, musician and storyteller Asiyah Ayubbi, who identifies as queer, Muslim, Black, and Nikkei spoke on her experiences with mental health and wellness, and music as a vehicle to extend the stories of her ancestors. Asiyah performed Sufi drumming and singing on Zoom in front of the 2021 cohort and addressed questions pertaining to these topics. Following Asiyah’s storytelling session, t.k.k. invited fellows to reflect on the previous portion of the retreat and to show a gesture about how they felt or to state a place in the body where they hold trauma/tension.¹¹⁰ Asiyah’s participation in the SAF program represents the ways they navigate their various intersectional identities and how they are able to create art and music as a means to combat the legacies of state violence on an individual who is Muslim, Black, and Japanese American. This impactful moment during the SAF program enabled participants to envision how they could use Zoom as a space to pursue collaborative creative performance. Asiyah’s music performance and

¹⁰⁹ Devon Matsumoto interview by author.

¹¹⁰ “6-month fellowship program schematic – VL SAF 2021”

storytelling is an example of healing justice frameworks that allow for creative expression to release psychosomatic tensions and be appreciated in community.

Asiyah Ayubbi's workshop enabled the 2021 fellows to envision our own form of collaborative performance that included our family and personal histories of oppression, while also collaborating in joyous creative expression. During the same retreat in March, t.k.k. facilitated a creative-expression activity in which fellows collaborated on the following prompts, selecting these phrases as beginnings to longer poetry stanzas: "1) The depth of my roots..., 2) My dreams speak..., 3) My dreams dance ..., 4) My dreams tell the future..., 5) My voice is my music..." In my small group, I wrote, "The depth of my roots spreads across the Pacific / Generations of farmers, gardeners, and home cooks" to acknowledge the lineages of Japanese (American) agricultural and domestic labor that came before me.¹¹¹ In her process, Kelsey was fond of the collective poetry activity as an opportunity to experiment with prompts about family and identity, and to collaborate with her small-group members about their own interpretation of these ideas with complementary hand and arm gestures. Together, Kelsey's group transformed their "chaotic" stanzas by "making things slow" and "presentable," and they were able to perform their collective poem live and on Zoom for the 6th Annual Bridging Communities Iftar gathering.¹¹² A significant collaborative performance towards the end of the 2021 program, the SAF fellows' live poetry performance exemplifies how collaborative arts are a means for youth to express and find catharsis in oftentimes suppressed emotions. I hope that by identifying the SAF program's healing justice techniques through breathwork, grounding exercises, body movement, and creative expression, I have made clear how the program prioritizes the wellbeing

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Kelsey Ichikawa interview by author.

of Muslim American and Japanese American youth in order for them to experience some form of transformation in their personal healing journeys.

As fellows participated in the 2021 SAF program online, community-building in their private living spaces or their family home transformed familial relationships. Eo and their mother, a first-generation Japanese American, often shared brief conversations in passing after Eo had come out of their room in their family's home after the SAF session had ended; Eo's mother asked what kinds of books they were reading, what types of activities they had done during the retreat, and even remembered me from the program after Eo had mentioned they were doing an interview for my project. Eo shared details with their family over the course of the program, such as the fact that Japanese Americans were among the first ethnic communities to display public local support for Muslim Americans after 9/11. Eo "could just see the wheels turning in [their mother's] head," her curiosity growing about how VL could tend to issues of community activism online.¹¹³ In Eo's case, community-building while living with immediate family members allowed for an immediate debriefing or translation of what had occurred when they reentered familial spaces. In other words, participating in the virtual SAF program meant that some fellows inherently invited family members, loved ones, and housemates into the program.

This invitation had lasting effects in breaking previous intergenerational disconnection and silence. Eo explained that there were large, intentional silences in their mixed-generation Japanese (American) family that stigmatized political activism. Ultimately, Eo felt that they were "planting the seeds in a way... that with every little conversation, some watering [was] being done."¹¹⁴ Thus, the 2021 SAF online program not only allowed for the sharing of stories of

¹¹³ Eo Hanabusa interview by author.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

survival and resistance among its Muslim American and Japanese American participants, but it also included conversations between those participants and their family members and loved ones. Addressing the closed dialogue and judgment among Japanese American family members that Kathy Masaoka described as a form of intergenerational trauma, the SAF program offered tools for Eo and other Japanese Americans to broach sensitive, nerve-wracking familial norms. In this way, the effects of community-building rippled into the personal lives of the SAF fellows, breaking cultural silences and fostering new understandings across generations.

Throughout my interviewees' reflections, it became apparent that the SAF program was an influential youth development opportunity rooted in arts and healing justice. Specifically, the SAF program filled an institutionalized gap in the promises of "community-engaged" paid work by neoliberal universities and colleges. During the COVID-19 pandemic in her family home, Nimrah Aslam looked forward to the Saturday retreats during a time when her family relations were under stress, describing how she logged onto Zoom on Saturdays and "could almost pretend like everything was normal." Previously, her involvement in an ethnic studies program at college transformed her enjoyment of learning and shaped her queer, feminist, and progressive ideologies. Nimrah also became involved on campus in the Muslim Students Association and as the secretary for inclusivity and diversity for student government. After graduation, Nimrah was excited to pursue non-profit work or social work in family and marriage therapy, but, ultimately, the limited availability of jobs, the cost of future training in therapy professions, and the low pay of the non-profit industrial complex made Nimrah feel "hopeless" about the future.¹¹⁵ Nimrah described not only a feeling of refuge and belonging within the SAF program, which was

¹¹⁵ Nimrah Aslam interview by author.

coupled with her post-graduate nostalgia for previous political and spiritual activism on campus, but also an underlying realization that Nimrah had not found a post-graduate political home.

In fact, this sense of worry and hopelessness in Nimrah's reflection corresponds to how non-profits, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the "community-engaged internship" are "enmeshed in the powers of neoliberal capital and state governance" and inaccurately substitute ethnic studies and gender and sexuality studies curricula as "community."¹¹⁶

Therefore, it is understandable how Nimrah and fellow passionate students of color seek non-profits as a space to address particular community needs and concerns – oftentimes in ethnic siloes. But, inherently, these ideas of "service" and "helping one's community" under neoliberalism mean that many non-profits target and train BIPOC individuals to "transform their conduct as well as sensibilities so that they manage themselves as proper (civil, sexual, and laboring) subjects" and to focus their efforts into a singular cause by ethnicity or spiritual identity, for example.¹¹⁷

Herein lies an on-going crisis about the lack of professional spaces for queer (and) BIPOC communities to apply our desires, skillsets, and intersectional lived experiences to serve the multidimensions of "a community" because, systemically, this means suppressing our progressive ideals. As I explain in the next chapter, unfortunately, I do not see an immediate and complete solution for these lapses. These college students and young professionals, still passionate and curious about how to seek non-profit application, viewed the SAF program as a starting point for finding paid work in these institutions. The SAF does not directly function to guarantee employment after participants' completion of the program, but rather is a site for some

¹¹⁶ Nguyen and Kwan, "Nonprofits, NGOS, and 'Community Engagement'"

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

participants to seek job resources and contemplate future work in non-profit services. In the case that future SAF participants or SAF alumni seek further recommendations about the landscapes of non-profit work, VL leadership could offer workshops in future SAF retreats on the best practices for maintaining one's politics and passions within the non-profit industrial complex.

Noor Ahmed's experience provides an example of how SAF participants sought to balance their rigorous academic and professional aspirations with the core values of VL's organizational model. During her participation in the SAF program, Noor Ahmed, introduced in the previous chapter, studied for the MCAT ahead of applying to medical school programs. She said that the SAF retreats were "fun" and a "relief" after taking eight-hour exams the day before or earlier in the week. They became a consistent place for Noor to surround herself with supportive people who shared similar political values.¹¹⁸ Wearing multiple identity hats as she aspires to become a doctor, Noor rooted her politics in community spaces such as the SAF program, and, by extension, VL, to recharge and to exercise creativity with community. Based in Northern California, Noor would not have been able to participate in the 2021 program if it were not for the Zoom online capabilities and her sense of flexibility in balancing her various commitments. Therefore, for youth of color, the SAF program has offered an outlet to slow down, pause, and to be in community – mechanisms of care that may combat "burnout" and hyper-productivity learned in higher education and other fast-paced institutional spaces.

Amid the anxieties and uncertainties that were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, fellows felt grateful for the virtual SAF program that could accommodate the various political, educational, occupational, and other desires of the cohort. Noor Al Riyami, a transnational Omani Egyptian American, stated:

¹¹⁸ Noor Ahmed (SAF alumni), interview by author (on UCLA campus), September 9th, 2021.

“I felt like I was held. [The SAF program] was a space that's curated for [me]. Navigating this world, I've felt secondary, just trying to survive. But then [I] just log[ged] into that screen and [feeling like] is this really meant for me? ... It felt special. What did I do to deserve this? ... I was being valued for my love for once. With a lot of people.”¹¹⁹

Acknowledging that early adulthood can present precarity and anxiety for youth of color, the SAF program and the VL facilitators made fellows feel cared for; like the earlier Asian American movement organizations, they fostered a feeling of belonging that Karen Ishizuka defined as “a combined sense of solidarity and shared identity.”¹²⁰ The SAF program offered a window into what could be; rather than an escape from the surrounding world, it was a space in which to ideate, to embrace love and care together, and to create ease together amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

This chapter has examined the realities of committing to an online six-month community-building fellowship – one that asks for vulnerability, creative expression, and political engagement while navigating the fatigue of being on four-hour Zoom meetings and the pressures of job-searching under capitalism. Through breathwork and grounding, *rajo taiso*, body movement and musical performance, and collaborative poetry creation, the VL facilitation team, including *traci ishigo*, *tkk*, and *Asiya Ayubbi*, crafted effective techniques for care during a time when emotions were stressed and heightened. Crucial to ensuring a comfortable space for educational workshops, these techniques constitute a model for non-profit groups who are committed to healing justice as well as for ethnic studies programs that engage with histories of U.S. and imperial violences. Ultimately, the SAF program exemplifies the usefulness of

¹¹⁹ Noor Al Riyami interview by author.

¹²⁰ Ishizuka, 116

returning to “serve the people” logics by clarifying what “community-building” looks like when undertaken with horizontal models of grassroots organization and leaders who continuously offer methods of care and catharsis for program participants.

CHAPTER 4

Sustaining Connection: Fellows' Visions for the Future

After the Solidarity Arts Program

The 2021 Solidarity Arts Program ended on June 26th, 2021 with a closing retreat facilitated by the cohort of fellows. Activities included a grounding and overview of the day, breathwork, a read aloud of adrienne maree brown's *Emergent Strategy*, a writing reflection exercise, an arts-based expression activity inspired by the animated movie *Inside Out*, a discussion on the theme of solidarity, and a closing sutra, or chant, led by a Buddhist fellow.¹²¹ These activities were fully planned by the group of fellows, who harnessed the lessons from the previous six months of online gatherings and the tools provided by the Vigilant Love leadership team of facilitators. At the beginning of July, traci ishigo sent out an email to schedule SAF closing interviews with the cohort members before the VL team took a two-week summer hiatus after the SAF program. The closing interviews explored our personal experiences in the program, what fellows learned, what we hoped for the growing SAF alumni network, how the SAF program influenced fellows' work and school-related endeavors, and how we wanted to commit further to VL.¹²² The closing retreat and closing interviews marked the end of the 2021 SAF program and they carved out room for fellows to think about how meaningful the experience was. Although the group did not have a chance to meet in-person during the six-month duration of the program, we shared the hope that one day we might be able to continue our discussions in-person.

¹²¹ 2021 Solidarity Arts Fellows, "VL SAF 2021 Closing Retreat Schedule/Logistics," June 17th, 2021, Google Sheet distributed to SAF cohort by email.

¹²² traci ishigo, "(Schedule asap!) SAF Closing Interviews," email communication to SAF fellows, July 6th, 2021.

In fall 2021, my interviews with selected SAF cohort members prompted alumni to continue thinking about how the program affected their other commitments and whether they wanted to continue working with VL. At the same time, the fellows recognized the ways that the idea of connectivity was, and still is, non-linear; in other words, during the late fall of 2021, the global pandemic continued to place restrictions on the ways fellows could meet in-person, which would have been the ideal culmination of the program and its lessons. In this chapter, I examine the effects of six months of virtual community-building, specifically the ways that the SAF program promoted hope for eventual in-person reunion among the fellows. I begin by framing the limitations of Zoom, mentioned in the previous chapter, which deeply influenced the desire for eventual in-person meetings. I detail the fellows' visions and ideas for in-person reunion, from potluck gatherings to book clubs, and I also highlight their impressions of social media as a tool for online connectivity in lieu of meeting in person. And, lastly, I examine a key leadership development trait, a facilitation style inspired by Vigilant Love staff, that was practiced by the SAF alumni who stayed around to work through the next year of programs and activities.

Limitations of Zoom as a Tool for Community Building

While VL facilitators created possibilities for learning and connection on Zoom, as discussed in the previous chapter, SAF participants still faced “Zoom fatigue.” Devon Matsumoto was in graduate school during his participation in the program and recalled how his university's transition to virtual learning, which included several Zoom obligations during weekday evenings, left him drained and distracted during further SAF weekend Zoom commitments. To deepen interpersonal connection, Devon recommended in his interview the use of more “breakout sessions” during SAF retreats to enable fellows to engage directly one-on-

one.¹²³ Thus, students' difficulties in remaining focused for virtual learning at their respective schools as well as during weekend SAF retreats should be a significant consideration for future iterations of the SAF program.

After half a year of virtual meetings, some fellows left the SAF program with a sense of selective connection with one another. Noor Ahmed, from Sunnyvale, California, believed that, for some participants, the fellowship was a means to engage in the retreats and bring back knowledge and skills to their respective communities, to take on greater leadership and activist roles. Noor expressed that, on an individual level, her connections with some fellows were stronger than with others, perhaps recognizing the difficulties during the pandemic for fellows to place full priority on relationship-building online.¹²⁴ Here, Noor provides a reminder that to build relationships there must be a certain level of investment and voluntarism that extends beyond what is shared during the SAF retreats; this entails individuals reaching out through social media, text, and/or email during breaks or after the retreats. Forging and sustaining even a few connections that lasted beyond the program were more than many fellows had when they entered the program.

Similarly, while Zoom and other digital technologies proved useful as sources for connectivity amidst the realities of the COVID-19 pandemics, fellows have provided reminders of the ways in which technology can feel confusing and overwhelming and can hamper getting acquainted with a group of people. Kelsey Ichikawa recalled that when the SAF fellowship began, one fellow recommended using Discord, an instant messaging application with organized "channels" (similar to Slack), to continue offline conversations in the retreats. Another fellow started a WhatsApp conversation, as well. As someone who was unfamiliar with and did not

¹²³ Devon Matsumoto interview by author.

¹²⁴ Noor Ahmed interview by author.

typically use either application, Kelsey described finding these initial attempts difficult to navigate; this reaction may have been widespread because after the initial creation of those chats there was little activity throughout the ensuing months.¹²⁵ Kelsey also pointed to an issue Vigilant Love is still navigating: which instant messenger application is the most efficient and most popular among the organization's constituents? Is it Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Discord, or Slack? Or is email communication sufficient? For Vigilant Love, as well as other community-based organizations, this issue of a universal platform is important should Vigilant Love choose to designate a singular social media app for its general communication. Yet, social media alone cannot fully meet the needs of Vigilant Love's missions for deep interconnected community-building, and, thus, to push past feelings of social isolation it is still important for fellows to reach out individually through phone call, text, or Instagram direct message to personalize these connections.

Building Relationships In-Person

Two alumni of the previous 2020 SAF program, which halted in-person gathering in March 2020, discussed the impacts of the first few months of their in-person retreats. Miyako Noguchi, a mixed-race yonsei and gosei living on Tongva land (Los Angeles), described the first opening two-day retreat in January 2020 when fellows slept overnight at a rented property. Miyako was anxious about meeting people for the first time but grew warmer and friendlier when fellows had downtime to introduce themselves, bond over shared astrological signs, and spend time doing homework together.¹²⁶ This first retreat set the foundation for the 2020 program because even the smallest in-person interactions allowed for the development of natural bonds and friendship among new acquaintances. In Miyako's 2020 SAF cohort, Yuki Torrey, a

¹²⁵ Kelsey Ichikawa interview by author.

¹²⁶ Miyako Noguchi (SAF alumni), interview by author (in apartment dining room), September 19th, 2021.

mixed-race Japanese American, affirms that the first few in-person retreats cemented trust and a sense of the SAF program as a “safe space” to dive into heavier and vulnerable topics.¹²⁷

Especially as pandemic lock-down orders began in March 2020, in-person connection provided some security and routine even if there was uncertainty that the 2020 cohort would be able to meet again together offline.

To move beyond the limitations of virtual connection, 2021 SAF fellows envisioned pragmatic and creative means of connectivity, both in-person and virtual, depending on how the COVID-19 pandemic panned out. Noor Ahmed, who was inspired to apply to the SAF program by John Hamamura’s novel *Color of the Sea*, recommended casual options for continued gathering. Noor was excited by the idea of an alumni book club, in which fellows could return to books mentioned throughout the program and to sit with them more slowly for their lessons to resonate more meaningfully. She also recommended casual festivities, such as potlucks, just to “hang out and share what we’re going through in life.”¹²⁸ Noor’s ideas offered hopeful steps to create further opportunities to get to know the cohort after the six-month program. Many of her ideas stemmed from the overall political intentions expressed by SAF participants during the program, such as mutual learning between inter-spiritual communities of color, and they also highlighted the desire for low-stakes, casual gatherings. In other words, Noor’s visions for connectivity reveal the need for re-introduction between fellows outside the virtual and facilitated nature of the program, and for reunions the fellows would plan on their own.

In addition, Kelsey Ichikawa reflected that the bi-monthly Saturday retreats served as “really nice and special” opportunities for fellows to process and share respective experiences under white supremacy and state surveillance through creative expression activities. Kelsey also

¹²⁷ Yuki Torrey (SAF alumni), interview by author (on UCLA campus), November 17th, 2021.

¹²⁸ Noor Ahmed interview by author.

commented on how “highly facilitated” these retreat activities were, crediting the VL leadership team with being able to navigate personal and serious topics online with a sense of embracing care.¹²⁹ In her view, the VL team’s warm, empathetic facilitation style was successful because, in spearheading the closing retreat agenda, fellows modeled the types of activities and facilitation styles of our VL mentors. Outside the facilitated environment of the SAF retreats, Kelsey wished for ease and low pressure in contacting members of our cohort through casual, informal conversations – for example, to send a “text or a meme out of nowhere.”¹³⁰

In their reflections on the SAF program, Noor and Kelsey touched upon two important lessons: Noor wished for casual settings, both virtual and in-person, for fellows to get to know each other again or in new ways. Kelsey wished for connectivity among the fellows that did not rely on the VL leadership team’s well-honed facilitation skills. Both Noor and Kelsey recognized that initiating these new methods of connectivity would require effort on the part of individuals or small groups.

It may seem obvious that these takeaways are necessary to continue participants’ investment in and commitment to each other, but I must remind my audience that in the confines of online community-building, the 2021 SAF cohort members did not experience in-person micro-interactions with each other during the bi-monthly retreats. We did not ever gather in a physical community space where we could engage in brief, casual conversations before the retreat began. We did not have shared in-person breaks for lunch or decompression in the middle of the retreats. And, we did not have the opportunity to extend these retreat days by getting dinner together afterwards in Little Tokyo. Therefore, Noor’s and Kelsey’s hopes for

¹²⁹ Kelsey Ichikawa interview by author.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

reintroduction and reunion highlight their excitement at finally being able to gather in-person and share physical space together.

Implementing SAF Lessons

While SAF alumni like Noor and Kelsey stated their commitment to further engagement with Vigilant Love’s programs or a reunion of our online cohort, other alumni were motivated by their time in the program to continue inter-spiritual and community-based projects that they had already been involved with. After concluding the 2021 SAF program, Devon Matsumoto, who lives in the San Jose area, has worked actively with a progressive Japanese American organization called Nikkei Resisters San Jose, and he was invited to speak as a Japanese American Buddhist on a panel about the legacies of 9/11 and strategic state surveillance of communities. In his short presentation, Devon recognized Vigilant Love’s organizing work in Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) and encouraged his audience to join direct actions to respond to these forms of policing.¹³¹ An active member of the San Jose Japanese American organizing community, Devon expressed his commitment to the spiritual and political institutions close to home with which he was already engaged. After completing the 2021 SAF program, Uzzy Alloo applied to the Council of American Islamic Relations California (CAIR-CA) as a Program Coordinator to work directly with Muslim youth towards empowerment and political organizing. Uzzy also expressed interest in furthering his academic journey by applying to a social work graduate program that focuses on youth mentorship.¹³² As discussed in the previous chapter, Uzzy’s commitment to Vigilant Love and CAIR was inspired by the network of “femtors” – such as Zahra Billoo, traci ishigo, and Sahar Pirzada – who have gone through academic training and then shaped unique careers working with youth. Despite their geographic

¹³¹ Devon Matsumoto interview by author.

¹³² Uzzy Alloo interview by author.

distance from the majority of Vigilant Love's base in Southern California, Devon and Uzzy have continued the SAF program's lessons about youth leadership to deepen their respective commitments to Japanese American and Muslim American political organizations in the San Francisco Bay area.

Building on the foundation of the SAF program, the fellows in the Bay area organized their own in-person gathering when COVID-19 restrictions became less stringent. In early fall 2021 before I began conducting my interviews, a group of fellows visited the UC Berkeley campus for the Berkeley South Asian Radical History Walking Tour, a two-mile tour curated by community historians Barnali Ghosh and Anirvan Chatterjee on the 120 years of Desi history on the streets of Berkeley. The group visited original sites and heard stories of four generations of immigrant freedom fighters and feminists.¹³³ In reflecting on participation in the walking tour, Nimrah Aslam felt that she was connecting with old friends for the first time and learned about new aspects of the group, such as their individual height and other characteristics that were not perceptible on Zoom. Nimrah said that, because she sometimes becomes nervous in unfamiliar groups and had not branched out to create new social circles since college (because of the pandemic), she was proud of herself for connecting in-person with the SAF cohort to share meaningful conversation.¹³⁴ It is inspiring that this group of Bay area SAF alumni initiated an in-person activity to learn about radical South Asian histories in Berkeley, a fitting topic for the SAF program. Gathering for this kind of group activity may have lessened the anxieties that can surface when meeting people in-person for the first time. Overall, the SAF reunion in Berkeley for the South Asian Radical History Walking Tour is an example of a casual, low-stakes, yet

¹³³ "South Asian Radical History Walking Tour," 2022, <https://www.berkeleysouthasian.org> .

¹³⁴ Nimrah Aslam interview by author.

interactive and thought-provoking activity that both continued the lessons that the 2021 SAF cohort had learned online and re-familiarized these individuals with each other.

In this chapter, I have described the lasting effects of online community-building, which left a dual sense of hope and confusion about the future, after the 2021 SAF program. The Zoom format limited the representation of full selves, in both individuals' performance when they "attended" Saturday retreats and in their reception of others who appeared in small boxes on their computer screens. As earlier alumni Miyako and Yuki have stated, it was essential for their cohort to have interacted together in-person before the COVID-19 pandemic to continue developing relationships with trust and certainty. Thus, as we concluded our program, it was understandable that participants envisioned small, practical steps to building relationships afterwards. Interviewees also offered examples of how the leadership-development lessons from the program have cemented local engagement with community organizations in our respective cities. In addition, the few opportunities that fellows have had to meet in-person after the program, such as through the South Asian Radical History Walking Tour, constitute vital means to affirm the relationships started within the program. These efforts reveal the ways that the 2021 cohort have stayed connected to the Vigilant Love network. As the pandemic became less severe for alumni in some geographical communities, they have begun to experiment with exciting hybrid ways of in-person and virtual community-building.

CONCLUSION

In this project, by focusing on the Solidarity Arts Fellowship, I have attempted to examine Vigilant Love as part of the legacy of Japanese American and Muslim American community leaders who recognized that cross-community relationships could be a means to navigating systemic Islamophobia and surveillance. In the current climate of non-profit industrial work, which includes under-resourced working conditions, lack of succession planning and mentorship, labor exploitation and “burn out,” VL co-founders harnessed “serve the people” and “community care” logics from “the long sixties” to envision a political space that could address the needs of seemingly disparate communities. By examining the role of Asian American “femtors” in VL, I hope to make clear the efforts by women, femme, and queer people of color over the past five decades to envision the needs of our people and to create sustainable grassroots social services programs that may serve us, despite conservative recent threats to pull funding for social services and ethnic studies. The relationship-building efforts by Kathy Masaoka and the new wave of “femtors” in the Los Angeles organizing space provide models of long-term investment in this difficult political work. VL and other progressive interracial grassroots community organizers continue to push stagnant non-profit institutions to develop timely responses not only to cycles of state violence but also to the needs of the next generation of youth artist-activists.

As detailed by my interview participants, VL’s SAF program provides a model of slower, intentional, and sustainable relationship-building needed to invest in long-term organizing work, given the neoliberal nature of longstanding Asian American and Japanese American non-profit and grassroots social-justice organizations. Amidst multiple, colliding crises of healthcare and white nationalism during the 2020-21 year, the SAF program cultivated a community of care and

wellness through its facilitated creative activities. In a time of catastrophic climate change and racial conflict, the SAF program serves as a creative model for how grassroots Asian American and BIPOC organizations can provide healing-justice frameworks for youth development.

Throughout this project, I have tried to convey the necessity of adaptability by the VL team to continue providing programming and political action against Islamophobia and state surveillance in a virtual context; ultimately, their care for the seventeen 2021 Solidarity Arts Fellows proved integral to our commitment to the program. Although the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has made in-person protest hazardous, I recognize the importance of direct action as a tool to link activist groups and I hope that the VL team may be able to introduce direct-action workshops in the 2023 SAF program. Because my second chapter reveals the deep need for community during times of crisis, as applicants expressed motivations beyond the written expectations of the SAF program's application goals, a hybrid model for next year's SAF cohort would enable all fellows to participate in arts and healing from the comfort of their own homes while also attending safe in-person gatherings to create connections through deep conversations. Lastly, while technology is often seen as a solution for accessibility, a needs-assessment survey of the 58 SAF alumni may reveal the best ways to reduce Zoom fatigue, to locate a centralized digital space, and to designate a regular casual online (or in-person) meeting space between and after SAF retreats.

As I finished conducting my oral-history interviews, an exciting development occurred for SAF alumni. A small group of SAF alumni and Traci Ishigo organized an in-person "re-gathering" in Griffith Park on November 6th, 2021, which included a potluck and arts-based activities. Approximately 20 people attended, comprising VL leadership and SAF alumni from the three previous cohort years. Mindful communication about COVID-19 precautions helped

ease tensions around gathering during the ongoing pandemic. This event was the first time that members of the 2021 SAF cohort met with each other in-person in Los Angeles, perhaps motivated by the group of Northern California alumni who had participated in the Radical South Asian History Walking Tour. The Los Angeles gathering was a chance for alumni across cohorts to reconnect after time apart (See photo below).



A group of masked Japanese American and Muslim American individuals gather at Griffith Park, with hands forming interlocking hearts, on November 6, 2021.

With hands forming interlocking chains of hearts – and while still masking up during the pandemic to stay safe – the VL network remains hopeful and determined to provide inviting spaces of re-connection for the growing SAF alumni base. Just as community leaders initiated “Break the Fast” iftars and casual engagement opportunities in previous decades, there is still a need to build community across ethnic and religious lines, especially during times of global capitalism and healthcare pandemic. To keep Asian American and Japanese American legacy institutions relevant and viable, it is our duty to reconsider what “solidarity” and “community” really mean within operations and programs. The early goals of NCR and the SAF program of

Vigilant Love show the ways that intentional relationship-building and trust form the core of sustained anti-racist and anti-oppression work.

APPENDIX

1. VL SAF 2021 application flyer, October 12th, 2020
2. About the Activist Postcard: Kathy Masaoka
3. About the Activist Postcard: Sahar Pirzada
4. The 2021 SAF Cohort at Manzanar Photoshop Project
5. 2021 SAF Program Retreat Schedule
6. Interview question guide for SAF alumni
7. Interview question guide for VL organizers

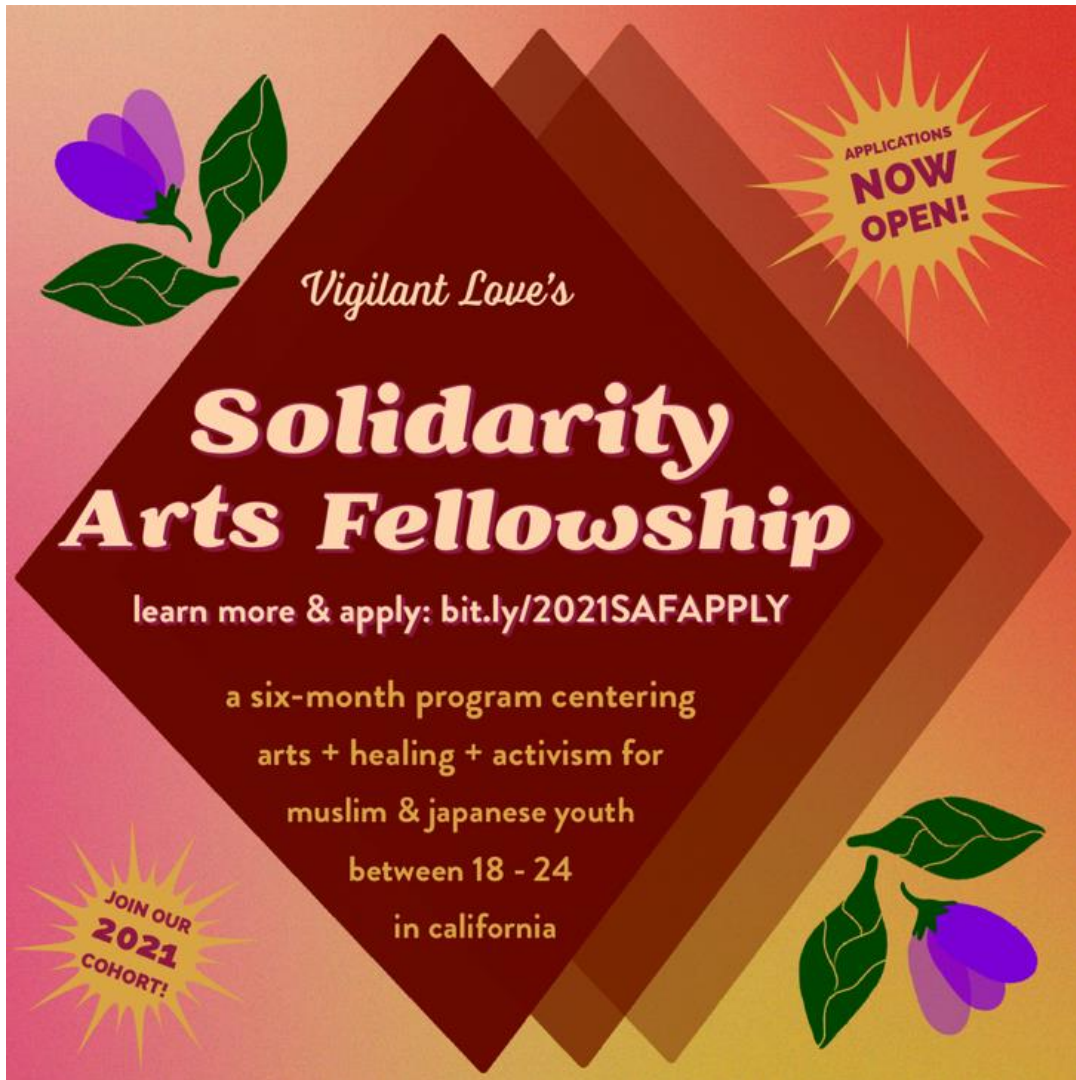


Figure: VL's "Join our 2021 cohort" call for applications graphic that reads, "Solidarity Arts Fellowship: a six-month program centering arts + healing + activism for muslim and japanese youth between 18-24 in california."

About the Activist Postcard: Kathy Masaoka



**KATHY NISHIMOTO
MASAOKA**

Japanese American Activist

Nikkei Progressives, Nikkei for Civil Rights and
Redress, Vigilant Love Steering Committee

When asked about what relationship-building entails, Kathy says, "It is deep rooted. It is about building and interlinking those roots. So that we build together, and no matter what happens, the roots are really strong and they are the foundation.."

Image from DiscoverNikkei.org. Excerpt from oral history interview, Nov. 6, 2021.

About the Activist Postcard: Sahar Pirzada



SAHAR PIRZADA

**Pakistani-American Muslim
Organizer and Educator**

HEART, Vigilant Love Steering Committee

Youth leadership development through the SAF program is "so important to build that capacity, that leadership of future generations who have a connection to the work and would want to come back, and dedicate some of their time to participating in the organization. They can give back in whatever way, through a professional lens on staff, as volunteers, or on the steering committee."

Image credit: Melly Lee/Kore Asian Media; Excerpt from oral history interview, Nov. 19, 2021.

The 2021 SAF Cohort at Manzanar Photoshop Project



24 Muslim American and Japanese American individuals are collaged in front of the Manzanar Incarceration Center's ireitō monument before the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

For the purposes of this thesis, I created this Photoshop collage of all 2021 SAF cohort member at Manzanar Incarceration Center because we were not able to make a pilgrimage there in-person. As a site of history, trauma, and reckoning, Manzanar has become a place for communities to navigate U.S. systems of oppression together. SAF retreats allow for cross-community storytelling and listening to Sage Romero, a hoop dancer and member of the Tovowahamatu Numu (Big Pine Paiute) and Tuah-Tahi (Taos Pueblo) Tribes. I hope this collage invokes the spirit of gathering, learning, and respect as if we were able to go to Manzanar in-person.

2021 SAF Program Retreat Schedule

January 16th and 17th: First Weekend Retreat:

Day One:

1. Welcome from the VL Staff and Intro to VL
2. Centering and Rajio Taiso
3. Story of your name
4. Writing activity & movement: who made it possible for you to be here today?
5. Storytelling with Brother Shakeel and Kathy Masaoka

Day Two:

6. Object of resilience creative practice and small groups
7. #ServicesNotSurveillance Workshop by Yazan
8. Closing writing activity (letter to my grandfather)

February 13th:

1. Critical Anti-Islamophobia workshop with Magari Hill from Muslim ARC [Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative](#)
2. Muslim V-Day card making workshop with [Taz Ahmed](#)

February 20th: Day of Remembrance

1. Grounding w/ Sahar
2. Storytelling with former incarcerated individuals and elder activists, Nancy Oda and Kanji Sahara of the [Tuna Canyon Detention Station Coalition](#)
3. Teach in on white supremacy (with a deeper dive on WWII and post war period) and the need for solidarity w/ [Dr. JP Contreras-DeGuzman](#)
4. Letter writing to someone who you are remembering / who is no longer here
5. Small group reflections
6. Creative processing w/ artist activists, Zen Sekizawa & Mario Correa of [Mano-Ya](#) & [J-Town Action and Solidarity](#)

March 13th:

1. Storytelling with Asiyah Ayubbi
2. Movement, drum, and gestures
3. Small group and large group reflections
4. Creative reflection and group shares
5. Group writing processes by tkk

March 16th (non-retreat):

- We are mourning and holding those who have lost their lives to anti-Asian violence, misogyny, and white supremacy – in Georgia on March 16th, and beyond.

March 26th: Sahar’s khutbah this Friday, March 26th at 1 pm & our SAF reflection space at 7:30 pm the same day.

1. Women’s Mosque – Sahar’s Khutbah
2. Evening Grounding w/ traci
3. Spiritual Visioning exercise
4. Small Group Breakouts
5. Closing Reflections w/ Mehak

April 17th: diving back into our creative processes and getting ready for the Bridging Communities Iftar. TKK will be leading us through, and coaching everyone along

April 24th: Manzanar Pilgrimage Retreat this Saturday, April 24th – starting at 11:00 am

1. VL Framing for the Manzanar pilgrimage
 - a. Original poetry by our very own, traci kato-kiriyama
 - b. “Pilgrimage” short documentary by Tad Nakamura
2. Manzanar pilgrimage (virtual program)
3. Communal reflections & storytelling
4. Presentation & talk w/ Rev. Duncan Ryūken Williams + Q&A
5. Learn about the experiences of Japanese American Buddhists with profiling, surveillance, and incarceration in camp

6. Hear stories of how faith & Dharma supported JA Buddhists facing repression and discrimination
7. Reflections on our Interconnections & Joint Struggle

Thursday, April 22nd: Bridging Communities Iftar Rehearsal

Thursday, April 29th: Bridging Communities Iftar

May 22nd: reflecting further on settler-colonialism and arts-based resistance with Paiute indigenous hoop dancer & cultural leader, [Sage Romero](#)

1. Workshop with Paiute artist & leader, Sage Romero
2. BC Iftar & arts activism reflections
3. Closing retreat planning

June 4th and 11th: clay hand building workshops with the Armory Center of the Arts, and our amazing artists/ facilitators / ceramicists, [Julieta Reynoso](#) and [Joe Galarza](#)

June 26th: Closing Retreat, led by us fellows

1. Grounding & Overview of Agenda
2. Breathwork & Read-Aloud
3. Writing Reflection Exercise
4. [Inside Out Share Out \(Visual Arts Expression\)](#)
5. Stretching
6. Solidarity Discussion
7. VL Staff Activity
8. Closing: Sutra Share/Chant

Sample Interview Guide for SAF Alumni

[Introduction]

Opening Script

Thank you for sharing your time with me in this interview. My name is Joseph Tsuboi, and I am a graduate student in UCLA's Asian American Studies Department. I am conducting interviews with Japanese American and Muslim American individuals who recently participated in the Solidarity Arts Fellowship or are key leaders in the Vigilant Love community. I am looking to reflect upon our experiences in the program and how the fellowship offered a space for care and connection, even in the virtual limitations of gathering and despite the ongoing pandemics around us.

As we proceed with the interview, please feel free to stop me at any point if you have any questions or additional comments. You can also choose to not answer a question if you do not feel comfortable. Now, I am going to read over a guide to the interview procedure that comes from the formal oral consent form I sent you.

[First, we are required to have all interview participants understand the following:]

1. The purpose of this study is to assess the online adaptation of Solidarity Arts Fellowship and the ways it cultivated community and how it may have influenced your sense of identity and community.
2. In this interview, I will ask you questions about your experiences in the program and your understanding of Vigilant Love's work.
3. The interview should last around 1.5 hours.
4. If at any point during the interview you feel uncomfortable or you do not feel like answering a question, you are entitled to withdraw from the interview. You do not have to answer all the questions and may end the interview at any time without any consequences.
5. This research study is voluntary and the information that you provide will be confidential. Your name and experiences will be used in my written report, unless you would like me to use a pseudonym. Interview data (audio and visual) will be kept in encrypted, password protected files only accessible to the research.

This is the oral consent form for the interview process that I have sent you. You can take a few minutes to review it before deciding to participate. Please let me know if you would like to continue and if you'd like me to use a pseudonym. If at any point you would like me to stop recording the interview, please let me know and I will do so.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

[After obtaining oral consent from the participant, begin recording.]

[Participant Guide]

Participant Introduction:

1. Can you share a bit about yourself? Please feel free to share any identities that you would like to uplift.
2. Where did you grow up? What was it like being Japanese American or Muslim American there?
 - a. Probe: Did your family maintain any ethnic cultural practices? (e.g. holidays, religion, food, etc.)
 - b. Probe: Did you have a strong sense of community? Were there any community leaders that inspired you?
3. Are you a college or graduate student? Where do/did you attend school? What studies most interest you / what is your major?
 - a. Probe: Did you have a sense of community there? What cultural or religious spaces supported your time?
4. Are you a recent graduate? What do you do for work?
Where are you based geographically now?

Before the Solidarity Arts Fellowship (SAF) Program:

1. How did you hear about the SAF program? Did you have any personal connections to the VL team before joining?

- a. Probe: What kinds of knowledge did you have about Vigilant Love before applying?
2. Why did you decide to apply to the 2021 program?
3. Have you been a part of similar organizations or fellowships that influenced your decision to apply?
4. Were you worried about the virtual nature of the program? If so, why did you still decide to apply?
 - a. Probe: How did you feel when hearing about the time commitments? Did they seem long and difficult to fit into your schedule?
 - b. Probe: Were you worried about the six-month, bi-monthly time commitment?
5. Did you think that the virtual nature of the program would allow for more inclusion of people across the state?

During the SAF Program:

1. What were your favorite moments of the program? Which specific activities were exciting, new, and special for you?
 - a. Probe: Were there any mindfulness activities that allowed you to stay engaged for the period of the retreats?
2. Were these activities supportive of your own work or extracurricular commitments beyond the Saturday retreats?
 - a. Probe: How did the activities, teach-ins, arts practices show up in other areas of your life?
3. How did you feel about spending (almost) every other Saturday online for over four hours?
 - a. Probe: Did you feel energized afterwards? Did you feel inclined to stay engaged for the next retreat?
 - b. For 2019 and 2020 alumni: How was your transition from in-person to online retreats?
4. How did you maintain energy to stay engaged? (How) did the VL team or our SAF cohort allow for space for breaks or rest?
 - a. Probe: How did the structure of the retreats provide a form of care, especially given the limitations of in-person organizing during the COVID-19 pandemic?

5. How could the program be strengthened or tailored to your energies?
6. What was it like to learn about other communities' histories in the program?
 - a. Probe: How did the SAF support your own learning of other communities' histories and experiences?
7. How was the SAF different from other similar community spaces that you are a part of?
 - a. Probe: Was SAF's model of community-building different? And, in what ways?

After the SAF Program:

1. What is next for you? Do you plan to stay connected to the program and/or VL? If so, in what ways?
 - a. Probe: How do you think we alumni of SAF should stay connected?
2. Do you have ideas for the next SAF program? How do you feel about it being virtual again or in-person (or a combination of both)?
 - a. Probe: How may we support future programs?
3. Do you have any people in mind to recommend for next year's program?
4. Are you excited about meeting our cohort in-person? How have you been able to utilize and build upon our meetings during the program?

Closing:

1. Overall, what were your key lessons from your SAF experiences? How has the SAF influenced/affected your thinking about further involvement in community organizing?
2. Are you holding any other thoughts after finishing this interview? Are there any stories you would like to add?
3. Do you have any questions or further comments for me?

Closing Script

Before we wrap up, I just want to ask: if there is one thing you want me to make sure I remember or take away from this interview, what would it be?

Thank you so much for taking time today to speak with me. If you have any additional questions, please feel free to contact me through email or phone. I will let you know if I believe we should have a follow-up interview after I transcribe this one.

I will also be sending you a thank you gift for your participation. Could you please let me know of your mailing address? Thank you!

[Turn off the recorder.]

Sample Interview Guide for VL Organizers/Leadership

[Introduction]

Opening Script

Thank you for sharing your time with me in this interview. My name is Joseph Tsuboi, and I am a graduate student in UCLA's Asian American Studies Department. I am conducting interviews with Japanese American and Muslim American individuals who recently participated in the Solidarity Arts Fellowship or are key leaders in the Vigilant Love community. I am looking to reflect upon our experiences in the program and how the fellowship offered a space for care and connection, even in the virtual limitations of gathering and despite the ongoing pandemics around us.

As we proceed with the interview, please feel free to stop me at any point if have any questions or additional comments. You can also choose to not answer a question if you do not feel comfortable. Now, I am going to read over a guide to the interview procedure that comes from the formal oral consent form I sent you.

[First, we are required to have all interview participants understand the following:]

6. The purpose of this study is to assess the online adaptation of Solidarity Arts Fellowship and the ways it cultivated community and how it may have influenced your sense of identity and community.
7. In this interview, I will ask you questions about your experiences in the program and your understanding of Vigilant Love's work.
8. The interview should last around 1.5 hours.
9. If at any point during the interview you feel uncomfortable or you do not feel like answering a question, you are entitled to withdraw from the interview. You do not have to answer all the questions and may end the interview at any time without any consequences.

10. This research study is voluntary and the information that you provide will be confidential. Your name and experiences will be used in my written report, unless you would like me to use a pseudonym. Interview data (audio and visual) will be kept in encrypted, password protected files only accessible to the research.

This is the oral consent form for the interview process that I have sent you. You can take a few minutes to review it before deciding to participate. Please let me know if you would like to continue and if you'd like me to use a pseudonym. If at any point you would like me to stop recording the interview, please let me know and I will do so.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

[After obtaining oral consent from the participant, begin recording.]

[Participant Guide]

Participant Introduction:

5. Can you share a bit about yourself, including name and pronouns? Please feel free to share any other identities that you would like to uplift.
6. Where are you based geographically?
7. What is home(s) for you? What was it like being Japanese American or Muslim American there?
8. What does community look like and feel like to you?
9. Are there any recent or upcoming actions, movements, or organizations that you'd like to share with me now?

Creation of Vigilant Love:

6. Can you share a little bit of the histories that led to the creation of Vigilant Love?
 - a. Probe: What was the Bridging Communities program and how did it influence the creation of VL?
 - b. What is the evolution of the Bridging Communities workshop/program?
 - c. Probe: What were lessons learned at your time working with CAIR for the Bridging Communities Solidarity Arts Fellowship program?

7. Why was it important to create a space like Vigilant Love?
8. Were there fellow community members who inspired you to grow this network?
9. What were those early conversations like in creating Vigilant Love?
10. What were the values that folks talked about when creating programs and organizing models? What programs were important to offer?
11. How was Vigilant Love different than other spaces around?
12. Is VL a 501c3? What are the implications of being a non-profit?

Implementation of SAF Program:

1. What were those conversations like to develop, to offer, and to coordinate the SAF program?
2. What did/does outreach look like and who were the target audiences for participation?
3. What did you envision the program to look and feel like?
4. Who did you intend to invite as community leaders and activists?

COVID-19 and the SAF Program:

1. How did COVID-19 affect VL's organizing and programming?
2. How did you adjust to the virtual shifts during 2020?
3. For the 2021 program, were you concerned about the virtual nature of the program? If so, why did you still decide to apply?
4. How did the VL team and invited speakers adjust to the virtual nature?

During the SAF Program:

8. What are your favorite moments or activities of the programs?
9. What do you learn from the SAF program and its fellows?
10. Why is it important to continue offering this space?
11. How did you maintain energy to stay engaged during the virtual nature of organizing?

After the SAF Program:

5. How do you imagine the future of VL's organizing and programming?
6. As the network of SAF alumni grows and the depth and reach of VL's programming grows, what you are excited about? Do you hold any concerns?
7. Do you have ideas for the next SAF program? How do you feel about it being virtual again or in-person (or a combination of both)?
 - a. Probe: How may we support future programs?

Closing:

4. Are you holding any other thoughts after finishing this interview? Are there any stories you would like to add?
5. Do you have any questions or further comments for me?

Closing Script

Before we wrap up, I just want to ask: if there is one thing you want me to make sure I remember or take away from this interview, what would it be?

Thank you so much for taking time today to speak with me. If you have any additional questions, please feel free to contact me through email or phone. I will let you know if I believe we should have a follow-up interview after I transcribe this one.

I will also be sending you a thank you gift for your participation. Could you please let me know of your mailing address? Thank you!

[Turn off the recorder.]

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