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From Merging Histories to Emerging Identities:

An “Asian” Museum as a Site of Pan-ethnic Identity Promotion

Chong-suk Han and Edward Echtele

Abstract

In this paper, we explore the significance of the Wing Luke Asian Museum (WLAM) in Seattle, Washington as a site where pan-ethnic Asian American identity can be promoted by analyzing the strategies employed by the staff and artists of the WLAM to promote, foster, and disseminate a larger Asian Pacific Islander American pan-ethnic identity. We argue that museums are a significant site that can “provide a setting for persons of diverse Asian backgrounds to establish social ties and to discuss their common problems and experiences.”

Notes on Asian and Pacific Islander American Pan-Ethnicity

In her seminal work, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities*, Yen Le Espiritu wrote:

The construction of pan-Asian ethnicity involves the creation of a *common Asian American heritage* out of diverse histories. Part of that heritage being created hinges on what Asian Americans share: a history of exploitation, oppression, and discrimination (Espiritu, 1992: 17, emphasis added).

At the same time, Espiritu, quoting Shibutani and Kwan, notes that the simple existence of this shared history doesn’t guarantee pan-ethnic identity formation. Rather, “only when people become aware of being treated alike on the basis of some arbitrary criterion do they begin to establish identity on that basis” (Shibutani and Kwan, 1965: 210, quoted in Espiritu, 1992). In this paper, we examine the Wing Luke Asian Museum (WLAM) as a site where a “common Asian American heritage,” particularly a shared history of exploitation, oppression, and discrimination is presented in an

effort to foster pan-ethnic identity formation among diverse Asian Pacific Islander American (APIA) groups.

In doing so, we recognize that Pan-Asian Pacific Islander American coalitions built on grievances and need for resource mobilization are sometimes tenuous, particularly if they fail to empower less-dominant groups. Once the perceived “threat” dissipates, pan-ethnic coalitions often dissolve into ethnic specific identities. While cross-ethnic mobilization is effective in bringing various ethnic Asian and Pacific Islander American groups together, it is the collective sharing of experiences that may foster long-term affinity with one another and lead to a true sense of “belonging” with each other.

As such, what may hold these collations together in the long-term is a shared sense of pan-ethnic Asian Pacific Islander American identity, not merely grievances or outside threats. Simply showing that such oppression exists does not automatically lead to pan-ethnic identity formation. After all, many ethnic specific “Asian American” museums include exhibits exposing America’s racist and oppressive past. Rather, it is in the way the stories are told, how they are told, and most importantly, who does the telling that can promote a pan-ethnic identity among members of the various APIA groups.

Of particular interest to Espiritu, and other authors including William Wei (1993), Lisa Lowe (1996), and Pei-te Lien (2001) who have explored pan-Asian identity formation, were the bridging institutions, particularly pan-Asian organizations born during the height of the “third world” movements. These organizations confronted social injustices and were critical in helping to shape a pan-ethnic Asian identity based on shared experiences of racism and oppression experienced by second and third generation Asian and Pacific Islander Americans who were once distanced from the more ethnic-specific identities of their parents and grandparents. Of critical importance were the nascent “Asian American” newspapers and pan-ethnic APIA social service agencies, and Asian Pacific Islander American literary and artistic collectives.

Despite the obvious centrality of museums as possible sites where such stories can get told, authors exploring APIA identity formation including Espiritu, Lowe, and Lien, analyze historical projects and museums only in passing. Only Wei and Wing Chung Ng (1999) devote some effort to the role of museums as a site bridging diverse

APIA identities. However, Ng and Wei both cite museums bridging the generational divisions within a single ethnic group, not how they promote a pan-ethnic APIA identity. The WLAM, growing out of an ethnically diverse APIA neighborhood, not only developed a pan-Asian mission that reflects its host community, but has assumed a role in the community as a key site where such stories are collected, told, formed, and disseminated.

In using the WLAM as a case study, we do not mean to imply that the museum is *the* agent of pan-ethnic identity formation among various APIA groups in the Pacific Northwest or that the museum's exhibits lead to the development of a pan-ethnic APIA identity. Rather, the already existing pan-ethnic characteristics of the region led to the development of the museum itself. Instead, we argue that the museum acts as a site of pan-ethnic identity maintenance and dissemination where "shared history" becomes a "common heritage." As such, the museum provides "a setting for persons of diverse Asian backgrounds to establish social ties and to discuss their common problems and experiences" (Espiritu, 1992: 164) and filling an important role in promoting pan-ethnic APIA identity. To demonstrate this, we first examine how museums can act as sites of identity formation, particularly among disenfranchised groups. Next, we discuss the WLAM by: (1) examining the characteristics of the Pacific Northwest that nurtured a pan-ethnic APIA sentiment that gave rise to the museum and (2) tracing the history of the museum through various exhibits that fostered a pan-ethnic APIA identity. Finally, we describe the specific strategies employed by the museum to promote pan-ethnic APIA sensitivity in its exhibits, staff, and volunteers. It should be noted that the purpose of this paper is to provide a case study of the WLAM rather than a critical overview. As with most case studies, the information gathered for this paper certainly presents a constricted view as it relies on the stories generated by those involved with the museum and should be read with caution. More importantly, there have been conflicts over the museum's role in the community and expanding the discussion beyond the case study model may lead to a different discussion about the role of the museum in Seattle's APIA community. However, our intent is not to examine the role of the museum in the larger community, but rather to focus on the museum itself as a site where pan-ethnic identity work can be done.

Museums as Sites of Identity Formation

To be sure, pan-ethnic APIA organizations geared toward the arts, such as the Asian American Writer's Workshop, Asian American Arts Centre and the Asian American Arts Alliance in New York, the Kearny Street Workshop and Asian American Theater Company in San Francisco, Asian American Artists Collective in Chicago, Asian Arts Initiative in Philadelphia, East-West Players and Visual Communications in Los Angeles, and many others are numerous. Noting the flowering of pan-ethnic identity in Asian Pacific Islander American literature and film, various writers have examined the "pan-ethnic" sensibilities in Asian Pacific Islander American literature, performance, and visual productions (Chin et al., 1974; Hagedorn, 1993; Kim, 1982; Lee, 1997; Leong, 1991). However, little has been written about how museums, as cultural institutions, may also promote a pan-ethnic APIA identity.

Despite the dearth of literature in Asian American Studies regarding the role that museums can play in identity formation, scholars from several disciplines have pointed to the centrality of museums in forging national and ethnic identities. For example, Benedict Anderson (1983) noted that museums were one of the three pivotal sites of identity formation for those imagining an "ethnic" community, particularly where one may not have necessarily existed before.

At the root of theorizing about museums as sites of identity formation has been the academic literature on representations. Cultural theorists have long argued that cultural identities are born and maintained "within, not outside, representations." (Hall, 1989: 69) That is, identities are not something inherent at birth but rather something that is culturally constructed. As such, rather than something that is fixed, identities change over time and develop through the consumption of various cultural artifacts such as media products and cultural objects. More importantly, "how the artifact is represented, how it is produced and consumed, and the mechanisms which regulate its distribution and use" are also important in constructing social identities (McLean, 1998: 246). As such, museums not only display objects but also create a cultural context for those objects to be displayed. As Zolberg notes (1996: 70), museum "displays create and reinforce a version of the past that constitutes a part of collective memory" and the act of remembering the past has pivotal consequences of how we view the present (Urry, 1996). Ulti-

mately, museums use the past to help create a present sense of how things are. In this way, museums play a pivotal role in how people come to see themselves, their history, and their current situation.

Examining “Latino” museums in the U.S., Kathryn Glenn notes that Latino museums allow patrons:

to connect their past personal experiences with the circumstances of their new (if they are immigrants) and changing environment. Latino museums do not have to provide definite answers to questions of Latino identity, they simply provide a forum in which to do this. . . Exhibits and programs suggest frameworks for constructing one’s cultural identity *within* the United States (1999: 9-11).

As such, “ethnic” museums become a place where a shared sense of an “American” identity, albeit along racial/ethnic lines, can be fostered and celebrated. Much more than depositories for historical artifacts, “ethnic” museums come to help in defining a sense of “peoplehood” among those who find themselves on different shores.

Seattle’s APIA Community

The fact that the WLAM was established in Seattle’s International District is no surprise or coincidence. Once called “the most successful experiment in pan-Asian Americanism on the U.S. mainland, where the development of Asian American identity and character has made great strides,” (Chin, 2001) the International District, or the “ID” as the locals call it, is unlike any other place in the continental United States. Tucked neatly below the Seattle skyline and within steps of the historic center of the Emerald City, it is the only place on the U.S. mainland where a succession of Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, and Vietnamese immigrants, as well as a large number of black migrants from the American South, congregated into one geographic area to create a unique neighborhood. While not truly “integrated” in that the different ethnic groups occupied a certain portion of the neighborhood, they nonetheless interacted with each other much more intimately than in other metropolitan areas where different Asian groups occupied geographically isolated areas of the city.

In the beginning, Chinese immigrants, mostly young men journeying to a new land to find their fortunes like millions of other immigrants from other parts of the world, carved out small

niches for themselves in an ever expanding city. In the growing Northwest, they worked in the canneries, rail roads, laundries, restaurants, stores, and gambling houses. Among their many contributions to the growing city was the digging of the first canal connecting Lake Union with Lake Washington. By 1877, Washington Street, where the Chinese established the first settlement in Seattle had “twenty-seven Chinese houses in about half of a block” (Bagley, 1916: 173). When their “original” neighborhood on Washington Street was burned to the ground in 1885 in the fervent malaise of xenophobia that spread throughout the West Coast, they persevered and began a new neighborhood just a few short blocks to the east.

Along Main Street, bordering the new Chinese neighborhood, Japanese Americans developed a Japantown (Nihonmachi). They established restaurants, bathhouses, laundries, and markets to support their growing population. They established social networks and associations including the Japanese Association of Washington State and a local chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League. Although Nihonmachi fell into disrepair during World War II, many returned to reclaim their neighborhood after the war’s end. Traces of their perseverance are found in small patches of the neighborhood, including the historic Nippon Kan Theatre.

Filipino workers also found their way into the neighborhood. They, too, faced the hostility and prejudice that confronted America’s “little brown brothers.” Tolerated as laborers in the West Coast farm industry or the Alaskan canneries, they found few other neighborhoods welcoming during a time when signs proclaiming “No dogs or Filipinos” were a common site on the American urban landscape. They flocked to the area’s bachelor hotels where they enjoyed camaraderie with other Filipino and Asian workers. In time, they also opened small businesses such as barber shops and cafes to support their growing numbers as well as engaged in union organizing and political uprising leading to better working conditions for all “manual” laborers.

Jackson Street, running parallel to Main, was also once home to the most famous Jazz venues in the Pacific Northwest, including the Dumas Club and the Entertainers Club. Among those who played at ID venues and stayed at the neighborhood’s hotels include Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and Erskine Hawkins (Chin, 2001). A part of the mass migration of black Americans out of the Ameri-

can South during World War II, blacks migrated to Seattle in search of available opportunities in the war industry that grew up around the Puget Sound. Like the Asian immigrants before them, they found few options when it came to housing. Finding refuge in the “ethnic” neighborhood, long neglected by the city, blacks from the South also developed a vibrant community.

After the 1965 Immigration Acts that opened up avenues for Asian immigration following decades of anti-Asian immigration policies, the area welcomed the arrival of new immigrants from China and Southeast Asia. A bustling Vietnamese community developed along 12th Avenue, which was later renamed “Little Saigon/International District,” to mark the new arrivals.

Since then, the neighborhood has met many challenges, including the building of the Kingdome on the edge of the neighborhood and Interstate 5, which bisected it. By the 1970s, the hotels that housed so many generations before were in disrepair and more than half shut its doors. Many long-time residents began leaving the area, fearful of the increasing crime and deteriorating living conditions. The neighborhood developed a reputation as being unsafe and undesirable.

During this time of upheaval, young Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino student activists—influenced by growing ethnic solidarity and a rising “pan-ethnic” consciousness—were spurred to action. Leading a fight to reclaim the area, they lobbied for low-income housing, set up social service agencies, formed the Seattle Chinatown/International District Preservation and Development Authority, a public corporation to preserve and renovate the buildings in this historic neighborhood, and gave birth to the Japanese American redress movement (Chin, 2001; Santos, 2002; Shimabukuro, 2001).

The fruit of their efforts have been the revival of long-neglected but historically important buildings, the establishment of first-rate social service agencies, and the renewal of the entire neighborhood. Buildings that once housed Alaska cannery workers were renovated and converted to low income housing for a new generation of APIA immigrants and the area was made safer by the efforts of such agencies as the Community Action Partnership and the Interim Development Corporation.

Today, the district is home to restaurants that cover the entire spectrum of Asian cuisine, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Malaysia, etc. Second, third, and fourth

generation Asian Pacific Islander Americans have set up law offices, dental offices, and other professional service businesses within the borders of the old enclave. Businesses and social service agencies cater to a “pan-Asian” clientele and pan-ethnic solidarity is more evident in the neighborhood than in any other place in the country.

Also, Seattle served as “home” for many Asian Pacific Islander Americans working in the Alaska cannery industry. Locked out of housing in other parts of the city, the single room occupancy hotels such as the Milwaukee Hotel, the Panama Hotel, the Bush Hotel, and many others, served as home for most of the multiethnic workforce. Often owned and operated by Japanese American residents of the neighborhood, they were the only places in the city where Filipino, and other Asian Pacific Islander American, laborers found available housing. As such, even in the earliest point of Seattle’s history, pan-ethnic cooperation, albeit for economic reasons, was evident.

Given this geographic and physical proximity to one another, it is not surprising that Seattle is home to a multitude of pan-ethnic social service agencies that date back to the tumultuous years of the 1960s and 1970s including the Asian Counseling and Referral Services, Washington Asian Pacific Islander Families Against Substance Abuse, International Community Health Services, International District Improvement Association, and many others. Even the rare community based organizations (CBO) with “ethnic specific” names such as the Chinese Information Service Center, serve a multiethnic clientele.

The specific factors that led to the formation of the pan-ethnic community in Seattle’s ID is unclear, and beyond the scope of this paper. Some speculate that the relative small size of specific ethnic communities relative to other cities where various ethnic groups established their own neighborhoods, the relative isolation of the Pacific Northwest, the pan-ethnic nature of the labor markets in the Pacific Northwest, etc. may have been contributing factors. In addition, it would be a mistake to assume that Seattle is a haven of pan-ethnic APIA cooperation. Certainly, there have been conflicts marked by ethnic lines (Hou and Tanner, 2002). The importance of the neighborhood, however, is that in relative to other large cities, Seattle’s APIA communities are marked by high levels of pan-ethnic cooperation.

The Wing Luke Asian Museum

The WLAM opened on May 18, 1967 after local Asian American citizens, led by members of the Chinese Community Service Organization (CCSO) including Ben Woo, Ark Chin, and Warren Chan, joined together to honor Wing Luke, the first Chinese American immigrant to be elected to the Seattle City Council, who died in a plane crash in 1965. Luke, whose family history in the Pacific Northwest dated back to the early 1900s when his grandfather immigrated to Seattle, talked openly of the need for a museum that would celebrate the culture and history of Asian Pacific Islander Americans in the region. At first, the CCSO members wished to implement Luke's vision for a facility that could serve as a center for the preservation of the Chinese community's cultural legacy and promote a positive image of the community. Nonetheless, all shared a vision of Seattle as a culturally pluralist city. While they originally viewed the focus of the museum to be Chinese and Chinese American culture, from the beginning, the museum had a pan-Asian focus. In fact, George Tsutakawa, an internationally famous contemporary artist who was on the faculty at the University of Washington and Fay Chong, also an established contemporary artist, were among the strongest supporters for the establishment of the museum. Both men saw the museum as a space where Asian American artists from different ethnic backgrounds could showcase their works.

While the inaugural exhibit was on Chinese pioneer families in Seattle, the exhibit was followed by an origami display mounted by Tak and Jesse Seto, adding a Japanese twist. More importantly, the inclusion of Japanese Americans in the planning and implementation of the exhibit reflected the recognition of Chinese and Japanese Americans' shared status as Asians in America (Friday, 1999). Soon after, Asian American artists and community activists initiated an annual Northwest Asian American art exhibition at the museum, bringing together a pan-ethnic group of artists. One of the highlights, according to Executive Director Ron Chew, was the 1980 exhibit titled, "Made in America," which included fifty works by local Asian Pacific Islander American artists. The naming of the exhibit, "Made in America," marked the mission of the museum, to share "American" stories and highlight "American" experiences of those with roots in the Asian and Pacific regions and signaled a

dramatic statement during a time when being “Asian” was easily equated with being “foreign.”

At first, the pan-ethnic collaborations were largely an accident of necessity and geographic location. Because of limited budget, the museum relied entirely on volunteers for both labor and for exhibit materials. In fact, the first years of the museum were based on *ad hoc* exhibit design largely dependent on the interests of the volunteers and what the volunteer staff could acquire from various community members. The museum’s first director, Peg Marshall, a close friend of Wing Luke’s sister Bettie Luke, organized exhibits using whatever was available from the community. Given the population of the Chinatown/International District, much of the “loaned” items came from diverse ethnic sources. Even the annual art auction that brought various Asian Pacific Islander artists’ works together was a necessity based on financial need, including the format of the auction which required potential patrons to “float” from one location to another, including the Chong Wah and Gee How Oak Tin Association buildings and later the Nippon Kan theater, exposing patrons to different “parts” of the district. Likewise, the geographic proximity of the various Asian and Pacific Islander groups facilitated the use of the small museum space by a variety of community groups as a meeting place. In fact, Glenn Chin, then a community activist who served on the museum’s board for most of the 1970s told the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* in 1976 that, “We’re trying to broaden our base, encouraging other than just Chinese to use our facility as a meeting place.” Chin, who was then a student at the University of Washington, and others like him, was influenced by the growing expansion of Asian American Studies that framed Asian Americans as a racial group who shared similar historical experiences. As a group, they were interested in examining these shared experiences and how these experiences shaped the “Asian American” experience.

Among the first attempt was an exhibit based on Alaska cannery workers. In 1973, Nemesio Domingo, Silme Domingo, Gene Viernes, and others organized the Alaska Cannery Worker’s Association (ACWA) to confront the cannery union and the canning industry for collusion and unfair hiring practices. As one of its first acts, the ACWA bought the recently founded *International Examiner* as a forum to air community issues from a pan-Asian perspective. At that time, the paper’s connection to the ACWA gave

it a progressive bent that reflected the inclusive, pan-Asian identification of its activist founders. Because the WLAM continued to rely heavily on volunteers, the research began by the staff at the *International Examiner* under Gene Viernes and the ACWA about the conditions in the canning industry easily led to the creation of a museum exhibit.

Because the exhibit's focus was on cannery work rather than a particular ethnic group, it presented a cross-ethnic perspective to a "shared" problem and the "shared" experiences of the Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino cannery workers. More importantly, the positive response to the exhibit sparked greater interest among activists to pursue expanded oral history projects as a means to foster a shared purpose and community identity.

In the 1980s, the museum became more pan-ethnic in scope due to financial need and a historical accident. By the early 1980s, many on the museum's board felt the need to professionalize the museum. Yet, many also believed that Peg Marshall was not up to the challenge of operating an expanded enterprise. When Marshall stepped down, the board replaced her with Kit Freudenberg, who recently completed an M.A. in museology and relocated to Seattle in the early 1980s. Despite community concerns regarding Freudenberg's suitability to run the museum, she nonetheless was offered the position, largely based on the various board members' inability to push their favored candidate to the entire board.

Ironically, Freudenberg's unfamiliarity with Asian and Asian American history and culture led her to produce exhibits that conflated Asian Pacific Americans as a homogenous group while at the same time, the need for a larger financial base led to the museum actively seeking participation from different ethnic communities. While Freudenberg's cross-cultural exhibits and focus on "culture-of-origin" exhibits reflected her limited knowledge and understanding of the Chinatown/International District, it nonetheless created an environment in the museum that meshed with the community activists' pan-Asian conceptualization of their community.

More importantly, the museum underwent a period of professionalization under Freudenberg's leadership. Freudenberg was able to secure a grant to process and inventory everything in the collection, easing concerns in the community about the treatment of heirlooms and artifacts that had been entrusted to the museum. The process of tracking artifacts and their owners allowed the mu-

seum to maintain an ongoing relationship with community members. This program continues to the present and current staff of the museum cites the loaned artifact relationship as being fundamental to their attempts to actively involve community members in the museum's projects and provide a sense of ownership of the museum to the community.

The decision to hire Ron Chew as the Executive Director in 1991 marked another milestone in the museum's history as well as highlighted a continuing commitment to a pan-ethnic solidarity. Chew, who by his own admission "hardly knew what a docent or curator was, or how a real museum was supposed to operate," (Chew, 2000: 63), brought with him what the museum's Board of Directors considered much more valuable, a history of community activism and a ten year history as the editor of the *International Examiner*. In addition, he was instrumental in the development of two WLAM exhibit in the 1980s, specifically "Shared Dreams," a statewide pan-Asian Pacific Islander American history display. It was this shared view of history that Chew brought to the museum and its future exhibits. The first exhibit with Chew at the helm was called, "Executive Order 9066: 50 Years Before and 50 Years After," which opened on February 19, 1992.

Rather than relying on "experts," Chew recruited hundreds of people from the community in the planning and execution of the exhibit, a radical idea at the time. During that time, and still largely today, museums were thought of as places where "experts" decided what was worthy of display while "patrons" were expected to be passive recipients. Chew, however, believed that the museum should be a place where individuals shared their own experiences and decided what it was about their experiences that were worth sharing.

While the majority of volunteers for the first exhibit launched under Chew's directorship were of Japanese heritage, many were "co-ethnics" who understood that the trauma of the internment was based more on the racial classification of Japanese Americans than the ethnic origins of our "enemies." During the planning and constructing stage, volunteers "met across the vast generation gulf, leaving behind old grudges and political differences," and came to rebuild a community that had spent years strained under the heavy burden (Chew, 2000: 64). Not surprisingly, the exhibit drew more than 50,000 visitors, a large number "co-ethnic" Asian Pacific

Islander Americans who understood what the internment meant for our “shared” history of racial exclusion in America.

Due to limited space and resources to care for a more extensive collection of artifacts, Chew and his staff decided that gathering personal narratives should be the museum’s primary focus. As such, the staff set about adopting the “Ecomuseum” model, consciously remaking the museum into the cultural memory bank of the community.

Taking a cue from the earlier, “Shared Dreams,” exhibit, the second exhibit developed under the model was “One Song, Many Voices,” which drew together narrative history, photographs, artifacts, maps, etc. in a dramatic overview of the 200-year history of Asians and Pacific Islander Americans in Washington State. A volunteer committee of over fifty people, representing more than ten different Asian and Pacific Islander American groups and sweeping the generational line, met together over a period of almost a year to share their photos, family artifacts, maps, and personal items. Coming together, they not only shared their personal histories but also drew parallels through their collective histories and shared experiences. Organized into five subject areas: immigration, employment, community life, discrimination, and cultural traditions, the exhibit drew parallels among the different ethnic communities.

The first major art exhibition under the new staff was “They Painted From Their Hearts,” which opened in 1994. Organized by Mayumi Tsutakawa, the exhibit showcased the long history of Asian American artists in Seattle, focusing on the fifty-year period between 1910 and 1960. The collection of art from early Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, and Korean American artists served as an example of how a common interest can forge a sense of community that transcended ethnicity

Following the pan-ethnic theme, the museum launched “Out of Focus: Media Stereotypes of Asian Pacific Americans,” in 1995, curated by University of Washington faculty members Connie So and Shawn Wong. Upon entering the exhibit, patrons were confronted with two key questions, “Where are you from?” and “How did you learn English?”

By eliciting an experience shared by all Asian and Pacific Islander Americans, the exhibit exposed the continuing racist caricatures that permeate in American media about Asian Pacific Is-

lander Americans, and adroitly exposed how these images affect all APIA. Much more than simply a museum display, the exhibit led to a series of public programs including the first-ever statewide Asian Pacific American leadership conference and ignited social action among Asian Pacific Islander Americans of diverse ethnic backgrounds. In this way, the museum continued to be the center of “community” concerns for the entire APIA community, a fact well documented by long-time community activist Bob Santos (2002).

The museum followed these pan-ethnic exhibitions with others such as “A Bridge Home: Music in the Lives of Asian Pacific Americans,” which examined the significance of music in the lives of APIA and led to a audio disc which included recordings by twelve Asian Pacific Islander American musicians and groups and “Beyond the Rock Garden: Craft Forms for a New World,” which featured contemporary crafts from a diverse group of Asian Pacific Islander American craft artists.

In 2002, the museum launched, “If Tired Hands Could Talk,” bringing together the histories of and struggles of Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, and Vietnamese garment workers. But rather than focus only on the negative, the exhibit acted as a celebration of accomplishments of an often ignored group of workers who act as the backbone of the garment manufacturing industry and provided a glimpse of their personal and family lives, offering hope and promise for the future.

Exploring the entire spectrum of the Asian Pacific Islander American experience, the museum has also been home to an exhibit on the oral histories of APIA women in the Girl Scouts, APIA in the Seattle hip-hop scene, APIA in sports, the graffiti art of APIA, and APIA adoptees. It has also addressed issues that are relevant and immediate for all Asian Pacific Islander Americans, such as domestic violence, including violence against APIA youths and HIV/AIDS in the APIA community.

Even “ethnic-specific” exhibitions have been a way to bring diverse communities together. In order to broaden the appeal of the museum to a larger audience, “ethnic-specific” exhibits were used as a way for the museum to bring those APIA groups that have not been previous well-represented, both in the mainstream and in the long-established APIA community, into the fold of the pan-ethnic umbrella. Among the groups represented by exhibits have been Korean Americans (“Golden Roots”), Vietnamese Amer-

icans (“30 Years After the Fall of Saigon”), and Sikh Americans (“Sikh Community: Over 100 Years in the Pacific Northwest”). In all three of the cases, the WLAM exhibit was the first time any museum focused specifically on that particular community’s history and contribution to American life. More importantly, the staff organized these ethnic-specific exhibits around the “universal” themes such as adapting to life in America, looking for work, and confronting the effects of racism. Once connected to the museums, many involved with “ethnic-specific” exhibits continue to volunteer for other museum activities or to return for exhibits that don’t specifically target their ethnic group.

Strategies for Museum-based Pan-Ethnic Identity Formation

As Espiritu would expect, many of the exhibits at the WLAM focus on “a history of exploitation, oppression, and discrimination” (1992: 17). Not surprising then, many of the exhibits at the WLAM focus on this shared history of oppression. That is, the exhibit needs to be more than a documentation of an oppressive event in history but must also “speak” to the larger pan-APIA community by actively showing that this shared history is often based on the arbitrary criteria of “race,” a fact well outlined by both ethnic-specific exhibits such as “Executive Order 9066” and pan-ethnic exhibits such as “Out of Focus.”

What has perhaps worked best for the WLAM has been an emphasis on collecting oral histories from community members. The emphasis on oral histories allows a connection to the past through lived experiences rather than artifacts. As such, patrons are provided the opportunity to share in experiences that are similar to those that they face, particularly as they related to racial discrimination and oppression.

It is the power of oral histories to shape a shared memory that is at the heart of the WLAM’s exhibits which then further drive pan-ethnic collective consciousness. Taking this one step further, the museum also focuses on a shared promise for the future. Exhibits such as “If Tired Hands Could Talk,” focus not only on the hardships of the garment work but also share in the life-enriching friendships formed among the women.

Another strategy employed has been gathering a committee for the “ethnic-specific” exhibits that cross over ethnic lines. While it is true that most volunteers for the “ethnic-specific” exhibits are

co-ethnics, the museum makes an effort to bring non-ethnic specific community to the planning table for every exhibit. By bringing volunteers from other ethnic communities to the planning table, more opportunities arise for pan-ethnic solidarity building.

The act of bringing different ethnic groups to the same table also provides an opportunity for members of different ethnic groups to compare their collective histories, thus, coming to see the similarities that can be drawn between them.

While examining "feminist exhibitions," Gaby Porter (1996: 118) found that they tended to be organized around themes that were lateral rather than the expected chronological themes found in more "traditional" museum exhibits. Doing so, these exhibits create "plural, and often contradictory, discourses and representations" that draws women together in shared experiences. As such, these exhibits represent more than physical spaces where objects are displayed but also emotional spaces where identities are constructed. Not surprisingly, the thematic exhibits of the WLAM accomplish the same goals of drawing various Asian and Pacific Islander American groups together through their shared experiences using themes rather than rigid historic time-lines. For example, in the exhibit, "If Tired Hands Could Talk," the thematic line of the shared experiences of garment work that spans generations pulls the histories of earlier Asian garment workers with the experiences of contemporary Asian garment workers who are not necessarily from the same ethnic group. In doing so, the exhibit becomes more than a display of artifacts but acts as an emotional site where identities may be shaped, constructed, and most importantly adopted.

According to McLean, the organizational structure of a museum also has "a significant impact on the ultimate product that is offered to the museum's public" (1998: 238). In relation to APIA pan-ethnic identity development, Otis (2001) demonstrates that an organization's hierarchy can reinforce ethnic hierarchies. That is, if an organization is structured so that those who trace their ancestry to more "dominant" APIA groups dominate the operations of the organization, pan-ethnic identity formation will suffer. As Espiritu noted, such neglect will lead to "marginalized" groups within the pan-ethnic umbrella to succeed or simply refuse to join. Given this, we would expect that pan-APIA solidarity will increase if the organizational culture promotes cross ethnic cooperation in its operations, making sure that members of non-dominant groups

are equally represented. Not surprisingly, this is the method employed by the WLAM, not only in terms of staff but also in the development of museum exhibits.

In terms of staff, much effort is exerted to ensure a cross representation of Asian Pacific Islander Americans, including the addition of the nation's first Cambodian American museum professional. Rather than a method of ensuring "diversity," this is done to ensure that exhibits do reflect the larger pan-ethnic sensibilities. As such, museum staff whose ancestry traces to Vietnam might find themselves working on an exhibit about Korean Americans and vice-versa. Museum staff not only bring their ethnic sensibilities but also a larger pan-ethnic sensibility.

The absence of "professional" curators also allows the museum to promote a system that is largely community driven. Museum exhibits are drawn from various proposals not only from museum staff but also from interested community members. More importantly, the staff at the museum makes every effort to ensure that those groups that have been historically marginalized, not only in the mainstream but also within the Asian Pacific American community, are brought to the center.

Discussion

If the greatest task at hand for "pan-ethnic" identity formation is to create a common heritage out of diverse histories, no doubt that a museum such as the WLAM must be at the forefront. As Richard Handler (1988) noted, having a "common" culture, or at least having the ability to claim a common heritage, is "taken as a mark of being a bona fide 'people'." It is the ability to claim membership in a group by sharing the common history of the group that defines group boundaries and marks group membership (Macdonald, 2003). As such, much still needs to be done to instill this sense of a "common history" among diverse groups who hail from all regions touching the Pacific Ocean, the WLAM may one step closer.

It is difficult to assess the "success" of the museum in actually leading to the development of a pan-ethnic APIA identity. Nonetheless, there are a few indications that the museum is, at least, helping to promote a pan-ethnic APIA consciousness. Taking the museum's lead, many other arts and culture related projects in the "ID" are pan-ethnic, including the Carlos Bulosan Memorial

Exhibit at the fully restored Eastern Hotel. On a more tangible level, the museum is currently two-thirds of the way complete in a \$25 million capital and endowment campaign to refurbish the East Kong Yick Building which has served as home to countless Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino laborers in the Pacific Northwest for nearly a century. The multiethnic roster of volunteers and donors who are involved in the largest capital campaign ever attempted by a pan-APIA organization is a testament to the durability of a pan-ethnic consciousness fostered by the museum. In addition, the museum's roster of volunteers is decidedly pan-ethnic with no single APIA group representing a majority.

By highlighting the WLAM museum and the pan-ethnic nature of the museum's history, exhibits, and staff, we do not mean to imply that the museum is *the* site of pan-ethnic identity formation or even that the museum itself leads to the development of a pan-ethnic APIA identity. In fact, it is difficult to measure the actual impact of the WLAM on pan-ethnic identity and consciousness among APIA in the Pacific Northwest. Rather we wanted to highlight the active role that the museum plays in attempting to promote a pan-ethnic APIA consciousness among various APIA communities in the Pacific Northwest. Our argument is that museums can act as another important site where persons of diverse Asian backgrounds can come together to share their experiences and address their needs, much like other pan-ethnic APIA institutions that have already been explored. While other museums such as the Plantation Village in Waipahu and the Lyman House Museum in Hilo certainly have pan-ethnic APIA sensibilities, the WLAM is the only specifically pan-ethnic APIA museum in the U.S. and deserving of exploration.

Also, limiting ourselves to a case study project on the WLAM leads to a heavy reliance on the stories told within the museum itself and by the museum staff themselves. As such, our conclusions should be read with caution. Certainly, like any other organization, the museum has its detractors. In fact, the history of the museum is rife with internal conflict as well as different ethnic groups and different generational groups actively competed to express their visions of community through the museum (Echtle, 2004). As Omi and Winant (1994) have pointed out, racially circumscribed populations not only seek to better their position in relation to the dominant group, but also within their own racial group in multiple different arenas of life. The cultural arena created by the WLAM

museum is no exception. Broadening the scope of the argument outside of the case study model may lead to a different discussion about the museum's role and centrality among APIA in the Pacific Northwest. However, our goal here was not to provide an exhaustive history of the museum or the cooperation and conflict that characterized the museum, but to begin the discussion about how a museum, like other pan-ethnic APIA organizations, can foster a sense of pan-ethnic identity and to examine how the strategies that the museum itself uses to promote this goal.

As such, our argument in this paper is not that the WLAM is the only agent of pan-ethnic identity formation or even that it is the major agent of pan-ethnic identity formation. Rather, our goal in examining the museum is to demonstrate that building identity is "doing" identity work. That is, effort must be exerted for an outcome to be evident. One cannot take as given that a pan-APIA identity "exists" somewhere. Rather, if the "goal" is to foster that identity, identity work must be done and pan-ethnic consciousness must be actively promoted. Certainly, such identity work is performed in a multitude of different arenas, including, as Espiritu noted, pan-ethnic social service agencies, pan-ethnic newspapers, Asian American Studies programs, etc. Yet, at the center of this "identity" work is a commitment to a shared pan-ethnic experience and consciousness.

It is the active commitment to "pan-ethnicity work" that drives the formation of pan-ethnic consciousness. Because of their ability to foster a collective memory and promote a common Asian Pacific American heritage out of what, on the surface, may appear to be divergent histories, museums can be powerful sites of pan-ethnic identity formation.

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