

Constellations and Collectivity: Youth Storytelling as Re- Rooting Methodology

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Abstract

In this collectively-written autoethnographic piece by youth and adult allies from *The Localized History Project*—a youth-driven participatory action research project advocating for the inclusion of radical, solidarity oriented and movement driven Asian American Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander history—we share and analyze the experiences of our youth during a three day Storytelling Retreat. We frame the storytelling as a “re-rooting” methodology, by which AANHPI youth are able to anchor themselves in histories of resistance, solidarity, and liberation. Through an analysis of photographs, written reflections, and survey collection, we share the following reflections: Firstly, storytelling is a “re-rooting” process as AANHPI youth were able to anchor themselves in histories of resistance, solidarity, and liberation. Secondly, storytelling is a form of a living archive, by which we move from individual stories to a broader sense of collectivity. Finally, we find that storytelling as a practice helps us deepen our commitments to collective liberation both within and beyond our community.

Keywords: Storytelling, Radical History, AANHPI, YPAR

Introduction

It was the first time many of us had seen stars. Shortly after our arrival following a three-hour bus ride to Frost Valley YMCA in Claryville, New York, a group of youth and adult allies from New York City, Westchester County, and Long Island found ourselves craning our necks, staring up at an ink-black sky, with speckles of light sparkling across the darkness. The light pollution of New York City and its surrounding suburbs made it such that we had never seen stars like this—so many and so bright, with the faint swirling pattern of the Milky Way spreading blue within the black. By the end of our two-day storytelling retreat trip, it was clear that the stars we saw at the beginning of the trip were not just lone shining entities, but powerful bodies strung together in constellations—*bright things made more legible by collectivity*.

In the fall of 2024, one adult ally, four AANHPI site directors, and twelve AANHPI youth researchers gathered in cabins in upstate New York, creating a rare affinity space where many experienced, for the first time, a physical and intellectual environment centered on both identities, and broader structural histories. Simple yet profound moments—such as removing shoes at the door, discussing cultural heritage and name origins, and engaging with fiction and oral storytelling archives rarely included in traditional curricula—became acts of reclamation.

This piece thus centers the efforts of *The Localized Histories Project*, a youth-produced critical archive seeking to increase the inclusion of Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) history in New York State classrooms through youth-driven curricula. In our work, we put forth a theory of change that Asian American youth should not just be learners but pedagogues, and that, through oral storytelling and intimate archiving, we can produce a “living” history, one that challenges the colonial logics of the traditional history classroom (Sunderram, 2023). In this collectively written autoethnography by youth researchers and an adult ally of the project, we reflect on our experiences during the storytelling retreat, drawing upon ephemera from our trip such as written reflections and photos.

During our storytelling retreat, we listened to oral histories of garment workers on strike in Sunset Parks' Chinatown, we painted a mural drawing from liberation struggles that inspired us, and heard fictional accounts and oral histories of South Asian migrant mothers. In this article, we hope to build on existing studies that frame storytelling as a form of living archive (Gallager, 2011; Mozeley et al., 2025; Sonoda & Garrison, 2023; Vö & Bonus, 2009; Wang et al., 2024). Ultimately, this piece asserts that youth-led storytelling is a critical pedagogical intervention in ethnic studies, that it serves as a “re-rooting” in lineages of collectivity, by which we were able to anchor ourselves in histories of resistance, solidarity, and liberation.

Literature Review

The traditional history classroom excludes the history of Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) peoples (An, 2016). When the AANHPI community is included, the history that is taught primarily centers the teaching of “Big People” history—history that focuses on famous figures, military actions, and hegemonic powers, and rarely centers movements, solidarities, and working class communities (Sunderram, 2023). Outside of content, the pedagogy of history classrooms often emphasizes rote memorization, and the ideology of the history classroom becomes one of maintaining status quo power structures—rarely is power distributed between student and teacher, by which learning is a collective practice (Apple, 2004; Barton & Levstik, 2004; Mathison et al., 2001; Ross, 2006a).

As Freire writes, when power is distributed in classrooms such that teachers and students teach and learn collectively, we move towards a place of liberatory pedagogy (Freire, 2000). Given that schooling is so often determined by testing and state mandates, it is difficult for this kind of distributed model to take place. Thus, oftentimes the sites in which collective learning takes place are cultural affinity spaces—“loosely organized” social and cultural groups that connect people through shared passions and interests (Gee, 2007, 2018).

Within cultural affinity spaces, this collective learning can take the form of oral storytelling. Storytelling maintains and “safeguard[s]” cultural identity while allowing for “continuity” with future generations (Monteiro et al., 2017). As Ladzekpo et al. (2024) paraphrases of Hammack, oral storytelling is a form of “cultural resilience and resistance,” especially for communities that have long endured marginalization or experienced historical injustices). Further, storytelling allows for critical analysis of histories as youth can “revisit, review . . . challenge, question, and change” narratives independent of “teacher intervention” (Al-Jafar, 2004). Storytelling allows activists to



The first time we saw stars.

defy problematic narratives, understand their own narratives, and share them with others—all of which strengthen the social movements the activists are fighting for (Moyer et al., 2020). Crucially, storytelling does more than merely replace the dominant narrative; it empowers marginalized groups to talk about their narratives while also examining how they interact with the dominant one (Williams, 2004).

Storytelling is used in advocacy moments by and for young students of color. For example, for undocumented youth advocacy movements in Chicago, storytelling serves three purposes: it is a boon to community-building, it promotes mobilization, and it allows for claims-making (Swerts, 2015). For Korean American students in the southern United States, it provided a means of “collective reflection on shared experiences...that acknowledges complexity and diversity in individual’s experiences,” encouraging learners to look for oppressive structures (Chung, 2024, p. 127). For Pacific Islander students, storytelling is also rooted in long-standing traditions of *Talanoa*, which calls for storytelling without concealment, with the end goal of consensus-building (Hautzinger, 2024).

It is through these processes of community building, mobilization, and claims-making that youth undergo a process known as “re-rooting.” Drawn from the above literature, we define re-rooting as a practice by which young people who are typically disconnected from their histories and sense of identity are able to re-find it through practices of storytelling, collective learning, and historical relearnings, and critically, that empowered and secured by this re-rooting practice, we can then move to spaces of collective action. In our reflections below, we share moments from our retreat in which re-rooting took place, and the impacts they had on our activism.

Methods

Below, we will go through our reflections on how storytelling was a re-rooting process for the AANHPI youth researchers. Firstly, storytelling allows us to anchor ourselves in histories of resistance, solidarity, and liberation. Secondly, storytelling is a form of a living archive, by which we move from individual stories to a broader sense of collectivity (Gallager, 2011; Mozeley et al., 2025; Ouyang & Chanani, 2024; Sonoda & Garrison, 2023; Võ & Bonus, 2009; Wang et al., 2024). Finally, we find that storytelling as a practice helps us deepen our commitments to collective liberation both within and beyond our community.

This piece draws on auto-ethnographic methodologies of reflection (Butz & Besio, 2009). Specifically, the category of autoethnographic practice we draw most heavily on is narrative ethnography, such that the youth researchers and adult allies involved in this project “analyze how they are situated in relation to the people and worlds they are studying, and to the fields of power that constitute those relationships” (Butz & Besio, 2009). For the Localized History Project, the youth researchers and adult ally reflected on how they are situated in relation to the broader AANHPI community, as well as the world of youth advocacy and educational spaces in New York. After the Storytelling Retreat, the four site directors developed a survey and facilitated a space for autoethnographic reflection among the twelve AANHPI youth researchers. The survey, which included both qualitative and quantitative prompts, gathered feedback on aspects such as feelings of community and social connection, as well as understanding of the Localized History project's goals. In addition, youth researchers were invited to write personal autoethnographic reflections, sharing their experiences in their own words.

Reflections

Storytelling Roots us in Intimate and Personal Stories

Throughout the Storytelling Retreat, we had activities that focused on utilizing our stories to better connect with one another. After discussing garment strike documentaries and analyzing AAPI literature, we developed a new understanding of what it means to be living history/archive historians. Furthermore, by holding campfire talks to explain the stories behind our names, important cultural centers, and family histories, we created paths that help others understand cultural concepts that otherwise would not have been learned/taught. As one youth explained, their experience at the retreat taught them the “importance of having nuance, time, and spaces to explore AANHPI history together.” Within these spaces, the youth also explained that they were able to “not just connect with people immediately connected to [them], but also other marginalized AANHPI[s].”



First day bonfire, 2024.

Moreover, the activities that we planned were structured for us to discuss the collective by focusing on our own individual experiences. During the different games and activities, we all heard stories from each other’s everyday lives—about what it feels like to be both Asian and Latinx, what it feels like to be an Asian American growing up in a predominantly White neighborhood. Even though we obviously couldn’t relate with each nuance to every single story, we were able to see them through our own lens; we found joy in the act of listening to someone who felt safe enough to open up to us about their experiences.

A lot of the opportunities for storytelling were structured through games. For example, we played a memory game where everyone anonymously wrote down something that fit under a proposed category (for example, the initial category was “landmarks” and many people wrote the Statue of Liberty). The goal was for us to figure out who wrote what submission and to not get caught; if you were caught, you teamed up with the person who identified you correctly to help them identify the others. Though, on the surface, it might not seem like this game would have led to meaningful storytelling about AANHPI identity, the explanations for why people chose to submit the things they submitted were revealing and heartfelt. In particular, when the category was “events in AANHPI history,” participants would tell stories about why they chose the events they did. One youth researcher talked about Bengali Harlem and how learning about Bengali migration to New York City felt empowering for them. Another youth researcher explained their reasons for choosing to talk about the U.S. annexation of Hawaii, which led to a discussion about how many of us only began to see the U.S. as a colonial power during high school. The things they

submitted were revealing and heartfelt. These games enabled us as youth researchers to see history and how it's taught through each other's eyes. Through repeatedly telling each other our own experiences and how they related to various AANHPI historical events that were important to us, we were able to both identify the gaps in the history curriculum that we learned and legitimized their importance outside of the various planned games, we also had opportunities to tell personal and intimate stories through creating art and sharing literature. When we crafted a 'Localized Histories' mural, we had to brainstorm ideas for how to decorate it—though we knew that the words 'Localized Histories' would be on it, there were a lot of ideas for how we could decorate the rest of the blank canvas. Ultimately, the idea we landed on were flowers that were significant symbols in our respective cultures. Though most of us had ideas of what the national flowers of ancestral homelands were, this also marked most of our first times having the opportunity to explore and explain the story behind them. As examples, one youth researcher painted the teuila, the Samoan national flower, and its role in the annual Samoa Teuila Festival; another youth researcher chose to paint the Hong Kong Orchid Tree, while telling others that photos don't capture the true beauty they have in person. Finally, we painted poppies to name our solidarity with Palestinian people amidst ongoing genocide.

When we were allowed some free time to rest, we continued to relay personal stories to each other about the things we had in common—our experiences in the New York public school system, our favorite New York restaurants, and places throughout New York that were perhaps only notable because of their personal significance to us. In this way, storytelling built a foundation for community building that allowed for critical connection, but also built the spaces necessary to then think beyond our own lives. As one participant noted, "This trip helped me find a sense of community I haven't found anywhere else." Another added, "It was specifically because it was centered around storytelling and histories that it added another layer beyond just getting to know one another."



Community building in the lodge!



Creating a Localized History Project Banner.

Storytelling Roots Us in Histories of Resistance and Solidarity

Moving from individual stories to collective and shared histories is a liberatory practice. During the retreat, we centered the idea of a collective AANHPI diasporic experience, understanding similarities in our struggles, hopes, and aspirations. In small groups, we read literature from a range of texts by AANHPI writers and allies to build a foundation of collective action and solidarity. For instance, one group read a piece by Michelle Caswell, a White-American archivist who helped create the South Asian American Digital Archive; others read primary source accounts from the South Asian American Digital Archive about the experiences of Muslim women in the United States. Reading these texts brought awareness to new perspectives we would not have encountered in a traditional classroom setting, expanding our views of past and ongoing efforts to tell AANHPI histories. Importantly, the texts shone light on approaches that involved collaborative, liberatory practices through communities, instead of individuals working in isolation.



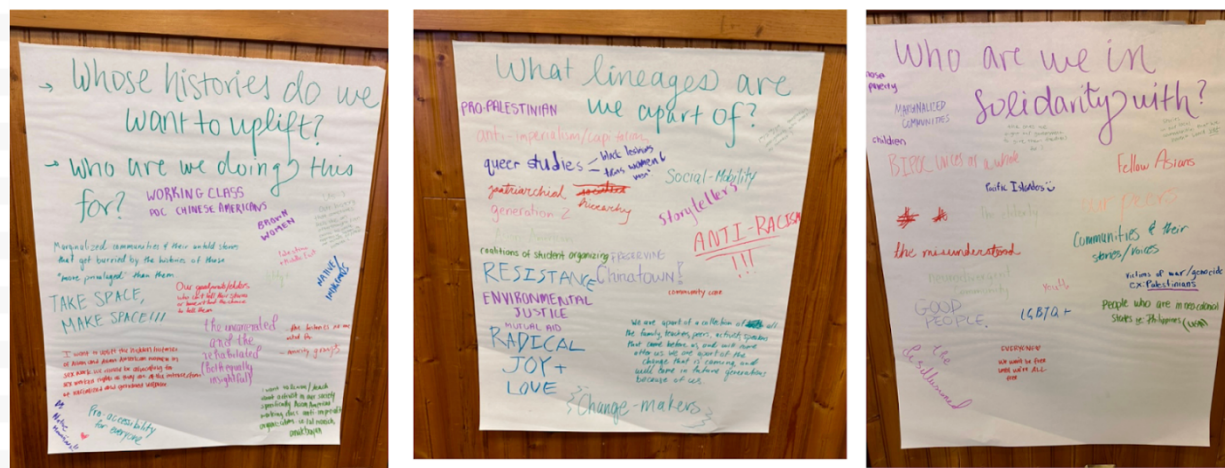
Taking a break for dinner!

During the course of the retreat, we engaged with histories of resistance within the AANHPI community—histories we are not taught in school. We learned about the history of the Bengali Harlem community, a community of migrants who lived in New York City in the 1930s, and found solidarity and kinship with Black and Puerto Rican communities. We also learned about the Sunset Park Hunger Strike of 1995, where eight Chinese American students went on strike in protest of the horrific working conditions of their mothers. Learning this history was really critical in shifting our programming from intimate and personal, to collective. As one participant noted, “I felt both ashamed [that this was the first time I was learning this history] and empowered when learning about Bengali Harlem and the Garment Worker Student Protests in Sunset Park . . . watching the documentary about the sweatshop workers making 0.75 cents an hour . . . made me understand that no one else is telling these stories so we have to.”



Discussions and workshops.

Storytelling Deepens Our Commitments to Collective Liberation



Youth Researchers respond to three prompts on whose histories we want to uplift, what lineages we are apart of, and who we are in solidarity with.

After anchoring ourselves in history, we came together as a group to respond to prompts on papers with the following questions; **“Who are we in solidarity with?”**, **“Whose histories do we want to uplift? Who are we doing this for?”**, and **“What lineages are we a part of?”** Shuffling around the room with a myriad of colored markers, we, sometimes sloppily or in beautiful penmanship, wrote our thoughts to these questions, actively interacting with one another, whether writing above a peer’s head in close proximity, or giggling after bumping into another. Even though we each wrote our personal thoughts to these questions, it became clear our wishes were not isolated despite coming from different backgrounds. We wanted to uplift the stories of “Native Hawaiians!,” “our grandparents/elders who can’t tell their stories or haven’t had the chance to tell them,” “working class POC Chinese Americans,” “Brown women,” “the histories no one asked for,” keeping in mind that “our history . . . sometimes feels like an afterthought and an excuse by White oppressive systems to not include all/other histories.”



The group sharing final reflections on the retreat and on AANHPI history before returning to New York City.

In response to “What lineages are we a part of,” some students wrote “storytellers,” “RESISTANCE,” “community care,” “coalitions of student organizing,” “queer studies—Black lesbians, trans women and men!,” “radical joy + love,” “mutual aid,” and more. Put succinctly, one

youth wrote to the lineage question, “We are a part of a collection of all the family, teachers, peers, activists, speakers that came before us and will roam after us. We are a part of the change that is coming, and will come in future generations because of us.” Sharing these sentiments based on our personal, lived experiences was a form of storytelling itself; one that allowed us to literally visualize the shared gaps we see missing from traditional school curricula on poster paper. As one youth researcher stated, we are not often taught to think of our personal histories as *real history*. They shared, “Normally I would not focus on something related to my immediate circle but talking with everyone has demonstrated that my personal history is part of our collective history.” This shift was a significant one for many participants, who have been often taught in school that history looks like one thing—often, the stories of dominant and hegemonic cultures. Or, that when our histories are taught, they must be taught through tokenized figures like Mao and Gandhi (Sunderram, 2023). Rarely do we view our own experiences and personal histories to be significant enough to be a history taught in schools.

Learning these stories, in other words, began to motivate participants to fight towards changes, either in school policy and curriculum, or more broadly. One participant shared how these activities concretized for her a “north star in her fight towards Asian American abolition.” Another participant added, “A lot of the topics we cover[ed] [were] heavy and painful histories, but liberation and resistance are also about joy. Ultimately, students and young people are major agents of change.” This sentiment, that learning histories sharpens our commitments to making change, was held by and mentioned in reflections by all 15 participants. One participant wrote the following poem:

*Liberating:
the mutual respect and understanding of an energy, once ignored or forgotten or underappreciated,
new bloomings to reflect new beginnings/opportunities.
To seek refuge in ones who can understand your struggles as a part of a collective that has needed to
fight for so long,
and will fight with you against the institutions that tried to but will not, mold us.
Thankful for all the time well spent with new friends.*

Conclusion

In Michelle Caswell's (2021) *Urgent Archives*, she writes “on the joy of troublemaking in the present,” instead of deferring to “hope.” She continues that “hope is inherently future-oriented; it can be an oppressive affective demand for those whose experiences teach them to be pessimistic about systemic change in systems designed to oppress.” In a time when future-orientation feels difficult to take for granted, it is important, and in fact critical, that we find joy in the troublemaking, and in making resistance. While storytelling might feel like a trivial or self-indulgent act, it is in fact the necessary foundation, the root-taking and root-making, that allows for collective action to grow. Further, if we do not anchor ourselves in the stories of lineages of resistance, we too often fall victim to the belief that we are the first ones in history to face these fights, the first ones in history to want to build something different. Our ignorance produces at best a sense of helplessness, and worse, a sense of vanity. It is requisite for any movement building to be reminded that there are things to be learned from those who have fought before us. To paraphrase Ruth Wilson Gilmore et al. (2024), *struggles have ancestors too*, and the act of remembering and collectively anchoring in these histories bring us a sense of urgency, and a sense of hope. We

define hope, not as Caswell writes it—as oppressively affective—but instead as Mariame Kaba (2021) defines hope—as a force of discipline, motivation, and activation.

Storytelling then, is a re-rooting and embodied act, one that reminds us who came before us, and who we can be. It is embodied, and through it we form collectivity and community, and breathes new life into our actions. Through silliness and levity, it brings us the joy that might fuel troublemaking; we are anchored by it in our histories, ancestors, and struggles. In her reflection to the storytelling retreat, Shreya, our adult ally wrote: “This weekend made me feel deeply connected to the idea of futurities, of what Asian Americaness can look like for all of us and who it can hold. How being at the periphery lends itself to both loneliness but also an acute criticality of what we want belonging to look like.” The *Localized History Project* works to build more inclusive, just, and collectivist classrooms that share power and tell better, richer, deeper, stories. We fervently believe that it is through storytelling that we build juster, kinder worlds.



Follow our work @Localizedhistory on Instagram and find our history archive at www.localizedhistoryproject.org.

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