Module 1
An Introduction to Community History

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Supporting Questions

What are historical narratives?

How do we define community history?

What are archives and what role do communities play in archiving?

1. Can collecting community histories confront the silencing of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders?

One Wednesday night in December 1975, twenty-seven people gathered in the basement conference room of Cathay Bank in Los Angeles Chinatown to form a new historical society. Most of them were Chinese Americans in their forties and fifties. In their day jobs, they represented many different professions: city workers and housewives, secretaries and engineers; one was a pastor at a local church, and another was a graduate student at UCLA.

Most of them were born in California where they had attended high school and college. Despite being well-educated and middle-aged, almost none of them had ever been given an opportunity to study their own history. Their high school history textbooks ignored the history of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. Their college history professors did, too. Indeed, nearly the entire profession of US historians in the 1970s believed that Asian Americans and

Pacific Islanders were not important to study.

Fifty-three-year-old Margie Lew was a city hall worker when she attended the first meeting. She recalled, “I looked up my old history book to see what it said about the Chinese in the US, and all it had was one line about the railroads. That’s all I knew. In school, they never taught anything about Chinese people in the United States.” Lew and the others were prepared to fill the gaps in their own education.

“They were talking about a historical society where we could learn about the history of the Chinese in the United States and what they were doing all those years from the gold rush days… So, I was really, really excited,” Lew said. That evening in 1975, this group of middle-aged women and men founded the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California (CHSSC). The society’s mission was to understand the significant historical role of Chinese and Chinese Americans in Southern California.

Do you know your own family history? Do you know the history of your neighborhood? When you look at a history textbook in school, do you see your own history reflected in that textbook? Or, like Margie Lew, do you feel overlooked?

Too often we think of history as something that happens outside of us, as a subject that we study in school. We think that history is something written by other people, about other people, and often for other people. Margie Lew didn’t think of history this way. She thought of history as something written by, about, and for her community.

Margie Lew and the members of the CHSSC are what we call “community historians.” The members of the CHSSC realized that no one else was going to write their history for them. If they wanted to see themselves represented in history, they needed to document that history themselves.

Only a few people grow up and get jobs at universities as historians, but every one of us has the potential to be a community historian. In order to become a community historian, all you need is a little training and the desire to document the history of our families, neighborhoods, and communities. It is almost certain that the various communities you are a part of have

historical stories that need to be documented. With a few new skills, you can be the person who does that documentation.

2. What Are Historical Narratives?

Today, far too many students graduate from high school in the United States without spending any significant time studying Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) history. Many high school students don't study any AAPI history beyond a brief mention of Chinese railroad workers and a lesson or two spent on Japanese American incarceration during World War II. Some high school students in the US don't even receive these lessons. Why is this? Why do traditional history textbooks not focus more on the history of Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, and other communities of color?

It is easy to think of the subject of history as just the study of the past, but this understanding is overly simplistic. It would be impossible for any one person or group to study the history of every person, nation, and community that has ever existed. All societies must choose which stories about the past they remember and retell. We call the true stories that societies choose to tell about the past **historical narratives.** Every person, family, and neighborhood has a historical narrative. However, not all historical narratives are equally well known.

The most widely told narratives about the past are called **dominant historical narratives.** Dominant historical narratives usually focus upon the people who have had the most social or political power, like Christopher Columbus or Thomas Edison. These narratives are often the history of presidents, leaders of corporations, inventors, and explorers. These dominant narratives are not only the most common ones taught in schools, but they are also the ones that dominate museums, movies, and popular books. For example, over the course of your life you have probably had no problem finding textbook passages, movies, or popular books about Abraham Lincoln or George Washington.

By constantly repeating the stories about men like these, societies create what the Haitian historian Michel Rolph Trioullot calls **historical silences,** which he defines as gaps or omissions about particular people or groups in the dominant narrative. These missing stories from particular people and communities keep history from being accurately represented.

Does your US history textbook talk about the long-lasting effects of US nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands? Have you ever seen a Hollywood film about the effects of the secret war in Laos on Hmong Americans? Have you encountered a children's book telling the story of the Jung Sai Garment Workers Strike? These stories have yet to enter into the dominant narrative. They have been silenced in most historical narratives.

We call the sources that tell these histories **counter-narratives.** Counter-narratives are those historical narratives that challenge or "counter" the dominant narrative. Counter-narratives appear much less often in textbooks, movies, and museums than dominant narratives. Counter-narratives often focus on people and communities who have been overlooked in history books. These groups include women, people of color, LGBTQ folks, and people with disabilities. Usually, communities like these are the focus of counter-narratives. We call these communities marginalized communities.

A **marginalized community** is a community that has been denied equal access to economic, political, social, or cultural opportunities and rights as a result of their race, gender, sexuality or other identity factors. All of us know people with these identities—indeed many of us claim one or more of these identities ourselves. The problem is that too often we don't think of these people around us as narrators of history. But they are. Their life stories can form the basis for a counter-narrative of history that centers more diverse voices and experiences than the narratives we often learn in school.

Community historians, like Margie Lew, are usually most concerned with documenting counter-narratives. As a result, community history usually focuses on different aspects of history than the ones found in textbooks, movies, and museums.

3. How Do We Define Community History?

Community history is defined by three factors:

1. It focuses on stories with everyday people from communities whose histories are not well documented.
2. Its primary audience is the community whose stories are being documented.
3. Its authors are members or supporters of the community being studied.

In short, community history is generally conducted by, for, and about members of a community whose stories have long been overlooked.

Historical Focus of Community History

Rather than focus on the history of dominant groups, community history focuses on the challenges, aspirations and accomplishments of seemingly everyday people. By focusing on everyday people rather than famous people who hold powerful positions in society, community history has become an important tool for documenting counter-narratives. The community historian Christopher Kim described his work as "history from the bottom looking up," while members of the CHSSC described it as "history that grows out of the lives of 'ordinary' people."[1]

Audience for Community History

First and foremost, the audience for most community history is the community whose history is being documented. For example, in 1977, the president of the CHSSC explained the goals of the society to the Los Angeles Times, "Our young third- and fourth-generation Chinese are quite Americanized. If you listened to them blindfolded the chances are you couldn't distinguish them from other young Anglos. That's why this project is so important. There are many stories, expressions, customs that we as children of immigrants want to preserve for future generations."[2] While many, if not most, community historians want to preserve the knowledge and experiences of elders for an audience of younger generations, other community historians might have different goals for different audiences.

For some community historians, the goal is both to inform their own communities and tell the broader society about an aspect of history they believe should never be forgotten. For example, the community history project Densho documents the history of Japanese

Americans who were incarcerated by the US government during World War II. “Densho” means “to pass to the next generation.” According to the organization’s website, in the 1990s a group of community members met in a church in Bellevue, Washington and asked, “What would happen if people knew about the history of Japanese Americans?”

They believed that spreading this history to the nation could improve the treatment of marginalized people throughout the US. Densho co-founder Tom Ikeda oversaw a team of volunteers who began to create a digital archive of Japanese Americans’ experiences with incarceration during World War II.

The idea of a digital archive was relatively new in the 1990s. But the Densho digital archive has become an incredible success and now includes oral histories, historical photos and documents, and written historical essays. Densho is a community history project whose main audience is the nation and the world. As we see in this example, community history is distinct in that it is the needs of the community that determine the primary audience and scope for a community history project.

But even Densho, whose goal is challenging silences about World War II Japanese American experiences, still includes a community audience. Rather than publishing their history in academic textbooks or journal articles for academic audiences as many university professors do, community historians write history for members of their own community.

Background of Community Historians

Community historians usually come from the same community whose story they are documenting. Or, if they are not from the community, they support them. Because community historians have connections to the communities whose histories they document, they have personal perspectives that allow them to speak on behalf of that community. This community connection helps ensure that community history is told for the benefit of the people in the community rather than for the personal or professional benefit of the historian.

What Are Archives? What Role Do Communities Play?

Community historians can challenge historical silences because they understand that the sources for our collective history are all around us. **Community historians understand**

the community itself is an archive. The sources we need to write our histories are kept in basements, closest, and computer hard drives of our friends and neighbors. Perhaps even more importantly, the histories of our communities live on in the memories of those who lived that history. That is why oral history is so important to community history.

In conducting oral histories, community historians not only help document parts of their community's history that have been silenced, but they also empower community members to see themselves and their own lives as important to the historical record. Too often, elders in our communities don't see or understand how their own lives or actions are part of history. Conducting oral histories with elders can help them and others see how their own life histories are part of the historical archive.

Traditionally, archives have not prioritized collecting materials from marginalized communities. As a result, the materials that relate to Asian American and Pacific Islander communities housed in most archives include materials created by people outside these communities. For example, in government archives, the AAPI communities exist mainly in the form of official interactions with the federal, state, and local governments: census and immigration records, military enlistment documents, or court and prison records. These records tell the history of the AAPI community from only one specific perspective.

In response to these limitations, community historians have created their own community archives. Community archives often begin by collecting photos, oral histories, and family documents from members of the community. Margie Lew and the other members of the CHSSC created one such community archive to keep the oral histories they began to collect in the 1970s. This archive has grown extensively over time.

Many community archives like those of the CHSSC have begun to put material online. In recent years, some community archives such as Densho or the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA) are housed almost exclusively online. The growth of these online community archives has democratized the collection and accessibility of many historical community materials.

Endnotes

[1] Christopher Kim, “Three Generations of Koreans Living In America” (bachelor’s thesis, UC Berkeley, 1974), 2; Chinese Historical Society of Southern California, *Linking Our Lives: Chinese American Women of Los Angeles,* (CHSSC, 1984), xi.

[2] Mark Jones, “Search for Roots by Oral History”, *Los Angeles Times,* July 4, 1977.