

White paper - for Seeing Lost Enclaves

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Abstract

Seeing Lost Enclaves: Hidden Portals is an artistic intervention which enables visitors to immersively experience sites of erased historic neighborhoods of color as they were long ago, reconstructed virtually as part of the Seeing Lost Enclaves project at the Library of Congress. Placed at several sites of lost Chinatowns and other destroyed sites, these VR experiences are constructed from archival photos, maps, and materials from the Library of Congress as well as local archives and other sources. Building on speculative historical work and the *critical fabulation* of Saidiya Hartman, and informed by the practice of *re-existencia*, as coined by Adolfo Albán Achinte, this creative approach to reconstruction is called *relational reconstruction*, as presented in a toolkit, video series, and workshops by Library of Congress Innovator in Residence Jeffrey Yoo Warren.

This paper will present some of the motivations for this form, discuss issues of invisibility and archival exclusion, as well as commemoration, audience, and personal connection in relation to the work. Relational reconstruction addresses the limitations of the archive as a means of accessing erased moments, experiences, and spaces, and seeks to correct erasure, through an imaginative, immersive, social, personal, and creative approach. Through relational reconstruction, visitors are enclosed in a gentle and nourishing space, rather than viewing an artifact of history enclosed in a diorama at a museum or described on a plaque.

Main text

When visiting the sites of past communities of color, the word that often comes to mind is *dissonance*. As an Asian American visitor, it's strange to see the site of an early Asian American community, especially one destroyed by racist anti-Asian violence, unmarked and invisible on the busy tourist-filled main street of old Truckee, California.



Present day view from the Fong Lee shop at the entrance to Truckee Chinatown circa 1870.

Seeing Lost Enclaves: Hidden Portals fills a void in the experiences of Asian Americans and of communities of color whose historical sites have not only been erased, but remain unmarked, unacknowledged, or, sometimes worse, marked in ways which reinscribe harm. I felt a kind of tightness, an ache, for weeks after visiting Truckee and other similar sites. And although many of the ideas and forms which make up *Hidden Portals* predate my trip and have different origin stories, they suddenly came into focus together when reflecting on my visit to Truckee.



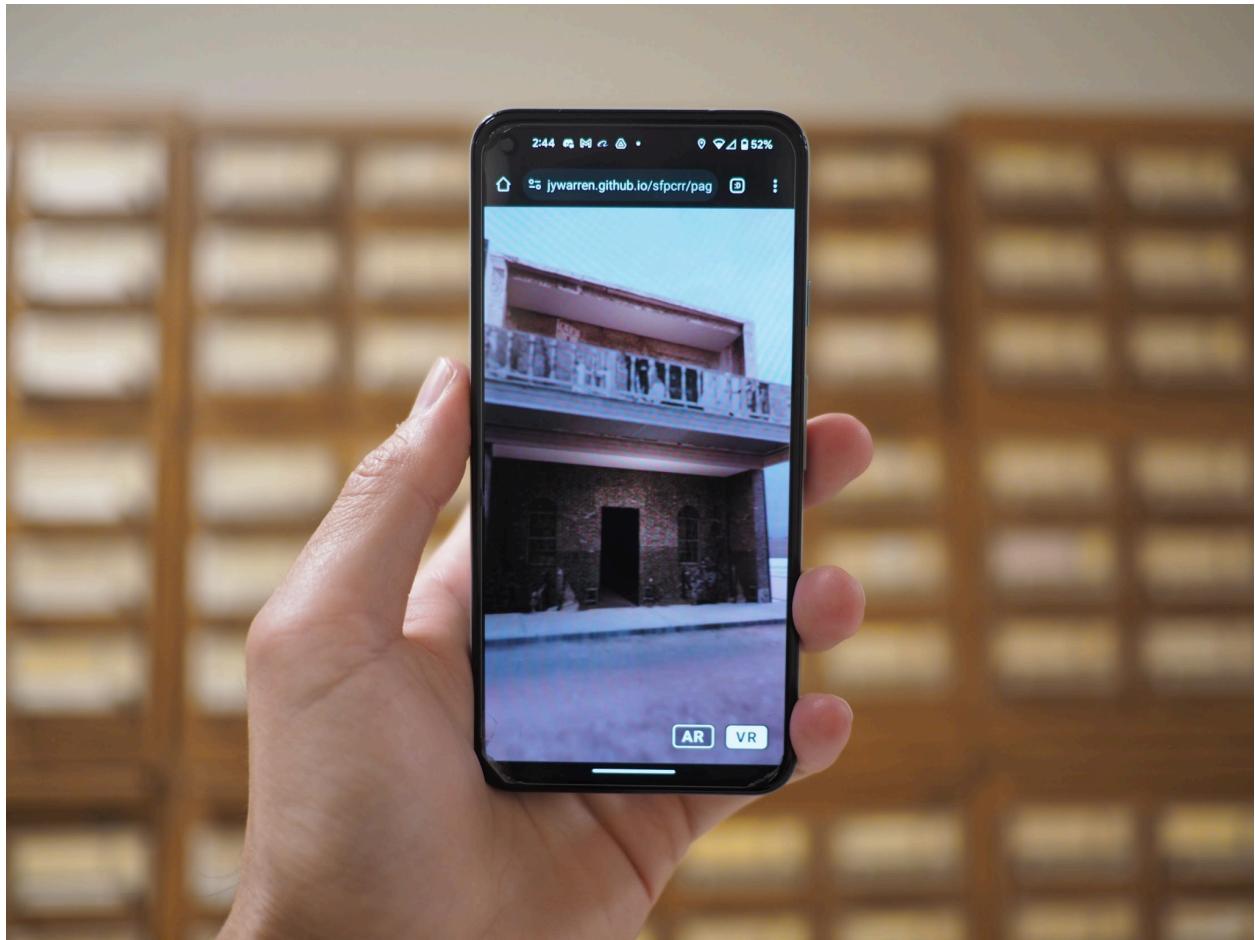
Empire Street today, at the site of Providence's Chinatown, 1904-1914.

Seeing Lost Enclaves: Hidden Portals is a culmination of much of my work as the Library of Congress 2023 Innovator in Residence, a broader project to digitally re-construct destroyed Chinatowns around the United States. Playing on the theme of invisibility (for many of these sites whose histories have been erased or obscured), *Hidden Portals* places these reconstructions in public at their historic sites, but in virtual space, that is, invisible to casual passers-by.



Concept sketch of viewing the Portland Chinese Vegetable Gardens – reconstructed in collaboration with [Dri Chiu Tattersfield](#) – through the Hidden Portals website, while at the Library of Congress.

Though Hidden Portals is accessed initially through a web address, the website is mostly explanatory unless visitors physically go to one of the five historic sites (or to one of five corresponding locations at the Library of Congress) with a mobile device. Upon nearing these sites, the website begins to “glitch” – the text wobbling intermittently in a chromatic aberration effect. Once close enough to the site, a visual portal, or circular hole, suddenly appears on the page, expanding to take over the screen. By moving the screen around, visitors can peer through the newly opened portal to see their location as it was at the historic time period I and my collaborators have reconstructed.



A reconstructed view of Hanford, California's China Alley, circa 1892, created in collaboration with [Evelyn Hang Yin](#), viewed through the Hidden Portals website while at the Library of Congress.

The scenes which make up the virtual experiences are the result of a methodology I call *relational reconstruction*, a process which focuses on the potential for a more multifaceted remembrance and correction, through relationships between the experiences partially represented in the archive, and today's related experiences in minoritized groups. It acknowledges the limitations of the archive as a means of accessing erased moments, experiences, and spaces. Through *relational reconstruction*, I seek to correct erasure through a personally imaginative and socially immersive approach, in which visitors are enclosed in a gentle and nourishing space, rather than enclosing an artifact of history in a diorama at a museum or on a plaque. This process restructures the archive as a set of selective clues; remnants shaped by the active intention to obscure ancestral knowledges that are best expressed in ways least likely to be historically preserved – emotional tone, color, sound and smell, private moments and ephemera of personal relationships, hopes, aspirations, things unsaid.

Over the past year, I have taught a range of relational reconstruction techniques to hundreds of people, in workshops especially attended by Asian Americans and others from communities of color whose histories have been erased. Through a video series and online toolkit (<https://libraryofcongress.github.io/seeing-lost-enclaves/>) I've invited many others to participate in this methodology and to apply it to their own personal and family archives. Through a series of collaborations, I have also begun to recreate relational reconstructions of other communities, including at Portland, Oregon's Chinese Vegetable Gardens (with Dri Chiu Tattersfield), New Echota, Georgia (with Alicia Renee Ball), Hanford, California's China Alley (with Evelyn Hang Yin), and Pachappa Camp at Riverside, California (with Mikki Paek). This is in addition to dozens of more personal-scale "enclaves" crafted from family photos and memories. Each reconstruction has opened new creative doors, incorporating speculative historic soundscapes, simulated water and vegetation, and imaginative atmospheric worldbuilding. However, it's been a challenge to imagine thoughtful ways to invite different publics to view and interact with these often sensitive reconstructions in ways that are respectful, nourishing, and appropriate.

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The ultimate decision to share reconstructions as a series of "hidden portals" invites some explanation, or unpacking. The playful inversion of invisibility repositions the work within a space of privacy, as a sensitive site, and protects it from ignorant or racist misreadings, or the indignities of adjacency with present day happenings in communities which are often no longer Asian American—for historical reasons directly related to the original violence which destroyed many of these sites. They also resist being understood as a form of tourism; a bit of "Old West color" or a curiosity, rather than a legacy and a responsibility which lives on in the present. The reconstructions, as virtual presences, remain ghostly, insubstantial – impossible to *drive out* as they "haunt" their sites of origin. (In an early version of the project plan, "breadcrumbs" or clues, in the form of recreated artifacts or insignias, subtly placed on site, indicated the exact spot where visitors would need to stand in order to access the reconstructions.) They likewise present a kind of provocation to present day communities, not asking permission to exist and yet taking up space as uncomfortable presences. Finally, the act of visiting these portals can be understood as a form of care, both for ourselves through our personal relationships with these histories (as descendants, or Asian Americans, for example), and as a way of honoring these past lives and struggles. In this paper, I'll be digging more deeply into how these themes shape the work in its various forms, as well as specifically in the *Hidden Portals* installations.

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Collage concept sketch for Hidden Portals at the site of Burrill Street Chinatown in Providence, RI

In unpacking the way *Hidden Portals* works, I return to the recurring question, “What kind of project is this?” I knew early on that although my work touches on many themes of harm and violence, it wasn’t primarily about recounting or cataloging harm and violence, although I think that is very important work. I appreciate work by authors like Jean Pfaeltzer, who take on that important task of documentation, which is still required today, as I regularly encounter people who seek to minimize or erase those very real parts of our shared history. But my work seeks to go beyond cataloging harm by developing relational reconstruction into a practice of reconnection informed by personal relationships with histories.

My work is also not exactly an archiving project; I’m neither a historian nor an archivist, and as I’ll get into, I’m often working at cross purposes with the official goals of institutional archives. (It is certainly entangled in important work by archivists: see Dorothy Berry’s “The House Archives Built.”) And although I’ve shown this work in various forms in

galleries or installations, I feel it's not a natural venue for these stories, in isolation from the world, and "on exhibit" in a problematic way, even in very welcoming spaces of that kind.

At its core, this question is about two things – first, **what are appropriate forms, genres, and venues to understand these histories?** Second, **who is the primary audience for this work?** The second question is easier to answer – for me, it's Asian Americans like myself who feel some kind of personal connection to these communities and sites, whether through ancestry, culture, racialization, or simply (yet powerfully) the experience of living in places where their own identity has been shaped by these long-ago communities in important ways.

The ongoing challenge of appropriate formats and venues is the reason my work has taken so many different forms: from online VR experiences, to cardboard mask-making workshops, to sharing food or camping in the woods. Relational reconstruction began as a way of situating my thinking within a set of digital and research tools. For me, it's evolved into a more expansive set of archivally-informed space-making approaches which center the personal, rather than the historical. In this way, it is distinct from memorial-making or commemoration in the public sense, and focuses more on creating intimate and even private spaces centered in present-day Asian American communities.

Perhaps that's why so much of my work has taken place online – where you can experience things in the privacy and comfort of your home. But it's also why I've often had the greatest challenges developing work in highly public real-world places. (This is compounded by the fact that many sites I've worked on no longer exist; have been overwritten and erased, and are not the site of present-day Asian American communities.) While I've given plenty of talks about the research and creative process which makes up my work, description and explanation are less vital than the personal engagement with histories which I feel can only happen within creative and organic community processes. Thus, as my work on *Seeing Lost Enclaves* progressed, I focused more and more on such creative communal practices, in the form of workshops, virtual visits, and other forms of group memory work. The deeper meaning-making of events like [Tigers & Portals](#), which I hosted in collaboration with Vic Xu and Vuthy Lay, has provided much groundwork for the design of Hidden Portals.

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I often cite Saidiya Hartman's work of critical fabulation as a primary inspiration for my own relational reconstruction work, though instead of working as she does, in text, my medium is immersive and multisensory. This stems from my own practice as an artist, but also from my awareness that multisensory work can be a powerful form of personal reconnection. It also works in two ways – multisensory knowledge is both less likely to

survive in an archive and more likely to survive an archive's damage. A recipe, a song, a tactile method of weaving, carving or kneading, is almost never recorded in archives in the way they are passed within families – experientially, multisensorially, and enmeshed in cultural context and lived experience. But this also makes them more opaque to outsiders, and more resilient to the kinds of damage – misunderstandings, rumors, bias – which other forms of knowledge (written records, for example) often experience. (See “playing dead” in [Dear Daughter, Welcome Back](#) by Christina Tran.) In my close readings photos (by White photographers), like that of a fish market in San Francisco Chinatown, I can sometimes pick out details like the joinery of a table leg, the tabletop warping from the moisture of the fish – which speak to my own knowledge and experiences, and through which I feel connected with those in the photograph. This connection is even deeper when I work with photography from Korea, where I can imagine my own ancestors carving wood, wearing clothes, or preparing foods in ways especially familiar and meaningful to me.



A fishmonger and customer. Cropped from original in Specific Subject File filing series, Print and Photo Division, Library of Congress.

These insights are both sensory, and personal. They build on Hartman's approach of "reading [archives] against the grain" by looking in the margins, but also through a personal lens, through my particular interests in woodworking and in cooking, for example. (See also *Albums of Inclusion: The Photographic Poetics of Caribbean Chinese Visual Kinship* by Tao Leigh Goffe for another inspiration.) While visiting historic Asian American sites in California with fellow artist Ann Chen, we cooked and enjoyed foods which drew on our own heritages, while taking inspiration from ingredients and recipes we recognized from historical accounts of Chinese American foodways. These enriched our experience of, and relationship with, the histories of rural Chinatowns, and also embodied the "against the grain" spirit of Hartman's work – the histories we drew upon, by White writers of the time, largely noted foods like fried oysters, preserved eggs, and rice liquor, as exoticized objects of disgust.

Multisensory approaches make space for pleasure, joy, warmth, and love, which can be hard to find in textural or even pictorial records. Likewise, the creation of a warm space of remembrance, as an immersive VR experience, is a form of counter-archiving, a reclamation of histories meant for in-community meaning-making.

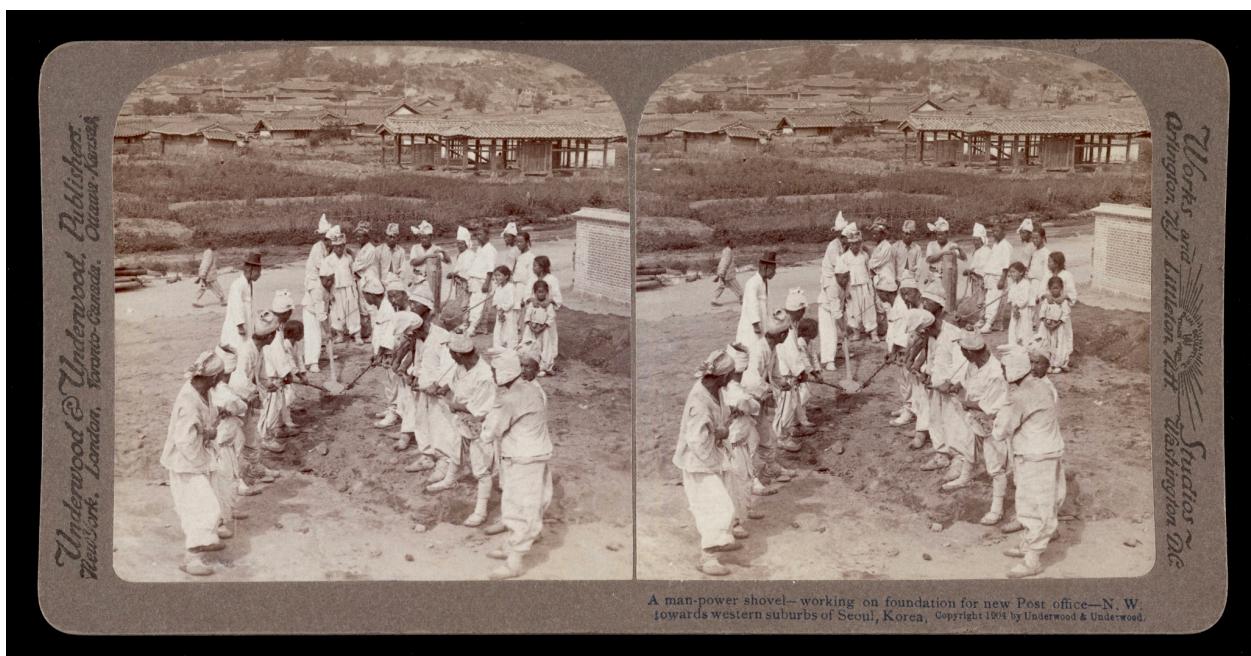
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This focus on sensorial, somatic work of reconnection, especially in practice, draws on another major inspiration in my work, learning from the work of Aisha Jandosova and Aida Issakhankzy's Babalar Press, who have taken up the concept of *re-existencia*. Coined by Adolfo Albán Achinte and further developed by Madina Tlostanova, *re-existencia* is the practice of ancestral craft practices; Tlostanova describes Achinte's call for "an active reworking of odors, tastes, colors and sounds of his/her ancestors and remaking of systematically negated forms of interactions with the world, of being and perception... a sensual response of resistance... in defiance to coloniality." Babalar Press hosts fellowships and publishes process-based works by Kazakh people reconnecting with ancestral practices like playing the dombra or sewing felt patterns. I love these kinds of experiential approaches as a form of sensory and methodological immersion situated in our relationships with ancestral knowledges, and both their relationality and their "defiance of coloniality" inspire me as embodiments of counter-archiving.

As my early work in virtual relational reconstruction grew in complexity, I was increasingly dissatisfied with the limits of virtual architectural space in opening an experiential connection with past communities, and these were some of the ways I began to work

around these limits. Re-existencia employs experiential methods as a tactic for evading “systematic negation,” inspiring my focus on the multisensory feeling of a place. When virtually reconstructing a space, I worked with artist and designer Alicia Renee Ball to develop a toolkit of techniques for shaping the emotional tone of our reconstructions through atmospheric effects and lighting. With Ann Chen, I included a chapter on historical, speculative sound reconstruction, with the same intentions.

Author Linda Sue Park's radical work in YA literature has been another inspiring example of re-existencia through storytelling; her characters are often either children in long-ago eras of Korean history (*A Single Shard*), or present-day Korean Americans reckoning with those histories through time travel (*Archer's Quest*) or even craft practice (see *Project Mulberry*). Park's work allows for connection with ancestral experiences through detailed immersive description of craft practice, whether Goryeo-era ceramic techniques, Goguryeo-era archery, or the struggle to learn ancestral silk cultivation in a predominantly White midwestern town in the present day. *Hidden Portals* functions in similar ways in creating experiences which incorporate a sense of magic, and juxtapose long-ago moments with present-day environments in generative and complex ways.



Increasingly, my residency work at the Library of Congress also intersects with my other artistic practices of material reconstruction, in ways which Park's work helps to explain. I've long engaged in the creation of replicas inspired by archival research of Korean historical practices, such as speculative ceramic works, water-based timekeeping mechanisms, and kite designs. (In all of these cases, predating my reading of Linda Sue Park's work, which is

why reading her work feels personally prophetic in providing a theoretical grounding for these projects.) During my many hours of work with Library of Congress collections, I have also encountered items I had been researching elsewhere, including a kind of cooperative shovel used in historical photographs of Korea. This was the inspiration for a replica I call the *Together Shovel*, a shovel with ropes enabling a group to shovel in synchrony with enormous power. In work which began virtually, with the creation of a relational reconstruction of the archival photo, creating and using physical replicas with fellow Korean Americans over the past year has been a portal of its own kind, unlocking powerful experiential knowledge and insights about the lives of our ancestors.



A virtual “ancestral memory enclave” reconstructed around the cooperative shovel, and the *Together Shovel* replica in use at China Camp State Park, California.

In particular, where textual knowledge may be lost, or where language barriers make it difficult for diasporic researchers to access ancestral knowledge, research through practice (*re-existencia*) presents a way to connect with such knowledge. Through my woodworking practice, for example, I often feel that the sensory and practical knowledge of wood and how to work with it forms a common language of sorts between myself and either historical (or present-day) Korean woodworkers, which creates a bridge as I continue to build my Korean language skills. This form of “practice-informed deep looking” is one important way that I have sought to enrich my and my collaborators’ reconstruction work, and I believe it represents the future of my practice.

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To find such a moment of connection in an archival photograph – evidence which can sometimes feel intensely personal – can sometimes feel like receiving a message from one's ancestors. That is, it seems very unlikely that the White photographer was equipped to receive this kind of knowledge, or was open to receiving it (to receive such a message definitely counts as *reading against the grain*), and the same is probably true of the photographs various stewards, rightsholders, and so on, all the way until the moment you perceived/received it. Dorothy Berry writes in [The House Archives Built](#) about the many ways in which a peoples' memories, archives, stories, may intentionally and unintentionally be scattered, and stripped of context and relationships. To take part in re-connecting not only oneself with ancestral knowledge, but one's present-day community, to re-suture and remake that knowledge through practice, is an intensely personal and deeply fulfilling act.

The personal knowledge and perspectives which one brings into this work inform the re-constructed constellation of a counter-archive, and represent an in-community reclamation of histories which lays at the center of *Seeing Lost Enclaves and Hidden Portals*. I've learned that in the (colonial) "thrill" of digging stuff up¹, many early Chinese American artifacts unearthed in historical archaeological sites by White researchers are stored, but not extensively studied or understood. The personal connection to these histories which Asian American historical archaeologists have with early Asian American historical sites is extremely generative – for one, embodied in the care with which some have gone through long-ago unearthed artifacts in order to reconstruct their meaning and stories, when such artifacts have long been overlooked. I have also been deeply impressed by Laura Ng's work to reconnect with descendants of the Rock Springs Chinese American community. I have noticed how many predominantly White researchers, historians, and historical organizations have never asked the simple question of where members of these communities are today, a question which comes from an understanding of history as inhabited by real people with whom we remain in relationship, however tenuous. In my own work, I gasped when I found a remarkable circa 1900 photograph which I instantly recognized as the kitchen of a restaurant in Providence's Chinatown, but it was difficult to articulate the knowledge of what it meant to find such an image unlabeled and unknown in a folder of photos of horses and dogs. How long had it sat there?

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https://web.stanford.edu/group/chineserailroad/cgi-bin/website/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/14_Commentary_Praetzellis_Praetzellis.pdf



Photo of kitchen of Chinese American restaurant, Rhode Island Historical Society.

Relational reconstruction is a form of counter-archiving in how it stitches these fragments back together through a personal lens. For my part, as a mixed Asian American person, I am particularly attuned to stories of mixed people. While reading an article celebrating the birth of two children to Chinese parents in late 19th century Providence, I noticed the mention of mixed children, who, the reporter notes, "...do not command the attention that Moy and his sister receive." This small detail may explode widely held ideas about Providence's Chinatown as a bachelor society, or a community without families – and generates a million new questions in my mind. What other fissures may appear when we are willing to listen? What other kinds of stories may have been shaped by, erased by, normative ideas about long-ago people? Historian Henry Yu describes how family associations in early Chinatowns respected the concept of "fictive kin" – accepting unrelated members of the same surname. Might this mix of traditions, adaptations, and circumstances have been a space of "innovation" (as Hartman remakes the term) in family relationships, from queer to interracial?

SOL

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ere taken to counteract the
cation upon the minds of
ly inclined, crimes of a
would greatly increase.

MY WELCOMED.

des at Cape Town.—
decorated in His Honor.
July 15.—Mr. Cecil Rhodes, emer of Cape Colony, ar-
to-day. He was welcomed on committee composed of
izens, and enthusiastically he traversed the streets.
buildings of Cape Town were
ith bunting and in front of
all a big arch had been
ng the words: "Welcome,
r. Cape Town-Cairo."

I Before the Queen.

July 15.—Miss Leonora Jackson, remarkable talent as a violin for her this season per-
hest place in European es-
t attained by any Ameri-
n, played last night before
at Windsor Castle. She
ssohn's concerto with an
accompaniment and other

ty was so pleased that she
Jackson to play for her
borne House, Isle of Wight,

sisted in a business-like manner that
papers should be filed, so that when
her children returned to this country
again there would not be any question
of their standing.

Congress decided some time ago that
Chinese could not become citizens of
this country unless born here. Mrs.
You was cognizant of the situation, and
so decided that her children should be-
come citizens of the United States. Mrs.
You intends to return to this country
with her children. In order to do so she
will take advantage of the law which
allows merchants to return, as she
claims to have an interest in the busi-
ness on Burrill street. Both Mrs. You
and her brother-in-law filed papers
yesterday at the Custom House to that
effect.

Moy Gum Bor and Moy Gum Sou are
the only children in this city whose
father and mother are both Chinese.
Several of the Chinese residing in this
city have married white women, but
their offspring do not command the ad-
miration that Moy and his sister re-
ceive. Chinatown will give the youthful
travellers a royal send-off, and it is
likely that the Yous will find a hearty
reception upon their arrival in China.

DONATION DAY.**St. Vincent de Paul Infant Asylum's
Celebration To-day.**

Arrangements have been completed
for the annual donation day celebration
at the Infant Asylum at Davis Park.

VERY ILL WITH

**Slaterville and Black
Were Hurt July**

**EACH LAD SHOT HIS
BLANK CART**

**A Woonsocket Boy
Sick from Blood Po
by Picking a Small
Came on One of Hi
There are two cases**

"Going Abroad. Two Little Chinese Citizens Armed with Legal Papers." Providence Journal,
July 19, 1899.

To be able to listen for such possibilities involves a kind of hypersensitivity, an opening of oneself to harm along with the possibilities of joy. I have struggled with the willingness of Hartman to retell, in detail, scenes of extreme violence – not because I doubt the importance of reckoning with these truths, but because I had difficulty seeing how they might be metabolized by those seeking to heal. The profound sadness of Truckee – the burnt planks, the bits of melted glass, the “disturbed ground” and the continued presence of the McGlashan family, whose ancestors were in many ways responsible for the violence – I can understand why Asian Americans may choose to protect themselves by simply avoiding these. Yet Hartman finds people, their power, their agency, and their joy in such moments, through a remarkable exercise of creativity and willingness to be in relationship with those whose lives she uncovers.

Hidden Portals is an effort to embody such connections by reconstructing histories immersively. Through it, I hope to create opportunities for Asian Americans to have an intensely personal, experiential relationship with a long-ago place and the people who lived

there, not as readers of a historical account, but as ourselves, whatever that may mean for each of us.