

*Confronting the Lumberjack (and other stories I tell myself)*

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Mentor, Garrick Imatani

Thesis Proposal

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I am proposing a multimedia video art piece about language, familial dysfunction, cultural disparity, alternate realities, distance, love, and forgiveness. The mediums I would use include: video, performance, animation, illustration, sound, and poetry.

Structurally, the video piece will potentially border on becoming a short film through what could be considered a series of vignettes, or otherwise a series of smaller video art pieces. In this way, the format will be similar to something like Akira Kurasawa's film "Dreams," despite most likely not portraying linear narratives. This strung-together, multiple-installment structure will provide the opportunity to make work around anything that pulls me; a creation process that would allow me to investigate the variety of thoughts, feelings, and memories that I struggle to make sense of. It will majoritively be a process of consistent making followed up by a final process of arranging and paring-down. As someone that overthinks and tends to freeze, this will challenge me to test out a more quantitative approach to making. Overall, this will be a process of rumination and meditation, confrontation and desensitization, with an underlying hope of finding my own version of peace.

Conceptually, motifs and themes such as alternate realms, drawn from China's long history of Buddhist and Daoist mythology; alternate as well as simultaneous timelines; animals – including a dog, a dragon, a snake, and an ox; and the poetics of mistranslation are at the core of my ruminations. The fluidity of time and reality is a central truth in my process toward safety and forgiveness. Referencing theories such as understanding the future as its own realm, cyclical

time, radical hope, as well as the research behind Accelerated Resolution Therapy, I will use these philosophies to help broaden my perspective of what a timeline can look like. The subjectivity of meaning is also a central truth in my process. Poet and author E.J. Koh often speaks about magnanimity in her own forgiveness process, and her memoir *The Magical Language of Others* will be a strong reference for my project and something I plan to finish reading this upcoming summer.

Formally, a recurring effect that I would like to pursue would be a sense of magical realism done through “amateur” editing techniques such as jump cuts, layering, and simple animation. Inspired in part by my love for watching magic tricks, I hope to create an intentional, subtle “cheesiness”: despite the editing method being potentially obvious, viewers can still find lighthearted fun in the outcome. This self-aware, simplistic editing will also serve to alleviate pressure for technological excellence, especially when faced with accessibility limitations during COVID-19. The idea of leaning into amateur editing skills is also largely inspired by Asian dramas, whose “cheesy” by western standards and often mistake-ridden editing styles have long become associated with escape and cultural reconnection for me from as early as the age of 10 years old.

With this project I hope to explore these questions: What does healing look like? What does magnanimity and forgiveness look like? How can I rewrite my personal narrative? How can poetry mend mistranslation? How can escape and confrontation become simultaneous? How can I create alternate endings? How can I find love through distance?

## ✿ Artist Statement ✿

Sherrill Zheng is a chinese american multimedia artist currently making self-reflective work during the Covid-19 pandemic. By investigating themes of childhood, race, gender, and identity, she explores art-making as a therapeutic and healing practice – a tool to excavate and externalize the unconscious stories within oneself. Through doing so, she aims to confront the ways in which she is still complacent in systems of violence while also finding compassion for her singularity. With quarantine as her chrysalis, she sees her current art practice as creating a foundation to eventually allow for future works that will hopefully focus more on connection. She hopes that through working on her own healing, she can provide a small point of reference for others to do the same.

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*Confronting the Lumberjack (and other stories I tell myself)* is a series of four works consisting of *Assimilation Simulation*, *Soothe*, *2020 ~ 2021 ruminations*, and *The Lumberjack*.

*Assimilation Simulation* is a 2 minute video performance that reenacts my childhood asian american affect around whiteness. It serves as an entry point back into my childhood mentality to confront the insecurities I faced at that young age.

*Soothe* is a 5 minute 34 second video and audio performance reaction to the increase of sinophobia in the US when the Covid-19 outbreak first entered the country. It is both a confrontation and desensitization to anti-asian hate as a way to survive, heal, and take back power.

*2020 ~ 2021 ruminations* is a collection of poetry written over the course of a year during two big and unexpected events in my life: a global pandemic and my mother's sudden health decline. It chronicles the adapting, grieving, coping, and reflecting that happened during this time period and the variety of stories that I tell myself, both consciously and unconsciously.

When reflecting on childhood and the power dynamics that I've both experienced and witnessed growing up in a predominantly white minnesotan suburb, the legend of Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox becomes easy to reimagine as a tale of exploitation of the mute and obedient Babe for the sake of the proud and all-american Paul Bunyan and his legendary reputation.

As a confrontation of this story, *The Lumberjack* is a reimagining of the stereotypical red and black plaid flannel that's often associated with western lumberjacks; it has been easternized through hanfu inspired garment construction and made using entirely second-hand materials. When worn at face value, *The Lumberjack* is an embodiment of a presence that I often feel is inescapable. However, through restyling it into personally wearable looks, I find the power to take away this "lumberjack energy" and instead, to reinsert my own voice and perspective.

In its entirety, this body of work documents an internal investigation into the stories that live within me and a process of reflecting on their legacies. ☆ ≡

*Confronting the Lumberjack (and other stories I tell myself)*



Sherrill Zheng

**INTRO**

Hello everyone and thank you so much for your presence here at my thesis presentation.

When I started off the year of 2020, I definitely did not predict at all what was to transpire. Even so, I had already known that my thesis would be a difficult process for me for what I was proposing: a project that would revisit my childhood narratives and their underlying traumas, but ultimately try to rewrite them into happier endings. But as the year went on, I soon found myself confronted with a lot more than I had ever anticipated to encounter. Time traveling into the past became infinitely harder when I was already lost in the present. The body of work that I ended up creating this past year shows my initially proposed investigation into childhood, but now while also needing to take breaks and process, self care, and self-soothe in the present.

I present to you: *Confronting the Lumberjack (and other stories I tell myself)*, a collection of work consisting of video performance *Assimilation Simulation*, video and audio performance *Soothe*, a poetry zine titled *2020 ~ 2021 ruminations*, and, of course, *The Lumberjack*.

**ASSIMILATION SIMULATION**

**Introduction**

Growing up in a predominantly white Minnesotan suburb, I often felt that my home life was somehow lesser than that of my white peers. My parents, in order to support the family, both worked long hours at factory jobs that often left me and my younger brother home alone. When they were home, they were often too exhausted and irritable from their consistent sleep

deprivation to have been able to spend much time with us. I often envied my younger brother for he had an older sibling to look after him and seemed to not have a care in the world while playing minecraft for hours on end on the home computer, meanwhile I had felt lonely and uncared for.

As a result, I found my own form of familial comfort through television sitcoms. These shows portrayed the white nuclear family as kind, emotionally-sensitive, and fun. If there ever was a conflict, it would be resolved through a sweet heart-to-heart before the end of the 20 minute arc. When I went over to my white friends' houses to play, I projected this fantasy onto their homes and in turn, would find their family dinners, dad jokes, pie-baking, and elaborate christmas decorations as evidence for my confirmation bias. Why couldn't my family be like theirs? I would think. Why couldn't I be happy and cared for like them? Soon I found myself looking towards my white peers as guides, white lights that were beacons to some kind of happier life. If I modeled myself after them, if I tried hard to be like them, I too would have this kind of happy-go-lucky life, soundtrack included.

My video *Assimilation Simulation* is the product of my reflection on this period of time in my life, and there will now be a link in the chat to view it.

[ Watch *Assimilation Simulation* ] (~2min)

## **Analysis**

In *Assimilation Simulation*, I aimed to capture this type of “not knowing the script” feeling, always looking towards others for it, and the unnaturalness that I felt in trying to replicate it. The performance in the video takes form as somewhat of a dance, with the main figure first putting on a large smiley face mask, then trying diligently to follow the choreography of the backup dancers, but failing miserably at it. The process mimics the mentality I had as a young, insecure, chinese american girl growing up in midwestern white suburbia. I had a deep inferiority complex and a strong propensity to people-please. A phenomenon coined as “asian american affect” by K. Hyoejin Yoon, I had found myself constantly putting on this type of metaphorical smiley face mask in front of my white schoolmates, friends, and teachers – an artificial happiness that I had thought would be the currency to exchange for the thing that I truly desired: to belong.

## SOOTHE

### Introduction

When I first got word of the COVID-19 coronavirus – back then, only an outbreak within China – I didn't think much of it. Even as cases first started popping up in the U.S., never did I fathom it could become this big. Instead, what I was already finding myself witnessing more and more of in those early days was a larger increase in sinophobia, a fear or hatred of China, that was plaguing the country as a response to the virus. As a reaction, I found myself feeling as though I needed to prove some kind of point – that I was not dirty or diseased; that I was not scared of the virus, because fearing the virus somehow felt like I was validating people's justifications for racism. Before wearing a face covering was required, I wanted to but refrained from doing so, scared that it would make me look “too asian” in a country that never normalized wearing masks. When people avoided me on the sidewalks, I couldn't help but wonder if it was because of the virus, or just because of my chinese face.

But as 2020 progressed and we soon found ourselves in this global pandemic, I started realizing that in all of those ways that I tried to dismiss the virus' deadliness, I was ultimately just putting my own health at risk, and dismissing my own right to be protected. This realization was especially upsetting because I knew that it was specifically because of my asian american identity that I even had this internal conflict in the first place that delayed me from taking precautions and the pandemic seriously. Having thought to have grown out of my white idolizing phase from childhood, I was taken aback by how I had still ended up valuing the opinion of the dominant culture over my very own safety. Why should it matter to me how they perceive me as long as I'm taking care of myself? Why should their words hold so much power over me?

*Soothe* is a video and audio performance made in response to these questions and the early rise in anti-asian hate during the Covid-19 pandemic, and there will now be a link in the chat to view it. As a content warning, the video does contain racial slurs.

[ Watch *Soothe* ] (~6min)

### Analysis

Being asian american, this existing as an asian body in a predominantly eurocentric country, is to be constantly reminded that my face, skin, body, and behavior is always being seen

in comparison to white faces, skin, bodies, and behavior. And cultural assimilation thus becomes an internalization of this seeing; having my own mind's eye see myself and all that I say and do through the eyes of the white gaze, a phenomenon that W.E.B Du Bois terms as "double-consciousness."

As a kid this manifested in wanting to be white and escape my differences as an asian american. Upon realizing, as I got older, the deeply internalized hatred that was the root of this desire, I instead wanted to heal it by living defiantly in being asian. But unbeknownst to me, the way that I went about my defiance had still made me beholden to whiteness. Because now, instead of living to chase white approval, I was now living to oppose white disapproval – in the end, I was still considering my identity, worth, and validity in relation to whiteness. The pandemic made me realize this distinction.

I found myself reflecting on a guest artist talk Sharyll Burroughs gave in one of my freshman classes at PNCA, how she described herself as being completely unattached to a racial label, largely influenced by her buddhist practice. I remember being taken aback by this sentiment, it having felt like a betrayal of a collective bipoc solidarity. But although I may not fully want to detach from the kinship that I do feel with others under this artificial moniker of "asian," I believe that I am starting to understand where she is coming from. It can be easy to forget that the historical basis that race was founded on in this country was to inform eugenics and to uphold white supremacy. Even today, specifically as an asian american, I along with the rest of the asian american population still have to face a legacy of this, with our race being used as a weapon to undermine other brown and black communities, and the vilification from all sides that comes as a result.

*Soothe* was made as a recentering for myself, a purging of this stress to constantly monitor the way I behave. Through stretching out the slurs with my voice, I aimed to extinguish the meaning within them and reduce them to mere sound, while adding layers of waterfall imagery and ambient water sounds in the hopes of creating an asmr-like calm. The result is a mixture of a barrage of superficial, zen-like triggers interspersed with the harshness of recognizing the slurs and the increasing absurdity of the performance. It becomes both a confrontation and desensitization to how others perceive me as well as the conditioned feelings I have had about myself.

I also think about this piece in the context of self care and rest. Especially in asian communities where selflessness and sacrifice are often set as standards by immigrant parents who work hard to provide better lives for their children, rest becomes seen as something that

needs to be earned, or is simply a waste of time. Acupuncture, traditional eastern medicine, massage, yoga, meditation, spas, salons – are all wellness practices that asians have helped spread throughout this country, yet we often do not even see ourselves as worthy of taking the time to use them. Instead, these practices become gentrified and marketed towards an affluent and often white elite. In the midst of a pandemic and a racist society, it becomes more important than ever for marginalized groups to value and care for themselves.

The Nap Ministry, founded by Tricia Hersey is an amazing organization using a “rest as resistance” framework and their active social media presence can be a great resource to learn more about rest as a racial and social justice issue.

## 2020 ~ 2021 Ruminations

### **Introduction**

At the beginning of the pandemic, I had originally already proposed my thesis to be a project of confrontation, that of my childhood traumas. I saw my thesis as an opportunity to rewrite my painful stories and to give them alternate happy, or happier, endings. I believed that I would have the chance to do this within the solitude and calm of my own presence, a chance to develop a personal sense of home and safety within myself, before confronting the external reality that was my difficult family dynamics. But as I found myself thrown into the lockdowns and mask sweat and tequila hand sanitizer fumes, I also soon found myself thrown into another confrontation that had caught me completely off guard: that of my mother’s health taking a sudden and unexpected decline.

A second open heart surgery that gave me flashbacks to her first, but this time, instead of making a slow but seamless recovery, she now had complications in her recovery and a stroke in her brain.

Unconscious for a while and unable to speak for herself, I retained updates sporadically and delayed through pixels on a phone screen and in 4 am soundwaves through a phone mic and speaker, the hour in which my dad gets off his night shifts minus the time difference between our central and pacific time zones. Suddenly, what I thought would be an experience of a slowed, baby-steps rewinding towards some long ago, nostalgia-shrouded, past-tense traumas, had now become an intense speedrun into the eternity of a never ending present, a never ending present that was now cloaked in a garment made of the past. This never ending present became

glitched and lagged through the compoundment of cultural, technological, temporal, and emotional communication barriers. Each barrier a frustrating speed bump in this unrelenting speedrun, I found myself feeling both stuck and unable to move while also being propelled forward by a super mario kart like rocketjet along a route to some potential alternate-future that I was no longer ready for.

Throughout all of this, I found myself writing in the forms of dream journaling and poetry. Dream journaling helped me gain clarity into how I was feeling and what was on my subconscious mind. At this point in time, I was finding myself unsure of how or what I was even feeling or thinking, unable to find words or even the emotions within me. I felt off and irritable and extra sensitive, but it was also all lost in a desensitizing haze and I felt as though I couldn't trust any of it to be real. As someone who doesn't often remember her dreams, dream journaling helped me develop the ability to better recall them and I was soon able to retain these subconscious stories that my brain was telling me every night. Stories that made no sense when put into words, but the feelings they captured and emotional journeys they took me on helped me pinpoint the underlying emotions and stresses that fueled them, and in turn, were fueling me. And through these dreams, these unconscious stories, I was able to find a language to find and express myself again. These unconscious stories were exactly what I was already trying to do with my poetry, I just didn't know it yet. All I knew when I was awake and writing these poems was that these stories that would come to me during the surreal, energetic process of poetry writing somehow rang more true than my actual "candid" truths. I knew for a fact that they were not factual, that there were lies and mashups and borrowing and editing that happened in the poetic process, but still, the end result would deliver that *feeling* of these personal truths that I was so desperately trying to express.

*2020 ~ 2021 ruminations* is a set of poems I wrote throughout this past year, and I will now read some of them:

[ Read 1st half of poems ] (~6min)

## THE LUMBERJACK

### Introduction

This last poem that I just read was born from an impulse to reimagine the legend of Paul Bunyan. For those unfamiliar, Paul Bunyan is fabled to be a giant lumberjack, a legend largely told across the midwest and Canada. He is famous for his larger than life feats of lumbering and also for his animal companion, a giant blue ox known as Babe the Blue Ox. When you hear this legend, what is the story you project onto it?

In my case, I find myself feeling a deep empathy for Babe, this blue magical, otherworldly creature that has been nonconsensually exploited for grewling labor, and all to uphold the name and prestige of a white man. That is the story that rings true for me. This most likely is not the inclination most of you would have when hearing this legend, but that is the point. The stories that we gravitate towards and tell ourselves become a reflection point for our own biases, sensitivities, vulnerabilities, and experiences.

The compoundment of my asian, woman, and american identities, along with my personal and childhood traumas, has resulted in an experience where I have had to learn to read between the lines to survive. Cultural and language barriers within my family have made me develop a sensitivity to misunderstandings, mistranslations, and the expectation of obedience, while my mere visibility as an asian woman in white america has made me sharply attuned to how I might be objectified, dismissed, belittled, or used in any given dynamic. Who is doing most of the work and who is getting the credit? I think about garment workers, often in asian countries, and the disposability the fashion industry treats them with. I think about the group projects I've been in for school, where kids would joke about being happy to have me in the group because I was so "smart," which was their way of saying that they wanted me to do most of the work but for us all to share the credit. I also think about the massage parlor workers in Atlanta who worked jobs designed to make bodies feel cared for and good, only to be blamed for the personal problems and sex addiction of a white man, and ended up paying for it with their lives. The lumberjack therefore becomes a symbol to tell these unconscious stories with, an embodiment of this overbearing, authoritarian, opportunistic, violent, lumbering presence that I feel that others can take on as a reaction to witnessing me and other asian women as mute, agreeable, docile, and exotic creatures, aka as Babe.

As a confrontation of this story, I decided to make a garment that embodied this "lumberjack" presence in my life. But as a character inhabiting my mind, it had to respect and adhere to the cultural conventions of the place it was in. So my garment, *The Lumberjack*, becomes a reimagining of the stereotypical red and black, plaid, button-up flannel typically associated with western lumberjacks; and is instead easternized through hanfu-inspired

construction, hanfu being traditional chinese clothing, as well as made out of entirely second-hand materials. I researched different styles of hanfu and came across the ao, a two-layered hanfu coat style that was commonly worn in winter. This felt ideal for a Minnesotan lumberjack, so I decided to embark on the laborious task of doubling the amount of fabric and sewing to make the piece.

The result is a coat-like garment made from a total of 6 thrifted button-ups, some parts and pieces of 4 old aprons, as well as a few additional yards of reclaimed fabric. Although I had anticipated creating this garment since the start of my thesis, I had found myself for the longest time, frozen at the idea of making it. I've always seen sewing as a meditative and healing process, but I was unable to truly dive into it until I had heard back that my mom had gained consciousness, was able to speak again, and was finally recovering. The news of her gradual healing gave me the peace and clarity to start sewing – both of us mending separately, but together.

This coincidence felt meaningful to me, and I thought about the work of Lee Mingwei, who has multiple works along the themes of clothing-mending and the relationships that they highlight. His projects “The Mending Project” and “Fabric of Memory” showcase this sensitivity to the depth of history and connection our clothing can often contain.

Through reflecting on all of this, I was eventually able to complete the construction for my reimagined lumberjack garment. So now, without further ado, I present to you: The Lumberjack!

## **Analysis**

When wearing the piece at face value, I found that in my attempts to try to embody this lumberjack energy, it would quickly devolve into something extremely humorous and naive. But I do think this is the danger of the lumberjack, this white innocence as James Baldwin often called it, that makes white violence that much more dangerous, because it is done unintentionally and completely outside of white consciousness and perception. It becomes easy to see the lumberjack as simply bro-y and other “ultimately harmless” descriptors, but these almost always overlook the true sinister nature of what is going on, giving him the veil to get away with things just under your nose. He embodies an all-american feeling that asians in turn are meant to model for minorities, but without the privilege of being able to get away with breaking the rules. Embodying the lumberjack can thus represent the process of being indoctrinated as a model minority and the continuation of violence that it perpetuates.

But the construction of this particular garment has given it a versatility that has allowed for it to be restyled in many ways. The ties can be tied in a variety of ways or not at all, the two front pieces that overlap having different patterns on each side giving the garment many ways to create new visual interest and silhouettes.

The stereotypical lumberjack pattern that I personally have found repulsive for all of the 2010's lumbersexual hipsters that it triggers in my mind, has now taken on a kind of maximalist, upcycled aesthetic that I actually find quite fun.

Restyling the lumberjack therefore becomes a way to overpower this “lumberjack presence” in the garment and in turn insert my own perspective, style, and voice. With clothing as our second skin, fashion easily becomes another form of storytelling and another way to discover more stories about ourselves.

Here I have some examples of restyling as granting the wearer power over the context of the garment.

## 2020 ~ 2021 Ruminations

I'd like to wrap up with reading from the last half the poems from *2020 ~ 2021 ruminations*

[ read poems ]

## CONCLUSION

I'd like to give a special thank you to my roommates Frankie and Tony, my mentor Garrick, Linda the head of thesis, and my family, for helping me get to this very moment. I am so grateful for all of the support that I've received from all of you. I'd also like to extend a thank you to those of you who came to view my presentation today, it means a lot that you all found the time to be here. This concludes my presentation and I will now open things up to the panel members. Thanks everyone.

## ❖ Bibliography ❖

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Performance video artwork where multiple videos documenting the performance done in various urban environments around the world were shown simultaneously. Socially-engaged piece that shows how different cultures react to stillness and body language.

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Contemporary Chinese television drama that takes place in the "Heavenly Realm" or "Spiritual Paradise" that is often referenced in Chinese mythology. Cheesy/fun special effects, Daoist/Buddhist themes.

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Specifically the short story "The Outing," it tells the tale of a queer love that doesn't happen. Storytelling inspiration.

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Explains how the theory of performativity applies for both gender and sex. Deviant bodies are used to define the subject.

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Magical girls genre anime. Fashion inspiration.

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Lee Mingwei

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*Madame White Snake*. Frank Lee International, 1956.

Directed by Shirô Toyoda. Aesthetic inspiration and themes of transcendence. Depicts *jing ling* (精灵) / humanizing of animals.

Mel Chin

Overall diverse and multidisciplinary repertoire. Inspiration to not feel pressure to have a single “thing” as an artist.

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Analyzes Baldwin's visible queerness in the public sphere. Touches on possible explanation for his refrain from using the label "gay," which encourages thinking about how our labels may or may not serve us.

*Semiotics of the Kitchen*. Martha Rosler, 1975.

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Satirical performance of 60's television cooking demonstrations.

Sharyll Burroughs

Gave an artist talk about her non-attachment to a racial label, largely influenced by her buddhist practice.

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*The Little Prince*. Goskino USSR, 1966.

Directed by Arunas Zebriunas, based on the novel by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. Inspiration for themes of loneliness and childhood.

*The Nap Ministry*. Tricia Hersey, 2016

An organization that uses a "Rest as Resistance" framework to provide resources and activism around rest as a racial and social justice issue.

*Whose Utopia*. Cao Fei, 2006.

Made in collaboration with the employees at Osram China Lighting Ltd., this video art piece explores the hopes and dreams of chinese factory workers.

Inspiration for simplistic but poetic video editing. Formatted in three parts/installments.

Yoon, K. Hyoejin. "LEARNING ASIAN AMERICAN AFFECT." *Representations*, pp. 293–322.,

doi:10.2307/j.ctt4cgqmc.19.

Discussed the racial and gendered ways in which asian american affect functions. How the "model minority" narrative is used by american society as a tool to maintain the affective economy of citizenship and how it affects dynamics in the classroom.