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Jessica Li  
*University of Pennsylvania, jesli@sas.upenn.edu*

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# Donut Boys: A Critical-Creative Understanding of South Philadelphia's Cambodian American Population

Jessica Li

*University of Pennsylvania*

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## **Abstract**

Philadelphia is a major resettlement area for thousands of Southeast Asian refugees, immigrants, and their families; however, there is little research and literature about these niche communities. The goal of this project was to examine the lives of Cambodian Americans in South Philadelphia, specifically the “Cambodia Town” neighborhood, through a critical research and creative writing lens. Through semi-structured interviews and participant observations in Cambodia Town, I explored themes such as family relationships in Cambodian American communities, intergenerational trauma from the Khmer Rouge, and the impact of Buddhism on the Cambodian American experience. Building upon these findings, I completed one novella and one adapted screenplay—both entitled *Donut Boys*—written in the perspective of a Cambodian American man who returns to his hometown of South Philadelphia to help his family’s donut shop in the aftermath of his brother’s suicide. Ultimately, I utilized qualitative research skills and ethnographic fieldwork within Cambodia Town to produce a more nuanced representation of this ethnic community in my creative work.

*Keywords:* Philadelphia, Cambodia, Cambodian American Identity, Anthropology, Ethnographic Fieldwork, Immigrant Studies, Refugee Studies, Creative Writing, Fiction, Screenplay

## **Introduction**

When I sat down to write my creative writing honors thesis proposal roughly seven months ago, I could not have imagined what the end result would look like. My world—and the world at large—looked very differently just a short while ago. Ideas, at the very beginning of their conception, are just that—ambiguous, amoeba-like thoughts that form in your head and that hopefully, with the proper care, can blossom into a project that is cohesive, interesting, and meaningful. While all of these designations for a piece of creative writing are truly subjective to every reader, I sit here today, seven months later in my home in New Jersey due to a global pandemic, writing this critical commentary and feeling proud of what I have produced. In this commentary, I aim to reflect on the wider scope of my thesis, *Donut Boys*, and the overall process of writing it: the personal motivations and intellectual development behind this work, the research methodology and sources used, how this work approaches genre and form, and how this work aligns with what is important to me as a writer. Ultimately, I hope this critical commentary will shed light on the development, reflection, and process of completing this work, as well as illuminate how I will push this piece forward into a wider context beyond the University of Pennsylvania.

## **Development**

In my academic studies at Penn throughout the past four years, Asian American studies and English literature have been defining parts of my experience, essential to my own understanding of myself and how I exist in relation to the world. In particular, the intersection between the Asian American studies program and the English department—Asian American literature—was powerful in shaping how I critically analyze texts and how I write my own.

Two courses that I took in my sophomore year, Dr. Josephine Park's Asian American Literature (ENGL 072) and Race and Asian American Literature (ENGL 272) in the fall and spring semesters respectively, introduced me to incredibly varied and diverse Asian American voices in literature. These authors, from Alexander Chee to Fae Myenne Ng to Chang-rae Lee, were unafraid to tackle difficult topics in the Asian American community that often go undiscussed: LGTBQ+ issues, mental health, racial discrimination, sexual assault, and more. Their unflinching depictions of important Asian American narratives inspired me to want to write my own in my creative writing courses and eventually, for this thesis. Furthermore, other Asian American studies classes, like Dr. Eiichiro Azuma's Asian American History (ASAM 003) and Dr. Rupa Pillai's Asian American Gender and Sexualities (ASAM 215), have allowed me to build a more foundational knowledge of Asian American histories and identity formations, providing a critical race theory framework through which to understand Asian American narratives.

Taking formative creative writing classes alongside my Asian American literature and studies coursework has also contributed to the eventual undertaking of my thesis. In the spring of sophomore year, I took Max Apple's Advanced Fiction Writing (ENGL 115), where I began to experiment with different Asian American narratives. One story I wrote that I was particularly proud of explored a young Asian American man's summer after high school, dealing with the consequences of a DUI and the aimlessness of having no plans or direction. I discovered that I liked writing about the feeling of identity loss or loss of direction, especially in Asian Americans, an issue that is certainly reflected in my own insecurities and process of figuring out who I am in the uncertainty of my early twenties in college. I built upon these ideas in Scott Burkhardt's Screenwriting Workshop (ENGL 116). In this class, I pushed myself to write a

challenging piece of literature from an Asian American perspective that was very different from my own, one that would propel me forward towards my senior thesis project: my final work was a half-drafted screenplay called *Cambodia Town*, a comedy about an aspiring rapper/high school dropout who gets his best friend pregnant in her last year of high school. This story took place in Long Beach, California, a highly populated Cambodian neighborhood in the United States that's also referred to as "Cambodia Town." After writing this piece, I was inspired to keep learning more about and writing about Cambodian American narratives and Southeast Asian American narratives as a whole, expanding on the ideas I built in this workshop. In my next and last creative writing class, Weike Wang's *Writing the Novella* (ENGL 115) which I am taking this semester, I chose to focus on writing my thesis novella—a novella about *Cambodia Town*, but this time, in South Philadelphia.

Why the interest in the Southeast Asian American community, particularly Cambodian Americans? I recognize this is a community that is not mine: I identify as an East Asian American woman, specifically Chinese American. Thus, I do not face the same issues or struggles that many in the Southeast Asian American community face. To answer this particular question, I must reflect on the extra-curricular involvements I have undertaken, outside of academic study.

Throughout my time at Penn, I have been heavily involved in Asian American organizations and activist spaces, wanting to learn more about my own identity and how I can help others in my community, including underrepresented voices that are not my own. In the spring of my sophomore year, I participated in an organization called APALI, or Asian Pacific American Leadership Initiative, in which we gathered for discussions about various APA topics every other week, from Asian food politics to Asian LGBTQ+ issues. One formative discussion

that inspired my work for this thesis was one in which we discussed the disparities between different Asian American communities, and how the “model minority myth” that East Asians and South Asians perpetuate in the United States (which claims Asians are the most successful minority group and pits them above all other minorities) overshadows the struggles that the Southeast Asian community faces. We watched a PBS documentary about Cambodia Town in Long Beach, California and the problems that this neighborhood faces: low high school graduation rates, gang culture and violence, lower income levels, and intergenerational trauma from the Khmer Rouge, a genocide that ravaged Cambodia, that many Cambodians in this area escaped from. This documentary struck a chord with me, and I ended up basing my main character in my Cambodia Town screenplay for Professor Burkhardt’s class on one of the men interviewed, which then inspired my ultimate thesis narrative.

As I furthered my involvement in Asian American spaces after APALI, I continued to do my best to advocate for underrepresented Asian voices within Penn’s community, particularly Southeast Asian folks. In my junior year, I served as Vice Chair of Political Affairs in Penn’s Asian Pacific Student Coalition (whose mission is to represent and support the interests and concerns of nearly all APA organizations on campus) and realized how little Southeast Asians were represented while East Asians and South Asians dominated the Asian organizations at Penn. In my term, I organized a Southeast Asian Collaboration night, in which all six of Penn’s Southeast Asian cultural groups came together for a night of games and food and culture-sharing as a way to hopefully engage more Southeast Asians at Penn and within our Student Coalition. This past year as a senior, I’ve served as Co-Chair for the Asian American Studies Undergraduate Advisory Board, a student-run board that supports and promotes Asian American

Studies at Penn. Through this position, I've learned the importance of advocating for resources for ethnic studies at Penn and listening to the narratives of my fellow board members and other ASAM students who identify as Southeast Asian. Many of them identify as first-generation low-income students, and the issues they've faced in their communities again highlights the disparities between the Southeast Asian community and other Asian groups: from lower education rates to socioeconomic class struggles to the uncertainty of refugee status, these are vastly different issues than what many privileged East Asians face. This knowledge, fueled by my activities within the Asian American space at Penn and my desire to learn more about a different community from my own, contributed largely to my decision to pursue this story about Cambodia Town in South Philadelphia.

### **Methodology**

In the process of creating my senior thesis, I wanted to emphasize and focus on the critical research component as an equally important step as the actual writing process, ensuring that I completed my research before starting any writing. Because I am not a Cambodian American man who grew up in Cambodia Town in South Philadelphia, and I was writing in the perspective of one, I depended heavily on my research to create a more nuanced, accurate portrayal of this person's life experiences and the community itself. Instead of writing a spontaneous, stream-of-consciousness creative work, I wanted to focus on research to inform my writing. I was planning on writing about difficult and delicate subjects, and I wanted to be as sensitive and as effective as I could in executing this. Additionally, I wanted to try creating and conducting my own primary research, something I had never gotten to do before. I saw this thesis as an opportunity for me to challenge myself, take initiative in building my own

independent research project, and explore a local community in Philadelphia I had always wanted to learn more about. In my preparation for this research in the fall semester, I submitted my IRB application to request permission to interview human subjects, applied for a research funding grant through CURF, secured a College Alumni Society Grant of \$150, and used this money to conduct my research beginning in spring semester.

My research methodology drew from anthropological and sociological fields, using ethnographic fieldwork to explore the Cambodian American community in Philadelphia. In the first month of the semester, from mid-January to mid-February, I focused solely on conducting research and gathering data, which included participant observation and semi-structured interviews. For participant observation, I observed the Cambodian residents that frequent the Preah Buddha Rangsey Temple, located in South Philadelphia on Sixth Street, to better understand the role that Buddhism plays in their daily lives. Out of the three total trips I made to Cambodia Town, I visited the temple two times. One time, I was greeted by a monk, and another time, I was approached by a Cambodian father who proudly showed me pictures of his daughter learning traditional Cambodian dances and who kindly invited me back to the temple later for Cambodian festivities. Additionally, I observed that during the weekends, monks teach Khmer language classes for children, an important community service. This detail becomes a substantial narrative device in my story.

For semi-structured interviews, I conducted four interviews with four Cambodian Americans: three Penn students, two women and one man, all around the age of 20; one older Cambodian male, around the age of 30, the director at a nonprofit organization that serves Cambodians in Philadelphia. The two male participants identified as 1.5-generation Cambodian (born in Cambodia and emigrated to the United States at an early age) and the two female



participants identified as second-generation Cambodian (born in the United States). However, despite these differences, there were several commonalities among all participants. All participants' parents were refugees who fled Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge, a brutal regime that killed 2 million Cambodians under the Marxist leader Pol Pot. All parents also worked in the service industry, from working at a factory to owning a donut shop to being a nail tech. All participants were among the first generation in their families to go to college, alongside their siblings.

Each interview was an hour long. With permission, I recorded each interview with my phone and took detailed notes. The questions I asked covered a wide scope of personal information, including family/home life (e.g., parents' background, their upbringing), history and culture (e.g., intergenerational gaps, the Khmer Rouge), greater community (e.g., growing up in Philadelphia, interactions with other Cambodians), and religion (e.g., impact of Buddhism in shaping their worldviews). As a result, these interviews quickly became deeply personal and emotionally raw; sometimes, they were hard to get through. I made sure to create a safe interview space, emphasizing that they could skip any question or end the interview at any time.

While all interviewees provided helpful and compelling insights, I was able to get the most relevant information for my story from the two male participants, especially the 30-year-old nonprofit worker who grew up specifically in South Philadelphia near Cambodia Town, as my main protagonist is a 29-year-old man who has a similar background. I was inspired by certain elements and details in their backgrounds and stories and was able to implement some of these into my final story: the donut shop, restaurants in Cambodia Town, working in a blueberry field as a child, and more. Overall, these interviews were extremely helpful in understanding the

cultural experiences of growing up Cambodian American in Philadelphia and set the foundation for the next two months of writing.

In addition to my primary research, I utilized several secondary sources in my final project. One research article I found particularly helpful was Heather A. Peters' "A study of Southeast Asian youth in Philadelphia: A final report," in which she provides a comprehensive look at the Philadelphia Southeast Asian refugee community and the role of ethnic identity among the Southeast Asian Youth in Philadelphia. Other articles that aided my writing included interviews with Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees in Philadelphia dealing with Trump's anti-immigration policies, a piece about the history of the Preah Buddha Rangsey Temple, and even an article featuring a local Cambodia Town rapper parodying Drake and rapping about his community. I also found an engaging YouTube video about why there are so many Cambodian donut shops in Southern California. Lastly, two short novels, both written by Asian American women, inspired me throughout my writing process and certainly influenced my writing style: *Goodbye, Vitamin* by Rachel Khong and *Chemistry* by Weike Wang. It was an incredible feeling to read Asian American literature while writing my own.

## **Genre**

This project's approach to genre is inherently experimental: it does not belong to any singular medium or label. I wanted to think about genre not as categorization, but as relationship and adaptation: what happens when we transfer a story from one medium to another? What is lost and what is gained in translation? Practically, I chose to write both a novella and a screenplay to sharpen my skills in both areas as someone interested in media and entertainment; theoretically, I thought the questions raised by adaptation were compelling and worth investigating.

By writing a fifty-page novella and adapting it into a twenty-page screenplay, I forced myself to constantly shift the boundaries of my story, understand what the core of the story was to trim the fat, and be as flexible as possible in my writing. Through this process, I discovered two surprising realizations about the art of adaptation from novella to screenplay.

First, I realized that screenwriting is much more limited in how you can express your characters' motivations and feelings. In fiction, the author has the luxury of entering the character's head, communicating as much background information and detail as they want to the reader. However, screenwriting is much more visually and externally driven, and emotions and internal conflicts are expressed through direct action—what the viewer can see them do on the screen. This was particularly frustrating, as I had to cut out many inner monologue ramblings from the novella and somehow convey the same emotional intensity in the screenplay.

However, this challenge led me to my second, more positive realization: this process allows you to maximize your creativity and explore all the possible ways your narrative can go. When I cut internal dialogue or thoughts away from the screenplay, this forced me to come up with new scenes that would emphasize action and also slightly alter certain elements of the plotline, sometimes switching out a character for another one or having my main protagonist do something differently. Surprisingly, sometimes I would like the way I wrote a plot point in the screenplay better than how I wrote it in the novella and would go back and change it. Before this process began, I had assumed the process of adaptation would be linear, that only the ideas from the novella would translate into the screenplay and not vice versa. I could not have been more wrong—I learned how collaborative the process is between both mediums, and how one can influence the other symbiotically.

At one point in the adaptation process, I wondered if I had made a mistake: was my story even the right kind of narrative for a screenplay? Did I get my story's message across in the screenplay? However, regardless of how objectively successful I was in adapting a novella into a screenplay, I'm glad I did it: this process of genre-bending taught me so much about both mediums, the gray area that exists between them, and ultimately strengthened my skills in writing both.

### **Next Steps**

As a writer, I deeply believe in the power of storytelling to enact social change. By writing and sharing and listening to the stories of historically marginalized and underrepresented people, we can build empathy, challenge stereotypes, and shed light on important issues that affect their communities. Sharing stories, no matter how small, is how we connect with each other: it shapes how we see ourselves and others, how we navigate this uncertain world.

This is why I'm not quite finished with my project yet. While I have completed writing it, my next goal with this piece of writing is to make it as accessible as possible for all, especially for those who this story is written about and for. I am taking tangible steps now to oversee this goal and take this story to a wider context beyond Penn.

First, I will be sending my completed story back to each of my interview participants, hoping they will find a small piece of themselves in these pages and that they share with those close to them. The 30-year-old male participant, in particular, has said he is interested in possibly disseminating the story to the Cambodian folks his nonprofit serves, creating more opportunities for this story to reach the community it is representing. Secondly, I am submitting my research and story to the 2020 Richard Macksey National Undergraduate Humanities Research symposium online database, a symposium that I was accepted into a few months ago but has

since moved digital due to COVID-19 concerns. I hope that this small act may encourage other humanities students that come across it to embark on their own initiatives to research and write about communities they care about. Lastly, I will be sending my novella portion to the director of a nonprofit organization called “People and Stories/Gentes y Cuentos,” an organization that seeks to open doors to literature for underserved participants, mainly incarcerated individuals, through oral readings and discussions of short stories led by trained teachers and volunteers, in hopes that they may find use in my story and use it for a discussion. This director was kind enough to send me an email out of the blue thanking me for an article I wrote in *The Daily Pennsylvanian* about the power of storytelling, and we ended up connecting over phone and talking about her organization and my thesis project.

I am extremely grateful to have been able to research and write this thesis project. This entire process, while difficult, has taught me so much about what it means to listen to someone’s story and understand a community thoughtfully and empathetically. Furthermore, as a writer interested in media and perhaps someday creating my own creative media project, TV show or movie, about an Asian American narrative, this story has certainly planted the seeds for future ideas to explore. While I am not entirely sure what I want to do with my life or exactly what kind of writer I want to be, I know that I want to advocate for Asian American representation in media and help shed light on the other issues our community faces, especially those marginalized within the Asia American label. Writing this piece has confirmed and solidified this goal. Thank you so much for the opportunity to write this piece. I hope you will find a piece of yourself in these pages, too.

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