May Babcock’s Lecture for the Panel: *Paper Diaspora: Materiality, Identity, and Place,* Organized by Serena Hocharoen

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Questions people ask me:

Where you from?

Excuse me, but, are you, um, well you look part Asian?

My mother was born in Taiwan. Her parents before her were born in mainland China, moving to

Taiwan in 1949 seeking political asylum following the communist takeover of China’s

Government.

On my father’s side, our family history goes back to the 1600s, when Europeans first settled in

New England. A well-known ancestor, John Eliot, nicknamed the ‘Apostle to the Indians’, was

the first to translate the Bible into Algonquian language. This was the first Bible printed in North

America.

Hello, my name is May.

I live in Rhode Island now. And I’m a half-white, half-Asian second generation immigrant.

In my art practice, I search to understand places. How landscapes, systems, and other humans

shape us. How we shape them. How we influence and change each other, both in the past and

into the now.

Funnily enough, I never intentionally set out to make my artwork place-based. I followed my

interests, my excitement, and my gut. And more strangely, it wasn’t until Serena asked me to

speak on this panel, that I drew connections between my personal background as part of the

Asian diaspora and my art practice, both the conceptual underpinnings and material approaches.

It’s true — paper has a storied, international history. And I think particularly in America,

techniques have traveled from far flung places to co-mingle and make something new and

unexpected. We use Philipino abaca, Nepalese moulds, and Japanese sheet-formation—it all

goes into the ‘art-blender’, so to speak.

In my own practice, I use many foraged plant fibers, and also modify or even invent techniques

to create my artwork. I am highly conscious of where my materials come from, to the point

where I spend much of my time trying to understand the complexity of a place. Who lived here?

What activities have human conducted here? How is the land used now? How did this plant

arrive? How does water move over or under the landscape? What does geological history tell

us?

Materials that I source by my own hand thus become much more complicated, and move

beyond visual aesthetics. Even how the fiber behaves as paper becomes informative; a process

of discovery. You can say I’m a Asian diasporic artist who has dived fully into trying to

understand what ‘American’ papermaking looks like.

I see parallels between plant histories and travels, and people histories and travels. Immigrants

who are finding a place to live, people who have been here longer, and people whose ancestors

have been much, much longer.

(Japanese knotweed is a common invasive plant from Japan that makes great paper. I

empathize with these travelers who are demonized because they are successful. Invasives do

have negative impact on ecologies, but we tend to place blame on the plant, and not ourselves

changing the climate.)

(Water chest, trapa natans, has Eurpean origins, and thrives well in Valley Falls Pond)

(Herbarium series, research into place names)

I see parallels between America’s immigrant origins and a paper diaspora.

(Deckle box papermaking, a modify Nepalese mould, used to embedded pondweed for my

Herbarium series)

(Hula hoop community papermaking at Galego court)

(tin can method with the elderly, asking them to think of their favorite natural places)

Often, those in diasporas feel un-tied. Not really part of the ‘home country’, but also too different

to feel included as a transplant. Perhaps that’s why I don’t feel any more ownership over

traditional Eastern fibers over working with rag pulp. I’m not bound to traditional Chinese

papermaking technique any more than I’m bound to using stampers to beat rag. You could say

I’m an equal opportunity papermaker who quotes from many traditions and makes up new ones.

Long distance or close by, each fiber material has its own characteristics that I take the time to

get to know. For example, abaca, a fiber that’s traveled far, plays a significant role in my studio

simply because of its particular strength, sheen, and sculptural abilities. What happens when I

combine it with some esoteric pondweed found in a glacial pond somewhere in the Montana

mountains?

Identity is intrinsically tied to place. And by seeing, embracing, empathizing with places through

available materials and transformation in the paper studio, these places have become part of

my own identity. What an amazing gift hand papermaking is!

# Panel: Paper Diaspora: Materiality, Identity, and Place

Several revered materials and techniques used in handmade paper, printmaking, and

the book arts have traveled long distances to America. Non-Western methods have spread

throughout the globe: from the initial invention of paper in China to joomchi from Korea or

traditional handmade paper and mokuhanga from Japan. What do we make of studying these

techniques from faraway lands and bringing them to the Western world? How can we place the

history of handmade paper within the history of colonialism, orientalism, cultural appropriation,

or globalization? As materials and techniques that can be used as a vessel to express any

means of artistic communication, are there poetic ways to acknowledge this history? We might

consider this dispersion of techniques and materials from the Non-Western world as a sort of

paper diaspora. The paper’s origins, be it a vessel for words, imagery, or installation, holds

potential meaning for the future of the diasporic condition.

For this panel, I propose to facilitate a discussion between four artists in order to discuss

these questions. By doing so, I will be providing a platform for fellow artists of the Asian

diaspora to speak as a demographic not well-represented by the handmade paper world. The

artists will discuss the ways that they use the materiality of handmade paper and printmaking

techniques to harken back to their cultural or local histories. In this new context, handmade

paper provides a link to the past but also acts as a substrate for the future to talk about place

and identity.

The artists in the panel come from diverse cultural and artistic backgrounds, providing a

range of new perspectives on paper’s significance within diaspora. May Babcock will discuss

the conceptual, technical, and personal significance of fibers sourced locally versus long

distance in her place-based practice. Ben Kraemer will discuss his recent thesis work dealing

with memory, identity, and appropriation of images. He will discuss his fascination with origami,

Godzilla, and other cultural icons passed down to him from his half-Japanese mother. Jane Kim

will be presenting her current thesis work, an artist book using Eastern papers. She is interested

in cultural hybridity and uses textile patterns that are specific to Uzbek, Korean, and Russian

cultures, drawing on old images from places that relate to her own experience or the shared

experiences of the Korean diaspora. The talked presented by these artists will provide an

overview of how the materiality of paper can be used to express meaningful perspectives on the

globalization of paper techniques and materials.

For the structure of the panel, after an introduction by the moderator, each panelist will

give a 8-10 minute artist talk with slides about their work. After the talks, the panelists will have

a discussion based off questions provided by the moderator. For the last 10 minutes, the

discussion will open to audience questions.

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