

**“A SUPPOSEDLY FUN THING I’LL DEFINITELY DO AGAIN”\***  
**\*(title a direct lift from David Foster Wallace's article and book of essays,**  
**“A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again”)**  
**by LaMar Mitchell**

On an Amtrak train headed south, trawling through what felt like thousands and thousands of acres of farmland, multiplicitous miles outside of any recognizable urban landscape, I pondered the lives people in these sorts of landscapes lead. You must understand, ultramodern cities like Oakland or San Francisco are all I empirically know, so seeing houses tucked away behind Ash trees and the foreign sight of cows and horses munching passively on land being tilled for crops and livestock, gave me a slight feeling of culture shock, albeit from a view vicarious.

The train attendant on the boxcar on our way there was colorful and as nice as you'd expect a state worker to be. Then two days later, after all was said and done, the middle-aged African American attendant on our train heading northbound back to Oakland/Jack London Square, was an absolutely gifted poet. At every stop, he would shoehorn the microphone-Intercom system, and spatter some flappy George Carlin-esque wordplay. Some real Beatnik-worthy stuff rife with verbal dances and odd arabesques. I honestly wanted to stop and ask him if he was an actual writer or wordsmith. Real recognizes real in the Bay. (LOL.)

So, riding on the Amtrak train happens to bookend the POCC Asian American Committee's trek to Clovis, California, a city planted a few miles outside of its more well-known cousin city Fresno, for the annual statewide Asian Pacific Islander Conference. Going there and back was a rather intriguing experience in culture. I was baffled to see the familiar sight of finely handcrafted graffiti splashed on the sides of walls next to the incongruous visual of cows, horses and agriculture. Like, what? There are actual graffiti writers in the rural heartland of California's Central Valley?? I must have missed that cultural memo.

Living in cities all my life, kind of gives one an open-air claustrophobia, for once you experience the spatial (and maybe temporal) dissonance of a smog-clustered city with all its trash, neon and city lights, you get bubbled inside the modality of an urban environment and, thrust into the wide-open space of fallow farmland, your city-glasses are appropriately shattered and stomped on.

And so it does go.

The ragtag band who I was traveling with, from POCC's headquarters in Alameda County, were the Asian Committee's staff supervisor, Adrienne, member Trung, and I. We touched down in the Fresno Amtrak station across from a brightly lit 7-11, got our bags and hitched a taxi to the splendid city of Clovis, and wallowed inside a Best Western hotel.

The hotel looks small from the outside, and even smaller inside. To the right, there is a pool and sauna, which made me kick myself for not bringing swim trunks and pool wear.

We were booked in three separate rooms, and I felt the thrill of aloneness and the adrenaline rush of sensing my ultimate liberation. Up to this point, I hadn't traveled anywhere big time in many, many years. That's what being in a mental hospital for 14 years will do to you. I suddenly felt free, unwatched, alone, and totally psychologically isolated. Not a toxic isolation, mind you. But thrilled “I-just-got-out-of-a-hospital-and-now-I’m-in-a-hotel-in-Clovis” exhilaration. A glee in which I realized I was no longer surrounded by deputy sheriffs, barbed wire, nurses or cameras. Show me the money, I was now truly free (if only for three days).

If there were any city in the world you could describe as an Anytown, USA, Clovis is probably on the map with bells on. Walking and riding a taxi through the very suburban town is like being Marty McFly from “Back To The Future” and flying in a DeLorean time machine and being inserted into the timeline of 1950's Americana. In a city like Oakland, there's highways and churches and liquor stores

and Starbucks and zoos and stadiums and subway stations and Mormon Temples. Clovis lives and thrives on the ubiquitous presence of endless antique shops. Every corner we turned had an antique store, and they were literally separated by maybe just two or three diners, perhaps. And honestly, to quote unquote “keep it real,” the mannequin statue of a native American Indian in front of one of these pseudo-monopolizing thrift/antique shops gave me the feeling I was perhaps in – and please forgive the partisan bent of this judgment – Trump Country. I'm not slighting the president here in this article, or by extension, his followers. I'm merely highlighting how seeing this very upscale, down-homey, suburban milieu kind of had me on edge, initially. But I digress. This is POCC and this is not **THAT** kind of article (LOL). And I'm not here to shame Trump lovers. Not here, anyway.

Checking our bags in at the hotel, we had a slight kerfuffle at the front desk. In my head, I immediately went to that irrational place of “Oh my God, what if we have to turn back?!” And yes, those are one or four of my less than choice qualities: catastrophizing, pessimism, overthinking, and jumping to conclusions. But the credit card situation was handled and my schizophrenic worries were ironed out for the time being, and I was given the electronic key to my hotel room: number 218 on the second floor. Trung was a few doors down from me, and Adrienne was on the first floor. I opened my room door, ambled in, saw the TV, the bed, etc. and I instinctively started looking around and sizing up my surroundings for those monsters of my post-hospital psyche: cameras, restrictions, locked doors, etc. Nope. I was perfectly alone. Wow. But indeed I was happy as a cherub.

Oh, and I absolutely have something to point out about Clovis. We walked into a diner that perfectly and succinctly epitomized my first impressions of the little town. It was one of those throwback 1950's American diners, with pictures of Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe and James Dean on the wall and bright red maroon stools to sit on and if memory serves me kindly, a jukebox adjacent somewhere in the back. Predictable, right? It was as though I knew there would be a diner or restaurant somewhere in this town that looked like this one, and Clovis was more than capable and willing to consummate my tickling suspicion. Entering the diner was obvious in it's Lichtensteinian pop imagery. The prices of the milkshakes started at \$8.00. I was reminded of the scene in “Pulp Fiction” where John Travolta and Uma Thurman shimmy into a 50's style diner (Jack Rabbit Slim's) and Travolta asks for a \$5.00 milkshake just to sip what a \$5.00 milkshake tastes like. “They don't put bourbon in it or nothin'?” he asks before he imbibes it. If I wanted to time travel to the 1950's I was starting off in the right place.

At 5:00pm on the first Wednesday night in Clovis, we gathered in my hotel room and rehearsed our stories, the whole entire reason we were there in the first place. (To tell our stories of resilience and recovery as related to the Asian Pacific Islander community, putting our collective stories into a workshop for that conference.) Afterwards, we went out to eat at Salsa's Cantina, a Mexican restaurant directly across the street from the Best Western, where I ordered a chimichanga full of pulled pork, cheese, sour cream and guacamole.

The next day, I woke up at about 7:45am to the blare of my smartphone. It was Trung waking me up. And I am not lying when I tell you, I woke up and literally thought I was still in Oakland. There was a brief discombobulation as I realized I wasn't in Kansas anymore. I looked around the room not knowing where the heck I was. About a few seconds elapsed before I realized I was in a hotel room, miles away from the comfy confines of my dig in East Oakland.

The Clovis Veteran's Building could serve as the model blueprint for any architect trying to build a hall or auditorium where conferences such as the API conference would be held. The design was marvelous and well-thought out; attention paid to acoustics and fine details, such as chambering different conference rooms and placing them in certain specific locations. There were bronze-like, life-like statues of soldiers, and dedications and memorials to veterans from World War 2 to the Korean War to the war in Afghanistan, stationed in the front entrance and in a lobby area, accompanied with a waterfall fountain and the audio throughout the room of thunderous H2O pouring and gushing and splashing.

After the decent continental breakfast, the actual Conference part of the day started. Opening remarks were made by Dawan Utecht, director of the Fresno County Department of Behavioral Health. This presenter made a comment that struck me: that providers must “see themselves in the people they serve.”

Jeji Africa, a gentleman who is the Director of Behavioral Health and Recovery Services in Marin County, gave an enlightening keynote speech primarily about the absence of the Asian American voice in mental health discussions. (He noted he was jetlagged from a fresh trip to Tokyo, Japan) As he spoke, he thumped about topics such as “Redefining the Model Minority Myth,” equal rights for all mental health consumers, “Reframing of Shame,” and the importance of a collectivist culture being involved in political advocacy in regards to mental health issues. Mr. Africa's best quote was: “If we're not for all people, we're not for the people.”

The day was then split up into a series of Breakout Workshop Sessions. Four presentations were going on simultaneously, and the one I chose to attend: “**Advocating for Mental Health Literacy In API Communities**” took place in the Veterans A room, and was presented by Ya-Shu Liang, Kimberly Saelee, Summer Her and Kia Yang. Yes, it was stimulating, and yes, it triggered some active neurons about how Asian communities, in general, treat mental illness as some sort of wayward mutation or taboo. I'm sure this cultural view intersects with other communities as well. (And not only Asians.)

The second workshop I attended was: “**Promoting Mental Health Care for Asian Pacific American Survivors of Domestic Violence,**” going down in the Veterans A room (once again), presented by Jessica Ayden Li. It was a pretty intense workout, as domestic violence is something I witnessed in my household as a child. I showed up late to this workshop, so I missed the first section, but I think I still gleaned the basic ideas of the session: silence and perpetuation of this maddening cycle of familial anarchy.

Maryann Le, the Deputy Director of Administrative Operations of Fresno County Department of Behavioral Health closed the show with some piquant-cinnamon remarks about the affair at large.

Somewhere between all this was time for our presentations. Adrienne went first, describing how the POCC was started and its structure. We had prepared packets containing the Strategic Plan, peer values, the applicable ACBH initiative, and brochures regarding the POCC and its Asian American Committee. Adrienne also touched briefly on her heartbreaking personal story, and the healing that happened through advocacy and providing input as a stakeholder during the MHSA Prevention & Early Intervention community gatherings. We each had to fill more time than originally planned, as one of our committee members could not come because of an illness. We switched up the rotation and order of our presenting. I went second after Adrienne, and Trung went last but certainly not least.

I honestly was not the least bit nervous about presenting my story for the workshop. I've done it too many times to let it hook into me with its familiar claws. But I must admit, midway through “my speech,” I was asked a question about my health insurance in relation to it being a barrier to me acquiring a psychotherapist. I was caught off guard by the question, and at first I stumbled, not knowing how to answer, as I felt the question was too prying and a little invasive. I wasn't sure how to deflect it, so I stammered a little, probably visibly perturbed. But besides that, I think my storytelling went well. I was a lot more naturalistic than I think I usually am.

Trung then told his story, narrating the tale of how he got through Vietnam, the challenges he faced in America, his life in the community now, and his goals.

Some time after our stories were told, we all returned to our hotel rooms and decompressed like hydraulic stick figures, exhausted from the previous day's four-hour train ride and an all-day discussion of some touchy subjects we in the mental health sector absolutely cannot avoid lest the head survives without the body.

It was mind-whirling, intense stuff. For me personally, it was good for my headspace; good to get out of my subjective little brain box.

On the train ride home, I wondered whether it would be cool to live on a stretch of farmland,

solely existing to harvest food specifically in order to feed the country or the state's myriad human populations; how cool it would be to have cows, sheep and horses in your backyard, and a sprawling expanse of walnut trees to dodge frivolously, like cars or people on a city street; in my head, I juxtaposed contrasts between the city life I've led and the perpetual width-extent-and-reach of the fertile Central Valley I was just casually passing through.

The Amtrak poet who barked witticisms into the train's intercom system probably did it all out of boredom, I think; just to spice up his likely tedious days and nights, stuck on a railroad going north, east, west and southward, probably getting paid just enough to eke by and earn a decent salary to feed his kids and prop up his partner, perking up his quaint life with a little inspired wordplay. And I actually DID think of asking him if he was a writer or poet, because his verbalisms were just so extremely spiffy.

We arrived in Oakland's Jack London Square at about 6:57pm. The phosphorescent and incandescent lights capping the city at night looked more beautiful than it probably ever has, but that may have been because I'm rarely out at night, due to my CONREP-imposed curfew, so the night looked every bit the fresh baby out of the cradle, steeped in oppressive shadow.

Trung and I Ubered it home, as I gazed up at the Mormon Temple in the Oakland Hills, on Highway 880, bathed in this dense blanket of mahogany squid-ink-hued darkness.

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November 24, 2019