**Memory in the Machine: Theorizing Transcorporeal Practices of Diasporic Memory-Making through Conversations with GPT-3**

There’s a lot that I don’t know about my family’s history. I grew up in a predominately white neighborhood a few states away from my nearest Bangladeshi extended family, and my mother wasn’t exactly enthusiastic about sharing our history with me. She experienced a lot of trauma growing up in Bangladesh during its war for independence, and while she’s written a memoir about her history to establish a coherent narrative of her recollections, she’s reluctant to let me read it. She’s never really said why allowing the public to read about her life feels more accessible to her than sharing these memories with her children, but I imagine it’s largely related to the collaborative, social act of memory-making and understanding our collective story that the act of sharing her (our?) story with my sister and I would require. In other words, we’d inevitably have our questions, our own interpretations of events, and our own ways of mediating this collective memory within our personal and collective diasporic narratives. This messy, social practice of memory is something my mother has shied away from, and, as a result, I oftentimes feel like my understanding of my family’s diasporic narrative and collective memory is a loose sketch at best, full of elisions and strategically-forgotten stories.

For my final project, I decided to explore some of these elisions in my family’s narrative and their affective significance in the construction of my identity as an Asian/American. Experimenting with the notion of transcorporeal memory-making and narrative construction, I decided to use a machine learning model called GPT-3 for my project. GPT-3 is a language model released by Open AI in 2020 that uses deep learning to produce human-like text in response to a prompt (Brown et al.). As a result of this prompt-based structure, many artificial intelligence researchers and enthusiasts have experimented with GPT-3 as a chatbot or a conversational interface through which a human user can communicate with the computer through natural human language. Chatbots can be used for a variety of different things, from serving as a proxy for a customer service agent on an e-commerce website to mimicking the language and mindset of one’s “inner child” to allow the user to converse with a computerized representation of their younger self (Huang). In this case, I decided to prompt the GPT-3 language model to engage in a “conversation” with me where it attempted to represent the perspective and interests of my mother as we discussed aspects of our family history that my mother has been reticent to share with me directly, along with more abstract concepts such as the AI’s “opinions” on the role of objective truth in memory-making practices.

In researching GPT-3, I was particularly intrigued by the model’s ability to generate a narrative given limited context. As a member of the Asian/American diaspora with no family or community members willing or able to discuss my family’s history with me, I similarly attempted to synthesize my own understanding of our history through limited context, pulling from my mother’s published writing and spoken word performances and at times hapless research about Bangladesh in its early national formation. However, my interpretations are inextricably linked to and colored by the affective ties of my familial relationships; although GPT-3 encodes a number of biases (studies have highlighted incidents of the model portraying gender bias and espousing Islamophobic rhetoric, ironic given that my mother and I are both Muslim women), its narrative generation is emotionless, devoid (free?) of potential distortions resulting from my own emotions or kinship ties (see Abid et al., Li et al.).

The implication of technology, supposedly unburdened by complex networks of affect, in my process of generating a coherent familial narrative, draws the non-human into the social practice of memory-making, refiguring our relationship while skating close to the common and problematic misconception of technology as a neutral actor devoid of bias, something that many critical technology studies scholars have warned of in recent years. Through my recruitment of GPT-3 in this project, I don’t intend to present its externality from networks of kinship and affective care that shape my collective familial memory as a moral absolute, but rather to engage it in the generation and mediation of one possible narrative of many.

Further, by engaging with a computer in this practice, I gesture towards the transcorporeal entanglements of the Asian American racial form as the “model minority” and the rise of the user-friendly computer in the 1960s and 1970s. American Studies researcher Huan He proposed the idea of the “racial interface” tracing the intertwined capitalist “success stories” of computers and Asian/Americans, describing the model minority, or the act of “minority modeling” as a form of racial interface which, similar to how a computer’s user interface places an inviting veneer over the mechanistic inner workings of the computer, “is a user-friendly design of racial logics, a schema for containing the meaning and power of race within the operations of US liberal capitalism.” As many designers devote their entire careers to engineering human-computer interactions which engender positive affect and trust towards the computer, the user interface is in fact “an aesthetic effect of mediation, obfuscating the machinic operations of computation while producing an empowering representation of its technical functions” much like how Asian/American identity has been mediated and interpolated under capitalism in such a way that obscures Asian/American sickness, death, dying, and other struggles under racial capitalism.

In the book *Pedagogies of Woundedness,* Lee highlights the ableist and capitalist logic endemic to the Asian American racial form and the minority modeling imposed upon sick, aging, and disabled Asian/Americans. Interpreting these logics and their fallibility, Lee theorizes “Asian Americans must exemplify success, in the classroom and the workplace; by extension, they must also inhabit indefinitely healthy bodies that serve this success frame. Yet they, too, get sick, become disabled, and… also die” (Lee 3). While the construct of model minoritization as a racial interface presents a “user-friendly” and unassuming version of the Asian/American racial form, one predicated on success, this interface hides the extractive machinations and power dynamics that exploit Asian/Americans as a tool of racial capitalism, even as their bodies inevitably fail and are often driven further towards this failure by labor conditions, the pressures of capitalism, etc.

Also notable are the historic origins of the user interface, and of language models like GPT-3. As He points out in his paper, many computer interfaces such as early graphical user interfaces or GUIs were first developed via military research. Computer interfaces remain a key research area for the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, or DARPA, today (DARPA RSS 1). Similarly, DARPA has funded research into most, if not all, aspects and use cases of natural language processing technologies, including technologies now commonly used in consumer interfaces, like Apple’s Siri (DARPA RSS 2). As I used GPT-3 for this project through a user-friendly “playground” interface released by its developers at Open AI, I noticed how this interface, designed to disambiguate the complex processes of machine learning, gestures towards the militarized legacies of these two technologies, and thus towards the separation of GPT-3’s complex mechanical computations from the interface, which reduces “the need to understand how computers work as *machines*, [allowing users to] maximize their productivity and capacity” (He 42).

While it’s unlikely that any of the stories I’d conjured, or any that I could solicit GPT-3 to generate, hold much, if any, objective truth, memory itself is influenced by the subject’s perspectives, emotions, etc. In the case of my mother’s childhood stories, which I’ve attempted to explore here, trauma, the passage of time, and what Viet Thanh Nguyen would call “strategic forgetting” certainly color her own recollections. As a child living in Dhaka during the war for Bangladeshi independence, many of my mother’s early memories are colored by the violence of war. According to Nguyen, war memories engage both “the basic dialectic of memory and amnesia” and a warped, perhaps more high-stakes variation of it “remembering our humanity and forgetting our inhumanity, while conversely remembering the inhumanity of others and forgetting their humanity.” While I wonder if a young child living through a war would possess the developmental and emotional capacity to engage in this “us vs. them” dialectic, Nguyen’s characterization of war in our memories as “haunted and haunting, human and inhuman, [something that] remains with us and within us, impossible to forget but difficult to remember” is reminiscent of my mother’s reticence to directly engage in the practice of memory by sharing her memories with me despite their pervasive echos in our day-to-day (Nguyen 29).

In using an AI model to generate a variation on my mother’s memories that she often struggled to remember or share, however, I don’t intend to eclipse her account of her childhood, nor the dialectics or affective ties that may have influenced that account. Instead, since her narratives were never accessible to me, I aimed to construct one possible narrative. Using the few vignettes of her childhood that my mother has shared with me, I hoped that something like GPT-3 could offer a possible interpretation of the moments in between those vignettes. In this way, I drew on Fujitani, White, and Yoneyama’s concept of memory as method. While acknowledging the ways memory is mediated through a variety of cultural objects and practices that ask to transmute our recollections into coherent narratives, and through the absence of memories through which to form these narratives, the authors highlight how social practices of memory-making allow us to generate knowledge of the past via “spaces of mediation in which the past emerges in communicative practice and interaction,” an intellectual tradition that’s long been cast aside by a binary view of the self and the collective, something that the concept of collective national, familial, or communal memories subverts (Fujitani 16).

Collective memory even extends beyond the temporal and spatial bounds of the individual’s direct “experience”. Citing Rea Tajiri’s short film *History and Memory,* a film about her “cultural memory” of the internment of Japanese Americans during World War Two, the authors underscore how “not only is memory constituted through various mediations, but it enables social and cultural practices of representation” (Fujitani 18). As my mother has written a memoir (that I’m not allowed to read) about her childhood in Bangladesh and migration to the United States, her interpretation of our family’s collective memory is mediated through the form of the memoir, written for a Western audience, by a woman who, in my view, has a lot of internal work left to do to truly heal from the traumatic experiences in her past. While conversing with an AI bot is only arguably a social practice, these conversations mirror the ones I hope to be able to have one day with my mother to establish a form of collective memory more true to her subjectivity. In this way, I’ve harnessed the bits of collective memory that I have, along with its lack, to engage in a form of self- and group representation, mediated through a non-human source.

**Works Cited**

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