
Asian American Art Oral History Project

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Ada Cheng Interview

Zishuo Wang

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Interviewer: Zishuo Wang

Artist: Ada Cheng

Location: JTR Lincoln park campus Library. Study room 306.

Date: May 21th, 2019

Note: the following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in ART 200: Asian American Arts & Culture during the Spring 2019 Quarter as a part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor Art, and Media & Design.



BIO: Ada is the host of the storytelling show *Pour One Out*, a monthly storytelling series at Volumes Bookcafe. She is also the producer and host of the show *Am I Man Enough?* a storytelling/podcasting show, where people tell personal stories to critically examine the culture of toxic masculinity and the construction of masculinity and manhood. In addition, she is the co-producer and co-host of *Talk Stories*, an Asian American/Asian diaspora storytelling show, along with Randy Kim, a show where they showcase Asian/Asian American storytellers and performing artists.

Image and Bio taken courtesy of the artist. For more info, visit:

<http://www.renegadeadacheng.com/>

Interview Transcript:

Zishuo Wang: So, I know you were once a sociology teacher here at DePaul University and you resigned during 2015 to pursue a path of art. Since then you've been exploring the theme of gender roles in the real world. Would you care to share a little more about that? Your background or your current occupation? Your upbringing maybe?

Ada Cheng: Ok, there are many questions there. Which question would you like to me to start?

ZW: Right sorry. Can you first share a little about your background?

AC: Sure! So, I was a faculty member here in sociology. I taught subjects on gender, sex, sexuality, masculinity, immigrations. And so, I was a sociologist in training academic, and I stayed in academia here at DePaul for fifteen years until I decided to resign my position to become a storyteller. And later as a performing artist, now a storytelling show producer. So, I started telling stories in January 2016 and I started out taking classes in second cities and different institutions here in Chicago. And at some point, at the end of 2015 ... it is interesting were in classes, it's always, you know, safe spaces. At Some point you need to go out to actually perform so I made a promise to myself that starting January 2016, I'm going to start going to open-mics. I started out with open-mics to just tell my stories in public and classroom. So, I started out with that and then after a few months, I started doing shows. And after that, I did my first solo show at the end of 2017, *Not Quite: Asian American by Law, Asian Woman by Desire*. And then in 2018 I did my second solo show which was *Breaking Rules, Broken Hearts: Loving across Borders* and then I traveled to different cities to perform. At the end of 2017 I started producing my shows. and so yeah, that's what I have been doing now.

ZW: Right Okay, so can you maybe share a little about your background or your childhood? and what lead up to this moment right here?

AC: So, I was born in Taipei, Taiwan ... it's interesting, you're from China, correct?

ZW: Yes.

AC: So, you're familiar with the very test-driven educational culture.

ZW: Yes.

AC: So, pursuing art, theater, performance art, including Graphic Design you were talking about... And so of course in Taiwan when you are about, you know you have to decide your

major before you enter college. And it is very interesting, because at the time, in Taiwan what were the major occupations at the time? You were either a doctor, a lawyer or you're a medical doctor. So, your parents would say, "you become a lawyer or you go to medical school or you go to business school." Right?

ZW: Uh Hum.

AC: And what was also very interesting is what my mother said to me, as a woman right, she said "well you should become a nurse so you can marry a doctor. Because if you become a doctor, then nobody would want to marry you." so it is also very gendered. So, um, and I majored in Spanish, that was my background.

ZW: Interesting!

AC: So, I spoke Spanish for four years and I wanted, at the time, to become a journalist in Latin America. And so, I majored in Spanish and I came to the states in 1991 and I graduated and actually worked as an editor for a magazine, as a journalist for 0a year. And after two years, I decided that I need to go to a graduate school and I decided to come to the United States. I came here during 1991 and I was in Eugene, Oregon for my master degree. And I went to UT Austin for my Ph.D. in Sociology. The reason why I came to Chicago is because I got a position at DePaul. And that's how I came here. And then I taught at DePaul for fifteen years and towards the end, I was just absolutely bored. So, I resign to pursue art and performance.

ZW: That's Great! And from what I've seen and heard, you obviously lean towards performance art is that correct?

AC: Yeah.

ZW: So, is that what you want to be associated with or do you categorize yourself as other forms of art?

AC: Yeah so It is interesting that we walk on a path. It makes sense looking in hindsight but as you walking on it, it really wasn't clear. So, when I came on and start telling stories and I quit my job and started this journey, I had no clue where I was going. I didn't know that it would come to this point. There was no guidepost. There was no clear direction or instruction for how I should walk my path. We also know when pursuing art, there are no financial benefits to it. Right, so it is really a pursue of passion. It is very difficult to make a living in art. And so, I didn't really know what I was doing. However, when I came out to tell stories in 2016, you know when Trump came out to campaign for presidency. There was a lot of rhetoric against immigrants, the demonization of minorities in this country. So, I, at the time I was telling

different kinds of stories, but I also happen to become a citizen in 2015. And 2016 really gave that sense of urgency to tell a particular type of stories, meaning before 2015 it was very difficult for me to label myself as an Asian American. Right. Because I didn't have my citizenship. I can be a member of the Asian diaspora. But once I had that citizenship it made it much easier for me to claim that label. Even though I think that Asian American experiences always has to be Asian Diaspora slash, Asian American. At the time I realized that the stories that really needed to be told and heard with urgency. Our stories about race, about immigration, about identity, all kinds of identity. That really challenged the status quo, that challenged the politics. And in some ways also challenged the power of relationship to construct the standard narrative from trump. So, I decided I want to focus on stories that were urgent. Speaking for race, identity, immigration.

AC: Now, I thought I was simply telling a story about being an immigrant. Being a member of the Asian diaspora, being an Asian American. These issues were central to me, they affect me. And in some ways when I tell stories in academic, I integrate my training as a sociologist, so I integrate structural analysis and critiques into my stories. So, every story that I have told contained some form on critical analysis of the structure that we are living in. It's interesting that I didn't think much of it. Because it is part of my training and it comes in a very natural way because I've been doing it for decades, I didn't think much of it. Until! Another storyteller I know told me, "your stories are always about social justice." Even though I personally didn't label it as such in a conscious way. People think it's about looking for structural justice and equality. I didn't think of that at the time but it all made sense as I was walking on my path. So even now, my stories are very relevant to what's going on now in this society. So, 2016 we had Trump, and 2017 had #Metoo movement, that lead to me to tell stories about gender equality, inequality, and gender sexuality. So, I want to make sure my stories are always relevant to what's going on.

ZW: That's great! You mentioned the path that leads you to storytelling, would you care to share a little about how you got involved with the production of *Am I man Enough* and *Pour One Out*?

AC: So following 2017, I did my first solo show and I had decided to take it to different French festivals. I went to Boulder Colorado, Capital Fringe in Washington DC, and I went to Minneapolis Minnesota. And the reason I want to do that is simple. I remember I did my first solo performance at a local theater. Somebody from the Chicago Reader came to review my show. That review was terribly written. I thought, Gosh, the review must be written by a student because he didn't really get it. However, because I read the review that afternoon, it had affected my performance, right. And I recognize that I really didn't want that, right. I did not want a review to affect how I perceive my own work. whether if it good or bad. I don't want to feel dismissed because of a terrible review. I also don't want to feel validated because of a good review. So, I took it to French festivals simply because I want to take it to a place where nobody knows me and people don't have the obligations to applaud me. And they would give me honest

feedback. That all I wanted, I want to make sure that I am not affected by anything. That is also why I decided to do the brave thing and take it to cities outside of Chicago. Now after I came back, I have been hosting discussion groups sessions at Volumes Book Cafe about masculinity issues. I was teaching courses on masculinity, toxic masculinity, and manhood in general when I was at DePaul. I felt it is a necessity to have conversations about those issues in public. So, I started out having discussions at Volumes Book Cafe. I showed documentaries and hosted discussions on the subject to whoever that showed up. I was also debating what else I can do that's beyond the discussion. So, I wanted to have a critical conversation and a show, where people can tell stories about this issue and we'll all have conversations.

AC: Towards October 2017, Volumes Book Cafe had this Pour One Out, which is their monthly curated/ semi curated show. And they needed someone to host the show. So, I asked to take over the show. For the first show, I want to have this thing *Am I Man Enough*. So, I invited teller who I know to have that story, about that particular thing. A lot of people came and we had a conversation about *Am I Man Enough* or we talk about using stories to address toxic masculinity and its negative impact from its different point of view. And Since *Pour One Out* is a monthly show, I cannot host *Am I Man Enough*. So, I wanted to make *Am I Man Enough* a traveling show, meaning I want to take it to different neighborhoods. And It would be one theme-based show. Why I take it different neighborhood and what is the theme? Well, I want to make it based around toxic masculinity. And there is a reason why I want to make a traveling show. Because when you host activities whether if its storytelling or theater performance, you're drawing the neighborhood crowd. This whole idea of people are going to travel far to see your show, that is an illusion. Most likely you're going to appeal to the local neighborhoods. So, when you take your show to different neighborhoods, you are attracting different people. So that's what I really wanted to do. If I take my show to the Northside, I want to hear stories about the people around Northside. And If I take my show to the Westside, I want to hear stories about the people around Westside, and that's why I want to take my show to different neighborhoods. So, the idea is capturing different ideas and people. I also host on different days to get even more diverse set of people and their stories. So that's how I got started. I have been producing that show every two or three months because it would just be too high pressure. And I want to make sure that the quality is good. And I have been doing it since the end of 2017 and it will be almost two years this year. It has been great!

ZW: That's amazing. So, it is clear that you put heavy emphasis on storytelling. Do you think storytelling is an effective way to tell a story about your culture and character? And do you think it is the most effective way to do so?

AC: I think it is one of the ways. It is one of the better ways, right. I am hesitant to use the word "most." Because "most" is articulating something so absolute. When we say the best, we're

saying this is really the best. And there can only be one, right. And in some ways, it's the best. Let's say, you do visual arts, right?

ZW: yes.

AC: I don't want to say storytelling is better than visual, because visual art can also be a very good way to communicate. So, I will say that storytelling is better to communicate, to connect with people in comparison with data. Because just before I left DePaul, I realized that facts, logic, data are not enough to convince people. Because when I was in the classroom talking to people about violence, prejudice, and racism with data, it is not enough to convince the students? No! Because the truth is no matter how much data you have, it would not be sufficient to convince people. People don't change their ideas and beliefs based on facts. But people might change if they feel something. And that's what I recognized, people do not act differently because of facts. People act because they are compelled to act. So, if I want my students to go out and make some changes, I cannot use facts. But if I make them feel something, not in a manipulative way, there might be a better chance for them to act differently. So, storytelling is about building connections and emotional vulnerability. In academia, it is about agreeing or disagreeing, winning or losing. When we talk about winning or losing, we are not concerned about the truth. But when we are having a conversation, it is more likely that we are willing to be vulnerable to truth.

ZW: That is quite amazing. So, let's get into these shows. Can you tell me a little about the productions process of these shows? Is it a hard process to manage? Do you manage every aspect of the production or do you work with a group of assistants?

AC: Right now, it is just me. I am very much hands-on with my shows. The reason for that is because the storytelling scene in Chicago is very white-dominated. I see the same people over and over again in a lot of shows. And so, I am very deliberate in securing and curating the lineup. Meaning I want people with marginalized identities and backgrounds to have a stage to tell stories. I want to make sure that it's people that I don't usually see in the scene. And so, I don't leave it to coincidence, right. And I don't even do submissions. There are shows that ask me to open up for submissions, but I refused. I do not tell people what they are allowed to tell, right. I do not want people to submit and I'm rejecting them. That doesn't make sense to me. I also feel that if I open up for submissions, then who would come to the show? Mostly the same people that I have seen, right.

ZW: Uh Huh.

AC: So, the number one principle that I have been very firm with is to make sure the lineup represents the diverse demographics of our nation and our city. I also want to make sure that it is

equitable, meaning if you're at space a lot, if you have the scene to tell, you don't need to come to my show. I want to give the space to people who do not have the platform, space, and the opportunities to share stories. That's what my space and show are about. So, I make sure to go out of my way to secure people, to reach out to people. I want to put them together and for them to shine. Nothing is by chance. So yeah, I want to make sure that my particular vision works, and that I can establish an infrastructure to make sure the show is representing the right group. So yeah, I am pretty hands on at the moment with my shows.

ZW: That is so inspiring. So then, your podcast, *Am I Man Enough*. In it, you've mentioned about the undervalued, misunderstood, or ostracized treatment of artists, do you think that there has been a change in that particular situation in the most recent years? Has it been the same? What do you propose that might change the state of the matter?

AC: No, it hasn't. It is not just artists, it is across the board. And interestingly, I also had a similar conversation with other people. You don't need to look at artists, just look at the faculty members here at DePaul. Who tends to be seen as authority figure?

ZW: The top white men.

AC: Exactly. And who would be the next?

ZW: Somebody who is also another white male character.

AC: Female maybe?

ZW: I actually don't see that very often.

AC: Ok. How about a man of color? perhaps?

ZW: [shakes head]

AC: No?

ZW: Not at all.

AC: Not at all? So still...

ZW: Well I came from Hinsdale, so a large part of my life has been pretty whitewashed.

AC: Ah ok! So, in that sense when you look at DePaul. A lot of faculty of color left. And that's another story there. But when you look at the idea of an authority figure, you see a man or a white man. And after that, it can be a man of color and then maybe a female. We as a society across the board in all occupations, we attach credibility to white people, men, and straight white men. So, there is that hierarchy that is shaped by race, gender, and sexuality and class as well. Is it going to change? Well if we talk about this issue regarding the artists, it cannot be resolved. It cannot be resolved if we don't resolve that structural issue. It is a social issue, not just an artist phenomenon. I mean I've struggled with that as a faculty member here. We attach very different values and give very different rewards to different groups. How do we resolve it? Well, it is very difficult. You see right now in the current state, we see two forces. One is this force for progress, equality, inclusion, diversity. At the same time, you witness a pushback. Look at Congress, you can see these two forces. There was large hiring for female representatives, but you can also see the push backs right now. But these two forces, in some ways, are very emblematic in all of our professions. Would it be resolved? It would take a long time. And the thing I also want to mention. In *Am I Man Enough*, as much as I am talking about male issues or inclusion/exclusion of women, it's never just that. We are talking about race, class, sexuality, so it's far more complicated than that. So, when I address how do we resolve male supremacy, we are addressing how to resolve white supremacy, they are both connected. They are very connected to class privilege, sexuality, and race. And so how do we tackle structural reformation? It is very difficult. Right now, we are witnessing this strong pushback from conservatives. You look at any development in our political affairs, you see a pushback against all the progressives. That concerns me a lot. So, when I talk about what's going on in the art field, it is a reflection on that is happening in our social structure.

ZW: These stories, you often address the theme of Asian American and their struggles in the U.S. or even in their homeland. Can you give an example of how you address these issues? For example, are you trying to present it in a way that can potentially reach out to those who don't like your ideas? Or are you looking for a particular audience?

AC: There are two components to that question. One is accessibility, which is different from the second question. I think the second component you are addressing is who is my audience. That is a very different question correct.

ZW: Yes.

AC: Now that's interesting. So, my audience, into the storytelling scene, are mostly white middle-class people.

ZW: Really!

AC: Uh hum. That is because the space is predominantly middle to upper-class white people. So often times I would be the only Asian, STILL, the only Asian. Now, what does that mean? We are talking about a double edge sword of being the only one. As much as a lot of the people with color talk about we are the only one in certain things. I also want to point out that there are benefits from being the token, Right. I have witnessed that some people enjoy being the token. Because when you are the token, you receive the benefits from it. Now, what do I want to do with my shows? I want to make sure that my show is people of color centered. Not just people of color, but women of color. Centered is a very different concept. I don't just include people of color, that's what many shows are trying to do. They Include one Asian, one African American, one Latino, that's inclusion. Which is a very problematic concept. Inclusion often times forcing into tokenism. So, when saying include, "Oh we have one Asian, that's enough" or "Oh we have one African American, That's enough." That is not what I want to do. I want my shows people of color "Centered," that is very different from simply including somebody. Now, who would be my audience? I want to make sure people of color are also my audience. Of course, the show is for everybody, but I also know that if the lineup doesn't reflect you, then I don't think you would want to see the show. I have been to shows which are Asian centered, but I didn't see a lot of Asian audiences in there. So, when I started producing my show, I want to get people to come to the show. I want to know why aren't people coming to the show. And what I recognized is this, it doesn't make sense for people to come and just watch. There is this distance between the audience and the artist. So, what I want to do with my stories is to integrate these community members into the lineup. My first question I had when I was how do I integrate people into my stories. They can't be passive observers, I want them to feel like they have a stake in the show. And what would be a better way to do that? Making them a part of the show! Not just performers, not just storytellers, right from the start I want to make sure that the community members can be a part of the show. That they can feel that they can tell stories too. That they don't need professional experiences. So, who is my audience? Its people of color, people with marginalized communities, they are my focus. Of course, my stories are for everybody, including white people. I also want to make the shows more accessible by everybody, not just the familiar faces but everybody. I want to explore the population or groups that haven't been explored.

[Phone rang and Ada had to wrap up the interview for an event]

ZW: Let's jump to the last two questions. Have you always stuck with storytelling or have you explored other mediums?

AC: Good question! So, I started out as an improviser and briefly as a standup comedian. So, at one point, I was doing storytelling, improv, and comedy all at once. And then I realized that I need to stick to one because I find that if I tried to do everything at once, everything will be half-assed. I was getting burned out because I was going out every day trying to do things, and that wasn't very productive. So, I decided to stick with only storytelling because I feel that it is an art

form that I can develop more and become good at it. Now I am interested in and other aesthetic. So yeah, I am interested in other art forms, but performance is the thing I want to do right now.

ZW: That leaves us with the last question. Do you have any special projects you are currently working on?

AC: Yes, of course! I would like to invite you to the show, Speaking Truth series, What Am I in America next Friday at 7:30. We have a Japanese storytelling committee and I would like to invite you and your classmates to attend if possible. It is a show that I want to connect storytelling with larger intellectual ideas.

ZW: Alright. Thank you for taking the time out of your schedule for this interview Ada Cheng.

AC: Sure. Very good.

-END-