

## **Diasporic Blues: On Memories and Hong Kong**

Before the summer of 2019, if I had to close my eyes and imagine a place where I felt the most alive, I would see Sheung Wan on bright, hot summer day. I pictured walking along the tram tracks, and petting neighborhood cats that were lounging or dozing off in front of dried seafood stores. Up the steep hills and stairs of gentrifying Sheung Wan, local Cantonese eateries and temples mixed with hipster coffee shops, cafes, and art galleries. Drinking a refreshing glass of salted Seven Up at Sing Heung Yuen and eating French toasts along with a cup of Hong Kong milk tea at Shui Kee remained some of my favorite memories. I would also picture the Hong Kong Island I saw from the top deck of the tram as I rode from Sheung Wan all the way to Quarry Bay, where my parents used to live. Riding through Johnston Road, I enjoyed seeing the vibrant colors of store signs and architectural remnants that connected the city's colonial history to the present moment.

Reflecting on this from the US, I believe I am drawn to Wan Chai and Sheung Wan because their eclectic atmospheres, people, and aesthetics echo the diasporic experience of never belonging quite neatly to a specific place. Rather than thinking of Hong Kong and the diasporic Hong Kong subject in the hackneyed term of East-meets-West, a concept that flattens Hong Kong's colonial history and its uneasy relationship with China and the West into an aesthetic attractive to tourists, I prefer to think of it as a complex incomplete mosaic that creates an optical illusion: just when we think we have seen the full picture, the color shifts and we question all over again the relationship between each tile, and our relationship with them as a whole.

As the 2019 Anti-Extradition Movement forms part of my memory and affective mosaic of Hong Kong, my relationship to my diasporic subjectivity, identity, and to Hong Kong has also morphed. As a diasporic Hongkonger in the US, I occupy a liminal space, simultaneously discomfited and yet intimately familiar with both spaces. As poet Ijeoma Umebinyuo so poignantly articulates in her poem "Diasporic Blues," diasporic subjects are "too foreign for home/ too foreign for here. /never enough for both." On the one hand, I struggled with immense survivor's guilt and imposter syndrome for not being on the streets of Hong Kong. On the other hand, surrounded by Americans who do not share the same deep tie with Hong Kong, I was unable to convey to them the heartbreak I woke up to every morning.

Some of the most violent clashes between protesters and the police happened at night in Hong Kong. Because of the 12-hour time difference between Hong Kong and Kentucky, I would often wake up to notifications of livestreams from Stand News and Hong Kong Free Press on my phone. As I brushed my teeth, I watched protesters being tackled to the ground, some shouting out their full name for those around them to document and help secure legal support. While I put on clothes and get ready to head to work, my heart would pounce to sound of shattering Molotov cocktails and the beat of tear gas cannisters hitting hard on the ground. During my morning bike rides to campus, the street was quiet as I hummed "Glory to Hong Kong" on my own.

*August 11, 2019*

The heat in Kentucky was sweltering. I was sitting on the bottom of the stairs at an old house my fiancé and I just purchased that was desperately in need of repair and renovation. By then, I had

already spent 13 years across three different states in the U.S., moving almost every year, never daring to form much attachment to the rentals I resided in. While somewhat decrepit, this little house in Lexington, Kentucky gave me hope that I would finally have a permanent home—a home that would provide not just physical shelter, but would offer me a sense of well-worn intimacy and comfort as I continued to feel discomfited in both the U.S. and Hong Kong.

That day in late summer, IKEA boxes were strewn all around our living room, so much so that we could not see the floor of the house. My fiancé’s parents and family members were busying around, helping us organize what would later become our kitchen cabinets. As they moved boxes around, I took out my phone and saw livestreams of anti-riot police firing pepper balls at close range towards protesters in the Tai Koo Shing MTR station. As the police advanced with batons and merciless beating, people were scrambling down the subway escalator—the same escalator I was on just last year when I visited, and during the 17 years when I grew up in the neighborhood.

In other words, I was building my very first home in the U.S. as I witnessed the destruction of my childhood home. I looked up from my phone. Asher’s family were still organizing the IKEA boxes. Outside our house, the sun was shining, and the neighborhood was calm

*August 30, 2019*

I was walking through the Student Center at the University of Kentucky. It was early afternoon, and the Center was full of students walking towards the cafeteria, lining up outside Starbucks, or heading to the new fancy gym in the building. By then, I had developed the habit of constantly checking my phone for breaking news and livestreams from Hong Kong.

Sitting on the bench in the hallway of the Student Center, I saw baton-wielding police indiscriminately attacked unarmed Hongkongers at the end of an escalator in Prince Edward MTR station. Soon after, Raptors rushed inside a train cart, their weapons rained down upon passengers whose only defense was their umbrellas.<sup>1</sup> A couple, both in white, were crying and cowering on the ground. After being threatened with batons and pepper sprayed in close range, the man lifted both his arms and plead with the police, “唔好呀!”<sup>2</sup> Still hugging the woman tightly in his arms, the man’s wail reverberated through my headphones.

I looked up from my phone. Amidst the hustle and bustle of the Student Center, it was as if the terror, fear, and tearful screams and pleas I just witnessed did not exist.

*November 18, 2019*

I was in my office at the University of Kentucky, preparing for my morning class. It was around 8am and I was the only one on the 13<sup>th</sup> floor. I had arrived early to gather materials for my Honors Freshman Writing course. Instead of doing so, I watched livestreams of the siege at the Polytechnic University of Hong Kong, not knowing that it would last a total of 12 days. In support of the young protesters barricaded inside PolyU, Hongkongers began marching in Tsim

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<sup>1</sup> “Raptors” refers to police officers from the paramilitary Special Tactical Force. It was created in 2014 during the Umbrella Movement to control crowds.

<sup>2</sup> “Don’t!”

Sha Tsui, chanting, “去理大， 救學生。”<sup>3</sup> Suffused with rage and fear for the student protesters’ safety, I questioned my responsibility as an educator and diasporic Hongkonger: rather than teaching writing in an American university, perhaps I should be in Hong Kong right then and there to protect students who had put their life and personhood on the line as they came face to face with a government and police force that dehumanized them as cockroaches.

That morning, I called my childhood friend in Hong Kong. I told her I felt as if I was living in parallel universes. Was the trauma I felt real if no one around me could see or feel it? We wept wordlessly into the phone until WhatsApp inadvertently dropped our call.

A week earlier, during my lunch break in between teaching my two classes, I locked myself in my university office. On my work computer, I watched the campus of Chinese University of Hong Kong set ablaze. Protesters had set barricades on fire while hurling Molotov cocktails, or as frontliners called it “fire magic,” towards anti-riot police. The siege occurred after nightfall. In the dark, I could make out shapes: the shape of umbrellas and makeshift shields and barricade, the shape of lithe bodies in black blocs, helmets, and gas masks falling on the ground or running across the flame to rescue those who were injured. Behind a small barricade that was engulfed in flame, someone waved a big black flag with the protest slogan “Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times.” I could barely make out the frantic cries among protesters as they, with whatever resources they could find, attempt to hold the police off for as long as possible. What was clearly audible was the sound of shattering glass and the rounds and rounds of tear gas and rubber bullets that were fired.

I did not, and still do not, know how to articulate the ache that radiated through my chest that day as I sat in my university office, feeling strangely resentful of the students and faculty around me who did not just witness such trauma and destruction.

### *Memories and Hauntings*

I keep ruminating over these vignettes of memories, hoping to make meaning out of them. But how can one make meaning out of the horror and trauma of bearing witness to ongoing state violence? Under the National Security Law, the trauma Hongkongers, including diasporic ones like me, has merely shapeshifted. It is, however, far from over. In my mind, I repeatedly revisit these moments from last year when front line protesters engaged in weekly clashes against anti-riot police and raptors. From a distance and from a privileged position of being in the ivory tower in the U.S., I feel that I must be able to reflect on this horror and arrive at something profound, something hopeful or uplifting perhaps. But time and again, I am at a loss. All I have got are infinite loops of imperfect memories.

Lying in bed now, the disembodied memories I have accumulated begin to blur: Was I remembering watching the siege of CUHK and PolyU unfold on my office computer in Lexington, Kentucky, or was I remembering standing in the lobby of College Library at the

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<sup>3</sup> “Go to Poly U, rescue the students.”

University of Wisconsin-Madison, watching live tweets of protesters who blocked off traffic on Long Wo Road in 2014?

In 2014, I sat on the floor of my rental apartment in Madison, Wisconsin, choking back tears as I watched on Periscope the police tearing protesters away from the human chain they had formed in Admiralty. I was ridden with guilt then for staying in the U.S. Little did I know at the time that the guilt would return in tenth fold five years later. These memories and experiences of bearing witness from afar affirmed my tie to Hong Kong, as they recurred as hauntings that remind me of my absence during the most monumental moments in the city.

Each time I saw a price alert from travel websites notifying me of the “amazing deal” to fly from America to Hong Kong, I wrestled with a simultaneous rush rage, impulsivity, guilt, and shame. I wanted to abscond my teaching responsibilities in the U.S. and fly to Hong Kong so that I could put my body on the line. At the same time, I was paralyzed and frozen with fear. The protest footage and livestreams I saw from Hong Kong terrified me. Each week, a new image of horror was seared into my brain: the young protester pressed to the ground with a broken tooth, repeating “I am sorry” to the police who reigned on top of him; the screams that Grandpa Wong in his signature yellow vest, stepping in front of anti-riot police with his arms and walking stick up in the air, begging them to stop pursuing protesters who had fled—“唔好追啦！唔好打細路啦。唔該你呀！”<sup>4</sup>

### *Bodies and Hearts on the Line*

Theorists and critics who study collective memory and trauma have written about the significance of witnessing: we are serving as a moral agent when we bear witness to another person’s suffering.<sup>5</sup> Immersed in dark cycles of guilt for not having been tear gassed, I wonder: Does it still count if the act of witnessing is mediated through a screen from halfway across the world? At the height of the protest in 2019, I encountered a meme on Instagram: with pastel colors and cartoon-like drawings, the meme jokes that only a real Hongkonger would have eaten egg tarts, milk tea, fish balls, and tear gas. My chest seized up when I saw this. Because of how rampant the police had been firing tear gas, 88% of Hongkongers had been affected in 2019. This meme triggered the perennial questions I had been struggling with since I moved to the U.S. 12 years ago: Am I a true Hongkonger? Only this time, the stake was made much higher: if I had not put my body on the line, do I still qualify as a Hongkonger?

I had a conversation once with another diasporic Hongkonger. She too was ridden with survivor’s guilt. “I was tear gassed only once at the beginning of the movement before I hopped on a plane to Chicago,” she recalled. While she started experiencing side effects of the tear gas on the plane, she was immensely guilty for not having suffered enough: “The police was still using the good stuff then, not the expired cannisters they later used. And I was tear gassed only

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<sup>4</sup> “Don’t chase! Don’t beat up the kids. Please!”

<sup>5</sup> I am thinking of Kelly Oliver, Adriana Cavarero, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, whose work inform my academic writing and thinking.

once.” As diasporic Hongkongers, our guilt knows no bound, matched perhaps only by the extent of our grief for a fallen home.

As I started experiencing debilitating symptoms of secondhand trauma after watching the protests and violence in Hong Kong for over a year, I realized that, unlike what I had previously assumed, I had not remained physically unscathed. Other diasporic Hongkongers I am connected to have also experienced similar episodes of depression and anxiety. For many of us, the dissonance of inhabiting two realities and the inability to relay our grief to those around us have taken a physical and emotional toll. As social movement scholar Zeynep Tufekci writes, “This kind of technologically mediated interaction via screens located far from the physical scenes of the clashes does not imply psychological distance. Many...report suffering genuine trauma because the online world is not unreal or virtual...Our capacity for empathy is not necessarily limited by physical proximity.”

Just as diasporic Hongkongers can empathize and be traumatized despite physical distance, the National Security Law (NSL) has rendered us vulnerable to state persecution from halfway across the world. Under its sweeping scope, activists who are not physically in Hong Kong can still be charged with sedition or “collusion with external forces.” As street protests mostly subside, with many frontline protesters facing criminal charges and long prison sentences, I feel the obligation to pick up the baton in the U.S. using my diasporic privilege. But each time I give a public lecture or write a public commentary critical of the Chinese regime, I feel a slight pang in my chest: “Would this be the lecture or essay that makes it no longer safe for me to return to Hong Kong?” The insidiousness of the NSL is that there is no clear answer, as it relies on the diffused sense of fear to motivate self-censorship. It is up to each of us to assess the degree of risks we are willing to stomach.

As political risk intensifies but becomes more amorphous, my feeling of not doing enough for Hong Kong also heightens. It compounds with the immense diasporic guilt and regret I have of not returning to Hong Kong in 2019. The regret and the sense of never doing quite enough, however, are not limited to diasporic Hongkongers. I have read heartwrenching narratives from protesters about to be imprisoned now regretting being on the front line. I have also read interviews with movement supporters who regretted not moving closer to the front, as they felt that they had failed youth frontliners. The recurring sense of guilt eats away at all of us albeit the different positions we occupy.

As we condemn the violence the police have inflicted on the bodies of Hongkongers, we need also to remember the ongoing emotional and psychical suffering we endure because of the regime, and because of how much we love Hong Kong. Each time I am haunted by guilt and memories, I remind myself that we are not the ones who should shoulder the guilt. Only by telling myself that can I continue with the long journey ahead.