

## Article

# Hira Makes a Sound: Nepali Diasporic Worldviewing through Asian American Studies Praxis during the COVID-19 Anti-Asian Hate Pandemics

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**Abstract:** In this article, we offer a specific example from our programmatic research and teaching praxis during the COVID-19 anti-Asian hate pandemic period. We demonstrate how Asian American Studies community-centered knowledge coproduction and narrative generational wealth investment can address critical experiences of young learners from underrepresented, religiously-diverse populations through content that supports culturally sustaining child development and challenges disparately impactful realities of racism, misrepresentation, and systemic Western biases which undermine their health and wellbeing. Focusing on religious themes in relation to child development was not an explicit intention of our collaboratively developed storybook project titled, *Hira Makes a Sound*. Nevertheless, centering a women-led, intergenerational Nepali immigrant story in both our process and final product necessarily led to foregrounding religious, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of diasporic family and community life that are essential to coping and development for the fictional lead character, Hira, and her loved ones. Robust story data themes—paradoxically grounded in the ether of a shared Gurung worldview—provide generative lessons for researchers, educators, artists, and community advocates who work with or need to account for the lived experiences of young learners within religiously diverse, multi-generational immigrant family households and community ecologies.

**Keywords:** anti-Asian hate; COVID-19; Nepali diaspora; Gurung worldview; Asian American Studies



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## 1. Introduction

*Bajei (grandma) lost her spirit trying to protect me! If I didn't yell back, this wouldn't have happened!*

When the 2020 pandemic hits the United States, ten-year old Hira's world is turned upside down. Not only must Hira and her family resist a contagious COVID-19 virus, but they also have to face anti-Asian racism. After a violent confrontation outside in their neighborhood, Hira's injured grandmother Ratna Bajei, an immigrant from Nepal, loses her spirit. Hira must find a way to help guide Ratna Bajei home.

In this article, we offer a specific example from our programmatic research and teaching praxis during the COVID-19 anti-Asian hate pandemic period in the U.S. We demonstrate how Asian American Studies community-centered knowledge coproduction and narrative generational wealth investment can address critical experiences of young learners from underrepresented, religiously diverse populations through content that supports culturally sustaining child development and challenges disparately impactful realities of racism, misrepresentation, and systemic Western biases which undermine their health and wellbeing. Focusing on religious themes in relation to child development was not an explicit intention of our collaboratively developed storybook project titled, *Hira Makes a Sound*. Nevertheless, centering a women-led, intergenerational Nepali immigrant story in

both our process and final product necessarily led to foregrounding religious, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of diasporic family and community life that are essential to coping and development for the fictional lead character, Hira, and her loved ones. Robust story data themes—paradoxically grounded in the ether of a shared Gurung worldview—provide generative lessons for researchers, educators, artists, and community advocates who work with or need to account for the lived experiences of young learners within religiously diverse, multi-generational immigrant family households and community ecologies.

We structure the article in four parts: (1) briefly reviewing relevant literature; (2) introducing the storybook methodologically as an intervention both to express our double pandemic anger-sadness and to collectively create meaningful narratives of care, coping, and growth for young learners in underrepresented, religiously diverse Asian American families and communities; (3) analyzing critical themes and issues in the storybook and sharing sample reflections regarding the significance of centering spiritual experiences and meaning-making of such experiences for young learners; and (4) offering brief conclusions and implications for scholarship with culturally responsive, equity-centered goals and priorities at the intersections of child development and Religious Studies.

## 2. Relevant Literature

The body of scholarship focusing on the role of religion and spirituality in child development has proliferated in the past two decades (King and Boyatzis 2015; Koenig 2012; Benson et al. 2012; King et al. 2020). Research shows how children and youth draw on the lens of religion to develop their morals, values, and worldviews (King et al. 2020), as well as important aspects of their social networks and affiliations. Yet this emerging body of scholarship has been limited in scope and scale (Benson et al. 2012; King and Boyatzis 2015) due to a dominant focus on Western religions, particularly white Protestant Christian traditions and institutions, in the United States (Bartkowski et al. 2008; Boyatzis and Janicki 2003; Mahoney et al. 2003). This predominant focus and familiarity that researchers typically draw on to develop their studies readily hinders the inclusion of non-Western forms of spirituality (King et al. 2014). The field has also been limited in its research methods and conceptual models that meaningfully engage and examine the experiences of underrepresented groups. Scholarly studies on religious coping, for example, typically employ traditional survey methodologies, focusing on individual behavior in relation to prayer and related religious practices (Bamford and Lagattuta 2010; Bartkowski et al. 2008; Boyatzis and Janicki 2003; King and Boyatzis 2015; Mahoney et al. 2003). Such methods and frameworks fail to capture other forms of religious and spiritual practices and forms of coping that do not adhere to Western traditions.

Scholars of color across an array of disciplinary fields have called into question the predominance of white Christian models and assumptions in the literature on spiritual development (Hall and Breland-Noble 2011; Mabvurira 2016; Mabvurira and Makhubele 2018). According to Benson et al., “Spiritual development should be understood to be a nonlinear and dynamic process” that emerges in specific cultural and linguistic contexts (Benson et al. 2012, p. 456). In a study of death rites in the Gurung diaspora, for example, Upadhyay (Upadhyay 2015) provides a nuanced explanation of Bön—the major traditional religion practiced by the ethnic Gurung population in Nepal. Bön is grounded in a broader, non-Western definition of religion: it is “Shamanistic and animistic in nature but later came to adopt Tibetan Buddhism” (Upadhyay 2015, p. 96). In the Nepali language, religion is translated into “dharma, which also means duty, ethics, morality, rule, merit and pious acts” (Upadhyay 2015, p. 96). This linguistically and culturally nuanced detail requires a different approach to studying the processes and outcomes of child development that reflect religious and spiritual influences in Nepal and across the Nepali diaspora. Clearly, fresh perspectives and corresponding models of inquiry are needed to understand the development of children from diverse religious, cultural, linguistic, and regional backgrounds.

### 2.1. Lived Religion, Racist Violence, and Asian American Studies Contributions

An alternative approach within the Religious Studies field—initially led by historian David Hall ([Hall 1997](#)) and sustained by sociologist Nancy Tatom Ammerman ([Ammerman 2021](#))—focuses on “lived religion” as a guiding conceptual and methodological commitment. Looking beyond and outside of Western institutional structures, scholars of lived religion explore how ordinary people experience and practice religious commitments and activities in their daily lives. Consistent with this emphasis on lived religion in the everyday, Russell Jeung, former chair of the nation’s oldest Asian American Studies Department at San Francisco State University and co-founder of the Stop AAPI Hate national network, has written convincingly with colleagues Seanan Fong and Helen Jin Kim about ways in which multigenerational Chinese American families incorporate spiritual practices of ancestor worship, Confucian relational responsibilities, and other ritualized commitments into their daily life activities, which cannot be captured or deeply understood through Western concepts of religion ([Jeung et al. 2019](#)).

Along with Jeung et al., a small but dynamic network of interdisciplinary Asian American Studies scholars and writers has produced valuable studies across global diasporic faiths, traditions, institutions, and practices, including some that directly engage with historically significant realities of racist violence. In *American Sutra*, for example, Duncan Ryūken Williams analyzes Japanese American Buddhists’ collective resilience in relation to their WWII concentration camp incarceration experience ([Williams 2019](#)). Preeti Kaur’s poem, “*Letters Home*,” mourns the terror murders of six Sikh worshipers at their Gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin ([Kaur 2012](#)) and traces their trajectories to and from the violence and outrage expressed in Nina Simone’s 1963–1964 cries of *Mississippi Goddam* following the racist murders of Emmett Till and Medgar Evers in Mississippi and four Black girls at a church in Birmingham, Alabama.

Current studies show, however, that racist violence directed toward Asian Americans has not primarily targeted places of worship. This contrasts with the painfully frequent, intersecting, racist-religious hate crimes that have so visibly violated mosques, synagogues, and historically Black churches in the U.S. In its cumulative March 2022 documentation of anti-Asian hate crimes throughout the COVID-19 pandemic period, the national monitoring coalition, Stop AAPI Hate, reported an astounding total of 10,905 hate incidents occurring against Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders across the country between 19 March 2020 and 31 December 2021 ([Yellow Horse et al. 2022](#), p. 1). Yet, of those nearly 11,000 incidents, less than one percent (0.9%) occurred in places of worship, while nearly half (48.8%) took place on public streets, in public parks, or on public transportation ([Yellow Horse et al. 2022](#), p. 6). Moreover, in their nationally representative, independent 2022 survey of nearly 2500 Asian American and Pacific Islander women, the National Asian Pacific American Women’s Forum found that an overwhelming 74% reported experiencing racism or discrimination during 2021 ([Pillai and Lindsey 2022](#), pp. 2, 4). Like the Stop AAPI Hate findings, most women (81%) reported that the spaces where they experienced incidents of racism during the previous year were public, such as in stores and restaurants (47%), in their own neighborhoods (17%) and on mass transit (17%) ([Pillai and Lindsey 2022](#), p. 5). These everyday realities of life, as well as death, impacted by racist violence, for Asian American women, in particular, demand intervention ([Hsieh 2022](#)).

### 2.2. Gurung Worldviews

In the following section, we provide a brief overview of the religious and cultural practices of the Gurung community that inform the process and product of *Hira Makes a Sound*.

#### 2.2.1. Gurung People of Nepal

*Hira Makes a Sound* is a story about a Nepali Gurung family living in the U.S. Nepal is an ethnically, culturally, and religiously diverse nation in South Asia, with 125 ethnic groups and 123 languages. The Nepali government recognizes 59 indigenous groups,

including the Gurungs or Tamu, who have their own distinct culture, customs, and values (Gurung et al. 2006, p. 12). The majority of Gurung people reside in the Gandaki region of Nepal. Due to the enlistment of Gurkhas in the British and Indian armies and recent labor migration, many Gurungs are now dispersed in diasporas far from their rural origins (Harrison and Macfarlane 2015, p. 20; Hausner 2016).

### 2.2.2. Gurung Religion

According to the Gurung religious oral text, Pye-Tan-Lhu-Tan, the lengthy history of the Gurung people, began more than eight or nine thousand years ago (Upadhyay 2015, pp. 93, 113). It details the Gurung customs, traditions, and rituals, including the traditional Gurung religion of Bönpo, or Bonism, although religious pluralism is the norm. The Gurung worldview is deeply rooted in Buddhism, Hinduism, Animism, and Shamanism. Despite modernization, the Gurungs in their homeland and transnational communities preserve their heritage by embracing social cohesion and interconnectedness through their membership in a Tamu Samaj, or Gurung society (Gurung 2014, p. 149; Harrison and Macfarlane 2015).

### 2.2.3. Sato Bolauney

Gurungs value community, family, intergenerational ties, and reverence for elders. In fact, they believe that spiritual wisdom evolves with age. Elders communicate with spirits and lead family rituals and ceremonies related to birth, marriage, death, and more. In certain spiritual traditions, a shaman, pachyu, or lama will perform sato bolauney (soul calling, in Nepali) rituals, or plahku (Gurung), to summon a lost soul due to traumatic events such as fear, illness, or any misfortunes. In the ceremony, community members gather, bringing offerings, and each person gives blessings to the affected person while tying a ripu or rupa, a protective wool thread, around the neck to help keep the souls in place—with nine knots for men and seven knots for women. People stand hand in hand, connecting the giver and receiver of blessings. Next, the person uses both hands to touch the affected member's head and shoulders while chanting "shyaae shyaae," and the rest of the group joins in unison as "support and strengthening" (Gurung 2014, p. 254). The individual's turn is completed by the handing of an enveloped offering. They continue this until every member of the community has had a turn to chant blessings and pray for their protection, health, and well-being.

### 2.2.4. Ether

Ether, or akasha in Sanskrit, plays a central role in Gurung rituals and belief systems. Ether is the fifth element, along with earth, water, fire, and air. The ether element is believed to represent the space or emptiness that exists between physical objects or beings. In Gurung culture, ether is often used in rituals and ceremonies to access higher states of consciousness and connect with the spiritual realm to bring about healing, transformation, and guidance.

## 3. Methodological Considerations of Process and Subject Position

*Hira Makes a Sound* was created, in part, as a programmatic response to the double pandemic of COVID-19 and racial violence experienced locally and nationally by Asian American communities, particularly for immigrant/refugee children and elderly women who are often the most vulnerable to harassment. The co-authors of this article are affiliated in multiple ways with the University of Massachusetts Boston, an urban public research university with federally-designated status as an Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI). Duong, Gurung, A. Ty and K. Ty are each alumnae who majored or concentrated in Asian American Studies (AsAmSt) as undergraduates and who work as production staff of the digital storytelling team (DST). Tang is the faculty leader and executive producer for the DST; Kiang directs the overarching Asian American Studies academic unit in which the DST is based. Gurung is a 1.75

generation (Rumbaut 2004) Nepali Gurung American immigrant educator and artist with an M.Ed in Elementary Education. She/They is bilingual/biliterate in Nepali. K. Ty and A. Ty are second generation Cambodian American daughters of refugees. K. Ty is an artist-scholar pursuing her doctoral degree and is bilingual with working biliteracy (an intermediate level between functional and professional bilingual literacy comparable to that designated by the Global Seal of Biliteracy: <https://theglobalseal.com>, accessed on 12 January 2022) in Khmer. A. Ty is a multimedia artist and author/illustrator. Duong is a 1.75 generation Vietnamese American woman and a mixed media visual artist. She is bilingual, with working biliteracy in Vietnamese. Tang identifies as a Chinese immigrant woman and is bilingual/biliterate in Chinese. Kiang is a mixed-race US-born and -raised Chinese American man.

Our work with digital storytelling in Asian American Studies recognizes the epistemological and pedagogical power of narrative construction (Abbott 2021) and builds on sustained commitments to immigrant/refugee community-engaged projects, public and activist scholarship, and Asian American Studies curricular and pedagogical innovations (Đào et al. 2017; Kaur 2012; Style 1988; Tang 2008, 2016, 2017, 2020; Tang et al. 2019; Kiang 2004). The *Hira Makes a Sound* storybook project is grounded in our platform's core commitment to "real life real stories," prioritizing the voices, experiences, and knowledges of everyday people, especially those in under-represented and under-served groups (Tang 2016).

In early 2021, we began to envision developing a multilingual children's storybook that would directly address the double-pandemic of COVID-19 and anti-Asian racism. Just as we were completing a university grant proposal for the project in March 2021, six Asian women frontline workers were ruthlessly murdered by a white male shooter in metro Atlanta. As a team of Asian American women with refugee/immigrant family backgrounds, our shared anger and sadness clarified our resolve to complete this storybook project with urgency.

Initially, we envisioned a storybook that is multilingual and intergenerational in its message, with a focus on immigrant/refugee children and elders who are vulnerable to racist harassment. An important source of story data was our own family experiences with the double pandemic. In addition, team members gathered relevant stories and specific oral histories through native language conversations with Khmer, Nepali, and Vietnamese women, frontline workers, and elders. We used a semi-structured oral history interview protocol developed by co-authors Tang and K. Ty and translated into Khmer, Nepali, and Vietnamese by K. Ty, Gurung and Duong, respectively. After each conversation, the team member who was responsible for conducting the conversation produced a written summary in English highlighting specific stories that directly connect to the contexts of anti-Asian racism and COVID-19, especially the perspectives and experiences of immigrant women, frontline workers, and elders. The team members convened for three ninety-minute sessions to process the oral history conversations and to cross-examine our sources and learned insights. For context and triangulation, we also collected stories through more than 20 local and national mainstream (e.g., *The Boston Globe*, *The New York Times*) and ethnic news media sources (e.g., *República*, *Khmer Post USA*, and *Pivot*), advocacy platforms (e.g., STOP AAPI Hate), and diasporic, native-language social media platforms via Twitter and Facebook (Bowman 2021; Griffiths 2020; Lah and Kravarik 2021; Vigdor 2021). Our team convened weekly during the following two months to discuss patterns emerging from these sources and to broaden and deepen our collective understanding of the double pandemic contexts affecting Asian Americans.

Because we have previously co-produced many DST projects together, as well as independently, including our own personal narratives, we fully trusted that every member of the team would teach and learn from each other throughout the story data analysis and deep reflection process. For example, after co-author Gurung reported an experience involving a traditional ritual that enabled their family to regain spiritual strength to cope with the double pandemic's lasting effects, we decided to ground our creative story, in part,



on the experiences of our local Nepali American community whose issues, voices, names, practices, and contributions have been minimally recognized by researchers, educators, and the general public, including other Asian Americans. Our own due diligence review of recently-published Asian American children's books further showed a dearth of Nepali American-centered narratives (Wenjun 2022). We took care and responsibility, therefore, to highlight the perspectives of an under-represented Asian ethnic group while drawing attention to relevant and realistic experiences that have transpired during the pandemic.

After deciding to develop a fictional story based on real events that took place in the local Gurung community, our team revisited the themes and patterns related to elderly women frontline workers that we had identified in our story data analysis process to help us create the fictional character of the grandmother. Moreover, in order to deepen our team's understanding of Nepali, and specifically, Gurung cultural practices, we collected and reviewed available photos and videos of Sato Bolauney rituals in Nepal and Boston. Additionally, co-author Gurung conducted follow-up conversations with family members who recently partook in a Sato Bolauney ritual. Throughout critical stages of the story development and storybook production and translation process, we also worked closely with a former school principal from Nepal who is a well-respected expert on the Gurung culture in both Nepal and the Nepali diaspora. These diverse cultural sources further informed our storybook development process.

The oral history conversations we conducted with elderly women during summer 2021 revealed many real-life stories of fear, loneliness, and uncertainty, as well as health concerns regarding the coronavirus and the meanings of healing and recovery in Asian immigrant communities. While fully acknowledging the racist targeting of women and elders, we also noted themes of strength and power in the participants' voices and stories. One theme that resonated with all of us on the team—in our subject positions as Nepali, Khmer, Vietnamese, and Chinese women with refugee and immigrant backgrounds ourselves—was that we each trusted and drew on our own respective cultural-spiritual belief systems and ancestral-indigenous-intuitive ways of knowing in order to survive everyday conditions of unabated racism and xenophobia. This shifted our perspective from viewing elders primarily as vulnerable victims to clarifying their roles as knowledge-holders, culture-bearers, and resilient survivors.

We recognize and represent Asian elders multidimensionally as precious holders of ancestral wisdom, role models, and activists in our communities. In compiling publicly available stories about anti-Asian racism and violence, we found that most portrayed elders as frail, one-dimensional victims. In contrast, our own native-language oral history conversations conducted with local Asian American women elders revealed stories of resistance, strength, strategy, and deep intuitive and ancestral knowledge—superpowers enacted in the mundane events of daily life. Our project moves beyond US-centric research paradigms that assume Euro-Western conceptual frameworks and research processes that typically focus on English-dominant sources and archives. Our work acknowledges and articulates the perspectives, worldviews, and cultural practices of elders in the communities. We seek to excavate, explicate, and preserve key facets of traditional and everyday knowledge in immigrant and diasporic communities for the mutual benefit and reciprocating responsibility of younger generations, as part of a contextual, communal process of supporting children's healthy development, including their capacities to survive, thrive, and reach high potential, not only physically, cognitively, and emotionally, but also socially, culturally, and spiritually, within their daily lived environments.

Figure 1 and subsequent Figures 2–5 are sample illustrations created by co-author Ammany Ty for a non-published beta version of *Hira Makes a Sound* (See Figure 1). These images are not intended to be used or reproduced for any other purpose.



**Figure 1.** Ratna Bajei explains to Hira the value of everyday items that is generally under-appreciated.

Thus, we created the characters of Hira Gurung and her grandmother, Ratna Bajei, to highlight the importance of generational cultural wealth in the Nepali diaspora. In telling the story of how a Nepali immigrant family copes with the double pandemic, we turn to the elders' "superpowers"—including their intuitive and ancestral knowledge. Through original text, dialogue, and full color illustrations, the story shows cultural-spiritual practices as central to coping within family and community-based contexts. When Hira Gurung learns that Ratna Bajei has lost her spirit following a racist assault on the street, she turns to Nepali spiritual practices and communal care to guide her grandmother home. In the process, Hira also experiences her own moment of spiritual growth and healthy development, thanks to the enabling ecologies of her immigrant family, diasporic community, and Gurung ancestors' worldview.

#### 4. Results

The story of *Hira Makes a Sound* highlights many aspects of the ancestral-indigenous-spiritual belief system that Gurung elders shared with us throughout the research and story creation process. The Gurung ancestors were a nomadic people who had developed deep intuitive knowledge about the natural world in which they lived. This ancestral wisdom enabled the Gurungs to understand and adapt to the lives and environments around them and survive across space and time. Over millennia, the Gurung ancestral-indigenous-spiritual knowledge system reflects the group's tribal origins, ancient Tibetan Buddhist influences, Hindu religious traits, and local animistic practices. In the Gurung worldview, the spiritual world and the physical world are closely intertwined. The Gurung ancient belief system, sometimes referred to as dharma (or "religion," in English), is deeply embedded in Gurung family and community practices. It is through such expressions of dharma within the physical world—"duty, ethics, morality, rule, merit and pious acts" (Upadhyay 2015, p. 96)—that the Gurungs develop shared understandings about what family/community/clan means, whether in Nepal or in the Nepali diaspora. The Gurungs' world is also inhabited by indigenous gods, deities, forest spirits, and other supernatural beings. They practice traditional rites, rituals, and ceremonies that connect the physical and the spiritual realms. Astrologers, shamans, and spiritual leaders actively play important roles in the community.

We created our storybook with abundant attention to and utter respect for these dimensions of the Gurung experience that are different from Euro-Western ways of knowing and white Protestant Christian institutions and traditions. For the Gurungs, the spiritual is embedded in everyday cultural practices. Thus, in showing and telling an intergenerational story about an immigrant Nepali American family, we have included over 30 visual and text references to prayer flags, altars, windchimes, bells, sounds and vibrations, and the five elements (earth, air, fire, water, ether) in nearly 30 out of 50+ pages of our storybook.

For this article, we highlight three specific examples of Gurung ways of knowing which are evident in the storybook and which emerged in our story data research process.

#### 4.1. Gurung Intuitive Knowledge about Danger

In an early scene when the grandmother character, Ratna Bajei, first learned from a TV news broadcast about the then-unknown virus COVID-19, she quickly turned to and relied upon ancestral-indigenous-spiritual wisdom sources to assess, determine, and act with clarity in response to imminent dangers. Recalling her homeland experience, she told her granddaughter, Hira: “When I was living in Nepal, I saw an astrologer. ‘Danger is fast approaching,’ he told me (See Figure 2). I told your mom to leave immediately. Within that month, the Civil War began. Last night, the astrologer came back to see me in my dream. ‘Danger is fast approaching,’ he said once again”.



**Figure 2.** Ratna Bajei reconnects with an astrologer in her dreamworld and heeds the astrologer’s warning by sewing masks.

In this scene, Ratna Bajei’s fresh reconnection in her dreamworld with an astrologer who last appeared before the outbreak of the Nepalese Civil War in 1996 clarifies that “Danger is fast approaching” once again, after more than a quarter century of time-space passage. Just as Ratna Bajei previously heeded the astrologer’s warning in Nepal, she immediately began to make fresh preparations by sewing masks by hand for her family members to wear as face coverings outside, even before public health masking mandates were issued. In ways similar to the Gurung ancestors who used their senses to forecast and prepare for oncoming natural disasters and physical dangers, Ratna Bajei trusted her



intuitive and indigenous knowledge about the looming viral spread of both COVID-19 and its accompanying anti-Asian hate.

In the next scene, Ratna Bajei and Hira, both wearing face coverings, were walking to a bus stop when a man shouted “Chinavirus” directly at them. Ratna Bajei, who does not speak English, told Hira, “I don’t know what that man said, but I know it was bad.” Ratna Bajei added, “Hira, there are times when we need to talk back right away and there are times when we need to think and plan before we act.” She then proceeded to call the Lali Gurans Community Center to report the incident and alert others close to her. Here, Ratna Bajei was sharing her Gurung wisdom, showing her granddaughter how to assess and deal with dangerous situations while affirming the collective power, care, and responsibility of the diasporic Gurung community in the U.S., but Hira, being young and boisterous, wanted to directly fight back and speak up for herself. After a woman screamed at Hira and Ratna Bajei in the next scene, “Stop making us sick! Go back to your country!”, Hira yelled back, “We didn’t cause the virus!” Ratna Bajei again sensed danger in the moment and immediately jumped in front of Hira to protect her from being punched. As a result, Ratna Bajei, herself, was badly injured from being hit and was taken to the hospital for treatment and observation, in light of her condition, age, and physical stature.

#### 4.2. Gurung Cultural-Spiritual Recovery

*“My heart does not feel good, Maya. My spirit has left my body since I was attacked that day. My spirit has not returned home”.*

The injury Ratna Bajei suffered was not only physical. She lost her spirit due to the racist attack. Full recovery for Ratna Bajei required more than Western medical diagnosis and treatment. Yet, this understanding about health and recovery in Gurung cultural and spiritual contexts was not a frame of reference that the doctor at the hospital was trained or prepared to take into consideration. When Hira’s mother, Neelam, tried to explain that Ratna Bajei was not ready, even though her medical chart showed signs of recovery, the self-assured white male doctor chuckled and said, “What do you mean, Neelam? Ratna is going home today”. Though Ratna Bajei was discharged officially and sent home physically, she was not fully ready. The next scene shows her sitting passively by herself in a dimly lit room with plants wilting in the background. Her spirit would not return to her body.

At this point of the story, Neelam recalled a ritual called Sato Bolauney that was used to bring alignment to Hira’s grandfather’s being each time he returned from combat during the Civil War period. This ritual involved the coming together of the community to call back the lost spirit. Hira remembered that Ratna Bajei had many friends at the Lali Gurans Community Center, including Aashish Bajey, who had become a spiritual master after migrating to the U.S. Over the next few days, Hira and her mother gathered community members to come to their home. They brought garlands of flowers, fruits, herbs, vessels, shawls, gold-dipped wool threads, and more to set up for the ritual. In a culminating scene in which the Sato Bolauney ritual took place, Hira, Neelam, and the community members all huddled shoulder-to-shoulder around Ratna Bajei as they held hands and chanted *shyayee shyayee*—sounds of the universe to guide the spirit home. In response, the glowing spirit of Ratna Bajei returned to the physical body of a delighted Ratna Bajei as Hira watched in joy and reverence (See Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** The community relies on the traditional Nepali Gurung ritual called Sato Bolauney to call Ratna Bajei's spirit back.

This Gurung ritual of calling back the spirit provided the much-needed community care and cultural-spiritual realignment for Ratna Bajei's full healing and recovery that the hospital facilities and personnel could not offer, or even understand. The support and bonding among diasporic family and community members across generations, the balance of the five elements of nature imbued throughout space in the room, and the rhythmic chanting and singing were all needed for Ratna Bajei to recover fully from her injury caused by racial violence. This scene captures the many nuanced ways that Hira's family and the Gurung community coped with the double pandemic—including ancestral wisdom, traditional cultural-spiritual practices, collective community care and intention, the sharing of generational cultural wealth, and more. In one of the final scenes following Ratna Bajei's recovery, Hira began to reflect more deeply and embrace more fully what it meant to be a Gurung. In this moment of her own personal growth and development, Hira recognized that she comes from a lineage of super powerful Gurung women.

#### 4.3. Ether (Sky-Space) and Sounds

*Hira Makes a Sound* concludes with Hira's reflecting on the generational cultural wealth she has inherited from her mother, grandmother, and other Gurung elders in the community. Hira recalled a conversation she had with Ratna Bajei earlier in the story as she picked up a can from the street and started admiring the life in it. Hira restated, "What may seem like nothing is actually something. Just like ether, there is meaning and beauty in everyday items that may seem like nothing to others".

This was an important moment of awakening to the understanding of the purpose of life in Hira's development as a Gurung young woman in U.S. society. At the beginning of the story, Hira followed her grandmother, walking around the neighborhood to pick up cans for recycling. Hira noticed that there were some cans that could be traded for money and others without cash return value. She asked Ratna Bajei why she picked up those cans that did not yield any money. In the scene prior to this conversation, Ratna Bajei is seen staring contemplatively at one of these cans in her hand. This scene draws attention to commonly-held views of elders in U.S. society as unproductive in the economy and unable to contribute to the society—and of Asian elders with language and cultural barriers, in particular, as incompetent and irrelevant. Ratna Bajei was aware of and, at times, wearied by this reality as an elderly Asian woman living in U.S. society, but she also showed her resilience and strength as a Gurung elder by transforming the cans that had no monetary value into useful and beautiful objects that made sounds. More importantly, in the process, by sharing her intentions and practices in everyday life, she was teaching her grandchild, Hira, the Gurung meaning of life.

Ratna Bajei drew on the five elements of nature in the Gurung belief system—especially ether—to make sense of her place in the world. In Nepali, ether is “sky”. She explained to Hira, “Ether is a critical part of life. It is different from earth, fire, water, and air. Ether is all around us and within us. It is the entity that connects us to the higher power and makes our existence possible. What may seem like nothing is actually something!” Just as the old cans do not count for cash, but actually have many meaningful uses, Asian elders who are seen and treated as disposable and irrelevant are actually valuable and respectable (See Figure 4). Ratna Bajei went on to explain the kinds of sounds needed to restore balance. “When these five elements are imbalanced, things go wrong,” she said, “But when wind carries blessings from the sacred sounds of mantras into the space, it purifies that air. This helps to restore balance.” She added, “You see, there are many different sounds, but the kind of sound we need when there is imbalance takes some care or purpose in our heart”.



**Figure 4.** Ratna Bajei teaches Hira about the Gurung worldview, including the meaning of ether and sounds in the Gurung ancestral-cultural-spiritual knowledge system.

At the time of this conversation in the story, Hira did not fully understand what Ratna Bajei was teaching her about the Gurung worldview, but she enjoyed making things together with her grandmother. After she directly experienced racial violence and participated in the powerful Sato Bolauney ritual that restored Ratna Bajei's spirit, she gained a deeper understanding of the meaning of ether and of sounds in the Gurung ancestral-cultural-spiritual knowledge system. The final scene of the storybook, therefore, shows the presence of ether (sky) visually with cans, bells, and mantras, together with Hira, concluding, "Just like when we're told that we do not matter, I know our lives are precious. And our sounds can make a difference, but with our care, purpose and good practice".

#### 4.4. Dissemination

To gauge interest and generate feedback about *Hira Makes a Sound*, during 2022, we utilized a near final, printed, beta-version of the storybook in a variety of sample venues, ranging from a predominantly Black and Latinx fifth-grade class at a local, urban, public elementary school, to our own university-level Asian American Studies courses, to a discussion with local Vietnamese bilingual elementary school leaders, to an online professional development training on anti-racist, culturally-responsive curriculum design for K-12 teachers hosted by a non-profit educational organization. The fifth-grade elementary students, for example, engaged and listened attentively throughout the entire reading of *Hira Makes a Sound*. They asked thoughtful questions, drew connections to a Human Rights unit in their curriculum, and showed genuine care for the characters who experienced hate and discrimination. Demonstrating empathy towards the protagonists in the story, they also connected directly by recounting their own experiences of discrimination and their familiarity with cultural community centers in their own neighborhoods. Additionally, they talked about

how they could support someone who may face similar situations and brainstormed ways which made sense to them to stand up against hate in their own communities. Facilitated by co-author Gurung, this meaningful discussion set the tone for further discussions on themes of race, diversity, and social justice by the fifth-grade children as they referenced the book several more times throughout their remaining 2021–2022 school year.

Thus, one intended outcome using this book in an educational context is to provide children with relatable and empowering depictions of varied identities and experiences. It is important for students of all backgrounds, including religious traditions and spiritual practices, to see themselves reflected in the stories they read, as well as to learn about the experiences and perspectives of others. For children and adults who do not share the same identities or experiences as the characters in a storybook, reading about these characters can provide “windows” into the lives and experiences of others, helping to broaden their understanding and perspective (Bishop 1990; Style 1988). At the same time, it is important for children to see themselves reflected in the stories they read, as this can provide “mirrors” that validate and affirm their own experiences and identities (Bishop 1990; Style 1988). A “real life real stories” narrative, with diverse and inclusive representation, can be a valuable tool for promoting anti-racist pedagogy. By showing children different points of view and experiences, a storybook can help break down stereotypes and teach children to understand and respect differences.

## 5. Conclusions

The process and product of *Hira Makes a Sound* demonstrate one specific response to double-pandemic effects and also reflect a long-term programmatic commitment in Asian American Studies at the region’s urban, public, AANAPISI university. Applied and community-engaged scholarship, such as the *Hira Makes a Sound* storybook project, contributes to perspectives that extend beyond Protestant Christian experiences by focusing on religious coping and child development in an intergenerational, non-white, immigrant community confronted with the dangers of a double-pandemic of anti-Asian racism and the COVID-19 virus. Our community-based storytelling project involves oral history documentation, thematic analysis, story creation, multilingual translation, publication, story-sharing/dissemination, and inevitably, further curriculum development (Roncolato 2022). As explained in previous sections, the centering of an intergenerational Gurung immigrant family story necessarily foregrounds the cultural and spiritual experiences of the Gurung community.

In the story, Hira’s learning and her capacity to be both contextually grounded and ethereally engaged through her multigenerational immigrant family, community, and Gurung ancestral worldview, offer an everyday example of vision, action, and meaning-making that we recognize in the story data from our research and also in our own intentions as creators. From this generative, experience-based subject position, co-author Duong, a Vietnamese immigrant from a Buddhist household, clarifies that the themes and issues represented in the storybook project “came out of our experiences with having conversations with these grand aunties and aunties of our communities. [But] there was one theme that stood strong and clear for all of us, it was a mix of spirituality and the ways of knowing how to survive that we as young Asian American womxn of today [connected and understood]”.

Other aspects of the team’s collective learning process through the project is captured, in part, by co-author A. Ty, who notes:

*Sometimes it is still difficult for me to fully grasp or articulate the concepts. I think part of that has to do with the loss of certain meanings and concepts in translation from Nepalese to English. For example, the word ether is translated into a single word, sky, can be fully understood on a different level in Nepalese but in English, the simplification of the translation to sky means so much depth is lost. As co-author and illustrator, this made the creation process difficult. There was a lot of learning on my part . . . I also relied on*



*my own culture's traditional practices that are different but in some ways, offer similar healing powers for my community.*

Co-author K. Ty who, like A. Ty, is a daughter of Cambodian refugee genocide survivors, further adds:

*Buddhism and animism are embedded in everyday Cambodian culture. While my mom converted to Protestant Christianity when she was pregnant with me, she continued to practice Khmer spiritual ways of knowing. Growing up, my mom would pat my back or chest whenever I was frightened or when something too cold touched my body. She would tell me that she was calming my spirit so that it would not leave my body. I quickly understood the purpose and meaning of the shyayee shyayee ritual when [co-author] Gurung explained it because of my own Khmer cultural frame of reference and lived experiences.*

In Hira's story, both the initial racist slur and the later physical fight occur in public spaces on the street and at the recycling center, as the double pandemic begins to affect the family's daily life reality, without regard for religion. The story's depiction of Gurung spiritual commitments, practices, and relations, however, are clearly present in the family's everyday life throughout the story. Though not our originally intended purpose, Hira's story and our larger Hira project exemplify what Ammerman compellingly asks her fellow Religious Studies scholars to recognize (Ammerman 2021). In her 2021 synthesis, *Studying Lived Religion*, Ammerman urges:

*Look around you as you walk down almost any street or byway in the world. Somewhere, often hidden in plain sight, there will be traces of religion . . . what if you paid attention to what they are doing and how they are doing it? . . . when we look carefully, we are likely to find people doing religion. Religion as it happens in everyday life. Religion in action. (Ammerman 2021, pp. 1–2, 4)*

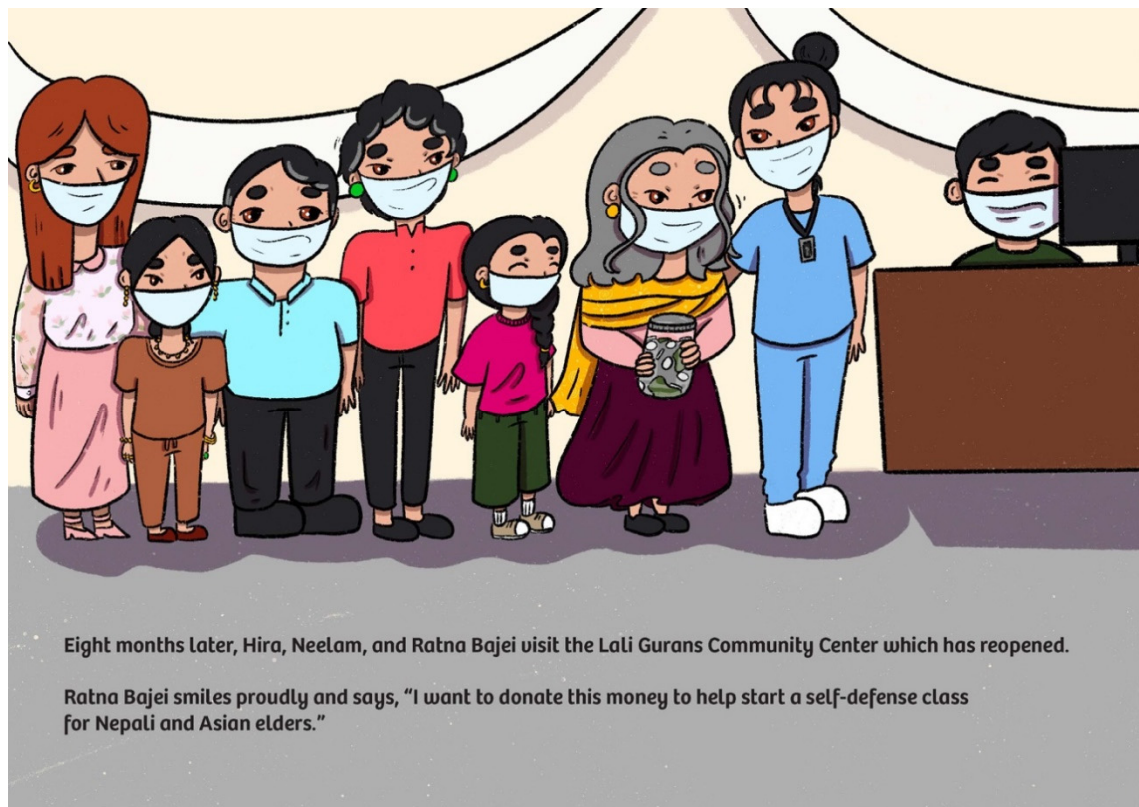
The central location of attention in Hira's story, outside of the family's homeplace, is the Lali Gurans Community Center, which serves as a nexus space that not only provides a physical setting to offer communal, multi-generational activities, classes, cultural performances, social services, diasporic news-sharing, and hate crime reporting, but that also represents a portal to the sustained, shared heritage and balanced, elemental practice of the Gurung ancestral worldview in real time. It is from within the community center space that the voices and sounds of ceremony emanate with such ethereal purpose and can be gathered so readily for healing (See Figure 5). Here, we suggest that the profoundly spiritual and ecological contexts of recognition that enable Ratna Bajei's spirit to safely return to her corporeal being should also be considered as necessary and powerful dimensions of care and support for Hira's own healthy development. Child development—conceptualized, organized, and practiced in this way—may be far more holistically impactful for Hira and other children like her from religiously-diverse, immigrant families of color than what is available or possible at school, and may also offer a collective capacity for healthy child development that extends beyond the concentration of care at home.

As co-author Gurung, a 1.75 generation Nepali immigrant, noted during one of many DST project reflection discussions:

*Community care is very apparent to a child. Even if they're running around . . . at the ritual. My uncle [says]: "you need to listen. This is important." The kids get the tone of the adults' voice and their energy. It builds their curiosity. Why do I need to touch my mom's hand? Why am I wearing this around my neck? They understand that it's important and a sacred thing and shouldn't be taken lightly. They pause. They understand, even if they're five or six years old.*

She also further clarified how and why the community's structure, culture, and everyday practice of rituals and ceremonies are so important, not only from a religious or spiritual perspective of maintaining tradition, but also from a comparative diasporic perspective of health and wellbeing:

*When I was growing up in the city in Nepal, I didn't understand this ritual as much as now in the diaspora . . . [It's our] diaspora story—putting yourself out there for your family and community (collective culture) vs protecting yourself and mental health (individualist culture) . . . What would happen if the younger generation doesn't know about this ritual? Lots of isolation, feeling like they're alone. No reliance on community. Depressive outlook on life. Why does anything matter? They're truly and genuinely happy when in community and being there for each other. It's sad that the younger generation who doesn't have that knowledge, they don't see community and relying on others as a safe haven or a space where they can just be and soak in life, because they're worried about other realities and truths . . . Youth are dealing with depression and anxiety, but we don't know how to deal with it in these ways. I worry that after our parents' generations that if we don't accept these as some ways of healing and community power, it can be... It goes back to that individual[istic] outlook on life. That's not Gurung people—it's not in our bodies or DNA. The isolation part would be really damaging to the mind body spirit.*



**Figure 5.** The Lali Gurans Community Center vibrantly represents a site of lived religion for all to witness and appreciate.

Finally, a setting like the Lali Gurans Community Center is typically invisible and unimportant to most researchers. Nevertheless, it vibrantly represents a site of lived religion for all to witness and appreciate, if we follow Ammerman's directions to see religion in action in everyday life, and simply "walk down the street" and "paid attention" (Ammerman 2021, pp. 1–2). Yet, such an easy-to-say, everyday action of walking down the street may not actually be safe or secure for some of us, due to the reality of widespread anti-Asian hate in this current double-pandemic moment. Moreover, the effects on child development of such public racist danger and pervasive violence—as thoroughly documented by Stop AAPI Hate and others—need prioritized attention and urgent intervention from practitioners and policymakers, along with relevant scholarly engagement by researchers. Given the profound financial, health, mental health, and other marginalizing effects of the

dual COVID-19 pandemics, the need for ongoing cultural and linguistic engagement with young learners and their immigrant family households—with all of their spiritual richness and ancestral legacy wisdom—is both timeless and current, in this very moment.

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