

**The Sensual Uncertainties of Staying True:  
A Review of Hua Hsu, *Stay True: A Memoir*. New  
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We could never write in a way that assumed anyone know where we were coming from. There was nothing interesting about our context. Neither Black nor white, just boring to everyone on the outside. Where do you even begin explaining yourself?

Hua Hsu, *Stay True*, 187

*Stay True* offers a range of poetic, philosophical, and sensual musings on the uncertainties of friendship, loss, memory, history, and staying true to who you are. A second-generation Taiwanese American mourning the murder of his Japanese American college friend, Hua Hsu's memoir reveals the profound diversity of Asian American experiences and refuses to be narrowly defined only as an Asian American memoir. *Stay True* interrogates the uncertainty of staying true to friendship and identity, with a focus on how music, film, sports, writing, and other forms of media mediates our relationships and individual identity formations. Throughout his memoir, Hua Hsu showcases the importance of sensual encounters through sound, image, representations of joys and pain, attempting to make sense of the senseless murder of his college friend through writing and remembering.

I first heard Hua Hsu interviewed by Terry Gross on Fresh Air when his book, *Stay True*, came out in 2022. The interview foregrounded how music and mixtapes helped make the author who he is, with the senseless murder of his college friend Ken in 1998 at the center. The book recently won the inaugural 2023 Pulitzer Prize for Memoir. Hearing the interview again on National Public Radio after the book won the Pulitzer Prize in September 2023 finally made me want to do a critical review of the book. I am a skeptic, and I cannot wait to tear the book apart; at least a part of me wanted to. At the same time, with mixtapes (what we now call playlists)

so central to the narrative, I instinctively felt there must be a lot of things I could tease out for review.

### **An Asian American Memoir?**

As a female Asian American reader, I was looking for Asian American things in the book, and I found a rather nuanced take on the issue but still operating very much within a male-centered homosocial world. The first time the question about being Asian American was raised is some forty pages into the book, when the author, Hua, a second-generation Taiwanese American, formally introduced his college friend Ken as one of the Japanese American kids who “can seem like aliens to other Asians, untroubled, largely oblivious of feeling like outsiders” (44). The very much assimilated Ken appeared too mainstream for the taste of our author, “I remember how odd it was that he sometimes forgot to take his shoes off when he came over” (78). That is to the extent, however, the author seems to want to indulge in the question of being Asian American at face value, although it is a thread that lingered throughout the book.

### **Staying True to Friendship and Identity?**

The formation and transformation of friendship and individual identity seem much more central to the memories that must be written down for the sake of remembrance and preservation, archiving and activation, after the murder of Ken. Hua offers insights from philosophers from Aristotle to Derrida to breathe life into his storytelling of love and loss, and memory and history. Youthful friendship, the instability and quick succession, as well as the possibility and intensity of pleasure as articulated by Aristotle, came to be disrupted by Derrida, who saw dichotomies as mutually constitutive. In *Stay True*, Hua wanted to “tak[e] seriously the ideas of our departed friends” and considered such an action “the ultimate expression of friendship, signaling the possibility of a eulogy that doesn’t simply focus attention back on the survivor and their grief” (57).

“What does it mean to truly be yourself?” (80), Hua asks his readers. He continued to weave in insights from philosophers, anthropologists, and sociologists to connect friendship, identity, and the sensual and emotional connections between individuals. From Charles Taylor, Bronisław Malinowski, to Marcel Mauss, Hua guided his readers through a journey in search of identity in remembrance. In his exploration of friendship in relation to the idea of the gift, Hua zooms in on Mauss’s “Essay on the Gift” and its original publication in 1923 as part of a special issue of

*L'Année sociologique*, a journal that Émile Durkheim, Mauss's mentor, had founded in 1896 and edited until his death in 1917.

The 1923 comeback issue overseen by Mauss paid tribute to a generation of scholars who were among the millions lost over the preceding decade. Mauss projects into a future that never arrived, imagining “what this would have become, if there had been no war” and his colleagues had continued living and working together. In this context, Mauss's idea of the gift takes on a new resonance. He is salvaging a lost world, trying to see through on a set of impossible potentialities, something Hua similarly attempts in his memoir (103-4).

### **How Media Mediates?**

*Stay True* is all about how media mediates our friendship, identity, memory, and sense of loss and history. Music and mixtapes are key, so are film, TV, radio, and other forms of mediations. Hua offers two film experiences as essential to the bounding of Ken and himself: One is *La Jetée*, a short film by the French filmmaker Chris Marker, and the other is *Berry Gordy's The Last Dragon*, considered by himself as “the greatest film ever made” after about ten minutes of watching. *La Jetée* impressed Hua with its formal and thematic simplicity: It mainly consists of a series of still black-and-white images with minimal voiceover; and it was a simple tale of a future civilization trying to time travel their way out of doom (71). However, I see something else in Hua's obsession with the film. The film not only resembles a zine, one of Hua's favorite ways of self-expression in addition to mixtapes, but it is also about confronting a past death in the future, Hua's central preoccupation in writing *Stay True* after Ken's murder. As to *Berry Gordy's The Last Dragon*, a kung fu comedy that featured a predominantly Black cast, it also inspires in multiple ways: Hua and Ken wrote a film script together inspired by *The Last Dragon* (98), although they never even got to the point of finding someone with a camera to shoot the film.

In this sense, writing as the ultimate means of mediation, is Hua's way of bringing Ken into the conversation after his murder. However, Hua is a skeptic, just like me. He invokes Derrida's “deferral of meaning” in his self-interrogation of the incapability and uncertainty of words and their meanings: “yet words are all we have, simultaneously bringing us closer, casting us farther away” (125). Similarly, “music no longer modeled a better world,” and he decided that he could no longer listen to anything from before (132).

## Making Sense through Sensual Encounters?

In a memoir full of music and mixtapes, Hua did not necessarily privilege the auditorial as a dominating sensual function for encountering friends, forging identities, and creating or losing meaningful connections. One particularly memorable example is offered when he hurt himself, almost intentionally and violently, in a baseball game after the murder of his friend Ken:

A gruesome, lunch-meat-sized scab formed on my knee. I appreciated the way it expanded, mutated, took on new crevasses. It looked like a landmass slowly expanding across the sea. I wore the wound like a badge. I loved telling the story of how it happened, because something about the way I reveled in its violence seemed uncharacteristic. And it was also a new story—one that had nothing to do with Ken or the past. (138)

This bodily experience is so vividly conveyed to the readers that it could easily be visualized and felt. Telling stories about it adds auditorial sensations to the visual and bodily experiences, guiding the readers to a deeper appreciation of the need for a new story, a new narrative, and the need to forge a new sensual experience. However, Hua's final musing on how to best represent what he and Ken experienced together betrayed his intended forgetting:

I needed to figure out how to describe the smell of secondhand smoke on flannel, the taste of pancakes with fresh strawberries and powdered sugar the morning after, sun hitting a specific shade of golden brown, the deep ambivalence you once felt toward a song that now devastated you, the threshold when a pair of old boots go from new to worn, the sound of our finals week mixtape wheezing to the end of its spool. (193)

In this sense, *Stay True* is Hua's attempt at making sense of the senseless murder of his friend through writing and remembering. To what extent one can stay true, however, is always open to the intervention of sensual uncertainties.

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### Author's Profile:

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