

# ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES AND LGBTQ STUDIES

## *Horizons of Intersectional Alliances*

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This essay is a brief reflection on the rich intersectional history of Asian American Studies and LGBTQ studies through an autoethnographic account. It focuses on the emergence of productive conjunctions between the two fields as framed by my own career trajectory in academia and community activism. I want to note that this is not an ego-boosting attempt to locate myself as an exemplary case, but I will unabashedly admit that I was a fortunate witness to and an avid participant in the provenance of the continuing fruitful alliances between the two fields.

I map these historical and theoretical meeting points as products of historical and biographical encounters and conditions. I believe the “state” of the fields should not be considered as a description of a present condition but rather, as critical assessment of a process, a persistent unfolding, and a continuous voyage of several communities of scholars. At the heart of this essay is not just a story or a history but rather a reflection on enduring questions that have propelled this intellectual crossroad. I offer an invitation or provocation to scholars to take risks, and to listen more closely and sensitively to the evolving world and to lives on the ground. The “roots” of this intersectional history of the two fields are a product of sensitive, activist, and community responses to problems on existing social injustices. As I will point out later, there is a danger in the institutionalization and official recognition of the works coming out of these conjoined fields, especially around the initial impulse for such collaborations which was taking responsibility to engage with ever-increasing and continuing crises of racism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, and extreme economic disparities. At

the end, I briefly gesture to the problems of institutionalization and suggest kernels of a possible future.

## STREET KNOWLEDGE

When I was in graduate school studying for a doctoral degree in anthropology, I was trained as a Southeast Asian Studies scholar. Like many fields in area studies, some countries and cultures were “trendier,” more “fundable” or deemed more strategically important than others. My kind dissertation adviser, who conducted fieldwork in the Philippines, very seriously told me that to be a “marketable” Southeast Asian Studies scholar in anthropology (a region already disparaged for its lack of strategic relevance especially after the Vietnam war) that I should focus on Indonesia since it was the treasure trove of anthropological curiosities.

The turning point that marked my shift from traditional anthropological area studies to both Asian American and LGBTQ studies was the major turn in the AIDS pandemic in the late 1980s. By that time, the pandemic started devastating communities of people of color, poor people, drug users, and immigrants. After years of living in a bucolic university town in western New York, the sense of safety and distance from the ongoing epidemic slowly fell apart.

By 1986, several of the Filipino gay men I met in New York City were coming down with AIDS, some of whom died within the next two years. It was that moment that spurred me to change my dissertation topic from Islamic education in Sumatra, Indonesia, which was a matrilineal society (where the lineage was traced through mother line)—a classic ethnographic topic if there ever was one. I told my adviser that I wanted to study AIDS among Filipino gay men first in San Francisco, then, due to lack of funding, I chose New York where I already had a network of Asian American, primarily Filipino American, gay men. My adviser was naturally disappointed, but like all generous dissertation advisers, he cautioned me that I would be unemployable and that I was taking a major risk that may damage my professional future. Nevertheless, he allowed me the freedom to explore uncharted intellectual and social landscapes despite the dangers and risks involved.

When I arrived in New York City to supposedly start my fieldwork in 1989, I became involved in GAPIMNY (Gay Asian Pacific Islander Men of New York) and I helped found Kambal sa Lusog, a Filipino American gay and lesbian group. To fund my research, I found a 9-to-5 job as program evaluator at the Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC) in New York City where I worked for five years and then

I moved to the Asian Pacific Islander Coalition as director of education on HIV/AIDS (APICHA). I worked in the AIDS world from 1988 to 1998.

I spent a decade of my life watching various communities of color struggling with the pandemic go to voguing house balls in Harlem and to Chinese immigrant clinics in Chinatown. During that time, my academic pursuits were pushed aside. In all my years at the university, I never took an Asian American Studies or an LGBT class. They were not available in the northeast. Nevertheless, I learned basic lessons about those fields outside university walls. I learned about immigration experiences in the pro bono law offices in Manhattan, about racism in the busy markets of Flushing, Queens, and the tough life of Asian American youth in public schools. My classroom was the streets of New York City in the 1990s.

Those ten years taught me important lessons especially about the roles of race, gender, class, and immigration in shaping sexuality. I began to interrogate the racialized dimensions of gay identity and culture. The pandemic provided hard lessons in the discrepancies between sexual and gender categories and its potentially violent consequences. This situation made it plainly and rudely obvious that the state, especially the Reagan presidency and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), were woefully ignorant about the complexities of non-Western, non-heterosexual sexualities as well as gender. The CDC fetishized and deracialized gay identity and unsurprisingly, desexualized Asian men and other men of color. Men who have sex with men was a category to name groups of men who did not identify as gay but seemed to have had sex with the same gender, and they were typically men of color who were mostly immigrants. Such unsettling or troubling situations proved to be useful in understanding contemporary crises such as COVID and anti-Asian hatred that I will discuss in the final section of this essay.

## **THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF LGBTQ ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES**

Based on my own unconventional development as a scholar, I created my own personal somewhat idiosyncratic historical account of the convergence of the intellectual and political trajectories of Asian American Studies and LGBTQ studies. Because of the AIDS pandemic and the rabid anti-immigrant movement in the late twentieth century, particularly in the 1990s, this convergence was not fortuitous but necessary. The 1990s saw the institutional expansion, legitimization, and growth of the two fields and the other interdisciplines. Asian American

Studies expanded beyond its founding sites in California by spreading into the Midwest and East Coast. At the same time, the nascent Gay and Lesbian Studies (which became Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies) became an acceptable specialization in various humanities and social science fields.

Due to the foundational history of Ethnic Studies in collective struggles for social justice, these interdisciplines created a more hospitable space for scholars dealing with LGBTQ research than most traditional academic disciplines. Therefore, it was not surprising that many of the hires in the late 1990s in Asian American Studies, Women and Gender Studies, and in traditional disciplines such as English, history, and anthropology were scholars doing work at the intersections of the two fields. This generation of scholars included Richard Fung, David Eng, Gayatri Gopinath, Ju Hui Judy Han, Alice Hom, Jasbir Puar, Russell Leong, R. Zamora Linmark, Gil Mangaoang, Trinity Ordone, Nayan Shah, Dana Takagi, Joel Tan, Eric Wat, and myself.

Two pioneering volumes on Asian American Studies scholarship on LGBT issues were published in the 1990s. *Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay and Lesbian Experiences* edited by Russel Leong, was published in 1996 and *Q & A: Queer in Asian America* edited by David Eng and Alice Hom was published in 1998.<sup>1</sup> Both collections highlight radical theoretical and conceptual shifts in then-mainstream gay and lesbian studies by focusing on Asian American experiences.

In the inaugural essay of the 1996 collection, Dana Takagi, in her aptly titled pioneering essay “Maiden Voyage: Excursion into Sexuality and Identity Politics in Asian America,”<sup>2</sup> advocated for the unsettling of gay and lesbian identities by critically situating them in the contexts of Asian immigration history to the US, and oppressive racialization and (de)sexualization of Asian Americans. In other words, sex is more than just sexual acts, and is a product of history, immigration, structural inequalities such as race, class, and gender, and cultural differences. Takagi’s invitation to rethink gay and lesbian experiences in more expansive ways via Asian American experiences is a portent of the dynamic renewals and reexamination of such terms. The essays in this volume were the first attempts to discuss the nuances and discrepancies of such mainstreamed gay and lesbian notions as “coming out,” homophobia, and the tensions between sex and gender. It was clear in the AIDS pandemic and in the works in this volume, that such concepts were structurally and culturally defined. For instance, normative focus on what was called “same-gender” desire, sexual orientation or object choice relegated many Asian American “gay and lesbian” practices (e.g., cross-dressing/drag, butch/femme, etc.) into primordial, premodern antecedents. It was a call to action in claiming the vital importance of the cultural, economic, and political experiences of Asian American LGBT communities.

In 1998, just two years after the first anthology, *Q & A* brought “queer” into the equation. More than just an umbrella term for gay and lesbian, Eng and Hom suggested a more radical dimension. Queer is not an identity per se, but a stance, a position that reclaims marginalized “deviant” positions as staging ground for possible lives and hopeful futures.

Given that both fields were interdisciplinary and focused on issues of marginalized identities and communities, it was not surprising that research, especially among Asian Americanist scholars, responding to political, social, and intellectual conditions shaped the emergence of Asian American Studies scholarship focusing on LGBTQ topics. The Association of Asian American Studies led the way in promoting this strand of scholarship—particularly evident in several panels in the AAAS conferences in the late 1990s and more prominently in the twenty-first century. A Queer Caucus was informally established in 2011 in the association and revitalized in 2016 as the Queer Studies Caucus.

In 2021, a second volume of *Q & A* coedited by Alice Hom, Kale Fajardo, and myself,<sup>3</sup> marked a more recent phase of the conjoined intellectual journeys of Asian American Studies and LGBTQ studies. This collection, following the lead of the first *Q & A*, continued to deploy the expansive and capacious notion of queer as not always about sexuality per se or sex alone. Rather, queer as it unfolds in this collection is part of the intersectional and complex interplay of imposed social categories, stereotypical figurations, unjust conditions, and marginalized positionalities (not identities) such as the “welfare queen,” the “diseased foreigner,” or the “terrorist.” In this work, the category transgender becomes the catalyst for upending and rejecting the assumed anachronisms of the feminized Asian “gay” man and the butch Asian “lesbian” as premodern relics of foreign exotic “traditions.” In other words, recent works on Asian American transgender experiences respond to the displacement of the Asian queer as always out of synch with the homonormalizing process of mainstream gay and lesbian culture in America. In addition, these works recognize the fallibility and erroneous preconception of queerness as emanating from Western modernity, but in fact, is produced by colonial, diasporic, and decolonial processes. Queerness moves in multidirectional ways and not merely through the imposition of Global North categories and practices onto the Global South and marginalized communities in the United States.

In fact, the two *Q & A* volumes recognized the transnational and diasporic unraveling of a unitary Asia and a unitary Asian America, and to think in terms of multiple “Asias.” Recalling Takagi’s astute provocation, the dynamic and vital contribution of this productive intersectional history of the two fields is to pluralize gender, sexuality, race, and class. This is necessary to better understand

structural violence and oppression beyond discreet groups or constituency but as constitutive of an unequal globalizing world

Thus far, it might seem that I have presented a bright and celebratory narrative of progress in terms of the institutional legibility and acceptance of these interdisciplines. However, at this current moment, we must ask: what is the price of institutionalization? Does academic visibility enable us to rest on our alleged accomplishments and victory?

### **ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES AND LGBTQ STUDIES: PERILS OF EXISTENCE IN THE NEOLIBERAL UNIVERSITY**

While the intersectional alliances of the two fields have become institutionalized in academia, I believe there is a downside to this development. I suggest the so-called emergence or “victory” has also placed the interdisciplines in a rut and in the middle of mounting internal skirmishes. I am reminded of a senior (presumably straight and misogynist) ethnic studies scholar who in a moment of exasperation exclaimed, “The queers have taken over ethnic studies.” This is not an isolated event as I have heard different iterations dozens of times in multiple spaces.

Such a claim requires more than a simple answer. First, we only need to remind ourselves of the conditions surrounding the two fields’ emplacement in the university and why there is an imagined “turf war” between queer scholars in ethnic studies and the interdisciplines themselves? Who is colonizing what? What is the space of the so-called conquest or colonization? What are the terms of our supposed institutional success? Who are the enemies? Who are the allies? The stage for this alleged war is the neoliberal university.

Secondly, the initial outburst from the senior ethnic studies scholar smacks of an imagined territorial battle, a war for imagined scarcity of resources, and a struggle for legitimacy in an institution that is now less about learning and social change but in propping up capitalist ideals of the institution. The alleged internal struggles within the interdisciplines have been fomented by the institution that is the very space for their academic institutional existence. The neoliberal university needs the interdisciplines to conform to a fleeting market fascination with “colorful” cultural (not racial) difference. The struggle for existence of these mostly endangered interdisciplines are based on metrics such as publication records and enrollment numbers upon which dubious labels such as prestige, integrity, and value are framed in numerical terms that do not add up

to the immeasurable value of the work of these fields. In other words, like the market of worldly commodities, things come and go, and in order to survive, interdisciplines are made to function as mere brands struggling for a clientele in a rapidly dwindling and increasingly conservative higher education market. As intellectual brands, the institutionalized interdisciplines are caught up in the struggle to measure up and survive, hence these internal battles.

As Roderick Ferguson<sup>4</sup> reminds us, the institutionalization of the interdisciplines from the 1990s to the present, while producing several generations of scholars who have produced fascinating, relevant, and provocative works, have also forced scholars to be complicit (wittingly or unwittingly) with the neoliberal university attempts to “manage minority difference.” This business of administering and controlling diversity, equity, and inclusion is a form of branding for enhancing the institution’s marketability and visibility. It seems to be a persistent condition of modern-day US higher education. This business of diversity management is conducted amidst dramatic and disparate conditions that exist not only in the larger social world, but within the material world of the ivory tower where elitism exists in the form of hierarchical arrangements, between various forms of labor (e.g., tenured, untenured, contingent) that are classed, raced, gendered, ableist, and sexualized.

If we are to closely follow the trajectory and collaborative potential of Asian American Studies and LGBTQ studies, we must be more sensitive to the ways in which their very existence as separate fields have been caused precisely by the material conditions produced by the neoliberal university. So, are we caught in a trap of producing metric and trend-based knowledge production? Are we subjected to an ever-ending cycle of coming up with what is more spectacularly queer and dramatically marginalized without regard to how to respond to these conditions beyond a text, a lecture, or a publication? What is the future for the intersectional history of Asian American Studies and LGBTQ Studies?

## **SEARCHING FOR HORIZONS FROM THE STREET LEVEL**

While the long-standing debates and struggles from the late twentieth century on gay and lesbian marriage, gays and lesbians in the military, and social visibility and acceptance seemed to have been resolved. But all is not well. Today, we are witnessing increasing physical, legal, and social violence against LGBTQ communities and women nationwide, including laws preventing the teaching of sexuality, misogynistic attacks on feminism, shootings in gay bars, and punitive

(anti-trans, anti-gay, misogynistic) legislations, our so-called victories seem quite hollow. Moreover, Asian American communities encounter intensifying anti-Asian violence and other rabid xenophobic acts stemming from the COVID pandemic. These persistent crises demand a broader, and more expansive view of social change and justice. I suggest the institutionalization of the interdisciplines has created widespread complacency and fear of risky yet radical visions for social justice for fear of survival at the university.

As an attempt to provide some preliminary answers to these questions about the future and as a way of concluding, I would like to go back to the most vulnerable period of my life, during my supposed “unmarketable” anthropological fieldwork living in an expensive city while surviving on a nonprofit salary. This is not a moment of self-pity, but rather a sober introspection of what I went through and how it might suggest a way to critically address the institutional rut we see ourselves embroiled in.

I initiated my project about Filipino gay men not out of careful, careerist strategizing of how marketable my academic profile would be at the university. In fact, I was resigned to doing nonprofit work and dead-end, part-time clerical jobs. I never thought that my work was going to be read, committing what some acquaintances called academic suicide. But I survived and indeed flourished but not because I “gamed” the academic market. I took the risk because I was compelled to do the work, not because a cushy tenure track job will be waiting for me at the end.

This view might not be popular especially those who aspire for graduate training in the interdisciplines. I am always skeptical and cautious about encouraging people to pursue graduate education particularly in the interdisciplines. There is no assurance of a career after years of financial, intellectual, and emotional investments. I typically lay the cards on the table when speaking with eager graduate school applicants. I tell them that the research topics they plan to pursue should come from a more visceral and capacious set of worldly problems. In other words, to get a clearer view, they need to take risks and take to the streets!

What does this trip down memory lane have to do with the future of the intersection of the two interdisciplines? I am not invoking a mythical place called the “outside” street world beyond academia walls. I am not advocating slumming among the poor and downtrodden outside the university gates. In fact, I am arguing that everywhere is a site of struggle including classrooms, corridors, libraries—everywhere! Therefore, the scholarship, research, and training of people in these two intersectional interdisciplines should reflect this fact. Researchers, students, and faculty should put aside their careerist strategies



and search for alternative modes of learning, teaching, and research that may or not may not conform to the strictures of the neoliberal university.

It might seem disingenuous to hark back to street knowledge coming from someone like me who has a senior tenured position. Some would allege that I am this old academic curmudgeon indulging in a romanticized harkening back to the viscosity of the street. It is not a nostalgic plea for an untroubled past but rather a reorienting of the way we think of the two fields as separate nodes of knowledge with their own selfish institutional interests, resources, and territories. The existing ethos or drive of the institutionalized interdisciplines have led to exceptionalism and isolation. We need to find alternatives to the current situation. Therefore, we need to be suspicious of and be wary of the university. I am not advocating for anarchic solutions but intellectual and activist ones.

Heeding Kandice Chuh's prescient view, we need to distance ourselves from turgid narrow identities since they have become fossilized, reified, and branded entities.<sup>5</sup> They have also become fodder for the creation of hierarchies of oppression. The interdisciplines are not "about" this more marginalized group or that more oppressed group. The interdisciplines are products of capacious aspirations and struggles for a just world. We can only look back in the previous centuries from the student and farmers strikes in the 1970s and Asian American queer activists marching for reforms in the AIDS pandemic. I suggest that the boundaries of the interdisciplines should become less rigid, more fluid, more coalitional, and in fact, should eventually be abandoned. We need more a more expansive view of what needs to be done based on what I call street knowledge and move away from what is trendy and marketable.

I remain optimistic. There is a way out of the rut. We need a forward-looking capacious gaze towards a viable and hopeful horizon for these intellectual and activist endeavors, we need to get a critical vantage, take risks, and go to the street level where the view is grounded in the ever-shifting broad-ranging realities of injustices, oppressions, and violence that compel us to act and move beyond institutionalized arrangements and scripted futures.

## NOTES

1. Russell Leong, ed., *Asian American Sexualities: Dimension of the Gay & Lesbian Experience* (New York: Routledge, 1996); David L. Eng Alice Y. Hom, ed., *Q & A: Queer in Asian America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).
2. Dana Takagi, "Maiden Voyage: Excursion into Sexuality and Identity Politics in Asian America," in Leong, *Asian American Sexualities*, 21–36.

3. Martin F. Manalansan IV, Alice Y. Home, and Kale Bantigue Fajardo, ed., *Q & A. Voices from Queer Asian North America* (Temple University Press, 2021).
4. Roderick Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).
5. Kandice Chuh, "It's Not about Anything," *Social Text* no. 121 (2014): 125–34.