

# ***Asian<sup>1</sup> Lesbians in San Francisco Struggles to Create a Safe Space, 1970s-1980s***

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## ***Introduction***

On October 12-15, 1979, more than six hundred Black, Latino, American Indian, Asian, and white people attended the First National Third World Gay and Lesbian Conference in Washington, D.C. That same weekend, the First National March for Gay and Lesbian Rights gathered more than one hundred thousand people in the nation's capital to dramatize their stand against a fierce anti-gay assault led by a coalition of New Right religious fundamentalists and Republican Party neoconservative politicians. Two hundred conferees, including a dozen Asians, marched as a Third World Contingent.<sup>2</sup> Later, Michiyo Cornell spoke for the newly formed Lesbian and Gay Asian Collective and told them:

We are called the model minority, the quiet, passive, exotic erotics with the slanted cunt to match our "slanted" eye or the small dick to match our small size. But we are not.... We share the same problems that other Third World lesbian and gay men share. Because of fear of deportation, because of Asian American dependence on our families and Asian American communities for support, it is very difficult for us to be out of the closet. But we need to come out of the closet. For not to do so, we would be living a lie, and the great lie, which is America, can use that weakness not only to destroy Asian American lesbians and gay men, but also our Third World lesbian and gay sisters and brothers.<sup>3</sup>

Exhorting an anti-racist politics and a liberationist vision, Michiyo then challenged the race and class privilege of the assembled white gays and lesbians:

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You share oppression from homophobia with us, but unless you begin to address your white skin privilege and actively support Asian American lesbian and gay men, you will not have our support and you will lose out on a chance to build the kind of world we all need, to live decently and lead full productive lives.<sup>4</sup>

Together, the 1979 Third World Conference and National Gay Rights March gave birth to a seminal Asian gay and lesbian movement. Soon afterward, Asian lesbians and gay men renewed their organizing efforts in New York and San Francisco, while new gay men's groups formed in Boston, Philadelphia, and Toronto.

Homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgenderism do not discriminate. They are found across time in every gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, class, and social group of the world. In the United States, where gender and sexual minorities are stigmatized, the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer (GLBTQ)<sup>5</sup> movements launched in the 1970s pushed American social, cultural, and political boundaries and gained some degree of acceptance and civil rights protection. But Asian and Pacific Islander<sup>6</sup> sexual and gender minorities—and all queer people of color, for that matter—are not recipients of the full bounty of those advances. While fighting stigma from the broader American society, queer people of color also face marginalization within the GLBTQ movement as well as from their ethnic families and communities. The 1979 Washington, D.C., events described above marked a turning point for all queer people of color. Today, an overlapping local, regional, national, and international network of hundreds of GLBTQ Black/African American, Latino, American Indian, Asian, Pacific Islander, and South West Asian/North African individuals, groups, and organizations strives to confront racism, sexism, and homo/bi/transphobia on multiple fronts.

This is a brief history of Asian lesbians in San Francisco in the 1970s and early 1980s and their struggles to build a community. During this same period, Asian and Pacific Islander gay, lesbian, and bisexual people in Honolulu, Los Angeles, and New York City launched similar organizing efforts.<sup>7</sup> While the San Francisco women's experience is not unique, their story typifies the cultural barriers, political inexperience, and lack of resources that challenged everyone in the beginning.

Collectively, the efforts of this generation laid the foundation for the Asian/Pacific Islander and broader people of color GLBTQ community and movement of today. This is just one small part of that story.

## ***Unchallenged Homophobia in 1960s Movements***

How did queer people of color find themselves on the outskirts of entire movements that purported to fight racism or homophobia but failed to include their queer or colored members? This conjunction can be traced back to the race, gender, and sexuality contradictions in the civil rights, women's, and anti-war/anti-imperialist movements that exploded with the emergence of "Black Power" in 1966.

Black Power articulated the desire from Black people for militant all-Black organizations to lead the Black struggle. This idea took powerful hold in the youth wing of the civil rights movement, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). SNCC began the 1960s with idealism, dedication, and a deep-seated belief in direct-action nonviolent politics as they organized voter registration drives throughout the South. However, after a decade of unchecked violence from racist state police and vigilante forces and a profound disillusionment with liberalism, many in SNCC questioned the reforms won by the newly passed Civil Rights and Voting Rights legislation. Intent on uprooting institutionalized racism, they looked instead to the self-determinationist politics of the newly decolonized African states and the armed revolutionary movements in Asia and Latin America. In 1966, SNCC changed direction under the Black cultural nationalist leadership of Stokely Carmichael (a.k.a. Kwame Ture). He supported the call for SNCC to become "black staffed, black controlled and black financed" and to "cut [themselves] off from white people."<sup>8</sup> Straining under convoluted race, class, gender, and sexual internal dynamics that had already polarized Black versus white and men versus women in SNCC, the white people in the organization were eventually asked to leave.

This decision marked a deep split that not only separated Black people from white people in SNCC but prompted all social movements to follow suit. The political empowerment organizing tendencies that rose with Black Power quickly transformed into various forms of cultural nationalism in the Black, Latino, American Indian,



Asian, and Pacific Islander communities, led by organizations such as the Black Panther Party, La Raza Unida, the Young Lords Party, the American Indian Movement, and the Red Guards. Under their influence, people of color community organizing moved rapidly forward on a separatist trajectory in parallel with, yet distinctly apart from, the white anti-Vietnam War, women's, and homophile<sup>9</sup> movements.

Although a disconcerting period for white activists who had previously looked to the Black movement for leadership, this was an effusive period of individual and collective discovery and challenge for young Black, Latino, American Indian, Asian, and Pacific Islander activists. For Asian and Pacific Islander people on the West Coast and in Hawai'i, collective empowerment gathered hundreds who reclaimed a common past and worked toward a common future. In the 1970s, the pan-Asian/Pacific movement came alive with the energy and ideals of young activists who crisscrossed daily in various community and campus struggles.

But in all the cultural nationalist movements, sexism, misogyny, and homophobia were unchallenged. Machismo, violence, and death were idealized as acts of manhood;<sup>10</sup> femininity was defined as submissiveness;<sup>11</sup> and homosexuality was proclaimed "a sickness, just as baby rape."<sup>12</sup> Despite support of the gay struggle from Black Panther Party chair Huey Newton,<sup>13</sup> the gay movement was viewed as illegitimate at best, and at worst a corruption of politics because civil rights were advocated for a group that should be criminally policed, punished, and eradicated. Additionally, for Asian American activists who looked especially to China for inspiration, Maoism declared "homosexuals cannot be communists."<sup>14</sup> But it was Cuba's anti-gay position that slammed the door on *out* Black, Latino, and Asian gays and lesbians in their own communities.

Cuba, the first socialist country in the Western Hemisphere, came to power in 1959 and was blockaded immediately by the United States. In 1969, however, the anti-war organization Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) organized the first "Venceremos Brigade," a group of North American volunteers who helped with the sugarcane harvest in Cuba.<sup>15</sup> In the first years of the Brigade, some openly gay Brigadistas tried to hold workshops and distribute Gay Liberation Front materials in Cuba. After an initial period of ambiguity, however, the Cuban Communist Party

stated in 1971 that “all manifestations of homosexual deviations are to be firmly rejected and prevented from spreading” and that offenders would suffer severe penalties.<sup>16</sup> The Venceremos Brigade then criticized those members who had appeared in drag or acted in an overtly sexual manner at parties as “imposing North American gay culture on the Cubans.”<sup>17</sup> Thereafter, North American gays were excluded from Cuban solidarity work until a policy change in 1984. In the intervening years, Brigadistas returned home and played leading roles in the Asian, Latino, and Black communities, and for the most part, Cuba’s anti-gay politics went with them and took root.

### ***“I Could Not Tell Anybody”***

Sylvia Savellano, a Filipino American from Oakland, met her first Brigadistas at Grove Street College. Syl was impressed with the Brigadistas’ community work and viewed communism as “communities working together.”<sup>18</sup> Syl was twenty years old when she went on the Third Venceremos Brigade to Cuba in 1970 and was joined by two hundred other politically radical young men and women of all races from across the United States. The six-week experience of working in the sugarcane fields, living in bunkhouses, meeting young Cubans, and visiting institutions was a turning point for her and her companions.

Before Syl went to Cuba, however, she was seeing a Honduran woman. She thought about coming out during the Brigade selection process but decided against it. Since Cuba viewed homosexuality as a “crime against the people,”<sup>19</sup> upon her return Syl knew that it was impossible to be a gay person in the movement. So she buried her feelings, volunteered at the San Francisco International Hotel, and was one of the first (among very few) women activists in the Kearny Street Asian American Movement.

Syl led a double life, an assumed *straight sister* in the Asian American movement during the day and a *pervert* at night in gay dance clubs. Recalled Syl, “It was isolating. It was a quiet thing. I could not tell anybody. Any inclinations, I had to can it.... I came out to my family because of the I-Hotel. But to my Movement friends I lived with ... they did not know what was going on.”<sup>20</sup> Then it all came to a head when

one of Syl's fellow Brigadistas called a meeting to start a chapter of the Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA) in the Bay Area in 1971. Syl, along with her girlfriend and several other lesbians of color, piled into a car and enthusiastically went to the first meeting called for women of color:

We thought we could express our sexual identity. Wrong.... We were isolated. We felt bad. We all picked up that we were not welcome, at least to not talk about our lesbianism. So we pulled out. We got the cold shaft.... In the Asian and Third World movement, we could have been treated better. It felt like our own people [were] stabbing us. [Name withheld] said, "We are not going to have any of 'that' here; we have too many bigger issues." So we boycotted [the TWWA]. We did not want to go. It was only for straight women. It was not the place to go."<sup>21</sup>

Syl never spoke about this incident to her other Brigade friends. Afterward, she left her Brigade house collective and moved to her brother's place.

Fortunately, Syl was Filipina and found a place in the Filipino radical group KDP (*Katipunan ng mga Demokratikong Pilipino*, Union of Democratic Filipinos). Homosexuals were allowed in KDP because one of its founding national leaders, Melinda Paras, was a lesbian. Melinda, born and raised in Madison, Wisconsin, was a young teenage Asian American anti-war activist and Venceremos Brigadista when she went to the Philippines and joined the revolutionary nationalist movement. She joined one of the revolutionary nationalist groups, *Kabataan Makabayan* (Patriotic Youth), and eventually worked with the American GI movement on the U.S. bases to develop support for the Philippine cause. On September 23, 1972, immediately after the declaration of martial law in the Philippines by President Ferdinand Marcos, Melinda was arrested and deported back to the United States. Returning to the Midwest, Melinda immediately linked up with other anti-Marcos nationalist Filipinos and Filipino Americans to organize the overseas community to stop U.S. aid to the Philippines.

A year later, the radical members of the Philippine support network formed KDP. Melinda was elected to its three-person national executive leadership committee, along with Cynthia Maglaya and Bruce Occena. In October 1973, Melinda left Madison, moved into the KDP's national headquarters in Oakland, and soon began a



relationship with another female KDP member (this author) who also lived at the headquarters. Melinda immediately informed her leadership group of her personal situation. There was no problem with her lesbianism, as Cynthia's older sister was a lesbian and Bruce was supportive. Melinda's stellar political credentials as a revolutionary movement activist and deportee also deflected any question that homosexuality had suddenly transformed her into a "social parasite." Melinda's standing as one of the KDP national leaders, however, was paramount to protect. Fearful that KDP's detractors would use Melinda's homosexuality to discredit the organization, the couple did not disclose their relationship. But it was a well-guarded *known secret* in the organization, and eventually there were a dozen gay and lesbian KDP members. As a result, Filipino lesbians and gays in KDP gained political skills not available to other queer people of color, equipping them to contribute substantially in later years to a wide range of movement-organizing efforts.<sup>22</sup>

### ***"If You Don't Want Me, I Don't Need to Be Here"***

In the meantime, lesbians and gays were pushed out of the Asian American movement of the 1970s. Born in Hong Kong and raised there until she was five, Kitty Tsui moved to England and then to the United States as a young adult, with her parents and grandmother. At age twenty-three, Kitty entered San Francisco State University in 1970, at the tail end of the Third World Strike for Ethnic Studies. Immediately thrust into the midst of radical race, gender, and anti-imperialist politics, Kitty became part of a small circle of Asian American writers, poets, and theater artists (now the "who's who" in Asian American literature). A rising talent, Kitty was busy giving poetry readings and working with the Asian American Theater in a few years. Then, in 1975, she fell in love with a Chinese woman. Elated with her newfound happiness, Kitty simply told everyone and came out publicly as a lesbian in a poetry reading that same year. Kitty's maternal grandmother, who raised her in Hong Kong, readily accepted her granddaughter's homosexuality; Kitty's mother reacted with tears and self-blame.<sup>23</sup> They have never talked about it since. Kitty, however, was most disappointed by her circle of ostensibly progressive Asian American men and women:

All of sudden, I realized I began to feel coldness and hostility. I told everybody. I was not hidden about it. I think for myself that I retreated from the Chinese American and Asian American community and tried to find a community with the gay and lesbian community. “If you don’t want me, I don’t need to be here.” From 1975-78 I was very involved with my two lovers. That was my way of retreating. I did not go looking for support in the white community. I just isolated myself with my lovers, Chinese women.<sup>24</sup>

Like the Black Power Movement, the Asian American movement was sexist, hetero-sexist, and homophobic. One Japanese American lesbian and media activist recalled that the women’s role was “to protect the manhood of the men” and “consider ourselves more as Asians than as women.”<sup>25</sup> Kitty also noted that the first significant collection of writings by Asian American writers, *Aiiieeeee!* published in 1974, had no women on the editorial team. (Furthermore, the 1990 edition begins with Frank Chin’s notorious harangue against the work of Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, and David Henry Hwang for their portrayal of emasculated and sexually repellent—read homosexual—Chinese men.)<sup>26</sup>

## ***Asian Lesbians Find a Home among Gay People of Color***

The liberationist politics that took off in 1969 with the Stonewall Rebellion did not deliver on its promise of rainbow inclusion. Within a few short years, the radical call for *gay power* was replaced with *gay pride* and mainstream inclusion of its white middle-class majority. With the dominance of single-issue (read gay-only) politics in the gay movement by 1973, few white brothers and sisters in the gay and lesbian movement were exposed to anything other than “gay” issues and soon became oblivious to the problems faced by gay people of color. The 1970s was the heyday of Gay and Lesbian Pride, as people came out of the closet in droves. Gay parades, discos, and rainbow flags sprouted up everywhere, while popular music, movies, novels, television shows, and politics reflected this changing reality across the country.



While many Black, Latino, American Indian, Asian, and Pacific Islander people found relative acceptance in the white gay community on an individual basis, the relegation of the struggle against racism to the sidelines left them with little alternative but to organize themselves for the struggle on multiple fronts of racism, sexism, and homophobia. Cross-racial coalitions and race-specific organizations formed across the country, mirroring the separatist practices of their brothers and sisters in the straight movements. By 1975 in San Francisco, the Gay American Indians and Gay Latino/a Alliance had formed, while Black gay men and women formed several networks. In 1977, the same year as the New Right's first assault, Asian lesbians in San Francisco began to organize.

Doreena Wong, a second-generation Chinese American, was a shy, studious young woman from a middle-class family in Millbrae, California, when she entered the University of California, Santa Cruz in 1969. The campus, however, was in turmoil over racism in the anti-war movement. Asian American activists had observed that the movement was concerned only for the loss of American (read white), not Vietnamese (read Asian), lives. Asian American activists soon formed their own group and began a long, bitter fight with the anti-war movement to take a stand against racism.<sup>27</sup>

Doreena joined other Asian Americans and attended the anti-war rallies and helped out at the International Hotel. But soon after graduation, Doreena fell in love with her roommate. It was very traumatic: "I was really scared. I really did not want to be a lesbian, to be outside the norm and not getting married.... I knew my family would disapprove. They were rigid. They knew what they wanted.... The further away I went from their expectations, the further away I might be from the family. So I first had to find out, for sure, if I was gay or not."<sup>28</sup>

In 1975-76, Doreena moved back home to live with her parents, but she visited San Francisco often, scouring the women's community for lesbian support groups. The consciousness-raising (CR) groups she found were all white, and she did not feel comfortable enough to talk in them. Doreena, who had previous political experience with groups, vacillated between passivity and frustration. She felt misunderstood and invisible. "I couldn't just say, 'My family was the first to move into an all-white neighborhood,' and be understood. The women did not have the personal experience

to know what that felt like. I always had to explain myself. ... I actually went to several different groups. ... But I was usually the only lesbian of color in the groups.”<sup>29</sup> After six months of these discouraging experiences, Doreena formed a support group for women of color. This group had monthly potluck meetings in Berkeley and was a welcome improvement. Still, Doreena was the only Asian woman in that group, too.

Canyon Sam, a second-generation Chinese American lesbian writer and performance artist from San Francisco, came out in the lesbian feminist community at nineteen years of age. Recalled Canyon, “I came out in 1975.... What was really exciting for me was the political atmosphere, especially around feminism—radical feminism, radical lesbian feminism. Consequently a lot of women at that time, including myself, came out with this two-prong coming out—personal and political.”<sup>30</sup> It was an exciting time of meeting interesting women, holding long discussions about feminism and separatism, reading women’s magazines, listening to women’s music, and attending women’s events. Like Doreena, Canyon was usually the only Asian woman. Worse yet, she was underage and constantly thrown out of the lesbian bars. Eventually she moved to Oregon, where she found a lesbian feminist community. There she lived on the land, worked with tools, and built homes. Affirmed by these experiences, Canyon told her parents of her sexual orientation, and they responded well. But the cultural isolation she experienced as the only woman of color was a constant problem. Then, fortunately, she met Doreena, who had just visited to make connections with lesbians of color on the land. Shortly afterward, in 1977, Canyon returned to San Francisco and looked up Doreena. They quickly became friends and began to organize.

Canyon and Doreena called an ad hoc support-group meeting that later became known as Asian American Feminists (AAF). They posted notices in the local feminist newspapers and bookstores and sent cards out to people they knew. Besides Doreena and Canyon, Kitty Tsui, Barbara Noda, Allison Chop, and Zee Wong came to the first meeting. They were all feminists *and* lesbians. Doreena recalled:

We were all ecstatic and talked about being together. It was only six of us, but at that time, that was a lot—with always being the only one all the time! ... [T]hen we kept meeting for two years. Sharing your story with a group of people is a very intimate, personal thing to do and I guess the process of doing it drew us all

together. I had never experienced that kind of closeness before.... Some of the stories were very sad. There were some very hard struggles that people went through; their hurts, their pains. Of course, as Asian women, the sexism in our culture was something we all shared in our struggles, too, so our stories had familiarity. It took a lot of trust to tell your story and it built trust in the process of doing it.<sup>31</sup>

Over the next two years, they were joined by more than a dozen other Asian women.<sup>32</sup> Eventually some of the lesbians began dating each other and forming couples. Inevitably, “old” couples broke up to form “new” couples—an emotional process that caused some women to leave the group for a while. After everyone had shared their stories, AAF meetings ended in 1979. That time was a precious incubation period when everyone needed and appreciated each other. These friendships were soon tested by difficult political and ideological differences.

### ***A Community Grows, Falters, and Moves On***

In the 1980s, this circle of friends and lovers evolved into a small community that grew steadily. In 1979, AAF member Zee Wong co-founded *Gente* (People), the first lesbian of color group in the Bay Area; soon Zee held the first of many annual Women’s GetTogethers where Asian, Black, Latino, and white lesbian friends gathered. Gisele Pohan, a Japanese-Indonesian lesbian, went to the 1979 March on Washington and later worked at the Artemis Cafe, a woman-only restaurant and cabaret that served the women’s community. Canyon and Crystal Jang, a Chinese American lesbian teacher, joined the public-speaking campaign against the Briggs Initiative, which threatened to prohibit homosexual teachers in public schools.

The late 1970s and early 1980s were also a period of path-breaking cultural work by women of color, and Asian lesbian writers were active participants. Pat Parker, a San Francisco poet and outspoken Black lesbian activist, was performing in many local venues. The year 1981 saw the publication of *This Bridge Called My Back*, edited by Chicana lesbians Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa. This landmark radical women of color anthology, which later received the prestigious Columbus Book Award, included works by Asian feminists Nellie Wong, Barbara Noda, and



Merle Woo.

In June 1981 the Asian American Theater Company presented Barbara Noda's oneact existential play *Aw Shucks (Shikata Ga Nai)*, about three stereotypical women devoted to pleasure, money, and spirituality. Jill Togawa, from Hawaii and then New York, where she trained on scholarship with the Martha Graham Dance School, moved to San Francisco and eventually formed her own all-women of color dance company, the Purple Moon Dance Project. Willyce Kim joined the new genre of lesbian fiction novelists with *Dancer Dawkins and the California Kid* (1985) and *Dead Heat* (1988). Merle, Barbara, Willyce, Kitty, and Canyon performed singly or together in numerous groups, productions, and poetry readings throughout the 1970s-1980s. Asian lesbians and gay men were even acknowledged in *Bridge*, the premier Asian American movement magazine.<sup>33</sup>

The most significant cultural contribution by Asian lesbians in this period was the formation of Unbound Feet (UF) in 1979. The first feminist Chinese American women's performance group, UF was composed of Canyon Sam, Kitty Tsui, Nellie Wong, Nancy Hom, Genny Lim, and Merle Woo. Using the metaphorical image of *bound and unbound feet*, from a poem by Genny and a four-line chorus written by Nellie, the group challenged the stereotypes of passivity and servitude that *bound* Chinese women in their mind. The signature piece that opened each program described the crippling process in which a young girl's toes were bent back to her heel and held in place by bandages. With feet thus bound—made small to fashionably emulate a lotus bud—Chinese girls were painfully initiated into womanhood. Closing with a choral refrain, however, the poets declared themselves unbound women—writers, workers and free. Through individual and group performance, they creatively addressed sexism, immigration, and family issues and developed a huge following of straight Asian Americans and lesbians. The women themselves—six very talented, strong, and powerful women—were the key to the group's popularity. Kitty, Canyon, and Merle, who were lesbian (stated in the program notes) and openly challenged homophobia by their public disclosure, were greatly admired, especially by other lesbians. In fact, Zee Wong's UF after-parties were popular gathering places for new Asian lesbians coming into the community.

A calendar of scheduled performances, a book contract, and a possible engagement

in Hong Kong were all in the works when an irreparable split in the group brought everything to an abrupt halt.<sup>34</sup> Unable to reconcile their differences, Unbound Feet broke up. When Merle, Nellie, and Kitty wanted to continue to perform under the name Unbound Feet-Three, the remaining three (Canyon, Nancy, and Genny) vigorously disagreed. Their dispute was carried out in public through lengthy letters to the editor in a women's community newspaper for the next five months.<sup>35</sup> The divide deepened as statements, counterstatements, and a picket line forced sides to be taken. After a year without the group meeting again or a concession from either side, the struggle for the control of UF's legacy ended, and with it an otherwise effective public education forum on Asian women's issues.

The end of UF was a setback for the Asian American movement and could have also ended the fragile community among Asian lesbians. But it did not. Merle, Canyon, and Kitty had performed together before Unbound Feet. After UF was over, they never spoke to each other about it but continued to participate in the Asian lesbian community. According to Kitty, no one was excluded from the community "unless you took yourself out, unless you said that you were no longer a lesbian."<sup>36</sup> Earlier too, during the days of the Asian American Feminists, when personal relationships led to love triangles and messy breakups, a lesbian was not excluded from the community. The women would keep their distance and friends would comfort each other. Some would leave, but they could always come back when they wanted.

### ***Personal Contacts Build a Community Network***

Despite the Unbound Feet debacle, the small community of mostly American-born local Chinese and Japanese women grew, and the women renewed their efforts to organize a group. One of the driving forces behind this move was Lisa Chun. Lisa had moved from the Midwest to San Francisco in the early 1970s to find her roots. In 1979, she was engaged to a young Chinese man, but a month before her wedding she discovered her lesbianism. Lisa called everything off and immediately told her family, who after the initial shock were accepting. She then explored gay life, but she met only white lesbians who were insensitive to the racial and cultural issues Lisa faced. Eventually, Lisa met some Asian lesbians who took her to her first potluck party. The

potluck parties were a “safe space” for Asian lesbians to meet, socialize, make friends, fall in love, build relationships, and develop their lesbian lives away from the prying eyes of family, friends, and co-workers.

Together with Zee Wong, Lisa compiled what would become the Asian Women’s Group’s mailing list. In 1977 there were only 6 women, but by 1983 there were 112 people. Initially, however, the mailing list was controversial. At the time, most of the women were from San Francisco Bay Area; many were in their twenties and still lived at home; fewer than a dozen were out to their families. The mailing list was available to anyone on the list itself, with this condition stated at the top: “Word of caution: These names, addresses and phone numbers are confidential. For personal use only. Do not add them to another organization’s mailing list, unless you have each woman’s consent. Discretion is advised when using phone numbers, since many women live with relatives.”<sup>37</sup> The strict confidential use of the mailing list and abstention from using the “L” (lesbian) word were matters of survival.

Usually, a young Asian woman faced her family’s expectation that she would marry and have children. This pressure would not end until she was thirty-five or forty years old—ten to fifteen years ahead for the women on the Asian Women’s Group list. Resisting marriage was an effort, but hiding one’s homosexuality was a struggle. Asian cultural traditions value filial piety and obligation of children to the family unit. Like most of society, Asian parents also viewed homosexuality with disdain and horror. Homosexuality was a volatile combination of stricture and stigma. These women knew that their nonnormative sexual orientation could result in being disowned by their families. To guard themselves and their parents from the possible pain, most bound themselves to silence. Explained Canyon:

The white culture is not as family based. In ... the Asian culture, your family is sticking to you, even if you move away; whereas white women, [they] just split. I know white women who have not seen their parents in eight-ten years, had not spoken to them. They don’t have that emphasis on the family unit. [For us] it was always an issue if you came out to your parents. What would it do? Would it give them a heart attack? ... [So] to meet in a group with lesbians in an organized way who were Asian and lesbian—that was a big deal! That was like being out in a certain way.<sup>38</sup>



Inspired by the example of Black, American Indian, and Latino gay and lesbian organizations, Lisa Chun, Janet Tom, and a few others created Asian Women's Group (AWG). (Notably, the word *lesbian* was not in their name, for the reasons described above.) AWG's goals were to build a "sense of self-identity, pride ... [and] community" among Asian lesbians.<sup>39</sup> AWG wrote a survey and held the first publicly advertised Asian lesbian event, an "Asian Women's Potluck: A Gathering for Asian Lesbians," on June 19, 1983, at the Swedish American Hall in San Francisco. Later that month, the June 1983 Gay Parade Program featured a full-page story on Asian lesbians and gay men in San Francisco.<sup>40</sup>

Asian lesbian political identity was growing too. On October 20, 1983, Lisa and a friend dropped by Ollie's, a lesbian bar in Oakland. To their horror, they found it was "Oriental Night," where the bartender and employees wore "Oriental" costumes. Lisa Chun wrote to the owner of Ollie's:

Thinking perhaps the bartender was unaware of the racist concept of the term, "Oriental," I explained to her that "Oriental" is no longer an acceptable term. That it in fact perpetuates the stereotype of the meek and passive Asians. ... I was [then] told that there was a "Western Night" and "Army Night," and now this was "Oriental Night." Although a "Western and Army Night" theme may be both novel and fashionable, we find that having an "Oriental Night" in the same context is demeaning and condescending.<sup>41</sup>

While many agreed with Lisa's initiative, a few others thought it improper to be "so out there." Divergent opinions had already surfaced on earlier issues, such as being out, putting "lesbian" in the name, and holding Asian-only functions. What should AWG do? Before the community really had an opportunity to discuss and settle these important questions, AWG's organizing momentum derailed after a contentious community meeting.<sup>42</sup> Unlike earlier conflicts over personal relationships and the disappointing breakup of Unbound Feet, *inexperience and errors in handling political disagreements within the community* led to this heartbreaking episode of discord and disunity. Everyone resigned from the AWG core group, including Lisa.

Six months later, in an effort to keep some community spirit alive, a group of

women started a newsletter, eventually named *Phoenix Rising*. The first issue was published in May 1984. (In Egyptian mythology, the phoenix is a bird that consumed itself by fire, but after five hundred years it rose again, renewed from its ashes.) *Phoenix Rising* did not bring the community together organizationally, but it was a way to communicate again. With articles on movie reviews and recipes produced on a manual typewriter and put together at paste-up parties, the newsletter was a welcome community staple. In 1985, a few women organized the first of many annual Chinese New Year banquets, held at a local San Francisco Chinese restaurant.

Sports also brought Asian women together again. San Francisco's Women's Basketball, Softball and Volleyball League games provided an accessible and popular meeting place. Many Asian lesbians "found" each other at ball games. They even arranged challenge games with their Asian lesbian sisters in Los Angeles. In 1984 an all-Asian softball team formed. Two years later, under the tutelage of their new coach, Miki Adachi, the team took the first of three league championship titles. Renamed the Tom Girls in 1987, after their sponsor, Diane Tom, the team played until 1992, when injuries and age forced many to retire from the game. With time, friendships prevailed and the fledgling community survived. But the issues that divided them—being "out" or not, being a political group or a social group—would take center stage in the late 1980s as a new generation of "out, loud, and proud" Asian lesbians stepped forward.

## ***Conclusion***

In the 1970s, when the Black, Latino, American Indian, Asian, and Pacific Islander communities took separate paths to political empowerment, their queer members were shunned and pushed aside. Misogyny and narrow cultural nationalism powerfully combined to justify outright homophobia and heterosexism in communities of color. The gay and lesbian movement, which followed the path of "Black Power" to proclaim "Gay Power" in 1969, soon fell back to an accommodationist goal of mainstreaming for white middle-class gay men, while a separatist vision led lesbians to build women-only cultural spaces and social institutions. "Rainbow inclusion" of GLBTQ people of color proved illusory.

As a marginalized people in a marginal community, GLBTQ people of color organized together and separately and eventually established a political and cultural identity that integrated their queer, colored, and gendered selves. The first stage of that process was the creation of a “safe space,” a community of like-minded people with whom to socialize, develop relationships, and build a life that would enable them all to struggle against the daily assaults of racism, sexism, and homophobia from society, their families and ethnic communities, and the gay and lesbian movement itself.

The First National Conference of Third World Gays and Lesbians, organized in 1979 at the initiative of the National Coalition of Black Gays (later, National Coalition of Black Gays and Lesbians), provided the first national opportunity for Asian gay men and lesbians to meet, organize, and address their specific issues. In San Francisco, a budding Third World gay movement organized conferences, campaigns, groups, and cultural productions that provided a nourishing environment in which Asian lesbians could meet, gather, and organize. In this environment, Asian lesbians created a community hidden from family, friends, and co-workers. It was a conservative strategy, but one that served them well in the beginning. Almost ten years later, in 1986, the First San Francisco Lesbians of Color Conference (June) and the Fourth International Gay and Lesbian People of Color Conference (November) provided a platform for a new stage and strategy to emerge. Through discussion and networking made possible by these conferences, a new activist core launched the “out, loud, and proud” phase of the movement, setting into motion the forces that became the national Asian/Pacific gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer people’s movement of today.

Stimulated by the 1986 gatherings, the next generation of Asian lesbians in San Francisco held the first Asian/Pacific Islander-only retreat in May 1987, which inspired a new effort to organize a visible and vocal presence in the lesbian and gay community *and* Asian and Pacific Islander communities. Linking up the following year with key Asian and Pacific Islander lesbian and bisexual women leaders in Honolulu, Seattle, Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, New York, and Washington, D.C., the Asian/Pacific Lesbian Network (APLN) was formed in 1988. (APLN later became APLBTN to reflect the later inclusion of bisexual women and



transgendered people.) Over the next fifteen years, this loose national network of individuals and organizations organized a succession of Asian/Pacific Islander-only local, regional, and national retreats and conferences focused on internal political issues of community building, identity, and inclusion. The most recent national conference was held in Los Angeles in 1998 and attended by three hundred Asian/Pacific Islander queer women and transgendered people from across the country. The 1990s will be remembered as the time when Asian and Pacific Islander queer women and transgendered people came into their own.

The space limitations of this chapter do not permit me to relate the trials, tribulations, and triumphs of the national community building process in this later period. But the efforts of this generation of out Asian and Pacific Islander GLBTQ activists were built on ground settled in earlier years by people, like these women who created a place for themselves and, in so doing, assured a place for future generations.

## NOTES

1. The women in this essay used *Asian* and *Asian American* interchangeably to identify themselves through the 1970s and early 1980s, but by the late 1980s *Asian* had become the preferred term.

2. See *Gay Community News*, 27 October 1979; and *The Gay Insurgent: A Gay Left Journal* (Summer 1980): 6.

3. Michiyo [Margaret Nishiko] Cornell, "Living in Asian America: An Asian American Lesbian's Address before the Washington Monument (1970)," in Russell Leong, ed., *Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay and Lesbian Experience* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 83-84.

4. Cornell, "Living in Asian America." Sadly, Cornell committed suicide a few years after the 1979 Washington march.

5. I use the term *GLBTQ*, and otherwise *queer*, to characterize what has become today's community and movement of sexual (gay, lesbian, bisexual) and gender (transgender) and inclusive/undefined/nonspecific (queer) minorities.

6. Pacific Islander lesbian and bisexual women were not part of the San Francisco

Asian lesbian community in the 1970s and 1980s described in this chapter. Therefore, “Asian/Pacific” lesbian is not used in the title or text of this specific account. Though few in number, Pacific Islanders have organized with their Asian sisters and contributed significantly to the overall Asian and Pacific Islander lesbian and bisexual movement since the 1980s. This is reflected in the term *Asian/Pacific*, used in the names of the communities and organizations of the late 1980s, such as Asian/Pacific Lesbian Network and Asian/Pacific Sisters. Of particular historical note are the contributions of such notable Native Hawaiian leaders as Katherine Ekau Amoy Hall (co-founder of the Asian Lesbians of the East Coast, New York, 1983); Lani Ka’ahumanu (co-founder of several bisexual organizations in San Francisco and national leader of the U.S. Bisexual Movement); and Ku’umeaaloha Gomes (co-founder of Asian/Pacific Lesbian Network [APLN], 1988, and Na Mamo o Hawai’i, Honolulu, 1994). For a more complete discussion of their contributions, see Trinity A. Ordon, “Coming Out Together: An Ethnohistory of the Asian and Pacific Islander Queer Women’s and Transgendered People’s Movement of San Francisco” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Santa Cruz, 2000), 219 (Hall), 256-74 (Gomes), 292-97 (Ka’ahumanu).

7. Asian and Pacific Islander gay and bisexual men and transgender people underwent a parallel process of community and movement building at local and national levels. Their story is beyond the scope of this paper. For one account, see Eric C. Wat, *The Making of a Gay Asian Community: An Oral History of Pre-AIDS Los Angeles* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

8. Position paper of the SNCC Atlanta Project cited in Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 198.

9. Before the 1969 Stonewall Rebellion, the movement for gay and lesbian rights called itself the homophile movement. See John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the U.S., 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

10. For example, Stokely Carmichael, upon the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., predicted a violent struggle in which Black people would “stand on our own feet and die like men. If that’s our only act of manhood, then Goddammit, we’re going

to die." A dozen cities burned that night. See Carson, *In Struggle*, 288.

11. Angela Davis recalled when she worked with a group of cultural nationalists in Los Angeles that women were told not to play a leadership role and that to do so was "aiding and abetting the enemy, who wanted to see Black men weak and unable to hold their own." See *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (New York: Bantam Books, 1974), 180.

12. James Baldwin (1924-1987), African American essayist, novelist, and playwright, wrote passionately and eloquently about racism and was the country's most prominent black writer during the 1960s. While in jail, Eldridge Cleaver wrote of his initial admiration, then later dismissal of Baldwin for his homosexuality, which he viewed as a love for whiteness and white men. Eldridge Cleaver, "Notes on a Native Son," in *Soul on Ice* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1968), 110.

13. Huey P. Newton, "A Letter from Huey to the Revolutionary Brothers and Sisters about the Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation Movement," originally published in the *Black Panther*, August 21, 1970. Reprinted in Mark Blasius and Shane Phelan, eds., *We Are Everywhere: A Historical Sourcebook of Gay and Lesbian Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 404-6.

14. Los Angeles Research Group, "Toward a Scientific Analysis of the Gay Question," in Pam Mitchell, ed., *Pink Triangles: Radical Perspectives on Gay Liberation* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1980), 117-35. Many radical gay liberationists participated in the civil rights, anti-war, and women's movements; see Karla Jay and Allen Young, eds., *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation* (New York: Douglas Books, 1972). A decade earlier, in the 1960s, Bayard Rustin, a well-known Black civil rights activist, was publicly attacked as a communist, draft dodger, and homosexual by arch-conservative and segregationist U.S. Senator Strom Thurmond in an attempt to discredit the 1963 March on Washington for Civil Rights. Despite internal and external pressure to disavow Rustin, key civil rights leaders defended him. Rustin remained the lead organizer of this now historic event. See Jervis Anderson, *Bayard Rustin: The Troubles I've Seen* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 247-51.

15. Allen Young, "The Cuban Revolution and Gay Liberation," in Jay and Young, eds., *Out of the Closets*, 206-28.



16. “Declaration, Cuban First National Congress on Education and Culture,” *GRANMA: Daily Organ of the Communist Party of Cuba* (May 1971), reprinted in Blasius and Phelan, eds., *We Are Everywhere*, 408-9.

17. Venceremos Brigade, “Policy on Gay Recruitment (January 1972),” reprinted in Blasius and Phelan, eds., *We Are Everywhere*, 411-12.

18. Sylvia Savellano, interview with the author, December 13, 1998.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. In addition to this author, former KDP members and notable Filipino lesbian and gay activists are Jaime Geaga (Filipino Task Force on AIDS, San Francisco); Gil Mangaoang (Asian Pacific AIDS Intervention Team, Los Angeles); Melinda Paras (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, Washington, D.C.); Syl Savellano; Jeanette Lazam (International Hotel Tenants Association, San Francisco); and Douglas Yaranon (Gay Asian/Pacific Alliance Community HIV Project, San Francisco).

23. Kitty Tsui, “A Chinese Banquet,” in *The Words of a Woman Who Breathes Fire: Poetry and Prose* (San Francisco: Spinsters Ink, 1983).

24. Kitty Tsui, interview with the author, April 5, 1994.

25. Liz Tanaka [pseud.], interview with the author, December 12, 1998.

26. For an excellent critical analysis of this controversial aspect of Chin’s work, see Daniel Y. Kim, “The Strange Love of Frank Chin,” in David L. Eng and Alice Y. Hom, eds., *Q&A: Queer in Asian America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 270-303.

27. William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).

28. Doreena Wong, interviews with the author, January 17 and May 3, 1996.

29. Ibid.

30. Canyon Sam, interview with the author, January 13, 1994.

31. Wong interviews.

32. Two heterosexual women attended Asian American Feminists meetings, though the majority was lesbian.

33. For early articles, interviews, and poetry of Asian gay men and lesbians, see

*Bridge: An Asian American Perspective* 3:4 (February 1975); 7:1 (Spring 1979); 8:3 (Summer 1983).

34. Unbound Feet member Merle Woo had also been a lecturer in Ethnic Studies/Asian American Studies for four years at UC Berkeley when she was dismissed in 1978, after the term limit changed from eight years to four years. Woo claimed her dismissal was the “result of her activism, her strong support of student and workers rights on campus, and her insistence on including the issues of race, sex, class, and sexuality in her teaching.” Merle wanted Unbound Feet, as a group, to support her, but they were divided on the issue and subsequently broke up. In 1984, Merle won the lawsuit against the university. See Stephen Stewart, *Positive Image: A Portrait of Gay America* (New York: William Morrow, 1985), 114-15; and Wei, *Asian American Movement*, 88.

35. “Letters to the Editor,” *Coming Up!* (San Francisco), September 1981, 6; November 1981, 8; December 1981, 5; January 1982, 4-5.

36. Tsui interview.

37. Asian Women’s Group, mailing list, 1977, Trinity A. Ordonia Private Collection.

38. Sam interview.

39. Asian Women’s Group, “Statement of Purpose,” 1982, Trinity A. Ordonia Private Collection.

40. “Asian Awakening,” 1983 Lesbian and Gay Freedom Day Program, Trinity A. Ordonia Private Collection.

41. Lisa Chun, letter to the owner of Ollie’s bar, October 27, 1983, Trinity A. Ordonia Private Collection.

42. On October 23, 1983, the Asian Women’s Group sponsored “A Sunday Bash” dance at Clementina’s Bay Brick Inn in San Francisco, attended by over 125 Asian women. Canyon Sam, however, had some rude interactions at the dance with a customer who snickered about it with the bartender. Canyon wrote a letter of complaint and called on others to withdraw their patronage from Clementina’s. A dozen women signed Canyon’s letter, but the AWG core group did not. Canyon reported the bar incident to the community at the November 18 meeting, but many people had no idea what had happened, who to support, or what to do. The confusion turned into disagreement that escalated to shouting and yelling at Canyon. While the

conflict that erupted remains unresolved today, Canyon said that some people made unsolicited apologies for their rude behavior toward her, including one person who apologized two years after the meeting.