

Alice Y. Hom

An APL's Alphabet

A is for Asian Pacific lesbian
B is for butch women who turn me on
C is for calamari which I eat with shoyu
D is for dildo that is lavender in color
E is for elegant when I wear my plaid shirt
F is for femme women who turn me on
G is for going down, farther than before
H is for hurrah when I make her come
I is for intense when she pulls me close
J is for joss sticks that I toss in the air
K is for Kulintang music that makes my heart race
L is for latex that feels smooth against the skin
M is for money that comes in red envelopes
N is for nipples that are always perky
O is for oops when I poked the wrong opening
P is for please when I want to have sex
Q is for queer, you know what I mean
R is for rice which I like sticky and wet
S is for safer sex which everyone should do
T is for tits which go in my mouth
U is for ugh when they have not showered
V is for vulva that gets slick with sweat
W is for whoa when she goes too fast
X is for X-rated films of gay boys that I watch with API dykes
Y is for yodel because I can't sing
Z is for zoom when I can't slow down.

Susan Y. F. Chen

Slowly but Surely, My Search for Family Acceptance and Community Continues

September 1991

IT IS TUESDAY NIGHT. MOM HAS JUST TOLD ME THAT WE ARE GOING to have a meeting in the kitchen, just the three of us: Mom, Dad, and me. I think "Oh no, I really, really dread these confrontations. I don't have enough strength to go through with this." This meeting has come as a result of recent months of friction between us over issues such as my going to too many "useless" meetings, receiving what they perceive as too many phone calls (from the wrong people) and, at the center of all the "problems," homosexuality...

I was living at home again after college graduation. I initially came out to Mom and Dad three summers ago in 1988 when I was a sophomore. I had formally started telling others about myself only six months earlier. By then, the loneliness and frustration of not being able to confide in anyone had grown to an unbearable level; I thought I would explode at any moment from the isolation. Since seventh grade, I had had crushes on other girls but did not have a clue as to what to do... so I did nothing, and kept all my feelings to myself. After joining a support group in college, I was happier than I had ever been in my life. That was the first time the *real* me was able to function (at least part of the time), and I was better able to express myself. I was no longer just quiet, polite, friendly Susan, as others may have seen me; another part of me was allowed to emerge.

As a result, I wanted to share the "good news" with my parents — that I was so happy as a result of being in my first relationship with a wonderful woman. The ideal coming out scenario turned out to be a personal disaster because they found out by accident, before I could even formulate a plan to tell them. Soon after, my father said in Mandarin Chinese (the language we speak at home), "You step on my heart," and that was very painful to hear. After months of bickering, alternating with periods

of noncommunication about the subject, I concluded that they just did not understand. Mom continued to say from time to time, "Every girl needs a boy to do things for her." And ever since then, she had the attitude that I would change and that I was at the stage in life of being "lost."

To make the coming out process even more difficult, I was afraid to say the "L-word" (lesbian) in front of them, out of embarrassment. I imagined that they would only think of the sexual aspect, but "lesbian" meant so much more to me — it was sharing my life with a woman I loved. Although all references to homosexuality were made indirectly, we always knew what we were talking about. Actually, sometimes my mom would discuss the topic of homosexuality in a roundabout way, and I would pretend that I didn't know what she was talking about, just to be annoying. As the months passed, the arguments continued. I began to lose hope that they would ever accept me as who I was. However, an occasional bout of optimism made me feel confident that one day they would understand. I did not know if that day would be months from now or many years away. So, I went into my own coping mode by not discussing the topic unless they brought it up. And, at the same time, I did not go out of my way to hide who I was. I thought this would be the easiest route for both me and my parents.

I grew up feeling pressure to measure up to my ChineseAmerican peers. There were frequent comparisons with "so-and-so's daughter or son," who won the piano competition or got near-perfect SAT scores. I wanted to make my parents proud too, but I seemed to fall short. While some of my peers grew up to become mainstream "successes," I did not automatically admire them, because in my eyes such success seemed superficial. I realized that it was unhealthy to judge my selfworth by comparing myself to others, but I found it a difficult habit to break. And being a lesbian often made me feel a greater compulsion to achieve. Although I once longed to be like some of my peers, I started to identify with another group of people — those who were active in areas of social justice, who did not promote progress at the expense of human suffering or define success only in monetary terms.

There was a significant gap between what my parents and I considered important in life. They wanted me to go to school, get a good

job, be comfortable ... but not get involved with anything resembling "political" activity. At that time, learning about activism was *all* I was interested in. What a conflict of interest! I wanted to transform my formal education into skills that I could use to improve the wellbeing of people. Of course, that included the struggle for lesbian and gay rights, as well as other social justice issues. My sole purpose in life was not to make lots of money, although I knew that money is necessary for survival in this country. I wanted to make a difference in my own way. I didn't expect honors or recognition from others; I just wanted my parents' "blessings." It depressed me — the idea that I could go through life doing my best to fulfill my goals, but my parents would never "see" or appreciate it. For example, something very important to me was often labelled "a waste of time" by my parents. As much as I worked on improving my selfconfidence and independence, I suspected that I would always feel a loss unless my parents shared in that sense of pride.

I was lucky that my parents would never disown me or refuse to assist me financially, if necessary. That was comforting in a lot of ways, but I also lived with constant guilt because I was aware that being a lesbian was a source of difficulty for my parents. Their continued feelings of hurt and shame worried me. Some of my nonAsian friends suggested that I just respond with, "Forget it; if they don't accept me it's not my problem. I'll just continue with my life as I please, and ignore them." Even during difficult periods, I could only maintain that attitude for a short period of time. Then the guilt returned. Besides, I loved them very much. Despite feelings of bitterness, I tried to find ways to retreat or compromise in order to soften the situation, especially since deep down, I knew that everything I had came from my parents. They had done so much for me and I "owed" much to them in return.

When I discussed the complexities of family acceptance with other Asian friends, I would inevitably bring up the topic of PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays). I was fascinated with PFLAG because it represented a phenomenon to me — parents as activists and advocates for their children on the issue of gay rights. One of my dreams was to see my parents become PFLAG parents, for them to hold signs (such as, Proud Parents of a Lesbian Daughter) and march in a huge gay and lesbian parade.

A friend of mine once said that Asian parents just didn't become PFLAG parents. In my case, I thought he could be right. My mom thought they had been "brainwashed" in the same way that I had been.

I feel tense as I take a seat at the kitchen table with my parents. My younger sister (who is supportive) is standing by the door, and I motion for her to go away. I think about my new-found identity as a Chinese lesbian and my efforts to become more "independent." But I question whether I can continue to live at home where my mail and phone calls are screened and where Mom is often still waiting up for me when I come home late at night from the club. In order to improve our relationship, we must create a new understanding between us. I know this can only be settled in a long, meaningful discussion with my parents, but I also dread the thought. Now, here is my chance to honestly discuss the issues that have been on my mind...

My parents' problem with homosexuality probably revolved around a number of issues: the lack of discussion of it in the local Chinese community, the shame and fear of their friends finding out, and the disappointment that their daughter was not going to travel the "standard route." A most important aspect, I realized, was the issue of happiness. My parents had always spoken of the importance of me being happy. I believed they had this image of "homosexuals" living extremely isolated and shadowy lives. They did not know that I now had the ability to be extremely happy, especially when I could be open as a lesbian, or at least partially open, as most situations allowed. I felt fortunate to be "out" as a lesbian in spite of the added burdens of societal discrimination and ignorance about homosexuality. However, it was ironic that my parents were the ones who were contributing to much of my current level of unhappiness. How did I communicate my feelings to them, though? I was lucky that my parents cared about me, but they smothered me with their constant worrying and attempts to influence my direction in life.

Throughout our discussion, my parents remain patient; Mom asks questions and raises different points, while Dad mostly listens. By comparison, I am like a child who is throwing a tantrum. Their patience only makes me feel more exasperated and emotional. I find it difficult to explain my point of view in a rational way. I think pessimistically, will everything I try to tell them drift away, become a wasted effort?

I tell them -- face it, the reality is I will not marry a man, but a woman. There

is nothing wrong with me and even though discrimination exists, that is a fact of life and I will have to deal with it, but I can't deny who I am. Near the end of our meeting, my dad finally says, "OK, but maybe you can find a Chinese woman." I look at him in disbelief — I have had this goal in mind for the past year, ever since I discovered what a wonderful feeling it was to finally talk to another woman who was both Chinese and lesbian, and feeling like we could really identify with some of our similar experiences. Before that, I had come across too few Asian lesbians to understand the concept of such sisterhood. I realize that I should introduce my parents to other Asian lesbians. It may just make a difference. But, that is not an easy task...

When I first came out in college, I was the only Asian gay or lesbian person consistently present in the "gay" community at school. I did see one or two other gay Asians, but not often enough to become acquainted. Over the years, the experiences of meeting first, Asian feminists and then, Asian lesbians were truly lifechanging for me.

At a conference in 1990, for the first time, I met a handful of Asian lesbians who were politically and socially active. It was a significant event for me because, up to that time, I did not have the privilege of getting to know other Asian and Pacific Islander lesbian and bisexual (APL&B) women. As a token of friendship, one ChineseAmerican lesbian put her arm around me while we listened to a speaker and I felt so happy. We became friends and I was able to "really" talk to her and the other Asian women. She was the one who called me her "sister." I had heard that term many times before, especially when my first partner spoke specifically about her "AfricanAmerican sisters and brothers." But, it took me awhile to get used to the word. I never felt that I could be someone else's sister without knowing that person for a long period of time (or without being related). I had always wanted a big sister, anyway.

As I met more APL&Bs the following year, I somehow expected a similar type of acceptance and warm interaction as I had with the first ChineseAmerican "sister." I was naive in thinking that, and felt dejected for many months, when it finally hit me that it didn't always happen that way. APL&Bs, along with other women of color were my sisters, but it made sense in the real world that we would not all get along, become friends and share a magical bond. I felt I had a responsibility, though. The ChineseAmerican

lesbian who reached out and called me her sister made an impression on me. There were many APL&Bs still in the closet and alone, to a certain extent. I wanted to reach out to them and offer some support as others had given me.

The past hour has been emotionally draining. Our meeting is coming to a close. I am eager to respond to Dad's request because deep down, that is one of my hopes — to form a family with another APL or B. I realize that my wish may not come true... But, I tell my father, immediately, "Of course, that is exactly what I have intended." He is funny — without changing his serious expression, he raises his hand up in a fist and says "Yay," and does a rah rah motion. I can tell at this point that there is much hope, even though it is my father speaking and my mother still looks very much unconvinced with the acceptance issue. I go on to say that one day I hope that they will not have so much fear in terms of my telling others of my orientation. (My mother frequently implores, "Ok, you are who you are but you don't need to tell anyone.") They say that perhaps there may be a day, not now, where they can talk about this openly with their friends.

I am eager for the day when we can speak up. I already want to be open about myself, but I can understand their situation and realize that they should be allowed some time to "come out" too. In our Asian and Pacific Islander communities, there are, no doubt, many families going through similar struggles. If one family comes out and is not ashamed of it, it leads the way for others to come together to talk, share, and show the local community that homosexuality is truly here and that it is healthy. Well, if only life were so simple...

I consider this another small milestone in the long process of obtaining my parents' acceptance and understanding. With a sigh, I feel a tired happiness and large burden lifted. We have become much closer since my coming out. It was never like this before — we rarely had serious discussions and I did not talk to them about my hopes, fears, or concerns. There are still many problems ahead, but I believe they now accept the fact that I am not going to "change." It's scary to think that I've gotten to this specific point. Sometimes, I think about my "innocent" days of just coming out. Back then, life did not seem as complicated. To see all that I have to fight for before me is overwhelming, but as it is often said, "I can't go back."

Tita' Talk A Cross-Talk with

Zelie Duvauchelle, 100
J. Kehaulani Kauanui, 100
Leolani M., 400
Desiree Thompson 600

In the tradition of talk story,² four Kānaka Maoli³ women got together to share our histories and ideas. Except for Leolani and Desiree, we only recently met each other. At this point in our lives we are all in the San Francisco Bay Area. Our experiences are varied: Kehaulani grew up in Southern California and will soon be off to New Zealand to begin Polynesian Studies on a Fulbright Fellowship. Zelie, a recent transplant from the rural island of Moloka'i, is pursuing a career in music. Leolani grew up in Nanakuli, Hawaiian homestead land, on O'ahu and has been in San Francisco for more than twenty years. She works in the trades. And Desiree, from downtown Honolulu, is a letter carrier.

Much of our conversation was in pidgin English, and we have chosen to present this to you in that form with minimal editing into "proper" English.

Introductions

KEHAULANI: My name is Kehaulani Kauanui. My *haole* (white) name is Josette, and I've been going by my Hawaiian name for three years. (Yea!) I'm 25 years old, born and raised in Southern California. I've been in the Bay Area for four years, and my mother is *haole* and my dad is Hawaiian.