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Asians and Friends of Dorothy: Language, Gender, and the Construction of Gay Asian American Community

By

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Abstract: Founding members of Asians and Friends – Chicago (AFC) were faced with a confounding problem in 1984. The Asian American Movement had begun in 1968 in California, and the Gay Liberation Movement in 1969 at Stonewall. Yet, it took until the mid-1980s for Chicagoans to form the city's first gay *and* Asian social group. Why had there been this delay? And how could a group whose membership was at times over 60% non-Asian create a welcoming environment for gay Asian men in the Midwest? I address these questions by modeling a novel historical linguistic method, which integrates sociolinguistic theory into archival research. Comparing *metalinguistic commentary* across prominent gay and/or Asian American political publications reveals a growing acceptance towards non-normative gender performances from the 1960s to mid-1990s. Early Asian American Movement rhetoric had pitted Asian pride against stereotypically-gay linguistic practices, thereby alienating its queer members. But later gay Asian groups like AFC reconciled feminine-coded speech with an anti-Orientalist agenda. By analyzing metalanguage, we see how one small, mixed-race community made room for overtly gay speech practices within the bounds of acceptable Asian American behavior. Asian men were not by default effeminate, but neither was effeminacy strictly anti-Asian.

1 Introduction

In early 1982, Larry Beck, a native white Chicagoan and long-time gay rights activist, asked himself a simple question: why was there no "gay Asian group" in Chicago?[1] Similar organizations, like the Gay Asians of Toronto (GAT) or the California-based magazine *Pacific Bridge* (PB), had existed since the beginning of the decade, but no comparable group could be found anywhere in the Midwest. Beck set out to change that. After a *PB* advert put him in touch with two Asian American men, Richard Jo and Robert Chan, Beck hosted a small ten-person party at his Northside apartment to "get things rolling" on "starting a social group for Asians and non-Asians."[2] August 1984, Asians and Friends – Chicago (AFC) was born. At first limited to hosting monthly socials for a pool of about one hundred members, the Asians and Friends network soon sprawled out to include sister branches in over ten major cities across the country.[3] Typical events included movie nights, drag pageants, AIDS fundraisers, and other casual meetings that provided a space for gay Asians to meet one another (often for the first time in their lives). Taking part in AFC "reinforce[d] my Asian identity," board member Ed Bautista stated in 1986, and encouraged him to speak out against racial stereotyping in the gay community.[4]

But AFC's founding story still raises questions about the interracial dynamics of gay Chicago—and about larger tensions between gay rights and Asian American activism at the end of the twentieth century. After all, AFC co-founder Larry Beck was a white man. So why had it

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[1] Larry Beck, "Looking Back," *AFC Newsletter* 2, no. 8 (1986), 7. Box 3.10, William B. Kelley and Chen K. Ooi Collection, Gerber/Hart Library and Archives (GHLA).
[2] Lee Wollard, "Remembering the Beginning," *AFC Newsletter* 10, no. 6 (1994), 8. GHLA.
[3] A 1993 AFC newsletter lists "Sistah" Asians and Friends groups in Atlanta, GA; Dallas, TX; Ft. Lauderdale, FL; New York, NY; Pittsburgh, PA; Washington, D.C.; Houston, TX; Kansas City, MO; Columbus, OH; and Seattle, WA. AFC also communicated with similar clubs based in Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, and France, as well as gay Asian American groups that did not use the "Asians and Friends" name, such as the Gay Asian Pacific Alliance (GAPA) in San Francisco.
[4] "Interview with Ed Bautista," *AFC Newsletter* 2, no. 3 (1986), 12. GHLA.

taken until *his* suggestion to form a gay Asian society in Chicago? And what sort of "Asian identity" could be reinforced by a group whose membership was, at times, over 60% non-Asian?[5]

Racially-mixed organizations like AFC are an important, if overlooked, aspect of queer Asian and Pacific Islander (QAPI) history. QAPI scholars tend to narrate their community development in two distinct stages, from being marginalized in a state of general invisibility by the gay liberation and Asian American movements of the 1960s and '70s, to gaining some public awareness with a radical Queer of Color politics by the late 1990s.[6] Gay Asian groups of the 1980s that were founded by, or significantly open to, white members are often glossed over in this history because these groups were also, in the words of Amy Sueyoshi, "over run [sic] with 'rice queens,'" or white men with a strong (and often prejudicial) racial preference for Asian men.[7] But AFC deserves scholarly attention precisely *because* of its mixed membership, not despite it. Club newsletters were host to heated debates that reveal the gamut of opinions about Asian race, gender, and sexuality in the 1980s to early '90s. AFCers—white, Black, and Asian—argued about appropriate interracial relationship dynamics. They pushed back against pre-existing derogatory stereotypes about Asian gay men in both the broader gay and Asian American communities, and attempted to publicize new positive images of "Gaysian" manhood instead. Their counter-stereotypes often come off as conservative from a contemporary perspective, but they were also sincere. Dialing in on "rice queen" organizations helps us

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[5] A 1988 internal survey found that a whopping 67.6% of AFC self-identified as "non-Asian" (the majority of which were white men, although there were some Black AFCers as well). Numbers from "AFC – Statistically Speaking," *AFC Newsletter* 4, no. 5 (1988), 2. GHLA.

[6] Jian Neo Chen, "Asian American Queer and Trans Activisms," in *The Routledge Handbook of Asian American Studies*, ed. Cindy I-Fen Cheng (New York, Routledge, 2017).

[7] Amy Sueyoshi, "Manservants to Millennials: A Brief Queer APA History," in *Q&A: Voices from Queer Asian North America*, ed. Martin F. Manalansan IV, Alice Y. Hom, and Kale Bantigue Fajardo (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2021), 174.

understand the messy history of how QAPI individuals transitioned from being seen as a "non-existent" identity group, to finding a tentative voice of their own by the end of the twentieth century.[8]

I explore this transition by using a combined historical/linguistic method that assumes a fairly literal definition of "voice." Metalinguistic commentary (or talk about talk) can be a rich source of evidence on how individuals defined the boundaries of their personal communities. Writing that discloses *linguistic attitudes* about odd, foreign-sounding, effeminate, unexpected, discordant, or otherwise notable modes of speaking can also signpost that author's expectations about prototypical behavior for members of a particular identity group.[9] And Asian American Movement and gay liberationist literature published between 1968 and the mid-1970s, as well as AFC newsletters published from 1985 to 1995, were saturated with this sort of linguistic stereotyping.

I apply linguistic theory to produce a social history of how one group of Asian men navigated romance, forged friendships, and produced a celebratory communal identity in the predominately-white American Midwest. Tracing metalinguistic discourse helps us place these hundred-odd AFCers within a broader landscape of evolving social attitudes about acceptable Asian American sexuality and masculinity at the end of the twentieth century.[10] We can see how, over this thirty-year period, political writers came to widen the parameters of which gendered or

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[8] Steve Lew, "On Being Asian, Male and Gay in the West and Re-writing the Story," *Lavender Godzilla* 1, no. 4 (1988), 4. Gale *Archives of Sexuality and Gender* (GASG).

[9] Peter Garrett, *Attitudes to Language* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[10] There is no one accepted definition of which ethnic and national groups make up the "Asian American" racial category. Indeed, political scientist Pei-te Lien has argued that Asian American pan-ethnicity is more of "an *imaginary* concept" than a lived reality. I attempt to get around this ambiguity by adhering to how historical actors deployed the "Asian American," "Asian," and "Oriental" labels in their own lives and times, rather than artificially imposing my own racial definitions. Although, I do note that the majority of AFC's Asian membership was of Chinese, Filipino, and Japanese heritage, in that order. See Pei-te Lien, *The Making of Asian America through Political Participation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 6.

sexualized linguistic behaviors could represent the image of a proud Asian American man. Popular metalinguistic discourse shifted from an angry scream against "Oriental" emasculation, to a disdain towards the prevalent "screaming queen" stereotype, to a growing acceptance for Asian gay men who might talk campy and date white men, but who still stood in solidarity with their Asian brothers and sisters.

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Queer Asian American scholarship is yet a relatively small academic field, even though stereotypes about Asian American identity and male homosexuality, or the related notion of effeminacy, have popped up across popular discourse for centuries. Indeed, people of Asian descent have, as a whole, appeared as queer figures throughout American history—if we understand the word *queer* to be nothing but a pejorative for people who fall outside the normative bounds of gender and sexuality. In the late nineteenth century, exclusionary immigration policies produced a stark gender imbalance among East Asian arrivals. The resulting population of primarily-male Asian workers—living in homosocial communities and often working typically-feminine jobs, like as laundrymen or domestic cleaners—stood in contrast to the "white bourgeois family" ideal on the Pacific Coast. In popular culture, "Orientals" came to be seen as a "third sex," possessors of an "ambiguous" and "hermaphroditic" sexuality that threatened the dominant social order.[11] As late as the 1920s and '30s, Filipino nationals continued to be portrayed as sexual oddities in contemporary literature, "feminized males" who were "not homosexual yet not fully heterosexual either."[12]

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[11] Robert G. Lee, *Orientals: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 85.
[12] Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 113.

Derogatory assumptions of "Oriental" queerness then have deep roots in the American popular consciousness. It took until the late twentieth century, however, for the first signs of a positive queer Asian American movement—in the political sense of *queer* as an challenge against hegemonic gender, sexual, racial, and economic norms—to gain visibility.[13] The first gay or lesbian Asian American organizations in the United States were not formed until the mid-1980s (about a hundred years after the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act), while the first politically-queer Asian American writings did not gain popularity until the mid-to-late-1990s (around a century after the Philippine-American War).[14]

Historians have examined this transition from "third sex" stereotyping to queer racial liberation from a few angles. First, Asian American Studies scholars have extensively chronicled activist efforts to produce a new, positive "Asian American" coalition out of the group once labeled as "Orientals" by appearance. Authors do quibble over the roots of this pan-ethnic racial category. Some emphasize the term's ties to the 1968 San Francisco State Third World Liberation Front strikes, when students formed one of the first pan-Asian coalitions to demand the establishment of Ethnic Studies Departments across several Californian colleges.[15] Others point to the enduring "model minority" stereotype to argue that Asian American politics emerged as a challenge against assimilationist strategies promoted by Japanese and Chinese American organizations in the immediate post-World War II (and post-internment) years.[16] And sociologist Dina Okamoto has also argued in broader terms that individual experiences of racial

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[13] My definition of queer politics is drawn from Judith Butler's "Critically Queer," *GLQ* 1 (1993); and Cathy J. Cohen's "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?", *GLQ* 3 (1997).
[14] Chen, "Asian American Queer and Trans Activisms," 318.
[15] See William Wei, *The Asian American Movement: A Social History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); Karen Umemoto, "'On Strike!' San Francisco State College Strike, 1968–1969: The Role of Asian American Students," in *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader*, ed. Min Zhou and James V. Gatewood (New York: New York University Press, 2000).
[16] Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

discrimination produced affiliations between Americans of Asian and Pacific Islander descent, separate from any one historical event.[17]

Whatever the root cause, scholars do agree on a couple key points: first, that much Asian American rhetoric was crafted as a direct response to pre-existing Oriental stereotypes that had, among other effects, feminized and emasculated Asian men; and second, that the exact contours of "Asian American" identity continued to be negotiated and re-negotiated long after that phrase was first coined in 1968. As Ellen Wu stated in 2014, "Asian American identity is neither predictable nor fixed."[18] And gendered and sexualized racial stereotypes emerged as one particularly live area of debate.

Fittingly, a second wave of Asian American scholarship has, since the late 1990s, worked to frame images of gender or sexually-nonconforming Asian people in a new light. Amy Sueyoshi uncovered invisible histories of Asian American involvement in early gay liberation activism, such as when Tamara Ching (a sex worker of Native Hawaiian, Chinese, and German descent) fought back against police harassment with "other street queens" in the San Francisco Tenderloin district a full three years before the Stonewall Riots of 1969, or when Kiyoshi Kuromiya (a Japanese American activist) co-founded the Philadelphia Gay Liberation Front branch in 1970.[19] Media and literary scholars too have celebrated QAPI images in popular American culture, while contemporary authors and artists produced revolutionary images of their own, as in David Eng and Alice Hom's influential 1998 *Q&A: Queer in Asian America*.[20] Most

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[17] Dina G. Okamoto, *Redefining Race: Asian American Panethnicity and Shifting Ethnic Boundaries* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2014).
[18] Wu, *The Color of Success*, 258.
[19] Sueyoshi, "Manservants to Millennials," 173.
[20] Examples of QAPI media or literary scholarship include Stephen Hong Sohn's *Inscrutable Belongings: Queer Asian North American Fiction* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2018); Darrell Y. Hamamoto and Sandra Liu, *Countervisions: Asian American Film Criticism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000). See also David L. Eng and Alice Y. Hom, *Q & A: Queer in Asian America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

recently, some scholars have turned to examine the role of Asian American gay social clubs, like Eric C. Wat's oral history interviews with leaders of the Asian/Pacific Lesbians and Gays (A/PLG) of Los Angeles, the first group of its type to be founded in the United States in 1983, or C. Winter Han's ethnographic study on a contemporary queer Asian American community in Seattle, Washington.[21]

These latter works have done much to probe at gay Asian society members' strategies of resistance as they challenged dominant narratives that "construct them as being less desirable, less worthy, and less authentically Asian than their gay white peers or their straight Asian peers."[22] However, Han, Wat, and other QAPI scholars leave us with two open questions. First, how do gay organizations of the 1980s—whose rosters often had a mix of white and Asian members, and whose politics fell somewhere between the queer Orientalism of the nineteenth to early twentieth centuries and the radical Queer of Color liberation of the late 1990s—fit into a longer history of queer Asian sociality? And second, how can sociolinguistic theory help us access this history? Indeed, outside of Martin Manalansan's research into Filipino immigrants' "*bakla"* gay argots, QAPI scholarship has had little interaction with emergent sociolinguistic theories about the role of language as a "central site of social practice" and a "crucial means for producing sociocultural identities."[23]

Searching for attitudes about race, gender, and sexuality by studying attitudes about language can seem like an out-of-left-field approach, especially for such a linguistically-diverse

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[21] Eric C. Wat, *The Making of a Gay Asian Community: An Oral History of Pre-AIDs Los Angeles* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002); C. Winter Han, *Geisha of a Different Kind: Race and Sexuality in Gaysian America* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).
[22] Han, *Geisha of a Different Kind,* 8.
[23] Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall, "Theorizing Identity in Language and Sexuality Research," *Language in Society* 33, no. 4 (2004): 492. See also Martin F. Manalansan IV, "'Performing' Filipino Gay Experience in America: Linguistic Strategies in a Transnational Context," in *Beyond the Lavender Lexicon*, ed. William Leap (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach, 1995); Manalansan, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

group as Asian Americans. However, even if there is little evidence that the Asian American population speaks with any one characteristic dialect, many writers, artists, politicians, and academics across history have expressed strong opinions about what Asian American people *should* sound like.[24] For example, Robert Park, the influential Chicago School sociologist, once narrated his puzzling encounter with an American-raised Japanese woman in decidedly raciolinguistic terms:

> I found myself watching her expectantly for some slight accent, some gesture or intonation that would betray her racial origin […] I was still not able to escape the impression that I was listening to an American woman in a Japanese disguise.[25]

About a century later, a Hawaiian Japanese man, Allan, described facing similar expectations in the Chicago gay dating scene, writing that "when you are Asian, other men think that you're going to be effeminate, or not speak English well."[26] In such commentary, linguistic opinions acted as a vehicle for writers to express their deeper, perhaps less palatable expectations about identity groups.

This thesis then takes a closer look at how activist writers from the late 1960s to early 1990s defined concepts of "gayness," "Asian-ness," and "gay Asian-ness" through the medium of metalanguage. Methodologically, I pull from Barbara Johnstone, Jennifer Andrus, and Andrew E. Danielson's landmark 2006 study of "Pittsburghese," which modeled a way to investigate the "linkage, usually assumed but not often described, between publicly circulating discourses about language and the linguistic life experiences of individuals."[27] Johnstone's team

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[24] Adrienne Lo and Angela Reyes, "Language, Identity and Relationality in Asian Pacific America: An Introduction," *Pragmatics* 14, no. 2-3 (2004).
[25] Robert E. Park, "Behind our Masks," *Survey Graphic* 56 (May 1926): 136; from Henry Yu, *Thinking Orientals: Migration, Contact, and Exoticism in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 67.
[26] Allan in Silvino da Silva, "East Meets West: Overcoming Asian Stereotypes in Our Community," *Gay Chicago Magazine* 14, no. 41 (1991), 25. Box 3.9, William B. Kelley and Chen K. Ooi Collection, GHLA.
[27] Barbara Johnstone, Jennifer Andrus, and Andrew E. Danielson, "Mobility, Indexicality, and the Enregisterment of 'Pittsburghese,'" *Journal of English Linguistics* 34, no. 2 (2006): 100.

had compared recorded interview data against a small body of newspaper articles to show the development of a perceived Pittsburgh accent between 1910 and 2001; I stick to just textual examples of metalinguistic commentary. Using only archival sources is as of yet considered an unconventional method in linguistic circles, but fulfills Joe Spencer-Bennett's recent call for scholars to begin giving "sustained attention" to the "relatively naturalistic metalanguage" that can be found in social-historical archives.[28]

First, I describe writings about "the voice" in nationally-circulating gay magazines, as well as discussions of political "screaming" in critical Asian American Movement literature, to show how both may have alienated gay Asian readers. Next, I take a close look at how AFC members parroted, digested, and, eventually, refashioned those extant linguistic stereotypes across club newsletters in the 1980s and early '90s. My analysis considers writing by "Friends" of AFC (like Larry Beck), but focuses on the intellectual contributions of the organization's Asian members. By analyzing their published conversations about speech, we see how one small community of gay Asian people produced a welcoming space for their intersecting identities out of a social context that was generally hostile (or just forgetful) toward Asians that violated heterosexual or masculine norms. And by contextualizing AFC's metalanguage within a broader landscape of gendered and raced linguistic stereotypes, I hope to rescue a place for these so-called "rice queen" groups in the timeline of QAPI history.

2 "The Voice" in Early Gay Rights Literature

"We are all familiar with the homosexual stereotype," a 1961 issue of the Homophile magazine *ONE* declared. He was a "grotesque figure," a demeaning caricature recognized by people both within and without the extant gay community. Physically effeminate and blond, this

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[28] Joe Spencer-Bennett, "The People's Critical Linguistics: Using Archival Data to Investigate Responses to Linguistic Informalization," *Language in Society* 50, no. 2 (2021), 300.

stereotype could also be spotted by listening for a characteristic voice: high-pitched, "reedish," and usually spoken "with something resembling a lisp."[29]

Before analyzing queer Asian American discourse from the late twentieth century, we should first set the stage by surveying the pre-existing cultural landscape of homosexual linguistic stereotypes. *ONE* magazine provides such a snapshot view into gay and lesbian authors' own opinions about "gay" speech, from a time when homosexuality was still generally criminalized across America. Early twentieth-century psychological definitions of queer sexuality were dominated by the theory of gender "inversion," which linked same-sex attraction to possessing "deviant" anatomical or behavioral features of the opposite sex.[30] *ONE* contributors sought to destigmatize and de-pathologize homosexuality over the magazine's 1952 to 1967 run by, oftentimes, pushing back against gender-crossing stereotypes. And as the quotations above imply, accent emerged as a popular means for authors to identify other homosexual people (particularly gay men) or to distance themselves from the more effeminate members of their community, whose "la-di-da, limp-wristed exhibitionism" was seen as undermining attempts to give homosexuality a more respectable image.[31]

One 1955 article by "James Douglas Margin," for instance, itemized a painstakingly-detailed list of what "postures of the body" and "pitch[es] of the voice" gave a man away as gay, and provided a step-by-step guide for readers to excise any hint of effeminacy from their daily behaviors.[32] "Learn to control the little finger," or "The 'fairy finger,' I've heard it called," Margin advised. Light cigarettes with a straight wrist, the four fingers touching, and put it out

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[29] Marcel Martin, "The Homosexual Stereotype," *ONE* 9, no. 9 (September 1961), 7. *Reveal Digital* Independent Voices Collection (RD).
[30] Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).
[31] 1957 letter from "Alex," in Craig M. Loftin, *Letters to ONE : Gay and Lesbian Voices from the 1950s and 1960s* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 84.
[32] James Douglas Margin, "The Margin of Masculinity," *ONE* 3, no. 1 (1955), 10. RD.

with a brief, vigorous shake—never any bouncing or gentle gestures. [33] And avoid speaking in ways that echo the "burbling womenfolk."[34]

Like the 1961 article, Margin highlighted lisping (or speaking with pronounced and high-pitched S's) as a marker for gay sexuality.[35] That particular homosexual stereotype can be spotted as far back as the 1890s, like in one 1892 *Herald* story on the notorious New York Bowery district, which reported how a male prostitute "minced up to [the author] and lisped."[36] However, Margin at least argued that "lispy" vocal ticks reflected stereotype more than reality: "Of all the gay males I've known or observed in a lifetime, only one or two actually lisped." Instead, Margin pointed to more abstract vocal qualities, like speaking with a "musical quality of amazing softness," or a "velvet texture" and "dulcet tone," which came across as exaggeratedly-cultured and therefore gay-sounding. On the level of vocabulary, Margin also cautioned his readers against using "gentle expletives" and advised them to "watch your adjectives, and use superlatives sparingly."[37] Another contemporary author, K.O. Neal, similarly linked absolute pitch to homosexuality. In his 1960 short story, Neal narrated his first meeting with a man whose "low, real low" voice made him seem straight at first. "It just didn't *sound* gay," Neal exclaimed. "I mean, a lot of queens can throw their voice down," Neal added, "but you can *feel* with your ear they're gay as a hoot-owl."[38]

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[33] Margin, "The Margin of Masculinity," 11

[34] Margin, "The Margin of Masculinity," 15.

[35] The "gay lisp" is not a true lisp speech impediment. Speakers produce higher-pitched fricatives by modifying tongue position, speaking with the tongue tip pushed closer to the front of the mouth. This more anterior point of articulation creates a higher-pitched, piercing, and more "feminine" sound—since, on average, English-speaking women produce S fricatives with higher acoustic peaks (around 5,500–9,000 Hz) compared to English-speaking men (around 4,700–8,000 Hz). See Lal Zimman, "Variability in /s/ Among Transgender Speakers: Evidence for a Socially Grounded Account of Gender and Sibilants," *Linguistics* 55, no. 5 (2017): 996.

[36] George Chauncey, *Gay New York*: *Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890 – 1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 40.

[37] Margin, "The Margin of Masculinity," 15.

[38] K. O. Neal, "The Junk Dealer," *ONE* 8, no. 3 (1960), 9–10. RD.

These snippets from across *ONE* demonstrate how most mid-century gay writers and columnists possessed a clear (and often exhaustive) understanding of what it meant to "sound gay," even if they personally disliked and distanced themselves from that voice. Their linguistic stereotyping also mirrors recent findings from sociolinguistic scholarship, a field that has been veritably obsessed with defining and picking apart the concept of a "gay accent" since William Leap published his seminal volume *Beyond the Lavender Lexicon* in 1990. Linguists' compilations of those sounds that, in the American cultural imaginary, make someone come across as gay generally line up with *ONE* contributors' own assessments: falsetto voice; elongated vowels; hyper-articulated P's, T's, and K's; in-group slang; and the use of piercing S fricatives.[39]

Invocations of these sounds from outside the academic linguistic literature show how gay vocal stereotypes have been *enregistered*, or entered into the popular consciousness as "symbolically or ideologically laden linguistic resources that are available for anyone – regardless of their erotic orientation – to draw on and recirculate."[40] Or, as sociolinguist Scott Kiesling put it, "not all gay men speak with a 'gay voice,'" but invocations of that voice are generally "recognizable in performance."[41]

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[39] For research on falsetto voice and homosexual identity, see Robert J. Podesva, "Phonation Type as a Stylistic Variable: The Use of Falsetto in Constructing a Persona," *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 11, no. 4 (2007). For research on vowels and plosives, see Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick, *Language and Sexuality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Scott F. Kiesling, "The 'Gay Voice' and 'Brospeak': Toward a Systematic Model of Stance," in *The Oxford Handbook of Language and Sexuality*, ed. Kira Hall & Rusty Barrett (Oxford University Press, 2018). For semantic features, see Anna Livia and Kira Hall, *Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender, and Sexuality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). For the immense body of research on the "lispy" S, see Jeremy Calder, "From 'Gay Lisp' to 'Fierce Queen': The Sociophonetics of Sexuality's Most Iconic Variable," in *The Oxford Handbook of Language and Sexuality* (Oxford University Press, 2020); Lal Zimman, "Gender as Stylistic Bricolage: Transmasculine Voices and the Relationship Between Fundamental Frequency and /s/," *Language in Society* 46 (2017); Kathryn Campbell-Kibler, "Intersecting Variables and Perceived Sexual Orientation in Men," *American Speech* 86, no. 1 (Spring 2011).

[40] Cameron and Kulick, *Language and Sexuality*, 91.

[41] Kiesling, "'Gay Voice' and 'Brospeak,'" 7–8.

Reading gay vocal stereotypes from across *ONE* articles then gives us more than just an understanding of how homosexual writers from the 1950s and '60s made sense of their identity through language; it also gives us a catalogue of terms to search for moments when future activists invoked and redeployed enregistered gay stereotypes to further their own political agendas. The coming wave of late-1960s movements for racial justice—including efforts by Asian American activists—would often engage with demeaning sexual stereotypes, and occasionally relate concepts about race through opinions about voice. I examine overlaps between those two projects by tracking metalanguage that countered the stereotypes found in *ONE*. Namely, metalanguage that oriented members of a racial community in opposition to voices that sound soft, gentle, dulcet, musical, flamboyant, lispy, or, when writers cut to the chase, simply grotesque.

3 Screaming Away the Silent Image of Asian America: Aiiieeeee!

Indeed, the radical new voice produced by Asian American Movement (AAM) writers was anything but soft. The Movement, which first began in college campuses around the Bay Area in 1968, rallied around three main causes. First and in the short term, college students of Asian descent organized to take part in the San Francisco State Third World Liberation Front strikes, which opposed Eurocentric curricula and resulted in the creation of Ethnic Studies Departments at SF State and the University of California, Berkeley.[42] Second, these young Asians took inspiration from Black Power radical politics to oppose the "model minority" assimilationist strategies that had been pursued by older Japanese and Chinese American organizations.[43] Third and with the most long-lasting consequences, activists promoted a new pan-ethnic "Asian American" racial category in order to lessen ethnic divisions and boost the

[42] Wei, *The Asian American Movement*.
[43] Wu, *The Color of Success*.

political power of this minority population. Each of these three political goals worked against stereotypes of the passive model minority and silent "Oriental," and each was often represented by a shared metaphorical quality of loudness. Or, as playwright and movement leader Frank Chin asked, "What holds the Asian Americas together, right now, at about half past dead?" An irrepressible scream, "Aiiieeeee!"[44]

To AAM writers, screaming was not just a useful linguistic stereotype but also a concrete political strategy. For example, in a 1969 issue of the Los Angeles-based paper *Gidra* (one of the most influential magazines for the Movement), Amy Uyematsu leveraged volume imagery to criticize the lack of visible Asian involvement in African Americans' struggle for civil rights. "The yellow people in American" had "accepted" being stereotyped as "passive, accommodating, and unemotional," she argued. They had "allow[ed] the white public to use the 'silent Oriental' stereotype against the black protest," thereby capitulating to a racist social order.[45] Instead, the inaugural issue of *Gidra* declared Asian people should adopt a new self-image and a new dedication to "recogniz[ing] and deal[ing] with injustices." The "shout of Yellow Power" was "symbolic of our new direction" and would soon be "reverberating in the quiet corridors of the Asian community."[46]

Notably, this screaming and shouting was also gendered in most 1960s-'70s AAM rhetoric. Scholars have since rationalized *Gidra*'s rejection of the silent model minority "myth" for a number of reasons. Framing all people of Asian descent as passive, hard-working emblems of the American Dream was a "gross simplification" of a population stratified by diverse ethnic

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[44] Frank Chin, "Come All Ye Asian American Writers," in *The Big Aiiieeeee!*, ed. Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusau Inada, and Shawn Wong (New York: Meridian, 1991), 92.
[45] Amy Uyematsu, "The Emergence of Yellow Power in America," *Gidra* 1, no. 7 (1969), 8. Courtesy of Gidra, Densho.
[46] Larry Kubota, "Yellow Power!", *Gidra* 1, no. 1 (1969), 4. Densho.

origins, immigration histories, and class backgrounds, Frank H. Wu argued. The myth had been "abused" in mainstream media to deny anti-Asian racism.[47] And it undermined a unified fight for racial justice by sorting non-white populations into the buckets of "good and bad minorities."[48]

But *Gidra* contributors also denied this myth due to a more personal concern. In particular, Asian male writers often associated both the model minority and silent "Oriental" stereotypes with their feminization, and so riotously raised their voices in response.[49] For example, one 1969 *Gidra* article acknowledged that while many "Orientals in America have become affluent through their hard work and silence," but "For their silence, they have paid the price of emasculation."[50] Or as the characteristically-blunt Frank Chin put it, "It is an article of white liberal American faith today that Chinese men, at their best, are effeminate closet queens like Charlie Chan and, at their worst, are homosexual menaces like Fu Manchu."[51] Screaming out in defiance was then linked to a sub-project of the Movement: proving Asian men's masculinity and, relatedly, their unimpeachable heterosexuality.

Male authors flooded *Gidra* with articles seeking to demonstrate their manhood and sexual desirability. Some looked to an imagined pan-Asian past for positive examples to counter demeaning tropes in American media. To "end the silence that has condemned us to suffer in this racist society," one such author said, "We must search our souls for the flame of the Asian warriors who fought for their people and their pride without fear of death."[52] Other writers'

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[47] Frank H. Wu, *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 49.
[48] Wu, *The Color of Success*, 248.
[49] For Movement rhetoric about Asian male re-masculinization, see David L. Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001). For literature on Asian American *women*'s sexualization and responses to rhetorical silencing, see Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men: Labor, Laws, and Love* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997); Patti Duncan, *Tell This Silence: Asian American Women Writers and the Politics of Speech* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004).
[50] Alan Nishio, "The Oriental as a 'Middleman Minority,'" *Gidra* 1, no. 2 (1969), 3. Densho.
[51] Jeffrey Paul Chan et. al, "Introduction," in *The Big Aiieeeee!: An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature* (New York: Meridian, 1991), xiii.
[52] Kubota, "Yellow Power!", 4.

assertions of Asian male masculinity veered over the line into outright misogyny, and stitched the sexual objectification of Asian women onto the broader goals of the Movement. For example, a 1969 letter to the editor from a "Curious Yellow" described the author's "delighted" experience seeing an Asian topless dancer at a local bar, and requested that *Gidra* write an "eye-popping" Playboy-style interview about her in order to "expand the inhibited world of the Asian male."[53] Another letter published earlier that same year defended having women play a more "subservient role" in marriages because that was "actually the dominating practice and ancient custom of the Asian people."[54]

Those latter two examples are outliers in their degree of explicit misogyny (and were harshly criticized by female writers). Still, it was not unusual to see male *Gidra* contributors promote a vocal Asian American politics that was at least subtly degrading and objectifying toward women—and that also had, as one gay Asian scholar argued, an "alienating effect on their queer brothers" as well.[55] Rhetorically, homosexual behavior appeared as a kind of boogeyman extreme representation for Asian Americans' previous acquiescence to "political manipulation by white America."[56] One *Gidra* poem opened with the one-two punch of a line, "Suck the white cock / little lemon skinned man," for that was a "Product of apathy / Product of fear. / From a sieve-like mind."[57]

Outside of rhetoric, homosexual people themselves generally disappeared in the pages of *Gidra*. I can find no examples of AAM activists calling for joint action with the contemporary gay liberation movement, and there are next to no named references to homosexuality,

[53] Curious Yellow, "Topless?", letter to the editor in *Gidra* 1, no. 5 (1969), 4. Densho.
[54] Name Withheld, "Prostitution?", letter to the editor in *Gidra* 1, no. 2 (1969), 4. Densho.
[55] Wat, *The Making of a Gay Asian Community*, 94.
[56] Nishio, "The Oriental as a 'Middleman Minority,'" 3.
[57] Marc Kondo, "Bitter!?", *Gidra* 1, no. 3 (1969), 3. Densho.

bisexuality, or transgender people. One rare counterexample comes in a 1973 article interviewing California Asians outside the Movement, which included a twenty-five-year-old gay Chinese American man from South Pasadena. The interviewer asked that man why he was not involved with Asian American organizing (A: seemed like it was nothing but a "fashionable and chic thing to be associated with") and whether he had any feelings about gay rights activism (A: "Nothing really").[58] And although the interviewer exhibited no overt homophobia, he still seemed ideologically opposed to homosexuality with some Marxist-inflected questions about whether the interviewee thought "homosexuality [was] a manifestation of a particular economic class?" (A: another simple "Not really" in response).[59]

Asian gayness, when mentioned, was criticized in metaphoric terms or linked to a bourgeois ambivalence to the Movement. Either way, it was clear that gay Asian men did not fit the desired sound for activists like Frank Chin. Some of the linguistic markers identified by *ONE* writer James Margin in Section 2—like a musical softness or cultured, dulcet tone—ran counter to their radical racial project of letting out a "scream so loud, so pure, so full of wretched agony" that it excised the "marginalization, dehumanization, and elimination" of their community.[60] As late as 1990, Frank Chin still positioned gay sexuality as detrimental to his vision of the Movement, with a critique against David Henry Hwang's 1988 queer *M. Butterfly* reimaging of *Madame Butterfly* for showing the "good Chinese man" as "the fulfillment of white male homosexual fantasy, literally kissing white ass."[61]

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[58] David Monkawa, "How Other's [sic] see the Movement," *Gidra* 5, no. 11 (1973), 6. Densho.
[59] Monkawa, "How Other's [sic] see the Movement," 6.
[60] M. Evelina Galang, "Introduction," in *Screaming Monkeys: Critiques of Asian American Images* (Coffee House Press, 2003), 7.
[61] Chan et. al, "Introduction," xiii.

Understandably, this screaming rhetoric also had a chilling effect on many individual Asian American gay writers from the 1960s to early 1980s. "I separated so much at the time," Californian QAPI activist Steve Lew stated in a 2002 oral history interview. "On the one hand, I was very political and very much into Asian American identity," he added, "But I couldn't put the two [gay and Asian identities] together."[62] Asian American Movement activists had essentially produced a "talk story," Lew argued in an earlier 1988 article, by which he meant a local Hawaiian term for sharing a "rambling personal experience narrative mixed with folk material."[63] This talk story "mined the richness of earlier generations" to give API people new "positive role models" and a positive pan-ethnic identity. But it also stigmatized and further marginalized gay Asian American men: "seldom has our talk story been uttered even to ourselves."[64] In the next section, we will see how newly-formed gay Asian social groups helped individual QAPI people "appreciate [themselves] as Asian gay men"—in part by inventing a new story of talk that made room for homosexuality, gender-crossing, and interracial relationships in the circle of acceptable Asian American manhood.[65]

4 Miss Gay Asian Pacific Man: The New "Talk Story" of Asians and Friends

When Larry Beck wondered in 1982 why there was no gay Asian American group in Chicago, he was asking the right question, even if he also rightly felt at first uncomfortable "as a

[62] Wat, *The Making of a Gay Asian Community*, 69.

[63] Hawai'ian pidgin "talk story" definition from Karen Ann Watson, "Transferable Communicative Routines: Strategies and Group Identity in Two Speech Events," *Language in Society* 4, no. 1 (1975): 54. The phrase was also popularized by Chinese American author Maxine Hong Kingston in her 1980 short story collection, *China Men*. Kinston talked story by "rewriting ancient tales," blending oral and literary Chinese traditions, and fashioning a revisionist history which "fracture[d] Chinese and white American authority." Lew's invocation of the term might reflect either the colloquial or literary notion of talk story. See King-Kok Cheung, "Talk Story: Counter-Memory in Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*," *Tamkang Review* 24, no. 1 (1993): 24–5; Hiu Wing Wong, "Talk-stories in the Fictions of Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan," PhD diss. (University of Warwick, 2006).

[64] Lew, "On Being Asian, Male and Gay in the West," 4.

[65] Lew, "On Being Asian, Male and Gay in the West," 6.

non-Asian" with "starting such a group."[66] Publications from the wave of Chicago gay activism that followed the Stonewall riots reciprocally did not include, or even mention, Asian American people. 1970s Chicago Gay Alliance (CGA) and Chicago Gay Liberation (CGL) articles, for instance, show next to no awareness of contemporary Asian American Movement activism. One 1971 CGA newsletter did acknowledge the influence of "the blacks, the young radicals, [and] the women's movement" on gay liberation, but did not include Asian Americans or any other Third World Movement groups in his list.[67]

That lack of Asian American perspectives may be because Asians and Pacific Islanders constituted such a minority proportion of the Cook County population in the twentieth century (2.1% in 1980 and 3.7% in 1990).[68] Although, interestingly enough, even if Asian gay men were essentially never highlighted as contributors to Chicago gay liberation, the ongoing Vietnam War was often invoked as a symbolic motif across articles. One 1971 CGA newsletter argued that "Most Americans hate those of their own children who disapprove of the war," hate "Jews, Negroes, Chicanos, gooks, dinks, slopes," and also hate "the private life of homosexuals." "In the light of the above," the author concluded, "if this last moral judgement on the part of most Americans bothers you in any way, you've got to be out of your fucking mind."[69] Another newsletter from later that year linked the projects of gay liberation and anti-war activism by playing on the dual meanings of coming out: "we say that we are gay and proud, and that we reject the sexist, racist war. We demand, with the majority of Americans: Out NOW!"[70]

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[66] Beck, "Looking Back," 7.
[67] "Gay Liberation Movement Seen to Have Major Social Impact," *Chicago Gay Alliance* (CGA) *Newsletter* 1, no. 10 (1971), 1. GASG.
[68] From 1980 and 1990 Censuses for Cook County, Illinois, U.S. Census Bureau and Social Explorer.
[69] The Editor, "Editorial," *CGA Newsletter* 1, no. 6 (1971), 2. GASG.
[70] "55 Gays Participate in National Anti-war Conference; Relate Gay Oppression to the War," *CGA Newsletter* 2, no. 8 (1971), 7. GASG.

Asian people were, in other words, shown only in silhouette, with no voice or individuality in either gay liberation organization's newsletters. The creation of Asians and Friends in 1984 filled that gap in the Chicago gay landscape, and, over the first decade of the club's existence, acted as a primary social hub for its Asian members. Before joining AFC, one Chicago-born Sansei stated, "I never had the feeling that I was the only gay person in this world, but I've had feelings that I was the only gay Oriental." After joining the group, that man reported, "Almost the only contacts I've had with gay Asians" remained through AFC.[71]

However, even as AFC fostered a nascent sense of Asian gay solidarity in the city, its activities and published articulations of QAPI identity were always inflected by the group's high white population (which, in 1988, was recorded as a whopping 69 non-Asians to 33 Asian members).[72] Why were so many white "Friends" drawn to this organization? What was their role in AFC compared to the roles of Asian members? How did AFCers of all races frame Asian gay sexuality and gender expression, particularly in comparison to many Asian American Movement activists' vitriolic attacks against interracial homosexual relationships just a decade prior? And how did writers' linguistic behavior or metalinguistic commentary shift from the *AFC Newsletter*'s first issue in 1985 to its last in 1995?[73]

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AFC did, in some sense, meet future critics' worst expectations for a majority-white, "rice queen" organization. Many white "Friends" seem to have joined primarily because of a fetishistic, or at least exoticizing, interest in "knowing about Oriental people or Oriental

[71] "Interview with Todd," *AFC Newsletter* 1, no. 4 (1985), 6; 8. GHLA.
[72] "AFC – Statistically Speaking," *AFC Newsletter* 4, no. 5 (1988), 2. GHLA.
[73] AFC published its monthly newsletter under the name *AFC Newsletter* from August 1985 to January 1995, when the publication was re-titled as *The Revelasian*. *Revelasion* issues continued to be produced until at least March 1999 (the last issue preserved at the Gerber/Hart Library and Archives). Those late 1990s editions fall outside the scope of this paper, but may motivate future research into how AFCers' opinions evolved as the group moved into the next millennium.

culture."[74] "I had never associated with gays before I joined AFC," said early member Glenn Joselane, and "since I was always fascinated with the Asian heritage, I thought it striking luck to have found an organization like this."[75]

However, an equally vocal faction of white AFCers joined not to *meet* Asian gay men but rather to support their Asian partners. As a result, newsletters from across that publication's ten-year run were continually flooded with articles offering advice about cultural sensitivity and seeking to destigmatize white-and-Asian interracial relationships. One 1986 article from the Hong Kong-born member J.L. argued that "at least [Caucasians who are interested in Asians] have the guts to take interest in races other than themselves."[76] Another 1988 poem by Larry Beck riffed off Rudyard Kipling's "White Man's Burden" to satirize the popular image of a "rice queen" as an older, richer white man who took advantage of young Asian immigrants:

> So you're new to the states and to gay life?
> Is that why you look so forlorn?
> I can help make it right
> 'Cause I'm gay and I'm white
> And I am American born.[77]

Similarly, in the first of a series of interviews with AFC board members, one interracial couple, Bill Kelley and Chen Ooi, debated the question of whether "rice queen" racial preferences were necessarily negative or discriminatory in the first place. Kelley began by differentiating between actually "being a rice queen" (by dating an Asian person) and the "negative explanations that people give for 'rice queendom'" (which were tied to "patronizing Asians or despising yourself"). Ooi piled on with a fierier argument, stating in unequivocal terms that "To call people

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[74] "Interview – Chen and Bill (Part 2)," *AFC Newsletter* 1, no. 3 (1985), 8. GHLA.
[75] Glenn Joselane, "Coming Back Home," *AFC Newsletter* 4, no. 10 (1988), 9. GHLA.
[76] "Interview: J.L.," *AFC Newsletter* 2, no. 6 (1986), 8. GHLA.
[77] Larry Beck, "White Man's Burden," *AFC Newsletter* 4, no. 1 (1988), 6. GHLA.

who are attracted to Asians a 'rice queen' in turn insults Asian people," because that "queen" label itself implied "someone who is 'nellie,' very effeminate."[78]

Ooi's statement in particular is an interesting counterpoint to earlier Asian American Movement denunciations of rhetorically "kissing white ass."[79] Sexual relations between white and Asian men, Ooi fired back, were not inherently emasculating. Rather, it was the *stigmatization* of such relationships through "insulting" terms like "rice queen" that was truly demeaning, since it suggested that anyone who was attracted to Asians must necessarily be an effeminate gay man. In other words, Ooi defended his relationship by transferring, rather than undermining, the basic premise of earlier Asian American Movement rhetoric (i.e. that effeminate gender expressions were an undesirable trait).

Nonetheless, even if many white and Asian members challenged the demeaning associations of "rice queendom," an overwhelming majority of AFC interracial couples recorded in interviews or articles still fit the general outline of Larry Beck's satirical "White Man's Burden" figure. White partners tended to be older, speak more confident English, and possess an American citizenship where their Asian partners did not. In one 1986 interview with then sixty-two-year-old member Paul Samuelson, for instance, Samuelson jokingly described the language barrier between himself and his young lover Ramesh, whom he had met while on vacation in Nepal. "Ramesh and I struggled with a way of understanding our own relationship better," Samuelson recalled. "I finally got the idea of [using the label] partners, because Ramesh has a good general understanding of business. He understood what partners meant."[80] In additional to their romantic relationship, Samuelson also acted as Ramesh's official sponsor during his

[78] "Interview – Chen and Bill," *AFC Newsletter* 1, no. 2 (1985), 11. GHLA.
[79] Chan et. al, "Introduction," xiii.
[80] "Interview with Paul Samuelson," *AFC Newsletter* 2, no. 9 (1986), 10. GHLA.

education in the United States. No one on the AFC interviewing team questioned the potentially-troubling power dynamics implied by these discrepancies in age, education, language, and immigration status.

In general, AFCers only challenged individual instances of racial bias in the gay community and did not consider any more systemic manifestation of racism or white supremacy—forms of racism which exist without the intent to be discriminatory. Many white members with a purported deep appreciation for Asian culture*s* actually spoke only about a singular "Asian culture." Admittedly, this habit was not limited to white contributors. Most AFCers casually referenced a monolithic "Asia" in their writings, and it can be hard to parse between discriminatory generalizations and affirming attempts to forge pan-ethnic solidarity in a social context where most people of Asian descent were already lumped together on the basis of appearance. Sometimes, articles would recognize the diverse make-up of the Asian American racial category, as in a 1990 word search puzzle which asked readers to identify countries from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India to China, Japan, and the Philippines in a "Search of…ASIA."[81] But as an editorial policy, group members were categorized as either "Asian" or "non-Asian" (with the more nuanced term "Asian/Pacific Islander" not being used until 1995). Asian members could also be inconsistent about whether they disclosed their own ethnic identities, or whether they described themselves as simply "Oriental" or even just "born in Asia."[82]

[81] "In Search of … Asia," *AFC Newsletter* 6, no. 8 (1990), 7. GHLA.
[82] The phrase "born in Asia" was used by Chen Ooi in the "Interview – Chen and Bill," *AFC Newsletter* 1, no. 2 (1985), 8. His name suggests that Ooi was ethnically Chinese, and that he was probably born in a country with a high Hokkien-speaking population, like Taiwan or Malaysia. But many other AFCers chose to remain anonymous by publishing under their first name or first and last initial only, making it difficult to guess at their ethnic background. I use the category "Asian" and refrain from speculating about an AFCer's biographical information unless clearly stated in a newsletter, since members of Asians and Friends were clearly attempting to imbue "Asian" with a positive, communal meaning. Although, future research might uncover how cultural differences textured members' opinions about homosexuality, effeminate behavior, and language stereotypes.

Still, many white members' offhanded disregard for ethnic differences between Asian populations is notable for a group whose purpose was, in part, to educate gay people about "the culture of Asians and Asian Americans."[83] Their routine generalizations suggest a blind spot in how white AFCers defined anti-Asian racism. For example, one 1987 issue reprinted—and criticized—a letter to the editor in which a white author defended his right to engage in sex tourism with young Asian men because "Most Oriental boys are street smart when Mom is still feeding us [white Americans] milk and cookies at home after school."[84] Larry Beck categorically denounced that letter as obviously racist. Yet Beck, as editor, also printed a fetishizing travelogue by Paul Samuelson on the very next page without comment. "Eyes of deep brown are enticing, but reading their message is impossible," Samuelson mused. And in an article on his time in just India and Nepal, Samuelson broadly concluded that "Asian men are often handicapped with the burden of an extraordinary ego."[85]

This more covert form of racism is also apparent in the metalinguistic assumptions expressed by some members, which linked non-standard English accents to deviant sexual behavior. In one 1985 interview between Deo (a Filipino man) and his white partner Adrien, for example, Adrien described how the sound of Deo's voice at first filled him with dread. "I heard this weird little foreign voice on the phone" and thought, "'Oh, no!' […] I thought he was probably going to be some little old Filipino, a strange little brown man in a slick black suit, a little kinky maybe." Deo's accent immediately sent Adrien down a spiral of racialized assumptions—assumptions which were only corrected by Deo's non-foreign behavior at their

[83] Untitled mission statement in *AFC Newsletter* 8, no. 6 (June 1992), 12. GHLA.
[84] Letter by A.B. Smith, reprinted in Larry Beck, "Dialogue on Racism," *AFC Newsletter* 3, no. 1 (January 1987), 8. GHLA.
[85] Paul Samuelson, "India/Nepal Notes (Things I discovered or was told)," *AFC Newsletter* 3, no. 1 (January 1987), 10. GHLA.

first in-person meeting, as Deo giggled in a disarmingly youthful manner and hit Adrien with a decidedly American reference, asking, “Are you Mr. Henry Ford?”[86]

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Overall, in the early years of the club’s history, AFCers’ linguistic expectations towards Asian gay men generally matched Adrien’s “strange little brown man” comment. Similar to James Margin’s careful separation between himself and the dulcet-voiced homosexual stereotype, or *Gidra* writers’ challenge against the emasculating “silent Oriental” voice, many contributors to the first few volumes of AFC newsletters carved out a space for their Asian and gay perspective by defining themselves in *opposition* to prevailing linguistic stereotypes. “Just because I’m Filipino,” said AFC board member Ed Bautista, “people think, ‘Oh, he’s going to be one of those snotty little queens,’” and act “cliquish and pretentious.” That was “a very bad stereotype,” Bautista concluded, but he noticed that “a certain group just upholds that standard that they think is to their benefit.”[87] A member of the Los Angeles-based A/PLG (who was pseudonymously named Paul Bautista) similarly distanced himself from the foreign-born, effeminate gay Asians he recalled seeing in his youth. “Back then, a lot of effeminate Thais showed up in the picture,” he stated in an oral history interview, “A lot of screaming Filipinos, too.”[88]

Screaming in the Asian American Movement sense had been a means for some Asian men to assert their political agency, masculinity, and heterosexuality; screaming in Paul Bautista’s memories was a stereotype that stripped away Asian gay manhood—and, most damningly, was “obvious.”

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[86] “Interview with Deo and Adrian,” *AFC Newsletter* 1, no. 5 (1985), 7. GHLA.
[87] “Interview with Ed Bautista, *AFC Newsletter* 2, no. 3 (1986), 12. GHLA.
[88] Wat, *The Making of a Gay Asian Community*, 53.

Obviousness—sounding obviously gay, obviously Asian, and obviously foreign-born—expressed how many club members felt caught in a bind by linguistic stereotyping from social movements of the past few decades. Men who were "obvious" could pull on enregistered features of the "gay" accent (high-pitch, musical tone) to clearly communicate their sexual orientation. But screaming voices also capitulated to derogatory stereotypes about Asian men's default effeminacy, which the Asian American Movement of the 1970s had diagnosed and separated from their positive view of political manhood. "When you're obvious," Bautista concluded, "you've got nothing to lose." But for people who had the ability to act "straighter," they should "fit in here first, get the American mold down pat, get your career going, your schooling done." There "wasn't this empowerment" in the mid-1980s.[89]

Indeed, writing from AFCers, and members of clubs like it, expressed a distance from "screaming queens" over the 1980s for a few key reasons. First, club members seem to have heard the derogatory, Orientalist tropes of effeminacy in such voices more than they heard references to a particular performance of feminine homosexual identity. Steve Lew of the California-based GAPA club noted how, in 1988, many white gay men still expected Asians to act as "cute, non-threatening geisha boy[s]," which mirrored general American stereotypes that labeled Asian women as "shy, subservient, accommodating."[90] Asians who spoke with a feminine-sounding tone were, in AFCers' assessment, playing into a racist fetish simply to attract white partners. "Most of the Asian gays I've met, especially the ones that weren't born here, tend to be very flighty" said the Californian gay man interviewed by *Gidra* in 1973. "They

[89] Wat, *The Making of a Gay Asian Community*, 53.
[90] Lew, "On Being Asian, Male and Gay in the West," 5.

play the passive role and sort of cling to their lovers–following them around the room. They were practically geishas."[91]

Second, and importantly, many club members distanced themselves from "obvious" voices out of a practical concern for their personal safety. Anti-gay violence was not unusual in the 1980s.[92] However, some Asian gay men recalled being targeted for both their sexuality and their race. "I got beat up a couple of times in elementary school because I was different," said Paul Chen of the A/PLG. Being "obviously feminine all the time" as well as Chinese in a primarily non-Asian school exposed him to risk from a young age.[93]

Third, some AFCers rejected overtly effeminate gay speech out of a sense of internalized shame, whether because of culturally-specific homophobic rhetoric they had heard from their families, or because of anti-Asian discrimination they had faced in broader American society. "People need to develop a sense of self-esteem and self-pride in being gay and being Asian," said GAT member Alan Li, but "integrating the two is no easy task in the midst of racism, immigration problems, economic problems, and so forth."[94]

Fourth, AFCers also felt more generally that "flamboyant" gay people fueled damaging stereotypes about the entire LGBT community—similar to *ONE* commentators from the 1950s

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[91] Monkawa, "How Other's [sic] see the Movement," 6.

[92] The 1984 National Gay Task Force (now National LGBTQ Task Force) Anti-Violence Project found "widespread" violence against lesbians and gay men across major U.S. cities, with about 90% of the total 2,100 survey people reporting "some type of victimization because of their sexual orientation." From the "NGTF Survey Indicates Widespread Anti-gay/lesbian Violence" press release, July 12, 1984. Box 46, folder 41, The National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce Records, 1973-2000: Series II: Field Files. Courtesy of Cornell University Libraries and GASG.

[93] Wat, *The Making of a Gay Asian Community*, 17.

[94] Alan Li, "Interview with Alan Li," *AFC Newsletter* 2, no. 10 (1986), 12. GHLA. Of course, not all Asian AFCers experienced a sense of internalized shame, since attitudes towards homosexuality vary from culture to culture and person to person. For example, one member, San, reported that he experienced little homophobia growing up in Thailand: "I didn't think I was really different from anyone else, because in Thailand they're really open about these things, and you are what you are. So, I didn't have a hard time coming out." San actually found it much harder to be openly-gay once he moved to Michigan. "Interview with Ian and San," *AFC Newsletter* 3, no. 5 (1987), 6. GHLA.

who expressed disgust with "la-di-da" exhibitionism.[95] With the ongoing AIDS crisis, gay leaders across the country reacted to accusations that gay men had brought on the epidemic through their own immorality or sexual promiscuity by "constructing a more palatable public face."[96] Political scientist Matthew Dean Hindman argued that this reversion away from the liberationist rhetoric of the 1960s and '70s had the effect of "desex[ing]" and further marginalizing gay men whose behavior fell on the fringe of "sexual creativity."[97] AFCers echoed this nation-wide move in their first five years as a club, although their rhetoric against flamboyancy was still crucially inflected by race—and was sometimes reminiscent of model minority rhetoric. In one 1986 article, Larry Beck commented on Asian members' low response to club calls to march in that year's gay pride parade. "For Asian group members, there is an additional reason to participate," he argued, since "The word 'gay' conjures up white images in both gay and straight society." And so, to those Asian AFCers who "feel that some of the floats, style, and dress of those in the parade reinforce societies [sic] stereotypes," Beck issued this argument: "March in a 3-piece suit, if you want, but march."[98]

Fifth and finally, some AFCers distanced themselves from "screaming" voices because they associated such talk with a symptom of isolation—which should have been addressed by joining a targeted Asian-and-gay social club. As one Jack Lo put it, "When I saw other gay Asians, we would look at each other, but never talk," because "There was often a sense of competing with each other for the attention of white gay Americans." That sense of competition

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[95] 1957 letter from "Alex," in Loftin, *Letters to ONE*, 84.
[96] Matthew Dean Hindman, "Promiscuity of the Past: Neoliberalism and Gay Sexuality Pre- and Post-AIDS," *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 7, no. 1 (2019): 53.
[97] Hindman, "Promiscuity of the Past," 63.
[98] Larry Beck, "Why March?", *AFC Newsletter* 2, no. 4 (1986), 8. GHLA.

and, by implication, silence "ended when I met a member of Boston Asian Gay Men and Lesbians."[99]

Fittingly, AFC newsletters from 1985 to the early 1990s worked to produce a counter "gay Asian" linguistic stereotype that only subtly differed from metalanguage found in *Gidra*. Club members' voices were decidedly masculine, just not heterosexual. For example, several AFCers weighed in explicitly on the subject of accent stereotyping in a panel interview on "Overcoming Asian Stereotypes in Our Community" with the *Gay Chicago Magazine*. "Because we tend to be small-boned and slight, people treat us like we're a weaker group," said one member Ray. "They think, 'Oh, they're so little and cute.'" Another member, Tom, complained that "even if we do know English," white men "still think that we don't." In response, a third AFCer named Ron delivered a warning to the entire gay community: "Because we look different and have an accent doesn't mean that we're different inside from other gay men. We can be as sexy or masculine as the next guy. Don't underestimate us" [100]

This claim of gay Asian sensuality through masculinity did see some exceptions across early volumes of AFC. One 1988 short story cheekily titled "A Dickens of a Christmas," for instance, described the author's encounter with an "extravagantly beautiful guy." This Sam Wong was tall and slim, dark and graceful, and spoke in a soft, gentle voice that calls to mind some of James Margin's vocal stereotyping from thirty-five years prior.[101]

But for the most part, AFCers replaced the experience of being pigeonholed as "snotty little queens" or cute "geishas" with another universalizing linguistic stereotype. The model

[99] Jack Lo, "Feeling 'Too Different,'" reprinted from BAGMAL June/July 1987 in *AFC Newsletter* 3, no. 8 (1987), 5. GHLA.
[100] da Silva, "East Meets West," 24–5.
[101] JP, "A Dickens of a Christmas," *AFC Newsletter* 4, no. 12 (1988), 4. GHLA.

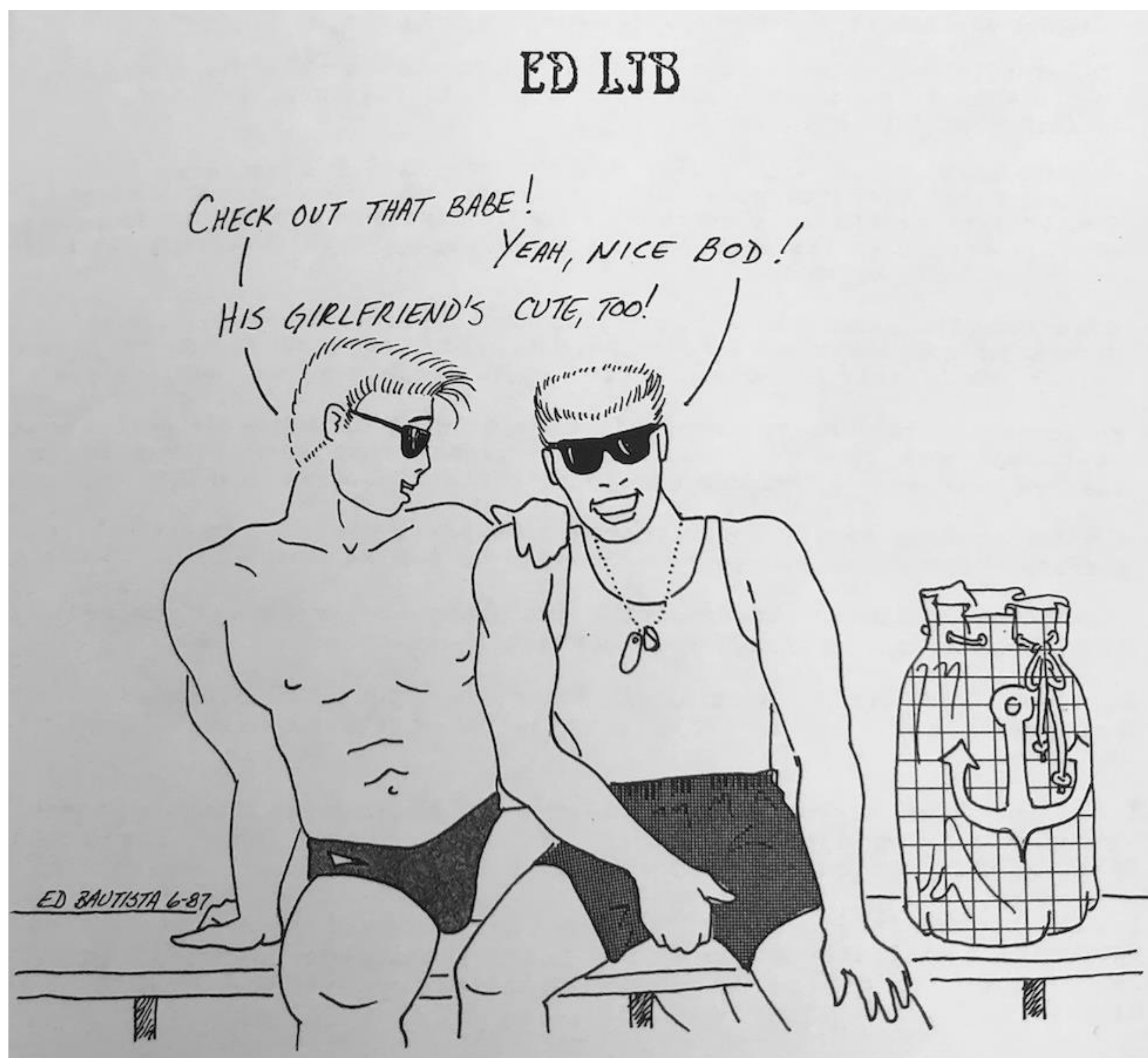

Figure 1: "Ed Lib" cartoon by Ed Bautista, in AFC Newsletter *3, no. 7 (1987), 11.*

AFCer of the 1980s was strictly masculine, and so also proudly Asian. He might be in a relationship with a white man, but would not pander to fetishistic sexual expectations. Cartoons by Ed Bautista in his recurring segment "Ed Lib" visually capture these linguistic trends (see Figure 1). Across his illustrations, all the Asian men are short-haired, broad-shouldered, and scantily-clad in outfits that show off their many, many muscles. "Check out that babe!" says one Speedo-ed man to his crotch-grabbing friend in a 1987 cartoon, before Bautista subverted expectations by revealing that the subject of these Asian manly-men's interest was actually

another man. The cartoon suggested masculinity by placing Asian gay men in the position of a catcaller. Such content from across newsletters defended AFCers' manhood—but often with an undercurrent of misogyny.

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This stringently-masculine "talk story" began to shift by 1992. As Asians and Friends – Chicago became more established as an organization, and as AFC began to forge closer ties with similar groups popping up across the country, members also became more comfortable with Asian men whose behavior, dress, and accent expressed alternative forms of gender and sexuality. For instance, the national network of Asians and Friends (AF) groups began hosting an annual International Friendship Weekend (IFW) conference full of "friendship, family, and fun" in 1990.[102] And when AFC hosted the third IFW in 1992, its newsletter reported on both the male and female-impersonator pageants at that event with a strikingly even tone. Above are pictured "Six of the ravishing contestants for Ms. IFW '92," the October edition explained, while below are "Seven of the hunky Mr. IFW contestants" (see Figure 2).[103] An article from their Californian counterpart, GAPA, commented on their own Miss GAPA and Gay Asian Pacific Man contests in similar terms. "What is it that makes grown men want to teeter-totter on stilettos or strip half-naked before a crowd of friends and strangers?" GAPA asked. To claim their fifteen minutes of fame? To have fun? Or to "dispel the stereotypical notion that Asian/Pacific people are passive, unassertive, and asexual"?[104] In other words, by the early 1990s, AF clubs from the West to East coasts began to link both masculine *and* feminine gender performances with an anti-Orientalist political agenda.

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[102] Truong Nguyen, "A Brief History of IFW," *AFNY News Forum* 6, no. 9 (1993), 5. GASG.
[103] N.t., *AFC Newsletter* 8, no. 10 (1992), 6.
[104] "Runway 1989: featuring the Miss GAPA and Gay Asian Pacific Man contests," *Lavender Godzilla* 2, no. 5 (1989), 6. GASG.

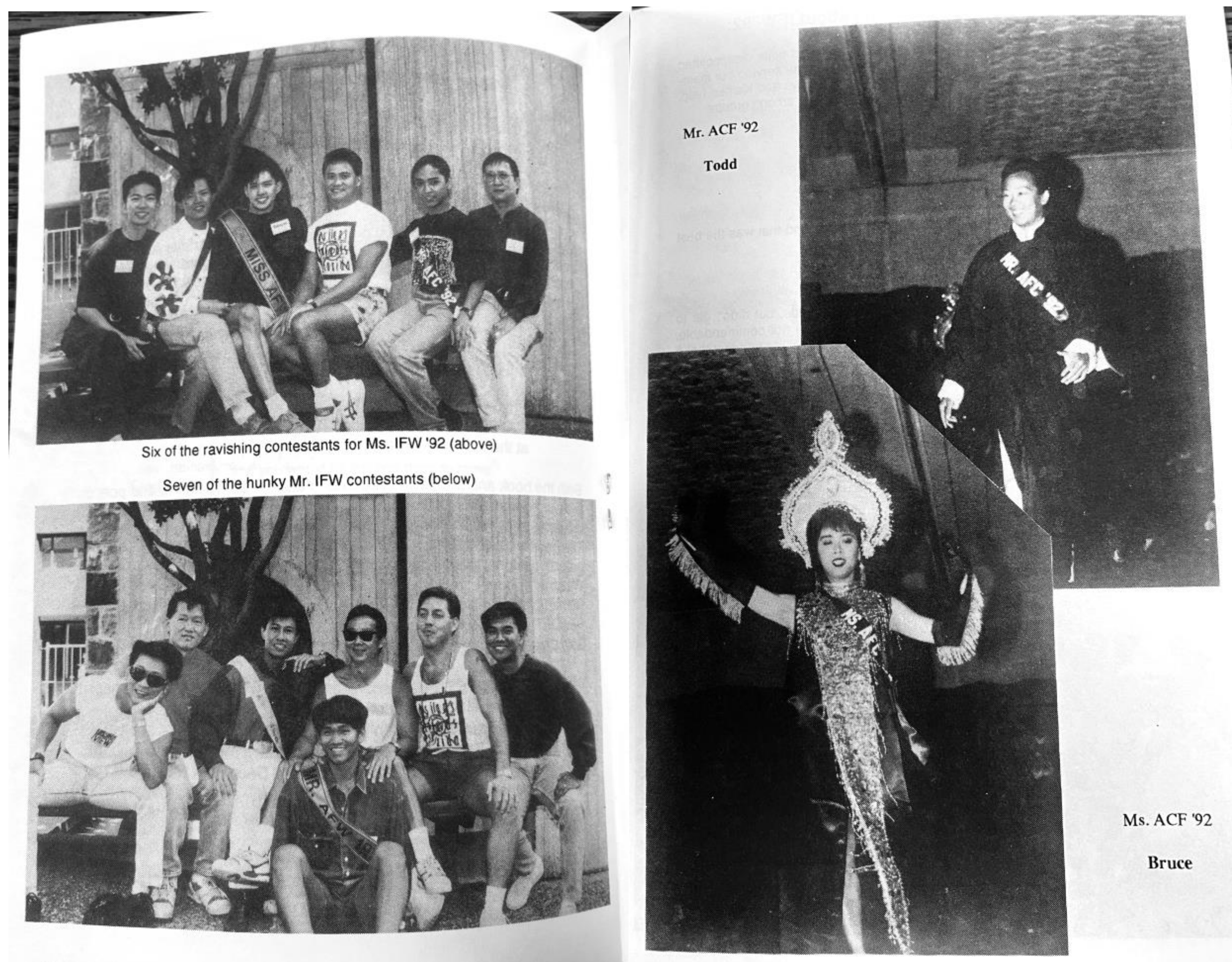

Figure 2: Photos of Ms. and Mr. IFW and Mr. and Ms. ACF (a typo for AFC) in AFC Newsletter *8, no. 10 (1992), 6; 9.*

Linguistic patterns across AFC newsletters of this period also reflected this increasing acceptance for queer femininity. Namely, club president Reymund "Kiki Nakamura" Alcordo's inauguration in May 1993 brought with it an enduring shift in the stylistic tone of each newsletter's opening "President's Message." Messages of years past typically consisted of a dry summary of the last month's social events. The president might sprinkle in a few personal anecdotes from time to time, but as a whole, messages were written with fairly formal diction. In contrast, Alcordo (who moonlighted as a drag queen) started her tenure off with a shout: "Would you girls believe that it took yours truly three long years of hard work, dedication, and sleeping

around (really!) to finally grab the elusive and most sought-after office of president?"[105] Another New Year's message next January toyed with spelling as she wished "all of you AFCers had a mahhhhvelous Christmas."[106] And in March, Alcordo playfully called a club trip to Fort Lauderdale a "Sunny, delightful and HOT (the MEN of course!)" visit to "Fort LaDeDa."[107] With such slang-filled and frequently caps locked writing, Alcordo evoked a sort of affectedly-flamboyant, sing-songy, and dramatic speech pattern.

No other AFCer echoed Alcordo's writing style during her presidency, and it is unclear whether Alcordo truly spoke with this campy voice outside of newsletter articles. However, when Kiki left office the next year, her replacement maintained a campy, if less dramatic, writing style in his messages. For instance, newly-elected Sam Chiu began one August issue with a joking "WOW! UHH! No, people, I'm not talking about someone's well-endowed body part. That's my one-word impression of the Big Apple before and during IFW 94."[108] Another message before IWF '95 asked whether Dallas, Texas, was "man enough to handle a bunch of wild Asian queens."[109]

Importantly, Alcordo's outlier style of writing was also never mocked, criticized, or really discussed at all by other club members. In an article for AFC's ten year anniversary, the club's first president, Samson Chan, simply stated that Kiki and his partner Michael had "added more life and fun into it [the presidency]."[110] Alcordo was also crowned "AFC Man of the Year" at the next anniversary dinner in 1995. This lighthearted non-reaction toward Alcordo's

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[105] Reymund Alcordo, "From the President…" *AFC Newsletter* 9, no. 5 (1993), 2. GHLA.
[106] Alcordo, "Pres Mes…", *AFC Newsletter* 10, no. 1 (1994), 2. GHLA.
[107] Alcordo, "Pres Mes…", *AFC Newsletter* 10, no. 2 (1994), 2. GHLA.
[108] Sam Chiu, "President's Message," *AFC Newsletter* 10, no. 6 (1994), 2. GHLA.
[109] Chiu, "President's Message," *The Revelasian* 11, no. 8 (1995), 2. GHLA.
[110] Samson Chan, "A Letter from AFC's First President," *AFC Newsletter* 10, no. 6 (1994), 3. GHLA.

effeminate style is a stunning turnaround for a club whose members, just nine years before, felt slighted by any association with "nellies."

Still, even if Alcordo was never the target of criticism in newsletter articles, other AFCers (particularly older white members) remained somewhat chilly towards effeminate gay men, Asian or otherwise. In a June 1992 transcript from a roundtable rap session about Chicago Pride, many of the white participants tried to distance themselves from the reputation that "Only idiots and crazies march in that parade." Bob (Caucasian) stated that "I don't want to associate with the 2% of the gay population that acts like that," to which Larry (Asian) responded that AFC had formed "our own subgroup here," and so "You don't have to belong to the subgroup of the 2%." Finally, Bill (Caucasian) summarized that while the rap session was not calling for "excluding them [flamboyant men] from the Gay Pride Parade," the group did hope that general Americans would see that "the gay community also includes some other people of these several other kinds of temperament as well."[111]

AFC had relaxed its hardline stance against images or sounds linking Asian gay men to femininity, but many still pointedly distinguished themselves from flamboyant men—not merely out of a desire to prove the gay community's diversity, but also out of a visceral sense of disgust towards "crazies." The organization was also still greatly influenced by its white members. A set of images from a September 1992 party showed a typical AFC social event, with an interracial mix of attendees, and a telling snapshot in the top right corner of a white man offering another white man the "Man of the Year" award (Figure 3). For these reasons, AFC's rhetoric about race, gender, and sexuality was, even ten years after the club's founding, a step away from the all-Asian "Queered Asian American communities" that would emerge later in the decade, who

[111] "Discussing the Coming Parade, Marching, and What it Means," *AFC Newsletter* 8, no. 6 (1992), 10–11. GHLA.

Figure 3: Photos from an AFC party, in AFC Newsletter *8, no. 9 (1992).*

"embraced their *racially* queer sexualities and genders, rather than trying to re-normalize them according to binary white codes."[112]

But when AFC members voted in January 1995 to officially change the name of their publication from *AFC Newsletter* to the more colorful *The Revelasion*, they were justified in this decision. Asians and Friends – Chicago had prompted a revelation among the city's small population of gay Asian people. This revelation was less radical than the QAPI leaders that would follow (and overshadow) the AF network in the twenty-first century, yet it was still meaningful to the few hundred total members of this early social group. Gay Asians in the Midwest were not completely isolated and without support, AFC affirmed. They were not

[112] Chen, "Asian American Queer and Trans Activisms," 322.

Figure 4: President Sam Chiu's "party-goer" vs. clean-cut personas (left), and the 1993 AFC board's welcome photo (right), in The Revelasian *11, no. 3 (1995),2; and* AFC Newsletter *9, no. 5 (1993), 1.*

categorically effeminate or categorically masculine. And a figurehead for their group could talk campy, dress in drag, and still be a respected gay Asian man (Figure 4). "I will do my very best […] to promise a supportive and non-threatening environment for the Asians in this group," Kiki Nakamura wrote in her very first President's Message, "Girl Scouts' Honor."[113]

5 It's a "CelebrAsian"! Legacies of AFC in *The Wedding Banquet* and Beyond

Sifting through linguistic trends across the late twentieth century reveals how a small community of Chicagoans made room for overtly gay, and even effeminate, gender performances within the bounds of acceptable Asian American behavior. "What am I?" AFC president David asked in 1988. "Chinese, American or gay? Do I have to choose from these few

[113] Alcordo, "From the President…", 2.

choices? Or can I choose of be all of them?" [114] By 1993, and with the election of a joyfully-flamboyant gay Asian drag queen to the head of their organization, AFC had decidedly broken out of David's binary restrictions. Decades before, 1960s and '70s Asian American Movement writers countered the popular cultural image of "Oriental silence" by insisting on Asian men's masculinity and staunch heterosexuality. Vocally, this racial rhetoric excluded previously-enregistered stereotypes about the average "gay accent" from representing the pan-Asian coalition. But AFC newsletters constructed another possibility—the possibility of being screamingly-loud, feminine, and still proudly Asian: "remember to ALWAYS PLAY IT SAFE AND WEAR YOUR RUBBERS. MALIGAYANG PASKO AT MANIGONG BAGONG TAON SA INYONG LAHAT!" (Tagalog for "Merry Christmas and happy new year to you all").[115]

By focusing on metalanguage, we see how discourse produced or popularized by political publications like *ONE* and *Gidra* continued to influence the opinions of individual gay Asian men well into the 1980s. And by following AFCers' evolving attitudes towards linguistic stereotyping, we see how some of those individuals came to produce a counter "talk story" that allowed for multiple Asian gender and sexual identities. Asian men were not by default effeminate, they argued, but neither was effeminacy strictly anti-Asian.

I end by asking, however, why these individuals? Why focus on this group? An Asian gay organization that represents an era of QAPI history that is little-remembered today? A small social club that was often dominated by its white membership, and whose politics—despite some growing acceptance towards gender-crossing and genderplay—remained fairly conservative even well into the 1990s?

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[114] David, "President's Message," *AFC Newsletter* 4, no. 1 (1988), 1. GHLA.
[115] Alcordo, "Pres Mess…", *AFC Newsletter* 9, 12 (1993), 2. GHLA.

In one sense, it is misleading to entirely separate AFC from those more radical Queer of Color groups that emerged in the late 1990s. Notably, Chicago's all-Asian queer group, the Gay Asians and Pacific Islanders of Chicago (GAPIC), was founded in 1995 by Reymund Alcordo, Sam Chiu, and five mutual friends—while Chiu was still in office as president of AFC! GAPIC and AFC would be "supplementing, not competing, with each other," declared Chiu.[116] And four years later, "Kiki" Alcordo still maintained ties with AFC as a member of the "Lick and Stick" newsletter committee.[117]

But AFC also deserves attention on its own terms. We might ask instead, what is lost when we skip past those earliest "rice queen" groups and only consider all-Asian societies in our mental history of the QAPI community? Indeed, we can see the consequences of forgetting clubs like AFC in the few cases of popular QAPI media. Taiwanese director Ang Lee's 1993 film *The Wedding Banquet*, for instance, was one of the first positive depictions of an East Asian gay man to ever be shown in American theaters. The romantic comedy told the story of Wai-tung Gao, a Taiwanese immigrant in New York City, and his decision to initially hide an eight-year relationship with Simon, a white man, rather than disappoint his parents' expectation that their eldest son marry to pass on the family name. Lee's sympathetic depiction of Gao's struggle between his personal happiness and his traditional filial obligations netted Lee the prestigious Golden Bear award at that year's Berlin Film Festival, as well as $23.6 million in worldwide sales off just a $750,000 budget.[118] *Banquet* was an unexpected hit among general American audiences. And, for AF members, the film may have had additional significance since according

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[116] Chiu, "President's Message," *The Revelasian* 11, no. 6 (1995), 2. GHLA.
[117] "AFC Newsletter Staff," *The Revelasian* 15, no. 3 (1999), 4. GHLA.
[118] Mark Chiang, "Coming Out into the Global System: Postmodern Patriarchies and Transnational Sexualities in *The Wedding Banquet*," in *Screening Asian Americans*, ed. Peter X. Feng (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 273.

to one AFC newsletter, "The movie [was] actually based on the experiences of a real life couple who just happen to be former members of our sister group, Asians and Friends – Washington DC."[119]

Yet, despite this potential behind-the-scenes connection, *The Wedding Banquet* never gave any hint that its main character could be connected to a larger gay social circle, let alone a gay Asian circle. Across the film, Wai-tung Gao was shown as symbolically isolated from the New York queer scene. His white partner, Simon, might table at an ACT UP stand, wear Keith Haring T-shirts, and thread a little earring in his right ear. Wai-tung, in contrast, wears only a businessman's buttoned-up uniform the entire movie. He picks Simon up from the ACT UP event at the curb but never steps foot outside his car. And while the film implies that both Wai-tung and Simon once regularly went out to New York gay nightclubs, the viewer never actually sees Wai-tung interact with any gay person outside of his relationship to his white partner. Glaringly, *The Wedding Banquet* framed Wai-tung as the only Asian member of an otherwise white queer community—and a tangential member at that. All the gay men are white, all the Chinese people are straight, and Wai-tung ends up alone as the odd-duck exception.

Queer film and media scholars have, since 1993, resoundingly criticized Lee's characterization of gay Asian isolation. The film's presentation of "the Asian American experience" had some "blind spots," argued Gina Marchetti.[120] By linking homosexuality to American whiteness, *The Wedding Banquet* reduced Wai-tung's sexuality to a stand-in "for the

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[119] "Upcoming Events in September," *AFC Newsletter* 9, no. 9 (1993), 4. I have no online access to the Asians and Friends – Washington DC archives, and so am unable to find any primary sources to either confirm or deny AFC's claim. However, Ang Lee's co-writer, Neil Peng, has told interviewers that the film was inspired by Peng's "closest friend," who was living in Washington with his white boyfriend of eight years at the time, which makes AFC's claim at least probable. See Patrick Pacheco, "Cultural Provocateur: In 'The Wedding Banquet,' Ang Lee Stirs Up Custom," *Los Angeles Times*, August 4, 1993.

[120] Gina Marchetti, "*The Wedding Banquet*: Global Chinese Cinema and the Asian American Experience," in *Countervisions: Asian American Film Criticism*, ed. Darrell Y. Hamamoto & Sandra Liu (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 291.

hybrid, inauthentic state of the Westernized ethnic subject," added Mark Chiang.[121] Lee enshrined the "importance of the nuclear family," said Peter X. Feng, and simply "render[ed] homosexuality safe for multicultural consumption."[122]

However, without an eye towards groups like AFC, these scholars could only see part of the issue with *The Wedding Banquet*'s depiction of 1990s gay Asian life. AFC's newsletter suggests to us that Wai-tung' social isolation was not just a questionable creative decision, but also, potentially, an ahistorical *omission* on the part of the filmmakers.

Admittedly, even if Lee had included the real-life Wai-tung Gao's links to the AF network, that alternate *Wedding Banquet* likely still would have irked film scholars as a representation of "the Asian American experience." If Gao had been written as a member of Asians and Friends – Washington DC (or its New York chapter, AFNY), the character might have had friends who could empathize with his struggles over defying traditional Taiwanese familial expectations. Gao might have felt less fear about coming out to his parents. He might have even attended AFNY fundraisers and safe sex seminars, and learned that AIDS was not just a white gay disease that could be avoided by idling at the curb. On the other hand, if Lee had mentioned AFNY, the film would have gotten embroiled in that organization's hot scandal of 1993, when AFNY was formally banned from marching with the People of Color (POC) contingent in the annual pride parade because of its high non-Asian membership. AFNY—which was headed by a white president at the time—presented a visibility issue for "what the people of color contingent would look like on the day of the march," said the POC Steering Committee in an open letter. More pressingly, the group needed to "Evaluate the effectiveness of your anti-

[121] Chiang, "Coming Out into the Global System," 281.
[122] Peter X. Feng, *Identities in Motion: Asian American Film and Video* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 185.

racism activities."[123] Had Gao and Simon been written as an interracial couple in such a shunned organization, their love story may have come off as less empowering to Asian viewers.

Still, even with this risk of controversy, I argue *The Wedding Banquet* would be a stronger movie if it featured the messy, full-hearted work of the Asians and Friends network. By simply giving viewers a glimpse at a larger Asian queer community—by even hinting that Wai-tung could be connected to a lively group with diverse opinions and political stances—the film would automatically add texture, depth, and realism to its core love story. By extension, its viewers and critics would automatically have a better understanding of how real-life gay Asian men constructed the confluence of their racial, gender, and sexual identities between the late 1980s and early 1990s. Ultimately, I argue scholars who look at a film like *Banquet* and ask, "Where are the other gay Asians?" are thinking too small. A more important question is, "Where are the gay Asian communities?" The gay Asian friendships, both local and country-spanning? The gay Asian conversations, conventions, and writing exchanges? Because members of AFC did not create a more welcoming "talk story" about gay Asian people on their own, or by solely socializing with their white partners; they did so by actively seeking out the company of other marginalized queer Asian men. "We have been oppressed too long," said AFC. "Isn't it high time we share and explore our feelings with our brothers and sisters to better enrich our lives?"[124] Films and histories that forget mixed-race groups like AFC, AFW, or AFNY leave us with a cleaner narrative of QAPI community development, but they also miss out on the full state of "CelebrAsian" that began as far back as 1984 in a small apartment on the North Side of Chicago.[125]

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[123] People of Color Steering Committee, "To the Executive Board and Members of Asians & Friends – New York: A Letter from the People of Color Steering Committee," *AFNY News Forum* (July 1993), 5. GASG.
[124] David, "President's Message," 1.
[125] The phrase "CelebrAsian" is borrowed from the title of Gay Asians of Toronto's (GAT) official newsletter.

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