

**Voices of Queer Asian Canadians:
Identity and Belonging for the Queer Asian Diaspora in Vancouver**

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This paper explores notions of identity, community, and belonging through the perspective of three queer Asian Canadians who are socially active members of the LGBTQ2+ (queer) community in Vancouver, Canada. Using a phenomenological approach, the lived experiences of the participants were analyzed. The common theme of both inclusion and exclusion in different “Asian” spaces was found. On one hand, participants felt exclusion in their ethnic Asian home communities due to rejection of their queer identity, and on the other hand, they found belonging in queer Asian spaces in the city. The study also revealed in participants feelings of “belonging to two worlds” as well as “being pushed and pulled”. The contradicting existent of being gay, and belonging to an Asian family culture that forbids gay identity, participants either brace the repercussions of coming out or live in secrecy in Vancouver’s thriving queer Asian scene. This ironic dichotomy points to the different “Asias” (Leung, 2017) that can be found in transpacific Vancouver and points to the complex and nuanced body politics of encompassing both sexual minority status and being an ethnic Asian in the city.

THE QUEER ASIAN DIASPORA: THE SITE OF A TRANSPACIFIC BODY POLITIC

My research for this paper comes from a deep personal connection of being part of the queer Asian diaspora and experiencing the polarizing effects of navigating the duality of these two contrasting worlds. How do you exist when it is forbidden to be gay in your family, while simultaneously living in a city with a thriving queer Asian community? The queer Asian scene in Vancouver can be tributed to the emergence of queer Asian events such as [Pride in Chinatown](#), [Rice Cake](#), and groups such as [Love Intersections](#) and [House of Rice](#). This small and mighty community has helped me find belonging in my seemingly contradicting existence among other queer Asians who share the same ethno-sexual

struggle. It has ignited my desire to understand the discourse of the queer Asian Canadian experience, especially in Vancouver, North America's "most Asian city" (Yuen, 2002) where 40% of Metro Vancouverites are foreign-born, with two-thirds being of Asian descent (Metro Vancouver 2013). More importantly, Vancouver is a transpacific city - "a [site] and 'contact zone' across which peoples, cultures, capital, and ideas travel" (Leung, 2017). Asian immigrant parents are often strong in their conservatism - they hold values that aim to preserve heteronormative notions of a traditional family (relations are between man and woman). One local example was that in 2014, Chinese parents mobilized together to show support against new transgender policies in the Vancouver School Board that aimed to protect and recognize transgender students (Leung, 2017). The queer Asian diaspora is a body politic who are caught in the clash of traditional Eastern values, while living in the Western world, a free society where all identity (including sexual identity and orientation) are protected and celebrated. Thus, transpacific migration is not just a process by which peoples move, but also where ideas travel and are preserved in their new environment. This poses some detrimental effects for queer Asians who belong to both an ethnic Asian community, as well as queer Canadian society - Asian sexual minority youth face higher victimization risks, reduced social support, increased rates of depression (and suicidality), as well as increased substance use and abuse than their heterosexual peers (Poon, 2011). Another example is that South Asians (the largest visible minority group in Canada), who identified as men having sex with men, have extremely low rates of HIV infection which do not reflect at all the "actual prevalence of HIV among South Asian gay men due to high levels of stigma associated with HIV in Asian communities" (Durrani, Sinacore, 2016). Through my interviews, I discover how queer Asians buffer the effects of (internalized) homophobia and stigma associated with being gay that is so prevalent in their ethnic Asian culture. Self-love and finding community (among the queer Asian scene in Vancouver) helped mitigate negative psycho-social effects.

RESEARCH, APPROACH, LIMITATIONS

Utilizing my social network, I selected three participants for this study. The criteria I used to select these participants were that a) participants are of Asian ethnicity and live in Canada; b) self-identity as a member of the LGBTQ2+ community; c) active member of the LGBTQ2+ community (eg. socially engaged, attend community events, work in the LGBTQ2+ spaces). I employed a phenomenological approach to collect data on the real experiences of my participants. I interviewed, [filmed](#), and analyzed my findings to find common themes. During our in-person (COVID safe) interactions, I conducted semi-structured interviews on three main topics: community, being queerAsian, self-identity and self-love. One major limitation was the lack of representation (and small sample size) of both Asian ethnicity and LGBTQ2+ identities; my participants cover a very small size of the diverse breadth of queer Asian identities. Finally, the questions I asked were also very general - deeper exploration could be employed in the future.

DETAILS OF PARTICIPANTS

Name	Age	Sexual Orientation	Ethnoracial Group	Country of Birth	Nationality
Joshua O.	27	Gay / queer	South East Asian (Filipino)	Philippines	Canadian
Lyle C.	32	Gay / queer	East Asian (Chinese)	Philippines	Canadian
Ricky C.	19	Gay / queer	East Asian (Chinese)	Canada	Canadian

SOCIO-CULTURAL RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LGBTQ2+ COMMUNITY

Name	Association(s)
Joshua O.	Filipinx dancer/artist involved with the local queer arts scene
Lyle C.	Model and activist for the queer and Asian community
Ricky C.	Photographer/artist, drag performer, member of the ballroom scene (ball culture)

RESULTS

COMMUNITY AND BELONGING

Where do you find community and belonging? The question of community is so subjective to each individual - it could pertain to a social marker of identity such as an ethnicity (eg. the Asian community), or related to a specific activity (eg. “the basketball community”). For Lyle and Ricky, community is indeed found through the connection of shared social markers of ethnic and sexual identity of being both queer and/or Asian. Lyle found community in the gay bar that he works at, but now it’s more towards an all-encompassing queer community. “The gay scene can be slightly judgmental, more restrictive, or a little bit more exclusive rather than inclusive so I’d say the queer community that involves non-binary, trans, lesbian, intersex, two-spirit. It’s not just all about gay men! Also, I find community in the Asian community - I’m Asian! I was raised going to New Town Bakery and having big meals with my extended family”. For Ricky, he first found belonging in Vancouver’s ballroom scene. “The first place that I genuinely found community and belonging is through the organization Van Vogue Jam. Basically, it’s the ballroom community in Vancouver that was originally started by Black and Latinx people, specifically trans and gay people in the 70s and 80s in response to racist environments in other drag balls. There’s a lot of queer Asians in that community”. Josh describes the community in simple terms, “community to me is rooted and grounded in respect to everyone’s unique culture - everyone is held and listened to”. Noting Lyle and Ricky’s experiences of finding their social place in queer spaces, we can infer that the shared notion of being marginalized as a queer and/or Asian person draws individuals to confide in communities that share the same experience as themselves, resulting in a sense of togetherness and comfort. This is no surprise as “some individuals will find community with other marginalized persons and build or join another life system that meets their need for communion” (Schlossberg, 1989). For Ricky, being around other marginalized queer Asians (as a default) has helped him find communion that is unavailable in his unaccepting

ethnic Asian family space. “I’m usually only around other queer Asians so I’ve never felt alienated... and don’t really feel left out”. Ricky is able to express his queer Asianness through his drag alter ego, “Galactic Consort Magenta Kwei-Fei Chan”. Socialization into spaces that reinforce identity is critical for individuals’ wellbeing. For Ricky, it is being recognized as both queer and Asian. “The social and individual functions of socialization indicate that there is an underlying need for identity that is part of being human. The individual dynamic is the need to be individuated, unique or special. The social dynamic is the need to belong, to be connected, to have union and fellowship with others. Both dynamics serve psychological and social well-being through feelings and self-perceptions of mattering to oneself and to others” (Adams, Marshall, 1996). Thus, being socialized into environments that allow queer Asians to be recognized for their ethnic identity (and their sexual identity), serves the psycho-social needs of individuals’ growth. Although coming out to family and queer acceptance is different for each individual, the prevalence of a thriving queer Asian community in Vancouver helps queer Asians explore their sexual identity and find belonging in a social environment, and get one from a step closer to moving from identity moratorium (identity crisis) to identity achievement (identity commitment) through the social support and communion found in the community (Marcia, 2011).

BEING QUEER AND ASIAN

What is it like to be queer and Asian? For both Joshua and Ricky, the theme of duality came up. “I feel like I have to placate to the model minority as an Asian person, and then as a queer person, I have to placate to straightness a lot - I feel like I’m stuck between those two worlds”. Joshua describes how in a heteronormative society, social capital is based on being part of a dominant majority - specifically, being White and straight. He feels that he is expected to play to the stereotype of being a “hard-working Asian” (model minority) in society, as well as upkeeping masculine self-expression (straightness) for his family. We can relate Joshua’s experience to the concept of “double jeopardy” where “sexual minorities of colour face a ‘double jeopardy’ in which they are discriminated against

due to their race and sexual orientation” (Pak, Dion, 1991). In this case, Joshua feels rejected by his Asian community for being gay and discriminated against due to stereotypes put on him by White society. Similarly, Ricky also feels a duality between his ethnicity and race. He expresses that being queer and Asian feels “like kind of a push and pull”. “I have very traditional parents who believe marriage is between a man and a woman... and then I do feel this sense of wanting to be freed. So there’s a disconnect between my Chinese identity and my queer identity”. In Ricky’s case, he feels a sense of identity moratorium (Marcia, 2011) where his queer identity exploration is extremely high, but he cannot fully commit to being queer and Asian in every space. He fully himself in queer Asian spaces, but not in his ethnic Asian family space. Ricky describes to me the struggle of being a drag performer and being unable to dress up and get ready at home - “my parents would freak out”. As mentioned earlier, I believe the prevalence of a thriving queer Asian scene in Vancouver helps queer Asians like Ricky to explore their sexual identity and get one step closer to full identity achievement which is critical for the psychological growth of individuals.

CONCLUSION: SELF-LOVE, ASIAN CANADIAN CULTURAL PRODUCTION

Being queer and Asian is not about glorifying “double jeopardy” and playing oppression Olympics, but it to recognize and celebrate our unique intersectional identity. There is so much to be proud of and so much to live for. We are all human after all. In the interest of compelling my participants to think about their own identity without any social markers of identity (gender, sex, race), I asked open-ended questions to spark self-love and to highlight their unique strengths. *What does it feel like to be you? What do you admire most about yourself? How do you show love to yourself?* For Lyle, being himself is “both exhausting... and great” at the same time. “It’s taken some time to get to where I am today, but I am very happy and grateful”. Lyle is referring to both his personal growth, as well as the acceptance of his queer identity. He admires his activism for the queer and Asian community, and his ability to connect with people on a deeper level. Lyle is currently raising money for local non-profits and groups

such as the Hua Foundation and the Vancouver Chinatown Foundation in his fundraiser called “[Asian is Community, Family & Human](#)” in response to anti-Asian hate. As an act of self-love, he draws clear boundaries and says no to things that do not serve his well-being. For Joshua, he admires his “stubbornness” (tenacity), passion, and his ability to express his feelings through creative form - dance. Joshua just completed his [dance residency](#) with Made in BC’s Re-Centering/Margins Creative Residency and premiered his dance work *Lakbay* which explores Tagalog through dance. To encouragement himself, he turns to self-talk. “I talk to myself a lot to remind myself how awesome I am”. Similarly, Ricky also credits his creative mind to express his feelings and experiences. “It’s what I turn to when I’m feeling down”. I have been blown away, witnessing Ricky perform his heart out at local drag shows and [House of Rice](#) events. As an act of self-love, he tells himself often, “okay I just need to get through this and I will be okay”. Despite feelings of duality and the struggle of full ethno-sexual recognition, Lyle, Joshua, and Ricky continue to recognize their strengths and turn to self-love and self-affirmation during turbulence. More importantly, their queer Asian identity has led them to find community among other queer Asians, and to take action through political activism (Lyle), and through artistic and cultural production (Joshua and Ricky). It is evident that the social and cultural fabric of the city can be contributed to the spaces that are both initiated and fostered by marginalized identities who confide and uplift each other in their own self-determination. This is not foreign, as Asian Canadians “have made an unreliable mark on both Canadian and International landscapes” through the Asian Canadian cultural activism movement in the 1970-80s, a movement where Asian Canadians “attempted to affect the world through their cultural practices”. This living community body “comprises of scholars, university students, artists, and community activists”. “[Asian Canadians] have won awards in almost every field of the arts: Roy Miki and Madeleine Thien in literature, Aiko Suzuki and Paul Wong in visual and video arts, Fumiko Kiyooka and Mina Shum in film, and Alvin Erasga Tolentino in dance” (Li, 2007). Thus, being Asian Canadian by default means to belong to a trailblazing body of cultural and artistic excellence, and critical engagement and activism.

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