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Robert Imada: Out in the Redwoods, Documenting Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered History at the University of California, Santa Cruz

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Authors

Reti, Irene H.
Imada, Robert

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ROBERT IMADA



Robert Imada (standing) with Joe Sampson

Interviewer: Irene Reti: *Robert Imada was interviewed on March 18, 2002 in the Regional History office at McHenry Library. Imada was a student from 1998 to 2002. He was a organizer for Queers of Color and the GLBT Network, as well as a Queer CUIP [Chancellor's Undergraduate Internship Program] intern. He was a recipient of a Queer Youth Leadership Award in 2000. He was a co-chair of the UCGLBTA and a member of the GLBT Campus Concerns Committee. Imada is a workshop leader, activist, and writer. He is also a color guard dancer.*

Reti: Robert, let's start by talking about your early life. Where were you born and where did you grow up?



Imada: I was born in Sunnyvale, California, which is in the South Bay area near San Francisco. I was born in 1980.

Reti: What was your family like?

Imada: I have a mother and a father, and one sister three years older than I am. I grew up in the South Bay area my entire life. We come from a fourth generation Japanese-American background. We were basically middle class, comfortably. I went to elementary school and high school there. My parents split up when I was in sophomore year in high school, when I was sixteen years old. Most of my grandparents and other relatives lived in Hawaii. My aunts and uncles are spread out around the Pacific or Western region, some in Seattle, Washington, some in Los Angeles and southern California. But most of them are still in Hawaii, either on Oahu or on the Big Island.

Reti: Did you come out in high school?

Imada: Yes, I came out sophomore year in high school. I explored myself, mostly through speech and debate. I didn't actually participate in "gay activities." I made up a monologue with a gay character, and performed it. I wrote prose and poetry. When I wrote articles for class, I'd write pieces arguing for gay marriage, or arguing for gays in the military, political-type pieces. I could safely say, "Oh, I'm arguing for gay rights but I'm not gay myself." It wasn't until my sophomore year in high school that I actually came out. My mom was the first one who asked the question, actually after a speech and debate competition, because she was noticing that I was doing all this stuff.

Reti: Was she worried about it, or was she supportive?

Imada: She was actually very supportive. I think at the initial moment she was a little bit surprised, I guess, as anyone would be. But then that night she said that she was okay with it. She was really supportive. It was a pretty smooth transition. She related it to my dad. My dad and I can't really talk about it too much, although he is supportive as well. He's a very quiet and shy guy, and doesn't talk about anything really political. My sister found out about it from my mom as well, and she was very supportive. I get along very well with my mother because she is very politically active. We talk politics, although my politics are more on the leftist side, more progressive than hers. She's a little bit more assimilationist, and I'm a little bit more towards the end of liberation and progressive politics.



High school was ups and downs. Junior year I came out in two classes—in my journalism class to my journalism teacher because I thought she was very gay-friendly. Then in senior year I started writing for the school newspaper. The new teacher who came in was gay, and he outed himself to me. We got along and it was a sense of support. I had a column and so I came out in the publication in the winter of my senior year. I didn't get outright flak for it, mostly just rumors and talking behind my back. Senior year was really tough. One of my gay friends left for community college my senior year and that was a loss of support.

In high school I also started going to the Billy de Frank Center in San Jose. I volunteered a little bit there, doing some high school youth programs. I went to their youth group.

Reti: That strikes me as amazing, because when I went to high school there were no programs for gay youth. Was it a fight to get the Billy de Frank Center to address gay youth, or were gay youth out advocating for themselves?

Imada: There was a youth program. It was really small. There was a youth support group, too, with a counselor, and then there was a social group on the weekends.

Reti: So when you decided to come to UC Santa Cruz were you aware that there was a gay community here?

Imada: I knew it was very progressive. I knew that it was really gay-friendly, so that was very much part of my decision to come here.

Reti: How did you know that?

Imada: I just knew. People who were acquainted with my mom told her. I heard it was very progressive, and very liberal. But I didn't know anyone here.

Reti: So you got here in the fall of 1998. What was your first impression of this place?

Imada: I picked Merrill College specifically because it was next to the GLBT Center. I already knew they had a GLBT Resource Center. I remember unpacking my bags, and getting settled right away, and then immediately going to the GLBT Resource Center and saying: "Hi, I want to get involved. I want to be active." I met Deborah Abbott. I said I wanted to volunteer. She said, "Oh, that's great." I found out about the Town Hall coming up and I went to that.



Reti: What's the Town Hall?

Imada: It's their annual queer community event at the beginning of fall quarter. I met Melissa Barthelemy, who was in the GLBT Network, which is one of the big five student organizations on campus. We represent a large student community on campus. I got involved with the GLBT Network my first year at UCSC. I was feeling out the waters. I didn't really have a focus as a student organizer. I got my feet wet. I learned from Melissa as far as student organizing goes. I got a feeling for the history. I learned that the GLBT Center had gotten its director the previous year and the space was going to be taken away.

My frosh year I went to the UC-wide UCGLBTA conference at UCLA. Then I participated in A Gay Evening in May.⁴⁹ I did a color guard dance piece for them. I met friends through the GLBT Network, friends like Joe Sampson, who is my year, and is an activist. We cooperate a lot. At the time I also was starting to learn about Queers of Color. Originally I didn't get involved with it my first year because I didn't understand what the group was about. I thought that Queers of Color was a group for African Americans and Latinos. It was my first year coming in, so I had no concept of race. Then I started taking the Merrill core course and learning a lot about racial politics and internalized racism, the things they don't teach you in high school. My high school in Sunnyvale was half Asian and half white. When I came to UCSC, I thought being Asian was an offshoot of whiteness. I had no concept of being a person of color. I didn't identify with that term. I thought, why should I go to Queers of Color? I began to learn a little bit more about the organization, and realized that Queers of Color was an organization for someone like myself too, to dialogue and talk about issues and have space, community.

Reti: At that point were there other Asian GLBT people in Queers of Color?

Imada: There were two. I remember going to one meeting. As a frosh, I was a little bit oblivious. There were all these people organizing, and for someone coming in who is not an organizer it's a little bit intimidating.

Reti: The focus was political?

⁴⁹A big fundraiser for nonprofit groups like the Santa Cruz AIDS Project and the Diversity Center, the lesbian and gay variety show, A Gay Evening in May, traditionally ran the two nights of the second weekend in May from the mid-1980s until 1999.



Imada: Yes, and I had no politics at the time. But when I was in the organizing meetings they were talking about what they wanted to do. And as far as Asians go, there were two women in the organization who were active. There was one, Frances Russell, who was mixed. She was half-Asian. And there was Juno Pareñas who graduated last year. She was a huge organizer. She's Filipina. She kind of ran *Queers of Color*, dominated it for awhile. Those were the only two queer Asians I came into contact with at the time.

Reti: Do you know the history of *Queers of Color*, how it started?

Imada: I believe it was started in 1995, maybe unofficially earlier than that, as far as when the mission statement was submitted to SOAR, which is what registered student organizations have to go through officially on campus. I know the organization has a history with roots. Not as long as GLBT Network. GLBT Network was the first GLBT queer entity on campus.

In my freshman year I did color guard.

Reti: What's color guard?

Imada: It's dances with flags and rifles and sabers. It's an art form that people don't really know about. It's progressed beyond marching band and parades and half-time shows. It's become an indoor art. There are teams that compete around the United States and internationally. I did that in high school, too. It got me into a piece of the gay community, because there are a lot of instructors who are gay men. Color guard was my first touch with the gay community. My instructors now are actually all gay.

Reti: Did you take any classes your first year that had queer content?

Imada: No, not until my sophomore year. I took Laura Engelken's class on *Gay and Lesbian Culture in America*. It was a two-credit class offered at Merrill. She used to be the coordinator of HIV-education at Merrill.

My sophomore year I started living at the Vito Russo apartment at Crown-Merrill.

Reti: Did the fact that it was gay-themed housing have anything to do with your decision?



Imada: Yes, very much so. I thought it would be cool to be in gay-themed housing. Actually Hong, another queer Asian I had known since I was a junior or senior in high school, we were both at Merrill and so we roomed together over there.

Reti: I'm trying to get a picture of what it is like to live in gay-themed housing. What makes it gay? How does it work? Is everybody in the whole building gay? Can you say more about that?

Imada: At Vito Russo... I don't know if it's called Vito Russo anymore, just because of changes in themed housing at Merrill. My residential assistant put on programs here and there. It wasn't extremely active. It wasn't like there were events every single week or anything. It was kind of hard because it wasn't like it was all queer people. It was half and half. It was people who were like, "Yes, I need housing and my friend happens to be gay." It was cool that that space actually existed and that it was named after Vito Russo the filmmaker.

Reti: Was there tension between the straight students and the gay students?

Imada: No. It was just like living in regular housing.

Reti: Pretty matter-of-fact.

Imada: Yes. It wasn't a big deal at all. I lived there my sophomore year. I got more into organizing. I kind of took over the GLBT Network. I started doing that a lot more, along with a few other organizers. My sophomore year, I started being a signer for Queers of Color, which means being one of the core organizers within the organization. And [through the] GLBT Network I was organizing Queer Awareness Week.

I put on workshops. One was called "Intersections of Racism and Homophobia." I publicized it widely. I made the flyer myself and sent it out. About thirty students, faculty, and staff came. Scott Morgensen came, and Nancy Kim of the Asian Pacific Islander Resource Center, and a lot of my contacts whom I had begun to know from my activism in the queer community showed up. Most of them were already on the same wavelengths as far as politics go, which was good. It was awareness-building. I began to build an identity around being a queer person of color, to figure out how I was going to fit that into my activism as a queer activist.



There was a Students of Color conference, which is an annual conference hosted by the University of California Student Association (UCSA). It was being held at UC Santa Cruz that year. I think it was the Student Union Assembly officer at our campus who asked us to put on a workshop on homophobia, and educating about homophobia within the people of color community. I collaborated with Queers of Color, and also with CLUH members, most of whom at the time were white. I think what allowed us to collaborate was because CLUH's workshop deals with intersections of heterosexism and racism, so they are well-versed and knowledgeable about these intersections. They are allies to people of color. So we put on the workshop, and it broke a lot of ground. It riled things up a little bit. The conference itself was disorganized, and there was one organizer who created a lot of ruckus about the fact that there were white allies there. We explained that they were putting on the workshop with us. I had even contacted them beforehand. It brought up a lot of drama, but it also brought awareness of UCSA. I'm not sure about now, but I think their conferences have shifted towards realizing that there is a space for allies at the Students of Color conference. This is three years down the line. The biggest collaborative effort was building ties [between] queers of color and CLUH members who helped put on that workshop. It was great that we were able to dialogue together and build a relationship.

Sophomore year I did the Queer Fashion Show at Porter College in May. I did a public art piece.

Junior year. I was a residential assistant at Merrill, at the Vito Russo apartments. At this point I was still a signer for GLBT Network, although I had begun to shift my focus. I became more active in taking over and building Queers of Color back up. I made a flyer for the fall OPERS festival, and [we did] a huge membership drive. I felt a responsibility to try to build Queers of Color up. Queers of Color folks had begun to graduate and there weren't new folks filtering in. Our fall reception was huge. The old members all showed up. Lots of new members came. Tanya Lee (she was a frosh at the time) came in. Apple, who was a frosh at the time... CLUH white allies came, because Queers of Color is also a space for white allies who want to come in and be supportive. John Holloway, the associate vice chancellor of student affairs, showed up to show his support. Deb Abbott was there, and Roberta Valdez, who had just become the director of the Women's Center.

Reti: How did you do outreach?



Imada: Mainly through flyering at the OPERS fall festival, flyers at bus stops. Email. I think that now, as I've begun to build up more of a PR awareness of how to do outreach on this campus, it's very difficult. Our main outreach was coming from within the queer community.

At the time I was also good friends with Qianya Martin, who was a re-entry student. She was twenty-five at the time that she was finishing up here. She re-entered. She said that when she had been at UCSC five years earlier all the activism was done by these gay Asian boys. I was shocked by that. That was very interesting.

I knew one person who helped secure the GLBT Resource Center when it was going to be taken by administration in 1997. Debbie Lee, I think.

Junior year, I started doing a lot of work with Qianya, who is a black woman. I did more workshops on racism and homophobia. Winter quarter I worked with Nidhi Chimani. She's Indian. She lived in India the first part of her life and then she came over here. She's not a citizen. She, and I, and Qianya started doing a lot of activism. Winter quarter we had secured funding through the Committee on Ethnic Programming and other sources to send queers of color to the UCGLBTA conference, specifically to diversify the conference. We wanted to empower our community. We wanted people to educate and empower themselves and bring their awareness back to UC Santa Cruz. We sent about eighteen folks to the conference. Phran, who is now back in Sacramento.

Also in that same bit, we collaborated with CLUH and put on a workshop at UCGLBTA, the UC-wide conference. It was called "Breaking the Silence," and it was about issues of racism within the queer community. The purpose was to educate white folks about issues of racism within the queer community, white privilege. It is already part of the workshops CLUH does. I spearheaded that, and it was really difficult to do, because it was so extensive. It was a two-part workshop, and involved having exercises, then lining up white folks to talk with CLUH folks about privilege and what that means, and also having people of color talk amongst ourselves, [about] issues that came up for us. At the time I was collaborating with Rahne Alexander, who is a transgender activist. I also worked with Dylan Garner, who was a CLUH and trans activist. It emotionally and physically tore a lot of people up. It was so much work having to educate people about racism, which is hard for us to do.



And the UCGLBTA at the time also was introducing intersex to the discussion. It was great for students to be able to hear that discussion. The year before at the conference there was talk about how the UCGLBTA wasn't diverse. It was at Davis and the people of color are all in southern California, and it's hard to get up there. People said, "Well, if the people of color want to add themselves why can't they just come?" That's why we decided to send people to Santa Barbara.

Qianya and I put on a RESYST workshop, which is an organization based in San Francisco, and they weren't able to come. Their workshop is based on very progressive politics about breaking down institutionalized racism, homophobia and queer hate, classism, xenophobia. Showing how it is a cycle. We tried to present it at the conference, but it basically broke down when we tried to talk about institutionalized racism and how that is a formation of white supremacy. The people at the conference were very uncomfortable. They were not really on the same page. They had other definitions of what they thought racism was, and they didn't want to see that racism is based on forms of privilege and power. It was a two-part workshop, and it was me and Qianya, two people of color, substitute leaders, trying to do this workshop. We were standing up there and seeing the workshop and dialogue crumble before our faces. The people who came back for the second part of that workshop were folks of color and three white people who got it. It was difficult, and I vowed that I was never going to do this again, unless it's with an organization where we're getting paid. It was really tough.

So that was winter quarter of junior year. After the conference we had a follow-up discussion. There was a lot of pain and emotional drain. It connected us. We had gone through this experience together. It was a wake-up call as to where we really are, where the queer community is with issues of race. People who claim to be progressive or liberal really aren't on the same page.

Junior year, spring quarter I put on a piece for the Queer Fashion Show. It's on videotape. Q-TV did it. I choreographed a color guard dance piece with people of color, some of them straight, some of them queer. It was called Census 2000 and it played off the whole notion that we have multiple identities. It was a queers of color empowerment piece. We had someone from CLUH and another person act as census bureau workers. At the beginning of the show they passed out these fake little surveys to the audience which said, "Please check only one." We told the audience, "Some of you have checked more than one box. Gay. Lesbian. Black. Asian. Latino. White. Please check only one. Some of you checked more than one box, and that's just going to mess things up for us.



We can't handle people who check more than one box." The piece was very lighthearted. It included some dialogue that was very serious. I think people got the point. Today people still say they remember that piece.

Reti: Were you taking any classes at that point that had queer content?

Imada: Junior year I was a teaching assistant for Scott Morgensen's class. At the time it was still officially, through paperwork, called *Lesbian and Gay Social Worlds*. The title now is *Transgressive Genders and Sexualities*, Community Studies 80F. I just love Scott Morgensen. He is one of my staunch supporters, as a lecturer, to dialogue about issues of queer politics and coalitional politics, and issues of race within the queer community. Heavy issues. Progressive issues. As a teaching assistant for the class I really educated myself about history, especially colonialism, and how that intersects with queer politics, and the history of people of color and queers of color communities in the United States. LGBT, same-gender loving.

In my junior and senior year I interned for the GLBT Resource Center. I did interviews with staff members and students. It's still part of the website. I took pictures.

Reti: That was a wonderful archive that I used in preparation for *Out in the Redwoods*. And you write for *City on a Hill Press* too, right?

Imada: I used to, yes. I did the campus desk my freshman year. Then I began to write a lot of articles on queer issues through the campus desk. When Proposition 22, the Knight Initiative, was happening I wrote a feature article on that.⁵⁰ I think that junior year the women's queer desk was resurrected. Qianya was, I believe, editor for it. I think the editor-in-chief said that [the fact that] I was coming in and writing articles on queer issues helped encourage the resurrection of the queer women's desk. That felt good.

I'm living in College Nine now. I am an intern at SOAR, which is Student Organization Advising Resources. I am the queer CUIP [Chancellor's Undergraduate Internship Program] intern, which means I work with the registered queer organizations here on campus, advising them, and seeing if they have any needs. I help their organization run smoothly. It's been great work. It's been interesting trying to do this internship, because

⁵⁰The Definition of Marriage Initiative, known as the Knight Initiative, was approved by a wide margin on March 7, 2000. It prevents California from recognizing same-sex marriages.



there's a lot of gray around it, which is partly because some of the queer organizations are more social and some of them are more politically active, like CLUH. Queers of Color has more of a focus. I'm still doing GLBT Network this year through my internship.

Reti: Let's go over what organizations there are. This is something nobody else has talked about—what exists now at UCSC.

Imada: What exists now is GLBT Network, which is the queer students organization umbrella. There is Stonewall, which is a queer men's group. There is Sappho, which is a queer women's group. Bi the Way, for bisexual, queer, non-labeling students, etc. These are only the official ones. There's CLUH. There's Queer Geeks, which was formed junior year for all self-identified geeks who are queer. Queers of Color, obviously. And Generation X existed last year, officially a transgendered, gender queer, and transexual group. Also for their allies. It existed last year officially. This year it's not an official organization and there are not really any meetings happening.

Reti: So to become an official organization you have to register with SOAR.

Imada: SOAR gives so much support to student organizations.

Reti: Is there money available for each of these organizations?

Imada: Yes. There are two pots. One is from the Committee on Ethnic Programming, which goes to Queers of Color and ethnic organizations. The Committee for Ethnic Programming was specifically created for the means of giving students of color organizations the means for retention and education of their communities and organizations. And then CORE council, which is student registration fees that go into this huge pot. The big five on campus are the African Black Student Alliance (ABSA); SANAI, which is the Student Alliance for North American Indians; MEChA, [Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan]; and APISA, which is the Asian Pacific Islander Student Association. Then there is GLBT Network. As large organizations, they automatically get four thousand dollars each. Then colleges have monies that they have through the student governments. Lee Maranto would be an excellent person to talk to. He's one of the founding members of CLUH, a trans activist, and he runs CORE council. He's the CUIP intern for CORE council.

Reti: What else have you been involved with this year?



Imada: Right now as the CUIP intern my focus is on student-initiated work, their needs. I get my name out there. I went to residential life trainings and publicized the fact that student organizations exist and they are doing work. Educating residential life staff about that. Putting on a couple of student retreats and showing them how to do publicity, how to get funding, how to be a student organization. I will do the same thing in the spring, with a focus on who is going to carry the organization next year. Also, I brought Keith Boykin to campus winter quarter. I had a budget of \$5000. I did that through Queers of Color, and worked with Oakes and with the African American Student Life Resource Center. Paula Powell is director there. I worked with SOAR as well.

I'm also the co-chair of the UCGLBTA, as of last spring. I helped to form and guide the formation of a student chair position within that association. It got passed at the general assembly of the last conference. That feels good. My role there had been kind of vague, like a token student. So now I can at least help to form a job description for the next person who comes in.

Last February I also did a queers of color round table discussion with Tanya.

This year is a shift for me. I've really begun to get to know the students of color community and students of color organizers. I've been dialoguing with them. I've been going to events, and also being involved in the Japanese American Students Association and meeting individuals from that community.

Reti: How has that coalitional work been for you? Do you feel accepted as a queer person within communities of color on campus?

Imada: My politics started off as a queer person, more than as a student of color. When I came in as a freshman (this is not my politics now), at the time I thought I was more oppressed as a gay man than as a Japanese American. I hadn't experienced that much oppression as a Japanese American. At the time that's how it formed my activism, which was strictly about queer issues. Then as I began to learn about queers of color, and that organization, I began to build my awareness of intersections. I learned about things like racism within the queer community and national and local organizations. And homophobia within the people of color communities, how that creates tug and pull for queers of color.



I've gotten to know a lot of the organizers, both queer, and students of color, through JASA. It's been great. A lot of women of color have been very cool as friends, and men of color as well, in other organizations. I'm getting to know people more and more. I've found my allies in both communities, CLUH folks, white queer folks, who know their shit. It's great to have that sense of community.

My senior year, my activism has shifted towards wanting to do more awareness and coalition-building within the students of color community, coming from within that community to talk and dialogue. It's interesting being the chair member of the GLBT Network, because people commonly think of GLBTN as being a white, gay thing. And they see me, and it's like—oh no, it's not. It's hard because, what happens when I step out? How is it going to be seen? At the beginning of the year when all the racist flyers got put up, apology to the black man, etc., I had spoken on behalf of GLBT Network, and raised the issue that we need to realize that hate is hate and it comes in many manifestations. I tried to raise the awareness that queer folks are here and supporting whatever color, whatever race. Then the Family Student Housing thing happened with the poster in the guy's apartment. He posted a flyer saying, "Cops will be heroes if they killed all the faggots instead of raping and killing the innocent black man." That was the end of fall quarter, during finals week. Tchad Sanger from the GLBT Campus Concerns Committee, and I threw together a rally at the last minute. I called folks like crazy, organized a march over there, created posters. What was great was that there was actually a representation of students of color at that march, which is contrary to a lot of things that happened in the past, where just white queer folks would show up. I knew students of color; I knew other students of color interns within SOAR. They came because I knew them. I knew the chair from APISA because of the Hate Bias Forum. I called her and told her about it. There was a very good representation of students of color from that group, marching over there. It was an interesting experience. I remember going over to the march with my SOAR adviser, Kemi, going over to Family Student Housing. The way the poster read it sounded like a black dude wrote it. We were saying, "Please don't let it be a person of color; please don't let it be a person of color!" Because if it was, it would have been this whole other facet thrown in there. We would have had to have had heavy education around the fact that this black dude did not represent all black people. Paula Powell went over there with the First Amendment breathing down her back, and she told this guy, "You need to take this down because this is not cool in the black community. This is not cool in the queer community. This is just not cool at all. You need to take this down."



Reti: But he was white, right?

Imada: He was white. And he took it down. He put up a second one, unfortunately. It was basically targeting a specific person who used to work at Family Student Housing child care services, calling him a “pedophile faggot,” saying that he was molesting the kids there, and accusing him of molesting the kids at a daycare center in Santa Cruz County. Pretty forthright. Whatever the case with him was, whether he was just not mentally there or not socially there, it was just wrong.

This whole time, the membership of Queers of Color really began to rise. I think that the knowledge and awareness of queers of color began to increase. Junior year we had a Queers of Color community dinner. We had queers of color invite people whom they wanted to be present, whether it was their personal friend they wanted in that space, or professors. It was at College Eight and tons of people showed up. It was really powerful.

I think that the resource center directors have always wanted to do cross-work, co-sponsorship work about multi-issues, which is great. Nancy Kim, the director of APRC, is bi. Last year they put on the first ever QAAMPI, for queer Asian Pacific Islanders. It was sponsored by the Women’s Center, APRC, the GLBTRC. I participated and it was great. I think it’s going to happen again this year.

Also, last year, the first ever queer Latino open mike was put on by MEChA. I went to a MEChA meeting. In UCSC’s mission statement for MEChA they have a statement saying, “Given the past history within our culture, sexism will not be acceptable within MEChA, and given that many of our fellow brothers and sisters are also gay and lesbian, homophobia within MEChA will not be accepted.” They have a queer caucus within MEChA here at UC Santa Cruz. They are the ones who put on the queer Latino open mike. They invited Meliza Bañales, a spoken word poet and activist here on campus. She’s done a lot of organizing. They invited Gloria Anzaldúa to read at open mike, and they opened it up to folks of all colors.

So, I would personally like to think that although I am one person, and I get scared because I am graduating this year, I am getting more comfortable because I feel like there are people who can step up now. I think that my place is to create awareness in communities, and give queers of color a name, through word of mouth or whatnot.



Last year Qianya and I were both interns for the Race Rave, which was put on by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and the Center for Justice, Tolerance and Community. It was hosted at UC Santa Cruz. It was supposed to be a Western region conference about racial justice, reparations, and healing. It was a two-day event. We did a lot of organizing for it. I did a workshop on intersections of racism and homophobia. That creates a dialogue as well. People ask, why is this needed? Well, queers of color don't have a choice. Even among the organizers there were different [ideals] of what racial justice was. The world is not going to be all healed once we end racism. Even within the Race Rave I think that... I don't want to act like the savior, but I think I'm strong enough to open up spaces and then people can go from there. Queers of color can feel empowered to speak because someone has opened up the space. One of our members during the people of color breakout session said, "I'd like to ask that queers of color be recognized right now." He did an empowerment piece. That was really great. I also spoke at the open mike beforehand. That was in front of a lot of students.

Going back to senior year, I think that Queers of Color has built awareness. There was a Hate Bias Forum put on by the Student Union Assembly's Hate Bias Committee, which I am a member of. I sit within the Student Assembly meetings as a member of the GLBT Network, which has an official vote with the other big four organizations. I feel like there's not really a cohesive movement, because I feel like I am constantly doing all the work on behalf of queers of color. But there are younger voices now who know where to take Queers of Color, and that it's more than just a social group. I think that should exist, but to realize we can collaborate with other organizations, we can do organizing within the people of color communities.

Reti: Would you like to talk about your work organizing within the city of Santa Cruz?

Imada: Yes. I would like to talk about writing for *Manifesto* newspaper. I started writing for them my sophomore year. I wrote a few columns about race and my personal identity. I wrote a column about how I was called a fucking Asian faggot outside of Warehouse on Pacific Avenue by a random group of white boys. I stopped writing last year, but it was good to write. It allowed me to write about what I wanted to write about. There were no bars holding me as far as what the content should be. And Marc Krikova was great. I love him. I made some close contacts through activism in the Santa Cruz community, Rahne Alexander, Paul Wagner.



I've now kind of cut myself off from doing activism within the Santa Cruz queer community, for a few personal reasons. Sophomore and junior year, I was beginning to do work with the Diversity Center in Santa Cruz. First, I had begun to do a lot of queers of color work, and I thought it was kind of weird that they automatically call themselves the Diversity Center without acknowledging the responsibility of taking on what that term means, and the fact that they are all white and middle class, most of them. I said, this needs awareness. So I called the Center up, got involved in forming this third Diversity Center Outreach Committee, and became the chair for that. I wrote a grant proposal for the Community Foundation of Santa Cruz County for funding. Originally, the idea was to initiate dialogue between the people of color community and the GLBT community in Santa Cruz, which is predominantly white, about issues of race. It was a half-a-year-long process that lasted through the summer of my sophomore year. I worked with Micah Lubensky, a graduate student in psychology, who is a queer person of color as well. What it came down to was a day-long training with the Diversity Center board members, half of which showed up, and some key members within the Santa Cruz community who were on different boards, organizations like Triangle Speakers and the Santa Cruz AIDS Project. The idea was to come in and talk about racism within the GLBT community and people of color issues. That was put on by the folks from Stir Fry Productions, who are the creators of *The Color of Fear* film. They came in to do a workshop. I think it was the first time most of them had ever engaged in a dialogue like this. But the whole project was very difficult. It was extremely tokenizing for myself as a youth, and as a queer of color. It was difficult, because people are on different planes. Trying to explain privilege and power and resources and saying, "No, the Diversity Center is not diverse. Your organization serves white, gay people who are middle class. It does not serve people of color who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, queer. Or from different classes, for that matter."

After that experience, I was burned out. I was physically on the edge. I was emotionally on the edge. My grades were suffering because of the activism I was doing. It was a good experience in that I realized who my true allies were. Three of them did attend the workshop with me. It was my decision to do the project, but I felt that I was tokenized into doing all the work. My awareness at the time was that I had to do it, because that's the only way change was going to happen. But I realized that I was just one person and I can't change people's mindsets. People are going to do what they want to do.

Reti: It sounds very hard.



Imada: Yes. Well, we ran a study, and at least through the pre- and post questionnaires we handed out, the results were encouraging.

Reti: It did have an impact.

Imada: Somewhat. Not entirely.

Reti: Do you go to gay bars?

Imada: I honestly have not gone to one gay bar in San Francisco. In Santa Cruz I've gone to Dakota. When I have friends who are over twenty-one to go with I'll go. A lot of my queer of color friends have left. I miss them a lot. A lot of the Queers of Color members now are young. They are under twenty-one. I'm not too much into that scene.

Reti: What has it been like for you to be a queer student within the psychology department?

Imada: For trans folks it's different. For myself, I can say, I have definitely enjoyed it. My focus is social psychology. I took some classes on social justice. I was able to write papers on gay and lesbian issues. I wrote how to fight racism in childhood development. I was able to write about what I wanted to write about. In some classes the whole gender binary was strongly enforced: male/female. And people aren't aware of trans issues as much. Even differentiation between gender and sexuality. Transgender wasn't totally expressed in the human sexuality class I took. It was within the book, but I don't think it was delved into as much as it could have been, especially in this day and age, given how much gender activism and awareness there is in Santa Cruz. And in one of the feelings and emotions classes I took, love was talked about exclusively as being between male and female. I brought up the question, "Well, aren't there any studies that look into love relationships between same-sex couples and the obstacles that they face, and what keeps a gay relationship together versus a straight relationship?" The professor brought up his two lesbian friends in Palo Alto. I was looking for actual studies. I didn't care about random lesbian friends that he knew in Palo Alto. And the first mention of queer or gay people in his class was that of relating homosexuality to AIDS, and talking about the feelings of gay men. "Today gay men appraise AIDS differently than [in] the 1980s. Gay men are not afraid of AIDS anymore so therefore they are having unsafe sex because they don't think they will get it." I'm thinking, God, this is the first mention of gay men! It was just that one professor in one psychology class. Overall, I think the psychology



department here is very aware, because the [department's] focus here is social justice. There is a lot of awareness. I feel it is very queer-friendly. I haven't felt hostility at all. The biology classes on this campus are entirely different.

For me, being at UCSC is entirely different from being in the city of Santa Cruz. I think that there are two extremely different sets of politics, for the most part. To be Asian and queer or gay in this town, even at this University, is very tough. There were times that I thought, I wish I could transfer to UC Berkeley, which has a queer Asian group called Q and A. Sometimes I am sick of having to educate people, which is why this year I have done much more activism around empowering queers of color, and educating and creating dialogues within the students of color communities so that queers of color can come out in their own communities.

Reti: So they don't end up isolated in the white, gay community.

Imada: Yes. UCGLBTIA queer and other resource directors on different campuses have all been saying that there have been reports of more hostility since September 11, and hate bias crimes against people of color, queers, and women.

There are so few of us on this campus. If you talk to retention interns, the diversity on this campus is extremely lacking. If you lump us all together, it's probably about forty percent people of color. How does that have an effect on students of color? Because if students of color are forty percent...forty percent is just the Asian population alone at UC Berkeley. It's the San Francisco Bay Area. They are around a lot more resources for GLBT people of color communities. Here in Santa Cruz, I really don't feel there is a community.

Reti: In the town or at UCSC?

Imada: In the town. The students are the ones who bring diversity to Santa Cruz. Anytime I see a person of color in Santa Cruz who looks like they are twenty-five or younger I say, oh, a University student, obviously. Queers of color are a very small percentage of that forty percent that exists here. Many of the members of Queers of Color do their own thing within the student of color communities, and their other organizations. Queers of Color is a space for them to talk, to crash. They can say, "Oh, I felt really marginalized in class," or, "This person said this really messed-up thing in



section that was very racist or homophobic.” We can be there for each other, and put on events, create community.

Phran McElroy was in the African Black Student Alliance, and did Destination Higher Education, which was ABSA’s retention program to recruit African-American students to campus. Apple Cardova, she’s Filipina. She does A Step Forward, with the Filipino Students Association. Tanya Lee does CLUH and also does Cousin, which is an Asian Pacific Islander retention program. We have one member in Los Mexicas, which is a dance folkloric group. We have a couple of members in Rainbow Theater, which is a people of color-focused theater arts troupe. One of our members is the chair of MEChA, a queer Latina. We are all over. I am in the Japanese American Students Association. It’s great that a lot of us are in all of these different organization.

My focus in the Student Union Assembly is maintaining organization space in the new Student Center. And I put on a workshop for affirmative action for residential assistants. Queers of color are active within the students of color communities, as leaders. We are there to support each other and also to be active organizations and make people aware. I find that really powerful.

My goal for next quarter is to recruit new leadership for GLBT Network, aware leadership, conscious people. I’m going to begin to recruit through Scott Morgensen’s class and other queer classes. That’s a great fostering ground for new student activists who can empower not only their own community, but also build coalitions and support other communities, other movements. I think we are all in cross-movements.

The Hate Bias Forum, which was this quarter [winter 2002], put on by the student assembly’s Hate Bias Committee was almost a pull and tug kind of thing because I was constantly having to [advocate for] queer issues. It was coming out of the students of color communities. Even when the Hate Bias Forum was created, we asked, “What is the purpose? To deal with racism.” I said, “Let’s start broadening things out.”

I understand that students of color on this campus feel the lack of diversity on this campus every day when they have classes. In my classes I am one of five people of color, and the only Asian. We feel marginalization and tokenization constantly. Even on the broad level, it’s easy to only identify by what you’re personally affected by. It shuts you out from other people’s needs sometimes. So I had to talk to people and say I can cover queer issues on this campus. At the Hate Bias Forum I talked about the hate crime that



had happened recently in Santa Barbara, where a gay man was burned to death, and talked about intersections of racism and homophobia, and some examples of queer hate. There were a lot of people of color at the Hate Bias Forum. There were very few queer white folks, only a few people from CLUH. I think that was because it was organized from a people of color focus, which is important, but I think that it's hard to do coalitional politics sometimes, unless everybody is in the same boat. But the awareness was there. When I spoke, I talked about how I am sick of white queer folks saying that "we" need to stand in solidarity with people of color because racism is hate just like homophobia. And queers of color are always sitting in the room going, "You bastards. We're here. We're queer, too. We *are* part of this community!" We are constantly having to point that out. People of color do the same thing. Many people of color leaders I see on the news say, "If you're black you need to stand up for people who are gay or lesbian, and if you are gay or lesbian and you see that a black person is being made fun of, you need to stand up." I say, okay, well I guess I'll stand up for myself! [laughter] Gay is seen as white.

At the Hate Bias Forum I was in front of a huge audience. The chancellor was there. Tim Fitzmaurice, the former mayor and city council member, was there with his wife, and some associate vice chancellors. It was in front of this huge audience and we created a lot of awareness. I said, "White queer people, if you're working for marriage rights that's great, but if you're at the chapel getting ready to get married and people of color are still in the hallway because they are getting racially profiled and they can't get in the chapel, what good is that going to do?" I said to students of color: "You are fighting against racism, and ideally when the day comes when there is no more racism in the world, which is not going to happen anytime soon, will your queer brothers and sisters be able to stand up with you?" After that five other queers of color got up and spoke, even ones I didn't know. They talked about the names they have been called on campus. It was very powerful. There's formation to get a hate bias crimes person hired on this campus to do education for staff, students in core courses, hopefully.

Now I'm a senior. I'm graduating this year. My hope is to continue the dialogue before I leave, especially within the students of color community, to do more outreach, to ensure that GLBT Network gets new, conscious leadership, people who want to do coalitional politics, whether they are white queer or queers of color. GLBT Network is a power position. It gets \$4000 every year, and that's resources. Power can be allocated; money can be allocated.



Those are some of my goals. I am not sure how people see me on this campus. I'm only here for four years. I'm a small piece of history. One time someone said, "Oh, I see you as being this really strong gay Asian student." But off to the sidelines, when I'm behind closed doors, sometimes I'm very angry, frustrated, sad, sometimes bitter. Sometimes I feel very broken. Activism is very hard, especially the activism that I'm trying to do. Feeling the tokenization left and right.

Reti: Well, you must have quite a struggle trying to be a full-time student and do all of the activism that you have been doing. It must be incredibly stressful.

Imada: It's hard. I could have gotten a 4.0 if I had just focused on academics. But what's been instilled in me is that I feel a greater sense of need and I want to sacrifice... They always say school should come first before your student organizing. A lot of student organizers say that. I do put my classes first. It's hard to balance it out. I have sacrificed some of my classes, my academics, in order to see that projects get done. Because it seems that I'm the only person doing it, and sometimes that's hard. But it's a sacrifice I want to make, and I've done relatively well despite... I have no fears of not going to grad school.

Reti: Is that your plan, to go to grad school?

Imada: Yes, in student affairs in higher education, and come back to a university. Some resource directors get their degrees in student affairs, most of them, administrators, residential life directors.

So those are my goals for myself. I want to leave here with Queers of Color having direction. It's so great that there are some members who are involved in their college, academic, or student of color communities, and that they can come to Queers of Color. It's so important for queers of color to feel like they can come out, if not to their families, at least to their peer groups at college. Within your ethnic community especially, because that's what keeps you here on campus, communities you feel close to. If you don't feel any closeness to any community, what's going to keep you here? Especially if you are a student of color or a queer student of color.

I'd like to talk about the GLBT Campus Concerns Committee. It's the Advisory committee to the chancellor on GLBT/queer issues for faculty, staff, and students. It's a political watchdog for the campus, to advise the chancellor on things like domestic



partner benefits, and things like safety, institutional issues, trans health care, and UC-systemwide issues. My involvement with them began sophomore year. I got connected to folks like Tchad Sanger and Laura Engelken, Antoinette González, and Joe Sampson on activism and campus issues. This year especially there has been a lack of interest in the GLBT Campus Concerns Committee. There are only four members. Queerness is really decentralized on this campus, which is great because it should exist everywhere. But because it is so decentralized, because, thank God, UC Santa Cruz is so queer-friendly in a lot of ways, or progressive, then people become comfortable and maybe don't feel necessarily a need to involve themselves in activism. It's like, what is there to fight for? Also the colleges do their own queer programming. Right now the membership is really low.

One thing that I really enjoyed this year on the GLBT Concerns Committee is that we've done these media blitzes or flyer campaigns, one of which was called "The Principles of Community Do Not Apply to Me." You can find it on the GLBT Center's website. That had to do with the fact that, institutionally, queer folks don't have the same rights as other people. Equity does not equal equality. Another one was, "These boxes don't apply to me." One was male and the other was female. It was a gender intersex piece that we did. And there is another one coming up that I am organizing with Scott Morgensen, who will be leaving at the end of this year for a job in the Midwest. I am so sad he is leaving. He is so great. What we are putting together is about racial issues: how is being gay seen as being white, and how does that make queers of color invisible? And doing a Q&A with queers of color from each campus, and put on a website to create awareness. Which goes great in conjunction with Queer Awareness Week and also these queer classes offered in spring.

Reti: Are there more queer classes in the spring?

Imada: Oh there are great ones. There is one through American studies on sexuality, specifically looking at intersections of gender and sexuality and ethnic identity, American Studies 147. And then Scott Morgensen's Community Studies 80F. And I think there's one on queer film.

I've found the current members of the GLBT Campus Concerns Committee to be extremely progressive. We went to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force together for the past two years. Bringing back politics to this campus, it's excellent.