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Queer Asian American Women's Search For Identity, Belonging, and Community

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Abstract

Queer Asian American (QASAM) women often have difficulty finding spaces that are accepting of their intersecting identities as both queer women and as Asian Americans. Because mainstream queer spaces are not inclusive for people of color and women, and many ethnic spaces are not accepting of queer identities, QASAM women often do not feel a sense of belonging in the community and social spaces that already exist. Through survey methods of 50 participants and in-depth interviews from 8 of those survey participants, this study investigates QASAM women's perceptions of identity, relationships with their families, experiences in their ethnic communities, and experiences in gender/sexuality communities to help understand the strategies QASAM women deploy to build hybrid spaces and communities for themselves. This study provides insight into QASAM women's community building by analyzing the ways in which they transition between ethnic communities and queer communities, how they create what I call "third spaces" that are representative of both their ethnic and queer identity, and utilize the internet and their social circles to find community groups and organizations in their areas that provide feelings of belonging.

Keywords: Queer Asian American women, sexuality, identity, coming out, community, queer worldbuilding, heteronormative ethnic space, white-normative queer space

By my junior year of high school, I met this girl on my cross-country team. I always said she was my best friend... We kissed each other before we went on a race. I was like, 'it's good luck,' because of course you can't be gay. We would hold hands and fall asleep on the bus listening to the same song together out of one iPod... And as far as romantic and sexual relationships went, I felt like that was much, much more intimate, emotionally, physically, more than any boy I was technically dating at the time. -Katelyn, 26

Introduction

As a Queer Asian American (QASAM) woman about to graduate college and enter back into a world where a sense of community may not be so readily available, I wanted to know how older generations of QASAM women find community and confidently feel a sense of self in a country where existing communities do not make room or acknowledge intersecting identities. Katelyn, a Chinese woman living in the United States and one of the women I interviewed, spent much of our interview discussing self-discovery and her journey finding her identity. Like many of the women I surveyed and interviewed, Katelyn began to grapple with her sexuality and identity in her late teens, but continues to navigate this space today in her mid twenties. We talked about everything, from subtle signs during our childhoods that we didn't understand until later, to explicitly queer encounters with other women who were also trying to understand themselves. I noticed patterns in my interviews that resonated with my own experiences, such as having a hard time understanding close relationships with other girls, competitive urges to be closer to some friends in comparison to others. We also talked about how these experiences, often assumed to be universally American, are actually different from mainstream white queer experiences, specifically, how race and gender change what it means to be a queer person in the U.S. We discussed how these interactions as young women affected how we interact with the communities around us today, how being women, queer, and Asian American opens certain doors and closes many others.

From my research, as well as my own experiences, I have found that QASAM women must navigate finding a sense of self among multiple communities, including ethnic spaces that exclude queer identities and queer spaces that exclude people of color and women. Grounded in an intersectional lens, my project investigates how QASAM women navigate their gender, racial, and sexual identities to create complex communities. Specifically, I ask:

- What experiences do QASAM women have coming out?
- How do QASAM women navigate heteronormative ethnic spaces and white-normative queer spaces?
- How do they create QASAM "third spaces," spaces that are inclusive of both their ethnic and their queer communities?

Ultimately, QASAM women have unique understanding of the communities they belong to and can provide insight to worldbuilding techniques that create a positive and inclusive environment to other queer Asian Americans.

Experiences of coming out greatly impact many QASAM women's feelings and our identities. Whether we feel safe enough to come out, or even want to come out at all, depends on how accepted we feel in our communities. Coming out is an ongoing process that constantly creates conflicting and circulating feelings of relief, alienation, frustration, joy, sadness, etc. The responses to coming out, whether it be from family, friends, coworkers, acquaintances, affects the ways in which many of us build our communities and which parts of our identities we prioritize. Furthermore, many QASAM women navigate both heteronormative spaces and white-normative queer spaces, creating a push and pull of identifications and disidentifications in mainstream spaces that may prevent them from fully feeling like they belong in a certain ethnic or queer space. In other words, as women who deal with multiple identities, we may often feel like there is not one single space in which we wholly belong. We must

therefore utilize different strategies in order to overcome the barriers and limitations of existing in community spaces that do not provide space for us to exist in the first place. One of the methods QASAM women use to find a community in which we feel a sense of belonging include using the internet to find political organizations, social groups, ethnic community groups, and queer community centers. Other methods included expanding on already existing friend networks, moving to different cities or states that have greater access to other queer people of color, and relying on chosen families. Finally, my study looks at QASAM women worldmaking of spaces that are inclusive of all intersections of our identities. These “third spaces” are not only representative of QASAM women’s queer and ethnic identities, but provide the space for these women to feel a strong sense of belonging and community.

My research suggests that QASAM women often feel like they must either choose between their ethnic community or their queer community, consequently isolating parts of their identity that don’t feel included and represented in both communities. QASAM women may not feel a sense of belonging in the spaces that are available to them. However, my research also acknowledges that QASAM women have unique ways of worldmaking that provide circles of support that are different from already existing ethnic and queer communities and thus can find other ways to feel a sense of belonging and community. Many QASAM women work to cultivate their own “third spaces,” communities that are representative of both their queer and ethnic identity and create a unique space that combines friendship, found family dynamics, political organizing, and the internet.

Backgrounds

Asian American scholars have long discussed how Asian American women are racialized and gendered as both “model minority,” and hyperheterosexual (Takagi & Espiritu, 1993; Huynh, 2022). Wu (2003) notes that Asian American racial formations are shaped by patriarchal and heteronormative structures; migration, war, imperialism, and white supremacy have produced and heightened homophobia and transphobia in Asian American communities. As a result, Asian American women are perceived, by both dominant American culture and their ethnic specific cultures, as not only as the submissive other, but primarily heterosexual. Additionally, while queer studies have talked about creating community, people of color and women were not always involved and included in mainstream queer spaces. Application of feminist theory within queer ideology sought to include women in queer spaces that were primarily available to men while queer scholars of color used their cultural knowledge and experiences as people of color to redefine what it meant to be queer in the US. Eguchi and Asante (2015) note that current queer theory fails to address culturally specific knowledge and experiences from non-white LGBTQ+ people and that it does not understand the significance of “relationships, communal ties, and collective resistance for LGBTQ+ people of color.” This exclusion from both queer theory and queer community may lead QASAM women to experience alienation, ostracism, and disapproval from their families and communities. Therefore, they may be “alienated from both the Asian American community as well as the... LGBTQ community” (Cheng, 2020). Thus, in the lives of QASAM women, there is tension within both ethnic and queer communities and strained feelings of belonging.

Munoz’s (1999) Disidentifications can be used to help explain the ways in which queer Asian American women either feel included or excluded from the communities that they are part of, whether they be ethnic spaces or queer spaces. Disidentifying from a normative space can be seen as a way to

work “on, with, and against a cultural form,” thus giving QASAM women the agency to stray from cultural norms both within Asian ethnic communities and the mainstream queer community (Munoz, 1999). Because QASAM women are racialized to be hyperfeminine and heterosexual, they often find themselves disidentifying with dominant narratives of what it means to be queer and what it means to be a woman. Thus, worldmaking, the ways in which queer people create spaces and communities outside of dominant social structures, allows for QASAM women to imagine new spaces that are welcoming and inclusive to women of color. Queer worldmaking “has required the development of kind of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to the domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation,” and must form outside of heteronormative social structures (Berland & Warner, 1998). Munoz (1999) also notes that queer worldmaking “delineates the ways in which performances—theatrical and everyday rituals—have the ability to establish alternative views of the world,” thus allowing for QASAM women to use their culturally specific knowledge and ethnic identities to address their marginalization within the queer community.

Methods

Survey: I distributed an anonymous survey through social media and direct email to 35 organizations across the United States, resulting in 50 survey responses. Organizations consisted of LGBTQ+, Asian American, and Asian American LGBTQ+ political and social groups in California, New York, Texas, Georgia, New Jersey, Washington, and Pennsylvania, among others. The survey included demographic questions such as age, ethnicity, and gender and sexual identity, as well as open-ended and multiple choice questions about identity, family, ethnic community, and queer community. The end of the survey offered respondents an opportunity to participate in a follow-up interview. Survey results were recorded, analyzed, and coded using Qualtrics and STATA.

Interview: From the survey participants, eight participants were selected for interviewing to represent a diverse range of ages, ethnicities, geographical locations, etc. The interviews were semi-structured with a few standardized questions. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using NVivo.

Demographics of Survey Participants:

Ethnic Identities of Participants

Ethnic Identity	#
Chinese	16
Indian	9
Filipino	7
Vietnamese	5
Taiwanese	4
Japanese	3
Korean	2
Burmese	1
Multiracial Chinese* (Indonesian, Japanese, Vietnamese)	3
Total	50

Sexual Identities of Participants

Sexual Identity	#
Queer	21
Pansexual	10
Bisexual	9
Lesbian	4
Women-Loving-Women (WLW)	3
Questioning	1
Asexual	1
Omnisexual	1
Total	50

Fig. 1: Shows the 9 different ethnicities participants identified as in the survey.

Fig. 2: Shows the 8 different sexualities participants identified as in the survey.

This study looks at survey responses from 50 participants. All participants were within the ages of 25 and 64, and were split up into two groups based on what generation they were in, millennials and generation X, respectively. Respondents identified with 11 different ethnicities and 8 different sexualities. In total, 9 Asian ethnicities were recorded, including Chinese, Indian, Filipino, Vietnamese, Taiwanese, Japanese, Korean, Burmese, and Multiracial Chinese. Additionally, participants self-identified with 8 different sexual identities, including queer, pansexual, bisexual, lesbian, women-loving-women (WLW), questioning, asexual, and omnisexual.

Results and Discussion

Identity and Coming Out: My survey data suggests that QASAM women on average come out at a later age of 22 than the national average of approximately 19 (McCarthy & Yi, 2024). My research suggests that this later initial coming out age may occur in QASAM women due to their sense of responsibility to maintain familial and heteronormative relationships within their ethnic communities. A majority of survey respondents indicated that they felt unsure if their families were accepting of their queer identities, with only 14 respondents or 28% replying a definite “yes”, and 27 respondents or 54% replying either “maybe” or “unsure,” and 9 respondents 18% replying “no.” While there may not be direct hostility within some QASAM women’s families about their queer identities, many survey respondents indicated that they chose to withhold their sexual and gender identities due to the uncertainty that they would be fully accepted. For example, Julia, age 28, discusses why she does not want to come out to her parents:

I'm specifically reluctant to come out to my parents at all because of homophobic things they've said before. I know I would not be accepted if I shared these identities and rather than put our relationship at risk or make it more contentious, I'm personally okay with just not telling them about this part of myself.

In our interview, Julia explained that because of the homophobic views her parents had, she did not want to come out and risk not having that relationship with them anymore. This was notable because even though she knew her parents would not accept her sexuality, and therefore all parts of her identity, she still wanted to maintain her relationship with them. This sentiment was shared among many of my interviewees as well as in the survey, as 24 respondents indicated that they were either not out at all or not explicitly out to their families because they wanted to maintain those relationships without tensions. Jenny, 41, indicated that subsequent choices she made about her coming out to family: “I came out to other people first. [My brother] was probably the last person because he's like the person I respect the most and I actually care what he thinks about me.” Like Julia, Jenny wanted to maintain her relationship with members of her family, thus delaying her coming out to him in order to make sure that he would still respect her and want to have a relationship with her. Interestingly, while Julia chose not to come out to her family at all, Jenny continued to come out to other people before eventually coming out to her brother. Participants indicate that the stakes of coming out to family are high and they are not willing to

sacrifice contact with their families, preferring to delay relaying information about their gender and sexual identities with family members until they are more certain of the potential gains or losses.

Navigating Ethnic and Queer Spaces: Participants indicated that besides family members, they are connected to many different groups such as friends, neighbors, coworkers, social media, and ethnic organizations within their queer communities and ethnic communities. Because participants reported few spaces they felt like they belonged to for all parts of their identity, my study suggests that QASAM women may participate in multiple different communities in order to get the needs of their different identities met. Figure 3 below shows which groups constitute participants' ethnic communities and queer communities; not all groups were part of both communities. For example, many respondents did not include their families or family friends in their queer communities while an overwhelming majority included their families in their ethnic communities. This suggests that, generally, QASAM women do not include their families in their queer communities for several reasons, including, fear of coming out, homophobia, and/or not having any openly queer family members. Many survey respondents noted that they relied more on their friends than their families when it came to their queer identity.

Most participants articulated that they were actively engaged in queer communities, however their feelings of belonging and whether they felt like their communities reflected their ethnic identities differed depending on what kind of space they were in. Many of these community spaces included political organizations, community centers, and social groups. When asked a series of likert scale questions about feelings of belonging within one's ethnic communities, survey respondents had an average of 2.58 out of 4, where 1 represents not feeling included at all and 4 indicates feeling completely included. Feelings of belonging within one's queer communities had an average of 2.80 out of 4. Thus, respondents tended to acknowledge that they felt like they belonged slightly more in their queer communities in comparison to their ethnic communities, but both are still generally in the middle. A two-sided T-test was conducted to determine whether there was a difference between feelings of

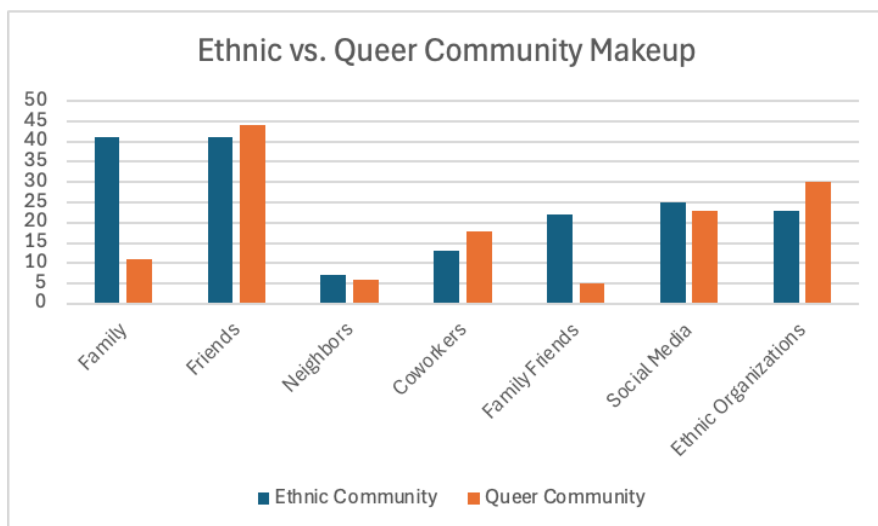


Fig. 3: Shows who participants included in their ethnic and queer communities.

belonging in ethnic communities versus queer communities, which resulted in a p-value of 0.081. While there was no statistical significance in the difference between these two communities, the averages of 2.58 and 2.80, being between “somewhat” and “mostly” for both groups, indicates that QASAM women do not feel like they completely belong in either their ethnic communities or their queer communities.

Feelings of belonging can affect how much QASAM women identify or disidentify with the communities they are involved in. Eguchi and Long (2019) note that “performing gender differently can be subversive or disidentifying for minoritarian subjects,” thus preventing QASAM women from feeling comfortable in their ethnic and queer spaces when they act, dress, and date outside of racialized heteronormativity. Emily, one of my interviewees who works at an LGBTQ+ clinic at a university in California, talked about how many Asian Americans at her university tend to disidentify with mainstream white spaces:

Even at [my university] where there's a large Asian population I feel like most Asian people here don't loudly claim a queer community or don't engage as actively with queer community...The queer community that I have worked with tends to be more white and there are times where I look around the Zoom room and I'm the only Asian here or I'm the only queer Asian woman here. I think in terms of representation there is definitely queer community here. But in terms of intersectional community that is a little bit harder to find.

My conversation with Emily brought up interesting points of inclusion and exclusion within different community spaces and how it can feel isolating to be in queer spaces that are not reflective of one's ethnic identity. Emily was proud to be part of the LGBTQ+ center at her university, but at the same time she wished that there were more queer Asian American folks within that queer space - hence while she felt that she belonged within these queer spaces, she also felt that she did not. Munoz (1999) argues that “the negotiations between desire, identification, and ideology are a part of important work of disidentification,” emphasizing that queer people of color can simultaneously identify and disidentify with the same space as a way to grapple with feelings of belonging. Chris, 42, who was part of many political organizations in the Bay Area of California, acknowledged that feeling so isolated from other Asian American people can feel taxing: “It is a lot of work. I'm in a space and I don't see anybody else that's like me there. I was like, all right, someone's got to be there for my group to make sure we're represented.” Wanting other queer Asian Americans to feel included was Chris' way of disidentifying with the community space available to them already and making it known that QASAMs should exist in political and community spaces.

Third Spaces: Queer Worldmaking: While many participants desired spaces that were queer *and* Asian American simultaneously, they also reported that few felt as if they had access to these spaces and felt that creating these spaces was important to them. 43 participants noted that their ethnic communities were either not at all or somewhat successful in getting the needs of its queer members met. Additionally, 32 participants noted that their queer communities were either not at all or somewhat successful in getting the needs of its Asian American members met. Consequently, many QASAM women in my study felt that even if they had multiple communities, they were unable to feel a sense of belonging or importance for the entirety of their identity. Finding and creating third spaces through community organizing and social gatherings allowed for QASAM women to involve themselves in community space that gives them a sense of belonging for all of their identities. Otis and Dunn (2021) discuss how queer worldmaking “disrupts heteronormativity” as well as provides context outside of

white queerness and American queer cultures. Queer worldmaking is therefore an important tool in which QASAM women are able to build their own “third spaces” that are representative of all parts of their identities. For example, political organizing is one way QASAM women are able to worldbuild and imagine a future beyond the social and political structures we live under. Jenny, 41, talked about how many of the communities she joined or created in her current town ended up being political in some ways even though that was not the original intention of some of these groups:

You can't help but be in a political space. I'm one of the organizers a Feminist Bird Club and I organize with the people who are very much queer and in the community and they have their day jobs too. Our mission is to have a safe space for folks to be outdoors but we also have these events to fundraise for various local organizations and things that we're passionate about. We've been fundraising for Palestine and a local black trans housing coalition.

It was interesting to discuss how organizations that might not even be political ultimately end up being very involved in the community and have high levels of civic engagement when it is made up of marginalized groups of people. QASAM women may choose to identify with certain parts of their identity such as sexuality and use their knowledge to participate in things they are passionate about, which can make them feel more included in their community. These feelings of belonging can be important for individual wellbeing and a sense of identity, but they can also be linked to an individual's involvement in civic engagement (Harris, Battle, Pastrana, & Daniels, 2015; Flores, Mansergh, Marks, Guzman, & Colfax, 2009; Heath & Mulligan, 2008). Disidentifications, as discussed earlier, of QASAM women can affect what types of communities they involve themselves in and form, and often lead to political and civic engagement as a “coping mechanism for those facing multiple levels of minority-based stress” (Harris et al., 2015; Balsam, K. F., Molina, Y., Beadnell, B., Simoni, J., & Walters, K., 2011; Poynter & Washington, 2005). However, QASAM women's involvement in civic issues leads to both ostracization and empowerment, which provides a “space to rethink the relationships between the constraining politics of heterosexism, racism, sexism and classism by crafting alternative meanings of what it means to be queer *and* a woman of color” (Alimahomed, 2010). This disidentification with mainstream queer communities “produces alternative knowledge formations and representations of resistance” among queer women of color. (Alimahomed, 2010). Thus, QASAM women who involve themselves in community and civic efforts often find themselves worldmaking and creating third spaces that are representative of not only QASAM women but other women of color as well due to the fact that other minority groups may be affected by the same marginalization. By fighting for the rights of marginalized communities, QASAM women make spaces that uplift and include other queer women of color.

In my interview with Jessica, 32, we talked about how queer worldbuilding also exists in creating new spaces that are specific to QASAM women's needs: “I had this impression that there weren't a lot of Asian American LGBTQ folks... That was definitely a driving force for me to seek out [the organization I'm part of] and other people who shared my sexual orientation.” Jessica chose to join an organization in her city that was meant to be a space specifically LGBTQ+ Asian Americans that cultivated community through social gatherings, special events such as potluck dinners and AAPI dance parties, and fundraising events for QASAM women's issues. Jessica chose to involve herself in this organization because it focused on issues that are specific to the QASAM experience. Similarly to Jessica's experiences, the organization Jenny joined also focused on political issues even though the main focus of the organization was to create social spaces for QASAM women. In these third spaces, those who are involved understand

and acknowledge the social issues that affect them, regardless of whether that space is meant to be political or not. By advocating for themselves and other marginalized communities, QASAM women ensure that the worlds they build can continue.

Conclusion

My study offers important insight to the experiences of QASAM women and how they navigate their identities, coming out, and feelings of exclusion within their ethnic and queer communities. The women in my study often described a delayed or partial coming out to not only themselves but to their families and members of their ethnic communities due to a fear of rejection and homophobia. Additionally, involvement in queer spaces and communities was complicated by invisibility due to racism and the dominance of mainstream white queer culture. Thus, QASAM women in my study felt that they had to compartmentalize their identities depending on what kind of space they were in.

However, my research emphasizes the ways in which QASAM women worldbuild and create their own spaces to resist erasure from mainstream spaces. Through friendship networks, social media, political organizing, and community-based groups, participants created what I call “third spaces,” which are communities that allow QASAM women to exist and feel a sense of belonging for all parts of their identities. These spaces were meant specifically for those who identified as queer, as Asian American, and as women, and allow them to focus on social and political projects that are important to them. Recognizing and giving power to these third spaces allows us as scholars, students, activists, and community members to worldbuild beyond what has already been provided for us. QASAM women have the ability to fill the gaps mainstream queer communities and Asian American ethnic communities cannot, and provide context for new ways to look at community building.

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