The State of Asian America

Activism and Resistance in the 1990s

Edited by
Karin Aguilar-San Juan

Foreword by David Henry Hwang

Afterword by M. Annette Jaimes

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THE HEAT IS ON *MISS SAIGON* COALITION

Organizing Across Race and Sexuality

YOKO YOSHIKAWA

The heat is on in Saigon
The girls are hotter 'n hell
One of these slits here
Will be Miss Saigon
God, the tension is high
Not to mention the smell
—opening lyrics to *Miss Saigon*[1]

Demonstration #1, April 6, 1991

Someone up there was rooting for us. It was perfect weather for a demo—cool, caressing, fresh—as good as spring evenings get in New York City. Moving toward the theater, we were a huge, motley mass of 500 or so, waving signs, chanting—loud, formidable, tough. This was *the* place to be seen and to see if you were a lesbian or gay man of color politically active in the local gay and lesbian community, a white gay man or lesbian committed to fighting racism and sexism, or a leftist Asian or Pacific Islander

anywhere along the sexual continuum. We, the organizers, were ecstatic. Not until that moment did we know how much support we would gather in our protest of the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund's *Miss Saigon* benefit.

Months before, members of the Asian Lesbians of the East Coast (ALOEC) and of Gay Asian and Pacific Islander Men of New York (GAPIMNY) had learned that two major lesbian and gay community institutions were planning to use *Miss Saigon,* Cameron Mackintosh's Broadway musical, as their annual fundraiser extravaganzas. One of them was the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund (LLDEF), a national law organization that champions lesbian and gay rights. The other was New York City's Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center. We felt outraged at these plans, as we saw *Miss Saigon* as the latest in a long line of Western misrepresentations of Asians, perpetuating a damaging fantasy of submissive "Orientals," self-erasing women, and asexual, contemptible men. As Asians and Pacific Islanders who experience the racism and sexism showcased in *Miss Saigon,* we called upon Lambda to drop the fundraiser. Lambda, however, citing its fiscal bottom line, refused to do so. Undaunted, we formed a coalition and organized two demonstrations, the first on April 6, 1991 against the Lambda fundraiser, and the second on April 11, the opening night of the show.

On April 6, a block or so before the theater, we were stopped by police, intent on keeping us where we could not fully see or be seen by the theater-goers. The rumor was that Tom Stoddard, LLDEF's then-executive director, had warned the police that he expected a large demonstration—and possibly violence. While we moved, amoeba-like, across the street to face the theater, the cops closed in. They hauled away six men, two of whom were monitors and active coalition organizers.[2]

The arrests infuriated us. We considered them an excessive exercise in intimidation. In effect, Stoddard drew a line between "law and order"—Lambda's well-dressed, overwhelmingly white, mainly male donors—and us, mostly yellow and brown-skinned, kept at bay by the cops.

Just minutes before 8 p.m., two donors gave their $100 tickets to us. A quick huddle, and Milyoung Cho (also a contributor to this book) and I decided to use the tickets for an impromptu act of civil disobedience. We took off into the enemy zone. Whispering in a deserted bathroom, we hastily planned our action.

The opening number was dazzling—and loud. The musical opens in a brothel in Saigon, where prostitutes vie for the title, *Miss Saigon.* U.S. soldiers buy raffle tickets; Miss Saigon will be the prize. But I was not following the songs—this lusty dance of glistening legs and dark breasts, of ogling eyes and lathered lips in uniform mesmerized me. It pulled me in, as soft porn will. But I also felt sickened and alienated. The show was designed to seduce, flooding the senses with a 3-D fantasy—specifically targeted at a heterosexual western man's pleasure center.

Rumor had it that Jonathan Pryce, a Caucasian British man and leading actor, was close to a nervous breakdown, unnerved by all the controversy and criticism of his role as a Vietnamese pimp. We sat and nervously waited specifically for him. As Pryce entered the set and launched into song, we blasted into ours—deliberate discord, whistling, yelling at the top of our lungs: "This play is racist and sexist, Lambda is racist and sexist!"

Kicked out and back on our side of the street, Milyoung addressed the crowd via bullhorn, saying that what we did in there was only possible because of everyone out here—our demonstration moved two donors to rethink their support of Lambda. With their tickets we brought the coalition's rage from the streets into the theater. It was as though Milyoung and I had acted as the claws of a large, potent animal, infiltrating the theater's inner sanctum and ripping away all illusions of innocence. The roar that swept over us as we, unscathed and exultant, emerged from the theater, was a roar of sheer power, concentrated and raw.

Setting the Stage, December 1990

Aluminum pans were half-filled with pad thai, kim chee, chirashi-zushi, egg rolls. When I walked in to my first coalition meeting, about two dozen people were on the futon couch and all

over the floor, eating, talking, digesting. I felt shy, and intimidated. Most of the women were members of Asian Lesbians of the East Coast (ALOEC), the men from Gay Asian and Pacific Islander Men of New York (GAPIMNY). The men were mostly young, good-looking, and physically entangled—arms flung around shoulders, legs entwined, one man leaning back into another's embrace, and someone's hands playing idly in another's long hair. This easy physical intimacy between Asian and Pacific Islander men moved me: I had seen men on the streets of Shanghai leaning into each other, close, but never here, in this country.

By then, *Miss Saigon* was already notorious for casting Pryce in a role that called for an Asian or Eurasian actor. In London, Pryce had been acting in yellow-face, with prosthetically altered eyelids and tinted make-up. In the summer of 1990, as advance sales for the show's Broadway run were racking up millions of dollars, Actors' Equity, the U.S. actors' union, called for the "engineer" to be recast with an Asian American when the show moved to New York. The media labelled the union's demand "artistic censorship," and rallied to support Mackintosh, the producer. When Mackintosh threatened to keep *Miss Saigon* off Broadway entirely, Actors' Equity backed down, unwilling to endanger the profits and jobs *Miss Saigon* would offer.

Our discussion after that first meeting centered on the show's theme and lyrics. Our faces were somber as Gene Nakajima summarized the plot and quoted some of the words used to describe Asians: "greasy Chinks" and "slits." *Miss Saigon* is the opera *Madame Butterfly* created by Giacomo Puccini in 1904, updated and reworked for post-Vietnam War popular consumption. In *Madame Butterfly,* a U.S. naval officer settles in Nagasaki, Japan, with a lovely courtesan known as Madame Butterfly (Chocho-san). Promising to return soon, he sets sail, and she scans the harbor daily, rejecting all other suitors while she waits. Years go by. One day his ship sails in, and he disembarks with his new, white wife on his arm. Madame Butterfly cannot bear the sight, and kills herself.

In a memo submitted in late February 1991, Angelo Ragaza, then a former temporary worker at Lambda, urged his co-workers

to examine the "orientalist" significance of both the opera and the musical:

> Westerners, bent on expanding their empires until there remained no territory left to expand into, were particularly interested in complex, centrally controlled Asian societies. These societies tended to be more tricky to infiltrate, politically and commercially. Among them, Japan was, and remains, perhaps the most notorious....
>
> Butterfly is a woman who can only exist for a man, not for or by herself. She symbolizes a Japan who cannot join the modern world without America's "help," and an "East" which has no identity without the benediction of the West. Everything about Butterfly's demise sublimates Western frustration about Eastern impenetrability. From her defloration by an American military official to her ritual suicide with a dagger, Butterfly's tragic death reasserts the primacy of Western virility and, in the mind of the spectator, erases the challenges to that virility posed by the East. Put another way, "Madame Butterfly" is constructed on wishful thinking.[3]

Miss Saigon portrays the doomed romance of a U.S. soldier, Chris, and a Vietnamese prostitute, Kim. In Saigon, Chris meets Kim at a brothel. They spend one night together and fall in love. The next day, U.S. forces abruptly pull out of Vietnam and Chris is forced to leave without her. He returns three years later with his white, U.S. wife, Ellen, to look for Kim and the son Chris conceived with her. Kim, meanwhile, ever faithful to Chris, was forced to flee Vietnam after killing a loathsome government official who was pressing her to marry him. Kim finally is reunited with Chris in Bangkok, only to die in his arms, having killed herself so that Chris and Ellen will raise her son in the United States.

Virtually the entire twentieth century—and its myriad assaults on the cult of white male supremacy—separates *Madame Butterfly* from *Miss Saigon.* During that period, East Asian nations have forced Western nations to contend with them as military and economic peers: with North Korea and North Vietnam (and the

dreaded shadow of Communist China) as Cold War enemies, and with Japan, former Axis aggressor, recently refashioned as a global financial heavyweight. In this post-colonial era, the West is no longer unquestionably supreme. These developments have led to a nostalgia for white European racial and cultural supremacy. *Miss Saigon* resurrects a myth that serves the Western empire in the late twentieth century: Abandoned by the white man, the "oriental" woman will voluntarily self-destruct.

True, *Miss Saigon* is only a night's entertainment. A few hours of froth—at $100 a pop—will not a racist make. With the proper dose of irony and detachment, a viewer could perhaps be humored by this show. But is it harmless? Hardly. "Miss Saigon" is yet another name to add to the roster of pop culture stereotypes: Suzy Wong, Charlie Chan, Fu Manchu, "Chink," and "Gook." *Miss Saigon* contributes to an entrenched system of racist and sexist images that straitjackets relationships between Asians and Westerners. This system is backdrop to increasing incidents of violence against Asians and Asian Americans across the United States, and paves the way for exploitation in massage parlors, mail-order bride businesses, and Asia-based tourist industries where women, children, and sometimes men are sold as commodities.

At stake in *Miss Saigon* is how those who control the means of representation and reproduction choose to define people of color and non-Western cultures, and to what ends. *Miss Saigon* rewrites the Vietnam War, pulling a sentimental love story from the carnage of carpet bombing, My Lai, and Agent Orange like a rabbit from a hat. Vietnam becomes just another exotic backdrop, good for a shot of nightclub sleaze and a real live helicopter lift-off. Mackintosh and company spiced the racism of "Madame Butterfly"—a white man's wet dream—with the endorphin-pumping antics of Rambo and came up with a new version of an old story of exploitation to feed into the money-making machines of Broadway. The bottom line is profit, and in a racist and patriarchal society, pliant, self-effacing geisha girls and despicable Asian pimps and traitors sell quite profitably.

While we organized against *Miss Saigon* that winter, the United States, led by President George Bush, invaded Iraq. The

rhetoric employed by Bush and company to drum up support for the war sheds light on how *Miss Saigon* falls in with a national syndrome: Simplistic beliefs about other cultures and non-Christian "natives" rationalize imperialism and aggression. Via mass media, Operation Desert Storm sold us glory and glitz, yellow ribbons and "smart" bombs, of an "all-American" winning team, out in the desert, fighting the good fight against the dark, ungodly, and upstart Saddam Hussein. Similarly, by serving up racist images of Asian servility, powerlessness, and depravity, *Miss Saigon* prepares the palate for the neo-imperialist policies advocated by former President Bush. Racist pop culture stifles the possibilities of understanding or compassion across racial or national lines.

The Coalition's Organizational Roots

Dozens of other groups no doubt discussed organizing initiatives against *Miss Saigon* in other overheated apartments all over the city that December 1990. A good number probably never saw the light of day. Our effort, however, weathered the winter, took root, and burst into bloom in spring. The Broadway production of *Miss Saigon* certainly merited public criticism and debate. It was our organizing that brought the problematic themes of the play itself to the public eye.

That first potluck heralded a new political alliance between a number of mostly young New York City Asian lesbians and gay men. Before GAPIMNY's inception, a year or so before, there had been no organization of politically active gay men to match and work with ALOEC. The GAPIMNY-plus-ALOEC combination had vigor: We knew we were pushing open a new and unique space, making community for those who have been marginalized as queers in a straight world, and Asians in a white one. As we came together across gender, we developed an openness toward difference and a flexible negotiating style that served us in good stead as we built our coalition.

A key factor was that we had enough lead time (from December to February) to develop cohesion and strength as a core group.

By no means was that easy. After the first couple meetings, Mini Liu, Milyoung, and I would rush through the cold streets of Chinatown, heading for the subway back to Brooklyn, and kvetch about "those men": how fractious and immature "they" were, how "they" did not know how to conduct themselves in a meeting.

As time went by, relations improved. Our meetings became more efficient, although they were always long and frequent. We began to work as a team, and to take on organizational roles. James Lee, for example, was archivist and point-person for all flyers, press releases, and our expanding database. I facilitated meetings. Those among us with long histories as activists in the New York Asian American community provided much needed level-headedness and pragmatic knowledge. A number of the "younger" members had been influenced by queer activism generated in response to the AIDS epidemic. There was an in-your-face, no-shit style to our confrontations and organizing that has always been a characteristic of ACT UP.

Right up until early March, we focused on convincing Lambda and the Community Services Center to cancel their use of *Miss Saigon* as a fundraiser, not on protesting the play itself. We called on the gay and lesbian community to deal with its institutional racism, and those who responded were men and women, mostly of color, committed to creating a community in which all lesbians and gay men, regardless of color, could find safe haven. They gave our struggle breadth and force. The core group pulled on various threads of friendships and working relationships in the community, and our coalition grew strong at the center of those tangled skeins.

From our base in the lesbian and gay community, we gathered the force and momentum to make our issue visible. We did not go beyond that community until late February, when we decided to take on *Miss Saigon*'s official opening. Only after we were sure that we wanted to make our position on *Miss Saigon* known to the general public, did we actively reach out to Asian and Pacific Islander communities in New York.

I flung myself into this undertaking. It fed a deep hunger in me for community and challenge. All of us in the core group had to

deal with the question of how, and in what, do we ground ourselves as the coalition and its goals grew. We learned that we could depend on each other, and find our strength there. We recognized in one another a stubborn, outlaw cunning and resilience, knotted ourselves a rope of sometimes grudging but usually wry affection, and tied ourselves in. It was when my grip on that rope loosened that I most likely found myself drowning.

Confronting Lambda, February 19, 1991

As Lambda's fundraiser was scheduled for April, and the Center's was not until October, our first goal was to persuade Lambda to cancel its benefit. In December, we wrote a letter to Lambda in which we set forth our concerns about *Miss Saigon,* and called upon it to discontinue the fundraiser. The organization responded with a civil but unequivocal no. We arranged a meeting to discuss the issue further.

On February 19, seven people from Lambda's board, staff, and management met with about a dozen of us, at a long table. Encircling us, along the walls, sat people that we had invited to attend: friends, lovers, and allies from lesbian and gay men of color organizations, and progressive Asian groups.

We stated our position in an opening statement:

> What does it mean for Lambda, a civil rights organization that claims to represent *all* Gay men and Lesbian women, to meet its annual budget with images of us as prostitutes and pimps, "greasy Chinks" and "slits"?...
>
> We call upon you to recognize that Lambda's use of a racist and sexist play is blatantly hypocritical and unprincipled. The monies you raise from *Miss Saigon* will disappear by the end of your fiscal year, but we contend every day with the exploitative and dehumanizing stereotypes and violence perpetuated by *Miss Saigon.*
>
> We call upon Lambda to recognize its responsibility as an organization of cutting-edge civil rights litiga-

tion, to put itself on the line for anti-sexist, anti-racist activism, in solidarity with all of us committed to social change.[4]

The meeting was contentious. Tom Stoddard, Lambda's executive director, explained that it was difficult to pull out as Lambda had already invested in the fundraiser, and it was counting on the proceeds, which would be 10 percent of its annual budget. We countered that *Miss Saigon* could ultimately cost Lambda far more in terms of its standing in the gay community. One (white male) board member, volunteered his opinion that *Miss Saigon* is not racist—a (white) friend saw it in London and said so. Carol Buell, another board member, began a sentence with: "Well, when *Miss Saigon* is dead and buried..." and Milyoung interrupted, "Men yell "Suzy Wong" at me in the streets now and that came out 20 years ago!" Ron Johnson, an African American board member, spoke soothingly, sympathetically, of "your pain," and proposed awareness-raising forums on racism for Lambda's donors, to be offered in conjunction with the fundraiser. Tsuhyang Chen, a member of our group, shouted the words "Faggot!" "Dyke!" and asked, in the shocked silence, how would they feel if people were paying money to hear those words used to describe gay men and lesbians. Why, then, is it so hard for you to understand our position vis-à-vis a play in which Asians are called "greasy Chinks" and "slits"?

The meeting was the galvanizing kick we needed to move our campaign up to the next level. Lambda refused to cancel, and we began planning our demonstration for its fundraiser. Those members of the community who participated in that first meeting with Lambda became the first and most stalwart members of our multiracial coalition. Coming face-to-face with Lambda's resistance and creating a forum for our anger pulled the core group of Asian and Pacific Islander lesbians and gay men together as nothing had before.

It was as though all the reasons anyone ever participates in political organizing were made evident during that meeting. We formed a group that we could trust, solidly knit in our understanding of the issues and goals, but loose and diverse enough to allow

a range in tactics (some people on our side of the table were more confrontational than others). I felt that I could step out, and risk speaking beyond what I would ever have been able to say alone, because I was with allies who would hear me and be there to back me up if I could not go on. Many of us who are marginalized by virtue of our color and sexual orientation must silently swallow racist or homophobic remarks, institutionalized bigotry, violence and the threat of violence, almost daily. What we swallow twists our bowels, poisons our bodies, affects our loves and lives. Collectively, for once, we set up a situation in which we could say, *directly* to the people who angered and hurt us, what they were doing and how they were accountable.

A few days after our meeting, Stoddard let us know by fax that Lambda would not cancel its fundraiser. The core group of Asians met to discuss our next step, and, hot with anger, we decided to storm Stoddard's office. We marched in, about a dozen strong, and crowded around his desk. The discussion was angry, polarizing, intense. That half-hour had a totemic significance for me; it was as though, talking to and facing that red-faced, loud-voiced figure across the desk, I was standing up to all the white male authority I had ever bowed to in silence before. Stoddard's face metamorphosed to my father's face, as I broke the taboos instilled so well in me as eldest daughter of immigrant Japanese: Do not disobey; do not talk back.

Building a Coalition Within the Lesbian and Gay Community, February to March 1991

Lambda attempted to address our concerns by sending its donors a copy of the statement we had presented at the first meeting and offering to refund those who wished to return their tickets. This did not satisfy us, and we launched a two-pronged strategy: Continue pressuring Lambda to cancel, and greet its theatergoers with a demonstration if it did not.

Our meetings and committees became multiracial. Members of ACT UP, Brooklyn Women's Martial Arts, Gay Men of African

Descent, Kambal sa Lusog, Las Buenas Amigas, Latino Gay Men of New York, Men of All Colors Together, Other Countries, Queer Nation, Salsa Soul Sisters, South Asian Lesbians and Gay Men, We Wah and Bar Chee Ampe, among others, joined.

We had meetings and phone conversations with the staff at Lambda. Seven staffpersons, all women, signed a letter to the board and management urging them to reconsider canceling and offering to take salary cuts to offset any loss of funds that doing so could incur. Lambda's public education coordinator, a Latina activist named Mariana Romo-Carmona, resigned in protest.

On the other coast, California's Gay Asian and Pacific Alliance and Asian Pacifica Sisters put pressure on Lambda's Los Angeles office.

In support of our struggle, Audre Lorde, an African American lesbian feminist poet who has since passed away, refused to accept the Liberty Award from Lambda and did not attend the presentation ceremony. Her response to Lambda's decision to use *Miss Saigon* was:

> ...it was a damned foolish, naive, insensitive thing for Lambda to have done, and again, since I understand why it was done, it makes me furious, it makes me furious!
>
> Until the real nugget of what racism and sexism is all about comes through to the white lesbian and gay community, this thing is going to keep happening all over again. Until every single person in every single organization realizes that people of color, gay or straight, are constantly being misnamed, are constantly being misidentified, and that if you are going to deal with any piece of culture with people of color, you must go to that community and ask: What do you think of this? And that goes from *Dances with Wolves* to *Miss Saigon.*[5]

In March, coalition members met with the board and management from the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center. This meeting, unlike the one with Lambda, was amicable and productive. The Center is a truly New York City-based organization, with stronger ties and commitment to the local gay and lesbian community. We had more lead time, as the Center's benefit was not until October. The Center witnessed the community's anger in response to Lambda's refusal to cancel and decided to pull out.

Our position stirred strong feelings. At our forum on *Miss Saigon* at the Center on March 29, a stack of anonymous flyers was found outside, accusing the coalition of being homophobic. *The Village Voice*'s only mention of this issue echoed that accusation:

> Aren't you tired of hearing about a show that hasn't opened yet? Tough. The latest on [*Miss Saigon*], which finally begins previews March 23, is that two gay Asian groups—Asian Lesbians of the East Coast and Gay Asian and Pacific Islander Men of New York—are up in arms over the show's racism and sexism. Are they picketing the authors, the directors, the producer, the theater? No, they're criticizing Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund and the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center, two of the 250 nonprofit organizations (including the Pearl S. Buck Foundation) selling benefit tickets to *Miss Saigon*. Sounds like sophisticated, more p.c.-than-thou gay-bashing to me...[6]

These comments uncovered a disturbing assumption: When lesbian and gay people of color criticize the white gay male establishment, they are "gay-bashing." This implies that one must be white to be gay. And that Asian lesbians and gay men are close kin to skinheads, cruising the Village, looking for "faggots" and "dykes" to beat up.

The divided feelings of the community found outlet in the letters section of *Outweek,* a weekly magazine that ceased publication that summer. Our message was helped by the sharp exchange: The issue was hot, and one way or the other, people gave it thought. *Outweek's* editors and commentator Michelangelo Signorile lambasted Lambda for its position on *Miss Saigon,* but a number of their readers did not. Some challenged our analysis of *Miss Saigon,* saying that the show actually criticizes U.S. involvement in Viet-

nam. Others were frustrated or saddened by what they termed infighting, asking why we should do this to Lambda, when it has done so much for all of us in the realm of civil rights.

We found support among lesbian and gay activists of color and white people committed to fighting racism and sexism because the issue spoke to the unequal distribution of power and privilege within the lesbian and gay community. As they do in mainstream society, white men hold a disproportionate amount of institutional power in the queer community. Gay white men sit on boards or head up a number of community organizations, and often help determine priorities and programs. In the allocation of resources such as AIDS funding, or the absence of programs that battle breast cancer, people of color and lesbians have found that their concerns and needs are not automatically given equal shrift.

In calling upon Lambda to withdraw from its benefit, we drew our line: Will you claim as your own our concerns as Asians who, like you, belong to this community? In a larger sense, this is what happens in the United States every time a minority group demands a withheld right, or attacks the discriminatory status quo. But when members of a marginalized group accuse other members within the same group of marginalizing them, they hit a land mine. Some members of the community may rush to its defense, sounding the alarm that they have been betrayed from within. They fear the community will splinter into ineffectual fragments, or that others will pounce upon this weak link. What, they ask, will happen to the real issue—our struggle for recognition and equal rights in society-at-large?

The core group broke a taboo: We rocked the boat, hard. We would not wait until the larger struggle was won. What use are future gains to us if we are not full members in the community that exists now? What is this "community" anyhow? We transgressed—derailed "the struggle," aired dirty laundry—because we were staking a claim to a community of our making. Those who saw that joined us. Fifteen activists, of color and white, described this undertaking in a letter addressed to Lambda in *Outweek:*

> We repeat our message to you and all other groups where white men dominate: We can no longer give our time and energy and spirit and lives to those who support our oppression by their racism and sexism. We want a movement where we can bring our whole selves—all of our concerns for freedom—to the organizing table.
>
> There is no tyranny of the oppressed; there is simply the strong call for justice and equality from those who increasingly understand that all oppressions are connected and single issue/single oppression approaches will never bring lasting social change.
>
> ... You are left with many years of work ahead of you to try to figure out how to overcome your current reputation for upholding a white heterosexual male view of the world, while we are marching toward a new kind of organizing, a deep and true movement of social change for all of us.[7]

Within the Asian and Pacific Islander Community, March to April 1991

The second demonstration piggy-backed the first. We began organizing for it in late February, when we decided that by supplementing our original coalition with members of New York's Asian and Pacific Islander communities, we could ensure a respectable turnout against the show on opening night. Our plan was to use opening night as the forum to publicly register our opposition to the show itself, proving that we were not just gunning for Lambda.

Our first new ally in this initiative was the Asian Pacific Alliance for Creative Equality (APACE), an organization of Asian theater artists who organized against *Miss Saigon* in 1990 over the casting issue. We were soon joined by others, including Youth for Philippine Action (YPA), the Coalition Against Anti-Asian Violence, the Japanese American Citizen's League, the Pan Asian Repertory Theater, the Chinese Progressive Association, and college students' associations.

They pitched in. Veena Cabreros-Sud read an extraordinarily powerful speech which she and other YPA members wrote for our forum at the Center. Ding Pajaron launched her own fight to educate other parents and administrators at her daughter's private school about *Miss Saigon,* to convince them to cancel their own *Miss Saigon* fundraiser. (In the end, the Bank School went ahead with it.) Lawyers from Asian and Pacific Islander organizations negotiated with the police at the demonstrations and provided counsel.

The Asians and Pacific Islanders we recruited looked to our coalition and saw leaders who were Asian, as they were. They saw a struggle that affected them as Asian and Pacific Islander peoples, and joined it. It should have been that simple. But it was not. We felt threatened. In the lesbian and gay community, Asians and Pacific Islanders had naturally led the opposition against a show that was racist towards Asians. But now, that role was up for grabs—after all, they were Asians, too.

We in the core group were quick to suspect the new members of attempting to erase or dismiss the coalition's lesbian and gay origins and membership. We all, as lesbians and gay men, had directly experienced the conservatism and homophobia of our own Asian and Pacific Islander communities. Simultaneously, we felt a fierce loyalty toward our multiracial gay and lesbian allies, and needed to assert the lesbian and gay roots of the coalition even as we moved away from it.

The closer we came to opening night, the more we were deluged with media requests for interviews. Yet we were divided on the thorny question of who should represent the coalition. There were a few Asians and Pacific Islanders, such as Peter Chow from Asian Cinevision, who were more experienced in presenting a historical and critical perspective on productions such as *Miss Saigon* to the media. However, we were not prepared to give the fleeting space our organizing had wedged in the public eye to people who had not been integral to the organizing since the beginning.

Would they have assuaged our distrust if we had clearly articulated it? Perhaps. On occasion, some of the Asians and Pacific Islanders were impatient with our relative inexperience with the

media and decentralized process. There were also those who may have wished to exploit the coalition for their own organization's interests or personal gains. But I recall no outright instances of homophobia.

Our coalition-building in the Asian and Pacific Islander community stumbled over sexual identity. They were not gay, and, therefore, they could not belong. We framed our organizing such that there was in essence two separate groups: gay and lesbian, Asian and Pacific Islander—moving toward two distinct demonstrations. Only in the last week and at the demonstrations, when we were all caught up in the power of what we had wrought, did the coalition become truly one.

Demonstration #2, April 11, 1991

The April 11 demo was less tightly organized and attended. It was less multiracial, more Asian, and more sober. We in the core group were still recovering from the first demonstration and found this one anti-climactic. Opening night was on a weekday, and started early—6:30 p.m. People straggled in late, having been tied up at work or assuming that the show would start at 8 p.m. The police cordoned off small pieces of pavement, and herded us into small pens, effectively diminishing our collective force. NYPD were around the corner in full regalia, mounted on horses, waiting for their cue to burst onto the scene. As the demonstration was smaller than that of April 6, the show of police was overkill.

But how the media swarmed! It was a feeding frenzy of cameras and microphones. All the major networks slotted us as their top story on the evening news that night. And then there were CNN, the *Post,* the *Daily News,* the *New York Times* non-local edition, National Public Radio, etc.

Our two minutes of fame consisted of an Asian talking head mouthing a rapid analysis: *Miss Saigon* is racist and sexist in the stereotypes it parades of Asian women and men as either self-sacrificing geishas or slimy pimps. And yes, we are concerned that Cameron Mackintosh hired a white actor for an Asian role, but, to

go further still, we call for challenging and three-dimensional roles for Asian actors in the entertainment and theater industry today.

The primary significance of the second demonstration was that we transmitted the collective voices and faces of Asians and Pacific Islanders, contorted with anger, to society at large. We broke through the ceiling that separates the concerns of sub-communities from mainstream awareness, and gave those who were watching a glimpse—of just the tip—of an iceberg.

What we managed to say was certainly not untrue, nor insignificant. It is just that so much was not said. TV framed the event: The Asian community, monolithic, united, rises up to denounce the injuries of Broadway. No mention was made of our organizing process, no questions were asked about who we were. Why should they? They saw our Asian faces.

The further our organizing took us from the lesbian and gay community, the more asserting our sexuality became a political act. To be a lesbian or gay man in a society that is as homophobic and violent as the United States is to fight for your right to live and love when people might want you dead. To be "out" as lesbians and gay men on an issue that affected us as Asians and Pacific Islanders would show others that we *are* everywhere.

But the media was not interested in tackling that aspect of our coalition. At one point an exasperated TV reporter asked James Lee off the air, "What do lesbians and gay men have to do with protesting *Miss Saigon?*" A link between two such groups was too farfetched for them. Only one piece about the lesbian and gay leadership was ever published in a mainstream paper. Written by Ying Chan, it was buried deep in the *New York Daily News,* and came out days after the demonstration. Peter Kwong wrote an article about our organizing for *The Village Voice* that never saw publication. Both reporters are Asian, and have written extensively about New York City's Asian and Pacific Islander communities.

What we were flew directly in the face of mainstream assumptions about Asians. That Korean grocers are racist, that Asians always excel in math, that Oriental women make good wives, for example—those things are known. But nowhere in their roster of

stereotypes was a place for angry, articulate, *queer* Asians. It was too much of a stretch for mainstream society to understand that we could be more than their cardboard cut-out Asians, that we could instead be complex individuals with divergent sexualities and multiple allegiances—just like them.

Conclusion

What, in the end, did we really do? *Miss Saigon* is still on Broadway. We never seriously thought we could close it down, although some of us certainly fantasized about a few well-placed stinkbombs. Lambda vowed to be more sensitive regarding issues that affect people of color. But when Tom Stoddard resigned from his position as executive director, they hired another white man, despite our lobbying efforts for a person of color or a woman.

The coalition, pared down to its lesbian and gay constituency, plowed on for about a year following the demonstrations, pressing various community organizations to actively address the needs and concerns of people of color and women in their decision-making, hiring policies, and programmatic emphases. Finally, it just fizzled out. People left town, or became involved in other consuming issues: HIV and AIDS, violence against Asians and Pacific Islanders, relationships, their own physical survival.

Our coalition pointed the way to a possible future: where a complex identity is not only valued, but becomes a foundation for unity. We who occupy the interstices—whose very lives contain disparate selves—are, of necessity, at home among groups that know little of each other. We know what others do not about reconciling differences in our own lives, and the mutable nature of borders. We have a deep hunger for a place in which we can be, at one and the same time, whole, and part of something larger than ourselves. Our knowledge and desire may at times bring us to action: We push the parameters of existing communities wide open, and cause the struggles of different communities to overlap and meld. In the tangle that ensues, we may also be midwives of vital coalitions.

This can be done only by claiming all of ourselves, with integrity, in community. At the first demonstration, James Lee taped a neon pink triangle to his leather jacket, emblazoned with the words: "San Francisco-born Gay Man of Korean Descent." On any other night, he could have been bashed for that. But that night, his back was covered. Gray-haired Japanese American wives and mothers and brash young white men from Queer Nation marched side-by-side. Dykes in dreads, campy queens, leftists of all persuasions: We owned Broadway.

Finally, a note of acknowledgement: I have not mentioned many people who were important to the coalition. Among them are: Bill Burns, June Chan, John Chin, Lei Chou, Sally Covington, Charlie Fernandez, Ben Geboe, Manolo Guzman, Curtis Harris, Scott Hirose, David Housel, Bert Hunter, Marla Kamiya, Don Kao, Ann Kwong, Mini Liu, Ming Ma, John Albert Manzon, Lance McCready, Gene Nakajima, Alice Ro, Robert Vazquez Pacheco, Vondora Wilson-Corzen, and Lisa Yi.

Notes

1. Lyrics are quoted from the libretto accompanying the *Miss Saigon* compact disc, produced by Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schöenberg, 1988.
2. Monitors Haftan Eckholdt and Joe Pressley, as well as activists Chris Hansen, Simon Howard-Stewart, Karl Jagbundhansingh, John Kusakabe were charged with disorderly conduct. The police beat both Kusakabe and Pressley, who are men of color.
3. Open memo to Lambda from Angelo Ragaza, dated February 21, 1991, pp. 6 and 7.
4. From the February 19, 1991 statement by members of ALOEC and GAPIMNY, read by John Manzon and Yoko Yoshikawa.
5. Audre Lorde, quoted from personal interview with June Chan and Mariana Romo-Carmona, recorded on video April 26, 1991.
6. Don Shewey, "Playing Around," *The Village Voice,* March 12, 1991.
7. "Letter to Lambda", *Outweek,* May 1, 1991, p. 5. Signed by Beth Richie, Suzanne Pharr, Val Kanuha, Chris Hansen, Helen Zia, Rebecca Cole, Kelly Kuwabara, Sally Cooper, Dion Thompson, Stephanie Roth, Robert Reid-Pharr, Rick O'Keefe, Tony Glover, Manuel Guzman, and Ann Kochman.