Introduction

*Geisha of a Different Kind*

Shortly before midnight, bodies gyrate to ear-numbing music on a small wood-paneled dance floor on the third level of R-Place, a local gay bar. The rhythmic beat from refrigerator-sized speakers urges patrons to “get on off of your feet.” As naked torsos bump and grind, a curious scent of sweat and alcohol, mixed with an odd medley of colognes, lingers in the air. The dance floor, tucked neatly into the rear corner, is even more crowded than usual because of a small, plastic kiddie pool placed right in the center of the floor. As oddly out of place as a kiddie pool might be in the center of the dance floor of a gay bar, patrons dance easily and freely around it, almost unaware of its presence, or, at least, unwilling to acknowledge the awkwardness of its presence there. For those moving in sync to the music and to those observing from the sidelines, the small pool and the gold-painted bar that rises out of it toward the ceiling make up a familiar sight that requires little explanation. These are the props required for a staple of entertainment at gay bars around the country—the wet underwear contest.

The contestants in the competition are also a familiar cast of characters that predictably represent what is widely valued and desired in the gay community. Young, fit, and overwhelmingly white, the contestants echo the images found on gay billboards and magazine covers. Deviations from the formula are met with sympathetic laughter or outright disdain. An older man, whose appearance may be frail but who is nonetheless full of life, is met with hoots of encouragement. The encouragement is disingenuous, for he would never win, but it is encouragement nonetheless. An obese man is assaulted with a barrage of verbal mocks. “That is so gross,” I hear someone yell behind me. Making no attempt to lower his voice, the same person yells out, “What *is* he thinking?” Whether tolerated, castigated, or faux-encouraged, men deviating from
the formula never win. The winner is almost always white, young, toned, and packing something large.

If the visual image of the winners represents what is physically valued and desired in the gay community, their actions represent what is behaviorally desired. Each performance is a ramped-up display of masculine sexuality. Contestants flex muscles, saunter across the floor, and proudly display their manhood for the audience to see. One contestant, who had just done 100 crunches before coming on stage because “the guy with the best abs usually wins,” told me that “you never wear boxers, it doesn’t show it off.” The bigger the display, the bigger the cheers, and the bigger the cheers, the greater the likelihood of winning. One after the other, contestants thrust their crotches toward the audience, simulating a massive, public display of insertive sex. Whatever their private sexual preferences may be when the doors are closed and the lights are off, everyone is a top on stage. Here, as in many other arenas of contemporary gay life, masculinity is rewarded while femininity is discouraged.

Even the most cursory read through gay personal ads makes the emphasis on masculinity blatantly clear. “Straight acting” is a marketing gimmick. “I’m not like other gay guys,” has become ubiquitous in gay personal ads to mark oneself as being different from the feminine stereotypes of gay men that still fester in the larger imagination. If “straight-acting” is a plus for those advertising themselves, “no femmes” is an equally striking warning to potential suitors that femininity is not desired or desirable. In contemporary gay life, men are to be men, at least if they want to be laid. “If I wanted to fuck a girl, I would find one,” a young gay man told me regarding his desire for a real man.

According to Martin Levine in his groundbreaking book *Gay Macho*, one of the first ethnographic studies to seriously examine gay life in America, the hypermasculinization of the gay male image, and thus gay male desire for men who are perceived to be masculine, can be traced to “the gay male world of the 1970s and 1980s [that] catered to and supported this hypermasculine sexual code.” As a response to the stigmatized “sissies” that defined what it meant to be gay prior to this period, the “gay clone” came to represent a hypermasculine image for the gay community. “[The gay clones] butched it up and acted like macho men,” Levine wrote, “the manliest of men.” The AIDS crisis of the 1980s fur-
ther magnified the desire for muscular bodies as being fit came to be equated with being well. While stereotypical images of effeminate gay men still exist, most of these representations are found in media outlets geared toward straight audiences and are often heavily criticized by gay media advocates. When found within gay media, these images represent a form of camp, where gender boundaries are actively challenged for the sake of entertainment value based on comedy and not as a way for gay men to highlight or celebrate the diversity of gender presentations that is found within the gay community. More important, not only is there a preference for masculinity within the gay community but also a strong anti-effeminate bias among gay men toward those viewed as not meeting the new masculine norm.

But even here in the mecca of masculinity, or at least the visual display of it, one racial group of gay men occupies a predominantly feminine space. If the performances of the white contestants are a reflection of the desire for, and expectation of, masculinity, the performances of the all-too-rare Asian contestants are reflections of an expected femininity. On this particular night, the lone Asian contestant stands quietly, waiting among the other contestants for his turn in the tub. While waiting in line, he is noticeably shy, half hiding behind a larger, muscular white contestant. When his name is called, he blushes and shrinks further behind his human shield until the MC coaxes him onto the floor and into the pool. While being lead into the pool, the Asian contestant continues his gendered performance, giggling with one hand over his mouth and feigning hesitation. Where real men pushed their way into the pool, the Asian man is pushed into it. Where real men are eager to display their masculine traits, the Asian man feigns modesty. Yet, once in the pool, his performance becomes vividly sexual. Hips gyrate and legs fly into the air as the contestant simulates a lone sex act with the giant pole. But here too, the performance of gender, or at least the gender role that Asian men are expected to perform within this arena, is crystal clear. Whereas the white contestants thrust into the pole, taking the dominant position of inserter, the Asian contestant pushes his ass up against it, in the submissive role of receiver.

“Damn,” one of his friends yells out, “I knew she would tear it up!” Another voice yells out, “He wants to be fucked by that pole!” Another man answers, “You know it.”
Despite the initial display of hesitation, despite having to be forced into the pool, and despite what appeared to be an overly shy demeanor, the spectators expected a sexualized performance, specifically a gendered sexualized performance. To his friends, and to many watching the performance, the “unexpected” turn of events was anything but. Much like the rape myth that tells us that women really mean yes when they softly whisper no, the modesty originally displayed by the Asian man is a ruse to hide his true sexual desire that he secretly “wants to be fucked.”

This book is an attempt to explore why the unexpected turn of events was anything but unexpected. That is, how did everyone know that he would “tear it up” and why did everyone assume that he “wants to be fucked”? To address these questions, I explore the ways that gay Asian men have been constructed in the western, mostly American, imagination and how the various ways that Asian men have been constructed in the western mind have affected the way they come to see themselves, other gay Asian men, and what it means to be both gay and Asian within the western context.

While it should be noted that the moniker “gay Asian men” encompasses a large group of people who trace their ethnic ancestry to nations that are characterized by different cultural, historical, and social backgrounds; and that historic norms regarding homosexual acts and homosexual identities are different in various parts of Asia, this book is an exploration into their collective American experience. As Yen Le Espiritu points out in her book Asian American Pan-Ethnicity, about how a pan-ethnic Asian American identity developed among Asian Americans, identity formation for Asians in the United States is more a reflection of common experiences they found within western borders than the discrepant histories and cultures of their homelands. Within western borders, they find that what it means to be Asian has been composed and orchestrated by forces outside of their control, often without consideration for where they were from, and they become subjected to the same types of stereotypes and expectations placed upon all people of Asian descent, regardless of their families’ place of origin. Therefore, it isn’t the differences of ethnicity that come to define what it means to be Asian in the United States, but the similarities of race and a shared racialized experience. I take this shared American experience as the starting point for examining the lives of gay Asian American men and
argue that it is not the different ethnic experiences and expectations that come to define what it means to be gay and Asian but the shared racial experience that comes to frame what it means to be both gay and Asian in the United States.

Asians, Asian Americans, and Asians in Asia

In the late 1960s, during the height of the “third world” movements, many community activists who traced their ethnic roots to various parts of Asia coined the term “Asian American” as an alternative to the label “Oriental,” which they saw as being derogatory and colonialist in origin. They argued that the label Oriental, defined as being east of Occidental, therefore “from the east,” was only true if Europe was used as the point of reference to define where all other people were from. Activists believed that the term Asian American would better mark the difference between people of Asian descent who lived in the United States and Asians in Asia, particularly in a country that continued to equate Asian Americans with Asians in Asia, marking them as perpetual foreigners who did not have a history in the United States or could not be assimilated into American life.

More recently, scholars have begun to acknowledge that the strict dichotomy between “Asian” and “Asian American” is becoming more difficult to maintain as the rise in immigration from Asia following the passage of the Hart-Cellar Act in 1965 and the growing transnational connections between people of Asian descent in both Asia and outside of Asia blur the boundaries of “Asian” and “Asian American.” In addition, growing recognition that people of Asian descent, from all over the globe, share a racialized history that is intimately connected to European colonialism and expansion, has led to a number of discussions regarding a shared racial experience as opposed to a shared ethnic experience. In this book, I trace both the shared racial experience among gay men of Asian descent and the specific experiences of gay Asian American men.

In doing so, I use the term “Asian” to refer to men who trace their ethnic roots to East and Southeast Asia, rather than to mark a geographic place of residence; I use the term “Asian American” when referring specifically to the experiences of Americans of Asian descent. Similarly, I use the term “gay Asian American men” when referring specifically to
men in the U.S. When referring to people living in Asia, I use the more cumbersome “people in Asia” and “gay men in Asia.”

While West and South Asians living in western countries have also been influenced by similar historic projects of racial formation discussed by Michael Omi and Howard Winant in their seminal book *Racial Formation in the United States*, their western experience is sufficiently different to warrant a separate discussion from that of East and Southeast Asian men who have been victims of similar histories. This isn’t to imply that much of what I discuss is irrelevant to South Asian men, or that my discussion will be entirely limited to East and Southeast Asian men. In fact, I expand the discussion to include South Asian men where relevant.

Also, I limit my discussion to gay Asian American men. Certainly, Asian American lesbians have also experienced racism and homophobia. In addition, gay Asian American men and Asian American lesbians often see themselves as members of the same sexualized and racialized community. In Seattle, Queer & Asian, a social and community activist organization of gay Asian American men, and ALBA—Asian Lesbian Bisexual Alliance, often organized shared events and projects. In 1996, they launched a joint effort called Leaving Silence: Queer Asian and Pacific Islander Oral History Exhibit which was eventually displayed at the Seattle Public Library before moving to the Wing Luke Asian Museum. In 2000, they organized Lotus Roots 3: National Conference of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Asian Pacific Islander Americans. More importantly, the social network of queer Asian Americans in Seattle included both men and women. In fact, in most of the events hosted by gay Asian American men or Asian American lesbians, queer Asian American participation was high.

However, Asian American women’s experiences with racism have been fundamentally different from those of Asian American men. Where Asian men have been denied masculinity, Asian women have been hyperfeminized. Whereas Asian men have been marked as sexually undesirable because of their race, Asian women have been marked as sexual prizes for white male consumption and, because of their alleged hyperfemininity, more sexually desirable than white women. Because of this different racialization of Asian men and women, the experiences of Asian American lesbians are likely to be different from those of gay
Asian American men. At the same time, because gay Asian American men and Asian American lesbians are, at least in Seattle, intimately connected to each other through friendship networks, community organizing, and political groups, they impact the lives of gay Asian American men in profound and significant ways. Thus, much of what I discuss in this book may also be expanded to shed light on Asian American lesbians’ experiences as well.

Goals and Aims

In examining the lives of gay Asian American men, I explore a number of intimately related questions. First, what are the contextual norms created for, and by, gay Asian American men in which racial and sexual identities might develop? By contextual norms, I mean the everyday realities gay Asian American men face that affect their roles within the larger society. These contextual norms include the social position of gay Asian American men within the gay community, their own racial and ethnic communities, and the larger U.S. society as constructed through various mechanisms that maintain and reinforce power relations between gay Asian American men and those that they interact with. A central argument I make is that contextual norms are created and maintained through representations that continue to present gay Asian American men as being outside of both gay America and Asian America.

A second question is to explore how social identities for gay Asian American men are constructed during social interactions. By social identities, I mean the various and complex ways that we come to view ourselves and how these identities influence the social roles that we play in any given interaction. Here, I want to be able to examine the expected roles for gay Asian American men among dimensions of race, gender, and sexuality and how these roles come to be manifested during interaction with others. I examine how these roles come to be reinforced, maintained, and followed, that is, what are the mechanisms during interactions that reinforce these roles? For example, what rewards are provided to gay Asian American men who follow these social norms and what sanctions are levied against those who do not? And then, how do these rewards and sanctions come to be viewed as such?
A third, and perhaps the most important, question that this book explores is the various strategies for resistance practiced by gay Asian American men to confront the dominant gay discourse/narratives they encounter. While acknowledging that outside forces heavily influence how all Asian Americans, as well as other members of racialized groups, come to see themselves and how that specific construction of race, sexuality, and gender influences their lives, it is important to keep in mind that rather than being passive receivers of dominant discourse regarding race, gender, and sexuality, Asian Americans have also been active producers of alternative narratives meant to counter the text, talk, and images that degrade and manipulate them. And gay Asian American men have proven to be no exception. Thus, arguing that gay Asian American men are passive victims of dominant discourse aimed at marking them as racially and sexually inferior to gay white men would only be telling half the story. Through this book, I demonstrate that gay Asian American men actively confront and challenge the dominant narratives and discourses presented by members of the dominant group that construct them as being less desirable, less worthy, and less authentically Asian than their gay white peers or their straight Asian peers.

Ways of Knowing and the Ethnographic Stance

In 1925, with the encouragement of her advisor, Franz Boas, Margaret Mead made her now famous sojourn to Samoa. The results of her ethnographic field work, first published in 1928 in *Coming of Age in Samoa*, went on to become the bestselling anthropological text of the twentieth century. In this classic work, Mead argued that, unlike adolescents in America who experienced emotional stress and conflict, adolescents in Samoa encountered life that was casual and peaceful. According to Mead, Samoa was an example of a “negative instance,” a counterexample that demonstrated that “adolescence” was a culturally developed, not biologically programmed, period of life. Her conclusion lent support for a theoretical perspective heavily championed by Boas, specifically that it was nurture, not nature, which ultimately “make and unmake man, physically and mentally.” During the height of the Eugenics movement, Mead’s conclusions provided Boas with much needed ammunition to counter the rapidly growing sentiment that there were distinct biological
differences between people of different races and that these biological differences justified different social arrangements. In his personal and professional life, Boas found the arguments championed by the eugenicists to be both troubling and dangerous. As such, he worked diligently to discredit the growing notion that there were biologically determined human traits. In his mind, “human nature” was not in the least bit “natural,” but was a result of complex cultural phenomena.

The problem, as Derek Freeman noted more than a half century later in Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth and The Fateful Hoaxing of Margaret Mead, was that, despite the widespread support today for the importance of “nurture” in determining “human nature,” Mead’s conclusions were based on factors outside of ethnographic evidence that included (1) Mead’s own fervent belief that human behavior is determined by cultural patterns which she developed under the tutelage of Boas, Ruth Benedict, and others; (2) her reliance on two Samoan adolescents Fa’apua’a and Fofa; (3) her false preconception that premarital promiscuity was the cultural norm in Samoa; (4) her desire to reach a conclusion that would satisfy Boas; and (5) Fa’apua’a and Fofa’s “prank” on Mead. While later researchers have reached a reasonable consensus that Mead’s, and by extension Boas’s, original conclusion that human behavior was largely dictated by cultural patterns was correct, and some may argue that the ends justify the means, a problem remains that the conclusions Mead drew from her work are representative of earlier ethnographic studies whereby a preexisting prejudice about the people “under study” was supported with selective monitoring of the “field.” Unfortunately, despite what may have been good intentions, the end result was nonetheless detrimental in the way various peoples of the world were viewed in the Western mind. For example, Mead’s ultimate conclusion that adolescence in Samoa was a casual and care-free period in life hinged upon her findings that premarital sex was rather common in Samoa, painting Samoans as the highly charged sexual other. Rather than presenting an objective portrayal of Samoa and Samoans, Mead simply reinforced the stereotype that was widely held at the time regarding the sexual mores of brown folks, thus reducing them to primitive aboriginals unencumbered by Christian morality.

Certainly, Mead’s intent was not to degrade the people she met. In fact, her affection and admiration for the people she encountered in
Samoa seem genuine. Nonetheless, Mead’s work demonstrates the possible negative consequences of an uninformed ethnography where the goal is not necessarily to encounter and describe but to promote an already existing agenda. Certainly, ethnography was often implicit in its support for colonial domination of brown people who were viewed—often using the very ethnography that was collected—as being heathens and primitives. It is understandable, then, that ethnography has a long and lurid history. Nonetheless, the problem with ethnography is not necessarily that it is inherently biased, but that there was, and still continues to be, widespread disagreement about what good ethnography should be and what it should accomplish.

As a research methodology, ethnography is viewed as a long-term investigation of a group that is based on immersion. Scholars enter into the study site to engage in long-term investigation of events, interactions, and patterns that make up community life. Yet questions arise as to what constitutes an “appropriate” level of participation for an ethnographer. In the early part of the mid-twentieth century, many ethnographers used the term “going native” to indicate a high level of participation in the “field”; this connotes a dangerously high level of participation that was perceived to be counterproductive to the goal of objective science. Contemporary ethnographers continue to draw subtle distinctions. Terms such as “participant observation” and “nonparticipant observation” (based on whether the researcher is taking an active role in the communal life of the group under study) imply, at the very least, that an objective observation of the field is possible. However, in recent decades, these descriptions have become more unsatisfactory to many ethnographic researchers given that the term “nonparticipant observation” implies that the researcher takes no role during what is supposed to be a long-term, intensive exploration into community life. However, all social research is a form of participant observation given that we cannot possibly study the social world without being a part of it. The idea that ethnographic exploration can be conducted as a complete outsider is difficult to sustain given that, oftentimes, the mere presence of any individual has the potential to change group dynamics and group interactions. The attempt to draw such sharp distinctions between participant and nonparticipant observation may have more to do with the adoption of the scientific model of objectivity and represents a
“hegemonic Western practice aimed at control or domination” of those who are being “observed.”\textsuperscript{13}

Rather than relying on an arbitrary measure of scientific objectivity, I take a critical stance to ethnography and argue that we are, by virtue of our presence, intimately tied to the actions that shape the outcomes. Rather than minimizing my role, I embraced it, keeping in mind that research itself can often act as an intervention.\textsuperscript{14} Certainly, this view is not new and can be traced to the work of such notable ethnographers such as Hortense Powdermaker in the late 1960s. In the article, “Field Work,” Powdermaker noted, “the recognition that the fieldworker is himself an inherent part of the situation studied and that his personal as well as his scientific reactions are an important part of the research process.”\textsuperscript{15}

As more and more ethnographers turn field work into homework by exploring their own communities, the distinction between scholars who know and subjects who show becomes even more problematic. Thus, my findings are not only a result of my observations but also a result of my own personal lived experience as a member of the group being studied. Rather than providing an uninformed discovered view, this book reflects the lived experience of the ethnographer and the ethnographized. Rather than hinder the scientific process, I believe that my own experiences as a member of the group being studied led to a richer understanding of the phenomenon being explored.

Driving much of my work is what scholars have called the “ethnographic stance.” That is, “a commitment to what [Clifford] Geertz has called ‘thickness,’ to producing understanding through richness, texture, and detail, rather than parsimony, refinement, and elegance.”\textsuperscript{16} During the years 1999 and 2004, I became active in both the gay and Asian American communities in Seattle, serving three years as the editor of the Asian American newspaper and running a well-funded capacity-building program for gay Asian American men in order to lower HIV risk behaviors. During that time, I met more than a hundred gay Asian American men who attended various meetings and social events hosted by the program.

Using the ethnographic stance, I am more interested in teasing out the intricate patterns of social life and how these patterns are influenced by and have an influence on the actions of the actors and the reality that is created by them within the larger social structures that we oc-
cupy than in isolating specific variables that may affect other variables. The underlying belief, of course, is that human interactions that shape and define “meaning” are never isolated acts of social engagement, but rather that these actions, and the patterns they follow, are intimately tied to the social processes that define behavior patterns that are seen as “appropriate.” Examining these social processes also involved documenting the everyday lived world of gay Asian men. Based on this guiding principle, I explored not only their social interactions but the cultural artifacts, such as meeting minutes, magazines, books, television shows, movies, and live performances that make up the everyday world of gay Asian American men in order to capture the thick description of the social context and the social realities that shape the lives of gay Asian American men. Like all ethnographic studies, this one does not purport to speak of a singular gay Asian American experience or provide a complete picture of all of the factors that influence the lives of gay Asian American men. Because of this, my work should not be read as an objective scientific inquiry into the lives of a “foreign” group. Rather, it is an honest chronicle of the lives of men who I believed were just like me, who read the things I read, watch the things I watch, and populate the same social spaces that I inhabit. Because being a gay Asian American man is an important part of who I am and how I have come to see myself, I consider this book to be not about them, but about us. I did not embed my life into my research. Rather, I embedded my research into my life.

Because this work is a reflection of who I am, the narrative I provide here and the stories that I share, as well as the various cultural artifacts that I chose to examine, are filtered through my own lens of social reality that I have developed in my everyday life as a gay Asian American man who grew up in San Francisco and was politically and socially active in the Asian American community in Seattle while writing this book. I cannot claim that someone not gay, someone not Asian, and someone who did not grow up in a city with a large Asian population, and did not have the same type of political and social networks in the Asian American community, would have interpreted the events I witnessed in the same way. Nor can I claim that they would have read the things I read or watched the things I watched in the same way. As cultural critic Stuart Hall has noted, media products are not simply encoded with mes-
sages but are decoded by the consumers of the product using their own personal lens. Thus, the only claim that I make is that this is what I saw and how I saw it. Just as important as how I saw it happen is where I saw it happen. And I saw it happen in a unique place.

Places of Seeing

On Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, Garfield High School, in Seattle’s central district, fills to capacity for the annual MLK Day Rally and March. Like most other rallies celebrating the legacy of Dr. King, the audience is composed of a majority of black participants. But unlike most, the black majority at Garfield High School is a slim one. When I tell my friends on the East Coast that almost half of the participants in the annual rally are nonblack, I am often met with surprise, then a smile. “That’s how it should be everywhere,” a friend once told me. “Unfortunately, it’s not,” she quickly added. Surprising as it may be to non-Seattleites, the composition of participants at Garfield High School comes as no surprise to activists of color in Seattle who have a long history of interethnic and interracial cooperation. After all, Seattle gave rise to the “Gang of Four,” a close-knit group of community leaders from the Native American, Asian American, African American, and Latino communities, during the minority rights movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The group, composed of Bernie Whitebear, Bob Santos, Roberto Maestas, and Larry Gossett, formed strong connections to each other and helped foster strong linkages between communities of color that helped to build bridges among different racial and ethnic groups that may be unique in American history. The spirit of interracial and interethnic cooperation is also evident among gay men of color in Seattle, as evidenced by the establishment of organizations such as People of Color Against AIDS Network and Lesbians of Color in the 1970s. These organizations attempted to address the needs of nonwhite sexual minorities rather than racial- and ethnic-specific groups that arose during the same time in larger metropolitan areas around the country such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, or New York City. While many have speculated about why Seattle politics, both gay and straight, might have been characterized by such high levels of interracial and interethnic cooperation, Bob Santos may have hit the nail on the head when he told me, “None of the groups
were big enough to go it alone during those times.” Although he may have been right that none of the groups were big enough to go it alone during those times, Asian Americans had long been the largest minority group in Seattle. Attracted by work in the Alaskan cannery industry, Asian Americans came to dominate the work force in the Alaska canneries in the early 1900s. For many of them, Seattle became home following the canning season.

The multi-ethnic work force of the Alaska cannery industry led to Seattle’s International District being the only place in the continental United States where Asian immigrants from different ethnic backgrounds came together to form one neighborhood. The activism during the 1960s and the 1970s in the Asian American community, led by Bob Santos, resulted in the creation of a number of pan-Asian American community service agencies such as International Community Development Association, Asian Counseling and Referral Services, International District Housing Alliance, and International Community Health Services, all of which had a decidedly pan-Asian focus. In addition, the International District is home to the International Examiner, the longest continuously publishing pan-Asian American newspaper in the United States. Founded by a small group of Japanese American business owners, the paper was quickly purchased for one dollar by Filipino American cannery workers as a voice for the Asian American labor movement in the Pacific Northwest; it has long been a voice for progressive causes within the Asian American community in the greater Seattle area.

Similarly, Seattle’s International District is home to the Wing Luke Asian Museum. Named after the first Asian American to hold elected office in Washington State, the museum continues to be the only pan-Asian American museum in the United States. Because of the community activism that has long characterized Seattle’s Asian American communities, the city is also home to one of the most politically active chapters of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) and the Organization of Chinese Americans (OCA), both of whom have spoken powerfully and publicly in favor of gay rights. The long history of inter-ethnic cooperation among different Asian American ethnic groups, as well as interracial cooperation with other communities of color, helped make Washington State become the first state in the continental United States to elect an Asian American as governor when it elected Gary Han.
Locke to the office in 1996 and re-elected him in 2000. Although Hawaii elected an Asian American governor more than two decades before Locke, it should be noted that Asian Americans in Hawaii composed a majority of the population of the state when George Ariyoshi was elected to the office in 1974, while they made up just slightly more than 5 percent of the population in Washington when Locke was elected.

Although Seattle may not be the gay metropolis of San Francisco or New York City, or a major gay tourist destination such as Palm Springs or Provincetown, the city does have a robust gay community, a thriving gay newspaper, a clearly visible gayborhood, and an active gay nightlife centered around the Capitol Hill neighborhood a few miles north of downtown. At the same time, the relatively smaller gay population compared to the gay metropolises may provide Seattle with a more close-knit gay community, and also may facilitate denser networks among gay men. Nightlife may also include more intimate settings at gay bars and nightclubs, as the relatively smaller gay population precludes the establishment of gay mega-venues such as those found in San Francisco or Palm Springs.

Prior to the late 1970s, the city’s gay population was relatively dispersed throughout the city. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, white flight as well as the collapse of Boeing as a major employer in Seattle led to the deterioration of the Capitol Hill area that was once home to some of Seattle’s richest families. As real estate values in Capitol Hill began to fall, gays and artists began taking advantage of cheaper housing, leading to a critical mass of people for community-building and community activism. By the time the 1980s and the AIDS crisis emerged, the critical mass on Capitol Hill that made the establishment of gay business and social organizations possible just a few years earlier also provided the social structure for activists to mobilize in one neighborhood. The community activism sparked by the AIDS crisis had similar effects in Seattle as in other parts of the country for the gay community. As gay men and women began organizing to fight a health crisis, they mobilized for political and economic rights as well.

By the time I arrived in Seattle in 1997, Capitol Hill was a fully gentrified residential and commercial neighborhood with some of the most expensive housing in the city. Shops catering to an upscale urban clientele dotted Broadway, the main thoroughfare through the neighbor-
hood. Restaurants, some with outdoor dining, crowded the sidewalks, often turning a casual stroll into a somewhat perilous journey. More important, the neighborhood’s status as the gay and lesbian commercial center was firmly established.

Like many gayborhoods around the country, bars and nightclubs in Seattle often attempt to cater to a specific type of clientele. R-Place, with its three levels, is considered a gay version of a sports bar. The small dance floor, tucked into the rear of the third level, is hardly the main draw. Instead, men who patronize the bar often prefer to gather around the large bar or the generously scattered tables that dominate the floor space. Neighbours Nightclub, a few blocks away, depends more on dancing as the main attraction and features a drag show every night. Situated in a less congested corner of the neighborhood where foot traffic during the day is modest at best, The Cuff Complex is considered Seattle’s muscle and leather bar. However, an expansion in the early 2000s of a bottom level that included an expanded dance floor diversified the clientele. Although a number of smaller venues, such as C.C. Attle’s and the Seattle Eagle cater to a much more specific crowd, the three larger bars, R-Place, Neighbours, and The Cuff, tend to attract a diverse crowd of men despite the persona that each attempts to present. Despite the different characteristics of the bars, the majority of clientele is shared, with most gay men going to all three bars in rotation, often starting at R-Place then moving to the more dance-friendly Neighbours or The Cuff later in the same night. This may have the effect of bringing men from many different walks of life and many different interests, both social and sexual, into routine contact with one another in ways that may not be possible in such cities as San Francisco and New York, where multiple bars cater to specific gay demographics.

Every place is different, but it is how Seattle is different that has implications for the ways that gay Asian American men may come to see themselves. Because of Seattle’s long history of progressive politics, especially around issues of race and sexuality, the experiences of gay Asian American men in Seattle are likely to be different from those of gay Asian American men in other parts of the country with a smaller Asian or gay population. Similarly, the long-standing pan-ethnic nature of Asian American politics and community activism in Seattle may also impact how men who trace their ethnic roots to different parts of Asia
may privilege an Asian racial identity over an ethnic-specific identity, for both gay and straight Asian Americans. It is within this context of Seattle that this book should be read.

The Road Ahead

In chapter 1, I argue that Asian men, both gay and straight, have historically been feminized as a result of western domination and control and continue to be feminized today through subtle means, which helps to maintain masculine domination of white men over Asian men. To do so, I explore a wide range of media products from movies, magazines, television programs, and even comic books. Rather than just exploring stereotypes, I trace how the complex relationships between the east and the west have led to the construction of the “mysterious east” that acts as a comparison to the “rational west” and how these constructions demonstrate an attempt to construct the west as being more masculine, thus more superior, to the east.

In the second chapter, I expand the argument initiated in chapter 1 by examining how gay Asian men are specifically portrayed in contemporary gay western discourse. Within contemporary gay western discourse, I find that narratives about gay Asian men simply mirror the narratives about all Asian men found in the mainstream media. Primarily, I analyze the Advocate and OUT magazines from 2005 to 2010 in order to examine how images of gay Asian men are constructed and maintained within larger “western” gay narratives. Much like the way that Asian men are used to promote white male superiority, images of Asian men in the gay media are often used to support gay white male masculinity. I also analyze the small number of gay Asian male characters from various television programs and popular films and trace the role that they play in the larger gay imagination. In examining these constructs, I find that gay Asian men are constructed as the feminine “other” to the more “masculine” gay white man.

Chapter 3 examines the nature of racism experienced by gay Asian American men in the larger gay community. Using ethnographic and interview data, I trace gay Asian American men’s personal experiences with racism and the impact that racism has on their everyday lives. Racism in the gay community is based largely on beliefs about the desir-
ability of one race over another as potential sexual partners. Within this hierarchy, white men are promoted as being the most desirable, while Asian men are perhaps the least. This highly racialized hierarchy of desire leads to gay Asian American men seeing each other as competitors for white male attention and hinders community formation for members of this group. At the same time, this chapter also explores ways that gay Asian American men attempt to combat the racism they encounter in the gay community and negotiate the racialized and gendered space they inhabit.

In chapter 4, I explore the various methods of combating the stigma of race and sexuality utilized by gay Asian American men. Rather than being passive recipients of dominant racist and sexist discourse, I find that gay Asian American men actively manage and reconceptualize what it means to be gay and Asian. After examining a number of ways that gay Asian American men attempt to manage the stigma of race and sexuality, I argue that members of this group attempt to reconceptualize what it means to be both gay and Asian using a variety of methods that address racial and sexual inequalities in the larger society. By doing so, they are able to increase their self-esteem by constructing a positive sense of self, thus helping to mitigate the stigma associated with being a racial minority in the gay community and a sexual minority within the Asian American community.

Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the ways that gay Asian American men construct social identities within the larger confines of race and sexuality. The primary focus of this chapter is in the various ways that gay Asian American men construct a social identity through the stories they tell about what it means to be both gay and Asian. Rather than having an identity that is inherent or developed through various stages of development as psychologists might note, I argue that identities are actively negotiated and maintained through interaction with others and the larger social environment. Specifically, I argue that gay Asian male identity is a response to the racialized and sexualized situation that those who come to view themselves as gay Asian American men experience in the United States. Constructing a gay Asian male identity is a complex process that involves negotiating what one views as being both gay and Asian, while at the same time defining how being gay and Asian makes one different from “regular” gays and Asians. Rather than an identity
that exists “out there” waiting to be found or adopted through various stages of development, gay Asian American men don’t necessarily have a clear understanding of why being gay and Asian makes them different from others. Instead, they negotiate what it means to be a member of this group. Because of this uncertainty, defining and negotiating gay Asian American male identities involves first outlining how being gay and Asian makes a person different from others. Not surprisingly, gay Asian American men’s narratives are often couched in the language of difference. It is this difference that they feel, from the mainstream gay community and the larger Asian American community, that first lays the groundwork for who they are. In chapter 5, I explore the specific social and historical experiences of “difference” that begin to define them as a group not quite a part of “Asian America” or “gay America.” Rather than developing along neatly defined or identifiable stages, I demonstrate that gay Asian American male identity formation and negotiation is a messy process through which race intersects with sexuality, gender intersects with race, sexuality intersects with gender, etc., and all exert pressures on each other.

Up the Street on a Different Night

By the time the lights abruptly go on in the club, the drag queens who have just competed for a crown have already changed into their post-competition outfits and have begun mingling in the crowd. The atmosphere in the room is noticeably more relaxed, as audience members and performers socialize casually and easily. As little pieces of paper, each containing a vote for a queen, are handed to pageant officials, there’s no campaigning or grandstanding. There’s no cattiness or showboating. Instead, the queens are genuine in their affection for each other and for the people who have come to cheer them on. As much as the winner of the wet underwear contest at R-Place was expected, so was the winner from this pageant. But, unlike the young white man who won by strutting his stuff in wet white briefs, the winner tonight is a slim Asian American drag queen, who most likely spent as much time on her craft as the white man spent at the gym.

Catching up with the winner, I congratulate her. “I’m glad you won,” I tell her. “Me too,” she says to me, “because I’ve got something bigger
planned.” That “something bigger” would come a few years later, as she would go on to be one of the founders of the Mister and Miss Asian Pacific Islander American pageant. It would be easy, right now, in this moment inside the now well-lit nightclub, to assume that all she would do is to establish yet another drag pageant in a city that already has more than its share. But that assumption would be missing the point of this book. Tonight, the winner on stage may be easily mistaken for being just a “pretty girl” wearing a crown. But in the next few years, she would become one of a number of gay Asian American drag queens who use their wins in drag pageants to turn racialized, sexualized, and gendered assumptions on their heads. Using the popularity and notoriety they gain by winning drag pageants, they will interrogate what it means to be gay in the Asian American community and to be Asian in the gay community.

As this book will demonstrate, for gay Asian American drag queens, winning pageants isn’t about self-satisfaction but about gaining a platform to address issues of race and gender in the gay community and sexuality in the Asian American community. In the process, they will challenge the hierarchy of race and gender in the gay community by troubling the taken-for-granted assumptions about the desirability of masculinity and whiteness and the hierarchy of sexuality in the Asian American community by disrupting the taken-for-granted heterosexuality that has come to define the “Asian American” experience. Using the platform they earn, gay Asian American drag queens will force gay men to confront what it means to be racially desirable and disrupt the gender hierarchy that attempts to position masculinity as “better” than femininity, while simultaneously forcing Asian Americans to confront what it means to be members of a racialized community. And by doing so, gay Asian American drag queens will save us all.