

The background is a deep red color with a central white text area. On either side of the text area are vertical yellow panels. The left panel features a hanging lantern, a diamond-shaped knot, a cloud-like pattern, a circular coin-like symbol, and a stack of coins. The right panel features a hanging lantern, a cloud-like pattern, a circular coin-like symbol, and a mouse. The title is written in a white serif font.

# A Brief Queer History of Asian Americans

By: \_\_\_\_\_  
21H. \_\_\_\_\_ Final Project

# Framing the historiography of queer Asian Americans

- Queerness has only just become visible in Asian American (AA) history
- “Queering” familiar AA history rather than unearthing new queer figures
- Very few historians in the space
  - Early (think late 1900s) AA historians and activists intentionally shut out queer people for moral reasons or because they thought it hindered their progress
- Very few publications
  - Queer AA joined with other POC to self publish (even setting up printing presses in their own homes)
- Funding is sparse
  - Difficult for queer historians who focus on queer history to get hired as faculty
  - Also bad in nonprofit organizations, e.g. a museum took down a sex toy exhibit because they feared losing funding from banks and politicians

# Major trends in Asian American sexuality

- Interaction between Asian cultures and white America
  - Asian conservatism + desire to be accepted in white America
  - Lots of Asian countries had same-sex sexualities before Western imperialization mandated strict moral codes
  - Imposition of American family structures
- Conflicting stereotypes of Asian sexuality in America
  - Painted AA sexuality (of all sexualities) as oppressed
  - Asian women are hypersexualized whereas Asian men are portrayed as asexual
  - Contrast between stereotype of Asian men sexually assaulting young white boys vs culture of emasculating Asian men

# Asian population trends in the US

- Immigration waves
  - Mostly came to seek employment starting in the 1860s
  - Gold, agriculture, factories, and railroads
  - Very few women immigrated
  - In 1860, only about 5% of the Chinese population in America was female
- Immigration laws
  - In 1875, the US passed the Page Law, which effectively prohibited the immigration of Chinese, Japanese, and Mongolian women
  - In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act prohibited all immigration of Chinese workers



# Mid 1800s to early 1900s: Chinatown in SF

- By the 1880s, the prostitute population was more than 1,800, accounting for 70% of the total Chinese female population
  - Police regularly evicted prostitutes
- Chinese female impersonators were also prevalent, making a lot of money working in theaters and nightclubs
- “Exotic oriental performance” included song-and-dance routines, slapstick, magic acts, Vaudeville, and even erotic “bubble” and “feather” dancing
- Attracted a lot of sex tourism and queer clients
- Doctors spread rumors of disease coming from there



The Street of the Gamblers (Ross Alley), Arnold Genthe, 1898.





Jadin Wong performs "The Dance of the Moon Goddess" at Forbidden City in the 1930s.



The Forbidden City chorus girls show off their legs, which was quite a titillating thing to do in the 1940s.

# Bachelor societies + family structures

- High male populations caused the emergence of “bachelor societies”
  - In Chinatowns and cities across the country
  - Think 1000s of men for <100 women
  - Worsened by the Chinese Exclusion Act
- “Neighbourhoods of grown men living together, sleeping in bunk beds, playing mahjong, and sharing the companionship and responsibilities that are usually dispersed across a family unit.” (Hune-Brown)





# Same-sex sexuality in the mid 1800s to early 1900s

- Male prostitution was prevalent among Japanese and Chinese immigrants at work hubs like Alaskan canneries
- Same-sex intimacy occurred before the labels of gay/lesbian/bi/queer etc. were created
- There were frequently interracial same-sex affairs and multiracial family structures in late 1800s
  - Wasn't until white women brought in the idea of “civilized family” aka white heterosexual marriage that this seemed weird (Sueyoshi)—connection to family structure discussed in class

Example: Japanese American communities continued to be mostly same-sex in this era until...

“As same-sex sexuality in America came to be perceived as deviant through the 1930s, the Japanese American press also represented queerness as troubling, creating a mirror in which Japanese in America increasingly viewed white American values about same-sex sexuality as their own.” (Sueyoshi, Yogi)

# 1940s: Effects of WW2

- Japanese internment camps
  - “The government’s efforts to “Americanize” Issei and to promote Christianity within the camps stressed heterosexuality and traditional gender roles. Nevertheless, there are indications, subtle and overt, of queer sensibilities and behaviors within the confines of the Japanese American incarceration camps.” (Sueyoshi, Yogi)
- Crackdown of gay nightlife in San Francisco
  - Military executed a series of raids targeting gay bars, with the stated aim of protecting servicemen from gay people
  - Chinatown was also searched several times as gay men frequently gathered there



Portrait of Jiro Onuma (center) with friends, c. 1930s, Jiro Onuma Collection (2000-27), Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco.

# 1940s-60s: Effects of the Cold War

- Government increased control over public spaces
- Chinatown attempted to adapt the framework of heterosexual respectable domesticity, in order to fit into mainstream American culture
- In 1953, Chinatown began holding Chinese New Year parades
  - Overall, was an attempt to improve public image, bring in business and tourism, and undo the image of "sexual and gendered deviance"
- In 1954, introduced an accompanying "Miss Chinatown" beauty pageant
  - Emphasized traditional Confucian gender norms and conformed to American expectations of womanhood (see class readings on protesting Miss America)
  - Portrayed Chinese women as exotic and submissive
  - Contestants were judged by White beauty standards

"By this time, Chinese Americans had long been Orientalized by their fellow Americans -- in other words, they were portrayed as exotic and distinctly different from White Americans," Yeh wrote. "(Community) leaders understood that only by appealing to the American Orientalist imagination could they distinguish themselves from the Red Chinese and, in addition, draw more tourists into Chinatown."

(CNN)



A rainbow of cheongsams are worn at the 2006 Miss Chinatown pageant in Los Angeles. Credit: Ricardo DeAratanha/Los Angeles Times/Getty Images



The **Hot** suit found remains a competition category of Miss Chinatown USA. Here 2017's winner, Yang Karun, walks on stage during the pageant in San Francisco. Credit: Liu Yifan/China News Agency/Getty Images



Four runner-ups stand around Carol Ng, winner of the Miss Chinatown USA pageant of 1960. Credit: Bettmann Archive/Getty Images

# Living as an AA gay man in the 1940s-80s

Common themes that came up in 23 interviews with Eric Wat (conducted in 1997 and 1998, called the “Los Angeles Gay Asian Pacific Community Oral History Project”)

- Importance of Asian restaurants + bars + bathhouses
- Difficulty of being Asian + gay in the military
- Preference for and competition over white men
  - Lack of friendship among gay AA
- White Americans either don't want AA or view them with “Geisha-like subservience”
- Pressure to assimilate to white culture
  - Tension between AA and Asians in Asian organizations
- Growing to understand the intersectionality of being an Asian gay man
- Want to not have AA queer organizations be viewed as “dating services”
- Protesting the Briggs Initiative, or California Proposition 6, which was on the California state ballot in 1978 to ban gays and lesbians from working in California schools (failed)

# 1970s-80s: Formation of AA gay and lesbian organizations

- Began forming their own organizations:
  - Asian Pacific Lesbians and Gays (A/PLG) in 1980
  - Asian Lesbians of the East Coast in 1983
- HIV/AIDS organizations include:
  - Asian AIDS Project (AAP) in 1987
  - Asian AIDS Taskforce (AAT) in 1987
- Began participating in larger LGBT conferences
- Asian lesbian and bisexual women organized retreats
  - The West Coast Asian Pacific Lesbian Retreat in Sonoma, California in 1987 drew eighty people, mostly from the Bay Area



Asian/Pacific Lesbians and Gays (A/PLG) contingent march at the Christopher Street West gay pride parade in Los Angeles. 1982.

# 1986: Trikone and queer South Asians

- Two Silicon Valley engineers started the Trikone magazine
- Co-founder Arvind Kumar used the photocopier at his HP office to print the first issues
- “We would joke that while Trikone was hailed as the world’s oldest South Asian LGBTQ+ organization, it was really just a bunch of homesick middle-class Indian engineers trying to find a home for both their ethnicity and their sexuality. But in the process they built something much bigger than themselves, these accidental activists with their engineering degrees. While the magazine shut down in 2014, the group continues to operate as a not-for-profit.” (Roy)
- Big emphasis was placed on not leaving behind Indian culture in pursuing gay rights. “They made sure Trikone marched not just in the San Francisco Pride parade but also the India Day Parade” (Roy)





Trikone members marched in the 1986 Pride parade in San Francisco, becoming the first South Asians to participate in such an event.



# 1980s-90s: AA gay and lesbian organizing

- Mainstream organizations like churches increasingly recognized their LGBTQ members
- Parents of queer children became more accepting + even formed groups in support
- Creation of AA lesbian performance and comedy groups, like “Unbound Feet”
- Rise of internet forums
- Increase in queer publications



FOR YOUR INFORMATION  
CONT'D

Spring Fever

A No-Nonsense Guide to Bay Area Women's Clubs -

by G.E. POHAN

"THE CITY"

- SOFIA'S - 527-9 Valencia Street, between 16th and 17th Streets, San Francisco, (415) 621-5795

The newest addition to the women's club circuit, Sofia's is also the first Latina dance bar in the Bay Area, warm, friendly atmosphere. An excellent gathering place for women of color. A great place to put on your dancing shoes and boogie to some hot salsa music! Not fleet footed, y'say? Check out the pool table or pin-ball machines. Sofia's, a refreshing change from the drone-clone discos.

- CLEMENTINA S/BAYBRICK INN - 1190 Folsom Street, corner of 8th Street, San Francisco Entertainment Hotline - (415) 552-1121

This is the hot spot to be on a Saturday night in the city. Sizzling music and sultry women (or is the other way around?) Come as you are or dress to kill, it's common place to find black seamed stockings and 501 jeans perched on the bar stools at the Baybrick. Weekend nites the club fills early...best to arrive by 10:00 pm or be prepared to stand in line. On a good night, expect approximately 30% women of color.

THE PENINSULA

- B STREET/SASSY'S - 236 S "B" Street, San Mateo (415) 348-4046

Coming from the city, take 101 South. Exit on 3rd Avenue, keep right. Turn right on "B" Street.

Nestled in the heart of the suburbs, B Street/Sassy's is a safe harbor for Peninsula gays. B Street (downstairs/street level) for men, with Sassy's (upstairs, accessible thru women's bathroom) for women. Although spacious and roomy downstairs, the women's dance/bar area upstairs is considerably smaller. However, good things come in small packages, as evidenced by the bumper to bumper traffic on the dance floor. Lots women of color...mostly Asian sisters.

An excellent place to recruit new members for our newsletter...I tried my best but soon abandoned the effort...why? Too many women, too little time!

EAST BAY

- OLLIE'S - 4130 Telegraph Avenue, corner of 41st Street, Oakland, (415) 653-6017

A great place to start your weekend off, Ollie's hops on Thursday nights. Disco music and women, women, women! No cover charge, too! 80% women of color. The crowd pours in around 10:00 pm. The disc jockey, Stacey, adds zest and sparkle, by rapping with the tunes. The women is hot! Two pool tables and a speakeasy lounge with fireplace.

A guide to clubs published by "Phoenix Rising", an Asian lesbian magazine from the 1980s.

# 1980s-90s: AA lesbian publications

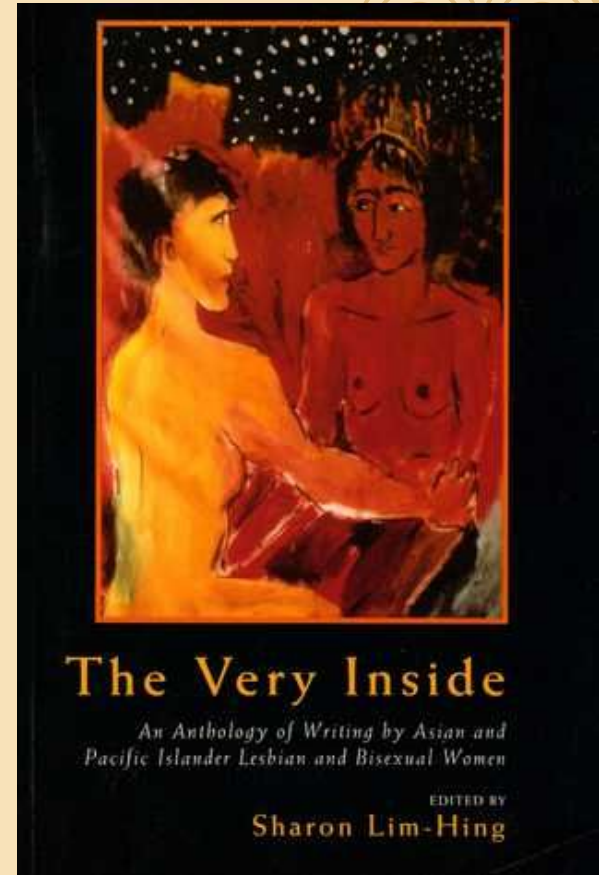
- “Between The Lines: An Anthology by Pacific/Asian Lesbians of Santa Cruz, California” (1987)
- “The Very Inside: An Anthology of Writings by Asian & Pacific Islander Lesbians” (1994)
  - One essay about a 3rd generation Japanese woman, who describes herself as a “queer banana”. She can’t claim to be Japanese, but would be presumed to be so by anyone at the train station.
  - Lots of stories about coming out and facing disapproval from parents
  - Struggles to find other Asian lesbians (in college, in the whole town, etc)

# The Very Inside

From an essay about the retreat from APLN to Santa Cruz in 1989

“Yet for all our differences, I think we all understood that diversity is not divisive”  
(117)

“I wanted role models to show me how things could be done, but, when I looked around me, all the possible role models I saw were gay white leaders... Now, I have 170 role models imprinted on my mind”  
(120)



## 2000s: Even more organizing



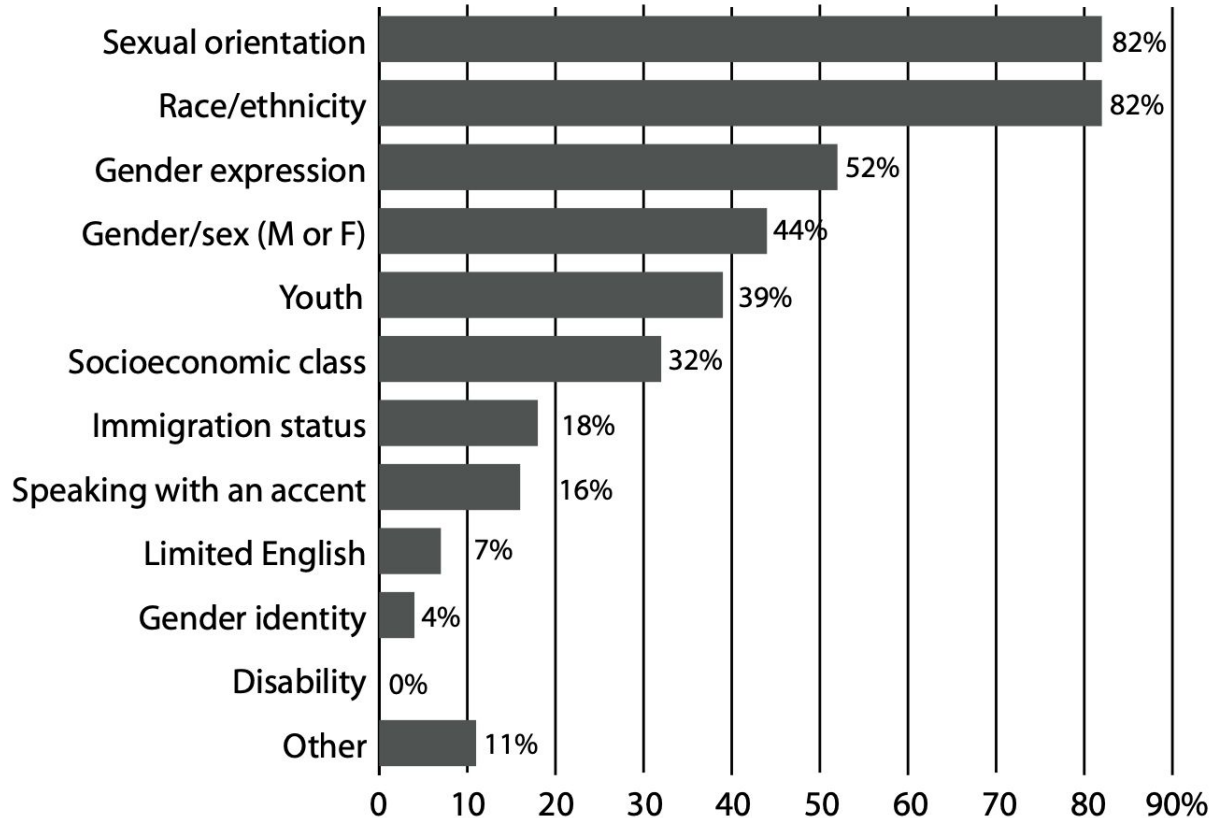
- More activism across the board
- Student groups forming on campus
- Exhibits in museums, showing AA queer history is making its way into mainstream American history
- Involved in larger movements
  - E.g. Korean American Dan Choi advocating for the repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell

# 2000s: Issues continuing today

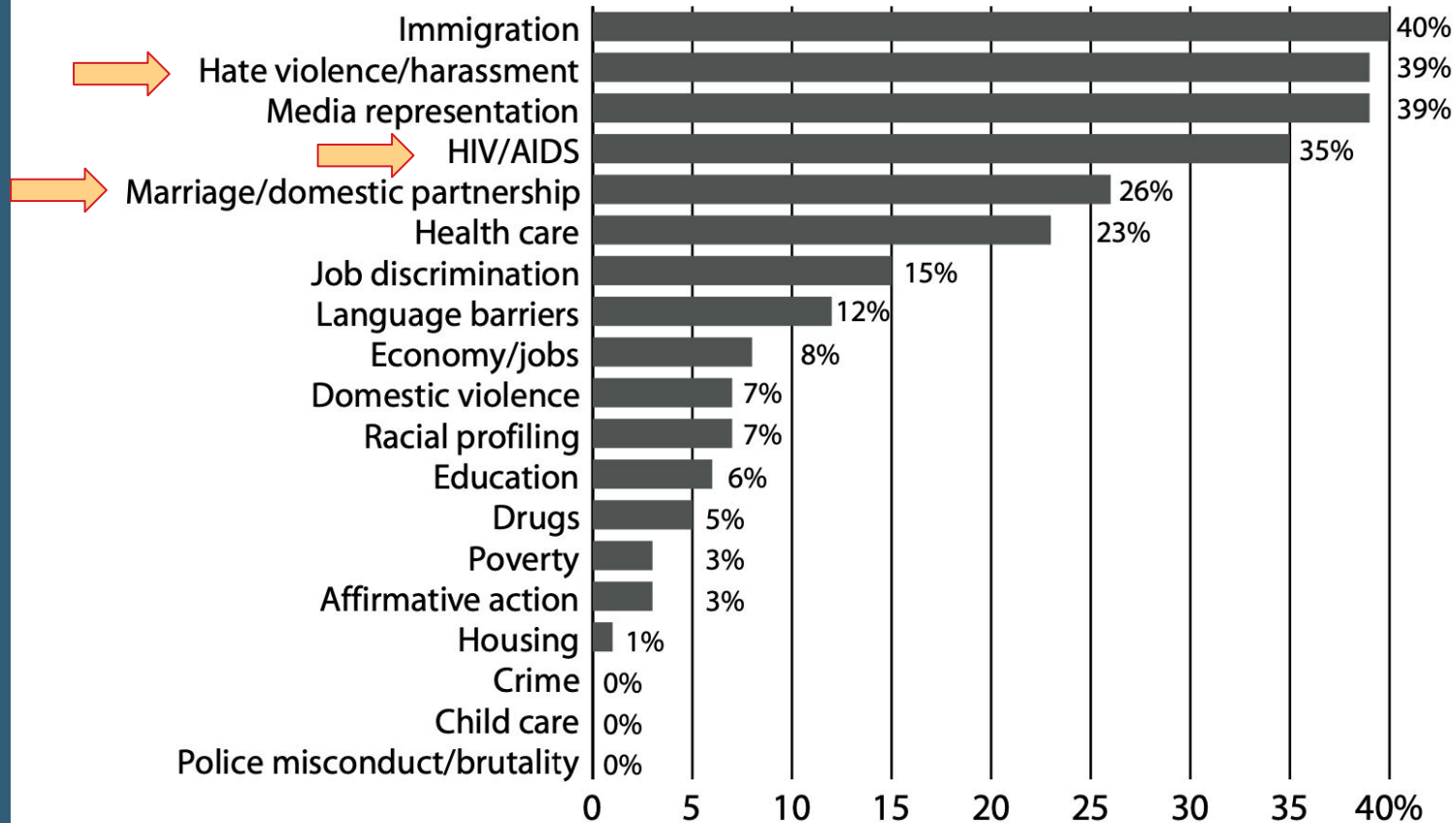
A survey of 124 attendees at the Queer Asian Pacific Legacy conference at New York University in 2004 revealed:

- Intersectional nature of queer Asian Americans opens up many more avenues for discrimination
- Language is a large barrier to inclusivity in the LGBT rights movement
  - 43% of Asian Pacific Americans over 18 are limited English proficient
- Gender is a large issue, where men are portrayed in an asexual manner and women are hypersexualized

## Have you ever experienced discrimination and/or harassment based on any of the following?

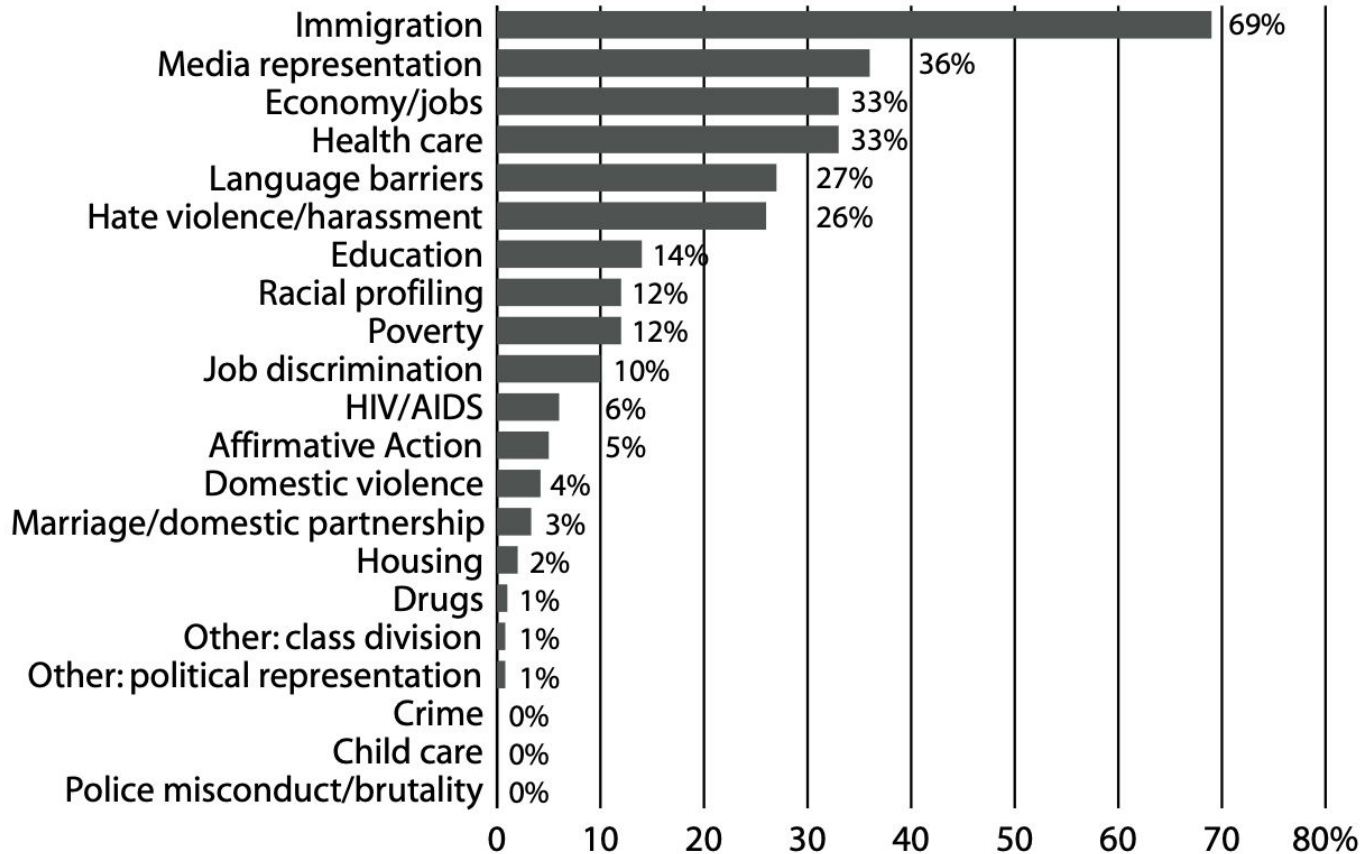


**Figure 16: Most important issues facing LGBT Asian Pacific Americans in the U.S.**





**Figure 15: Most important issues facing all Asian-Pacific Americans in the U.S.**



# Connecting to today: Asian American hate



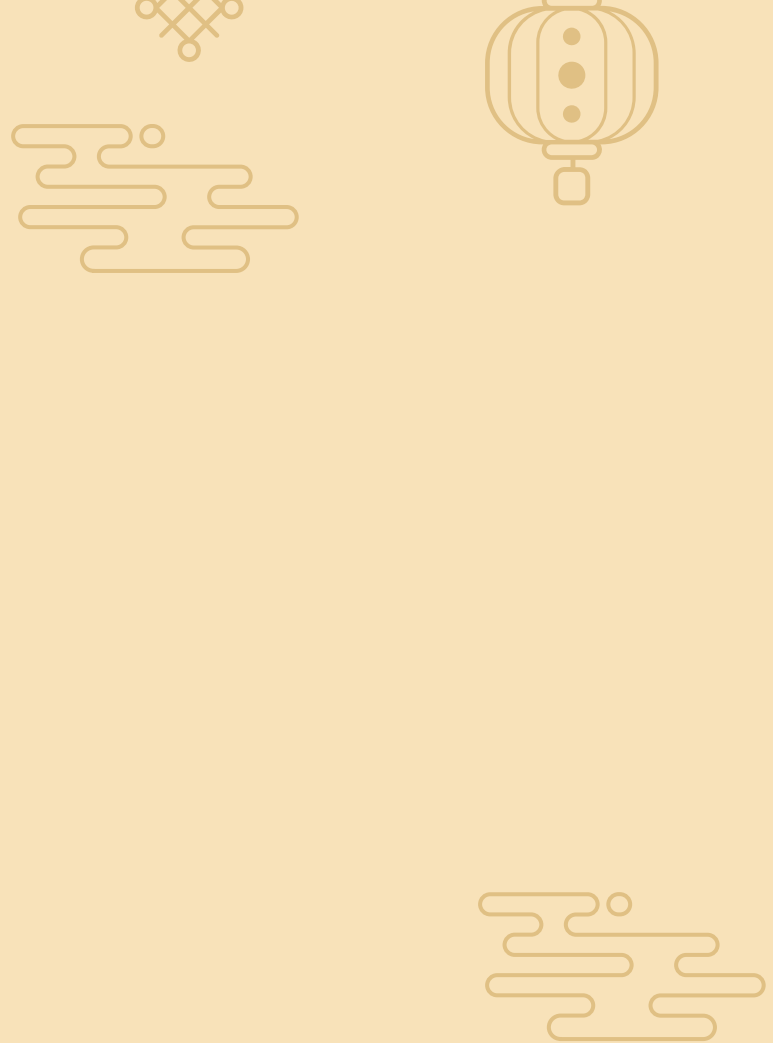
# Summary

- Queer AA history is a very new field, and deserves to be studied in greater depth.
- Same-sex sexuality in AA communities has existed since the 1800s, but was squashed as the traditional American family structure grew.
- WW2 and the Cold War increased the pressure to assimilate.
- Conservative nature of Asian cultures is not the sole reason for discrimination against AA queer people. It was worsened by the need to adopt Western moral codes.
- The intersection of race and sexuality (and gender), a common theme in this class, is key.

Unity comes not from uniformity but from accepting the fucking fact that individually we have been shaped by a unique combination of experiences and as a result we're bound to piss each other off.

# Thanks!

Contact \_\_\_\_\_@mit.edu with  
questions.



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