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Rainbow Rice: A Dialogue between Two Asian American Gay Men in Higher Education and Student Affairs

Raja G. Bhattar & Nathaniel A. Victoria

We, the authors (an Indian American Hindu and a Filipino American Catholic), share our experiences as gay Asian American graduate students in a higher education and student affairs administration program. We first focus on the ongoing struggles of being gay in conservative Asian American cultures and religious traditions. Next we describe our experiences as Asian Americans in a gay culture that is predominantly White. The hybridization of our ethnic/religious and sexual identities during our graduate school experience concludes the piece. This Scholarly Personal Narrative provides our reflections on identity development and factors that have influenced the process. We provide suggestions for the field on how to increase the presence of underrepresented groups.

Though we are both Asian American and gay, our surroundings rarely allow these identities to coexist. This narrative presents a dialogue between two Asian American gay men and chronicles our identity development. As we explore the contradictions related to being both gay in Asian American society and Asian American in the predominantly White, gay society, we describe the aspects of our educational experiences that promote successful integration of our identities. We provide information to the higher education and student affairs administration community in the hopes of creating a healthier environment for Asian American gay men.

First, we comment on the taboo status of homosexuality in most Asian cultures and its perception that homosexuality is a component of White, not Asian, culture. Specifically, we comment on how the religious roots of our cultures have hindered our coming out processes. Next, we explore the discrimination we experience due to the predominantly White representation of gay culture in the United States, focusing on the difficulties created by a lack of visible role models and the absence of an environment celebrating our identities. Finally, we reflect upon our graduate

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experiences in the Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration (HESA) program at the University of Vermont (UVM). It has provided a framework for integrating these disparate identities, resulting in this narrative.

Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller (2004) state that “every person has many social identities that are influenced by race, gender, sexual orientation, and religion, to name a few identities. If we see individuals in terms of only one identity, we minimize the complexity of who they are” (p. 23). We concur and recognize that people cannot be confined to singular identities.

Gay? Hijra? Bakla? Defining the Struggles of East versus West

The Paradox of Being Hindu and Gay (Raja)

The term *gay*, a recent addition to the Indian cultural dictionary, carries a lot of resistance. Even today, the Indian Penal Code #377, implemented during British rule of India, states,

Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine. (India Law Info, n.d.)

The phrase, “against the order of nature,” refers to any non-heterosexual relationship. Though organizations are working on this issue, Indian tradition and pop culture still define gay as abnormal and “evil,” just like my older sister calls it.

From my experience, the stereotypical portrayal of homosexuality in Indian society is in the form of a very feminine male or a *hijra*. *Hijra* is a term used to define transgender, intersex, and “third gender” people who live in communities outside of society (“Hijra (South Asia),” n.d.). Consequently, there is a fear among Indians that if someone identifies as gay, he will soon start dressing and acting as a woman. The idea of being a gay male in the Western sense is only slowly gaining acceptance among the more progressive crowds, let alone among my orthodox family of hereditary priests. Especially in the United States, Indian communities have a hard time accepting sexual differences because sexuality is a taboo topic in India. Through my conversations with family and friends, I have been told many times that “people who say they are gay are sick, period” (R. Nandhan, personal communication, August 13, 1999).

Some of my family members also share this view. “You can’t be gay! You’re a Hindu!” were the first words to come out my cousin’s mouth when I came out to him my sophomore year of college (P. Bhattacharya, personal communication, October 23, 2002). For a few years prior to this occasion, my sexual and religio-ethnic identities were at battle, something from which I am still recovering.

I have been aware of my attraction to other men since the seventh grade; however, I cannot think of a time when I did not know I was Hindu. From the day I was born, I have been socialized as a Hindu from celebrating special holidays to performing daily rituals. My extremely orthodox family and the Indian community incorporated religion into every aspect of my life. My use of the terms *Hindu* and *Indian* as being one and the same in this work is intentional. They are interchangeable in my mind because of the highly integrated presence that Hinduism and Indian culture have had in my life. I really cannot distinguish one from the other.

I was never known just by my first name like the other kids; I was always Raja, “the priest’s son.” This title was appropriate in some respects because I was heavily involved in our temple. As a family friend once wrote, my parents had groomed me to be the “perfect Indian boy, a role model for all Hindu youth growing up in the United States” (S. Thangada, personal communication, August 5, 2000). They worked hard to make sure that I knew my prayers and daily rituals by heart, taught me how to write and read in several Indian languages, and instilled in me a deep appreciation for Indian culture. Because I was so deeply rooted in this culture, it is apparent why I consider my ethnicity to be my primary identity.

My life in high school was considerably different. In addition to serving as our school mascot for two years, I was involved in several extracurricular student groups. My parents always had a hard time understanding why I spent so much time at school in meetings instead of studying. As I became older, my parents’ anxiety increased because I was starting to act like “those crazy American kids,” which is what my mom liked to call my friends. When I would mention that my friends were dating, she was quick to reprimand me for associating with those “spoiled kids” and made sure that I did not consider dating. Because everyone knew that my culture did not allow me to date, I did not have to worry about having a girlfriend or coming out, which would have been disastrous in light of the negative perceptions of homosexuality in Indian culture. Though I did come out to a few close friends who also happened to confide in me about their sexuality, for the most part I ignored any conversation about relationships or dating. There were only a handful of Indians at school, and I did not want them to know my secret. If I came out to them, in essence I would be coming out to my parents and the whole Indian community. That information had the power to travel more quickly than the speed of sound.

Oddly enough, though I have felt little support from the Hindu community, my religious and spiritual beliefs have been a great source of comfort and courage for me throughout my sexual identity development. I consider myself a Hindu not only because I was raised in this tradition but also because I truly believe in its core philosophy (though it is not always apparent to others in practice). A basic tenet of Hinduism is that every being has a soul; every soul is equal in the eyes

of God; and, therefore, every being is equal in the eyes of God. Regardless of creed, gender, sexual identity, religion or any other difference, all souls are formed from one substance that Hindus call God. To the best of my knowledge, there is nothing in Hindu scriptures that looks down upon homosexuality.

When I was struggling with accepting my sexuality in college, I emailed the editor of a Hindu magazine to which my family subscribes about this dilemma: “Can I be Hindu and gay?” I was not sure if anyone would even write back to me, but I was surprised to see an e-mail in my inbox the next day. It said something to the extent of homosexuality not being an “abnormality” or against my faith because we are all created by God and however we are created is who we are meant to be.

With this e-mail response boosting my confidence, I decided to come out to my cousin. While I paced back and forth in the bathroom of my residence hall, my cousin questioned whether I was playing a joke or going through a phase. As I had expected this relative to be the one person in my family who would understand my situation, this was an especially difficult conversation. He said, “I can’t believe you. Why are you telling me? Do you think I’m gay or something? Dude, the family is going to be pissed when they find out about this!” (P. Bhattacharya, personal communication, October 13, 2002). I really did not know what to say. I responded with, “Please promise me that you won’t tell anyone. I’m only telling you because I had to tell someone. All my friends know at college and I wanted you to know because I trust you to keep this secret.” I could tell he was in shock, trying to process the information. Overall he was understanding and remained on the phone with me throughout a two-hour long conversation.

My cousin is one of only two family members to whom I have come out, and I have a feeling things will remain this way for a while. During my college years and now in graduate school, I am out to most people. Though I have lost several friends in my life by coming out, I have accepted that people will constantly transition in and out of my life. However, it is much harder to lose family members, as they are the ones I hope will be always there, even when my so-called “friends” are not. I have close relationships with most of my family, especially my parents, and cannot imagine losing those bonds. I have a feeling that I will have to come out to them soon, especially when the wedding question arises. Indian culture believes strongly in arranged marriages, and my mother has already chosen a bride. This poor woman is now waiting for me to marry her and be her Prince Charming. The problem is, I want my own Prince Charming, too. I know this will be a difficult conversation to have but until that day comes, I will be who I am while trying to balance a parallel identity where my two worlds are kept separate (Dilley, 2005): one where I try to pass as a heterosexual man among other Indians and one in a non-Indian community where I try to fuse my ethnic and sexual identities.

Struggling to Find a Voice (Nathan)

Nathan, why did you hang up on me? You look so ugly with your breasts showing off . . . You're a boy, Nathan. You are not a girl. You are only 23 . . . things can still change. (family member, personal communication, October 14, 2006)

The Filipino portrayal of gay culture is similar to the Hindu version described by Raja. In Tagalog, the word similar to *hijra* is *bakla*, which “means dressing up, and making a living in the woman’s role, while his partner is usually straight” (Silverio, 2003, para. 4). Although I do not prescribe to this mentality, both friends and family members have perceived me in this fashion, as depicted in the quote above. In that example, after beginning a new workout routine, I had developed pectoral muscles. Apparently they looked like breasts.

Around age 12, I remember remarking to classmates that doing traditionally female things, like playing hopscotch, did not make me gay. I professed that “It’s not really that I’m a girl. I’m just a lesbian inside a guy’s body.” I knew I fell out of what the majority said a man should be; but I also recognized that I needed to like women. So instead of questioning the cultural expectations placed upon me by my religion and society, I questioned myself.

I believed that no one around me could empathize with my situation. My Catholic religion and my Filipino American cultural identity did not provide the channels I need to express myself. And so, I found refuge in what I believe is negatively facilitating the identity development of many closeted gay men today through its ability for fragmenting different selves—the Internet.

The World Wide Web allowed me to express my identity without coming out of the closet as a gay male. I was simultaneously able to connect with gay and bisexual men and maintain a certain level of discretion. The Internet allowed me to engage in what I thought my religion said homosexuality was all about: sex in all its forms. In the movie *God and Gays: Bridging the Gap*, one character said “[Heterosexual people] have a life. We have a lifestyle” (Clark, 2006). As Raja described, I led a double life: engaging in gay culture, while living a Catholic, Filipino American life.

My pre-collegiate education, 13 years of Catholic education, was very homogeneous. In the environment of grade school, White married parents left the hospital or office early to pick up their child in a Lexus or a BMW. Although I was fiscally similar to my classmates, I was visibly different due to my ethnic identity. It was not until high school where I fully realized I was also different due to my sexual identity. My high school was a private, preparatory, Catholic day school in Delaware. I was one of the few people of color in my graduating class of a little over 125, and I did not know anyone who was out. However, I am now dating someone who

graduated only a year above me from the same school and was out of the closet. My lack of awareness of other gay men in high school could have been caused by the sheltered environment in which people pretended to be welcoming of all different types of people, provided they were not gay or pro-choice.

I believe Catholicism's main inspiration is the Bible, a book that operates within a binary context. I recently heard that "the Bible is a wonderful story about oneness taught through the use of duality" (Clark, 2006). The binaries abound: man and woman, good and evil, right and wrong. Living within my contradictions, struggling when wrong doesn't "feel" wrong or evil feels "good," this mentality limited my life choices. My struggle around binaries was exacerbated by my dilemma around free will—a core tenant of Catholicism. Some Catholics believe that acting on homosexuality is a choice: homosexuality is a sin; a sin is a choice; therefore, living as a homosexual is a choice. Never mind that Catholics are taught to believe "You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than [this]" (Mk 12:29-31 New American Bible). But I never fully felt the love.

Even without the support of those close to me, I got through most of high school by keeping my religious and gay lives separate. But as I came to realize that both my gay and Catholic Filipino identities were important to my identity, I did not know what to do. When I was forced to bridge these two identities, calamity ensued.

My coming out process to my family happened right before I went to college. Though when I look back, it was not really a process; it was an episode. It was late winter of my senior year. The Spring Musical was opening the next day, but a freak snowstorm canceled rehearsal and classes after 11 a.m. I decided to visit my boyfriend at the time, who lived in Philadelphia, roughly 30 minutes away, instead of going directly home from school. My short visit and nap turned into a six hour snooze-fest, leaving me to drive home in a foot of snow.

Upon entering my house, I was accosted by family. I struggled to come up with viable excuses to explain my absence, but my mother saw through each and every lie. She finally pried his number out of me, calling to verify that I had been with him. She asked him "Are you gay?" He answered, "Yes, and thus implicated me as well. At the time, he was 24, and I was 17. My parents threatened to throw him in jail, and the rest of the story is a painful blur.

This bridging of my gay and Filipino identities has strained my familial relationship. I almost did not go to the college of my choice due to the political liberalness of that environment. During preview weekend, the queer community chalked offensive material on the ground to challenge potential conservative matriculants. Though I found this action welcoming, my parents saw it as offensive. To my parents, sending me to that school was like "putting an alcoholic in a liquor store."

A pamphlet that I received from my parents right before I started college explains their mentality. It stated “similar to the recovering alcoholic, the homosexual must take one day at a time, and make it a day of activity combined with trust in the grace of God” (Harvey, 1979, p. 12).

All-American Boy Next Door...Is That Me?

Finding my Voice Through Building Meaningful Relationships (Nathan)

As a gay Filipino youth, I rarely saw images of Asian or Asian American role models. Everywhere that I turned, I found images of blue-eyed, blonde haired men with perfectly chiseled faces, tanned skin, and defined muscles evident through their striped, fitted shirts. These images became my sexual ideal. Next to them was a feminine version of that model. In front of them were the children, one male and one female, and the dog, usually a golden retriever. These images became what I sought out. They became my norm. Little did I know that in my mind they were establishing the dominant discourse around Whiteness and heterosexuality.

In the 1950s, Bob Mizer, the founder of the Athletic Model Guild, supported this ideal. He had a specific aesthetic he wanted for his models, “which included chiseled muscles, a cleft chin, and, by and large, white skin” (Morgan as cited in Watt, 2002, p. 60). This aesthetic still exists today. These are the aesthetics necessary to fit into the gay world, the subcultural capital one must have to be valued. It is hard for many Asian Americans to achieve these looks, and at the beginning of my development, I was told by the gay environment I was not the norm. Growing up, it was not uncommon to hear, “You don’t sound like I thought you would. Your voice doesn’t have an accent.” Or, “You don’t look Asian. I’m not saying I’m racist, but you don’t have those eyes.”

Jill Nagle (2004) discusses the plight for queer men of color when stating “Any representations of men of color most often appear as fetishes for ‘white’ men’s interest” (p. 444). David Henry Hwang (1989) discusses this phenomenon specifically for Asian Americans in the afterword to *M. Butterfly*. He states, “in [interracial] relationships, the Asian virtually always plays the role of the ‘woman’; the Rice Queen [gay White men who only pursue gay Asian men], culturally and sexually, is the ‘man.’” (as cited in Chang, 2001, para. 11). I did not see myself or other gay people of color as full members of the queer community, and thus I fell prey to the racist environment of the gay culture within which I operated. As I internalized the belief that queer people of color (QPOCs) are inferior to gay White men, I unconsciously believed I needed to date a White man to become “full.” I avoided other QPOCs and only interacted with White men until my junior year of college.

During the fall of my junior year, I enrolled in a course called “Diaspora and Asian

American Experiences.” I experienced a phenomenon that Maira (2002) describes in her book *Desis in the House: Indian American Youth Culture in New York City* as a “self-conscious, intellectual exploration of ethnic identity among college-age youth which leads to what some call an ‘ethnic revival’ in the second generation” (p. 4). Ang Lee’s (1993) *The Wedding Banquet*, a commentary on inter-racial relationships, was the first piece we analyzed in this course. This experience was the first time I was given some of the tools I needed to analyze the society in which I lived. I began to see that the reason I only had met gay White men was possibly due to internalized racism, and my avoidance of more effeminate men was due to my internalized homophobia. I started going to the QPOC meetings at my alma mater and dating QPOCs. Not until my graduate school search, however, would I break through all of my internalized racism and homophobia.

I first met Solomon during an interview weekend for a graduate program that I attended during my senior year of college. During the winter break of my first semester as a graduate student, Solomon and I reconnected. Meeting for coffee at a small café where he went to school, I found out that Solomon was gay. Our similarities were striking: we both had struggled with bridging our sexuality and religion. Neither of us had had “relations” with another Filipino. We both had dated only White men, and we both had felt feminized by our partners in our past relationships. Solomon is still a close colleague, and I value the discussions we have shared since that day.

Now that I am an out gay man, within a field that is much more welcoming to gay men compared to others, I have found a supportive community, including QPOC. This does not mean, however, that I do not continue to feel inferior in the gay community. I still go to gay establishments and get asked, “Where are you from? No, where are you *really* from?” implying that I cannot be gay, Asian American, and from the United States. But this community, including my non-Asian boyfriend who tries to understand what I am going through, loves and support me, and that is enough to keep me going.

Finding Myself in a Distant World (Raja)

As silly as it sounds, I grew up believing that I was the only gay Asian American in the world. Until my third year of college, I had never met an Asian American person who could relate to my experience. I see U.S. gay culture as predominantly White, upper-middle class, and urban. Some of the television series and films that portray gay men are *Queer as Folk*, *Will & Grace*, and *Brokeback Mountain*; it is not a coincidence that all the major characters are White. I have yet to see a positive representation of Asian American queer men in the media.

When it came time to choose colleges, I decided to attend a large, urban institution hoping that without the pressures of family and the Indian community, I could

openly explore my gay and ethnic identities at my own pace. A step in this process was exploring the gay scene in Boston. Within this exploration, I attended my first gay club, which was an awkward experience. Craig, the “All American” boy with stereotypical golden blonde hair and baby blue eyes, invited me to go clubbing with him and told me to meet him there. At this point, I was pretty sure I was gay but still had not ventured out to the gay scene. So I mustered up all my energy to go gay clubbing. Could I really walk into a gay club by myself? What if Craig was not there when I arrived? In the spirit of taking a chance and exploring new territory, I decided that it was time for me to check out the gay scene.

With my feet shaking and my heart pounding, I walked into the club, seeing a few scattered pockets of people as the music blared. I did a quick scan of the place, and I could not see anyone that I recognized. I was scared, and as I was about to turn around and walk away, I was relieved to find Craig. As more people came in, the music got louder and we started dancing. Within minutes, Craig was a man-magnet with a circle of admirers around him. I, on the other hand, was left dancing by myself. At this moment I took another look at the club to find that I was the only person of color in the whole room besides the Black drag queen dancing on the stage. I was feeling overwhelmed, and certainly did not know what to do when a guy in his mid-twenties came up to me and asked if I was Latino. When I told him I was Asian, he responded with, “Stop playing around, you’re not Asian!” I felt extremely out of place, and I began to doubt whether I was indeed gay. “Can Asians be gay?” I thought to myself as I quickly exited the club.

As I walked home with tears in my eyes, I realized that I was the only queer South Asian I knew. I had met other gay men in my residence hall, but they were mostly White and from upper-middle class backgrounds. I even met a few Asian queer people but never any that identified as South Asian. They never seemed interested in talking about these conflicting identities. That was the first and last time I went to a gay club until I found a community willing to engage in such conversations in the most unexpected of places: London, England.

D’Augelli’s (1994) model for lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) identity development can shed some light on many of the experiences I had throughout this time. When I landed in London, I was in the beginning stages of developing my own queer identity. In one of the first few weeks, I met Suborna (Subby), a British-born Indian who identified as a lesbian. She would be my gateway to the South Asian gay scene in London. Subby was amazing. She and I had many conversations about being Indian, Hindu, queer, and our experiences growing up in England and the United States, respectively. It was an unforgettable semester abroad.

She also introduced me to Club Kali, a club in the north end of London that transformed into a South Asian gay club every other Friday. The first time I went

there, I was blown away by the sheer number of Asian gay people in the room and the incredible mix of Eastern and Western music. For the first time in my life, I knew I was not alone. I remember thinking to myself, “Wow, I’m finally among a group of people who can identify with me. They don’t just know what it’s like to be a person of color or a queer person; they understand the whole experience!”

In this environment, my queer social identity prospered. I met many friends, and we went out to the local cafes and clubs three or four times each week. My time in London was crucial for my appreciation of being queer and Asian. After meeting these South Asian gay people there, I realized that a person could infuse both gay and Asian in an identity that was stable and not “abnormal.” I was always taught my sexuality was at odds with my religious beliefs and upbringing; therefore, I had always kept my identities in separate contexts. This epiphany of identity fusion helped to end my internal struggle of many years.

Identity (Con)Fusion

Graduate school has facilitated the fusion of our previously conflicting selves. When examining our graduate experience through the lens of Sanford’s (1967) theory of challenge and support, it is apparent that our friends, mentors, and colleagues have furthered our identity development. People from the campus community, especially those identifying as QPOCs, have been the first role models that we can fully relate to on professional and personal levels.

Our relationships in the cohort experience have established a forum to engage each other in conversations about our varied identities. To our program’s credit, the faculty make an effort to enroll a diverse (in all senses of the word) cohort, including other QPOCs. Although these colleagues may not identify with our nuanced experiences, they nevertheless provide support as active listeners as we explore similarities among our journeys. Questions of identity are topics of discussion during meals, walks to class, and social events. An environment where these topics can be approached at any time has allowed the furthering of our development.

Advisors and mentors throughout campus, especially those that identify as QPOCs, have served as the first role models that we have been able to emulate. While one of us benefited from knowledge of a QPOC student forum at his undergraduate institution, it is more effective here, as it provides a place where students, as well as administrators and faculty, can come together. In one of our graduate courses, Cultural Pluralism, we worked with a lesbian woman of color who provided us a positive role model and friend. Having her as one of our instructors assured us that we did not always have to be the “token” QPOC to address intersecting identities. Finally, in this woman we saw a QPOC who possessed characteristics that we have been told we could not have by our families and society: a long-term

relationship, children, and professional success. She has transformed a homogenous department into a diverse organization that now serves as a model for the rest of the institution.

In addition to these campus connections, professional associations have enhanced our support network. National and regional conferences with the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators offer communities supportive of our multiple identities. While presenting on QPOC student development at a regional conference this year, one of us found the response and attendance at the session empowering. Truly this topic interests the field, and we are now forming networks with others to continue these conversations.

Through reading this article, we hope that higher education and student affairs administrators will understand the difficulties that QPOCs face throughout their development, particularly in college. We specifically encourage practitioners to foster an environment conducive to QPOC development through the following:

1. Providing avenues for discussion of intersecting identities inside and outside the classroom.
2. Actively enhancing demographic diversity on campus through recruitment efforts and exploring the idea of intersecting identities.
3. Creating a safe space where QPOC students, faculty, and staff can engage in dialogues about their experiences.
4. Enhancing an understanding of the QPOC experience on campus.
5. Ensuring that QPOC students receive appropriate resources.
6. Offering mentorship programs for underrepresented communities.

This list is not exhaustive but serves as a springboard for measures that can be taken at institutional, departmental, and individual levels.

We entered this profession to become the visible mentors that we did not have in our undergraduate careers. To encourage administrators to be more aware of how their intersecting identities influence their professional philosophies, we offer the following quote as a final reflection:

My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definition.

(Audre Lorde, 2004, p. 69)

The concentration of energy that Lorde discusses has become a crucial part of our lives. Our profession must embrace a holistic conception of identity development. This mentality has created a more developed self-awareness and has allowed the previously unacknowledged aspects of our identities to shine.

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