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ASIA AM 40: Asian American Movement

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Part I: Short Response

“Serve the people.” That’s it, and it’s just that simple. Throughout the Asian American Movement, the goals have always been to serve everyone, not just Asian Americans or those who have been disadvantaged by the system. Moreover, the statement serves as the agenda for activists and groups during the ongoing Asian American Movement. The goal of each group should be to work for the people and not for themselves because “[w]ithout the reconciliation of the self to the community, we cannot invent ourselves” (Ishizuka ch. 6). As the quote indicates, without involving the community and working for the community change is impossible. The reason serving the people is so important for the activists involved is because they want to do what their oppressors are not doing: serving the people.

One of the most prominent issues where Asian American groups worked to serve the people was at the Kearny Street Block in San Francisco. Kearny Street was the home of the famous International Hotel that served as a safe haven for Chinese and Filipino elderly men, but it was also the home of many great endeavors and programs designed to help the community. However, it was “slated for eviction and demolition in the late 1960s” (Fong, “Mobilization Against Redevelopment,” 1/31/22). Seeing how crucial the I-Hotel was for the community, legions of activists of multiple races showed up to protest the demolition so that the people of San Francisco could be served. Some of the prominent organizations that the I-Hotel housed were the Chinatown Cooperative Garment Factory and the Kearny Street Workshop.

The Chinatown Cooperative Garment Factory started as a UC Berkeley Asian American Studies class project, in which workers were paid an hourly wage. This was game changing considering that at the same time there were 3,500 women who “were employed in Chinatown sweatshops, earning \$1 to \$2 for a dress that retailed at \$25” (Ishizuka ch. 6). The workers in the Garment Factory were not only paid properly but they were also offered English lessons and other classes. This is a prime example of serving the community and the people. While thousands of women were being taken advantage of by those who did not support them, Asian American activists sought to fix that by serving those not served. Similarly, the Kearny Street Workshop also offered free classes to the community, which included classes in the Arts and in English (Ishizuka ch. 6). The KSW acts as another prime example highlighting the determination of Asian American Activists’ to serve the people. The KSW was so determined to continue their efforts that even after the eviction and demolition of the I-Hotel, the organization kept moving “and, when necessary, moved again and again” (Ishizuka ch. 6), making it the oldest Asian American arts organization in the country.

On campus, the effort from Asian American student activists to serve the underserved wasn’t any different from what was found in the community. For years, students of various minority groups were disadvantaged by the system, but in the 1960s tensions regarding institutional access broke out at UCLA. At the time, and to this day, UCLA and other campuses were not serving people for the best interests of the community, but change was coming. In 1968, the Hi-Pot program was created with the help of activists and administrators, to serve underrepresented minorities (Fong, 1/24/22). These are just some of the many inspiring examples of conflict AA activists fought for in order to fill the extensive gaps left by the oppressors. Oppressors who were leaving minorities in the dust without serving them.

Part II: Essay

The 1960s were a tumultuous time in which the viewpoints of millions of people and various organizations were colliding. These ideas and struggles were brewing into actions and initiatives to better the world in which we live. Like every piece of art, the artist, or in this case the activist, took inspiration from previous and current artists to define and develop their piece in history. Without a doubt, the Asian American Movement and its activists took great inspiration from others currently fighting the same battle, while learning and improving from those who already fought the struggle. Moreover, Asian American activists went beyond interracial and international borders to spread their vision to not only help others, but to ally themselves with others to better serve the world.

Interracialism was a key influence for the Asian American Movement, and it acted as one of the main sources of inspiration for the movement. Asian American activists and extremists often aligned themselves with other races who were also “systematically subjected to capitalistic exploitation that relied upon the racist logic of whites over peoples of color” (Maeda, 108), who were also known as Third World groups (Fong, 1/12/22). Therefore, it can be determined that the roots of the long history of alliances between third world groups are found in the early stages of the Asian immigration movement to the United States.

In the 1870s while the immigration of Chinese Americans was increasing, the United States attempted to halt the incoming population by passing the Chinese Exclusion Act. Originally African Americans were on board with the idea of stalling Chinese American immigration, but when the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed, their support for the side of the United States quickly shifted to the side of the Asian Americans (Ishizuka, ch. 2). The African Americans could see that the racist and discriminatory parts of the system that have been hurting

them, were also impeding on the lives of Chinese Americans. Like that, the two groups were able to form a bond going past racial boundaries because both groups saw the issues plaguing the United States, creating their common struggle.

Moreover, these boundaries continued to be blurred in Southern California during the pre-WWII and post-WWII era. In the 1920s there were 15,500 African Americans and 21,000 Japanese Americans in LA, and pre-WWII “where one group was found, the other was likely as well” (Ishizuka, ch. 2). Similarly, post-WWII saw a drastic rise in Japanese populations in LA as internment came to an end. The number of Japanese Americans in Crenshaw, a historically white neighborhood, grew from “seventy blacks and Asians in the area [...] to 8,500—half black and half Japanese American” (Ishizuka, ch 2). African Americans continued to grow and develop with Asian Americans through the merging of their small and isolated communities. They were not only able to grow, but they were also able to witness each other's struggles and fight against unwarranted oppression. Moreover, this support for each other across racial boundaries continued well into the Asian American Movement in the 1960s as minorities banded together to adapt solutions and initiatives to better fight their struggles together.

A prominent group that Asian American activists followed was The Black Panther Party. At the time African Americans faced a disturbing civil rights crisis and a fight for Black Liberation. The AAM drew upon the fight for Liberation, as both minorities sought equal representation in the United States and the demise of oppression from the majority (Fong, 1/12/22). Because of how similar the Black Panther Party's struggle was to the Asian American struggle, several organizations spun off its core values to adapt and implement what the BPP was doing for African Americans, to support Asian Americans. One example of this can be found with the Red Guard Party, who, similar to the BPP's free breakfast for children's program, started

a free Sunday brunch program for the elderly, who they believed to be the most neediest within the community (Maeda, 109). Asian American activists drew from several of the Panthers' movements in order to fix and address the problems in the community. Without the support from these other organizations, these various AAM groups would not have been able to get the footing they needed to be successful.

Further, through the connections of the BPP, the Red Guards were able to get in contact with a Latino organization with similar values known as Los Siete De La Raza. Los Siete De La Raza, similar to the BPP and the Red Guard, also had treacherous run-ins with SFPD, which was responsible for the oppression of various minority groups (Maeda, 109). In order to counter this, the minority groups grouped together and by combining forces, these groups were able to extend their reach and expand their communities. As a whole they had the potential to challenge the oppressive white majority while going past racial divides.

Moving closer to home, this struggle for breaking the oppression and increasing educational inclusivity was deeply ingrained in the history of UCLA. In the September 1969 issue of the *Gidra*, it is said that the Third World groups together fought for there to be a single home for ethnic studies and minorities: Campbell hall (Hat, 1). All of these minority groups fought the struggle together because their initiatives were the same, and without working together towards the same goals, they would not have been able to overthrow the white majority. Hence, even at UCLA these minority groups continued to stick together and break racial groupings and have solidarity for one another. The reason for interracialism is not just to group minority races, but instead to group minorities to become the majority so that they can break the power race holds over society.

Continuing, this idea of combining forces with other groups expands with the idea of internationalism. With internationalism AAM activists essentially “declared solidarity with people in Asia preyed upon by US imperialism” (Fong, 1/12/22). Asian Americans were already being oppressed in the United States, but they couldn’t sit down and stay quiet while watching the United States exert its influence and oppression on their home countries. Primarily, with the conflict in Vietnam, various minority groups stood up and spoke out against the paradoxical nature of the war. Kwame Turé described the draft as “white people sending black people to make war on yellow people to defend the land they stole from red people” (Ishizuka, ch. 5). This, once again, shows a prime example of the white majority taking advantage of minorities to wage their conflicts. However, to combat this, Third World groups rose up and provided a reason for minorities to not fight Vietnam by popularizing the phrases “No Vietnamese Ever Called Me Nigger”, “No Vietnamese Ever Called Me Chink”, and “No Vietnamese Ever Called Me a Fat Jap” (Ishizuka, ch. 5). Once again, Asian American activists and other minority groups were able to forge interracial connections, while also being able to establish solidarity with Vietnam. Asian American activists challenged the whole war and the oppressive white government leading it, increasing their influence and ability to force change.

The Asian American movement was a diverse movement that not only impacted the lives of Asian Americans, but every minority struggling to break free from white oppression. It drew from various influences spanning multiple ethnicities making it an interracial movement. It was a movement that aimed to help the Asian Americans who have made America their home while also preserving their home countries and preventing American toxicity to overthrow them. To this day the AAM is an ongoing movement, and the broader influences that it stems from can still be traced to form today.

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