

Concept Paper

# Flowing between the Personal and Collective: Being Human beyond Categories of Study

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**Abstract:** Caught between different structures of identity hierarchies, queer and trans Asian American experiences have been systematically erased, forgotten, or purposely buried; as such, their experiences have often been minimized. In this paper, we seek to reimagine personhood in psychology through the perspectives of queer and trans Asian American subjectivities. Beginning with a brief discussion on the impacts of coloniality on conventional conceptualizations of who counts as human, we then consider how this is taken up in psychology, especially for multiply marginalized folx. Moving beyond the possibilities of representational politics, we explore possible decolonial frameworks and alternative methodologies in psychology to center queer and trans Asian American personhoods and to see them as more than just research participants.

**Keywords:** Asian American; Asian; sexuality; LGBTQ+; queer; trans; identity

## 1. Introduction

Histories, narratives, and lived experiences of queer and trans Asians in the U.S. have generally been erased, forgotten, or purposely buried [1]. For example, the lesbian and gay Asian American organizations, *Asian Lesbians of the East Coast* (ALOE) and *Gay Asian and Pacific Islander Men of New York* (GAPIMNY), led protests against the production of *Miss Saigon*, thought by many in these organizations as racist, sexist, and perpetuating the myth of the white man's burden/savior. The protest of the show in 1991 was also either largely distorted in the news, under-reported, or misreported [2]. What was more hurtful to gay and lesbian Asian Americans was the decision by the national legal organization for LGBT communities in the U.S., the Lambda Legal Defense Fund (LLDF), to continue to utilize the ticket sales to *Miss Saigon* as a fundraiser for their organization. This decision to continue was made despite the fact that both ALOEC and GAPIMNY had raised their concerns over the harmful stereotypes that the show perpetuates directly to the LLDF. Even though ALOEC had been organizing for almost ten years by this moment, the disregard for their concerns reflects the difficulty that mainstream LGBT organizations had in understanding how and why histories of colonialism and occupation, racism, patriarchy, and homophobia interlock. This was also reflected by the minimal and distorted reporting in the news [2]. For example, *The Village Voice* reported the protest as homophobic despite ALOEC's and GAPIMNY's leadership, while another TV news reporter asked exasperatedly, "What do lesbians and gay men have to do with protesting *Miss Saigon*?" [2] (p. 292). While the show was problematic in several ways for the larger Asian American community, including the decision to cast a white man in yellowface, the concerns raised by lesbian and gay Asian Americans and their participation and leadership were forgotten. When *Miss Saigon* was back on Broadway in 2017, *The New York Times* reference to the 1991 protests completely left out the participation of lesbian and gay Asian Americans

in the organizing and continues to be dismissive of the protests' demands [3]. This perpetual forgetting seems to reflect the difficulty in imagining the racialized "other", in this case, Asian Americans, as queer and trans, implying an underlying dichotomy within the normative imaginings. This absence is similarly reflected within academia [1] and, as a result, we argue that it contributes to the perpetual circulation of Asian American stereotypes and dismissal of the experiences of queer and trans Asians in the U.S.

Due to this limited interest in queer and trans Asian Americans, the current understanding and representation of their experiences are often limited by the existing structures of power, established norms, and stereotypes. Hence, the purpose of this conceptual paper is to examine the implications of such absences and the limitations that result. This paper also seeks to present alternative methods to re-center the personhoods and subjectivities of queer and trans Asian Americans through and beyond representational politics, especially within the field of psychology. In the following sections, we will begin with unpacking the colonial frameworks that underlie the histories of gender, sexuality, and race in relation to queer and trans Asians in North America. We will then discuss how representational politics is utilized within psychology and its critiques. Following this, we will illustrate how alternative methodologies fit with a desire-based approach to understanding personhood beyond representational politics and pain.

## **2. Contextualizing Gender/Race/Class/Sexuality/a New Identity Category or How Colonial Masters Conceived the Marginalized Human**

Alongside the colonial conquest of geographical space and people, the much more insidious rooting of ideological strongholds has meant that despite the ending of formal colony status for some nation-states in the world, the values and structures of colonial empires persist [4,5]. Attempts at "complete" decolonization and deimperialism are difficult because of the persistence of colonial/imperial logics and ideologies that permeate new governing bodies and structures, including knowledge production, in independent nations [5]. This persistence of colonial and imperial logics and ideologies is understood as coloniality; past relationships between the colonial metropole (e.g., Britain, U.S.) and its colonies (e.g., India, Philippines) merely shifts to a relationality that forms the "sociocultural hierarchy" between European/North-American and non-European/North-American nations [4,6]. Because of how coloniality remains fundamental to our thinking and structures "post-colonial" nation-states, systems of power that benefited colonial masters remain relatively unchallenged. These systems are not produced and maintained just by the colonizer, but also with those who were/are colonized illustrating how "formal" colonialism is more than geographical occupation; it is not just about a land grab, but also a mind "grab," which Fanon refers to as "a massive psychoexistential complex" from the moment of conquest [4,7].

Coloniality impacts the negotiation of personhood as it reflects the persistence of these systems in regulating and policing norms. These norms are established through colonial (white) systems. For example, in a study of Chinese and Japanese immigrants during the turn of the twentieth century in San Francisco, Amy Sueyoshi [8] illustrates how the American "Oriental" is constructed for white sexuality and gender expressions and behaviors. In the process of creating the cisgender heteronormative white men and women, Chinese and Japanese immigrants were bastardized to fall within narrow definitions of either too sexually and morally loose (Chinese) or too sexually or morally conservative (Japanese) and inapt at adopting to "American" culture. Because whiteness becomes the norm for which dominant systems of power (e.g., race, gender) are established, these structures that maintain white supremacy contextualize the tensions that emerge in performing normativity for survival while simultaneously resisting. The pervasive ways in which coloniality continues to invade the mind and body of the colonized subject are also seen through Lugones' comprehensive characterization: "The long process of subjectification of the colonized toward adoption/internalization of the men/women dichotomy as a normative construction of the social—a mark of civilization, citizenship, and membership in civil society—was and is constantly renewed" [9] (p. 748). This process of coloniality is an active process of reduction and subjectification

that is invested in dehumanizing; this process “turn[s] the colonized into less than human beings” [9] (p. 745). Hence, the colonial project is not to civilize or to turn the “Other” into a human, but to maintain hierarchical relationships that privilege white cis-heteropatriarchy.

Furthermore, intertwining racialization with the gender system, Lugones illustrates how “the gender system is not just hierarchical but racially differentiated, and the racial differentiation denies humanity and thus gender to the colonized” [9] (p. 748). In the process of racialization, the colonized is assigned a sex but not a gender, as the gender system, which hierarchically structures “man” as the norm in relation to the dichotomized “woman,” operates on the notion that the gender category “man/woman” is possible only for the civilized, i.e., “white/colonizer.” This inherent construction of gender prescribes the multiply oppressed colonized individual as a living species closer to animal than human within the colonizer’s structures of power. Hence, the colonized subject cannot have a gender because they are firstly a racialized other. Because the racialized other can only be visible to the state by mimicking prescribed gender and sexuality norms, deviance from these established norms jeopardizes recognition and the promised access to membership into civil society. Hence, efforts towards representational politics and assimilation into a “melting pot,” especially for multiply marginalized folx, such as queer and trans Asian Americans, become an impossible project that replicates colonial violence through the perpetuation of dehumanizing processes.

In addition, Puar elaborates on how the racialized other becomes an object in the discourse of white (wo)manhood. Her framework also elucidates how homophobia is attached to the racialized other [10]. While her work is based on the normative construction of the cisgender Muslim man and his relationality to Islamophobia and homonormativity, her larger framework illustrates the function of homonormativity and the foregrounding of homophobia over other systems of oppression (racism, misogyny, and imperialism) applicable broadly to queer and trans Asians. This foregrounding, according to Puar, creates the discourse of U.S. sexual exceptionalism that privileges white bodies and justifies state-sanctioned violence on the racialized and gendered other [10]. In doing so, this discourse also limits the experience of homophobia to white cisbodies only. That is, cis-homonormativity constructs the racialized “other” as inherently homophobic due to their “tradition” and “backward” cultural norms, and therefore as perpetrators of homophobic violence. Not only does the racialized “other” become the scapegoat for homophobic violence, but this discourse also aids in the dichotomization of race and sexuality, where the subjectivities of queer and trans Asian Americans are erased. It is this purposeful division that produces explanations for LGBTQ+ Asian Americans as having an “unhealthy sense of self” within the frames of U.S. sexual exceptionalism [10]. Queer and trans Asians disappear in such dichotomies, i.e., not white enough to be queer, and not cis-heterosexual enough to be Asian [11]. This dichotomy is also seen through the reports of the 1991 *Miss Saigon* protest noted above. Despite the fact that the protest was led by lesbian and gay Asian Americans, *The Village Voice* reported it as a “more-p.c.-than-thou gay-bashing” [2] (p. 287). As Yoishikawa reflects, “When lesbian and gay people of color criticize the white gay male establishment, they are ‘gay-bashing.’ This implies that one must be white to be gay” [2] (p. 287). Similarly, the LLDF’s decision to not withdraw from using the show as a fundraiser despite ALOEC’s and GAPIMNY’s protests demonstrates the marginalization of queer and trans Asian Americans within the mainstream U.S. gay rights project. Both of these moments reflect the dominance of the dichotomizing discourse and the difficulty in conceptualizing the subjectivities of multiply marginalized folx—not being able to understand why the protest against a racist, sexist, and imperialistic production was also important to queer and trans Asian Americans. *The Village Voice*’s report also expertly maneuvered away from the critique of the white savior colonial complex and reduced it to the action of homophobia from the Asian American community.

This dichotomy is also reflected in the construction of queer and trans Asians within psychology, as it often (re)produces the Asian culture and community as the scapegoat for homophobia, implicitly signaling the white U.S. culture as a sexually liberal space, affirming the discourse of U.S. sexual exceptionalism. If Lugones’ framework articulates how the colonized subject is denied their humanity,

then Puar's framework of U.S. sexual exceptionalism provides the explanations for the dichotomy of sexuality and race. Moving through the psychological literature will exemplify their concerns and illustrate the importance of foregrounding decolonizing approaches in understanding multiply marginalized lives. The next section elaborates these points.

### 3. Culture and Colonialism: Asian, (Queer) Asian Americanness in Psychology

Psychology's desire to be recognized as a legitimate Science has resulted in its contributions to established power structures [12–14]. This is not limited to a historical past. In recent years, mainstream psychology's continued contributions towards existing capitalistic and colonial power structures have ranged from the seemingly innocuous personality tests in corporate organizations to the ongoing controversies of the American Psychological Association (APA)'s involvement with torture [15]. While critical approaches have challenged these colonial and imperial involvements, these examples still point to the overall investment in and engagement with "historical and contemporary legacies of colonialism" [16] (p. 91) while scapegoating "traditional" cultures as sources of oppression (e.g., patriarchy, homophobia). This is important to note because of the overarching reach conventional psychology has in influencing mainstream culture and systems of power [17]. The following subsections will reflect how psychology has tried to make sense of LGBTQ+ identities, Asian Americans, and queer and trans Asian Americans, as well as the limitations of these explorations within decolonial frameworks.

#### 3.1. LGBTQ+ Identities in Psychology

To understand how psychology makes sense of LGBTQ+ identities, we think it is important to begin with the field's conventional approaches to sexualities. Sigmund Freud's, *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex* [18], was one of the influential works that shape the understanding of sexuality within the field of psychology [19]. Within this volume, he began with the analyses of "inverts" (or those who are now recognized as gay/lesbian individuals) and compares their experiences to what he deems as "normal" adult sexuality [18]. While "normality" is not explicitly defined, it is conceptualized in opposition to "aberrations," which was how the sexuality of "inverts" was categorized. Implied in his writings were the notions that a "normal" man's sexuality is in the alignment of his sexual object toward his sexual aim, that his "proper" sexual object is the "opposite" sex of women, and that his "proper" sexual aim is in the "union of genitalia" leading to reproduction [18]. "Normative" sexuality is highly associated with the act of reproduction [18]. Within Freud's psychoanalytical frame, "inverts" and those with "aberrations" to their sexuality were deemed to be afflicted by some form of neurosis that leaves them to be constitutionally disposed to immense sexual repression and a predominant force of sexual impulse with a tendency to perversions [18]. Hence, sexualities beyond what was defined as "normal" were pathologized and medicalized. This was noted by Foucault in his analysis in *The History of Sexuality*, where he notes that sexuality gets increasingly medicalized, with science being introduced as a way for morality to be justified by "medical truth" and "normalcy" [20]. The medicalization processes support the regulatory and corrective mechanisms of state control, and psychoanalysis emerged as a useful way to diagnose and pathologize the "non-normative" individual. Prior to the understanding of sexuality as an identity category, sexuality was conceived of as sexual acts. Sexual acts were behaviors done by an individual but did not define them in the way that we have now come to understand. Through the mechanisms of medicalization, sexualities began to emerge as an identity that can be used to uncover some fundamental truth [20]. In this process of truth-seeking, those who were defined as "normal" as they were able to reproduce became the benchmark for comparison. Everyone else was an "aberration" to be "fixed" by medical interventions. Freud's contribution and Foucault's critique reflect the general approach that psychology has taken towards understanding LGBTQ+ sexualities. Within the published literature, the field has had a tendency towards pathologizing these individuals, though a recent shift has been made to acknowledge the external stressors that contribute to the mental and physical health burdens experienced by LGBTQ+ individuals [19].

In a recent systematic review of studies about LGBTQ+ individuals in psychology from 2000 to 2016 conducted by Susan Walch and colleagues [19], they found that topics that were most studied were social well-being, mental/psychological health, and sexual behavior, with social well-being and mental/psychological health receiving a more recent uptrend (i.e., more studies in 2015/2016 than in 2000). In addition, they also observed that while studies with comparative approaches between heterosexuals and LGBTQ+ folx have continued to be made, they have fallen out of trend as a method of study. However, even as psychology has moved towards an approach that minimizes pathologizing explanations, the published studies were still dominated by WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) [21] populations and also continued to reflect a cis-patriarchal and racial bias. Studies about cis-gender men and white folx dominated the overall make-up, and this was mostly maintained from 2000 to 2016 [19]. This implies that operating from an intersectional approach remains challenging for the field. Even within a marginalized community, established hierarchies of power continue to operate; the rationale of U.S. sexual exceptionalism shapes how research is done. This phenomenon is similarly observed by Tuğçe Kurtiş and Glenn Adams [22] with respect to feminist psychology scholarship. While we are careful to not equate the studies on LGBTQ+ individuals to the sub-field of feminist psychology, the caution that Kurtiş and Adams provide in their conceptual paper can be applied to the work on LGBTQ+ individuals. Importantly, they observed how conventional forms of feminist psychology have the tendency to “reflect and reproduce forms of racial and cultural hegemony that silence or pathologize experiences of people across various majority-world settings” [22] (p. 389) and the ways they fall prey to a methodology and knowledge production that replicate the androcentric perspectives of abstraction and universality that, inevitably, reproduce domination. Given what was observed in the systematic review of Walch and colleagues [19], these critiques seem appropriate. For example, a quarter of the studies focused exclusively on “majority race” individuals, while only less than 6% focused on the experiences of LGBTQ+ “minority race” individuals. A multiply marginalized individual’s experience is less likely to be addressed or taken seriously within the current conventions of the field. Replicating the model of knowledge production as it has been established within conventional psychology practices will result in the perpetuation of the existing hierarchy and structures of power, therefore re-centering the experiences of white cisgender gay man in the U.S. as the subject of study. In the process of replication, this also minimizes the ability to address the larger structures at play, structures that Lugones [9], Puar [10], and other decolonial scholars have pointed to. Even as psychology shifts its focus to studying the social well-being of folx of marginalized sexualities, without addressing long histories of U.S. sexual exceptionalism [10] or why identity categories are important to nation-states [9,20], the shift may be limited.

### 3.2. *Founding of Asian American Psychology*

Likewise, psychology has traditionally explained observed cultural differences through reductive binary relations. These differences form the baseline for comparison between the “Eastern” other against the white normative [16]. Such work has neglected how whiteness is defined through these constructed differences in the first place [8]. Utilizing the binary relation of West vs. East also does not take into account the complexities in the histories and politics of Asia, reducing the category to one that is depoliticized, essentialized, and monolithic [16]. This reductive approach is further complicated in the production of the “Asian American” figure whereby constructed monolithic cultural differences are transplanted onto the racialized category [8]. The conflation of race and culture in psychology also results in a falling back to “Asian values” to distinguish them from other racialized groups [23,24], limiting its ability to interrogate the processes and structures that make up Asian Americanness. In an attempt to address the limited interest of conventional psychology in Asian American communities, the Asian American Psychology Association was established.

The founding of Asian American psychology in 1972 had a particular focus on “(a) educating and training Asian American psychologists and (b) improving mental health services to Asian Americans” [25] (p. 355). This is similarly reflected in the journal articles, where a “focus on



treatment and prevention, psychological and physiological disorders” characterized the bulk of the publications [25] (p. 359). The impetus for Asian American psychology was to address a lack of adequate services and programs catered to the Asian American and Pacific American communities [25]. Focusing on services to individuals and communities, however, obscured the need to interrogate why these services may be/are necessary in the first place or how collapsing Asian American into a singular category cannot address the complexities within and between communities. Since its inception in 2009 until 2016 (last annual review publication), the annual review of psychological studies on Asian Americans by the *Asian American Journal of Psychology* have identified that most of the interest lies in health and health-related behaviors, racism and discrimination, and counseling and clinical issues [26]. These interests, while useful for addressing the mental health of the communities, perpetuate a deficit-centered model for understanding the experiences and subjectivities of Asian Americans. This attention also rarely gets to the complexities between histories, structures, and individuals.

Despite these moves to center the experiences of Asian Americans in psychology, the limited interrogation of how the category is constructed restricts a broader critique. Wen Liu notes how psychology has been entangled with scientific racism and imperial ideology through the production of “empirical, rational, and moral justifications for domination over the racialized Other” [24] (p. 36). What this means is that psychology often utilizes “differentiation and quantification of the interior cognitive life” [24] (p. 36) and uses its disciplinary boundary to absolve itself from considering the meso- and macro-level that an individual life occupies. In this move, it allows the basis of normality and pathology to remain defined by the unnamed white cis-heteropatriarch and continue its assistance in the project of dehumanization. For example, when a difference is observed in the racialized other, the difference is in contrast to the white cis-heteropatriarch figure. Psychological and physiological disorders and their corresponding treatment and prevention are then based on this difference. Hence, operating within this existing framework without questioning how psychology has constructed and understood race and racial difference can limit understanding of Asian American subjectivities. Hence, to begin centering Asian American personhood, we have to also question the construction of Asian American racial identity in psychology.

In interrogating conventional psychology’s construction of Asian American racial identity, Liu [24] explores the orientalist fantasy in the origins of Asianness as a psychological category. She uncovers the inconsistency of racial formation for Asian Americans, which connects this formation to the colonial differences that produced the initial ideas of Asianness [24]. While she observes this history of racial formation in psychology, she notes that the current psychological definition of the category of Asian American begins with detaching racial claims from the sociopolitical contexts that produce them [24]. In doing so, this relegates the Asian American category to the status of apolitical racial minorities. Through this depoliticizing move, the category of Asian American also serves to regulate the relationalities between other racialized communities, such as between Black and white communities, through the process of comparison and maintenance [6,24]. For example, Asian American communities are often used to exemplify the success (e.g., the model minority myth) they have over other marginalized groups, and they are deemed as “good” immigrants in comparison to Black and Latinx communities who are perceived as liabilities to the nation-state and, therefore, “bad” immigrants [27]. Such maintenance and comparisons are often made without regard for the histories and sociopolitical contexts, and are attributed to some inherent “cultural differences.” Without addressing these concerns, conventional psychology’s utilization of Asian American as a monolithic, apolitical racial category also limits its ability in addressing the experiences of queer and trans Asian Americans.

### 3.3. *Queer Asian Americans in Psychology*

Reflecting Lugones’ critique of the existing gender system, conventional psychological research in the area of gender has focused mainly on similarities and differences (typically within a binary frame of white cisgender men and women) and has not wholly considered gender within an intersectional framework beyond sexuality [28]. Because psychology has consistently neglected any kind of decolonial

critique in its process of knowledge production, even in the well-intentioned feminist psychological approaches, the discipline often fails in addressing the complexities of multiply oppressed individuals and communities, thus inevitably perpetuating existing hierarchies and cultural supremacy [22]. Hence, in addition to the limited understanding and theorizing of Asians and Asian American experiences in psychology, the absence of seeing gender and sexuality beyond whiteness in psychology is noted through the negligible number of studies about queer and trans Asian Americans. The field's general lack of theorizing about the Asian American LGBTQ+ community is reflected by the fact that only about 1% to 3% of the total articles making up the total proportion of studies on Asian Americans between 2009 to 2015 are on their experiences [26]. Since the orientation of psychology generally tends towards damage-centered approaches, the impact of the model minority myth that portrays Asian Americans as always successful [27] and the dichotomies that separates sexuality and race [9,10] may explain part of this theorizing. It is in this context that the Division on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Questioning (LGBTQQ) in the Asian American Psychological Association (AAPA) was established [29]. The division's goal is to address the limited research, yet much of their work continues to follow the trend of the field [29]. In addition to producing deficit-centered research, research has also refocused the conflicts between identities of racial/ethnicity and sexuality as a primary psychological concern among queer Asians, limiting an analysis of the sociopolitical contexts that produce and result in these concerns. As research centers around damage and conflict of identities, it also absolves the accountability and responsibilities of those in power as well as the structures and institutions that produce the harm in the first place [30]. By stating that "the lack of acceptance of LGBTQ people and identities in Asian American ethnic and religious communities" impacts the development of "healthy dual identities" [29], the AAPA's orientation risks perpetuating the dichotomy between sexuality and race that further affirms the stereotypical belief of Asian American communities as homophobic due to inherent cultural traits. Because of the established understanding of queerness and Asian communities [1,2,10], this orientation can also be interpreted as indicating that LGBTQ+ Asian Americans cannot make up Asian American communities because normative Asian Americanness is heterosexual and homophobic.

One of the germinal works on queer Asian identity formation, Connie Chan's "Issues of Identity Development among Asian-American Lesbians and Gay Men", perpetuates several restrictive binaries [23]. Her study includes general statements on Asian cultures and gender roles, such as the notion that being gay is frequently viewed as a rejection of the most important roles for women (being a wife and mother) and men (carrying the family line through their inheritance). As this study is one of the earlier works on lesbian and gay Asian identity, it establishes subject expertise even if it is not necessarily a comprehensive view or approach. In addition, because of the ways in which members of marginalized communities are often expected to speak on behalf of and represent entire communities [31], Chan's view becomes an established position for the experiences of all lesbian and gay Asian Americans.

Through the process of establishing a racial difference in the experiences of lesbian and gay Asian Americans from white lesbians and gays, Chan's paper also inevitably establishes the normative construction of Asian American gender roles and sexuality. By citing the normative roles of women as wives and mothers and men as patriarchs, it unquestioningly attributes heteronormativity as quintessentially Asian. This also implies that motherhood and the rearing of heirs are restricted to cis-heteronormative coupling. Through these broad statements, Chan has established a very limited and restrictive understanding of lesbian and gay Asian identity. In addition, her ability to claim membership as Asian American provides her with the status of expert, allowing her to make claims about Asian culture without other sources and critiques. Her broad statements about Asian cultural values continue the tradition of depoliticizing the category and reproduce the monolithic perception of the Asian American community. As her study pits race against sexualities for her participants through items such as "Experienced discrimination because of being Asian?" and "Experienced discrimination because of being lesbian/gay?", it already determines the relationship between race and sexuality.

That is, racial identity is already constructed within the research to be contrasted against sexuality, as participants are expected to categorize which experiences are the result of racial discrimination and which are sexual discrimination. Because marginalized folx who possess social power can dictate what and how cultural values and differences are invoked and are often insulated from critiques [6,31], her position allows her to establish certain cultural values as normative for “Asian cultures.” Citation practices within systems of power contribute to the persistence of these systems and aid in the maintenance of coloniality [32]. The circulation of her work reaffirms these assumptions as truths and continues to orient work around queer (and trans) Asian Americans.

Because work from the margin is complex and the positionality of the researcher plays an important part in the perception and reception of the work, we are also mindful of her position as a colonized subject, especially within academia and in psychology. Because of the ways in which the colonized subject is frequently hailed to adopt and internalize normative constructions, it may be unsurprising that her work perpetuates unproductive hierarchical dichotomies and binaries. Even if she was aware of these limitations, her scholarship, especially in psychology in the 1980s, would probably require for her to accommodate these systems so as to survive as a woman scholar of color. In addition, because racially marginalized communities strive for respectability within the racist structures of U.S. society, embracing queerness in the community seems counter-intuitive to its goals [1]. Hence, to recenter the personhoods and subjectivities of queer and trans Asian Americans in psychology, we will have to address the long histories and sociopolitical contexts that make up part of their experience.

#### 4. Centering Personhoods and Subjectivities

Because of the ways in which personhood, as understood by conventional psychology, privileges WEIRD individuals and their communities, those who fall outside, including queer and trans Asian Americans, are often regarded as the anomaly. This mode of reference allows for the perseverance of deficit-centered and conflict-centered research studies while maintaining conventional psychological science in the savior role. That is, conventional psychology can remain unquestioned as providing a solution to the problems experienced by queer and trans Asian Americans. By focusing on the damage experienced by marginalized communities, it allows for the clever maneuver from colonial master to savior without having to examine the very structures of oppression that were put in place, thereby absolving colonial masters from their creation and allowing these structures to persist unexamined. To move towards approaches that consider the full humanity of queer and trans Asian Americans, we believe we have to begin with taking seriously the long histories of coloniality and power and their impact on conventional psychology’s configurations of identity categories and their limited applications. This will also allow us to address the limitations of representational politics that rely on the state to recognize and hail their subject, often through their deficiency compared to WEIRD norms. In the following section, we propose the importance of addressing decolonial critiques in psychological studies and the reconsideration of alternative methodologies that will allow for queer and trans Asian American subjectivities to be taken seriously.

##### 4.1. Thinking through Decolonial Frameworks in Psychology

Focusing on relationalities beyond individuals and systems of power moves the focus from representational politics to the “repertoire of strategies, regulatory practices, and instrumentalities” that links the state to bodies [33] (p. 672). Colonized subjects, as Lugones notes, “take up, respond, resist, and accommodate to hostile invaders who mean to dispossess and dehumanize them” [9] (p. 748), illustrating a much more complex web of relations between resisting and oppressing. This active process that animates the fractured locus of the colonized subject draws attention to how colonized subjects have to navigate systems of power, often for survival “where the “sides” of [their] locus are in tension, and the conflict itself actively informs the subjectivity of the colonized self in multiple relation” [9] (p. 748). Making sense of the self through this framework reflects the complexities of identities that move beyond how one is hailed or fits within an existing categorical structure.



This process of holding onto this multiple sense of self, not for the goal of reconciling into a whole (hence, fractured), then allows us to look at power and personhood through the gap produced between resisting and oppressing. That is, we are able to speak to the constant negotiation that marginalized folx are made to navigate between resisting and being oppressed; it is an active relationship rather than a static application. By recognizing its active process, we are able to then address how colonial legacies and “traditional” cultural norms are constantly influencing each other [16] and shaping the subjectivities of queer and trans Asian Americans. For example, in Liu’s critical narrative analysis of interviews with queer Asian American women, she reflects how the experience of patriarchy and negative attachment they feel with Asia also provided them with the ability to “evaluate the racial and gendered encounters they experienced across contexts and recognize the similar dynamics of regulation and control in the new place, instead of finding the West or the whitening queer space to be their savior” [11] (p.189). Rather than the reductive, essentialist binary of East vs. West that defaults to the West as offering liberatory gender and sexual roles [10], these decolonial approaches to the colonality of gender provide a useful way to unpack how gender, sexuality, and race are coded and made legible within the different gender systems. The production of a subject is the result of understanding how the politics of identity and social movements connect with and to structures of power and institutions through the context of imperialism [33]. This is also explored in Evelyn Blackwood’s work on West Sumatra tombois, which expands upon work on trans identities as they have been conventionally defined by the West [34]. Defining tombois as a site for which gender expressions “exceed or transgress normative gender categories” and possibly outside understandings of transgenderism within the U.S. and European context, Blackwood suggests that tombois are a “culturally defined, ideologically constructed category of ‘man’ through everyday practices of performing masculinity [ ... and] inhabit multiple and seemingly contradictory positions” [34] (p. 456). Blackwood’s work connects expectations of masculinity and gender to culture, signifying their contingency. It is in this contingency that space opens for different readings of gender and sexuality, focusing on social interactions and cultural contexts rather than just how they differ from norms.

The tensions in queer subjectivities and Asian American belonging offer opportunities to consider the position of diasporic subjectivity that embraces the “concurrent processes of alienation from and attachment to both the U.S. and Asia and a sense of collective consciousness with others who share similar histories of colonialism and racialization” [11] (p. 179). Through a critical narrative analysis of her interviews with two queer Asian women, Liu suggests that their experiences have contributed to the organization of their multiple identities that connect personal traumatic and healing events to structural forces [11]. This analysis also aligns with Lugones’ proposition of seeing the colonized subjects through their fractured loci without moving towards a reconciliation [9]. Through Liu’s participants, she concludes that the embodying of queerness, not just as a sexual identity but as a narrative structure, is a strategy of “mourning against the colonial splitting of spaces and subjects, the erasure of history, and the segregation of communities” [11] (p. 189). By refusing to be hailed by the normative identity categories, the attention on the subjectivities of queer and trans Asian American persons exposes the uneasy gaps and tensions produced by the U.S.’s color-blind sexual exceptionalism and the pressure of assimilation through Asian American communities. Unlike the AAPA’s construction of identity that conceives sexuality and race as disparate categories that present an irreconcilable difference, queer is more than a label for an individual’s sexuality [35]. Manalansan argues that queer should be considered as pivotal and constitutive to the understandings of all Asian American experiences, that is, queerness operates through the messiness of complex identities. This is similarly adopted by Liu and observed in her participants’ narrative [11]. Because Liu moves beyond queerness as a sexual identity but instead to “examine queerness as a narrative structure that makes the multiplicity of participants’ identities intelligible” [11] (p. 183), it shifts the approach to understanding a multiply marginalized individual’s personhood.

Centering queer and trans Asian American personhoods in this case is not about the reconciliation towards the whole or the acceptance into either queer or Asian American communities; rather, what

is offered is the moment to consider how the investment in being the “good” Asian/queer is a futile gesture. Indeed, Liu asks if the melancholia experienced as a queer Asian American is actually better understood as a “refusal to ‘feel better’ under the current condition of neoliberal hegemony” [11] (p. 181), therefore rejecting the need for or desire to assimilate or integrate within the larger society. Her approach also demonstrates the limitations of a deficit-centered approach in research work, as it does not ask what causes the “deficit” or the traumatic experiences, nor does it question if the non-deficit state is an ideal or possible position for the queer and trans Asian American. Liu’s work also demonstrates how psychological studies with multiply marginalized communities can look when they address the complexities of colonial and imperial histories and center the experiences and analyses of these individuals. Because the goal is no longer assimilation within existing hierarchies, this allows for an entry into dealing with how the colonial past continues to sustain current racialized and gendered subject relations [9,11]. Allowing her participants’ narrated experience to guide the approach to understanding queer subjectivities, Liu’s work opens up the space for thinking through the structural and the personal as intimately intertwined. Without being tied to the desire to “fix” what is wrong, and reframing the orientation towards social, mental, and physical well-being, studies like Liu’s [11] allow us to ask if it is important for queer and trans Asian Americans to assimilate into the established hierarchies, what is at stake when the goal is no longer assimilation, and what possibilities open up when assimilation is no longer the goal.

#### 4.2. *Alternative Methodologies*

The recent re-investment in qualitative methodologies in conventional U.S. psychology is a good start, as it allows us to begin to move away from just positivistic approaches to understanding identities. However, if it does not also interrogate the WEIRD and colonial roots in the work, it runs the risk of replicating existing power relations, as observed in feminist psychology [22,36]. Qualitative methodologies, such as critical narrative analysis as it was employed in Liu’s study or oral history interviews, can allow us to better center the personhoods of our participants [11]. When these methodologies are integrated with decolonial frameworks, they also call for a re-examination and re-negotiation of researcher–participant relationships. For example, to center the personhoods and subjectivities of queer and trans Asian Americans, it is not enough to just include them within the data, but to also consider that the role of “expert” may not belong to that of the researcher. It is not enough to say that they are narrators and co-constructors, but to apply these dynamic shifts within the project from “data collection” to “analysis.” This shift challenges the scientific method popular in conventional psychology and adds to critical approaches [37]. Tuck’s desire-based research framework can help with “understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives” [30] (p. 416). This is contrasted against research that typically focuses on marginalized communities’ trauma and harm, which reduce their humanity to pain/victimhood. Methodologies that consider the personhoods of multiply marginalized folx through their own contexts are crucial to psychological work that seeks to tie the personal with the structural. Together with Tuck’s [30] call for a desire-based research, these approaches that situate a different form of relationality and consider narrators more fully beyond objects of analyses provide a way to practice decolonizing work and to intervene in existing psychological literature.

In addition, oral history approaches can help with resituating power away from the researcher to “power that grew out of reflections of personal experiences” [38] (p. 372). This reframing is helpful to see oral history projects as dialogues between narrator and interviewer, and also to question the role of the interpreter. With this working frame, the relationship established during interviews rejects the conventional relationship of the expert researcher and the naïve participant [39]. In addition, some approaches to reporting oral history data have suggested that the full transcript be integrated in the main body of the paper rather than the appendix [40]. By doing so, this invites the readers to understand the recounted events as they were constructed during the interview, and emphasizes the context and temporality that are important to interpretations. While dissected texts are important to answering the

researcher's question because they allow for a close reading, this approach risks decontextualization and returns the narrator to the position of object. Adopting a method of reporting that forefronts the full transcript first further affirms the importance of centering our narrator's personhood and supports the shift in researcher–narrator dynamics.

The work of interpretation cannot just take the interviews as “raw data”, but must also consider the narrator's own nuanced analysis from the context of their lives [39]. The work of interpretation by the interviewer/interpreter has to account for and acknowledge (barter and negotiate) the narrators' perspectives rather than dismiss or discount them as non-experts. Such an approach allows space to reflect on the knowledge produced through the intersubjective relations and to address some of the power asymmetry, therefore addressing the fact that knowledge production is a biased process rather than hiding behind a facade of objectivity, as is typical of the scientific method. Oral history emphasizes personal context alongside a recounting of an event [40]. Personal reflections and how folk remember their experiences move oral history beyond “historical accuracy,” thereby speaking to a more complicated process than a simple recalling or retelling [38]. Because the process of doing an oral history is a “collaborative generation of knowledge” between the narrator and interviewer [39], it also makes explicit the relationship dynamics. For example, Liu's [11] relationship to her participants allowed for certain assumptions to be made and shared. These assumptions form a shorthand for the knowledge that is being generated through the interview, which can also sometimes make interpretations opaque at times if the shared assumption is not clear. However, her relationship allows for a certain level of trust and rapport to be built, and it is likely that a different interviewer, one who is not associated with the organization, will not be able to elicit a similar response. Rather than being seen as a drawback, these forms of relationships make the process of knowledge production more transparent and also provide space for confronting the structures of power that permeate the interviewers', narrators', and interpreters' lives and dictates how knowledge is (co-)constructed.

Emphasizing the importance of listening to the individual, Dana Jack [39] invites interviewers to understand the nuances that make up the narrator's life while also contextualizing these experiences with the larger cultural narratives. Because the process of oral history is highly collaborative and results in a co-created narrative, it also becomes important to understand the positionalities and stakes of the different actors. The subjective positions and various ethical concerns should be laid out as much as possible. Yow agrees that it is in the awareness of “our biases and preconceptions, the limitations of our experience and preferences [that] bring us closer to an understanding of how we influence our research and interpretation, whether it is qualitative or quantitative” [40] (p. 5). By recognizing and reflecting on how we shape the project, we are being more truthful to the potential biases that appear in our work.

## 5. Conclusions

Current approaches in psychology have not done enough to consider the personhood and subjectivities of queer and trans Asian Americans. Personhood has to be conceived beyond the limits of representational politics, which requires a re-orientation of the locus of self, especially for those on the margins. As such, identity labels and categories that are limited to the subjective level are insufficient in explaining and seeing the marginalized individual's personhood. Because of the risk of being deemed as “deviant” by the state, policing non-heterosexual sexuality within racialized communities, such as the Asian American community, reflects the normative script of U.S. sexual exceptionalism [10]. Conventional psychology has failed to address these larger colonial and imperial histories and relations, and is therefore limited in its intersectional approach. Those who are multiply marginalized, like queer and trans Asian Americans, continue to remain excluded and made invisible. In addition, despite the best intentions to consider social well-being, psychology's struggle with understanding identities as intertwining discourses and subjectivities that are constantly flowing and shifting, as well as the fixation on damage and deficit, continues to limit its ability to address the structural problems that impact the lived experiences of those on the margins.

We suggest that a decolonizing shift is necessary to address the concerns of multiply marginalized folx and to return their full humanity by centering their personhoods in research. This approach resists reduction of participants to just data and also requires a thoughtful consideration of the relationship between researcher and participant. The current reliance on representational politics for those on the margins will not get us to understanding one's full humanity, but only perpetuates existing structures of oppression.

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