



Critical Voices of Asian American Non-Tenured Female Faculty: A Dialogue on Intersectionality

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ABSTRACT

Marginalization of non-tenured faculty of color in academia endure increased responsibilities and workload without compensation, based on cultural affiliation (Cleveland, et al., 2018; Rideau, 2021). The gender equity gap in salary among non-tenured faculty further exacerbates the issue (American Association of University Professors, 2020). In raising this awareness, this collaborative autoethnographic study focuses on foregrounding the positionality in Asian American non-tenured female faculty (AANTFF) who experience triple marginalization of being Asian, female, and non-tenured. The theoretical framing for this work draws upon Asian Critical Race Theory (AsianCrit) (Chang, 1993; Iftikar & Museus, 2018; Yoo et al., 2022), Critical Asian American Feminism (Chow, 1987), and Critical Collaborative Autoethnography (Bhattacharya, 2008), to develop an interdisciplinary framework using the lens of intersectionality both as a concept and a method. Guided by this research question, in what ways do AANTFF amplify their critical voices through autoethnographic work to understand positions within Asian Critical Feminism and AsianCrit? The researchers critically reflect and engage in a dialogue on their lived experiences with intentional and collective engagement, which are rooted in a deeply seeded racialized history that has informed and shaped their present context.

Keywords: academic elitism, AsianCrit, autoethnography, cultural taxation, faculty of color, female faculty, intersectionality, non-tenure

INTRODUCTION

The label of non-tenured faculty of color conjures complications with cultural and gender taxation and marginalization in academia, where faculty of color are faced with increased responsibilities and workload without compensation and based on cultural affiliation (Cleveland, et al., 2018; Rideau, 2021). Relatedly, there are the continued inequities in salaries between male and female tenured, tenure-track, and non-tenured faculty. Asian American non-tenured female faculty (AANTFF) in particular experience triple marginalization of being Asian, female, and non-tenured (American Association of University Professors, 2020).

Women are more likely to hold a non-tenured faculty position where they are largely underpaid and hold the least amount of job security (AAUP, 2020). Added to this are the challenges Asian American female faculty face, masked by stereotypes of perceived success influenced by the model minority myth. However, the dearth of research on AANTFF raises the need to highlight the voices and experiences from the field. While the authors in this study identify as female, non-tenured, and Asian American, their approach to using collaborative autoethnography is salient for creating a new space for dialogue of an underrepresented subgroup in academia. It is through this process that we shift from using third person to first person in order to provide a more personal connection to our work, lives, and stories. The lack of research in this area poses a challenge to interrogate consequences that are prevalent in the lived experiences of AANTFF, as we continue to pursue truth in this educational realm. Hence, the overarching research question addresses the ways AANTFF amplify their voices through critical collaborative autoethnographic work to understand positions leading into an *Asian American Non-Tenured Female Faculty Interdisciplinary Framework*. Further we examine the intersections of AANTFF within professional spaces that address academic elitism and cultural & identity taxation.

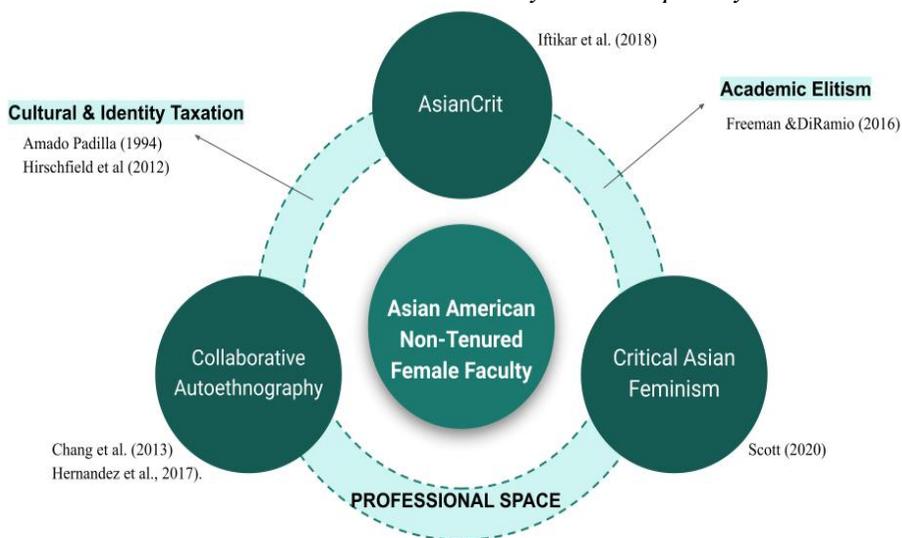
FRAMING THE LITERATURE

Interdisciplinary AsianCrit Frameworks

In order to address the needs of AANTFF, we adapted and developed an interdisciplinary framework, which was informed by the following theoretical and methodological perspectives: Asian Critical Race Theory (AsianCrit), Critical Asian American Feminism, and Critical Collaborative Autoethnography (see Figure 1). These three areas allow us to critically reflect on our lived experiences with intentional, collective engagement, which are rooted in a deeply seeded racialized history that has informed and shaped our present context.

Figure 1

Asian American Non-Tenured Female Faculty Interdisciplinary Framework



Asian Critical Race Theory (AsianCrit) was conceptualized by Chang (1993) to understand Asian American legal scholarship informed by critical race theory during a time of rising anti-Asian hate in the 1990s. Building upon this work, Iftikar and Museus (2018), applied AsianCrit in higher education spaces that center on race as the primary focus of the problems experienced by Asian Americans through racialized stereotypes, such as being cast as the model minority, or perceived as being a forever foreigner. The seven tenets that govern AsianCrit and inform this study through an added lens of critical feminism include: 1) Asianization, 2) transnational contexts; 3) (re)constructive history; 4) strategic (anti)essentialism; 5) intersectionality; 6) story, theory, and praxis; and 7) commitment to social justice (Iftikar & Museus, 2018).

Applying a critical Asian American feminist lens to this work raises both racial and gender consciousness to the ways that Asian American women historically and presently face oppression (Scott, 2020): 1) perceived as exotic and overly sexualized; 2) assumed to be passive; and 3) subject to racialized violence and sexual harassment (Azhar et al., 2021; Chow, 1987; Ontiveros, 1993). Within the workplace, complications of AANTFF and Asian professional women are viewed with similar biased ideations as foreign and passive. This raises a need to center AANTFF positionality to create agency and to understand the complexity of the challenges that AANTFF face. Lastly, critical collaborative autoethnographies serve as a means to reexamine the collective lived experiences of AANTFF as an asset by building

community through intentional and engaged dialogue. As autoethnography serves as exploration and reflection of self, collaborative autoethnography evokes a space to connect through personal experiences and engage in critical dialogue to unearth (Chang et al., 2013; Hernandez et al., 2017). An additional layer to the dialogue is the mode. During COVID-19, the autoethnographic collaborative spaces were enacted virtually in order to reach and connect across cities, since such spaces were not available or did not exist on site.

Professional Spaces

Professional spaces in higher education include the physical workplace environment such as classrooms, faculty offices, open campus spaces, virtual and in-person conference rooms. Traditionally, classroom spaces are regarded with clear lines of authority and power, where faculty uphold command of the classroom space. Asian American female faculty have experienced the opposite, where the classroom is a “contested space” that includes experiences of open student resistance through questioning one’s authenticity, experience, and knowledge to hold an academic position. Moreover, AANTFF face these challenges more often than their White male counterparts (Hune, 2011). In addition, newer female faculty experience higher rates of incivility by students compared to male faculty.

The professional space beyond the classroom is also challenging for Asian American female faculty because they feel disconnected, Othered, and experience the triple standard to prove oneself in being perceived as American, holding leadership skills/knowledge in multiple subject areas, while balancing a personal life. As part of the stereotype cast on Asian female faculty perceived as “forever foreigner”, those who have an accent experience lower course evaluations in perceptions of content knowledge compared to those who are native English speaking (Deo, 2013; Hune, 2011).

Tensions with Asian American Female Faculty

Our stories do not neatly map onto the central narratives of the academy, and like most women of color in academia, our first instinct is to keep our stories to ourselves, following the unspoken rules and making no waves (Gutierrez y Muhs et al., 2012). The hope for this paper is to begin a conversation on how these experiences are being understood by AANTFF, why they feel they do not have a voice in these challenging spaces and begin creating a space to raise this issue in spite of how it will be received by the academy. The inner tension AANTFF face is the want for resistance, while not feeling the support to speak out due to community perceptions, institutional rankings, and relatedly, credibility of scholarship due to institutional affiliation. How do these rankings and profiles create further tension within Asian American female faculty who already feel under-supported?

Academic Elitism & Perpetuation of Generational Wealth

Within the context of this paper, the term academic elitism refers to the institutionalized structure that perpetuates dominance from perceived scholarly voices of authority stemming from highly ranked institutions and acclaimed or prestigious institutions. Academic elitism influences scholarship and voices of authority in academic and professional spaces.

This translates into hiring practices where 70% of elite higher education programs hire faculty who have graduated from top ranking institutions. The formation of cliques in hiring practices perpetuates a continuance of excluding prospective candidates with diverse backgrounds (Freeman & DiRamio, 2016). Although assumptions of research quality and productivity tied to institutional ranking are unfounded, academic elitism persists. The focus on prestige and institutional rank serves to maintain its reputation. Structural (i.e., institutional culture and climate) and external (i.e., funding, prior partnerships) perceptions are also identified in understanding the intentional relationships between top-tiered institutions.

Relatedly are the ways academia is largely structured and supported through generational wealth. The overwhelming majority of those who are in academia come from family backgrounds that include high achievement and roles in higher education that support their navigation process in being placed in academia. This process creates a barrier for prospective first-generation candidates who want to pursue careers in academia (VanDam, 2022).

Cultural & Gender Taxation in Higher Education

Cultural taxation is a discriminatory practice, defined by Padilla (1994) as an extra burden of service responsibilities placed upon minority faculty members due to their racial or ethnic background. The concept is expanded to identity taxation to encompass how other marginalized social identities (i.e., gender, race, sexual orientation) may result in additional non-academic service commitments for certain faculty (Hirschfield et al., 2012). Female faculty face a double minority status of being female and from a minoritized group, adding the burden of balancing work and personal responsibilities (Cleveland et al., 2013). The added weight of responsibilities further limit opportunities for minority faculty advancement into leadership positions. Further, minority faculty are not remunerated for the additional workload that is not outlined in their responsibilities. Examples of this practice include the expectation to speak on behalf of a community or culture, focus research on a minoritized community, advise and mentor students of color, lead and attend ethnic and cultural groups on campus.

METHODOLOGY

Critical collaborative autoethnography is not only a methodological approach to qualitative inquiry but it is a collective process and “a form of

empowerment that facilitates survival, solidarity, and resilience” (Ashlee, 2017, p. 91). It also allows authors as researchers and participants to interrogate themselves in relation to society (Bhattacharya, 2008; Chang et al., 2016). This approach creates the conditions to analyze the hegemonic structures experienced as AANTFF. By employing a critical collaborative autoethnographic approach, we address the intersubjective narratives from our respective lives as female, Asian American K-12 educators pursuing higher education. The initial process began organically through a casual conversation in January 2022 during an organizational Zoom Online Communications (Zoom) meeting. We chatted in the text box about some of the challenges we were facing personally and professionally during the COVID-19 pandemic. From these conversations, we began to formalize the process to capture our lived experiences. Without knowing each other, we offered to meet and introduce ourselves in Zoom and decided to write about our personal educational journey in K-12 to see if we had any similarities. From this experience, we continued to meet, discuss, and critically reflect upon our past and the ways we are confronting repeated experiences today.

As our positionalities are central to this work, we are providing aspects of our ethnic and professional identities. As a first author I identify as a multi-generational, Japanese American who, at the time of this study am also a non-tenured female faculty in higher education teacher preparation and previously worked as an adjunct at three different higher education institutions for a period of seven years. Within these institutions I taught in a variety of teacher preparation courses in literacy, social studies, human development, teaching multilingual learners, and language assessments. I was an elementary classroom teacher in the second largest public school district in the nation. Then moved to a public school with a high migrant population and taught a newcomer class and literacy intervention. A few years later I moved to teach at an affluent private school serving a large international student population and taught English language development while also serving as the English language development and sheltered programs department chair.

As the second author, I identify as a first-generation, Filipino American non-tenured female faculty, who at the time of the study worked at five different institutions on a contractual basis, teaching foundations in education, methodology in curriculum development, STEM, and classroom management. I was a former bilingual elementary classroom teacher in an inner-city public school, then moved on to a middle-class public school. Finally, I served as a language acquisition instructor in an affluent private school.

METHODS

We collected two types of data sources in this research study. The first was a written personal narrative that encompassed our educational journey (i.e., positionality, educational experiences, teaching, and research interests) that we, as AANTFF, shared with each other. Using Google Sheets, we exchanged our narratives to read and annotate our connections and wonderings. We also reflected on our similarities and differences while categorizing them accordingly.

The second data source was video and audio recordings via Zoom with each of us writing one autobiographical sample, describing our educational journeys as a starting point to our conversations. There was a total of seven recordings ranging between an hour to an hour and a half. Through questioning for further clarification, elaboration, and engagement, we discovered the shared challenges we endured hidden beneath the surface.

Zoom transcriptions and notes were extracted and organized in Google Sheets. Our responses were combined and hand-coded with emerging themes and categories. Themes and categories include experiences with discrimination and hiring/promotion practices due to race and assumptions of foreignness, seeking community through professional organizations, and questioning our own abilities in spite of our educational background and experience. Based on these emerging themes, a new theoretical framework was constructed to address the specific lived experiences of AANTFF.

RESULTS

The outcomes in this study revealed that our experience as AANTFF is multilayered and complex, with feelings of marginalization within the organizations we served based on gender, ethnicity, role, and institutional ranking. The results of our study align to categories that address the intersectionality of race, gender, non-tenure, and institutional ranking. These areas inform our adapted, interdisciplinary framework: Asian Critical Race Theory, Critical Asian Feminism, and Collaborative Autoethnography.

Critical Female Asianization

Critical female Asianization raises awareness to both race and gender consciousness in the ways Asian American women historically and presently face oppression (Scott, 2020). We discuss below the ways historical racism persists in our journey in higher education. Examples range from microaggressions to blatant and explicitly racist comments. The first author experienced biases within the blind peer review process in an academic journal where “I was questioned about my authenticity and ethnic identity on more than one occasion. While positionality within research is important, the reviewer’s assumption was that I was not Japanese American”. The second author was also questioned about her capability to spearhead a bilingual

authorization program at her former institution. “I took the initiative to research and gather detailed information on how this program can be started; unfortunately, my proposal was shut down and I was not given the opportunity to lead nor assist in getting the program started. I felt the reasons for this decision were based on ethnicity, position, and gender.

I wanted to push for the bilingual authorization in this University that I worked for...I believe that even my colleagues in that room supported me in a sense that the proposal for the bilingual authorization was strong enough. However, there's one person in that room who is white and has the authority to either say yes or no and shut down that proposal. This person normally doesn't have that capability of running the program. That thought was running in my mind the whole time because the person would say ‘No, we're going to table it later on. We're going to bring in more people to hear their input’ as though my input is not good enough.

Academic & Gender Elitism

We both experienced some form of academic elitism, which included the biased assumptions of abilities based on non-tenured positions and institutional ranking through Carnegie R1 and R2 research classifications. This was experienced not only within society but also within our ethnic communities. The perceived ability of high performance and productivity in research is tied institutional ranking that follows the Carnegie classifications (Freeman & DiRamio, 2016). We both did not work at R1 institutions,

Conferences and organizations perpetuate the conditions for academic oppression based on affiliations. The first author interacted with a male graduate student attending an R1 institution who boasted of his research abilities due to his affiliation and claiming the author would not know about research because the author is not employed at an R1 institution. The author reflected upon whether the same comment would be made to a male faculty member.

I was taken aback by the comment made by this male graduate student from an R1 institution who bragged about his competence in research investigations based on his connection with the highly reputable university he's currently enrolled in. More than that, he insinuated that I don't know anything about research because I'm not in an R1 school.

The second author encountered an incident where her former female graduate student refused to apply for the doctorate program of the same institution because it was unrated and assumed that most, if not all, professors in that institution were substandard in their teaching capabilities.

It was very surprising for me to hear that my former student did not want to get her doctorate degree in the same institution where she

received her master's degree. I sensed that there was (still is) a stigma to obtaining a higher degree in a non R1/R2 institution due to its negative reputation in terms of the lack of marketability for employment.

Cultural and Gender Taxation

The concept of cultural and gender taxation, or the “tax” enforced on faculty based on gender or color which adds responsibilities not listed on one's job description go unrewarded and unacknowledged and instead, turns into an expectation (Cleveland et al., 2018). The two authors in this study reflected on the different occasions where they were given duties additional work in their department without any compensation. They were expected to attend additional meetings and were given extra tasks that were outside their job description. They reflected on why these responsibilities were given and wondered if it was due to gender, ethnicity, or lack of experience.

One of the challenges I face is balancing the workload of being a new/junior faculty and also wanting to be present in my children's life. I thought long hours was temporary as a PhD student, then I thought it would be temporary while working full-time as a teacher and taking on multiple part-time jobs that I thought would help me secure one full time position in academia.

For the first author, she has always wondered why she was not getting compensated for extra duties placed upon her and whether it was an option or an expectation. She has reflected upon whether this was a result of her position within the institution/department, gender, or ethnicity.

Starting a full-time position during COVID and being 100% remote has some perks but also drawbacks. There are missed opportunities to engage with colleagues and grasping the connections already present as well as understanding the organizational structure. I seemed to work longer hours than I ever had before, taking on additional tasks, and not seeing how they fit my role. What are the realistic expectations to maintain my position vs. the realistic goals in order to advance?

Double-Edged Sword in Professional Spaces

During the time that Affirmative Action was heavily put into effect, the second author was hired as a classroom teacher not on the basis of her capabilities but was due to her gender and ethnicity of being a Filipino American female. She overheard the principal make a surprising comment after he hired her: “I am so glad we hired a teacher – a Filipino American female” without any remarks on her professional qualifications. This experience seems to mirror a double-edged sword phenomenon in professional spaces.

So, because in the schools that I work for three school districts, I was the only Filipino so first that Compton Unified I was the only Filipino and then I went to ABC unified school district and other I was in Filipino and then Rowland unified another one, so it was, in fact, an advantage because they saw me as a different— another face, another ethnicity, if you will, and somehow I represented a certain portion of the students there so that was the leverage, of course. On the other hand, I was a product of you know affirmative action and in this affirmative action. I overheard my principal saying ‘oh okay I’m glad we hired because, at least we have one Filipino’ so that somehow offended me because I thought I was hired for my skills and not for my skin tone or my ethnicity, but in a way that was an advantage for me, because that led me to receiving this full-time position in teaching. Who I am is a triple standard because I also need to prove that I am English proficient, which seems ridiculous. Sometimes I need to prove that I do have these skills, but it depends on the context. I’m not going to go into a room full of leadership and take over the conversation, right? I think there’s certain types of behaviors based on the people in the room, and so a question came up but more like a statement that I come off as being passive and my response was then you don’t know me, you know nothing about me, and I it took that as a huge insult. Because to me passive means, not only are you quiet, but you have no opinion and so, that is a huge stereotype. I feel like that’s being placed upon me and so, I have to constantly prove myself—right? It’s very frustrating, because that doesn’t happen to the other people that are in the room. And it doesn’t happen to white women that are in the room, and because they’re not looked at that, from the start, you know, whereas it’s assumed from me that it’s going to be that way so it’s this weird triple standard of having to prove that I’m good enough to fit in. I was just thinking about that because it just came up the other day, and I was super frustrated and angry about it. It’s hard to constantly try to prove myself. I’m tired, you know, like I shouldn’t have to prove myself to anyone.

Amplifying Our Stories & Actions

We used our personal narratives as a starting point to create a positive support for one another during COVID-19, and dove into an unexpected area of discussion within our educational journey. It is through our vulnerability in sharing these stories and lived experiences that we can critically engage and develop mutual compassion. This turns into a source of support and creates a sense of community. It is through our shared stories that we discover our common themes.

So that brings to mind this book that my colleagues and I read through...not webinar but maybe like a small group. We get together and every week, we would talk about this book called Presumed Incompetent and these are stories of minority women who have been neglected, who have been ignored and had their goals shattered because of higher authority of White males who are dominant in the higher education. So, I look at your experiences as somehow similar to mine because of the passivity concept among Asians and so I totally relate with that, and I guess the frustration happens when you're pushing yourself too much and it's still not good enough.

The result of being unsilenced considers how we confront our challenges to build strength. Since we both did not have any mentors within our institutions and learned on our own to navigate through the higher education realm, we collaborated with each other as non-tenured faculty, submitting conference proposals, and publishing articles. Our cultural intuition and positionality as AANTFF grounds us and through our engagement, we created a space to support and strengthen one another in the process.

CULTIVATING PROFESSIONAL SPACES FOR AANTFF

As we continue to support, encourage, and build up each other in the process, we also want to extend this engagement by cultivating professional spaces for other AANTFF, who may have similar challenging stories like us. We hope that as we go through the process of vulnerably sharing our stories and foster a sense of community among those who wish to amplify their voices by destabilizing the hegemonic assumptions within racist, male-dominated, patriarchal educational practices, particularly in higher education. Hence, by disrupting the pattern of isolation, we aspire to cultivate professional spaces that will serve as a refuge or a haven for current or future AANTFF who wish to collectively examine and dismantle systems of oppression, with the goal of liberating ourselves and other AANTFF in higher education.

CONCLUSION

This study explores how AANTFF navigate higher education spaces and how their positionality provokes motivation to push themselves further in combating experiences with microaggressions, academic elitism, vulnerability, and cultural taxation. All of the aforementioned aspects stem from institutionalized racism and guided by the research question: In what ways do AANTFF amplify their critical voices through autoethnographic work to understand positions within Asian Critical Feminism and AsianCrit? Through the collaborative autoethnographic process, we were able to contextualize our respective journeys through the common themes that exemplify our lived experiences within a racialized system of oppression.

Future research can explore how complex oppressive systems and areas are experienced and understood within a larger population of AANTFF. Do biases exist within the larger landscape of Asian American female faculty within particular colleges and programs (e.g., education, social science, hard sciences, etc.) or between research institution tiers? Is there a hierarchy association and affiliation in articulating this further, what informs Asian American female faculty decision-making to be at their current institution? In addition, do AANTFFs feel they had options to choose from? How can we develop critical awareness of biases in academic settings based on tier affiliation and assumed competency despite the presence of the academic elitism?

At the same time, this study is also a starting point to explore how AANTFF's cultural capital can play a significant role in navigating organizations as junior faculty, find and create community, and seek mentorship and other protective barriers against oppressive structures. Sharing these thoughts with a wider audience of junior faculty can be a starting point in addressing these historically tabooed discussions.

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