



# R.A.W.

[Raunchy Asian Women]

## Giggly Geisha Girls Need Not Apply

By Hannah Kwon

RIZWAN MAJID

**F**our women in black. Eyes flashing and feet planted, they stand militantly behind microphones, in that anticipatory moment before the lights flare and the show starts.

“Current times and current trends/ When will it all come to an end?/ Fashion trends and haute couture designed to appropriate my culture/ for mass hysterical shopping sprees./ What is it that makes me ‘in’ this year?” they asked.\*

So began this historic night of Asian American women’s performance art at Dartmouth College. The show was held on March 7th in the Poison Ivy nightclub, well-known victim of deserted island theme parties and salsa nights. But on this evening, Poison Ivy was packed with well over 50 Asian American and GLBT activists, progressive-minded members of the Dartmouth community, and those curious enough about the show’s

title to lay aside final exams and term papers for a few hours.

“R.A.W. [Raunchy Asian Women],” inspired by a Diana Son play of the same title, was the first show produced, directed, and performed exclusively by Asian American women in the College’s history. It sounded the coming of an all-out, no-holds-barred political consciousness among Dartmouth’s Asian American women through spoken word poetry, meditations on the intersections of race, gender, culture, and sexuality, and plenty of true-to-promise raunchiness.

R.A.W. was originally intended to be a part of Dartmouth Asian Organization’s annual Culture Night, but concerns for its appropriateness at an event that traditionally attracts many younger children and non-Asian community members pushed Dot Lin and Morna Ha to produce it as a separate program, making it Far

Off Broadway (FOB)’s first foray into Asian American feminist performance.

“Most of the Asian American play literature out there—what little there is—is written by males and centers around them, too. In most cultures, women are the minority in a constant struggle for more voice,” says Lin. “So what better timing and what better people for producing this show?”

Opening the show with Anida Esguerra’s spoken word poem, “Not Your Fetish,” Diane Kim, Smita Tripathi, Anshu Wahi, and Paloma Wu addressed the “mother-fuckers [who] exploit *my culture* / out of context with no content.” The poem references Madonna, the fashion industry, Martha Stewart, and the movie *Seven Years in Tibet* as examples of Western civilization’s offensive appropriation of Asian culture as a fashionable trend, demanding that it “stop masturbating in your

\* Excerpt from Anida Esguerra’s “Not Your Fetish,” off *I Was Born With Two Tongues*’ album, Brokenspeak.



own glory/ Stop masturbating in my culture."

In one of the few original pieces performed, Anshu Wahi read "Selections," a poetry and prose meditation on the torture and ecstasy of feeling wholly comfortable and wholly alien in one's own skin. Speaking to the audience all of the emotions and thoughts that she could never express to her first-generation immigrant mother about her identity and sexuality, Wahi says, "So many times I could have endured in love if part of me did not hate it. Hate it for being something that makes me even more depraved to you."

Tsering Kheyap also performed an original piece entitled, "Conversation with Ma," which addressed issues of interracial dating and generational culture gap between first and second generation immigrants.

Also performed were excerpts from *Pages from a Eurasian Notebook*, by Carol Roh Spaulding and *Tea*, by Velina Hsu Houston, "Fear of Flying," by Shawn Wong, and Diana Son's *R.A.W.* ('Cause

*I'm a Woman*), and Tomi Tanaka's "from a lotus blossom cunt."

In "from a lotus blossom cunt," performed by Wendy Liu, a woman in the Asian American movement of the 60s addresses the "brothers" of the movement who oppress their Asian American sisters, even as they claim to be a unified front in the struggle for Asian American rights. The performance of Tanaka's piece put the evening's production in a larger historical context, thus simultaneously celebrating the coming of a new Asian American women's consciousness at Dartmouth, and a much longer tradition of Asian American feminism, one that stretches decades into America's past.

Tanaka's monologue revealed the hypocrisy in Asian American women being pressured by Asian American men to place race over gender. This pressure would eventually drive many of them into the new feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Having left the Asian American movement, though, many of these women ironically found themselves being

asked to choose gender over race in the predominately middle class, white women's feminist movement.

Frustrated with being asked to choose one identity over the other—as if they could be separated—Asian American sisters founded the Asian American women's movement, finding solidarity through study groups, women's centers, and organizations like Organization of Asian Women (OAW) and Asian Women United (AWU).

The angry voices that delivered these lines of confusion and self-confidence, anger and gentleness, sexual repression and sexual liberation surely surprised those audience members who cling on to images of Asian American women as giggly geisha girls, quiet, submissive wives, or whip-wielding dragon ladies. They surely surprised some of the Asian American men in the audience as well, those unaware that they hold the potential to be as oppressive as their white counterparts by supporting a culture of patriarchy.

But the voices surely surprised some of the Asian American women in the audience, too. The value of R.A.W. was not in the sometimes-off delivery of lines by amateur actresses, or suggestions of the sex that always sells, but in that it exposed Asian American women to a culture of solidarity that some may not have known existed. By speaking out against the objectivism of "Asian fetishists," the "double binds" of racism and sexism, a generational gap between parents and children that is compounded by cultural difference, these "Raunchy Asian Women" were naming personal experiences that Asian American women often share.

Ha differentiates R.A.W. from Dartmouth's traditional culture nights, saying, "I wanted to bring a more complete and explicit picture of what it means to be an Asian American woman—including the anger, sadness, confusions, sexual frustration, expletives, and finally hope." In reacting with righteous rage, but allowing themselves not to become disillusioned and bitter, the stories of R.A.W. empower Dartmouth's Asian American women to never be afraid of being yourself, and to always hold on to the right to be whatever and whoever you are—as long as you share your stories with your sisters.

On the campus of this remote



RIZWAN MAJID



New Hampshire college that is more often than not known for *The Dartmouth Review*, the Greek system, and its former Indian mascot, R.A.W. was Asian American acting troupe FOB's contribution to an activist movement that has been gaining in strength and volume in the past few years. From the first New England Asian American collegiate conference organized by Hoyt Zia '75 in November 1974, to Thursday night's performance of R.A.W., Dartmouth's ethnic Asian students have slowly been united into an Asian American community over the past three decades.

R.A.W.'s sophisticated analysis of race, gender, and sexuality is indicative of a growing political awareness that has not always existed amongst Dartmouth's Asian American community. But in recent years, the Asian American community has begun to deconstruct what it means to be Asian American at Dartmouth, and in a "multicultural" America. Helped along by the hiring of Nora Yasumura as the advisor to Asian and Asian American students in 1999, the Asian American community has been involved in issues of racial profiling, sexual assault, the hiring and retention of minority professors, and the debate over Asian American Studies.

Another testament to the maturation of the Asian American community is the abundance of important Asian American figures that have recently come to speak at Dartmouth. In the last two years, activist Helen Zia, scholar Evelyn Hu-Dehart, and scholar Vijay Prashad, have lectured at Dartmouth. Only one night after the performance of R.A.W., civil rights activist and Howard University law professor Frank Wu came to Hanover to



KIZWAN MUMFORD

speak on "The Changing Face of America: The Mixed Race Movement and the Power of Building Coalitions" and discuss his new book *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White* (Basic Books, 2001).

However, lest Dartmouth's Asian American community become content with the progress it has made, R.A.W.'s women remind and warn us of a PC, racially-sensitive sentiment where people hide away in "safe gated subdivisions/ only handling culture for eight hours a day." With the plethora of diversity initiatives that seek to institutionalize multiculturalism at Dartmouth, the new challenge to communities of color will be to ensure that these initiatives actually change the power structure instead of "handling" the growing political awareness of a new generation of minority activists.

With this in mind, FOB promises to continue challenging how Dartmouth talks about gender, sexuality, and race. They have tentative plans for an "alternative" culture night, in conjunction with Asian Pacific Heritage Month in May, where "anything goes—fighting, cursing, family dysfunction, screaming, raunchy laughter, even extremely modern dance," says Dot Lin. Lin pictures this alternative culture night to be "a venue where Asian Americans can talk about sex, family, friendship, politics, religion, and pop

culture in truthful, provocative, and creative ways. No holds barred."

The women who performed in R.A.W. and those who came out to support it prove that Lin is not the only one ready for an "Asian American cultural revolution" on this campus. Ha reports that "feedback has been absolutely amazing. Both men and women, Asian and non-Asian were complementing us and saying how great the show was." Dartmouth's Asian American community today is not the same as it was a decade ago, even four years ago.

"The days of 'my mother made me pay the violin' are funny, but they're gone now," says Lin. "We've moved on to something more real. My mother never made me play the violin or the piano and in six to ten years, many of us will be having children and we won't make them play the violin—those stereotypes will be outdated, along with the rapidly aging geishas and the exotic flower. What will we have then?" Lin asks. "A bunch of outdated stereotypes saying what the Asian American culture is not, but not what it is." What it is remains to be created and seen by any who will speak up and share their stories. ♦

*HANNAH KWON is a graduating senior. She often goes by the nickname "little Asian firecracker."*