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**RUIN AND RENEWAL: ASSOCIATION FOR ASIAN
AMERICAN STUDIES' 2022 CONFERENCE**

Tereza Šmilauerová

FOR 43 years, the Association for Asian American Studies has striven for “excellence in teaching and research in the field of Asian American Studies” (“About AAAS”). In accordance with Association’s efforts to support and advance not just scholarship, but also teaching, the interconnectedness of communities, and social activism, AAAS has held an ever-growing annual conference since 1980 (“History”). This conference is devoted to exploring Asian Americans’ past and current varieties, burdens, and possibilities. This year’s conference of the Association for Asian American Studies, held on 14-16 April 2022 in Denver, Colorado, revolved around the theme of ‘Ruin and Renewal’. This topic, ever-relevant in the field of Asian American studies (which among other issues includes the Othering of the group and other minorities, and ways to fight or subvert that phenomenon), has re-emerged as particularly relevant due to the surge of anti-Asian violence during the COVID-19 pandemic and Donald Trump’s presidency.

Chaired by Marguerite Nguyen and Cathering Fung, the conference had a very full schedule and offered various events for eleven hours all three days. These ranged from panels devoted to paper presentations and roundtables to section meetings within individual sub-fields in Asian American studies (each day after noon), as well as books/awards receptions in the evenings. Since at the time of the conference the COVID-19 pandemic was still raging across the United States, AAAS decided to not just observe all required restrictions but, considering the recent development of the pandemic, to hold the conference in hybrid form, with the Thursday and Friday events taking place at the Hilton Denver City Center hotel in Denver, Colorado, while most of Saturday’s panels and sessions were held online via Zoom. Technology was, moreover, of great help throughout the whole event to all attendees, who had access to an online guidebook, continuously updated with announcements of side events, entertainment, and chatrooms. This mobile application followed up on the great success of the previous year’s conference which took place entirely online (as did almost all conferences at that time).

In accordance with Association’s aims, the overlap of scholarship with community activism, (student) leadership, and personal engagement with American

social and political issues was strongly emphasized throughout most panels, sessions, and roundtables. That included not only panels focused on ongoing Asian American public engagement (including the current activism and responsible responses to anti-Asian violence during the COVID-19 pandemic), such as “From Communities to Campuses: Asian American Activism“ on Thursday), but also panels focusing on its possible future(s) as well as sessions inherently practical for both (under)graduate students and starting scholars – mentorship sessions carried out as roundtables and “Meet the Professor” meetings, and Drop-In Clinics offered each day. Thursday afternoon also offered a workshop for starting social scientists in the field, “Navigating Disciplinary Boundaries: Early Career Mentorship,” and a session (intended also for budding scholars) on what and how to publish in AAAS’s journal, the *Journal of Asian American Studies*. The journal, as well as Amerasia, the other journal focused exclusively on Asian American studies, had a stall in the central lounge throughout the whole event, sharing the space with book exhibits and stalls representing the main publishers concerned with Asian American scholarship. Support and help, moreover, was not aimed only at emerging scholars; on Friday, a panel called “How to Not Have Your Shit Together: A Sloth-Professorship Workshop on Failure in the Academy” offered mentorship and encouragement for long-term academic staff, and “Asian American Feminisms Works-in-Progress Workshop” was meant to support and advance writers and scholars in this sub-field. Similarly, on Saturday, the panel “Asian American Feminisms Caucus” offered a mentoring roundtable aimed at mid-career scholars and full professors of feminist studies within the field.

Since AAAS strongly believes in the interconnection and mutual influence of scholarship and art, and also in artivism, activism through art, several panels were devoted to art and performance. On Friday this topic was addressed in a trio of late-afternoon sessions: “Seeds of Renewal”, which brought to the audience a shared performance by three poets and an illustrator, “Navigating With(out) Instruments,” where an authorial reading by traci kato-kiriyama was combined with a dialogue between the author and a scholar, and the screening of “Chinatown Rising”, a documentary on Chinatown, with its director Joshua Chuck (the screening of another documentary, “The Chinatown Files,” took place on Saturday with its author, Amy Chen). On Saturday, a panel called “Care in the Ruins” offered, in a similar vein, a performance followed by an interactive literary workshop with a Vietnamese American collective of poets and performers, “She who has no master(s).” Later in the afternoon, a poetry reading and conversations with authors Jasmine An and Carlina Duan took place online. One of Thursday’s panels was also devoted

to recently deceased professor Anantha Sudhakar of San Francisco State University. The papers there built on her research interests as well as her impactful mentorship, teaching, and social/scholar activism.

While many sub-fields and topics recurred throughout the conference – queer studies, environment and geographies, the limitations of Asian American studies and activism, refugee issues, neocolonialism, trauma studies, Orientalism, etc. – several drew more attention this year than others, emerging multiple times in various panels and thus marking the current directions and key discussions in the field. One of them was understandably (as mentioned at the beginning of this review) connected to the COVID-19 pandemic: “Yellow Peril” prejudice and anti-Asian sentiments and abuse. This topic was often not only described and analyzed as a phenomenon, but also discussed in terms of confrontation and possible counter-measures. Of course, it was not only the current violence and prejudice that was discussed, since anti-Asian discrimination and violence have been present since the first arrivals of Asian immigrants to the United States of America. The pandemic was also discussed from various angles, particularly in connection to Asian American responses and impact on the community during the ongoing crisis. Another popular topic was the healthcare system during the COVID-19 as well as health and mental wellness in general. This included the treatment of caregivers and health facilities employees (particularly those of Filipino origin) in the States, depiction of mental health retention strategies and failures in literature and other media, and assessment of the mental and physical wellness of the elderly, disabled, and queer within the community.

Womanhood, femininity, and feminism were, as is traditional, another of the overarching topics of the conference. Often discussed in connection to body and bodiliness, and also in connection to possible transformations and interventions in this sub-field, panels concerned with the topic infallibly offered dynamic discussions and new intersections.

Among all the topics discussed, two were most prominent: a discussion of the best fitting and most generally relevant approach in the field, and the forms, limits, and consequences of construction and performance of Asian American identity. The former topic showed an ongoing move from multiculturalism to trans-/pan-ethnic, transnational, and transpacific approach and methodology. That re-directs focus from primarily categorizing peoples into individual, separate groups to analogizing them and putting them into relations without omitting their specifics. A special re-emerging emphasis was put on the mutuality of the Afro American and Asian American experience in several aspects, particularly visible in the panels “The Ruin and Renewal

of Afro-Asian Critique” on the first day and “Embodying Afro Asia: Expansive Black and Asian Affinities” on the last day of the conference.

The latter-mentioned topic has been essential in the field since its beginning. The term “Asian American” itself was constructed artificially to unite the efforts of individual ethnic groups of Asian origin during the Civil Right Movement in 1968, and also to avoid and overthrow the derogatory designation “Oriental”. Over the decades, Asian American scholars have asked what the limitations of such a concept are, and how it is constructed, represented, and performed. From a roundtable discussing “What’s Left of Asian American Identity in Netflix’s *The Chair?*”, through panels focused on the impact of war(s) on Asian American identity, to a panel directly “Exploring Asian American Identities”, this topic was much present during the whole conference. However, when discussing Asian American identity, it is important to mention that despite the unity felt between Asian Americans, in accordance to AAAS’ mission to “reflect multiple communities and varied identities” (Gonzalez 2022, 5), many ethnic sub-groups had, as usual, a panel devoted specifically to their culture, history and prevalent issues. Several of the ethnicities had specific topics for their panels; while Chinese American ones were particularly, as mentioned above, directed at histories of Chinatowns across the United States, Filipinx American panels researched mainly the transatlantic connections of the community. Korean American panels discussed the transformation(s) of culture and femininity in the community, whereas the South Asian American panel explored the legacies of castes. Papers and panels on Hmong Americans have also been appearing with greater frequency.

The first evening’s reception was devoted to new books in the field and the announcement of this year’s winners in individual categories. Since Thursday afternoon had already seen a panel with a partial selection of the new books presented by their authors, the evening was primarily an opportunity to celebrate the success of fellow scholars in the field. Although the second evening’s reception was, according to the schedule, reserved for chairs and directors, the Department of Asian American Studies of the University of Colorado graciously invited the rest of conference participants for an informal and cordial reception nearby, which was an unexpected yet very pleasant surprise. Finally, as the elections of a new president and a half of the board of the Association took place during the winter 2021/2022, the last evening of the conference was devoted to a passing the presidency’s baton (in a literary as well as figurative sense) from (former) president Jennifer Ho, of the University of Colorado (who managed to bring the conference to her home state, at last), to president-elect Pawan Dhingra, of Amherst College, and announcing and welcoming new members

into AAAS leadership. There was also space for celebrating winners of this year's AAAS awards (excellence in mentorship, early career achievement, engaged scholar, grad student paper, and community).

What characterizes AAAS as an organization and thus permeated the whole conference? The spirit of fellowship and comradery, seen not only in the fact that whole panels, such as Friday's "Half Baked Ideas: Share Ideas for Your Project-in-Progress and Get Feedback", were devoted to uplifting and encouraging the scholarship and social engagement of every member, but also in the fact that the overall atmosphere of every session, meeting, and evening felt informal and friendly, despite the indisputable academic excellence of the research presented during the event. This year's conference was thus a worthy conclusion to the presidency of Jennifer Ho as well as, hopefully, a magnificent goodbye to the pandemic era. May its title, "Ruin and Renewal", epitomize not only the recent crisis with its first half but also the future in its last word.

Link to the conference website: <https://aaastudies.org/conference/2022-conference/>

Link to a PDF of the programme: <https://aaastudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/2022-Program-AAAS.pdf>

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