

**UCLA**

**AAPI Nexus: Policy, Practice and Community**

**Title**

Reenergizing and Renewing the Call for Asian American and Pacific Islander University-Community Research Partnerships

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9d33d557>

**Journal**

AAPI Nexus: Policy, Practice and Community, 16(1-2)

**ISSN**

1545-0317

**Authors**

Poon, OiYan A.  
Villanueva, George

**Publication Date**

2019

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Message from the Guest Editors

## Reenergizing and Renewing the Call for Asian American and Pacific Islander University-Community Research Partnerships

OiYan A. Poon and George Villanueva

What are the theories of change in the field of Asian American studies and research on Asian Americans and/or Pacific Islanders (AAPIs)? What are the ethics of care that researchers should embody in developing university-community partnerships? In a thought-provoking letter to communities, researchers, and educators, Indigenous education scholar Eve Tuck (2009) called for a revisioning and firming “up of our theory(ies) of change and to determine what role, if any, research has in making our dreams come true for our communities” (423). Tuck (2009) criticized what she called damage-centered research, which “operates, even benevolently, from a theory of change that establishes harm or injury in order to achieve reparation” (413). We commonly find this research approach in some applied and community-based studies on AAPI communities and in policy advocacy efforts. For example, significant volumes of research have spotlighted socioeconomic disparities found among low-income AAPIs, and particularly Southeast Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, to counter stereotypes of aggregate high achievement in advocating for increased public attention and resources for AAPIs (Poon, Dizon, & Squire 2017). Perhaps produced through unequal relations between communities and researchers, such “pathologizing analyses” (Tuck 2009, 415) can obscure the roles of racism and colonization that produce dehumanizing effects of social stratification. The articles in this special issue call for a reenergized agenda for AAPI university-community research partnerships, demonstrating transformative methodologies, pedagogies, and praxis.

Although there have been calls for increased community-based research methods or university-community partnerships to strengthen scholarly methods and communities (e.g., Kwon, 2006; Okazaki, Kassem, & Tu, 2014; Sangalang & Gee, 2015) rooted in the founding history of Asian American studies (Ong & Nakanishi, 2003), few have examined the complex systemic conditions that contextualize working relationships defined by power between communities and researchers. Efforts toward university-community partnerships or research can unexpectedly confront formidable barriers created by the webs of institutional structures and cultures found in the complex systems of community organizations, public institutions, and higher education. Therefore, community-based research and university-community partnerships should begin with collective critical assessments of organizational structures and power as well as their implications for such work. Fifty years after the founding of Asian American studies, there is a need for reenergizing sustainable university-community partnerships for the next half century and beyond, through cultivating organizational boundary crossings and bridgework.

For instance, the idea and purpose for this special issue organically germinated during social gatherings that brought together community organizers, leaders, artists, advocates, and academics in Chicago, transgressing boundaries between our professional personas across the city and institutional positions. Through laughter, shared stories, conversation, appetizers, and drinks with community organizers like Steve Moon (Asian Americans Advancing Justice—Chicago), we talked about models for university-community research projects and partnerships. As pretenure faculty and former full-time community advocates—George in city politics and urban planning; OiYan in higher education practice and policy—we strongly identify as scholar-activists whose research agenda focus on racial injustices and include AAPIs. In conversation with our community leader friends in Chicago, we saw a need to identify frameworks for university-community partnerships. We agreed that these models should not romanticize notions of community-engaged research or university-community partnership. Instead, the discourse should prompt further methodological dialogues and systems thinking that advance transformative praxis. As we built a community across organizational missions and professional status, we developed trust, shared ethics, and envisioned dreams for our Chicagoland AAPI communities. We imagined theories of change and models for university-community research projects and partnerships. In a fortunate stroke of serendip-

ity, our own emergent interests matched the preexisting desire of *AAPI Nexus Journal* to publish a special issue on university-community partnerships. We appreciate the *AAPI Nexus* editorial team in providing the opportunity and organizational structure to pursue the worthy themes in this special issue.

Prior to our academic careers, we started our respective postcollegiate careers as an educator and community organizer. We both pursued graduate school with the explicit goal of developing interdisciplinary theories of change and research skills—tools to use in partnership with communities seeking to transform systems to be more just and humane. As pretenure scholar-activists with almost two decades of community-based professional experience, we often discussed our shared hybrid identities as scholar-practitioners in education, communication, urban planning, and politics. *We have always had the intersectional identities (academic researchers, practitioners, and Asian diaspora) of being engaged scholars seeking to produce successful and reflexive university-community partnerships for positive social change in diverse communities.* This is particularly the case with our own experiences as second-generation Asian Americans (OiYan: Chinese American, George: Filipino American) and scholar-activists that deliberately design our work toward benefiting AAPIs and other marginalized communities.

Ultimately knowing that higher education makes a difference not only for our own individual cultural capital but also for our AAPI communities and kinship contexts, this special issue harkens back to the fifty-year charge of Asian American studies to serve the community. Fifty years later though, we acknowledge that universities are not the only places capable of producing theories and models of change. Everyday communities possess valuable knowledge and skills necessary for transformative change. As we briefly describe in the following text, and the contributing authors articulate in their articles, collaborative knowledge exchange and production is the most optimal way forward if Asian American Studies is to reenergize its commitment to everyday communities beyond the university walls. Therefore, we urge Asian American studies and like-minded academic endeavors to “serve with community” through a renewal of engaged scholarship and epistemological projects centering thoughtful development of university-community partnerships that account for complex organizational structures.

Our call for renewal comes at a concerning time of rising chauvinistic nationalism, boldface patriarchy, the entrenchment of neoliberalization in higher education, and a general rejuvenation of oppressive

hegemonic forces that scapegoat immigrants of color. Renewal requires critical self-reflection and systemic analyses to inform transformative praxis (Boggs, 2012; Freire, 2000). A renewal of transformative praxis also requires that scholar-activists in academia ask the proverbial questions “research for what?” and “research for whom?” in the conceptualization of their research agendas. We believe, along with the contributors to this special issue, that research should be done through university-community partnerships that effect positive social change for marginalized groups and issues within AAPI communities. Directing our research efforts to pressing issues in AAPI communities is a worthwhile endeavor because it helps build power for AAPIs to both reflect on oppressive conditions and develop new solidarities toward reenergized collective and transformative actions.

Further, we recognize, as have other critical AAS scholars (Chang, 1999; Kiang, 2008), that there has been a “disciplining” of Asian American studies in the last three decades that has privileged individual career building and abstract theorizing within university settings nationwide. Asian American Studies’ founding mission was to transform the university toward serving the interests of underresourced and marginalized Asian American students and communities. Instead what we see today in countless university settings (in particular, highly resourced private and research-intensive universities) is that the hierarchical structure of academia and individualist culture of becoming superstar academics has had more of an effect on transforming Asian American studies from its broader activist and community-engaged origins to hegemonic pursuits for individual accolades from the Ivory Tower. Although advanced theoretical developments are necessary to transform praxis, there must be a strong balance between theoretical analysis and action, or a connection between academic thought and community or public engagement. We propose in this special issue that university-community research partnerships remain a valuable educational artery to reenergize and renew Asian American Studies’ transformational praxis.

Because transformational praxis is complex—shaped by ecological and systematic variables in society—the works in this special issue highlight the intersections of multiple organizational structures within university-community research partnerships. The ten articles provide theoretical models, methodological tools, and community engagement strategies for developing and sustaining community-

university partnerships. Four articles authored by Patraporn (“Serving the People in Long Beach”); Agres, Dillard, Nui Enos, Kakesako, Kekauoha, Nakaoka, and Umemoto (“Sustaining University-Community Partnerships in Indigenous Communities”); Yee and Cheri (“Generating Theory with Feminist, Activist Lenses”); and Lee and Patraporn (“Let’s Get Along: Strengthening Academic-Nonprofit Partnerships in Research”) offer diverse conceptual approaches and tangible lessons for sustainable community-university partnerships. Mar, Pelaud, Jeung, Nguyen, Carreon, and Ming Dariotis (“Serve the People! Asian American Studies at Fifty”) and Le and Nem (“Incorporating Community Engagement into Asian American Studies Curriculum Reform”) offer frameworks for Asian American Studies curriculum development and reform to center community engagement and partnership. Finally, Chung, Choi, and Song (“Navigating Ethnic Hierarchies in Community-Academic Partnerships”); Phun and Dang (“Building Gardens: Food Justice, Community Engagement, and Gardens for the API Community in the San Gabriel Valley”); Geron, Dao, Lai, and Wong (“Asian American Studies and the Fight for Worker Justice”); and Daus-Magbual, Daus-Magbual, and Tintiangco-Cubales (“Pin@y Educational Partnerships”) spotlight exemplar pedagogical approaches in Asian American Studies courses with community partnerships at their core.

The articles in this volume are dynamically situated in community-based research projects, university curriculum, and innovative pedagogy. Within the context of continuing national divestment in higher education and other public infrastructure, the projects and tools featured in these articles offer possibilities for research partnerships and curriculum redesign that disrupt organizational borders that separate the university from communities. We hope they provoke further development of innovative efforts to reimagine and transform organizational constraints in higher education and beyond.

Our own reading of this collection of papers leads us to ask additional organizational questions. How is the field of Asian American studies inviting, including, and honoring the leadership of community members? How is the field recognizing university-community research partnerships? The Association for Asian American Studies (AAAS) has only intermittently recognized researchers involved in community and public scholarship only since 2009; and its annual award recognizing community organizations and community leaders has only been given out since 2014. What more can the field do

to empower transformative community-university partnerships, beyond awards?

What about disrupting power relations in the academy by inviting community members to join organizational leadership boards? There are few examples of Asian American Studies programs, departments, research centers, and universities as a whole inviting community members to join their advisory boards. When we say community board members, we are not referring to individuals with deep financial pockets that make up the majority of university boards today. Instead, we are referring to organizational leadership and participation from marginalized groups and social change community-based organizations that make up underresourced communities in the university's immediate region. Community board members can help shape how universities can benefit and collaborate with marginalized communities that are in the regional geographies of campuses. This is not a far-fetched idea given that Asian American Studies and its sister programs in Black Studies, Chicanx Studies, and Indigenous Studies were all born out of strikes for ethnic studies programs by students and everyday community members in the 1960s. Such an idea speaks to what is at the heart of this special issue. Reenergizing research partnerships means developing multilevel organizational innovations and leadership that integrate shared knowledge production, governance, and power between universities and the communities. How might we radically reimagine and transform higher education and its relationships with communities?

Ultimately, the special issue and its call for a renewal of university-community partnerships in Asian American Studies speaks to the sustainability and politicization of the field and our communities. First, such research partnerships sustain the relevance of the field to AAPI issues that are pressing and ever evolving; thereby making Asian American Studies responsive to the communities we purport to serve. Second, community-university partnerships align with lifting up subjugated knowledges and political activism carried out on the ground within AAPI communities. They harness, reenergize, and renew research toward a systemically transformative praxis of popular education that seeks to build critical consciousness beyond just awareness building. This work pushes university-community research partnerships toward simultaneously changing the everyday reality and structurally oppressive conditions of marginalized AAPI communities and our universities.

## References

- Boggs, G. L. 2012. *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Chang, M. J. 1999. "Expansion and Its Discontents: The Formation of Asian American Studies Programs in the 1990s." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 2(2): 181–206. doi:10.1353/jaas.1999.0016
- Freire, P. 2000. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Kiang, P. N. 2008. "Crouching Activists, Hidden Scholars: Reflections on Research and Development with Students and Communities in Asian American Studies." Pp. 299–318 in *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*, ed. C. R. Hale. Berkeley: University of California Press..
- Kwon, S. A. 2006. "Youth of Color Organizing for Juvenile Justice." Pp. 215–28 in *Beyond Resistance: Youth Activism and Community Change: New Democratic Possibilities for Policy and Practice*, ed. S. Ginwright, P. Noguera, & J. Cammarota. New York: Routledge Press.
- Okazaki, S., Kassem, A. M., & Tu, M. 2014. "Addressing Asian American Mental Health Disparities: Putting Community-Based Research Principles to Work." *Asian American Journal of Psychology* 5(1): 4–12. doi:10.1037/a0032675
- Ong, P., & Nakanishi, D. 2003. "To Serve, Help Build, and Analyze." *AAPJ Nexus: Policy, Practice and Community* 1(1): iii–vi. doi:10.17953/appc.1.1.24541684vu7m38kw
- Poon, O., Dizon, J. P. M., & Squire, D. 2017. "Count Me In! Ethnic Data Disaggregation Advocacy, Racial Mattering, and Lessons for Racial Justice Coalitions." *Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity* 3(1): 122–54.
- Sangalang, C. C., & Gee, G. C. 2015. "Racial Discrimination and Depressive Symptoms among Cambodian American Adolescents: The Role of Gender." *Journal of Community Psychology* 43(4): 447–65. doi:10.1002/jcop.21696
- Tuck, E. 2009. "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities." *Harvard Educational Review* 79(3): 409–28. doi:10.17763/haer.79.3.n0016675661t3n15



---

OIYAN A. POON, PhD, is an Associate Professor of Higher Education Leadership and Director of the Race & Intersectional Studies for Educational Equity (RISE) Center at Colorado State University. Her research focuses on the racial politics and discourses of college access, higher education policy, affirmative action, and Asian Americans. As a scholar-activist, she has been a key advocate for the establishment of the federal AANAPISI designation, the collection of ethnically disaggregated student data in the University of California, and a lead author of the 2018 *amicus* brief on behalf of 531 social scientists submitted in support of race-conscious admissions in the *SFFA v. Harvard* case.

GEORGE VILLANUEVA, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Advocacy and Social Change in the School of Communication at Loyola University Chicago. He is broadly interested in the global performative context of multiethnic community transformations. To this end, he studies the role that communication, media, activism, and expressive culture play in place-based advocacy and social change goals of marginalized groups in cities. Visit [www.georgevillanueva.com](http://www.georgevillanueva.com) for more information.