Hapa Midwest:
Proposal for an Object-oriented Autoethnography

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Introduction

On my 100-day-old celebration, I was dressed in vibrant green and pink silks and presented with the objects that would foretell my future. Prophetically, I held a pen aloft in my chubby right hand to the small crowd of admirers: grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, and young cousins. According to doljabi tradition, I was destined to lead the life of a writer: to Koreans, the pen is a symbol of scholarship, intelligence, and artistry. 23 years later and I've developed a callus where my pen rests between my middle and index fingers, hovering above the lines I inscribe here. Objects have always held power in my life.

Writing is how I make sense of the world. Particularly, it is how I meditate on my identity as a queer mixed second-generation Asian American. I have always felt that I lie at the intersection of winding paths few others have traveled—mixed Asian-Americans like myself are already a small population in the US, making up 0.8% of the country's total population (or 2.6 million people) according to the 2020 census (U.S. Census Bureau). The country doesn't even track the population of second-generation Asian-Americans. Then you consider the myriad ways queerness affects identity, then location, then local population, and it becomes apparent why I feel such loneliness in my current home of Cincinnati, Ohio.

As a second generation Korean-Irish lesbian American, I hope to offer my experiences through an autoethnography so I might help populate the information about mixed queer Asian Americans in scholarship, as none currently exist. I want to interrogate my own feelings of isolation and euphoria about my ethnic and queer identities in order to give voice to other mixed queer Asian Americans. My transitional geographic identity as a Californian living in the midwest is also very important, as well as my cisgender femininity.

I want to write an autoethnography because I want to demystify the experiences of queer mixed Asian Americans by offering my own story to the public—a public that does not often

acknowledge people like me, particularly in the midwestern state of Ohio. Therefore, the research question that guides my work here is two-fold: 1) Why do I experience loneliness as a queer, mixed, midwestern Asian American, and 2) What sites elicit/prevent feelings of inclusivity and why?

Literature Review

Works about mixed Asian Americans fall under various names like hapa and wasian that vary across geographic locations and social contexts (King-O'Riain 2022). The word hapa is a transliteration of the word "half" in Hawaiian, now commonly used to describe any mixed-race Asian American person (Green 2022). On the other hand, wasian is a combination of the English words white and Asian, gaining popularity in early 2020 on social media platforms like TikTok (Google Trends).

Plenty of multimedia narratives of queer Asian American experiences exist, including oral history projects (ex. Dragon Fruit Project) and community organizations (ex. KQTx, Mixed Asian Media, and Okaeri). Despite these works, I have found no academic literature about queer mixed Asian Americans. The fact that extra attention is required to locate information about mixed people is just one example of our status as overlooked; hidden.

Anzaldúa's theory of intersectionality will be central here, as the existence of mixed Asian Americans is a literal intersection of cultures (Moraga and Anzaldúa 2002). This approach is necessary to an autoethnography, especially one so concerned with cross-cultural identity (Hughes and Pennington 2017).

By interrogating my reactions and experiences in various sites, I hope to shed light on how the intersection of my queer mixed Asian American identities shapes the ways I interact with the world, providing a foothold for others who share similarly niche backgrounds to publicize this overlooked community of people.

On Object-Oriented Autoethnographies

While autoethnographic accounts have been used in scholarship since the 1920s, it was not until the 1980s when scholars adopted autoethnography as a qualitative research methodology (Onwuegbuzie 2024). Since then, autoethnographic accounts in research have crossed disciplinary borders from feminist studies into several spaces, including LGBTQ+ studies, ecological research, indigenous studies, and many more (Custer 2014; Murphy et al. 2022; Whitinui 2014). Furthermore, researchers have synthesized autoethnographic perspectives with mixed methodologies, object studies being one of these.

"An object-oriented autoethnography allows for a broader sense of the multiple critical trajectories that are possible within a single, tangible, thing. In working through, carefully, the relationship of self to a particular object, we engage in a mapping of that object into a sociopolitical location" (Rowe 2017). While scholarship about the ethnographic experiences of queer, second-generation wasian women does not exist, there are many accounts of object-oriented ethnographies which explain their methodologies and potential for enacting social change.

For example, queer studies scholar Rowe (2017) opens her object-oriented autoethnography with a description of a stapler she'd smuggled from an old job. She is possessive of the stapler, old and ugly as it is, paint flaking where her thumb and pointer finger meet to grasp it. She feels a kinship for the object, "marked the ways in which our workplace, sometimes, forgets us. Forgets that we are people, too." The use of a tangible object to symbolize a larger phenomenon, one experienced by the author that might shed light on a larger community of people they represent, is power of the object-oriented autoethnography.

Methodology

Little literature exists about the experiences of queer mixed Asian Americans, so I want to present this niche occupation of identities through the information I know first-hand. I want to articulate my experiences while stressing they are my own and not to be interpreted as a generalization of all queer mixed Asian American lives. In telling my story, I hope to empower people like me so we might start a national conversation about intersectionality as it manifests for us queer, mixed, Asian American folks.

Therefore, I believe a disclaimer is very important in this project. It should clearly explain that the stories and beliefs shared are my own and not to be taken as a generalization of queer mixed race people.

Additionally, a great strength of this object-oriented methodology is accessibility. If all my sources are ones I own, then I have no need to travel or seek archives. I might also refer to sources or artifacts other wasian people identify with through social media (King-O'Riain 2022).

Style & Form

For my narratives to carry the most weight, they most braid three strands of writing together: personal narrative, reflexive analysis, and theoretical insights. The narrative is where the objects are described and their place in my life identified. This might be done in a number of various forms, including poetry, prose, and fabulation—any style which magnifies the minute details and slows time so my audience is able to consider the objects carefully and graciously. Incorporating images in the body of the autoethnography is also possible, though I may reconsider this in the final product. If the point of the autoethnography is to demonstrate how my biases reflect those of queer mixed Asian Americans, then having the objects on display may distract from my perception of them.

The reflexive analysis will serve as the connective tissue between my lived experiences and critical interpretation. It is where I pause the scene to identify my own assumptions, positionality, and cultural scripts that shape how I understand the object. This strand acknowledges that meaning is never fixed; it shifts as I shift. Reflexivity, in this context, is less about explaining the object and more about tracing the conditions under which the object and I come to matter to each other.

The theoretical insights will complete the braid by widening the scope of the narrative beyond the personal. Each object, layered by my own thoughts and biases, intersects broader conversations about agency, materiality, and positionality of queer mixed Asian Americans. These insights will be woven into the scene, summing the object and my experiences together with those of a larger, unheard community. Together, the three strands create a hybrid form that allows the objects to speak alongside me, not merely through me.

Example: The Lesbian Pride Blanket

Even now as I write this in my living room, I can see many items that could appear in my autoethnography or at least provide a point of inquiry. For example, across my lap lays a blanketed crocheted by my girlfriend in yarn the colors of the lesbian flag. The blanket was a Christmas gift, crocheted in the span of less than a month after we returned from our first international trip to Japan. In a final days of our vacation into the weeks after returning to California, I suffered from a severe case of food poisoning and internal bruising. Yarn and crochet hooks followed us as I re-acclimated to public settings outside urgent care clinics. She never told me what she was crocheting, only that she knew I liked those colors. On Christmas night (specifically midnight of December 25, because her family's tradition is to celebrate the holiday immediately after a great party and feast), there was the blanket, sitting at the bottom of a

nondescript cardboard box. She worked on it up to the very last moment, hence the plain box and the blanket's short width, not quite enough to cover my legs.

Still, I couldn't ask for a better present. This blanket, an item intended to bring comfort and warmth, resembles her great care for my health and pride in my lesbian identity, crafted deftly in less than a month, as our long-distance relationship means our visits are always curtailed by a deadline that one of us must fly back home. This item is wrapped in "multiple critical trajectories," including my same-sex relationship, cross-cultural traditions, and affinity for my faraway hometown (Rowe 2017).

Timeline

Determining what sources I need for an autoethnography means I must identify what objects will be rich in personal experience and how I will access them. My mind goes instantly to the tangible sources—nostalgic locations, personal diaries, and photos—which led me to an object-oriented autoethnography in the first place. "What objects create/sustain/destroy our lives? What are the stories of those objects in relation to the subject?" (Rowe 2017). In my case, I ask: What items are charged with my identity as a lesbian wasian woman?

I plan to complete the draft over summer 2026, as I will be freshly graduated from graduate school. I will begin by identifying four objects I believe are rich symbols of my life as a queer mixed Asian American. Most will be objects I already own, like the Korean-English medical dictionaries I inherited from my grandmother. Then, I will freewrite about them in various forms, including poetry, prose, creative nonfiction, fabulation, and any others that capture the essence of the object I wish to highlight. I also hope to incorporate a travel writing element here, as my identity has always been transitory, traveling literal distance across state lines where so much of my family has scattered. Ideally, I will be able to bring my objects or find new ones in my home

state California, which might result in some exploratory creative writing exercises. Overall, I plan to draft the narrative component from June through mid-July, including a field trip to California.

After writing about the objects and my experience with them, I will begin collect theoretical research about queer, mixed, and Asian American communities and synthesize them with my own experiences. Here, I can reflect how my understanding of the objects has evolved and if my perspectives align with concepts identified by scholars of the various identities I embody. These will be conceptual passages that complement the narrative scenes, offering insight into why it is I have attached myself to various objects and what my relationships mean on a larger scale. This drafting phase will take place from mid-July to mid-August. As I will no longer be affiliated with an academic institution, I plan to procure my sources through my local public library and the repositories of WorldCat, HathiTrust, and ILLiad.

After the first draft is complete, I will revise through the end of August and longer if necessary. Then, I will be able to submit the manuscript for publication at various journals of feminist studies, Asian studies, and writing studies.

Impact and Beyond

My intention in analyzing intersectional identity through an object-oriented autoethnography is to identify patterns that have appeared in my life as a result of my mixed race and queerness, then connect those feelings to a tangible, visual symbol. This analysis then may reach other mixed-race queer individuals, especially those who, like me, seek “recognition and connection” (King-O’Riain 2022). In performing an autoethnography, I can empower myself by writing reflexively about the obstacles I face as a mixed queer person in a region where few people share my same background (Custer 2014; Rowe 2017). Hopefully, the resulting essay will be something that fosters empathy in readers and connection through those universal feelings of loneliness, desire, and hope we all share (Custer 2014).

As my work is interdisciplinary, I have no personal preference where it is published so long as it is public access. It is crucial that this work exists where queer mixed Asian Americans like me are able to access it, otherwise my writing will have been for nothing. The desire to connect with others who share my identity is one of the guiding drives of my writing, and here I have an opportunity to carry my narrative to readers all over the country.

This object-oriented approach provides a clear organization of my narrative as I draft. By having actual objects to manipulate, I will have a clear entry point to writing my story instead of wondering exactly where in my 23 years of life to begin my story, an obviously daunting task further exacerbated by the fact that autoethnographies might have no specific research design (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2024). I can wind my objects with the "metaphors, symbols, and allegory" that are so important in autoethnography "to communicate knowledge between individuals (human and non-human) and cultures" (Custer 2014). My autoethnography is framed by the importance of these sources in my life—a scavenger hunt representative of my experiences as a young lesbian wasian woman.

This essay will be the first of its kind to document the intersectional experience of a second-generation queer hapa woman through an object-oriented autoethnographic narrative. Collecting narratives such as mine will foster a national culture of engaging queerness, mixed cultures, and intersectionality.

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