



Periodically Queer Episode – Lavender Godzilla: In Search of Queer Ancestors – With Dino Duazo and John Silva

Audio transcript

Umi Hsu ([00:03](#)):

Hey y'all I'm Umi Hsu. I use they/them/theirs pronouns. I'm the Director of Content Strategy and ONE Archives Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to telling histories and stories about LGBTQ+ communities. I'm the Producer of Periodically Queer. For this year's pride season, we're kicking off a new podcast project. Periodically Queer explores the stories about LGBTQ+ periodicals, such as magazines and organizational newsletters as a way to learn about queer community building. What you're listening to is the first episode of our pilot season with a focus on LGBTQ+ communities of color. This season is made possible by a grant from the city of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs and many thanks to ONE Archives at the USC Libraries for providing research materials for this podcast.

Umi Hsu ([01:09](#)):

In this episode, I unwind some history and stories around Lavender Godzilla, a newsletter and magazine published by GAPA, GLBTQ+ Asian Pacific Alliance, formally known as the Gay Asian Pacific Alliance. GAPA was established in Berkeley, California in 1988. Through the pages of Lavender Godzilla, I take you on a tour through what it was like to be a member of a queer Asian community in the late 1980s and 1990s in the San Francisco Bay area. A little bit about me, I'm a queer and trans, non-binary Taiwanese American person who came of age in the 1990s while living in Virginia. I used to dream of a whole community of people, LGBTQ+ people of Asian descent, who were like me trying to live their lives in ordinary and extraordinary ways. From Lavender Godzilla, I can sense the activist spirit and community belonging that GAPA created. It invites the reader to learn about the intersection of being gay, queer, and Asian, and to dive into issues like immigration, racism, and family. It offers reflections on queer sexuality in ancient China and the Philippines, queer homoerotic artworks, and tributes to community members who are lost to AIDS.

Umi Hsu ([02:31](#)):

I loved reading these intimate reflections and sharings. I even enjoyed reading the mundane stuff like organizational updates and community calendars for events, such as the GAPA choir and theater performances. They made me feel like I'm a part of something larger than me, a feeling of kinship. Before we dig in, I'd like to provide some content warning about colonial violence. Please take care while listening. I had the privilege of speaking with Dino Duazo, one of the Co-editors of Lavender Godzilla and a Founding Member of GABA.

Dino Duazo ([03:14](#)):

My name's Dino Duazo. I'm one of the Founding Members of Gay Asian Pacific Alliance, which is transformed into GLBTQ+ Asian Pacific Alliance. And one of the prime features of GAPA at that time was having a newsletter just to share information about what the organization was doing, but also to share about perspectives from the queer API community. So, I was involved in the newsletter committee from the beginning. There was a bunch of us, but eventually I became one of the co-editors. I took a break for a little bit for a few years and then I became the newsletter editor again, like in the 2000's.



Umi Hsu ([03:57](#)):

I also spoke with John Silva, a writer, a historian, and regular contributor to Lavender Godzilla. John currently lives in the Philippines, so I'm thankful that he stayed up into the night to share his stories with me.

John Silva ([04:11](#)):

My name is John Silva. At that time, 1990, I was a contributor to Lavender Godzilla. I wrote several more articles. I was a member of GAPA, but also head of the GAPA Community HIV Project, I was the Executive director. GAPA was a small organization. And so, we all knew each other and I knew Dino very well. And Dino was the editor and Dino said, "you're a writer." And he knew because I wrote for the Filipino American newspapers. I also appeared in various publications, so he recruited me to write on things that were gay and gay Asian.

Dino Duazo ([04:55](#)):

I mean, this is us sharing our stories for us. We're not writing for the mainstream community, we're writing for ourselves, for our community, it's for us and about us. That was kind of our driving principle. We wanted to also make it accessible and not to scary in terms of sharing what they felt. So, we definitely had a lot of pieces that were like full on articles, hundreds of words, but with what GAPA means to me, we just have people share like a couple paragraphs here and there. That way we can get a broader slice of the community just to share different perspectives. Then they all add up together into a bigger picture of what GAPA is, what community is, what the organization is, so we can get as many perspectives and build a community through that.

John Silva ([05:43](#)):

With GAPA, it was really in the 1980s, a real organization that took pride in being gay and Asian. Now is sort of like taken as a matter of course, but in those days to be a GAPA of member and to go out during Gay Pride Week and Gay Pride Parades, and all sorts of gay events was a matter of assertion and serious and yet also very proud of being able to be out there. I mean now I look at it and it seemed frivolous, but in those days it was a very serious thing to say, "I'm gay, I'm out, and I'm going to be out in the public, and I have to come out to my parents."

Umi Hsu ([06:32](#)):

When I first came across Lavender Godzilla while doing research at the Archive, I was really drawn to the name. I asked Dino about the origin of the name.

Dino Duazo ([06:41](#)):

We had a retreat in Angel Island trying to come up with names for the organization. And I don't know if Jesse was being serious or he just wanted to throw it out, but he said, "Lavender Godzilla." It was a great name. It's a blend of the queer perspective, the lavender and then the Asian perspective with Godzilla, which is ancient and modern, it's this dinosaur, but it's really tied into the modern world. You can be destructive but the lavender softens it, makes it like a non-binary thing. That kind of reflects our community too, there's this kind of passive stereotype but there's a fire within that we can put to use and put out there when we want to.



Umi Hsu ([07:27](#)):

Hearing about Lavender Godzilla as a symbol of a queer Asian community, I got curious about what it was like to be Asian and gay in the Bay area in the 1980s when GAPA was forming. This is what John said.

John Silva ([07:39](#)):

Joining GAPA and being with GAPA in the 80s was a source of community for many gay Asians. And many of them were gay immigrant Asians who were also trying to figure out what it means to live in America and meeting up with people because of that diversity in people. And I noticed that many of my GAPA of friends had to navigate themselves in situations where especially with relations to white gay men, there was all these roles that had to be played or were being played to be accepted as a gay Asian man. So, the gay Asian man had to be kind of sexy and had certain qualities and it was all made up and it was all what the thinking was of how a gay Asian man will be sexy or a commodity in this culture. So, when you hang out with all these other gay men, Asian men, all of that sort of disappears, all of that having to deal with the outside world and realize that there's so much more strength, so much more akin and loving with other gay Asians.

Umi Hsu ([09:07](#)):

I asked how this feeling of a community translated into the creation of the newsletter. John told me about how writing his personal life as a cultural strategy to uplift the lives of LGBTQ people.

John Silva ([09:18](#)):

And I think using my personal life, because that's it, I mean that's my truth. Nobody can sort of deny that my truth, of course I can embellish my truth but it's my truth. Then I managed to get more into people's hearts and minds and that I think is the best way to expand LGBTQ consciousness.

Dino Duazo ([09:45](#)):

I think it's basically just to give our community a voice because it was so limited and there was a sense of perceptions boxing us in. Since it was a new organization, there was a lot of excitement about all the things we were doing, all the things that we could accomplish, so that translated into the newsletter in terms of just reporting, but we also wanted to share personal stories. In the beginning I think a lot of it was coming out and identity, but as time went on to broaden that we focused on different aspects like sexuality, family. Then we broadened even more like food and travel. I mean all the different perspectives that queer APIs had, it's just to get a sense of us as a community, all the different aspects of us, not just what the mainstream media would have us be, but just reflect back to the community, all that we could be, and all that we are to show the diversity. But then there's still that common thread of who we are as queer APIs because the Asian experience is so broad. It's life, basically.

Umi Hsu ([10:58](#)):

Writing is a form of exposure. In fact, some instances of writing and publishing can be risk taking. I asked if anyone felt like it would be potentially dangerous or harmful to share their stories.

Dino Duazo ([11:11](#)):

Sometimes it's really hard to get people to share. So, it was a constant process of reaching out and telling people like can share something. It helped a lot to have a focus in terms of, can you write about this? Can you write about that? We gave people the option of writing under a pseudonym, so that they can share what they're going through but at the same time have a little bit of distance, so that they're not immediately identified. Because it's important to get their stories out. I remember a couple, one was talked about their drug use and another person was bisexual who's married and had kids, but he shared what it meant to be a bisexual man. We did respect that and what they shared was so powerful.

Umi Hsu ([11:58](#)):

When I came across John's article, a photograph of a gay ancestor, my jaw dropped. He was asking some of the same questions that I've been thinking about, and he did it in 1990 when an article came out.

John Silva ([12:10](#)):

And I did my masters on pre-Spanish Philippine sexuality. So, I did a whole lot of study on sexual norms before the Spanish came. And it's noted somewhat in that article about how when the Spanish came, they found men and women sort of being affectionate with one another and they got really upset and they would call it sodomy and they'd burn them at stake and crucify them, et cetera. So, for them it was like wow, we saw sin, so, we had to do this. Not a lot, right? But nonetheless, it comes out and it just shows that the Filipinos who were practicing same sex love in those days were really in trouble. Those snippets I found, which is perfect and important for my master's thesis to prove that there was same sex love before the Spanish and during the Spanish period. Aside from being a historian, I collect books, old rare Philippine books. So, I stumbled upon this photographic journal by Felix Laureano, of his photographs of the Philippines.

John Silva ([13:26](#)):

I had thought then that Felix Laureano was a Spaniard, turns out he was a Filipino Spaniard who's born and raised in the Philippines, but had this book published in Barcelona. He actually was a Spanish Filipino. He gets very dramatic and romantic about various scenes in Philippine life. And then there is this page of three people washing clothes by the river. And then he describes them, there are two women, and then there's this man. And this man is a *binabayi* or an *agui*. It just popped out. I mean, these are just like explosive words because they were local description of somebody who was effeminate, *binabayi* or *agui*, who was not a man and wanted to be with another man. He wrote this and that was in 1860, 1870. It was the first time ever a declaration of meeting somebody who he considered effeminate or an *agui*, from a historian point of view saying, aha, now I can say that in 1860, there was this sighting of a gay man washing clothes by the river and affirmed by this Spanish Filipino.

Umi Hsu ([14:58](#)):

I read in his article that *binabayi* or *agui* played a key cultural role in the pre-Spanish Philippines. In history, across many cultural contexts, gender nonconforming people have often been subject to colonial violence. This is especially the case if gender diversity is tied to religious power.

John Silva ([15:19](#)):

Well, I find it almost amusing thinking about that time when the Spaniards arrived and the priests came around and they would say, "take us to your leader." And the natives would point to a woman and they'll say, "no, no, no, no. Take us to your leader." And they'll keep pointing to the woman to the Catalonas and they didn't understand that. So, in assisting the Catalonas, who were these *agui* and *binabayis* who were—many of them were dressed up as women in the Berdache kind of tradition, they themselves were married to other men and they played a very important role. They somehow, they also had a set of mystical properties or healing properties or important role in the divination of a funeral, of a birth, of a various certain event. So, they assisted the Catalonas very well.

Umi Hsu ([16:18](#)):

I was so moved by what John said, I asked him what it felt like to have found a photograph of a gay Asian ancestor during his research. This is what he told me.

John Silva ([16:28](#)):

It centered me. It made me feel like this whole thing of sometimes when you grow up being gay you realize, is there anybody else or am I the only one sort of thing. Only to find out, oh my God, it's stretched back to history. At least this one was the 19th century, but it actually stretched back all the way to early Spanish accounts of meeting and seeing men and women being affectionate with one another. So, that was a very important piece, plus there was that photograph. He took the photograph and you can clearly see the man washing the clothes was somewhat feminine, looking straight at the camera, very demure. And I could feel like transmitting this sort of connection with him through over a hundred years, knowing that he was my ancestor.

Umi Hsu ([17:31](#)):

I've been on a quest for traces of queer and trans ancestors for a while asking questions like, who am I? Who are we? How can we find us? Who is us? So, knowing that there are more of us in the universe makes me feel like we exist beyond the here and now. This expansion is an antidote to the feelings of isolation.

Dino Duazo ([18:00](#)):

A lot of times we get kind of focused on the moment and what we're experiencing, so that when you do kind of broaden, what's shared about gay Asian experience that you can't start thinking about how far back it goes. You kind of think well it's like I'm going through this, other people must have gone through it in the past. There is a sense of a continuum and the mundane and experiences we may have, it's something that happened way before us to our community has this kind of strong intergenerational component. There's a lot of interaction in co-mingling and sharing between so many different generations. It's just part of the community. People aren't kind of separated or pushed aside. Yeah, there's definitely a mix where people come together, which is awesome.

Umi Hsu ([18:54](#)):

This intergenerational kinship seems very natural to me as a queer and trans Asian person. I was inspired to hear that I'm not alone in feeling this way or wanting to feel like I belong to a family structure by birth or by choice. From Lavender Godzilla, I've discovered some hidden spaces in which queerness can thrive within a family. I was reminded of an article that John wrote about his nanny.

John Silva ([19:24](#)):

I grew up with a nanny, instead of a mother. My mother of course was always there, but my nanny was really my physical mother. I can remember her loving and her embraces much more intently than I would with my own mother. So, I wrote about that. I felt that that was important and she defended me when I was starting to show my feminine ways. My father, who was a strict disciplinarian and was a military man would get so angry with me and demanded, I march like a man. But when I would, I was such a flagrant queen, a little queen. And so, when my father would get so upset with me, my nanny would rush to my defense and take me up and run away with me, so that I wouldn't be touched by my father. Eventually my father came around, I wanted to know that dad also respected and was supportive of my coming out and supportive of my lover and now married partner, who we've been married for now 46 years.

Umi Hsu ([20:36](#)):

There are articles about what it's like to come out to family, interviews with people who recently came out to their family and parents. There are also interviews with parents of gay children. In fact, GAPA's often refer to as a family. In a special issue on families that came out in 1997, I asked Dino about this issue since he co-edited it,

Dino Duazo ([21:00](#)):

That really stands out for me because I set that up, I got all these gay fathers together. Just the fact that way back then in the early nineties there was this already, this established group of gays Asian fathers and they were able to share their experiences, which just kind of amazing. I mean, just from me wanting to be a father myself and not thinking that it was a realistic opportunity. So, to have them share what they went through and what they're going through. I thought that was really amazing for me.

Umi Hsu ([21:36](#)):

John shared with me a very moving account of an event that took place during the time that he served as the head of the GAPA Community HIV Project.

John Silva ([21:45](#)):

We're providing services and aid to AIDS clients, particularly APIs. We were one of the first, if not the first to do that in the Bay area. This was still pre cocktails. So, many of my clients did pass on. So, that took a toll on many in our staffing, including myself. I would find people who would lend me their country houses outside of San Francisco, the Bay area. And on weekends, I'd load up the cars with our AIDS clients, we'd drive to the country, to these borrowed homes. And for that weekend, we would just cook and have fun and swim and enjoy each other's company. And they needed that, especially some of our clients who were discarded and rejected by their own family members. So, they needed to have an affinity with other people, with other like-minded people.



John Silva ([22:53](#)):

There were various Asian community groups that were quite conservative on the issue of getting HIV. So, we had clients who were kicked out of their homes by Filipino parents, by Chinese parents, Korean parents, who just couldn't deal with them not only having HIV, but also being gay. It's like a double whammy when they had to come out to their parents. So, we took care of them, not only just for their health, but also just as a place for them to find refuge and being cared for and being loved. Yeah, so we became family.

Umi Hsu ([23:42](#)):

Well, I've been on a hunt for queer ancestors in part because I've seen how queer and gender nonconforming people fall off of the family tree in traditional Asian contexts. I have to get creative while looking for spaces for queer feelings, families, and archives. With Dino, John, and other contributors to Lavender Godzilla, I know I'm in great company. Who did you become family with? Who were your LGBTQ+ ancestors? Where are they? How did you find them? I invite you to chat with us on social at One Archives.

You can find John Silva's article on Finding a Gay Ancestor along with excerpts, from the family issue and illustrations from Lavender Godzilla on our website at onearchives.org/periodicallyqueer.

This episode of Periodically Queer is produced by me, Umi Hsu, edited and engineered by Quincy Surasmith, music by Analog Tara, research support by Jaime Shearn Coan and Ambika Nuggihalli. Graphic Design by Maxwell Fong. Production Support by Shei Yu and Fati Zulaikha.

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