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Sisterhood in the City: Creating Community through Lion Dance

Casey Avaunt

Introduction

The China Trade Center, a gray, concrete square, sits at the center of Boston's Chinatown. The building houses a range of businesses and organizations, and Gund Kwok, an all-women's lion dance company, has negotiated weekly rehearsal space in the basement, a small area resplendent with red paint and Chinese lanterns. Every Thursday night, members of Gund Kwok trickle in to this space as they arrive from work in disparate parts of Boston. Although they arrive with an air of stress after maneuvering through Boston's famously aggressive traffic or riding its subway, they soften at the sight of their team members and settle into the conversational rhythms of a place protected from the restless city.

After gathering the lion heads from the back room, the women set up for rehearsal, asking one another about their families, health, relationships, incidents, and work frustrations. In this way, the rehearsals become more than just a means to train for and perform the lion dance. They are an opportunity for the women to reflect on Asian American female identity and to cement connections within the group. Unsurprisingly, the camaraderie that Gund Kwok builds extends beyond the physical rehearsal space to a symbolic space: the tight-knit realm of sisterhood. In the interviews I conducted with the group and on the Gund Kwok website, members of the company frequently report that their primary motivation for joining the group was to be part of a sisterhood, a member of a close community of Asian American women. As of March 25, 2022, for instance, a "ten reasons to join" page on their website[1] lists as reason number 8: having a "built-in sisterhood" where members could "have your group of cheerleaders following you everywhere." The idea of a built-in sisterhood lies at the core of Gund Kwok's mission: being part of "workout buddies" and the communal eating and clothing swaps (other reasons on the list).

To an outsider, the lion dance, an ancient Chinese[2] ritual practice based on the kung fu technique in which two performers animate a lion costume from within, provides an unusual platform to develop a sisterhood. Until recently, the practice was forbidden to women.[3] However, for the roughly twenty members of Gund Kwok, the sisterhood engenders a space where, as one member, Leanne Fan, reflected in an interview, "Asian women can go to rehabilitate and to experience a new definition of what it means to be Asian" (2019). Gund Kwok's membership is primarily comprised

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Casey Avaunt, Elon University, Elon, North Carolina, US.

Casey Avaunt, is assistant professor in the Department of Performing Arts at Elon University. She received her PhD in critical dance studies from the University of California, Riverside. Her research interests include Asian and Asian American dance and the role of culture and gender in the production of choreography.

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of middle-class, college-educated, working professionals[4] from various age groups, and includes women from several ethnicities, including Chinese, Taiwanese, Malaysian, Hong Kongese, Thai, and Korean. Amid their similarities and differences, cultural and otherwise, the women have formed a strategic alliance through lion dance practice.

I argue here that Gund Kwok's sisterhood carves out an alternative community that contends with modes of racism and the dance's patriarchal underpinnings while offering members ways to articulate Asian American cultural identities outside dominant (white) Western/US cultural frameworks. Drawing from my ethnographic fieldwork from 2017 through 2020—which included one-on-one interviews, in-person observations at rehearsals and induction ceremonies, attending live performances, and assisting in company performances—I investigate how Gund Kwok's sisterhood develops through the company's performance practices, technical training processes, group discussions, and shared goals of mobilizing political and social agendas within Chinatown. I explore how Gund Kwok's sisterhood becomes a pathway to formulating diasporic identities in Boston, a city with a historical narrative and brand identity of liberal politics focused on immigration, diversity, and multiculturalism, but that still often fails to address the inequalities that underrepresented groups face (Aguilar-San Juan 2009, xiv). I also examine how Gund Kwok's sisterhood challenges how lion dance companies and kung fu schools have historically sequestered the practice within ideologies of brotherhoods. Despite the potential pitfalls of a sisterhood, a coalition based on a shared identity is both problematic and politically useful.

In recent decades, overly utopic notions of community have come under scrutiny. Post-structuralist scholars such as Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) have convincingly argued that idealized notions of community encompass a violently universalizing potential and demand for the sacrifice of individual freedom that renders community formations potentially dangerous. Similar concerns have carried over to performance studies. Miranda Joseph, among others, criticizes discourses that view the word *community* in a purely positive, uncritical light and warns against the usage of the concept in idealistic terms. In her ethnographic study of San Francisco's gay/lesbian Theatre Rhinoceros in the 1990s, she reveals how the group, in trying to create a community for gay and lesbian members, implicitly excluded non-white and transgender people from the company, and she points toward the "exclusionary and disciplining characteristics of community" (Joseph 2002, xxi). Alan Filewood similarly interrogates idealized notions of community performance in his investigation of the Canada-based Ground Zero Theatre, arguing that the term *community* "replay[s] essentializing and totalizing fictions of sentimentalized communities, of geography, ethnicity, class, and gender" (2001, 89). Instead, he advocates for seeing the Ground Zero Theatre company as a community based on goals of shared political action rather than as a community based on similarities.

What is more, *sisterhood*,[5] an operative term for my study, has been a prominent yet contested concept in gender and sexuality studies. During first-wave feminism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the second-wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, notions of sisterhood provided a collective sense of unity among women in their fight against the oppression of patriarchy. In the mid-1990s, however, proponents of third-wave feminism, influenced by postmodern and postcolonial theory, started to challenge notions of "universal womanhood." Women of color began bringing greater attention to the uneven power dynamics and lived experiences among white "sisters" and their non-white counterparts. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa first published *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* in 1981, which included essays by Black, Asian American, Latina, and Native American women. The book pushed back against white feminists who saw sisterhoods as a collective of women with equal levels of oppression. Subsequently, bell hooks's "Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women" argued that white feminist leaders have often imposed the idea of a "common oppression" of all women while glossing over and marginalizing nonprivileged voices. According to hooks, "The idea of 'common oppression' was a false and corrupt platform disguising and mystifying the true nature of women's varied and complex social reality. Women are divided by sexist attitudes, racism, class privilege, and a host of other prejudices" (1986, 127). For hooks, these divisions

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cannot be dismantled "by wishful thinking or romantic reverie about common oppression despite the value of highlighting experiences all women share" (127). Instead, it is crucial to recognize intergroup differences before mobilizing for change.

In Asian American studies, conceptualizations of *community* and *sisterhoods* have been equally problematic. As Deborah Wong notes, the term *community* "is a sticky concept in Asian American studies" because it often overlooks generational, cultural, economic, political, and other differences among Asian Americans (2012, 131). The pan-ethnic Asian American movement of the 1960s and 1970s encouraged a focus on the shared identities of Asian Americans as a way of unifying against discrimination and exclusion, but it came at the expense of camouflaging differences among various Asian groups. Yutian Wong reminds us of the contradictory ways in which the term *Asian American* has been "used as a political operation for pan-ethnic coalition building, a shortcut for a racial designation, a shared collective experience, a perceived collective history, or a mode of analysis" (2016, 12). By portraying a singular community, the term creates what Linda Trinh Võ calls "precarious interchangeability" (2015, 33). Worldwide, scholars and activists have questioned whether sisterhoods sought by Asian women share some of the same risks. Aihwa Ong (1996), for example, points out instances when women from economically successful countries, such as China, Taiwan, and Japan, have ignored the historical and cultural differences between themselves and those from economically less developed countries, such as Vietnam, Cambodia, and Indonesia.

However, there are ways of forming fruitful alliances, especially regarding some political struggles. SanSan Kwan maintains that "a discourse of community, however flawed, is still a necessary political construct in any project for social mobilization," labeling her formulation of the community as "alternative forms of collectivity, always implicated in formations of power, sometimes resistive, always temporary" (2013, 11). Sonia Shah reminds us that differences among Asian American women "are at times much bigger, more real, more visceral and emotionally laden than the similarities," yet Asian American women "all share the same rung on the racial ladder" (1997, xiii). Although vast and unique, Asian American women's experiences have been largely determined by the socioeconomic and political milieu present in the United States. Therefore, it is vital not only to recognize differences within groups but also to see how Asian American women can work together to counter these forces. As Shah writes, "What makes political sense to talk about is how the forces of racism, patriarchy, and imperialism specifically affect Asian American women. And, most importantly, how Asian American women counter resistance to those forces" (xiii).

For Asian American dance performers, coalitions can be successful if differences are valued. Rosemary Candelario writes of intercultural dance alliances: "Intercultural alliances do not attempt to create a new entity, but instead seek to enact strategic ways of working together, undoing in the process assumptions that separate East and West, modernity and tradition" (2016, 21). Although it is important to recognize the caprice of community-based relationships, the risks of forced shared identities and the inherent social hierarchies present within groups—as my observations of Gund Kwok suggest—offer important functions for the sisterhood's constituents.

My understanding of dance communities is influenced by Judith Hamera's analysis of how shared dance practices lead to opportunities for self-articulation and have a broader social impact. In her book *Dancing Communities: Performance, Difference and Connection in the Global City*, Hamera argues that intimacies are created among dancers through shared daily practice and that "both concert dance and amateur practice are laboratories for examining and revisioning the myriad complex interrelations between gender, sexuality, race, class, and culture in urban life" (2007, 1). Taking part in dance communities, she argues, "exposes aesthetic spaces and practices as social and vernacular, as sites where participants actively confront and engage tradition, authority, corporeality, and irreducible difference" (2007, 1–2). Hamera positions a community of dancers as active shapers of their group identity in order to highlight how different personalities might come together to practice dance forms and challenge the status quo. Gund Kwok's community of sisters similarly provides its members with a space for

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identity affirmation and the freedom to express culture in a self-directed manner. As this article will explore, sharing the common language of the lion dance technique helps to establish networks throughout the city, fostering shared philosophies and missions for civic engagement and social activism.

I argue that the sisterhood for Gund Kwok offers other benefits, allowing members to create a shared, specifically Asian American dance space outside mainstream culture. Boston's Chinatown, like other US Chinatowns, continues to wrestle with gentrification, poverty, eviction, and a lack of resources,[6] an already challenging situation that has been exacerbated by COVID-19 and the uptick in anti-Asian hate crimes. These challenges exemplify the need for cultural and artistic communities that are distanced from white-dominant spaces. In Boston and across the nation, Asian American women contend with a particular set of stereotypes that frame them as hypersexual, submissive, and exotic, which produces the need for a sisterhood space where women lion dancers can simultaneously escape from and address these struggles. With its focus on cultivating a sense of physical power and strength, the lion dance provides an opportunity for women to develop a sense of agency while Gund Kwok's sisterhood opens a space for collective social advancement. Gund Kwok's sisterhood also allows for reframing the beliefs that the lion dance is for men only, showing that strongly held expectations surrounding gender can adapt within traditionally patriarchal dance traditions. My aim, though, is not to suggest that Gund Kwok should be seen as a community of similarity, but to illustrate how the ideology of sisterhood can continue to have value in specific instances.

Creating Gund Kwok's Sisterhood

Gund Kwok members develop sisterhood through shared experiences, the micropolitics of relationships among them, their social gatherings, activist projects, and the technical practice of the lion

Photo 1. Gund Kwok Group Photo. 2019. Photo courtesy of Gund Kwok.

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dance. When Gund Kwok's leader, Cheng Imm Tan, organized Gund Kwok in 1998, her mission was to provide Asian American women with an opportunity to learn a physically demanding cultural practice from which they had been excluded. Originally from Malaysia, Tan came to the United States to attend Dickinson College. By the late 1990s, her primary job was serving as the founding director of the Mayor's Office of New Bostonians, a program developed to serve immigrant communities in Boston. In her free time, she attended Asian cultural events in Chinatown and began to notice that lion dance companies around Boston's Chinatown did not include female dancers. Determined to change this dynamic, she trained with local lion dance master Eddie Lau and became proficient in lion dance practice. She returned to Malaysia to purchase some lion costumes and then, back in Boston, invited ten of her closest female friends to form Gund Kwok.

In Tan's vision, the sisterhood is designed to provide space for self-understanding and collective strength concerning adverse conditions. In her words, "connections between Asian American women have the potential to provide spaces of solidarity, a space where others understand each other's daily experiences of oppression" (Tan 2019). During our interviews, she talked about how lion dance rehearsals provide opportunities to work against the sexualization and objectification that many women face. "As Asian women," she said, "we internalize looking at ourselves as sexual objects and we reach for unrealistic standards of beauty, but we are not socialized to be in our bodies, to be strong, to be physical, which is why I wanted to start Gund Kwok" (2019). For Tan, the lion dance became an important vehicle for undoing part of the sexual objectification that Asian women experience. "The lion dance is very physically demanding and the women [in Gund Kwok] learn how to become more in tune with their physical bodies. The lion dance is a very powerful performance because the lion is a powerful animal and so, in rehearsals, we encourage each other to get physically strong" (Tan 2018).

To address some of the issues faced by Asian American women, a frequent ritual at rehearsals highlights the importance of community: check-in time, during which the lion dancers form a circle and share. Although check-ins do not occur at every rehearsal, Tan usually encourages group members to share something about what they have been up to, as women and as Asian American women. Each of the dancers shares an issue and the others respond, in empathy, by sharing a similar issue or by listening and offering support. In this way, the rehearsals are more than just a means to train and perform the lion dance; they are an opportunity to reflect on Asian American female identity and to cement connections within the group.

Rehearsals, performances, and gatherings are also times when such coalitions create the potential to mobilize as a community, resulting in an impressive wealth of community power and providing a springboard for action against racial and gender-based disparities in Chinatown. For example, women's rights and racial discrimination are key sociopolitical focuses of Gund Kwok, and the performance in the 2017 Women's March on the Boston Common, following the election of Donald Trump, was an opportunity to express their concerns about how the Trump administration would treat these issues. The dancers performed with drums beside a banner proclaiming, "We march for equality, dignity, and justice."

In addition to multiple annual performances in cultural celebrations, Lunar New Year parades, and weddings, the company supports fundraising events meaningful to the group, such as helping to raise money for young Asian women in the ASPIRE (Asian Sisters Participating in Reaching Excellence) program, which seeks to empower Asian American girls and women. In line with the company's mission to empower women, Tan focuses less on having the most technically advanced lion dance company in Chinatown and more on providing opportunities for Asian American women to address gendered and racial inequality in a nurturing environment.

Despite the company's emphasis on gendered issues and racial injustice, not all members named confronting and challenging racism and patriarchy as a major reason for joining the company.

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Some focus instead on "family." In an interview, Shaina Lu explained that Gund Kwok has served as a replacement for her martial arts team at an all-women's college: "I missed my team a lot [and] I wanted to have another family environment" after college (2017). For many members, the desire to join a "family" was central to their decision to join the company. Jeanne Chin, for example, said, "I now have a great bunch of friends. For me, that's the best part. Performing is my least favorite part. But the social part is really important. Everyone has different personalities, but we all get along really well, and rarely is there a conflict" (2016). Another member, Q. J. Shi, agreed: "I had a friend who was doing Gund Kwok, and I didn't think about doing it for a while. But it ended up being more than I thought it would be. I think it's a great community of women of all ages and I think it's a space for me to be a part of myself where I'm not in other spaces" (2016). Although Shi initially wanted to be part of a consistent group of workout partners, she eventually realized that her participation went deeper. Her sisterhood developed over many years of rehearsing and socializing, and now the women see one another weekly for rehearsals and performances, and they often get together after shows for dinner or meet during the holidays.

As well as the social aspects of Gund Kwok's sisterhood, much of the sense of working together and being with people with a shared interest comes from the trust built through the physical practice of the form, which facilitates social bonds and the deeper connections that form when members inevitably rely on one another for their safety. Underneath the brightly colored cloth lion costume, one person plays the lion's head while another is the tail, bending over to grasp their partner's waist in front. The back dancer is the "lifter," lifting the front dancer into the air or onto their partner's thighs behind. Through this partnership, connections are made through the body. Dancers must synchronize to execute the choreography in time with a musical accompaniment (drums and cymbals), particularly during the timed lifts, when dancers develop shared corporeal experiences through mutual sensing.

At one Gund Kwok rehearsal, I observed this corporeal sharing. Two members were practicing lifts. Standing behind her partner, the "tail" grasped the woman's red sash as a hoisting device. The two took two modest bounces in unison and then the woman in front, the "head," jumped backward onto her partner's thighs. They held this for a moment before the lifted woman returned to the ground, feet safely planted back on the floor.

Another pair began to practice again, on top of clay pots two feet high and arranged in two rows. Two pairs of women wearing a full lion dance costume negotiated turns around each other, careful not to hit another pair. In one lift, the dancer at the front jumped backward, wrapping her legs around the tail dancer's waist. I gasped: it looked like one jumper would fall. The space in which they were practicing has a concrete floor, and a falling dancer could easily injure herself. Jumps such as this require complete trust in one's partner. Even when the members themselves may not point to the centrality of bodywork in forming a community, I believe that the unavoidable physicality of the practice facilitates these social bonds. Deeper connections inevitably form as members trust one another completely.

The same week that I witnessed this trust building, I sat down with Shi and asked her about the techniques she needs to embody as a lifter. Shi has been a member of Gund Kwok since 2012, and although many dancers go back and forth between their roles of jumper and lifter, Shi has remained predominately a lifter. She described the connections that develop between partners as follows:

> It's like a willingness to exert as much of yourself as possible for the benefit of the group. We also try to make sure we're coordinating with our partners. If they're jumping and let's say they miss a jump, I usually try to encourage them to jump again at another point in the choreography, so they don't feel like they let themselves or the group down. You start to form a bond [with your partner]. You begin to understand how they jump and how you can work together. (Shi 2016)

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What is more, partners encourage each other to improve their technique. The more seasoned Gund Kwok sisters offer their expertise and feedback to help train newer members. I noticed in rehearsals that there was often a sense that the sisters would help one another, walking over to suggest a particular move or offering guidance on the performance quality. Gund Kwok does not have soloists or star performers, which lends to the sense that all of the sisters work together—lifting, supporting, and sharing weight and expertise.

Mutual understanding is not simply cultivated through corporeal sharing. Open lines of verbal communication are an integral part of the sisterhood dynamic. This culture of communal knowledge and peer feedback extends to the company's organizational structure. As former member Chien-Mei Chang notes,

> We have a lot of teachable moments as a group. Sometimes it's personal, like about what someone might be going through outside of rehearsal in their everyday lives but often it is just through the technique of learning the dance or even in helping each other think through the logistics of various performances. But whether it's by actually dancing, sharing our personal lives, or organizing the performances, hearing feedback from the other women in our group is encouraging. (2016)

Although the performers learn to make the performance look easy, the movement is strenuous and requires strength, coordination, and trust, especially when company members add clay pots and two feet to the acrobatics. For this reason, I find lion dance to be unique because the dancers share a kinesthetic understanding, not only by coordinating their lifts but also by embodying the lion as a unit.

Beyond rehearsals, performances—strenuous events requiring precision by the dancers—are a key arena for the cultivation of Gund Kwok's sisterhood. In February 2019, I volunteered as a supply cart carrier during the Lunar New Year parades, one of Gund Kwok's large-scale annual performances. My job was to provide the dancers with water, Band-Aids, snacks, and support. Typically, the parades include all the lion dance groups in the area, with each company stopping at businesses and restaurants in Chinatown to offer blessings and perform the *choi cheng*, a ritual cleansing of negative energy. During the ritual, two dancers beneath the lion costume perform choreography that includes kung fu stances, kicks, and sometimes lifts. Musicians accompany the dancers and coax the lion to enter the shop to cleanse the space. The ritual culminates with the lion pretending to eat oranges, cabbage, or lettuce set outside the shops by the owners.

These parades last for about eight hours, all in the freezing Boston winter, and the performers repeat the strenuous lion dance choreography for each business or restaurant in the area. Holding up the lion's head while performing the choreography, navigating narrow spaces, and manipulating the lion's facial expressions is hard work for both partners. I could see the internal dynamics of the performance and the care they showed each other when exhaustion set in.

The trust and sense of community that membership in Gund Kwok cultivates, however, did not insulate the group from the fissures in group dynamics that communities commonly experience. For instance, Gund Kwok holds monthly discussions on social and political topics, discussing such subjects as affirmative action, women's inequality, how better to engage in conflict resolution, and how to deal with racial oppression or the hypersexualization of Asian American women. Although many members join Gund Kwok for its left-leaning political views and activist spirit, Leanne Fan, a Gund Kwok member, told me that there are disagreements and sometimes the discussions are heated. Often, their differing perspectives relate to generational differences among group members. For example, according to Fan, some of the group's younger members "get upset if someone comes up and asks if they speak English [as if implying they are not American] while the older members don't care" (2019). Additionally, each woman has her own

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perspectives relating to a current understanding of racial disparity and feminist thought. Despite the divergent opinions, however, Fan reflects that group discussions are still a vital space to address issues that are difficult to explore outside the group. "They allow us," she said, "to discuss what it means to be Asian in America and what our different values are" (2019). Years of working and performing together, giving support and valuable feedback and tactile assistance during rehearsals and performances, have created a powerful bond within Gund Kwok. As Chien-Mei Chang said, "We are all different—different ages, occupations, backgrounds, and perspectives—but we work together and with the same goals" (2016).

Defining an Alternative Space through Lion Dance Practice

The connections among the sisters of Gund Kwok are developed, in part, through the enforcement of boundaries—the delineations of group membership as Asian and female. This distinguishes the group from the dominant society, securing and reinforcing their Asian American identities and reaffirming Gund Kwok's participation as an alternative space to develop traditional dances. Establishing group borders separates the group from the regulatory norms of society—in this case, whiteness and masculinity—and facilitates a sense of resistance to those hegemonic forces.

However, the task of negotiating definitions of both *female* and *Asian American* is complicated. Sisterhoods typically rely on the premise that group members are "women," but in recent years, queer and trans studies scholars have deconstructed gender binaries to challenge previous conceptualizations of gender, calling into question frameworks of sisterhood based on these essentialist definitions. However, if sisterhoods recognize gender fluidity and difference, there is still room for drawing from the coalition building that a sisterhood offers. For instance, according to Kelli Zaytoun and Judith Ezekiel, both trans movements and feminist movements seek liberation from oppression: "Both movements claim to seek to transcend the limitations and violence that traditional classifications of sex and gender impose" (2016, 209). Therefore, a sisterhood could

Photo 2. Two Gund Kwok performers practice onstage. 2019. Photo courtesy of Gund Kwok.

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be premised not on "physical classifications or identity of its participants but conceptualized as a political process, project, and struggle, built around lived experiences and consciousness and traversed by multiple social relations" (2016, 196). Seen in this way, a sisterhood that includes broad definitions of gender and sexuality can successfully work toward larger goals. Gund Kwok recognizes the complexities of defining gender, and envisioned within the company, such categories are quite fluid. For instance, the company allows anyone to join who identifies as female regardless of biological sex, including those who identify as transgender. Company member Shaina Lu noted that members encompass a wide range of gendered and sexual identities, and many care deeply about this openness.

Defining *Asian American* is equally complex. David Palumbo-Liu (1999) argues that the term is inconsistent, and the changing nature between the categories of "Asian" and "American" depends on historical and social events. Similarly, Karen Shimakawa argues that *Asian American* is constructed in response to an abject positionality within the dominant US culture. She writes that Asian American subjectivity constantly shifts concerning Americanness as "a movement between visibility and invisibility, foreignness and domestication/assimilation" (2002, 3). As a result, the Asian American body onstage is in tension between an anti-Asian racialization and the political agendas of the nation-state as seen through a history of immigration policies marked by inclusion and expulsion. As Angela Ahlgren makes clear, Asian American performers are often tasked with grappling with the "ever-shifting parameters" of these definitions due to immigration and the "hybridity and complexity among Asian Americans" concerning Americanness (2018, 15).

Maintaining inclusive definitions of *Asian American*, Gund Kwok has never turned away an applicant who fails to meet its race requirements. Gund Kwok encourages anyone to apply who considers herself Asian American, even if she has non-Asian or mixed-Asian parentage. Adriana Li, who is of Puerto Rican and Chinese descent, emphasized that the group did not question the extent of her Asianness. "Gund Kwok is very accepting and open-minded about diversity," she writes. "As long as you're an Asian female, you can join the group. I've faced [issues with my mixed heritage] with outside people, even friends, with the fact that I don't look visibly Asian. I kind of just roll my eyes and say, 'Well, I am Chinese whether you like it or not.'" She continues:

> It's funny because no one even asked me [what my ethnicity was] when I joined Gund Kwok. Not everyone looks Asian in the company, in my opinion. We're all from different areas of Asian countries—there's Cambodian, there's Korean, there's Taiwanese. That's something I feel embraced by. There even used to be an Indian girl. In our society, not everyone realizes that Indians are Asian. I'm all for that. And there are a lot of different personalities, a lot of different lifestyles so it's nice that we can bring those together even when we clash on ideas or things, we work together and that's what matters. (Li 2017)

That members of Gund Kwok accept Li's Asian identity, or at least biracial identity, means a lot to her. For the women of Gund Kwok, who likely have grown up in the United States and are aware of the variety of racial identities, Li's appearance has no bearing on her acceptance by the group. Her identification with her racial heritage and her Taishanese grandmother, and her willingness to dedicate her time to practicing lion dances, is sufficient "proof" of her racial categorization as Asian. Still, setting boundaries around self-identifying as Asian is an act of resistance for Gund Kwok.

My experiences of conducting ethnographic research with the company, and my role as a white, female observer, exemplify the unique sisterhood space developed through Gund Kwok membership. My appearance as a woman granted me access to certain shared affiliations denied to others. Many of the members of Gund Kwok spoke about how the company resisted male-dominated histories of the lion dance. However, my whiteness prohibited my accessing other aspects of Gund Kwok's community-based knowledge and participation at most company rehearsals. Perhaps it

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also restricted information that members were willing to share with me in one-on-one interviews. Tan remains committed to clear racial as well as gendered boundaries, which are crucial for securing this space as a unique opportunity for Asian American women. For this reason, I was never a complete insider, which I fully expected, in keeping with the group's rules for membership. Gund Kwok is a rare opportunity for Asian American women to participate in a community that is solely theirs, and that meant my exclusion. However, although I did not become a company insider, neither was I a detached observer. As Danielle Sarver Coombs and Anne C. Osborne (2018) maintain, the roles in ethnographic research are often characterized by the insider/outsider dichotomy when, in reality, there is often more of an in-between status (243). For instance, Patricia and Peter Adler argue that there are more nuanced typologies of researcher positions, such as the "peripheral membership role," which allows researchers to "observe and interact closely enough with members to establish an insider's identity without participating in those activities constituting the core of group membership" (Adler and Adler 1994, 380). In addition to my interviews with and observations of Gund Kwok members, I was invited to join one technical practice to get a sense of the physical rigor of the training and to volunteer for the group during their Lunar New Year performances, wearing the company uniform as we paraded throughout Chinatown. Beyond this, I did not attend outside gatherings. There were times, though, when I longed to be included to a greater extent, but having accessed female-only spaces myself, I recognized the value in excluding outsiders or members of an "oppressive" group.

Clarifying the attributes of the in-group is a normal mechanism of community development. Communities are by definition exclusionary, and setting such boundaries can be an act of resistance for marginalized groups. As Q. J. Shi told me, "I think just having a space for Asian women is political. We get a lot of questions about other people joining and why they're not allowed to join so I think a big part of it is just making sure we have our separate space" (2016). It is this defining of the in-group—the setting of boundaries—that allows the company to focus on Asian cultural practices with minimal external interference. Whereas participating in the sisterhood provides an environment outside the dominant culture, learning and performing traditional Asian forms of dance opens doors for members to connect to Asian cultural identities, which—as Gund Kwok members reported—can feel splintered and painful, the result of minority cultures being repressed in the United States. The ideas produced through Gund Kwok's rehearsals and performances are a way to piece together a cohesive sense of cultural identity and reimagine one's cultural past.

Stuart Hall maintains that the act of "imaginative rediscovery" provides a way of "imposing an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation, which is the history of all enforced diasporas" (1990, 224). The act of bringing forth past images, symbols, and practices not only helps people to heal but also acts as "resources of resistance and identity, with which to confront the fragmented and pathological ways in which that experience has been reconstructed within the dominant regimes of … the West" (1990, 225). Such spaces provide members with a space for identity affirmation and the freedom to express culture in a self-directed manner, a place from which to enact social change, and a way to escape and resist the order of mainstream (white) culture.

As Adriana Li says, Gund Kwok membership offers "a space to let your guard down and talk about what it is really like to be a woman and to be Asian today and a space to redefine Asianness" (2017). This reflects what American studies scholar Lisa Lowe has theorized: that alternative spaces that do not align with mainstream cultural practices benefit Asian American communities. Lowe contends that specific immigration and exclusionary acts targeted at Asian American citizens have rendered Asian Americans the "alien other," making it impossible for them to assume an insider position within the US social sphere. Asian Americans must negotiate the contradictory messages that they receive concerning citizenship, which positions them as outsiders while demanding assimilation. Lowe argues that "disidentification expresses a space in which alienations, in the cultural, political and economic senses, can be rearticulated in oppositional forms … [allowing] for the

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exploration of alternative political and cultural subjectivities that emerge within the continuing effects of displacement" (1996, 103–104). This distance, she says, "preserves Asian American culture as an alternative site where the palimpsest of lost memories is reinvented, histories are fractured and retraced, and the unlikely varieties of silence emerge into articulacy" (1996, 6). In postulating the role of the sisterhood as a space outside of Western domination, the sisterhood becomes a place from which to subvert the layers of domination.

The community's integrity also protects traditional knowledge. Johanna Gibson, an intellectual property law theorist, argues that the community has the capacity to protect and maintain "its custom, culture, and knowledges ... [which include] expressions and performance, practices and beliefs ..." (2016, 36). The repetition of shared practice among group members gives them a sense of traditional knowledge ownership, and defining group membership as Asian marks off a cultural territory and provides benefits (social, economic, spiritual) to the inside group—those who gain access to the cultural products. Only those who have access to the sisterhood's shared cultural property can follow the particular symbolic allusions within the performances, which allows them to accumulate cultural capital within Boston and Chinatown.

Performing Asian traditional culture through the lion dance is an important strategy to disidentify with mainstream culture and to create alternative spaces. The company's use of distinctively Asian (predominately Chinese) tales, movements, and movement techniques, rather than Western arts and dance techniques, serves a similar purpose. This fosters a sense of cultural identity by pulling aesthetic material from Asian historical and cultural frameworks to highlight specifically Asian myths, symbols, and practices.

Although Gund Kwok draws from traditional stories in its choreography, it often redefines the tales, altering a narrative to fit the company's mission or a specific performance opportunity. As Leanne Fan reflects, "I guess that's a dimension of how we're able to respect our traditions but at the same time we are brokering the parts that we are reconsidering and that we want to reimagine." Fan gives an example: "Recently we performed with a pig head. And I guess it's unprecedented to put a pig head on a lion dance framework, but Cheng Imm decided to experiment with it in some performances" (2019). The pig head was made by Tan's husband, Ken Morin, to reflect the 2019 Chinese zodiac year of the pig, but it ended up being an innovative addition to their Lunar New Year performances that year.

In the 2019 performances I witnessed at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the Peabody Essex Museum, the appearance of the pig head on a lion body elicited squeals of laughter and surprise from audience members because of the juxtaposition of the pig head on a lion body and the uniqueness of such a creative choice. With regard to the decision to implement the pig head, Fan noted, "That's what is interesting about how we create our dances ... it's like an ultimate expression of the ways that we hold tradition and the way that we reimagine it" (2019). Since the utilization of the pig head, Gund Kwok has integrated each year's Chinese zodiac animal into their Lunar New Year performances, using a custom-made (also by Morin) tiger mask in their most recent 2022 performances. Gund Kwok has also created a female character with pigtails and rosy cheeks to accompany the lions as they perform. Typically, lion dances have a male character, a rotund Buddha figure, who acts as a leader of the procession while helping to manage the crowds, add narrative content, and interject humor. Gund Kwok has made this character female as a way of experimenting with tradition while marking a contrast to its masculine counterpart.

Despite the joy of performing a cultural heritage dance, there is a tension between protecting an Asian cultural practice and performing for the predominately white audiences that view Gund Kwok's performances during cultural events. The company frequently performs in institutional spaces like the Peabody Essex Museum during the Lunar New Year season and other Asian holidays,

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Photo 3. A lion dance character re-imagined by Gund Kwok as female. 2017. Photo courtesy of Gund Kwok.

such as the Mid-Autumn Festival. As Leanne Fan says, it is difficult to find a balance between wanting to perform publicly and protecting lion dancing from the outside gaze:

> I feel that there is such a hard line between how we are performing for spectators and what the lion dance means to me. Something I'm uncomfortable with is how the Western gaze or the white gaze fetishizes this experience. When we performed at the [Peabody Essex] Museum, I saw little children wearing *qipaos* and had chopsticks in their hair. It made me feel like … the myth of multicultural harmony in our country has been destroyed recently and now people of color are demanding a fuller identity from the majority, like demanding we are seen as more full people. And I think this is an interesting juncture of where we are with a lion dance. It provides cover for people to be like "I'm open to other cultures because this [lion dance] is something I consume" and I'm not sure I want to legitimize that. (2019)

In performances geared toward Chinatown audiences, rather than mainstream audiences, there is a different dynamic. As Cheng Imm Tan noted in one of our interviews, when Gund Kwok performs for the Asian American community, there is a sense of giving back to Chinatown: "We're a staple in terms of Chinatown celebrations, banquets, and festivals" (2019). Performing lion dances is a way to reclaim oppressive histories and narratives and promote cultural visibility. As Tan explains, "Performing the lion dance helps to maintain our identity as a community. When you're a minority

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culture, most of what you do is private, but this gives you a public expression of what community means" (2019). For Tan, public performances of the lion dance provide a sense of cultural pride for Asian audiences in Chinatown while showcasing Asian traditions to the Boston community.

Sisterhoods as Oppositional Strategy to Brotherhoods

Although much of the emphasis in an all-women's lion dance group is on creating a space for Asian American women to establish partnerships outside mainstream culture, an added layer is how the sisterhood recognizes cultural differences while rejecting masculinity as the foundation for the practice. As anthropologist Avron Boretz (2011) points out, participants in Chinese popular religion and martial culture have traditionally focused on cultivating an ethos of masculinity predicated on sworn brotherhoods and shared masculine power. This culture of brotherhood carried over to Chinese diaspora communities in the years before the development of Gund Kwok, as male lion dancers drew from the lion dance and martial arts to accumulate physical power and ritual capital.

Before Gund Kwok, lion dance groups in Boston and elsewhere existed as fraternal spaces aimed at developing masculine bonds to cope with the emasculation and racism that Asian men faced in the United States. Drawing from long-standing notions of Chinese cultural masculinity, Asian American men reinforced notions that women could not practice the lion dance as a means of securing their power in the face of adversity. In the 1960s, rapidly rearranging legal structures exacerbated Asian and Asian American men's racial oppression and disillusionment within the social landscape. The abolition of quotas based on national origin in 1965 vastly increased immigration to the United States, but racism and inadequate measures to provide opportunities for education, language assistance, or other services to new immigrant youths inevitably led to large numbers of dissatisfied Asian American men (Yeh 2008, 78). Masculine and militant activities (such as kung fu and lion dances) became a way to recuperate a sense of cultural identity and masculinity (Yeh 2008, 97).

In response to both heritage and "family roots" reclamation projects and the call for militant masculinity by radical youths in the Yellow Power Movement, lion dances proliferated. In major cities such as San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles, and Boston, the new shifts within Asian American activist movements had a tangible impact on the daily life of Chinatown communities. Activist work helped to create an assertion of Chinese culture through an emphasis on accepting and promoting difference, rather than with attempts to assimilate. According to Michael Liu, Kim Geron, and Tracy Lai, "Traditional art forms such as the lion dance, martial arts, taiko, and kulintang music became vehicles for the expression of anti-colonial sentiment and integral elements in community organizing" (2008, 112).

Regrettably, many of the attempts to construct male identity during this time came at the expense of restricting women's access to Asian cultural traditions. The drive to create a sense of cultural nationalism promoted notions of preferred access to ritual and symbolic capital that the lion dance and other cultural practices afforded men. As Sonia Shah writes, "Leftist Asian women in Yellow Power and other Asian American groups often found themselves left out of the decision-making process and their ideas and concerns relegated to 'women's auxiliary groups' that were marginal to the larger projects at hand" (1997, xvi). However, women were not only excluded from the realm of activism; they were also denied the opportunity to participate in the activities that were cultivating this new identity. As Yen Le Espiritu (2008) notes, unitary notions of cultural nationalism and identity were framed as male and heterosexual.

According to Adam Cheung, a longtime Boston Chinatown lion dancer, these findings apply to lion dance groups in Boston as well. Cheung remembers growing up in kung fu clubs in the 1980s and 1990s, when the community's lion dancers he looked up to had a "real tough guy vibe." The dancers, all men, "were the type to have tattoos and sunglasses" (Cheung 2017). Two former members

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of Gund Kwok have similar recollections. Jeanne Chin, who works for a successful technology company in Boston, grew up in Boston's Chinatown in the 1980s and never saw women performing lion dances. She remembers that "lion dance groups were always kind of a dangerous thing 'cause some of the groups would fight each other. Parents didn't want their children to join" (Chin 2016). Similarly, Adriana Li recalls that a male family member was a lion dancer in the 1980s and 1990s and there was always a "very masculine feeling" (2017) about his group and their performances. Cheung says that it was Gund Kwok that changed the dominant understanding of lion dances in Boston's Chinatown (2017).

Many Gund Kwok members seek a sisterhood space because they are familiar with the exclusionary brotherhoods of other Boston-based lion dance companies; some have tried to join. One member, who wishes to remain anonymous, felt excluded not only from the brotherhood of local Boston schools but also from a Shaolin Kung Fu academy when she went to China to study. She recalls that the fraternal dynamics of these other kung fu lion dance schools were pervasive. "Other groups," she says, "have female lion dancers around Boston, but Gund Kwok is the only one that is so sincerely predicated on a sisterhood. For me, that is very important because many of the male *sifus* around Chinatown see themselves as so powerful and they're kind of arrogant. They have an overtly masculine quality and way of directing the company that's sort of off-putting."

These brotherhood dynamics, which are embedded within the kung fu and lion dance groups, are a facet of lion dance culture that Gund Kwok works to redefine. The commitment to action echoes through Leader Tan's callouts after every Gund Kwok performance, when she states that the mission of Gund Kwok is to showcase how women can perform the lion dance as well as men can perform it. In carving out space as a sisterhood, Gund Kwok exerts an oppositional strategy to the dominance of masculinity that unsettles past and present practices of gendered oppression. Because of the sisterhood, Gund Kwok women neither seek nor need access to the former brotherhoods of kung fu schools. Gund Kwok showcases the political power sisterhoods have by creating their own spaces, directed by their interpretation of traditions and cultural narratives. Regardless of its potential failures, strategically deployed sisterhood offers a place for Asian American women to build partnerships that move against the mechanisms of assimilation, and work to destabilize the presumption that masculine power is the only authentic power.

Conclusion

Gund Kwok, an all-women's lion dance company, has provided a unique opportunity for Asian American women in Boston's Chinatown. The sisterhood created by Gund Kwok challenges gendered and racial oppression, allowing Asian women performers to stand up against the forces of racism and patriarchy that are inherent in their experiences as women of color in the United States. In performing the once male-only lion dance, Asian American women are actively confronting their own traditions and reshaping them to reflect a modern-day reality.

Whereas scholars (Nancy 1991; Joseph 2002; Filewood 2001) have problematized community formations, I argue that we should continue to look for the potential benefits that strategically enacted communities, including sisterhoods, can provide their members. Although community ideology is unavoidably tied to power dynamics and can pose risks to members, communities can also generate social and political benefits that should not be overlooked (Kwan 2013).

Nevertheless, although sisterhoods are powerful entities, it is crucial to avoid seeing groups such as Gund Kwok as monolithic. Although there may be similarities, the differing perspectives and backgrounds of community members should still be recognized and encouraged. As Rosemary Candelario (2016) argues, intercultural alliances made during the artistic process open the potential for a deliberate way of working together despite difference. The dancers of Gund Kwok each have

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their own opinions and experiences and have come together amid a variety of backgrounds (cultural, ethnic, economic, and political) to advocate for change both within the tradition of lion dancing and in terms of Asian American women's equality.

Gund Kwok's sisterhood is shaped through the company's rehearsals, training processes, group discussions, and performances. Dance communities—where dancers support one another physically, mentally, and socially—are uniquely suited to cultivate shared understandings and mobilize for change (Hamera 2007). Rehearsal rooms and social spaces are where the sisterhood of Gund Kwok has the opportunity to flourish. The intimacies cultivated through dance spaces and shared daily practice, are the laboratories where existing ways of being and traditions can be questioned and reimagined. In carving out a sisterhood space, Gund Kwok creates opportunities for liberation, transformation, and celebration in Boston's Chinatown.

Notes

1. http://gundkwok.org/10-reasons-why-you-should-lion-dragon-dance-with-gund-kwok/.

2. Although the lion dance likely originated in Chinese culture nearly two thousand years ago, other Asian groups, such as the Vietnamese, have adopted lion dance traditions. In Boston's Chinatown, lion dances are usually performed by Asian Americans from various backgrounds.

3. Women have been prohibited from lion dancing for several reasons, including the belief that they are not strong enough, that menstruation affects the ritual purity of the performance, and that the chasing away of evil spirits that lion dances accomplish requires masculine energy. However, since the creation of Gund Kwok, women are increasingly learning lion dances across the country.

4. Among Gund Kwok members, there is a chief operating officer at a tech company, a senior leadership development program manager at a clinical research company, and an instructor at a disability advocacy group.

5. The terms *sisterhood* and *female* as they pertain to Gund Kwok will be problematized later in this article.

6. See Main and Bell (2019) and Semuels (2019).

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