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## Creating Community

*An Interview with Vanessa Au and Ellison Shieh of the Seattle Asian American Film Festival*

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**ABSTRACT** Leilani Nishime interviews Vanessa Au and Ellison Sheih, the former and current codirectors of the Seattle Asian American Film Festival. Au and Sheih discuss the mission of the film festival, the process of selecting films, the ideological investments of the festival organizers, and the labor involved in running a festival. Of central importance to the conversation is the relationship between film festivals and the surrounding communities. **KEYWORDS** film festival, Asian American, labor, community organizing

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In *LGBTQ Film Festivals*, Antoine Damians argues for understanding film festivals as a method in which festivals function “not solely as objects of research but as ideal sites for understanding cinematic cultures.”<sup>1</sup> In this conversation with the current and former directors of the Seattle Asian American Film Festival (SAAFF), the directors, Vanessa Au and Ellison Shieh, and I discuss what we might call an Asian American cinema culture. Au and Shieh talk about what they see as the festival’s role in reflecting and creating Asian American cinema audiences, the labor and economics of film festivals, their ideological investments in the films they screen, and what films and film festivals have meant to their own cultural identities.

As the grants manager and a staff member for the past eight years, I have seen firsthand how the festival has become one of the major events for Asian Americans in Seattle. It crosses ethnic boundaries while attending to the specificities and distinctions of cultural and national identities. Like the term *Asian American* itself, the festival wears its progressive politics on its sleeve. The festival partners with community organizations to screen independent, small-budget, fictional and documentary films, both shorts and feature length. In the summer, the festival runs free films in the park in Seattle’s International District, also featuring local performing artists. In between events, the festival holds screenings, filmmaker get-togethers, and presents

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FIGURE 1. Vanessa Au, codirector of SAAFF, 2012–2021.



FIGURE 2. Ellison Shieh, codirector of SAAFF, 2021–present. Photo by Robin Templeton.

films at other festivals. The entirely volunteer-run festival has a staff that ebbs and flows, with many members working in local community organizations. These connections and events turn the festival into a cultural hub with spokes reaching out to multiple sites across the network of Asian American groups in Washington State.

In 2022, SAAFF was gearing up to celebrate its ten-year anniversary and run its first hybrid festival. At the same time, it was undergoing a transition in its directorship. Vanessa Au, one of the festival cofounders and longtime codirector, transferred the directorship to two longtime festival staffers, Victoria Ju and Ellison Shieh. Vanessa Au earned her PhD in Communication from the University of Washington and is currently a senior program manager in the tech industry. In spring of 2023, Au and Shieh joined me in a zoom call to talk about the creative turmoil of the last couple of years, the feminist slant of the organization, and their strategies for programming queer Asian American films (figures 1 and 2).

## ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

**Leilani Nishime:** I've known you all for quite a while but could you tell me who you are and your role in the festival or how you got involved in the festival.

**Vanessa Au:** I am one of the original cofounders of the festival. I started planning this when I was finishing my PhD in 2012. That was when Kevin Bang and I met because we realized the Northwest Asian American Film Festival had stopped running. He and I picked it up and decided to rename it the Seattle Asian American Film Festival. We had

our first one in 2013. I was a codirector with him, and then after he moved off to New York, with other folks including Martin Tran and Victoria Ju. I was codirector until 2021, when I stepped back and played a much smaller supporting role. Then Ellison and Victoria became codirectors.

**Ellison Shieh:** I'm Ellison. I use they/them pronouns. I'm one of the current codirectors of SAAFF. I was still finishing up my film degree in 2015 when I volunteered for the festival during Valentine's Day weekend, and later that year I was invited to join the staff, and I've been a part of SAAFF ever since. I have shifted through so many different roles. I primarily do the communications and programming on top of being a codirector. It just aligns with a lot of the other stuff that I do within Asian American and arts circles here in Seattle.

**LN:** I was talking with Vanessa earlier about something called founder's syndrome, where the people who found an organization get really attached to it and have a hard time letting it go so that when the founder quits or passes on or whatever, the institution falls apart. Let's start with you, Vanessa. Why did you decide to step back? I want to find out more about what that transition looked like.

**VA:** There's actually two instances where I stepped back. The first was when I had Koji [Vanessa's son]. We were wondering if we were going to pause the festival for a year, or if somebody would come up and help because directing the festival has always been a two-person job. What ended up happening is Martin [Tran] jumped in to pitch in for a year while I was out, and that went really well. We're so aligned in our vision for the festival that it's never been a difficult thing to say, "I'm going to disappear, and I trust you to make all the decisions."

I think I felt just as good about this transition. I handed the reins over completely to Ellison and Victoria [Ju] because I think even before Ellis was in that leadership position, I always valued their feedback and their input, and they just had really good insight into why we should make a certain decision or take the festival a certain direction. I always had that trust in both Victoria and Ellison to get it done, even though it was probably going to look a little bit different from the way I did it. I thought it was actually good to pass that on to people who are younger because everything has to change. I value them bringing a fresh perspective to the festival.

**ES:** For me, I think the transition period was interesting with Martin stepping back and Victoria stepping in, and then Vanessa stepping back

and me stepping in, and it's all during the pandemic. [laughs] It was just such a wild shift in how we have to think about sharing our values, sharing creativity and hope, and resilience in our community virtually. I think it was easy to imagine, but the technical side was just the biggest hill for us to climb (see figure 3).

When I was at the point where I became the codirector, having been at SAAFF for so many years, I understood the culture so well, and not just the work culture and our staff, but the people who come out, the people who look forward to our events, and the people that we want to reach. Obviously, the pandemic had huge challenges, but we've had a lot of great successes since then. I think that's really a testament to how I've learned from the people who brought me on to the staff and continue to learn from the people who I work with right now.

**LN:** I thought you all had some really creative responses to the pandemic, like the drive-in movies were great!

#### **MISSION AND MEANING**

**LN:** Let me ask you, then, about the vision for the festival. Why do we need an Asian American film festival? What do you see as the reason for wanting to run the festival?

**ES:** I've gotten this question from multiple outlets the past year or two, and it's really interesting with the rise of Asian American representation these days. It's great to see Asian creatives getting more work behind the camera, writers getting into writers' rooms, and more representation on screen. But we're supporting the indie work, the stuff that isn't mainstream, the stuff that isn't dictated by studios, and is very earnestly made by these passionate creatives within our community. We're also centering the stories that are much harder to find and are lesser known. That continues driving our work. Our mission isn't just about representation on screen. It's about understanding each other better. There are so many communities within the Asian American umbrella that don't often get the platforms that they deserve. I think our festival is a great bridge between creatives and the audiences that they want to reach. We also bring in more people who wouldn't have expected to experience these stories, and they'll just continue sharing that with other people, too. I think the festival is a great catalyst for learning and connection and fostering even more creativity within the Asian American film space.



FIGURE 3. Each year SAAFF collaborates with local Asian American artists to design our festival posters. This 2019 poster incorporated a stylized gate that is one of the more recognizable symbols of Seattle’s International District. Design by Simson. Courtesy of SAAFF.

**VA:** I agree with Ellis because, again, there's so much diversity of experience that is represented on screen at our festival. It's not just about the different ethnicities and immigrant experiences, but also age. We even have documentaries every year by senior citizens who learned filmmaking in LA through the Digital Histories program, and it's so lovely to see those. They're building their filmmaking skills and sharing their stories. There is so much diversity that people don't even consider.

I think we also need film festivals because they can really help to engage the local community. Those are things you're not going to get sitting at home and watching Netflix. We invite nonprofit groups, for example, to promote film programs that match up with their mission, and then they get to come to the film festival to set up a table and introduce themselves at the screening. We get community organizations like API Chaya [a group supporting survivors of gender-based violence] and ACRS [Asian Counseling and Resource Services]. We've even done a bone marrow registry drive with Be the Match when we screened the film *Mixed Match*. At our opening parties and our summer film series, which is our free series of outdoor movie screenings, we always bring local performance artists. It's not just about filmmakers coming from other places to show their films. We want to be able to support the community in Seattle as well.

**LN:** And the summer festival was planned to try to bring more people down into the International District when people were avoiding the area at night since it had a reputation of being unsafe.

## LABOR

**LN:** The film festival is a huge amount of work. Have we ever figured out how many hours you'll probably put in each year?

**VA:** That's not good math to do. [laughs] It's a big labor of love.

**ES:** It's the off season, but we're still doing work because we're preparing for summer, and then we're preparing for the next festival. Then the past few years whenever the festival rolls around, it literally is a second job. It just takes over my entire life, every waking hour when I'm not working, or maybe even during my work hours, [laughs] I'll be doing stuff.

**LN:** It takes up this massive amount of energy and time. I think you know Lori Lopez's work on Asian Americans and the media industry and how a lot of people leave because of burnout.<sup>2</sup> So what motivates you? What helps you stay excited or involved with the festival?

**VA:** I think you get excited about the films. But what really kept me going is when you see the other independent film festivals like SIFF [Seattle Independent Film Festival], which is a really big one here. It just doesn't have a lot of the content that we bring to our film festival. It has a little sliver, and usually we're invited to promote or co-present those films. There's a lot of great films, but not a lot of us in main roles on the screen there in general, and I think that's a really huge gap that I got excited to fill. It reminded me our festival serves a really important role here (see figure 4).

**ES:** I think the topic of burnout, especially in the past few years, has come to the forefront with the pandemic. People are learning and getting the tools to more mindfully take care of themselves, especially as volunteers, especially as an organization that is often short-staffed. It's something that has been on our minds a lot. We know the impact of what we do from the filmmakers, to the people who attend, to the community partners that we work with, and all of that is super gratifying. But, I think that burnout is very real, and it's something that we're still trying to figure out how to balance. We are trying to be more mindful of everyone's time and their contributions. It's definitely an ongoing thing that we're trying to figure out amongst ourselves.

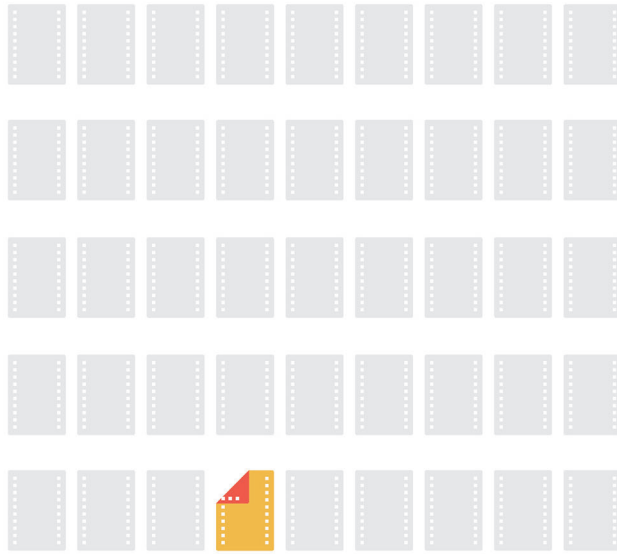
## **FEMINISM AND GENDER**

**LN:** I want to shift topics a bit and talk more about some of the programming and how you choose films for the festival.

**ES:** We continue that model of having everyone on staff who's interested in contributing share their opinions on what they watch, and we bring in volunteers from the community who have interest in watching Asian American films to help us bring their voice into screening these films. Then it just boils down to the programming team reviewing all that they can.

**LN:** How do you decide what's going to be the opening night film or the closing night film for the festival?

**VA:** We get to a short list of opening and closing night films pretty fast. They just really stand out in terms of narrative, production quality, and the performances, and it's about the tone of the film as well. We don't want to kick off opening night with a documentary about a really profound tragedy or anything. We try to open it with something hopeful, dynamic, heartwarming, or, entertaining. And end it with something really memorable.



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FIGURE 4. SAAFF poster in 2016 illustrating our place in the larger film ecosystem. Design by Simson. Courtesy of SAAFF.

**ES:** We definitely go for things that we feel would be crowd pleasers but also very impactful. Opening and closing [night films] are the biggest bang for us. It bookends our festival, and every year it sets the tone of the festival. We have a huge diversity of different stories and mediums being shared throughout the festival. Our opening, closing, and centerpiece



films, when people see them and then dive into our other programming, they see what kinds of stories we're centering and highlighting and uplifting that year. We try to be super intentional with those.

**LN:** I think you've all made some pretty unusual opening night choices, like the wrestling movie *Signature Moves*.

**ES:** Yeah, it was a multiracial queer romance/wrestling movie with family stuff, too, so it had a lot of things going for it. I think we selected it that year because of how unique it was. And, you know, it's really good to center a story like that.

**LN:** This interview is for *Feminist Media Histories*, so a lot of the readers are going to be interested in feminism and gender studies. It seems like our festival has a lot of queer programming, so I was wondering if this was a conscious decision. How do you do programming around queer subjects or queer themes?

**VA:** I think we've always gotten a lot of submissions featuring queer themes and intersecting identities. That tends to be what we get, but we are also intentional about it. We've always highlighted LGBTQ screenings, and they also do really well in terms of attendance. We have a lot of support from the community. I think the fact that we give it such a strong spotlight may be why we continue to get really strong submissions for that programming.

**ES:** When I was first part of the programming team, we had our first queer-focused shorts program. Since then it's been something that people have been looking forward to every year. It's such an integral part of the festival. The queer community, I mean, we need outlets. [laughs] It feels really good to know that there are other people who understand us and to put ourselves and our creativity on screen. Seattle being such a queer-friendly place with Asian American queer folks being more involved throughout the art scenes, it was very natural for us. We connect with so many community partners that center the queer community and specifically Asian American and Pacific Islander queer communities. It's a very natural part of our festival and a big part of our identity as well.

**LN:** I remember when you first did that programming, the Queer AF shorts programming. I think it was the free admission the first couple of years that helped really build up an audience for it. The short programming was usually in the afternoon, and then we'd have a full-length queer-themed film, usually in the evening. I thought it was really a smart way to help build that audience.

There was a study done by USC where they looked at 1,000 top-grossing films between 2007 and 2016 and only two Asian women were

directors or filmmakers.<sup>3</sup> The numbers are really terrible, and yet you would not know that from looking at our film festival. I'm interested in why there's so much content from female identified filmmakers. Do you think that makes a difference in the kinds of films that we see, or the feeling of the film festival?

**VA:** We get a lot of outstanding films from female identified directors. So why are they not making it big in Hollywood? I think that's very telling. There are obviously other forces at work. We know the talent is there, but who's on the selection committees? Who controls how funds are directed? How many of them are women or nonbinary?

**LN:** Would you consider the film festival to be feminist? And you can interpret that any way you want.

**VA:** I think it is inherently feminist. The fact that we invite audiences to experience so many different and unique perspectives that challenge the status quo through film. And in our selection process, we are deliberate about ensuring we have the broadest representation possible in our programming committees.

**ES:** Between personal values and sharing the voices of the creatives that we uplift, the way that we drive the organization is inherently feminist. We are very intentionally inclusive and open to also admitting wrongs when we do or say something, when we didn't know any better or should have known better. I think the way that we continue sharing and continue growing [is feminist]. I mean, a lot of us are also personally very antiracist, prodecolonization, antipatriarchy, and antisystem. Even though we, as an organization, don't explicitly say it, I think in the way that we select the films, select the perspectives that we share, it's very obvious that we are from a feminist [perspective], from radical roots.

**VA:** Even though we are a volunteer run organization. We are selective about who we work with. We can choose not to work with people who aren't aligned with those views and those values, and we have made decisions before to ensure that.

## STRUCTURE

**LN:** I think many people have no idea—I know I didn't before I got involved—how you put on a film festival. Can you talk about the organization of the film festival? I know that it's all volunteer run so how are you able to run a festival where everyone's volunteering their time?

**ES:** I think the biggest thing is investment. If people are invested, they will show up. They will do the work and contribute and really want to be a part of making things happen. There are some people who join and then a lot of things happen in life, and they have to step down, and that's just the way it goes, especially as a volunteer-run organization. I think the biggest thing is how we foster community within our staff, where there's transparency, where we can support each other, where we can help each other with things cross departmentally. That's been something that we've been working on a lot, bringing in everyone for the big decisions, and not just leaving it up to two or three people at the top.

**VA:** When I started as a codirector, I also tried to encourage the staff to take a role that they wanted to learn, even if they had no experience doing that. I figured that they could learn from staff who did have professional experience, and get something back for the hard work they put into the film festival. I wanted them to develop new skills along the way that they could add to their resume.

**LN:** Can you talk about the meeting structures?

**VA and ES:** [laugh]

**VA:** I mean in the before-times it was always in someone's living room. We used to do a potluck and everything. When we started to get bigger, we broke off into groups. The different groups met separately, but then got together for big decisions. So how is it now, Ellis? Now it's harder with so much online meeting and a bigger team.

**ES:** Our hope is to do more in person later this year, as we gear up for the festival. Since the pandemic, it's been largely online, which is definitely more convenient for people who can't get out of work on time to get here or have to be home or out of state. It's still driven in the same way where we set an agenda, we have people share their updates, see what people need support, and also just check in with each other. It's not all just work. It's also spending more time to support each other personally. We always get off track at some point or multiple points. I think one of the best parts of all of our get-togethers is that we're all doing stuff, but we have all of these lighthearted moments that help us connect more and, in turn, helps us be more cohesive and want to do better work.

**VA:** That's why I missed those days when every meeting was a potluck at someone's house. Even if we had five noodle dishes, a pizza, and a bag of chips. [laughs] I miss that. It was lots of fun.

## THE LAST WORD

LN: If there were a couple of the films from the festival that ended up being favorites, that you would want to recommend, what would they be?

ES: One of them that comes to mind is a feature film from a Vietnamese American director called *Song Lang* (2018). It's directed by Leon Le. Oh, my God! I watched it at another festival, and I knew immediately that I needed to have it at SAAFF. It features Vietnamese opera, which is a dying art, and is a gay love story. It's so beautifully told, beautifully shot. Everyone who came out of that theater was so emotionally distraught. [laughs] And it ended up winning both audience favorite narrative film and the jury award for narrative feature [at SAAFF]. Being able to recommend something to people and seeing them walk out of the theater and not being able to stop talking about it or thinking about it, that's one of the best feelings that you can have running a film festival.

VA: I have so many. My favorite recent one is *Liquor Store Dreams* (2022) by So Yun Um. I can't stop telling people to watch it. It's a 2022 film, and it's just so much raw conversation with her dad about her having grown up a liquor store baby, but also talking to other liquor store babies within that film, and what an important space that was. There are just so many layers to it. I remember when we screened it, one of the filmmakers that had an opening night short was up there for the Q&A session, and was like, "It's hard to answer, I'm still processing *Liquor Store Dreams*."

Another one for me that was a real standout was *American Revolutionary* (2013) about Grace Lee Boggs, by [director] Grace Lee who had made *The Grace Lee Project* (2005). What an amazing activist and scholar Grace Lee Boggs was! I'll never forget that film.

LN: My last question is: are there moments that stood out for you from the festival?

VA: A lot of people have met at our festival over the years. We talk about community and people coming together, like really coming together, because how many people that met at the film festival over the last decade or so have actually gotten married? It's something that I never expected would happen at the film festival.

ES: The connections that you make. A lot of people tell us that our festival is one of the most fun that they've ever been to, and a lot of that is because of the way that we create a community space for people to connect. There are so many people that I've been friends with for years

just through connecting with them through the film festival. It's really lovely to be a part of that and continue doing that every year, whether in person or virtually.

**VA:** I think we do a good job of centering the filmmakers, too. From their reviews of SAAFF, they feel really welcome and really special. We're not just taking their work and screening it. We're featuring them and making them the guests of honor, and we have special events just for them. They feel like they're treated like VIPs, and they should be because they're who created all this incredible art. ■

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