

Seid Studies Issues of Chinese Culture and Gender

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

“I am a child of an immigrant from Hong Kong. My grandparents were also Chinese immigrants to the U.S. It is common for the second or third generation to return to the culture, to study the language. I wanted to understand Chinese immigration to the US, and that has always been a very important topic to me as a scholar. Later, I found that I could study literature, film, and media and look at Asian-American representation and at the history of how the Chinese immigrated to the U.S.”

That is how Dr. Danielle Seid explains why she has such a diverse academic background. This native of San Diego, California received her bachelor’s in humanities and Chinese from San Diego State University, her master’s in English and Cultural Studies from the University of Hawaii, Mānoa, and her doctorate in English from the University of Oregon. Today she is an assistant professor in the Department of English of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences.

For Seid, the interest in film and media in general comes from her family roots. “I approach film and media from a cultural studies perspective. For me, film and media are in my DNA. My grandparents spent probably three or four years in the 1950s filming a feature-length documentary entitled ‘Forever Chinatown.’ The film documented Chinese-American life in this really important period when the Chinese were finally able to naturalize and actually become citizens. I grew up with that film. That archive, I feel, lives inside of me.”

Seid would also have other experiences as time went by. “When I was growing up in the 1980s and 90s, at that time my grandfather had turned to importing films. I would go with my mom to the airport, and we would get the big films, which were very heavy in the big canisters. They were imported from Hong Kong, and they were mostly martial arts films but also melodramas. My grandfather would screen these films for the Chinese-American community in Southern California. As a film scholar, I look back at that. It really taught me how important film is to communities, how it builds communities. People would come, mainly Chinese-Americans, from



Dr. Danielle Seid.

Photo by Omairys Rodríguez

all over the region to see these films but also to be together. I would spend most of my weekends in the projector’s booth watching these films.”

One wonders whether Chinese-Americans really understand the history of Chinese immigration to the U.S. “In many cases, younger people don’t know about that history. My grandparents immigrated during the time of Chinese exclusion, which began in the 1880s and was extended well into the twentieth century. There were small numbers of a certain class of immigrants who were allowed. My grandparents were filmmakers, so they were very much interested in the Chinese experience. Chinatowns were relatively safe places for Chinese-Americans to live. It was also in response to the pressure that they were kept in one space and confined in one space. That began to shift somewhat in the 1950s and 60s, and the documentary that my grandparents made was from that time period.”

Seid has also studied the cultural aspects of Chinese chefs in this country. “In the last few years,

Asian-American male chefs have styled themselves as Asian-American hipsters. My interest in Asian-American women performers led me to the corners of the internet, like YouTube and food blogs, where I found these Asian-American anti-hipsters. They are older Asian-American women, who are creating their own cooking shows. They have been kept out of the formal media TV industry. They produce their own content, and they create their own fan bases. They are actually reaching millions of viewers, but they’ve done it in kind of a subversive way.”

On the topic of food and cooking, to what extent have non-Chinese preferences influenced the way Chinese food is prepared in the U.S.? “In the early twentieth century in New York, you could come from uptown and take a tour bus through Chinatown. Chinese food developed to American taste. Chinese-American food is not the same thing as Chinese food. In the early twentieth century, the most famous dish was chop-suey. Chop-suey is not a Chinese dish;

it was something that was invented in the United States largely to appease the non-Chinese tourists to Chinatown,” says she.

In 2014, Seid published a work of fiction entitled “Suay.” Why would someone who publishes mostly non-fiction venture into fiction? “I actually started as a fiction writer. I considered doing an MFA, but I found that actually I was interested in studying culture, and English allows you to write in different ways. In academic writing, we have disciplinary boundaries. I have been experimenting in my scholarship with some elements of fiction and creative non-fiction, elements of memoir. I’ve incorporated thinking about cultural-memory, personal and family memory, into a piece that I’m working on.”

As a student of sexuality in society, Seid has been watching societal acceptance of rapid changes in that area, particularly when it comes to trans people. “We have gotten to a point where there has been more media attention, more visibility. That can be a little frustrating for trans people, who realize that of course trans people were around before ten years ago, and now we have so much more visibility around the issues. But we still have a very long way to go. With that visibility, one thing that concerns me is we might sort of rest with ‘Okay, we have this visibility, and we have attention on the surface of the issues,’ when underneath there are some serious issues that trans people face simply living and maintaining themselves.”

One also observes generational shifts regarding views on sexuality. “I see that in my classes. So that’s very encouraging. The younger generation definitely has taken up the language, the vocabulary, and the concepts. But as a scholar and teacher who works in queer and trans studies, I want my students also to have a foundation in history, an understanding of the historical struggles of trans people. We have progressed and now have advanced ideas about trans people, but it’s important that we actually understand where we’ve been and how we got here and the challenges we still face moving forward.”

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College of the City University of New York. The radio show on which these articles are based can be watched at: <https://vimeo.com/267617691> He can be contacted via Aldemaro.Romero@baruch.cuny.edu