Nick Mulé: How would you identify? Say, activist, academic? I know in your case you’re a physician, you also do research, you write, you do community development. I’m kind of defining you for you. I don’t mean to do that, but [laughter] so, as you choose, who you are.

Alan Li: I’m Alan Li; I’m a gay Asian man who works as a physician, who has been involved in community organizing, community-based research, activism, some artistic creative work. And I’m part of the queer community, the Asian-Canadian community, the HIV community, the healthcare community in many different ways. And I think those all kind of link and intersect with what I’m going to share today.

NM: Okay, thank you. So, with some of these questions, we do use the term ‘queer liberation’ right in the question. I hope that’s going to be okay. But the first question is, can you tell us a bit about your work and how it addresses queer liberation?

AL: Okay, so I guess there’s different parts of my work. There’s my paid work, there’s my volunteer work. I guess I used to think that my volunteer work has more to do with queer liberation, but it really started with the journey of personal liberation, I would say. Because as a queer Asian man, I struggled a lot with my own sexual identity and sexual orientation. I was aware of it before I immigrated to Canada from Hong Kong. And that was when I was a very young teenager, and it was very challenging. I felt that there was no future, no hope, you know, that I should change my sex to become a woman in order to love a man, so those are the kind of environment and culture and context that I grew up with.

And I spent five years in Winnipeg before I came to Toronto, and I was in a relationship with a heterosexually-identified male, so I guess that kind of affected some of my thinking, and I didn’t have any support. There were about three or four queer Asian men in all of Winnipeg, and there was some gay liberation movement, actually, but I was mostly a student trying to adapt, fit in, get by. And it wasn’t [pause]. And partly I think I moved to Canada to explore and find out more about my identity in many different ways, especially my sexual identity. So that was a very important time, and I think having been situated in Winnipeg, in the relatively less developed Asian–less kind of well-developed, organized overall–gay movement in the ‘70s, I really felt that I didn’t understand anything about gay liberation or queer liberation or any kind of liberation. I just felt very opressed and trapped and helpless.

So the thing that really, I think, affected me was when I went to bookstores and began to see books with covers that had two men on them; I began to find that there was gay literature, gay love stories that I discovered eventually. And *InTouch* magazine, at that point. And then I began to realize that there is a bigger connection somewhere, and then I began to challenge some of my preconceived ideas about what being gay or loving another man means if I’m male. And it also connected me to, I think– And then, I think I tried to place a mail order through Glad Day bookstore, actually, and then I came to visit Toronto and went to Glad Day. And I saw a notice of a benefit that the Gay Asians Toronto was putting on, right after the bath raid in 1981, at the 519, to fundraise for the Right to Privacy Committee.

So I went to that event, and that was like a life-changing experience for me. And that was the first time I–it’s not the first time I met other gay Asians, I met other gay Asians since I was 11 on the streets of Hong Kong and, you know, other places, but that was the first time I saw a gay Asian in the community that actually, not just having sex, but actually doing something to support the community or resisting against oppression in some constructive way.

And that was very moving for me, and having been in a city that was not very gay-supportive, and having been in an environment that was very secluded, you know, that just sparked something in me that was both inspiring and scary and exciting and whatever, right? So, and at that time I got into med school in Toronto and so I moved to Toronto that summer and began to get involved with Gay Asians Toronto, which was just formed about six months before that. And then I kind of learned about gay liberation, about community, about community organizing. And I felt passion for it because the way it helped me change the way I perceive myself, and my possibilities, and my identity.

Because I remember how bad I felt, and how isolated I felt, and how getting to know other friends and getting involved in the group–it was quite small at the time, basically, I think, eight to twelve people, probably–and most of the groups were coming out, reflective, discussion group, support group kind of activities. But it was tremendously helpful for me and so I see what it can do to help me so I thought it’s something worthwhile to support and get involved in and do more, right? So that’s my, kind of, how I got connected to the queer community or the queer liberation movement.

[8:00]