

Reclaiming Our Traditions, Rituals, and Spaces: Spirituality and the Queer Asian Pacific American Experience

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Over the last decade, Queer Asian Pacific Americans (QAPAs) have come out of the closet in large numbers to write about experiences that were previously hidden from our families and communities.¹ We have written from our perspective on a number of topics, including activism, history, cultural studies, and the law.² These developments are significant because, until recently, our voices have been “met with silence or token inclusion at best.”³

There is also a growing body of literature about QAPAs and our spiritual and religious experiences.⁴ Building upon that literature, this essay will provide an overview of QAPA spiritual practices. In particular, it will describe how QAPAs have developed our own unique spirituality in the following three ways: 1) by reclaiming our spiritual traditions; 2) by reclaiming our rites and rituals; and 3) by reclaiming our sacred spaces.

This essay begins by describing the term “QAPA” and the complex issues that are associated with that term. The essay then describes some of the common experiences that are shared by QAPAs. Next, it turns to the three ways in which QAPAs have developed our own unique spirituality in response to those shared experiences. Finally, the essay concludes with some thoughts about the future direction of QAPA spirituality.

COMPLEX DEFINITIONS

“QAPA” is not an easy term to define. Both of its component parts—“Queer” and “Asian Pacific American”—are umbrella terms that describe a wide variety of individuals who are marginalized within the dominant United States culture. “Queer,” on the one hand, refers to those individuals who identify as being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, intersexed, questioning, or allied with such individuals. “Asian Pacific American,” on the other hand, refers to those individuals who are of Asian (whether East Asian, South Asian, or Southeast Asian) or Pacific Islander descent, and who currently live in diaspora in North America. In other words, QAPAs are individuals who exist at the intersections of both of these broad categories.

Is it possible to say anything meaningful about the QAPA experience, particularly in light of the large number of sexualities, gender identities, races, ethnicities, and cultures that are encompassed by the term “QAPA”? Upon first glance, there may not seem to be very much in common between, say, a South Asian lesbian from the suburbs of Dallas and a Japanese American transgender man from New York City. However, I believe there are certain experiences that are shared by QAPAs, and I will describe some of those experiences in the next section.

“Spirituality” is also a difficult term to define. Like “QAPA,” this term can signify many different things for many different people. For some, “spirituality” is used in contradistinction to “religion.” That is, spirituality is seen as something more open-ended and inclusive, whereas religion is more closed and exclusive. For others, “spirituality” is used in contradistinction to “theology.” That is, spirituality relates to praxis (or doing), whereas theology relates to theory (or thinking).

This essay will use the term “spirituality” in a much broader sense. Here, “spirituality” is used to describe any practice—whether public or private, formal or informal, praxis-oriented or theoretical—that brings an individual closer to ultimate reality, regardless of the monotheistic, dualistic, polytheistic, or non-theistic nature of that reality. In other words, spirituality can include liturgies, sacraments, prayers, reading scripture, meditation, dance, or even sex. Like the term “QAPA,” the term “spirituality” is fluid and broadly inclusive.

SOME COMMON EXPERIENCES

What are some common experiences that are shared by QAPAs? As noted above, the term “QAPA” refers to a wide range of sexualities, gender identities, and ethnicities, and it would seem that few generalities could be made about QAPAs. Nevertheless, there are at least two major themes experienced by many QAPAs: metaphorical homelessness and alienation from the body.

First, many QAPAs experience a sense of profound metaphorical homelessness. In other words, we never belong fully to any particular community. Unlike most “straight” Asian Pacific Americans, we are often excluded from our families of origin because of our marginalized sexualities and gender identities. Also, unlike most “white” LGBT people, we are often excluded from the mainstream lesbian and gay community because of our different races, ethnicities, and cultures. This experience of exclusion is further compounded for those of us who come from organized faith traditions, because we are often excluded from those communities as well. To be QAPA is to experience exclusion from multiple communities.⁵

Second, many QAPAs are deeply alienated from our bodies. We are profoundly aware of how our bodies differ from those individuals who belong to

mainstream North American culture. We are rarely seen for who we truly are. Sometimes we are fetishized for our “exotic” and “foreign” looks, and other times we are ignored because we do not meet “white” standards of beauty. Sometimes we are even categorized by other QAPAs. For example, there are labels for QAPAs who only date other people of Asian descent (“sticky rice”), as well as for others who only date non-Asians (“potato queens”). As such, many QAPAs experience alienation from our bodies from an early age. We learn to dislike our bodies because of the differences that they signify.

WHAT IS QAPA SPIRITUALITY?

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In light of the above, it is not surprising that a central task of QAPA spirituality is to heal ourselves of the metaphorical homelessness and bodily alienation that we experience. Unfortunately, many traditional Christian spiritual practices—for example, worship services, sacraments, prayer, reading scripture—are often not the most effective ways for allowing this healing to occur. Most of these practices do not address the issues of race and sexuality that are central to our identities. In fact, some of these spiritual practices might actually alienate us even further from our communities and our bodies (for example, Christian dualism in separating spirit from flesh; the queer “texts of terror” in the Bible). Not surprisingly, many QAPAs have sought to redefine spirituality on our own terms in order to facilitate this healing.

RECLAIMING OUR SPIRITUAL TRADITIONS

First, QAPAs have sought to redefine spirituality by reclaiming the Asian spiritual traditions of our ancestors. Many QAPAs grow up equating spirituality with Christianity because that is the dominant faith tradition in the United States. In other words, spirituality is situated squarely in a Western context: belief in the Triune God, viewing the Bible as divinely inspired, understanding sin in the context of the fall, incarnation, atonement, last judgment, and so on.

Although the Christian belief system can be healing for many people, many QAPAs find that this tradition does not adequately reflect our own rich histories and ancestral heritages. In my case, for example, Christianity goes back only one generation. My parents are Christian, but my grandparents were not. The religious heritage of my ancestors was a mixture of traditional Chinese religions (for example, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism). In recent years, I have been incorporating some of these traditions in my own spiritual practice. For example, I have found comfort in Buddhist meditation practices, as well as reflecting upon scriptural texts such as the *Dao De Jing*.

Other QAPAs have their own unique ways of reclaiming their ancestral spiritual traditions. For example, some of my friends who are QAPAs draw upon Hindu spiritual practices by practicing and teaching yoga to others.

Another friend draws upon Buddhist spiritual practices by leading an ecumenical *sangha* that is open to people of all spiritual backgrounds. Still another engages in chanting from the Nichiren Buddhist tradition. Yet another friend draws upon the Shinto tradition by performing sacred drum rituals with other Asian Americans.

What all of these QAPAs have in common is a deep commitment to reclaiming the spiritual traditions of their ancestors. By doing so, we become less alienated from the culture in which we are situated. We recognize that we are heirs to spiritual traditions that go back thousands of years. As someone who is rooted primarily in the Christian tradition, I see this commitment as a true recognition of the diversity of the Body of Christ. Although these spiritual practices may represent “varieties of activities,” it is in fact the “same God who activates all of them in everyone.”⁶

RECLAIMING OUR RITES AND RITUALS

Second, QAPAs have sought to redefine spirituality by reclaiming certain rites and rituals that expressly affirm our bodies and sexualities. For many QAPAs, traditional Christian rites and rituals (such as Holy Communion, reciting the Daily Office) neither speak to our social location nor serve to heal the alienation that we experience with respect to our bodies and sexualities. As a result, those individuals have created rites and rituals that celebrate more concretely the embodiment of the divine in their lives and in the lives of others. For example, one of my QAPA friends is a sacred intimate, and his vocational calling is the use of tantric rites to heal others who may also experience alienation from their bodies and sexualities. Another friend is a masseur, and his spiritual practice involves working on the bodies of others who long for touch and human contact. Still other friend uses a combination of bodywork, herbal medicines, and energy work to heal others spiritually.

It is important to note that not all QAPAs reject traditional Christian rites and rituals. For example, a number of my QAPA friends are ordained Christian priests and ministers, and their spirituality is rooted deeply in the celebration of the Eucharist. However, what they do share in common is a profound awareness of the connection between the Eucharist and their own bodies and sexualities. For them, the Eucharist signifies that “the Word became flesh and lived among us”⁷ through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. That is, the Eucharist is a celebration of the goodness of the human body and God’s creation—a central belief that the Church has struggled with since the gnostic heresies of the first century CE. As someone who was raised in the Roman Catholic sacramental tradition, I have also found great healing in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

Nevertheless, what many of us have in common is a commitment to reclaiming the traditional rites and rituals of Christianity in light of our experi-

ences as QAPAs. Whether through bodywork on a massage table or Holy Communion on an altar, we are living out the words of institution that were spoken by Jesus Christ at the Last Supper: “This is my body, which is given for you.”⁸ Like Christ, we experience the brokenness and rejection of our own bodies, but we are able to transform this brokenness into wholeness by giving up our own bodies for the healing of others.

RECLAIMING OUR SACRED SPACES

Third, QAPAs have sought to redefine spirituality by reclaiming the idea of “sacred space” to include any place where we experience Ultimate Reality with others in community. Many of us grow up thinking that sacred spaces are limited to churches, chapels, shrines, and other traditional places of worship. However, because many QAPAs have experienced rejection or alienation from organized religions, they have created their own sacred spaces.

For example, in the spring of 2005, GAPIMNY (Gay Asian and Pacific Islander Men of New York) sponsored a ground-breaking workshop on embodied spirituality at the LGBT community center in New York City. Around thirty gay Asian men spent almost two hours in communion with each other—talking about issues involving spirituality and sexuality, and engaging in simple exercises (such as breathing, eye contact, movement) in order to affirm our bodies and the bodies of our gay Asian brothers. For those of us who were present, there was no question that a simple meeting room was transformed into sacred space.

The internet is another example of how QAPAs have reclaimed sacred space. The Queer Asian Spirit website⁹ and Queer Asian Fellowship (QAF) email listserv¹⁰ are two internet resources that allow QAPAs who are interested in spiritual issues to connect with each other, despite being located in different parts of the world. In fact, some of the individuals who use these resources live in places where the simple act of being “out” can result in physical harm. Although these resources exist only in cyberspace, they are sacred spaces nonetheless to the extent that individuals can gather and experience Ultimate Reality together in community.

There are few limits, if any, on where sacred space can occur. For example, sacred spaces might include a planning meeting of QAPAs of faith to march in a Lunar New Year parade in support of LGBT rights, or a circuit party in which QAPA men dance ecstatically with each other, or a retreat center where QAPA men gather to engage in body-affirming rituals in order to heal their body-negative thoughts and feelings, or an academic conference at which QAPA women engage in theological dialogue with each other. Sacred space is wherever QAPAs gather and encounter Ultimate Reality together in community. Indeed, “where two or three are gathered,” Christ is there.¹¹

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This essay has described three ways in which QAPAs have redefined our spirituality: 1) by reclaiming the Asian spiritual traditions of our ancestors; 2) by reclaiming rites and rituals that expressly affirm our bodies and sexualities; and 3) by reclaiming the idea of sacred space to include any place where we experience Ultimate Reality with others in community. These acts of redefinition are important because traditional Christian spiritual practices often cannot heal the profound sense of metaphorical homelessness and bodily alienation that is experienced by many QAPAs.

Much remains to be done. This essay has touched upon only a small part of the many exciting and creative ways in which spirituality is manifested in the lives of QAPAs today. A whole new generation of QAPAs is wrestling with issues of marginalization with respect to race, sexuality, and spirituality, but within its own social context.¹² It is my hope that future writings on the topic of QAPA spirituality will not only describe the unique spiritual practices of these individuals, but also inspire all people of faith in our quest for integration and wholeness.

NOTES

1. See Sharon Lim-Hing, ed., *The Very Inside: An Anthology of Writing by Asian and Pacific Islander Lesbian and Bisexual Women* (Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1994); Russell Leong, ed., *Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay & Lesbian Experience* (New York: Routledge, 1996); David L. Eng and Alice Y. Hom, eds., *Q&A: Queer in Asian America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998); Song Cho, ed., *Rice: Explorations Into Gay Asian Culture + Politics* (Toronto: Queer Press, 1998); Quang Bao and Hanya Yanagihara, *Take Out: Queer Writing from Asian Pacific America* (New York: Asian American Writers' Workshop, 2000).
2. See Kevin K. Kumashiro, ed., *Restoried Selves: Autobiographies of Queer Asian/Pacific American Activists* (Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press, 2004) (activism); Eric C. Wat, *The Making of a Gay Asian Community: An Oral History of Pre-AIDS Los Angeles* (Lanham, MD: Roman & Littlefield, 2002) (history); David L. Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001) (cultural studies); Kenji Yoshino, *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights* (New York: Random House, 2006) (law).
3. Russell Leong, "Introduction: Home Bodies and the Body Politic," ed. Russell Leong, *Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay & Lesbian Experience* (New York: Routledge, 1996).
4. See You-Leng Leroy Lim, "Webs of Betrayal, Webs of Blessings," in Eng and Hom, eds., *Q&A*, 323–34; Patrick S. Cheng, "God Loves Sex Too (Getting Down With the Spirit)," *DRAGÜN* 18 (Spring 2000); Patrick S. Cheng, "Multiplicity and Judges 19: Constructing a Queer Asian Pacific American Hermeneutic," *90/91 Semeia* 119–33 (2002); Leng Leroy Lim, "The Bible Tells Me to Hate Myself: The Crisis in Asian American Spiritual Leadership," *Semeia* 90/91 (2002): 315–22; Patrick S. Cheng, "Roundtable Discussion: Same-Sex Marriage," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2 (Fall 2004): 103–07; Jeanette Mei Gim Lee, "Queerly a Good Friday," in Kumashiro, ed., *Restoried Selves*, at 81–86.

5. See Cheng, “Multiplicity and Judges 19,” at 125–27.
6. 1 Cor. 12:6.
7. John 1:14.
8. Luke 22:19.
9. See <http://www.queerasianspirit.org>.
10. See <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/QueerAsianFellowship>.
11. Matt. 18:20.
12. See Michael Kim, “Out and About: Coming of Age in a Straight White World,” ed. Arar Han and John Hsu, *Asian American X: An Intersection of 21st Century Asian American Voices* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 139–48; Kevin K. Kumashiro, ed., *Troubling Intersections of Race and Sexuality: Queer Students of Color and Anti-Oppressive Education* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001).

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