

GAY ASIAN MASCULINITIES AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIES

Patrick S. Cheng

The gay Asian American male body is a highly contested site with respect to masculinity. On the one hand, we gay Asian men¹ are often seen by the white gay community as sexually undesirable because our “oriental” racialized bodies are perceived to be less masculine. On the other hand, we are often seen by the straight Asian American community as sexually dangerous because of our perceived deviance from the heterosexual norms of masculinity.

The experience of living at the intersections of racism and homophobia is a common theme in the narratives of gay Asian men. Many gay Asian men experience a profound sense of metaphorical homelessness. To paraphrase Jesus’ saying about the Son of Man, we have nowhere to rest our embattled bodies.² We neither belong fully to the gay community that is overwhelmingly white nor do we belong fully to the overwhelmingly straight Asian American community.

This essay will explore how the embattled gay Asian male body, like the bruised and battered corpus of Jesus Christ on the cross, might serve an atoning purpose by decolonizing the racism and homophobia of contemporary Christian theologies. That is, gay Asian men—by the very fact of our hybrid and intersectional existence—are called to challenge both the whiteness of queer theology and the heterosexuality of Asian American theology.

Gay Asian Narratives

Although Asian male bodies have existed in North America since at least the 1700s, the voices of gay Asian men did not emerge until the rise of the gay rights movement in the United States in the 1960s. One of the earliest of such voices is that of Kiyoshi Kuromiya. He was a gay activist of Asian descent who wrote about his hybridized experiences of both racism and homophobia. Kuromiya, a third-generation Japanese American, was born in an internment camp during the Second World War and raised in a conservative Christian household. In 1965, he participated in one of the first-ever gay rights demonstrations, which actually occurred in Philadelphia several years before the Stonewall Riots in New York City. As someone who lived on the intersections of racism and homophobia, Kuromiya criticized both the exclusion of people of color by the predominantly white and middle-class homophile movement as well as the homophobic slurs of activists of color such as the Black Panthers.³

In the mid-1990s, the voices of gay Asian men emerged with full force. During this time, a number of groundbreaking anthologies of the LGBTQ Asian experience were published, including *Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay and Lesbian Experience* (1996), *Q&A: Queer in Asian America* (1998), and *Rice: Explorations in Asian Gay Culture and Politics* (1998).⁴ It also saw the rapid growth of many gay Asian organizations across the United States, including Gay Asian and Pacific Islander Men of New York (GAPIMNY) in New York City. The publication of several other anthologies of gay Asian voices followed, including *Take Out: Queer Writing from Asian Pacific America* (2000) and *Embodying Asian/American Sexualities* (2009).⁵

The narratives of gay Asian men in these anthologies include essays, short stories, poetry, art, and photography. One theme consistently appears throughout the various narratives: the experience of double marginalization in the form of racism from the white gay community and homophobia from the straight Asian American community. As the gay Asian writer Eric Wat puts it, those of us who are gay Asian men are caricatured as either submissive houseboys or corrupt perverts. In other words, we are “run over at the intersection of racism and homophobia” and “left in the middle of the road, unacceptable to those at either side of the street.”⁶

Racism and the Gay Community

In a provocative essay from 1991, “Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn,” the gay Asian filmmaker Richard Fung writes about how Asian men are viewed as “undersexed” by the white gay community. In contrast to the Black man—who, according to the post-colonial theorist Frantz Fanon, “is turned into a penis”⁷—Asian men are defined by a “striking absence” of the penis. As such, Asian men in gay video porn are “caricature[s] of passivity.” According to Fung, we are always the bottom; “Asian and anus are conflated.”⁸

Twenty years after the publication of “Looking for My Penis,” gay Asian men are still viewed as sexually undesirable by the white gay community. In a series of recent articles about racism in the world of cybersex, Joseph Erbenraut writes about how anti-Asian prejudice is alive and well in the predominantly white gay community. For example, gay Asian men routinely see “No Asians” on gay online dating and hookup sites. Certain gay bars and dance clubs are mentioned derogatively on websites and listservs as having been “invaded” by Asians. And gay Asian men are still characterized as having small penises. We are viewed as more “feminine, scholarly and submissive” and as “universal bottoms.”⁹

The experience of alienation—or, at the other extreme, fetishization by “rice queens”¹⁰—has taken its toll on gay Asian men in terms of self-esteem. As Kent Chuang put it, his ego was shattered when he encountered a number of “fuck off, Asian” looks during his first foray into a gay bathhouse, and it took him a while before he “mustered up enough courage to look people in the eye again.”¹¹ Tony Ayres, a Chinese Australian man, characterized his experiences as a “wearing, subtle, almost imperceptible feeling of exclusion” and undesirability that is shared by other gay Asian men in the West.¹²

Homophobia and the Asian American Community

The straight Asian American community sees the gay Asian body as sexually dangerous, due in large part to the view that this body perverts the heterosexual norm of masculinity. Many Asian Americans view homosexuality as a “white disease.” For them, there is no such thing as a gay Asian person; the very idea of being “gay” and “Asian” is an oxymoron.¹³ This view is pervasive in Asian American communities that are strongly influenced by Confucian traditions about masculinity, which

reinforce patriarchal family structures and social hierarchies. Although Confucian writings do not discuss sexual orientation or homosexuality directly, men in such traditions are expected to fulfill traditional gender roles, including having male children in order to pass on the family name. Indeed, some Asian American communities are “even more Confucian in their cultural beliefs than their counterparts” in Asia.¹⁴

This homophobia is magnified by the influence of evangelical Christians in Asian American communities. For example, Chinese American evangelical churches played a significant role in stirring up support in the Chinese American community for Proposition 8, the California ballot initiative from 2008 that prospectively eliminated the right of same-sex couples to marry in California. Hak-Shim William Tam, an evangelical Christian and official proponent of Proposition 8, wrote a Chinese-language online essay that alleged a connection between gay people and child molestation, an allegation that has repeatedly been proven untrue in study after study on the subject. Tam also circulated a letter to the Chinese American community alleging that the “gay agenda” would lead to legalized prostitution and pedophilia, a claim unsupported by the worldwide jurisdictions that legalize same-sex marriage.¹⁵

In a moving essay, Michael Kim—a Korean American young gay man writing under a pseudonym—describes how his family and ethnic community, despite his considerable academic accomplishments as a graduate of Harvard College, would find him completely worthless if they discovered that he was gay. According to Kim, “if in the end, I am still gay, I end up with a big fat zero.”¹⁶ He would also bring shame to his family, a cultural attitude that is reinforced by assumptions about masculinity for those, like Kim, who are the oldest (or only) son in immigrant families.

Decolonizing Both Queer and Asian American Christian Theologies

Not surprisingly, the embattled state of gay Asian male bodies is also reflected in the Christian theological realm. As a gay Asian male theologian, I have been troubled by the profound silence of white gay theologians about the issues of racism and xenophobia that gay Asian men face on a daily basis. For example, I have found no discussion about Asian or Asian American issues in a recent landmark 350-page anthology on queer theology. Indeed, the title *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body* seems to suggest that queer theology is simply a “Western”

phenomenon and has nothing to say about Asian bodies or to Asian gay men in the diaspora.¹⁷

Similarly, straight Asian American theologians rarely talk about sexuality in relation to theology, let alone the suffering and marginalization experienced by their gay Asian brothers. For example, a recent introductory guide to Asian American theologies covers a wide range of theologians and topics, from reading the Bible to race relations and evangelical theologies.¹⁸ However, the book is largely silent on the issues of sexuality, heterosexism, and homophobia that significantly impact the Asian American gay community. This silence is particularly troubling because many Asian American theologians employ post-colonial discourse in their own work, yet are unable to see the marginalization of LGBTQ people in their own midst. Ironically, to use the discourse of post-colonial theory, each theological movement is the colonizer—and also the colonized—with respect to the other.

The post-colonial concept of hybridity is a useful tool for gay Asian men to decolonize gay theologies with respect to Asian American issues on the one hand and to decolonize Asian American theologies with respect to gay issues on the other hand. Hybridity, which arises out of the encounter between the colonized and the colonizer, describes a “third space” of resistance in which a new reality is created and in which both parties are irrevocably transformed.

Post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha has likened hybridity to an encounter within the liminal and interstitial space of a stairwell that is located in between two floors, “prevent[ing] identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities.”¹⁹ Hybridity empowers the subaltern but also challenges the power of the colonizer. This echoes the persistent theme in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures that speaks of valleys being raised up and mountains made low. The humble are lifted up while rulers are brought down, and the foolish and the weak shame the wise and the strong.²⁰

Hybridity and Gay Asian Theologies

The emergence of gay Asian theological writings in recent years by individuals such as Eric Law, Leng Lim, and me can be understood as the creation of a hybrid “third space” that challenges the assumptions of both queer and Asian American theologies. Eric Law is a gay Asian Epis-

copal priest who has written extensively about diversity issues in church congregations, including the intersection of race and sexuality. Leng Lim, also a gay Asian Episcopal priest, has written about the homophobia of Asian and Asian American church communities around the world. As a gay Asian Metropolitan Community Church minister and a professor at the Episcopal Divinity School, I have written about the intersection of race, sexuality, and spirituality as well as the pervasive racism in the gay communities of faith and homophobia in Asian American communities of faith.²¹

Our writings are part of a larger movement of queer theologians of color (such as Irene Monroe²²), our white queer allies (such as Gary Comstock²³) and our straight Asian American allies (such as Kwok Pui-lan²⁴). This movement can be characterized as pursuing a trenchant critique of the troubling absence of dialogue between racial and sexual theologies. Though this particular essay has focused on gay Asian male bodies and masculinities, there is a broader movement of LGBTQ Asians and their experiences of religion and spirituality. It includes organizations such as the Network on Religion and Justice for API LGBT People (NRJ), the API Roundtable at the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry at the Pacific School of Religion, the Emerging Queer Asian Religion Scholars (EQARS) group, and Queer Asian Spirit.²⁵

Where is the good news in all this? For me, the good news is that, in post-colonial terms, Jesus Christ can be understood as the ultimate hybrid being. As the Word “made flesh,”²⁶ Jesus Christ is a hybrid being who is both divine and human. He has “nowhere to lay his head” because he is in both worlds, and yet he belongs to neither world alone. As understood by the Christian theological tradition in the Athanasian and Chalcedonian creeds, the dual nature of Jesus Christ is what bridges the chasm between the divine and the human. In other words, God irrevocably transforms both the divine and the human through Jesus Christ by bringing down divinity in the incarnation and crucifixion and by lifting up humanity in the resurrection.

Contemporary queer and Asian American theologies *do* recognize the hybrid nature of Jesus Christ, but this recognition is limited to their own particular contexts. For example, in *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up*, queer theologian Robert Goss writes about the Bi/Christ who occupies the bisexual third space between heterosexuality and homosexuality,

and the Trans/Christ who occupies the transgender third space between male and female.²⁷ In other words, the queer Christ is a hybrid being because s/he bridges (or deconstructs) the chasm between traditional sexual and gender binaries of gay vs. straight, female vs. male.

Similarly, the late Asian American theologian Jung Young Lee argues in his book *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology* that Jesus Christ holds the third space between divine and human existence as a result of the incarnation.²⁸ This parallels the experiences of Asian Americans, who, as hyphenated persons, occupy the third space between Asian and American cultures. The Asian American Christ as a hybrid being bridges/deconstructs the chasm between traditional racial and ethnic binaries of east vs. west, oriental vs. occidental.

Unfortunately, the foregoing discussions of hybridity in contemporary queer and Asian American theologies do not go far enough in terms of cross-fertilization across the divides. Goss' queer Christ is limited to categories of sexuality and gender, while Lee's Asian American Christ is limited to race and ethnicity. The gay Asian male body, however, challenges both sets of limitations because it is a hybrid of both sexual *and* racial identities. The gay Asian male body is metaphorically stretched and deformed because it refuses to conform to the traditional categories of hybridity in queer and Asian American theologies. The gay Asian male body is caught "in between" the broader categories of sexuality and race, which are seen by most people as being mutually exclusive. We gay Asian men experience racism in the gay world and homophobia in the Asian American world. The gay Asian male body is never fully at home. Our bodies and masculinities, like that of Jesus Christ on the cross, are constantly battered and bruised in our search for a place of belonging.

Yet, the bodies of gay Asian men have an atoning significance because we challenge and deconstruct, by the mere fact of our existence, the unspoken assumptions in the larger society. Despite the fact that our bodies and masculinities are metaphorically crucified as a result of the deforming, battering, and bruising by and through narrow categories of sexuality and race, our gift to the world is that we can decolonize both queer theologies *and* Asian American theologies from within.

Like Jesus Christ, who embodies the binary categories of divinity/humanity, life/death, grace/sin, spirit/body, and infinity/finitude, we gay

Asian men embody the grace of hybridity and intersectionality in our daily lives. We are uniquely able to bridge the chasm between both the queer and Asian American communities. In the theological realm, the gift of hybridity allows us gay Asian men to decolonize both racist queer theologies and homophobic Asian American theologies. Akin to the bruised and battered corpus of Jesus Christ on the cross, the embattled bodies and masculine identities of gay Asian men can serve a redemptive purpose in terms of decolonizing the racism and homophobia within contemporary Christian theologies.

Notes

1. In this essay, I use the term “Asian” to refer to Asian Americans, Asian Canadians, and other people of Asian descent in the diaspora. While the focus is on the experiences of gay Asian men, it needs to be seen in the broader lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (“LGBTQ”) Asian community.
2. Matthew 8:20; Luke 9:58.
3. Liz Highleyman, 2009, “Kiyoshi Kuromiya: Integrating the Issues,” in Tommi Avicoll Mecca, ed., *Smash the Church, Smash the State!: The Early Years of Gay Liberation*, San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, pp. 17–21.
4. Russell Leong, ed., 1996, *Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay and Lesbian Experience*, New York: Routledge; David L. Eng, and Alice Y. Hom, eds., 1998, *Q&A: Queer in Asian America*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press; Song Cho, ed., 1998, *Rice: Explorations into Gay Asian Culture and Politics*, Toronto, Canada: Queer Press.
5. Quang Bao, and Hanya Yanagihara, eds., 2000, *Take Out: Queer Writing from Asian Pacific America*, New York: Asian American Writers’ Workshop; Gina Masequesmay, and Sean Metzger, 2009, *Embodying Asian/American Sexualities*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
6. Eric C. Wat, 1996, “Preserving the Paradox: Stories from a Gay-Loh,” in Leong, *Asian American Sexualities*, pp. 71–80.
7. Frantz Fanon, 1970, *Black Skin, White Masks*, London: Paladin, p. 120.
8. Richard Fung, 1998, “Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn,” in Eng and Hom, pp. 115–34.
9. Joseph Erbenraut, 2010, “The Last Bias: How and Why We Tolerate Anti-Asian Prejudice—And Its Pernicious Effect on Our Community,” *EDGE Boston*, August 22, 2010, available at <http://bit.ly/cLbWDo>, accessed on March 5, 2011.
10. In gay slang, a “rice queen” refers to a white gay man, usually older, who dates only Asian men. By contrast, a “potato queen” refers to an Asian gay man who dates only white men.
11. Kent Chuang, 1999, “Using Chopsticks to Eat Steak,” in Peter A. Jackson, and Gerard Sullivan, *Multicultural Queer: Australian Narratives*, Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press, pp. 29–41.
12. Tony Ayres, 1999, “China Doll—The Experience of Being a Gay Chinese Australian,” in *Multicultural Queer*, pp. 87–97.

13. Margaret Rhee, 2006, "Towards Community: KoreAm Journal and Korean American Cultural Attitudes on Same-Sex Marriage," *Amerasia Journal* 32(1), pp. 75–88.
14. Eunai Shrake, 2009, "Homosexuality and Korean Immigrant Protestant Churches," in *Embodying Asian/American Sexualities*, pp. 145–56.
15. Gerry Shih, 2010, "Chinese Christians Are the Focus of Same-Sex Marriage Case," *New York Times*, January 22, 2010, available at <http://nyti.ms/4MR0MO>, accessed on March 5, 2011.
16. Michael Kim, 2004, "Out and About: Coming of Age in a Straight White World," in Arar Han, and John Hsu, eds., *Asian American X: An Intersection of 21st Century Asian American Voices*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, pp. 139–48.
17. Gerard Loughlin, ed., 2007, *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, Malden, MA: Blackwell.
18. Jonathan Y. Tan, 2008, *Introducing Asian American Theologies*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
19. Homi K. Bhabha, 1994, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, p. 5. For a helpful discussion of hybridity, see Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, 2000, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, London: Routledge, pp. 118–21.
20. Isaiah 40:4; Luke 1:52; 1 Corinthians 1:27.
21. For a list of LGBTQ Asian theological writings, including those of Law, Lim, and myself, see Patrick S. Cheng, 2010, "Rethinking Sin and Grace for LGBT People Today," in Marvin M. Ellison, and Kelly Brown Douglas, eds., *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, 2nd ed., Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, pp. 105–18. See also Patrick S. Cheng, 2011, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology*, New York: Seabury Books; and *ibid.* 2006, "Galatians," in Deryn Guest et al., eds., *The Queer Bible Commentary*, London: SCM Press, pp. 624–29.
22. Irene Monroe, 2009, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place," in Miguel A. De La Torre, ed., *Out of the Shadows into the Light: Christianity and Homosexuality*, St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, pp. 39–58.
23. Gary David Comstock, ed., 2001, *A Whosoever Church: Welcoming Lesbians and Gay Men into African American Congregations*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
24. Kwok Pui-lan, 2007, "Asian and Asian American Churches," in Jeffrey S. Siker, ed., *Homosexuality and Religion: An Encyclopedia*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, pp. 59–62.
25. See <http://www.netrj.org> (NRJ); http://www.clgs.org/programs/api_roundtable (API Roundtable); <http://www.eqars.org> (EQARS); <http://www.queerasianspirit.org> (Queer Asian Spirit), accessed on March 5, 2011.
26. John 1:14.
27. Robert E. Goss, 2002, *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up*, Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, pp. 170–82.
28. Jung Young Lee, 1995, *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, pp. 77–99.