

IN GOD'S HOUSE: OF SILENCES AND BELONGING¹

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In 2004, San Francisco gained prominence—and infamy—for being the first city in the United States to legally recognize same-sex marriage. While the event predictably broadened public discourse on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights, it also exposed a complex layer of Asian American religious life that until then remained implicit.² By naming the ways silence and taboo (as itself a form of “silencing”) structure the documentary, *In God's House* (IGH), I explore the engagement of faith and ethnic identities among Asian Americans as theoretical frameworks to re-think *belonging*. More than just a posture of resistance, silence illuminates a sense of *communal-belonging* that challenges the paradigm of “marriage=one man+one woman.” Silence and taboo thus destabilize significations of gender, sexuality and faith that, in turn, broaden notions of identity, community and theological imagination.

¹ These reflections were written with the following communities in mind: members of the Network on Religion and Justice (NRJ) and Emerging Queer Asian Religion Scholars (EQARS).

² It is important to highlight that while the 2004 event served as a watershed moment not only for LGBT rights, but also for progressive, ethnic Christian denominations, it was certainly not the first time Asian American Christians addressed LGBT rights. Rev. Lloyd Wake—legendary retired pastor of Pine United Methodist Church in San Francisco—presided over a same-sex ceremony in the 1960s. See John V. Moore, “The Struggle for Gay and Lesbian Rights in the Methodist Church,” *Syndic: The Literary Journal*, no. 3 (June 2011), <http://syndicjournal.us/syndic-no-3/essay-lesbiangay-rights-by-john-v-moore/>.

Asian American feminist theologian, Kwok Pui-Lan offers an overview of “progressive” API faith spaces that more intentionally addresses same-sex issue today. See Pui-lan Kwok, “Gay Activism in Asian and Asian-American Churches,” *The Witness Magazine (A Globe of Witnesses)*, May 19, 2004, <http://www.thewitness.org/agw/kwok051904.html>.

Re-contouring “Asian America”

Produced in response to public protests of largely Chinese American churches to the 2004 same-sex marriage initiative, *In God’s House* resists staticized categories of “Asian America.”³ As a collection of “coming out” stories, the documentary gathers first-person narratives of leading queer voices in Asian American faith communities: Oneida Chi, a lesbian and Chinese American leader in an evangelical Christian church; Harold and Ellen Kameya, members of a Japanese American congregation and parents of a lesbian; and Nobuaki Hanaoka, an immigrant Japanese pastor,⁴ who “supports the full acceptance and affirmation of LGBT people in the church.”⁵ They trace journeys that problematize assumptions of what appropriately contours Asian America. Speaking from acknowledged positions of “minoritization,” they deconstruct and so “disidentify” the presumed stability of identity markers, even parameters of Asian American life itself.⁶

As a film about queer, ethnic subjects who assert belonging in traditionally conservative, white, Christian enclaves, IGH speaks to multiple sites of power—white America and presumably *straight*, Asian America. In this regard, IGH dismantles the ambivalent category of “minority” so central to contemporary identity politics. In its place, the film suggests a form of perennial reintegration that reconsiders boundaries and practices of belonging itself.

Territorial Limits: Re-naming (Asian) America

“Asian America” evokes contention both in the academy and among communities that have long

³ While the documentary highlights the specific narratives of Chinese- and Japanese-American individuals, the film’s demographic target includes the broader Asian and Pacific Island (Tongan, Samoan, Hawai’ian, etc.) communities. This intention is apparent in the number of languages to which the film was translated for distribution purposes.

⁴ The religious identities of the documentary subjects herald to a shift/move from conservative to progressive communities: Oneida was raised Catholic and active in an Evangelical Church. She now serves at a Pine UMC. The Kameyas are now active in a UCC congregation in Northridge; and Rev. Hanaoka serves as a UMC church.

⁵ Lina Hoshino, *In God’s House: Asian American Lesbian and Gay Families in the Church*, Documentary (PANA Institute, 2006), www.ingodshouse.com.

⁶ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Cultural Studies of the Americas v. 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 5.

struggled to locate and identify themselves in U.S. migration narratives. As an ethnic category, “Asian American” appeals more to control mechanisms deployed by mainstream American life to an incomprehensible people than a strategy of self-location for those who identify as such. Tat-siong Benny Liew asserts that the name “simultaneously facilitates and frustrates ‘visibility,’ ‘diversity,’ and ‘inclusivity’ through an insidious ideologic of minoritization.”⁷ Minoritization both ghetto-izes *and* incorporates non-normative bodies. Thus, the documentary’s deployment of *silence* and *taboo* serve as acts of resistance against limiting characterizations of queer, Asian and Christian bodies in the American imagination. While specifically addressing the controversial intersection of sexual identity and faith, the documentary proffers a broad reading of belonging that resists static assumptions of “authentic” Asian American bodies. The question of “Asian America” is therefore less as a claim about a minoritizing category as a reiterative definition of white America itself.

Struggle to Be: Asian Americans Talk Sex and Belonging

Asian Americans don’t talk about sex—or so it seems. When breached, sex-talk is veiled beneath sophisticated innuendoes, often garbled by taboo. This is the cultural premise that frames IGH. Produced in 2006 by the PANA Institute,⁸ the documentary challenged the “marriage=one man+one woman” slogan endorsed by Bay Area Asian Christian churches in defense of family values.⁹ While this family model hints at evangelical Christian roots, it hearkens also to assumptions

⁷ Tat-Siong Benny Liew, *What Is Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics?: Reading the New Testament* (Honolulu: UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 2008), 3.

⁸ PANA is the acronym for the Institute for the Leadership Development and Study of Pacific and Asian North American Religion, a privately-funded non-profit organization supported by the Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley, CA. The documentary was directed by Lina. Hoshino. Due to financial restructuring, the PANA Institute was closed in 2009.

⁹ While the documentary was produced as a form of outreach to a variety of Asian American *and* Pacific Island communities, this analysis will focus specifically on the ways the film expands Asian American notions of self, community and sexuality.

For a media perspective of the event, see Ulysses Torassa, “Thousands Protest Legalizing Same-Sex Marriage | Asian Americans, Christians Rally in Sunset District,” *San Francisco Chronicle* (San Francisco, CA, April 26, 2004), http://articles.sfgate.com/2004-04-26/bay-area/17421426_1_same-sex-marriage-issue-marriage-licenses-chinese-americans.

about ethnic identity that authenticate these churches as “Asian American.” In short, to be appropriately Asian, one had to be theologically *and* sexually conservative—stereotypical counterpoints to presumably progressive, white and sexually-active North American culture. Typically reticent in the public sphere, predominantly Chinese American congregations jettisoned civic silence to claim a moral voice.¹⁰ For these churches, the protests were as much a claim upon ethnic belonging as they were about religious and sexual morality.¹¹

It is without surprise that discussions of ethnic and religious identities generate particular vigor around sex-talk. Reflecting on the role of taboo in the constitution of Confucian identities, Boyung Lee asserts that sexuality “cannot be discussed in public except for discussions about procreation.”¹² For Lee, the procreative turn of sex-talk evokes a dichotomy between private and public identities that undergirds the social fabric. Sex taboo structures subjectivity; silence secures a specific mode of communal belonging.

While prohibitive in its silencing mechanism, sex taboo also offers space for Asian Americans to stabilize their unwieldy ethnicity.¹³ Upheld as model minorities in nearly all aspects of

¹⁰ For an interesting analysis on Chinese-American political participation—and their traditional reticence around civic engagement—see Gordon Chin, “Overview of Chinese American/Asian American Political Power in San Francisco”, October 14, 2008, chinatownurbaninstitute.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/week1.pdf. Gordon Chin is a leading figure in San Francisco Asian American civic engagement and has served as Executive Director of the Chinatown Community Development Center. In this article, Chin describes the various religious communities in San Francisco’s Chinatown area as right-leaning.

¹¹ It is important to assert that the immediate mobilization of these Asian American churches do not represent the general sentiment of most Asian American communities concerning same-sex marriage. Certainly, the popularity of IGH among more progressive Asian American circles—comprised mainly of mainstream Christian denominations—attests to the diversity of opinions on the issue. Again, review Kwok’s blog entry in Kwok, “Gay Activism in Asian and Asian-American Churches.”

¹² Boyung Lee, “Teaching Justice and Living Peace: Body, Sexuality, and Religious Education in Asian-American Communities,” *Religious Education* 101, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 402.

¹³ Gordon Chin, in his long work as an activist and organizer in San Francisco’s Chinese American community, discerns the value of maintaining the integrity of one’s “face” both within and outside the Chinese-American space: “Perhaps the idea of ‘face’ is more important in Chinatown organizing than in other neighborhoods because of cultural reasons (We are taught not to disrespect our elders etc.). However, I don’t think culture or Confucianism really has much to do with it. What’s more relevant in my view, is simply that Chinatown as a neighborhood remains more self-contained, more

life, Asian Americans wield taboo to protect themselves from the scrutiny of the dominant culture. Professional successes in the public sphere shields one from intrusive criticism. Rather than exclude, sex taboo allows Asian Americans to “pass” in white, North America.

I suggest that this conflation of public (ethnic/cultural) and private (sexual/moral) identities illuminates a malleable self able to challenge the appropriateness of certain identities. Freed from its moorings as a moral guardian, sex taboo exposes the instability of ethnic categories, especially when Asian American bodies participate in presumably non-Asian practices like same-sex marriage. In a sense, taboo “outs” the model minority façade as a *strategy* for resisting one’s mis/integration into white, North American life.

Struggle to Believe: The Silent Confessions of Asian Americans

For Asian American Christians, sex taboo is exacerbated by (western) Christianity’s paranoia towards sexuality overall. To channel Mark Jordan: “[m]uch of what Christians say about sex is *confession*...[taking the form of]...declarations of repentance or [accusations] of being impure, unchaste, weak, luxurious, lustful.”¹⁴ This negative sex-talk promotes a silencing discourse that frames the public face of Christian practice. Christian identity is fortified through what is not/said about sex. For Asian American Christians who tenuously straddle public/private lives, this silencing “Christian impulse” deepens the chasm between appropriate/inappropriate practices, belonging/alienation. What emerges is a double taboo that intensifies already ambivalent public lives as insufficient Asians and Americans. One’s support of same-sex marriage implies distantiation from

insular, more compact than any other San Francisco neighborhood.” See Gordon Chin, “Coalition Building and San Francisco Chinatown” (San Francisco, CA, September 2, 2008), chinatownurbaninstitute.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/week1.pdf.

¹⁴ Mark D. Jordan, *The Ethics of Sex*, New Dimensions to Religious Ethics (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 4.

one's ethnic and religious homes: one becomes *less* (evangelical) Christian, *less* Asian, *more* (progressive) Christian and *more* white.¹⁵

Emergent Interruptions: LGBT Selves Come Out and Come Home

To a significant extent, IGH strategizes taboo to *affirm* the practices of belonging specific to LGBT Asian American Christians. Indeed, what lends potency to the film is its ability to *talk sex* in ways that *fortify* the communal structure while allowing for non-normative subjects to thrive. In the documentary, each biographical vignette is structured as a coming out that itself speaks of a *coming home* to Christian, Asian American and sexual identities. Indeed, Oneida speaks of her impossible struggle to come out as both lesbian and Christian. Tenaciously claiming space in homophobic Asian American churches, she conversely affirms her Christian identity in LGBT communities that are themselves often suspicious of religion. For Oneida, coming out assumes not just the retrieval of a lost or buried self, but the re-emergence of an extant and communal self that renders her coming to be—her coming home—perennially interrupted.

Oneida's embrace of contradictory narratives embodies a self that Judith Butler describes as the "accumulation and convergence of [different] 'calls.'"¹⁶ To the degree that the self is named/brought to existence by the recognition of an/other, this self is constituted by interruptions of diverse relationships that secure subjectivity. In short, bodies are constituted through a process of

¹⁵ In the documentary, this tension between being queer and Asian is expressed humorously when Ellen Kameya, one of the main interviewees, reacted to her daughter's coming out in disbelief: "How can an you be gay? You're Asian!" See Hoshino, *In God's House: Asian American Lesbian and Gay Families in the Church*.

Theologian Patrick Cheng nuances this tension between Asian/Christian identity and queer identity by suggesting that "Although the Christian belief system can be healing for many people, many queer, Asian Pacific Americans (QAPAs) find that this tradition [Christianity] does not adequately reflect our own rich histories and ancestral heritages." In this regard, it is important to qualify *Christianity* as a complex, multi-ethnic category that both transcends and embraces specific identity markers. When Asian Americans claim "Christianity" as a form of ethnic label, it is done to affirm a specific ethnic value, e.g., sexual morality. See Patrick S. Cheng, "Reclaiming Our Traditions, Rituals, and Spaces: Spirituality and the Queer Asian Pacific American Experience," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 6, no. 2 (2006): 234-240.

¹⁶ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 122.

mis/recognition.¹⁷ Disobedience to the “call” of an/other constructs bodies to the same degree that obedience secures belonging. Oneida’s coming out as a Chinese-American *and* lesbian Christian heralds a self that wields contradictory conditions, values and worldviews in tension with the other. It is this capacity to subvert the presumed singularity of self-integration that renders her coming out to multiple homes, truly queer.

Indeed, IGH illuminates “disobedient” practices that invoke multiple negotiations between belonging and disavowal. Echoing Butler’s reading of Nella Larsen’s *Passing* and the construction of white vis-à-vis black bodies, LGBT Asian American selves interrupt and thus secure the existence of Asian American *Christian* bodies.¹⁸ The vehemence with which Asian American churches reject same-sex marriage speaks more about what is feared in the volatility of white America than what is postured to be authentically Asian.

From Necessary Taboo to Strategic Silence

One of the more poignant moments in the documentary features Ellen and Harold Kameya’s struggle to affirm their daughter’s coming out. To counter the silence of homophobia, they “queer” their daily hike around the canyons: at an isolated cliff-edge, both would yell, “Our daughter is a lesbian and we love her!” Their daily ritual is an ironic gesture to the extent that it is shrouded really in silence: they scream at a nameless multitude, asserting truth more to their internalized homophobia. The Kameyas deploy an indirect, (not-so) silent strategy so necessary in Asian

¹⁷ Indeed Butler claims that “it is this constitutive *failure* of the performative, this slippage between discursive command and its appropriated effect, which provides the linguistic occasion and index for a consequential disobedience.” Ibid. Emphasis added.

¹⁸ She observes: “[One] cannot be white without blacks and without the constant disavowal of [one’s] relation to them. It is only through that disavowal that [one’s] whiteness is constituted, and through the institutionalization of that disavowal that [one’s] whiteness is perpetually—but anxiously—reconstituted.” Ibid., 171.

American communities at a time of contentious debate about belonging and identity. Their silence arises as a form of *voice*, an articulation of integrity.¹⁹

More than a strategy of articulation, the Kameyas' practice illuminates a kind of community that affirms multi-generational relationships in the constitution of self. Indeed, the film highlights the ambivalent positionality of first-generation Japanese American Nobuaki Hanaoka who finds himself at the unexpected position of having to affirm a lesbian daughter who *still* struggles to come out in the face of her father's very public affirmation for LGBT rights. The irony of her struggle screams loudly of an ambivalent belonging: it is *not* enough that her father supports LGBT rights, it is *not* enough that she explicitly comes out—it is *imperative* that her coming out be undertaken in the embrace of community.

For Oneida, the Kameyas and Hanaoka, coming out engages a form of silence that facilitates a form of “coming home.” There is no “breaking of ties” to assert one's authenticity. Silence re-establishes belonging and identity in ways that strengthen community. But ultimately, this “strategic silence” interrupts too the discourse of the properly integrated Asian American body. It is an ambivalent coming out to the extent that taboos are still upheld—not so much out of fear as to expand the communal space.

Indeed, something transformative occurs when that held in silence—especially sex—pierces boundaries of privacy. Sex-talk—especially when conflated with religious language—unfolds to prophetic silence.²⁰ There is something telling about the public insistence of conservative Asian

¹⁹ Anne Joh alludes to a necessarily postcolonial dynamic at play among individuals and communities who live in between tongues, languages and cultures. She suggests further that this postcolonial impulse is grounded in the issue of “location” and the ambivalent deployment of silence. See Wonhee Anne Joh, *Heart of the Cross: A Postcolonial Christology*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 61–62.

I suggest that in their deployment of silence and taboo, Harold and Kameya allude to a kind of location that eludes stability. Straddling community and isolation, white and Asian, LGBT and straight worlds, they assert a form of visibility—and “articulated silence”—that trumps the imagined stability of seemingly singular identities.

²⁰ As Jordan asserts: “[R]eligious discourses have served at many times to revolutionize the possibilities for human living. Particular forms of religious community have served to protect the position of the marginal while religious institutions,

American churches to limit the scope of marriage and sexuality. By witnessing to that which is appropriate, they herald the *existence* of what is not: queer bodies who love and believe abundantly. Taboos blunt the prickly thrust of “ideological speech.” Rather than “[wasting] language to the point that an opponent despairs of speaking”²¹—taboo situates one at the cusp of speech: one shouts back. Perhaps this is the reason why for the Kameyas, “shouting” embodies not so much a rejection of silence as a resistance to despair. What emerges is a reconfiguration of communal selves, a reorientation of “home” and belonging constituted by explicit/implicit speech.

Kindred Spirits: Belonging and Community

At the film’s end, a community emerges that thrives not out of univocality, but of contradictory narratives that hearken to the multiplicities of America itself. The double-bind of sexual and ethnic marginalization lends Asian American LGBT Christians the opportunity to reorient communal belonging in a home and place that labels non-white, non-Christian, non-native and non-straight subjects as “other.”

At the film’s premiere in 2006, Asian American faithful from Bay Area churches gathered at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley to pray, share song and honor the stories of Oneida, Ellen, Harold and Nobu. Structured as a communion service, the premiere was incorporated into the Gospel proclamation—re-constituting God’s word on bodies that have long been forced to thrive at the margins of institutional church life. Out of these proclamations, new stories emerged to expand the limits of Gospel imagination. These voices interrupted the univocality of Christian liturgy—evoking the abundance of prophetic witness, rendering God’s word alive, perennially at the cusp of new utterances. More than a succinct counter-narrative, the premiere re-imagined the

despite themselves, have served as havens for those with alternate experiences of sexuality, See Jordan, *The Ethics of Sex*, 151.

²¹ Ibid. Jacques Derrida also offers an interesting analysis on the way Marx locates religious impulses in ideology. See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

contours of “America,” exposing hopeful impulses already latent within Asian American communities themselves.

Working draft

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