

**Gay, Asian, and Religious:
The Search for Religious Community by Queer Asian Americans**

By
Celeste Naomi Tannenbaum

A Thesis Submitted in Fulfillment of the
Requirements of Independent Study
In the Department of Religious Studies at
The College of Wooster

Thesis Research I and II, Religious Studies 451-452

Advisor: Dr. Charles Kammer III March 6, 2013

Abstract

Celeste N. Tannenbaum

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This project examines the religious communities of queer Asian Americans. Queer Asian American Theology is an emerging field currently studied by only a handful of scholars. In his article “Reclaiming Our Traditions, Rituals, and Spaces: Spirituality and the Queer Asian Pacific American Experience,” Dr. Patrick Cheng isolates several shared experiences which revolve around the lack of acceptance in both Asian American and queer communities. He offers ways by which such individuals can heal from these experiences by reclaiming religious practices and sacred spaces. In my research, I have interviewed a sampling of queer Asian Americans about their involvement in religious communities. I then return to Cheng’s work to analyze his arguments and examine their relevancy, as well as to identify several additional common experiences and possible solutions. Each subject was asked about their ideal religious community, and their answers are examined to understand what queer Asian Americans desire in religious communities. This project intends to query not just what theologians or religious leaders believe about the religious needs of queer Asian Americans, but to explore the views and experiences of the individuals themselves. Transcripts of each interview are included in the appendix of the project for further research.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my advisor Charles Kammer for our lengthy conversations that occasionally had to do with this project. Your guidance, both about life and research, is invaluable. Thank you also to Linda Morgan-Clement for spurring my interest in Asian American theology, for otherwise I would never have arrived at this topic.

Thank you to my parents and brother for listening to my excitement and for trying not to ask too often, “So, what is it that you’re going to do with a Religious Studies degree?” Thank you also to my family in the Bay Area for hosting me while I conducted research there.

Thank you to my friends and housemates, particularly Sarah-Beth. Your encouragement and positive affirmations have been what motivated me through this long process.

Thank you to the Henry J. Copeland Fund for your generous support of my research. Without your aid, this project would not have been possible.

Thank you to each one of my interview subjects for sharing your stories with me. I can only hope that I have done them justice.

And to everyone else who has helped me at any point along this journey, thank you.

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Introduction

In the winter of 2011 I was hired as a Sophomore Research Assistant by Dr. Linda Morgan-Clement. I had applied on a whim, not having much of a particular interest in Asian or Asian American Feminist Theology. However, once she and I began talking, I became very interested. She wanted to prepare a class on Asian and Asian American Feminist Theology which would begin with a two week immersion in Thai culture. What struck me first when I began this research was how little information I could find. Feminist Theology, at least in its Western conception, began in the 1960s and 70s, so this was not where the difficulties lay. Asian American theology began around a similar time, and I was able to find several books and many articles about it, as well. What was most surprising, was that there was very little written that combined these two fields, and that addressed the intersectionality of this identity.¹ Over the course of the year that I did research with Linda, we tried to stick to “mainstream women,” which also translated to straight women. Occasionally queer voices would emerge, which piqued my interest, but I did not have time to explore them.

After doing research with Linda, she asked me to continue to work as her Teaching Apprentice for the Wooster in Thailand course. When we got to Thailand, I was struck by the cacophony of noises, colors, and the constant presence of religion. There were stands in every market and storefront selling Buddha figurines, and spirit houses outside many dwellings, even outside simple corrugated metal shacks. I also was struck by the variety of people around me. I wondered how much I did not understand, how much my Western mind was simply unable to process. I especially was curious about the sheer number of women around me who, if I saw them on the street of any city in the United States, I would have

¹ One book, “Making Paper Cranes: Toward an Asian American Feminist Theology” by Mihee Kim-Kort was published in December, 2012, and seems to begin to explore some of these issues.

understood to be butch lesbians. Very often I saw pairs walking around holding hands with one woman who dressed more masculine of center, and one much more feminine of center. I wondered if they were lesbian couples, or if I was completely misunderstanding the situation and the women were simply friends. Though Thailand is one of the more tolerant Asian countries in regards to homosexuality, public displays of affection are frowned upon by any sort of couple. If they were gay, I wondered how their families had reacted, what their friends had thought, and if they were still welcome in Buddhist temples. I realized how many questions I had about the lives of these women, and also how much I, as an outsider, was unable to understand.

When it came time for me to pick a topic for my Junior Independent Study, my main goal was to pick something that would keep me interested for over a year. I knew if I only analyzed texts for a year, I would quickly grow bored, and that I would much rather interview people. I had been involved in interfaith dialogue while in college, and realized that this practice had instilled in me the view that everyone has a story which is important to hear and understand. I was afraid to study a topic in which I would be an outsider, as I worried that I did not have a right to do so, and that I would misinterpret what I saw. After speaking with my advisor, I realized that both insiders and outsiders to a tradition have important views in gaining a full picture. While practitioners have an understanding of what they are doing, observers can look at the greater context and have a different understanding of the same occurrence. These viewpoints combine to create a more accurate portrayal of a situation. With these concepts, I decided to study queer Asian Americans and religion. I began doing background research, and discovered that, once again, there was almost nothing written about Queer Asian American Theology. This solidified my decision to continue with

this topic. I was not sure where the project would end up, but knew that I wanted the core of the project to consist of interviewing individuals, and recording their stories.

I began by using the term “gay” in my research, as the term “queer” still felt pejorative to me. As I began to read Queer Theology, I realized the intentionality behind the word, and the reasons why people have chosen to use it. “Queer” attempts to be a transgressive word, and to break the normativities often implicit in gay culture and Gay Theology. When doing Queer Theology, I try to break outside the standards of gay, white, male, middle-class and western.

For my Junior Independent Study I did background research, first by dissecting my topic and examining Asian American history and terminology, Asian American religions, Queer Theology, and the few articles that combined those topics. One article, by Rev. Dr. Patrick Cheng, titled, “Reclaiming Our Traditions, Rituals, and Spaces: Spirituality and the Queer Asian Pacific American Experience,”² proved to be the framework in which my other questions were developed. In it, he explains several negative shared experiences of queer Asian Americans and then offers three spiritual solutions to heal the wrongs.

During the summer of 2012, I heard that the College of Wooster would be hosting a conference titled, “Global Queerness: Sexuality, Citizenship, and Human Rights in the 21st Century,” so I applied to present my research. I was accepted to the conference and presented on a panel titled, “Queering Race in the U.S.” The opportunity to speak with and learn from scholars who do research on a wide range of queer topics solidified my reasons for using the term “queer” in my research and the feedback I received gave me confidence that this research was necessary.

² Cheng, Patrick S. “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.

In the fall of my senior year, I applied for and received funding through the Henry J. Copeland Fund for Independent Study. I planned to travel to the Bay Area, where many queer Asian Americans live, to conduct interviews. With the time constraints of only a year, I knew that this project would never be able to offer a conclusive statement on what it means to be queer, Asian American, and religious, but rather my goal was to put several pieces of the puzzle together, and gain a slightly clearer picture by recording and analyzing stories.

In California I spoke with eight queer Asian Americans from a variety of traditions. All of my interviews were recorded, and the transcripts are available in the appendix. I then reexamined what Dr. Cheng had written, and compared what he had found to what my subjects had experienced. Some similarities and some differences emerged, which can be attributed to a wide range of reasons, including the differences in our relation to the topic (insider versus outsider status), with whom we spoke (he is an academic, I was speaking mostly with lay people), or any other variety of reasons. I analyzed my interviews further, and attempted to draw out what elements aided queer Asian Americans in feeling welcome in and fulfilled by a community. I also include in this section a summary of the work that a variety of communities are doing, and in which ways they are successful.

The conversations I had with the amazing individuals I interviewed stunned me. My subjects opened up to me about many topics which we do not often talk about in theology, such as their family's reactions to their sexual orientation, the fact that their partner does not go to the same church as them, or their frustration with the hook up culture present in many gay communities. There also was a certain amount of shared experiences that emerged in our conversations. I, too, am queer, and, though I come from a different cultural background, am much younger, and mostly have a different religion than my subjects, our shared queerness

gave us a bridge that helped to fuel these conversations. The following quote from Robert Goss sums up very well what this experience has been for me:

Queer has widened my own self-definitions by navigating me into uncharted waters where I engage in conversations with people whose identities are shaped by particular markers and experiences quite different from my own. These experiences are challenging, engaging and ever-widening. I find myself theologically committed to engage in dialogue and learn from different worlds, cultures, histories and communities.³

The conversations and thought processes that this project has allowed me to engage in has broadened my world-view. The importance of community has never been more clear to me, and I know whatever my next steps after Wooster, I will seek a community in which I can be fully present, and will try to help others to do the same.

³ Goss, Robert E. "Queer Theologies as Transgressive Metaphors: New Paradigms for Hybrid Sexual Theologies." *Theology and Sexuality* 5, no. 10 (March 1, 1999): 43–53.

Background

The following sections present a summary of what has been written thus far about queer Asian Americans and religion. It begins by exploring the terms used in this research including the terminology used to describe the ethnicity of the individuals included in this study. Then Asian American religions are explored, which involve a wide range of traditions. Next, Queer Theology is explained, including the necessity of a Queer Theology as opposed to a solely gay one. Finally, the intersection of queer and Asian American is explored, including the limited history of same-sex attracted Asians in the United States.

After establishing a standard terminology for the conversation, Dr. Cheng's work is presented. Dr. Cheng is the primary scholar working with Queer Asian Pacific American Theology, so space is given to understand what his views on the topic are. Last, the works of other authors are presented, including sermons given on queer topics in Asian American churches. These sections are meant to give a context for the interviews, and to give a sampling of what is being written by theologians and other scholars.

Asian Americans

There are many terms used to discuss the ethnic background of the individuals researched in this project. The term "Asian American" was coined in 1968 by two students at the University of California at Berkeley. They were trying to unify students whose ancestries lay in Asia, and felt that the term "Oriental" involved too many layers of colonialism, thus

“Asian American” was born.⁴ Asian Pacific Islander (API) is a slightly broader term that also includes individuals with family ties to the Pacific Islands. This project attempted to examine individuals from a range of countries, but there was little available from the Pacific Islands, so for the purpose of this project “Asian American” will be used. Asian American usually means one who can trace their family back to Asia (or more often, whose skin color or facial features makes them “look Asian”), and who now lives in North America (usually used to mean those who lives in the United States). Part of the complication with this term is that, while a Caucasian person whose family only arrived in the United States from Europe one generation ago is known simply as “American” (the term “European American” is rarely used, even in scholarly works), an individual whose family has lived on American soil for hundreds of years but who has vaguely Asian features will always be “Asian American.” The term is intentionally not hyphenated because hyphenation can imply that the individual is not fully either identity, but rather a conglomeration of identities.⁵ For the purpose of this research, the most important aspect is self-identity. If a person identifies as “Asian American” or another similar identity term, their voice is relevant to this project.

Important also to note is that, when I am discussing an author’s work, I attempt to be consistent with the terms they used. This means that throughout this paper terms that will be used include “Asian,” “Asian American,” “Asian Pacific Islander,” “Asian Pacific American,” and perhaps others as well. These terms usually refer to a similar group of people, but if the author draws their boundaries differently it will be noted.

⁴ Zia, Helen. *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People*. 1st ed. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000.

⁵ “GLAAD: Asian Pacific Islander Community Media Resource Kit.” *Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation*, n.d. http://archive.glaad.org/media/resource_kit_detail.php?id=3667.

When writing about Asian American cultures and religions, the most important aspect to emphasize is the multiplicity of countries and experiences represented. “Asian American” and all of its variants is still a relatively new identity term. Rev. Dr. Kwok Pui-Lan, a post-colonial feminist theologian, emphasizes that “we don’t call ourselves ‘Asian American.’ We say ‘Korean American’ or ‘Chinese American’.”⁶ Asian American is a term that is useful for bringing communities together and understanding commonalities, but it must be used with caution in order to not negate the experiences of distinct individuals or cultures. Helen Zia is an Asian American journalist and scholar. In her book *Asian American Dreams*, she explains: “There is no monolithic Asian American culture; it would be more accurate to speak of Asian American cultures. Is it possible to create cultural symbols and expressions that can convey the richness and complexity of Asian Americans?”⁷ While I find it necessary to use some generalizations about the cultures I am studying to make this project feasible, the plurality of experiences encompassed by the term “Asian American” must guide my work.

Asian Americans and Religion

According to the Pew Forum, of those in the United States whom identify as Asian American, 42% identify as Christian, 26% as non-affiliated, 14% as Buddhist, and 10% as Hindu.⁸ This data appears flawed because it fails to take into account those that identify as multiple religions. An important aspect of much of the research on Asian American theology is that many Asian Americans either identify as multiple religions, or at the very least are

⁶ Personal correspondence with Dr. Kwok Pui-Lan, April 13, 2012.

⁷ Zia, 268

⁸ “Asian Americans: A Mosaic of Faiths - Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life”, July 19, 2012. <http://www.pewforum.org/Asian-Americans-A-Mosaic-of-Faiths-overview.aspx>.

strongly influenced by other religions. In “Homosexuality and Korean Immigrant Protestant Churches,” Dr. Enuai Shrake writes about the importance of Confucian values in an observant Protestant church.⁹ While all members of this particular church identify as conservative Protestants, Confucian ideals have a prominent place in the church as well.

Another trend that emerges in the report is that conventional measures used to discern the religiosity of other Americans do not produce accurate results with Asian Americans. For example, attendance at religious services is a common measure of the importance of religion has in the lives of Americans. While many Asian Americans report that they do not attend services weekly, a large amount report that they have religious shrines in their homes. This does not mean that they are not religious, but that religion is practiced in varying ways by different cultures. If the questions that are asked in surveys do not take into account diverse religious practices, they will produce unreliable results. This shows that using a Eurocentric model of religion to study other identity groups is not always accurate, and instead questions must be developed that take cultural traditions into account.

The survey also discusses the religious lives of “unaffiliated” Asian Americans. An important point is that “‘unaffiliated’ does not necessarily mean ‘non-religious.’”¹⁰ Nearly half (49%) of “unaffiliated” Asian Americans state that they believe in “God or a universal spirit,” and almost a quarter (24%) attend worship services at least yearly. Also, significantly more Asian Americans who were born in the United States identify as non-affiliated than those born outside of the country. This could point to a widening gap in religious communities between U.S.-born Asian Americans and those born elsewhere.

⁹Shrake, Enuai. “Homosexuality and Korean Immigrant Protestant Churches.” In *Embodying Asian/American Sexualities*, by Masequesmay, Gina and Metzger, Sean, 145–156. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2009.

¹⁰ Pew Forum, 9

Although Asian Americans identify with a wide variety of religions, most of what is written is about Christianity (albeit a Christianity that often acknowledges its Buddhist or Confucian influences). All religions play out differently wherever, whenever and by whomever they are practiced. Thus, Asian American Christianity has changed as Asian American identity in the United States has been formed. In Methodist theologian, Dr. Roy Sano's 2002, "Shifts in Reading the Bible: Hermeneutical Moves Among Asian Americans," he explains that as Asian Americans began to realize their outsider status in American society, they had to shift their readings of the Bible to more relevant stories.¹¹ One example of this is that rather than seeking refuge in the Book of Ruth (a story of an immigrant finding help through a powerful native of her new land), they sought to find strength instead in the Book of Esther (where an outsider saves her people and elevates their status in her new land).

Around the same time that liberation theology began to spread, Asian Americans realized that they too could find liberation through religion, though interpreting the Bible had to be done carefully. Many ethnically Asian churches, believe in the inerrancy of the Bible, as well as in the orthodox canon (94% of Asian American evangelical protestants believe that the Bible is the "Word of God," and 52% believe that it is "literal, word for word").¹² Sano believes that Asian Americans must learn to work with and interpret the Bible in order to truly use it as a liberating tool, such as the example of the story of Esther above, and to create their own operating canon of sections of the Bible that are most relevant to their time and place.

Religion in the United States is often referred to as faith, which shows the underlying assumption that religion is about belief. Asian American religious communities are often

¹¹ Sano, Roy I. "Shifts in Reading the Bible: Hermeneutical Moves Among Asian Americans." *Semeia*, no. 90/91 (2002): 105–119.

¹² Pew Forum, 6

operating under a different paradigm, one where action is at the center of religious performance. Carnes and Yang explain this in “Asian American Religions,” writing that Asian American religious communities contain a set of formal traditions and hierarchies within them, and that the concern is with carrying out these actions in a specific way. “The emphasis is on religion as a doing—rather than a believing—of ritual, worship attendance, charity, and age hierarchy—and an especially strong patriarchy.”¹³ While some of these aspects are also present in other American religious communities, they paint a picture of a religious tradition that operates under a specific paradigm.

Another aspect that makes Asian American religions different from other American religions is the conception in the United States of separation of church and state. In the United States, one is supposed to separate religion and culture and to box religion off to a separate realm that only occurs in certain designated locations. A common theme among many Asian American religions is the notion that religion and culture are inseparable. This concept was referenced again and again in the literature about a variety of religions, including in “Rainbow Rice: A Dialogue between Two Asian American Gay Men in Higher Education and Student Affairs.” Bhattar writes “My use of the terms *Hindu* and *Indian* as being one in the same in this work is intentional. They are interchangeable in my mind because of the highly integrated presence that Hinduism and Indian culture have had in my life. I really cannot distinguish one from the other.”¹⁴ Researchers must realize that attempts to separate religion and culture are impossible, and lead to inaccurate research. It is especially important for non Asian American researchers to not only ask questions about

¹³ Carnes, Tony, and Fenggang Yang, eds. *Asian American Religions: The Making and Remaking of Borders and Boundaries*. New York: New York University Press, 2004.

¹⁴ Bhattar, Raja G., and Nathaniel A. Victoria. “Rainbow Rice: A Dialogue Between Two Asian American Gay Men in Higher Education and Student Affairs.” *The Vermont Connection* 28 (2007): 39–50.

what individuals believe, but to observe individuals and communities. Additionally, research must be conducted not just in temples and churches, but also in community centers or other gathering places.

Asian American religions are also largely religions of immigrants. Though there have been Asians in America since the 1500s, the number of Asian Americans has spiked in the last century.¹⁵ According to the Pew Research Center, in 1965 Asian Americans made up less than 1% of the United States population, but in the year 2012 they now make up nearly 6% of the population.¹⁶ One result of this immigration is that Asian American religions often end up being more conservative than their counterparts in Asia. Ironically, coming to the United States to gain freedom can lead to a desire for more religious structure and rigor. Religious fundamentalism serves to create structure amid the disruption of immigration, but also helps to preserve traditions for the next generation.¹⁷ The influx of immigrants also can serve to keep Asian American congregations from progressing, as each wave of new members causes the process to begin anew. Immigration, and the effects of immigrants on Asian American communities, are important aspects of this narrative to examine.

¹⁵ Zia, 23

¹⁶ Pew Research Center. "The Rise of Asian Americans." *The Pew Research Center*, June 19, 2012. <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/2290/asian-americans-rise-education-college-hispanics-population-income-identity-chinese-japanese-korean-vietnamese-indian-filipino>.

¹⁷ Carnes and Yang, 7

Queer Religion

According to the Oxford World Encyclopedia, theology is “the investigation or expression of the beliefs and precepts of a religion.”¹⁸ This was one of the few available encyclopedia definitions that did not explicitly reference Christianity in its explanation. This explanation is less biased than most others, even leaving monotheism behind to include the study of “God or gods.” This definition still must be expanded, though. Theology, in the contexts in which I find it used, can be a verb or a noun. One can “do theology” or “read theology” or even “preach theology.” Theology is rarely used alone, though. Theology can focus on an entire tradition, such as “Hindu Theology” or “Jewish Theology,” but it can also have to do with specific identity groups. This project examines how queer Asian Americans interact with religion, and how religion interacts with them, thus it is studying Queer Asian American Theology. The previous sections begin to explore Asian American religions, and this section will continue with queer religion.

In order to understand Queer Theology, one must first understand how theology grew from a concept which offered only one worldview, to one which seeks to be more inclusive, including presenting the voices of the oppressed. In “Queer Theologies as Transgressive Metaphors: New Paradigms for Hybrid Sexual Theologies,” Robert Goss begins by explaining the progression of theology from one which tried to unify every value into an all-inclusive collage, to the current state of each identity category creating its own theological discourse.¹⁹ He writes about the normativity implicit in theology, which is where the writers assume that the subjects they are writing about all possess certain traits, and that those

¹⁸“Theology.” *World Encyclopedia*. Philip’s, 2012.
<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199546091.001.0001/acref-9780199546091-e-11510?rskey=F6779Z&result=8&q=>.

¹⁹ Goss, 43

reading the text also possess those traits. This usually appears as heteronormativity, where all the subjects are assumed to be heterosexual, but it also emerges as homonormativity.

Homonormativity is a newer concept which refers to the assumption that all homosexual individuals are Caucasian, Western, and middle-class.

Goss continues that “Gay Theology” is often written to an audience of white middle-class men, which in itself excludes many other non-heterosexual people. Therefore, he calls for a Queer Theology, one which can transgress all of these normativities and that confronts the power dynamics inherent in all cultures, not just the ill-defined “gay community.” It must seek and address the role of ethnicity, class, religion, physical ability, country of origin, etc., in order to truly transgress all boundaries. Though Goss wrote over a decade ago, his predictions ring true today. More Queer Theologies are emerging that take into account different ethnic and immigrant groups, if not even more extensive identities.

While Goss writes mostly about the need for a Queer Theology, Lisa Isherwood seeks to define Queer Theology. According to Isherwood, in the *Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*,²⁰ Queer Theology has three defining characteristics. The first is “the emphasis on the construction of sexuality.” By this she means that one’s sexuality (both sexual orientation and sexual expression) is not decided solely at birth, but rather is the result of myriad influences, including one’s community, culture, religion, and family. Her next characteristic is “the element of plurality which needs to be present in any reflection.” This is similar to much of what Goss writes about, that Queer Theology must not address only one homogeneous community, but must instead include underrepresented (or completely unheard) voices. Her last characteristic is “the idea of ambivalence or the fluidity of sexual

²⁰ Isherwood, Lisa. “Queer Theology.” *Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*. Cambridge University Press, 2011. <http://www.credoreference.com/entry.do?id=10416919>.

identities.” She insists that Queer Theology acknowledge that sexual identities, including sexual orientation and gender identity, can be fluid; that is, instead of assuming that, if one “comes out” as a lesbian, one will always be attracted to women, or if one gets married to someone of a certain gender, one will never be attracted to someone of another gender. She also believes that Queer Theology ought to also recognize that not everyone wants to be under the umbrella of a specific label that shapes their entire identity.

Isherwood presents Queer Theology as a postmodern theology, which realizes the necessity of analyzing the whole picture when doing theology. She feels it is unacceptable to do theology in a way that only addresses one part of a situation. An example could be a theology that looks at only a biblical text itself and does not actually study how it is preached in churches. Queer Theology is a decidedly political theology, partly because it acknowledges and gives voice to a group of people that many religions condemn. It also deals directly with issues often ignored in traditional theology. One such issue is the role of sexual pleasure within religion, instead of merely focusing on sexual acts as a means of procreation (or a means of sin). Another such issue is the inclusion of autobiographical narratives and the importance of telling one’s own story as part of doing theology. This last aspect is one which is central to the methodology of this project.

As is evident by this discussion, part of the complication with Queer Theology is that neither of the terms involved are concrete or quantifiable. In “Controversies in Queer Theology,” Susan Cornwall writes that “...many of the controversies surrounding queer theology stem from attempts by various groups to say that the thing *they* do is queer theology... the very concept of queer has built into it from the start an idea of elusiveness,

uncertainty, non-fixity, and a resistance to closed definitions.”²¹ Queer Theology attempts to be so inclusive that it is nearly impossible to define, which presents a challenge to scholars and theologians.

While Queer Theology is a progressive field, some believe that it is not progressive enough. Cornwall writes that Queer Theology is seen as not being transgressive enough, as it is still grounded in academia and therefore is blind to the real lives of people of color and of those in poverty.²² Questions that arise from this criticism include whether an illiterate person can “do” theology, whether a white person can write theology for people of color, and in general what role privilege plays in theology and in discourse about religion as a whole. It also brings up whether or not it is necessary for theology to strive to include every voice and every possible living circumstance, or whether generalizations are sufficient. Defining something as being theology or not also carries implications for whose voices are being heard and whose are not. This project strives to be inclusive and contain a range of voices, but it still is necessary to recognize that because of the scope of this project many other voices will not be heard.

Queer Asian Americans

Finding the correct language to discuss queer Asian Americans is challenging. In the United States, the term “gay” has come to mean an individual who is Caucasian, American, middle class, cisgendered and male. Though the term “gay” initially seemed most appropriate, after extensively reading about Queer Theory and Queer Theology, “queer”

²¹ Cornwall, Susannah. *Controversies In Queer Theology*. Controversies in Contextual Theology. SCM Press, 2011.

²² *Ibid.*, 77-78

seemed more applicable to my subject. The term “queer” is used to move past the boundaries of what and who is traditionally defined as “gay.” Queer includes people who are non-white, with a range of socio-economic statuses, whose gender performance is non-conforming, who are non-monogamous, or who for any other reason do not fit neatly into the label of “gay.”

Reclamation of previously pejorative terms can be a potent way of gaining power. While the term “queer” has been reclaimed by English speakers, other cultures have been reclaiming words as well. This can help to unite those with a common language but different countries of origin. One such example is the use of the terms *joto* or *jota* by Spanish speakers. While the word initially meant “fag,” and was pejorative, it now is used colloquially by queer Spanish speakers. Even when homophobic people use it in a way that is intended to be degrading, the harmful power of the word is taken away by the reclamation of the term. A problem for queer Asian Americans is that there is not a common language among their communities. Individuals from the same countries of origin have created some new terminology, but it is not used in pan-Asian settings. An example of this came from Dr. Kwok, who explained the terminology from her country. The term *tong zhi* means comrade, and “people in Hong Kong and Taiwan use it because it means that you make the same decision or journey the same path. It used to be a Communist term. They use the term and appropriated it.”²³ Individuals may have a difficult time explaining their sexual orientation to their families because of literal lack of language with which to speak about sexual orientation. Words in Asian languages for “homosexual” often either involve complex metaphors or deal solely with sexual behavior, not romantic relationships. Language presents problems for queer Asian Americans, both because there are not pan-Asian terms, but also

²³Personal correspondence with Rev. Dr. Kwok Pui-Lan, April 13, 2012.

because often no words exist that describe their sexual orientations or gender identities accurately.

Same gender relationships seem to have been a part of Asian American life nearly as long as Asian Pacific Islanders have been on United State soil. The earliest reports of same-sex relationships among Asian Americans occur in the late 19th century. The first organized group of Asian American lesbians and gays were the Lesbian and Gay Asian Collective which emerged during the National Third World Lesbian and Gay Conference in 1979.²⁴ Throughout the 1980s, more groups appeared, some on a national level but mainly in New York, California and Hawaii. With the growth of the internet, more individuals have been able to participate in these organizations, especially individuals not living in metropolitan areas. In the 1990s, as this movement spread and numbers increased, groups with ties to specific nationalities began to emerge, as well. This does not mean that homosexual acts or homosexual relationships were accepted by the surrounding society, but rather that they were not completely invisible. The history of queer Asian Americans seems to be generally non-existent. There are no books written on the history of queer Asian Americans and what little information existed generally appeared as entries in encyclopedias about Gay and Lesbian history.

Queer Asian Americans face unique problems in their identity because of the interplay of their culture and sexual orientations. According to Dr. Hyeouk Chris Hahm and Chris Adkins, researchers at Boston University, “In the United States, the interplay of racism, sexism and acculturation creates psychological and social stressors that may affect the

²⁴ Hogan, Steve, and Lee Hudson. “Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders.” *Completely Queer: The Gay and Lesbian Encyclopedia*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998.

development of positive ethnic/sexual identities among Asian and Pacific Islander[s].”²⁵ In their article they go on to examine the different ways in which queer Asian Americans form identity by combining several models of ethnic and sexual orientation identity formation.

They settle on four stages of identity formation for queer Asian Americans: “Initiation,” “Primacy,” “Conflict,” and “Identity Synthesis.” Within each stage there are a range of outcomes depending on how an individual connects or relates their country of origin’s (or family’s) culture to mainstream American culture.

In “Initiation,” queer Asian Americans begin to question their gender or sexual orientation in a “bicultural context.”²⁶ In this situation, queer Asian Americans often have a much greater sense of otherness than other queer Americans because of their cultural background. An example given in the article is the Japanese and Chinese concept of *jen* that governs an individual’s social interactions. *Jen* (also written as *ren*) is the core virtue of Confucianism and dictates how a good person should act, especially in their interactions with others. It involves complex layers of hierarchy and deferential relationships.²⁷ *Jen* might feel even more restrictive if one does not fit into the heteronormative model of society. This could manifest in a woman who is uncomfortable in her requirement to act deferential towards men, or a youth who is unable to respond to their parent’s disapproval of their gender presentation.

In the “Primacy” stage, queer Asian Americans chose to value one identity over the other. Part of what makes the Asian American situation unique is that children are seen as representatives of the whole family. If they do not assume the gender roles expected of them,

²⁵ Hahm, Chris Hyeok, and Chris Adkins. “A Model of Asian and Pacific Islander Sexual Minority Acculturation.” *Journal of LGBT Youth* 6, no. 2/3 (September 2009): 155–173.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 159

²⁷ Stefon, Matt. “Ren.” *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, n.d. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/302493/ren>.

they not only distance themselves from their family, but they could distance their family from their greater community. Language plays a large role here again, but in this case, the problem is that, as explained above, there often are not words in Asian languages with meanings similar to “gay” or “lesbian,” words which refer to emotional, as well as sexual, relationships. Rather, the words available in Asian languages often deal much more with behavior, such as “imply[ing] that while everyone is heterosexual, some people may try to have sex with a same-sex partner for the sake of exploration and experimentation.”²⁸ These terms can lead to families assuming that individuals will follow all aspects of homosexual stereotypes, or to sexual orientation seeming like a choice that is being done to punish a family.

The third stage is “Conflict,” in which an individual learns how to deal with discrimination or biases in both the Queer and Asian American communities. There can be both positive and negative aspects that arise from straddling these two communities of identity. Some of the positive aspects could be having the support and role models of two separate communities, and the ability for social networking and interaction with a variety of people. The negative aspects could include having queer friends or partners who do not understand why Asian American cultural norms are important, or families who do not understand why it is important to an individual to dress in non gender-conforming clothing.

The last stage is “Identity Synthesis” which the authors note that not everyone will reach. In this stage, queer Asian Americans commit to both their sexual orientation or gender identity and also to their cultural identity. This does not mean that queer Asian Americans will necessarily feel completely accepted in either community, but that they are still striving to feel connected to both. An example of this could be an individual who brings their partner

²⁸ Hahm and Adkins, 163

home but introduces them as their “good friend.” Their family could respond by accepting the “good friend” and welcoming them into family life and events. Everyone involved might know the true nature of their relationship, but for the sake of saving face and avoiding uncomfortable conversations, might treat the relationship as platonic.

Understanding the cultural context from which queer Asian Americans emerge is vital to understanding their identity. Queer Asian American support or cultural groups exist in most major cities, and work is beginning to happen on a national scale as well. Several of these communities are explained later in this project. An important aspect of these conversations is the unique balance of being part of at least three communities with values that are at odds with each other. With proper support and effort, identity can be redefined, and individuals can find ways to live their lives as fully queer, fully culturally Asian, and fully American.

Rev. Dr. Patrick Cheng

Rev. Dr. Patrick Cheng is an ordained minister in the Metropolitan Community Church who teaches at the Episcopal Divinity School. He is one of the main scholars of Queer Asian American Theology, and he works to communicate his work to a variety of audiences through books, academic journal articles, newspaper columns and by giving lectures around the country.

Queer Asian Pacific American (or QAPA) is the term that Cheng uses to describe himself and the others he writes about. He introduces it in his article “Reclaiming Our Traditions, Rituals, and Spaces: Spirituality and the Queer Asian Pacific American

Experience.”²⁹ He acknowledges the multiplicity of experiences of QAPAs, but explains two common shared experiences. The first is “profound metaphorical homelessness,” by which he means that QAPAs are not fully accepted in heterosexual Asian Pacific American culture, white queer culture, or faith-based groups. This leads to a feeling of alienation and not knowing where to turn to find community. Secondly, QAPAs experience alienation from their bodies because they physically differ from both mainstream Asian Pacific American and Caucasian culture. To be queer in the United States translates into being Caucasian, and QAPAs physically have different features than the surrounding queer community. Cheng defines QAPA spirituality as one that seeks to heal these wrongs.

Cheng goes on to list three ways in which QAPAs can heal from these experiences of disconnection. The first is by reclaiming spiritual practices of their Asian ancestors, even if they have fallen out of practice in more recent generations. The second is reclaiming rites and rituals, especially Christian ones, and giving them new meanings. The last is reclaiming sacred spaces by allowing encounters with the divine to occur outside of traditional churches or temples, including on the internet.

Among his published works Cheng offers several reinterpretations of biblical stories. In one instance, uses a QAPA hermeneutic³⁰ to examine the Book of Galatians.³¹ The main theme of Galatians is that it should not be compulsory to be circumcised in order to follow Jesus Christ. Cheng argues that similar to circumcision in Galatians, homosexual sex should not bar one from being part of the church. The most famous aspect of Galatians is when Paul says that social divisions no longer exist, including male or female. This is very significant to

²⁹ Cheng, Patrick S. “Reclaiming Our Traditions...”

³⁰ A lens through which one examines a text.

³¹ Cheng, Patrick S. “Galatians.” In *The Queer Bible Commentary*, by Guest, Deryn, 624–629. SCM Press, 2006.

Cheng, who writes that this line means that churches must not discriminate based on the gender of the participants in a relationship, because God sees no gender in love. Freedom from legalism is another theme of Galatians, and Cheng expands it to the yoke of oppression from right-wing fundamentalists, straight allies who do not want their sexual orientations questioned, and from the ideological constraints of queer culture that promote a correct way to be queer. He ends by going back to his story and his search for a place in the gay community as an Asian American man, and in his church community as a gay man.

In a different piece of theology, Cheng writes about Judges 19.³² He begins by looking at four different ways that multiplicity ties together QAPAs and the concubine in the story. The first is multiple naming, for the concubine is called by several nouns throughout the text, and by many more by later theologians. Queer people are also called by a multitude of terms, and Asian Americans are called even more. Naming implies power, derogatory or otherwise, and being labeled by someone else renders the subject powerless. The second crossover is multiple silencing, because never once is the concubine allowed to tell her own story. QAPAs are silenced by not being accepted fully into either ethnic or sexual orientation based communities. Third, QAPAs and the concubine both experience multiple oppressions. Many different men rape the concubine, and QAPAs are subject to racial and homophobic prejudices. Lastly, QAPAs and the concubine both experience multiplicity through multiple fragmentations. While the concubine is physically cut into twelve pieces, QAPAs must constantly decide which part of their identity to embrace at a given moment (for example whether they are going to “act gay” or “act Asian”). He ends by directly referencing his hermeneutic of multiplicity and explaining how it can be applied to other biblical texts.

³² Ibid. “Multiplicity and Judges 19: Constructing a Queer Asian Pacific American Biblical Hermeneutic.” *Semeia*, no. 90/91 (2002): 119–134.

In his 2006 article introducing the experiences of QAPAs in the church, Cheng writes that QAPAs must go back to their ancestral traditions to reclaim spiritual practices. Cheng is a devout Christian, but in one article he compares Kuan Yin (the Buddhist bodhisattva of compassion) to Jesus Christ.³³ Cheng writes that Kuan Yin contains three aspects important to queer identity: queer compassion, queer sexuality, and gender fluidity. Kuan Yin's compassion contrasts with the God of Christianity who punishes those who engage in same-sex acts. God, as an aspect of the Trinity, is asexual, but Kuan Yin affirms her sexual desires, and has sex with men and women, both in heterosexual and homosexual pairings. Finally, while the God of Christianity is discussed using male pronouns in English, Kuan Yin has different names and genders depending on the tale or geographic location. Cheng then compares Jesus' three roles to Kuan Yin's, writing that Jesus' descent to Earth as a priest mirrors Kuan Yin's addressing the cries of the downtrodden. As a king, Jesus rises from Earth towards heaven, which mirrors Kuan Yin helping humans rise towards enlightenment. Lastly, in his role as a prophet, Jesus is a witness to truth, much as Kuan Yin is a witness to gender fluidity.

While Cheng believes that acts of reclaiming Asian religious traditions, like this example, are important for QAPA spiritual development,³⁴ others find this to be a problematic decision. Dr. Tracy Tiemeier, an Asian American Feminist Theologian, cautions against picking and choosing parts of religious traditions to practice.³⁵ More specifically, she believes that it is disrespectful to be part of a dominant religion, especially Christianity, but to choose aspects of non-Christian Asian religions to bring into one's practice. She also

³³ Ibid. "Kuan Yin: Mirror of the Queer Asian Christ." *Patrick S. Cheng*, 2003.

http://www.patrickcheng.net/uploads/7/0/3/7/7037096/kuan_yin_mirror_of_the_queer_asian_christ.pdf

³⁴ Ibid., "Reclaiming our Traditions..."

³⁵ Tiemeier, Tracy Sayuki. "Retrieving 'Asian Spirituality' in North American Contexts: An Interfaith Proposal." *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 6, no. 2 (2006): 228–233.

brings up how the histories of these traditions affect the process, "...Christian North American engagement in non-Christian Asian practices is inherently mired in the historical realities of European imperialism, American economic and military co-optation, and Christian involvement in these colonizing processes."³⁶ Tiemeier finds it to be problematic when North Americans feel that they can choose aspects of Asian religions to integrate into their religious practices.

The issues do not disappear if it is Christian Asian North Americans doing the co-opting. She acknowledges that this reclaiming might come with the best of intentions, such as from a desire to celebrate and reclaim connections to one's ancestral community, but this does not exempt one from the harm that this act can cause. Tiemeier also criticizes the phrase "Asian Spirituality" which is the idea that all traditions that began in Asia have a common core of tradition or belief. Though she finds this term to be problematic, she does acknowledge that "Asian religious traditions other than Christianity practice methods of self-realization and transcendence, offering distinctive diagnoses, paths and goals."³⁷ Even if Christian Asian Americans want to integrate a spiritual tradition from their ancestral past into their current religious life, it may still occur with the colonialist viewpoint that Christianity is the true religion and others are merely spiritual practices.

Tiemeier believes that the solution to these problems is to use an interfaith perspective when engaging with other traditions. She gives several examples of how to do this. One is to read religious texts comparatively, such as a Christian person reading the Bible alongside a Hindu text in order to gain greater insight into their own tradition's text. Another example is to examine the wider tradition rather than just selecting one aspect to adopt. Her example is

³⁶ Ibid., 228

³⁷ Ibid., 229

when learning yoga, rather than just practicing the *asanas* (poses), one must also learn about the other Hindu beliefs that yoga is just one limb of. She does not say that one must accept all aspects of a tradition, but that one must actively acknowledge that the practice they select does exist within a much more complex system of beliefs.

Tiemier offers an important criticism to Cheng. Cheng's urging to queer Asian Americans to look into their ancestral tradition and to reclaim practices comes from an honorable viewpoint of wanting to help QAPAs connect to their history. Regardless, as Tiemier points out, it still is done with a colonizing viewpoint that Christianity is a true religion, and Asian religions are simply spiritual traditions that can be dissected and used alongside Christianity. As this project continues to examine Cheng's work, it will attempt to do so through the lens that Tiemier uses, and to try to avoid creating a hierarchy of religious traditions.

Sermons

Another source of theological discourse is sermons. Through the internet, sermons preached at a church on one Sunday can be read around the world by the next. The Network on Religion and Justice for Asian Pacific Islander Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender People (NRJ) has gathered several sermons related to queer Asian Pacific Islanders and has them available on its website.³⁸ One such sermon was preached by the Rev. Elizabeth Leung at Pine United Methodist church in San Francisco. At the time Leung was working for the Pacific School of Religion's Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry's Asian and Pacific Islander Roundtable Project. Her sermon is titled "The Audacity to Be

³⁸ "Network on Religion and Justice", n.d. <http://www.netrj.org/>.

Proud,” and deals with the conflict between being Asian and gay.³⁹ The sermon was given on “Pride Sunday” which is the Sunday before Gay Pride Week. Leung writes that, as an Asian woman, she has always been taught to be humble and to never take pride in her own ideas or accomplishments. She contrasts this with being queer, and writes that LGBT individuals “need to be proud of their sexuality, exactly because of the chronic shame surrounding it.”⁴⁰

She calls upon Asian American Christians to think of Jesus’ work and read the Bible through a lens of justice and compassion. She brings the message to all people, not just the LGBT people in the congregation by writing “... we are all created in the image of God, just like the rest of humanity. From this truth comes the audacity to be proud. Because God is love, and the truth that we are created in the image of God means that love is the reason for our existence.”⁴¹ She turns the message of sin around, saying that not practicing self-love and pride in one’s sexual orientation is misunderstanding God’s will, and therefore sinning.

This sermon is very relevant for queer Asian Americans, especially Christians. First, Leung culturally situates herself with her audience by bringing up common phrases that her mother used to admonish her to be humble such as “other people’s praises are cheap words, so do not take it to heart.”⁴² She acknowledges the added cultural baggage that these teachings bring to the struggles of queer Asian Americans. Leung is an Asian American minister who works with Asian American communities so when she writes about the compassionate lens of Jesus through which scripture must be read, she knows full well that this is in sharp contrast to the trend of Biblical literalism in Asian American churches.⁴³ She

³⁹ Leung, Elizabeth. “The Audacity to Be Proud”, Pine United Methodist Church, San Francisco, CA, June 3, 2007. <http://www.netrj.org/?p=library&id=4>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Pew Research Center (2012)

gives several examples of why we must always interpret the Bible through the cultural context in which we live, explaining that the word of God coming from ancient Greco-Roman culture is not going to have the same meaning today. She ends by referencing Jesus, and explaining two values that queer Asian Americans need to have present in their lives. One is pride, because of being made in God's image as a queer person, and one is the fully human aspect of endurance and compassion that queer Asian Americans must gain in spite of their sufferings. She sums it up with a definitively Christian reference, "And such are the practices of our spirituality: the audacity to be proud, the healing of shame, the freedom to be real, the remembrance of losses, and the insistence on compassion. Truly human. Truly divine."⁴⁴ By returning to a Christian quote, Leung is able to have the authority of Christianity behind her words, which serves to strengthen her message.

Another sermon available online was given at a United Church of Christ (UCC) Church in Los Angeles, California, titled "Our Journey."⁴⁵ Rather than being given by a pastor, the sermon was given by Harold Kameya, a Japanese American man who became an LGBT rights activist after his daughter came out as lesbian. In the sermon he describes the process he and his wife went through after their daughter came out to them 20 years before. They began drifting away from their church because they felt unable to talk about their daughter's sexual orientation. After a period of searching, they found a new church that was in the process of becoming "Open and Affirming" (meaning that they would welcome all, regardless of their sexual orientation). They slowly began to be more involved in gay rights issues within the Japanese American and larger Asian American communities by speaking on panels and appearing in articles. He admits that he still has times when he is uncomfortable

⁴⁴ Leung

⁴⁵ Kameya, Harold. "Our Journey", Mt. Hollywood Congregational Church, Los Angeles, CA, February 18, 2008. <http://www.netrj.org/?p=library&id=2>.

speaking to Asian audiences about the struggles his family has faced, but that he understands the importance of his work.

Kameya also brings politics into his sermon by explaining that many conservative Asian churches opposed an amendment in California that would have allowed same-sex marriage. He explains that they are promoting misinformation and that as religious institutions they should support love between all people. He does not incorporate much scripture, but he does tie together much of his writing with the biblical passage from John 8:32 “... and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”⁴⁶ He contrasts this with his explanation of Asian churches’ avoidance of speaking about homosexuality, writing that “controversial topics in many Asian churches are typically addressed by SILENCE.”⁴⁷ Kameya’s message of support for queer people is amplified by his social status as an Asian father.

What Kameya wrote paralleled what Bernie Schlager, Director of the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry at the Pacific Theological Seminary explained.⁴⁸ Schlager spoke about how, in his experience with queer Asian Americans, when an individual tells their family that they are queer, it is not just the individual who “comes out,” but the entire family, must, as well. The sexual orientation of one individual reflects on the entire family and they are no longer just “a family,” but “a family with a gay son,” or “a family with a lesbian sister.” Kameya points to the alienation that this can cause when a family is unsure of their continued acceptance in their communities.

Another sermon available on the website was given on the same day as Rev. Leung’s sermon, but is much more complex than the first two. It is titled “Testimony for Pride

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Personal Correspondence, September 27, 2012.

Sunday,” but no author’s name is given.⁴⁹ The author explains that he is a Filipino United Methodist Minister but does not feel comfortable giving his name because of the discriminatory stance of his church and the fact that he is not out to his family or community. He describes his journey of growing up in the Philippines and knowing that he was different. He felt called to the ministry from a young age, and went to a progressive seminary in his home country. He eventually found gay-affirming church denominations but decided not to convert so that he could work to change the United Methodist Church from the inside. He writes very directly of the pain he has felt from not being able to tell his family about his sexual orientation and therefore having to hide his love and heartbreak. He also writes about the rejection he has felt in the church as measures in support of homosexuality were voted down. He ends with his one mention of scripture, which is the phrase “’And it came to pass...’”⁵⁰ He explains that this phrase is a reminder to him that the church will eventually heal from its homophobia and become an inclusive community. He writes “I look to the rainbow knowing that the bright light of affirmation is just behind the clouds that shroud many of our churches.”⁵¹ Though he writes about his struggle with his Christian community and his sexual orientation, he is able to end on a hopeful note, that one day his identity will be able to be reconciled.

These sermons are likely only a small sampling of the sermons on queer issues that have been given at Asian American congregations. Important, also, is that all of these sermons were given at reconciling congregations, meaning that their gay-affirming message is consistent with the congregation at which they are being preached. The sermons all contain

⁴⁹ “Testimony for Pride Sunday”, Pine United Methodist Church, San Francisco, CA, June 3, 2007. <http://www.netrj.org/?p=library&id=5>.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

a common message, that while currently being Christian, Asian and queer is difficult, change will come. All three sermons employ Christian quotes and imagery as they explain their vision for a future where these identities can coexist peacefully. Sermons such as these are powerful, and must be expanded to other denominations, religions and venues, in order to help queer Asian Americans to be more accepted in their religious traditions.

Methods

I received funding through the Henry J. Copeland Fund for Independent Study to travel to the San Francisco Bay area to conduct interviews of religiously and spiritually inclined queer Asian Americans. I interviewed eight individuals over the course of five days in November, 2012, meeting mostly in coffee shops, or other public venues. These interviews have all been transcribed and are included in the appendix for reference. A short summary of each interview is below to provide background for understanding the following sections.

I reached my subjects through a variety of venues. Some were from a chain of word of mouth referrals initiated in my conversations with Dr. Kwok Pui-Lan when she visited the College of Wooster in April, 2012. Others I received by emailing any and all Bay Area queer Asian American email listservs that I could find, as well as by emailing several national ones. I received many emails from men, but a week before I was set to leave for California I still had not secured any interviews with women or trans* individuals. I emailed my male contacts explaining my problem and asked if they knew women who might be interested. In the end I found three women to talk to, almost all of whom were contacts of my male subjects.

All three of the women I spoke with were either leaders in their communities or religious scholars, whereas none of the men I interviewed had any sort of affiliations of that sort. I spoke with Maria and her partner about this phenomenon, and she gave several different reasons why this could have occurred. One idea was that women already are in a powerless situation, so for a woman to come out means that “[y]ou don’t have any value and then you become less, no, or zero, negative even in the ... value of who you are.”⁵² Women

⁵² Maria, cliv

who are in leadership positions serve as role models for other women, so they may feel an obligation to come out. Another reason could be that women are already oppressed by the patriarchal systems of Asian religious communities. Rather than come out and remain in these oppressive structures, they end up leaving these institutions and forming their own communities that are structured very differently than churches or temples. While I cannot know exactly why the discrepancy of men and women in my interviews occurred, it is important to recognize that these issues may have affected my data.

A commonality in all of my interviews occurred when I mentioned either my Filipino step-grandmother, or my own queer sexual orientation. There was a noticeable shift in the conversation, often including an “Ohhhhh!” It encompassed both recognition of why I was interested in this subject, but also gave us a bridge of understanding through these (apparent) commonalities. The connection because of our sexual orientations was genuine but mostly left unspoken. I was much more conflicted about the connection because of my perceived Filipino heritage. My step-grandmother lives across the country, I know no words in Tagalog or Ilocano (her native language), and, at best, I could recognize one Filipino dish. All of my subjects, especially my Filipino ones, seemed to become much more comfortable when I situated myself culturally with them, and I have no doubt that this influenced my conversations. My hope is that by acknowledging the leverage that my perceived Asian background gave me, I can work to right this misconception.

Summary of Interviews

In the following pages are a short summary of each interview which aims to give the necessary background for understanding the rest of this section. As a note, all names, except where indicated, have been changed to protect the privacy of my subjects. Additionally, interviews are cited as (name), (page number from transcript). Full transcripts of each interview are provided in the appendix.

Charlie

Charlie is a Chinese man in his fifties who has been living in the United States for over thirty years. I interviewed him in a crowded San Francisco bakery. He is involved in a Queer Taoist group, but does not identify as religious. In his interview he explained that he views his Taoist practice as a philosophical interest, but also acknowledged that the line between religion and spirituality is hazy at best. His Taoism, along with his Chinese background in Confucianism, was very apparent in the examples he gave and the stories he told. Though our conversation was short, Charlie's interview proved to be very valuable.

Joseph and Ryan

I interviewed Joseph and Ryan together in an office at the Catholic Church that both men attend. Vivek connected me to both of them, partly because of their work as the founders of the "Rainbow of Love" group for LGBT members and allies at their church. From the onset of the conversation, a major theme was both men's desire for a religious community where they could be gay, Catholic, and Filipino. They both spoke of attempts to find more progressive Christian communities, but they always returned to their Catholic

Church because of its strong Filipino heritage. Joseph desired a community where his sexual orientation was a non-issue, and was not something that anyone paid attention to, while Ryan envisioned a more radical, non-hierarchical church. Ryan spoke quite a bit about his research into the pre-Hispanic Philippines where women and men who dressed like women were religious leaders called the Babaylan. This research connected him to his Filipino heritage, and helped him find peace both with his sexual orientation and his cultural history. This was the only group interview that I conducted, but I really appreciated the way that both men were able to help to push the conversation to go farther and prompt each other with their own ideas. The city the church resides in is omitted, and the name of the church and LGBT group are changed, as the men feared repercussions from the greater Catholic Church.

Michael

Michael, a Filipino man, converted to Judaism eight years ago. He was the individual who spoke the most positively about his religious community. He also was the only individual whose main religious community is a specifically queer one. I am Jewish, too, which he was aware of, so I wondered throughout our conversation how much that knowledge affected how he spoke about Judaism. Halfway through our conversation he changed directions and said that now that he had told me all the positive aspects of his experience as a gay Filipino Jew, he was now going to tell me the negative ones. During our conversation he invited me to join him at his synagogue the coming Friday night for services, which I did. I was very welcomed by him and his congregation, and it was very valuable to have a chance to experience what he had described.

Vivek

Vivek Anand asked me to use his real name in this project so that he could be a resource for other South Asian LGBT people. We planned to speak in a coffee shop, but it was busy so instead we sat under an ancient oak tree. Vivek grew up in a multi-faith home in India, and remains influenced by many religions to this day. Rather than identifying with a single religious community, Vivek participates in a wide range of communities and practices which together shape his identity. Vivek speaks very intentionally and philosophically, especially when discussing religion.

Irene

Shortly before I left for the Bay Area I contacted Pine United Methodist Church because I had read several sermons for Pride Sunday that had been preached at their pulpit, as well as seen mention of their API (Asian Pacific Islander) LGBT Bible Study group. The church secretary put me in contact with Irene, but I did not know if she would be queer, or would be only speaking as someone who facilitates these events. I was pleased, and also challenged, by conducting an interview that encompassed both her personal identity and her role in the leadership at her church. Pine UMC was one of the first gay affirming API churches, and remains a leader at the congregational level, so I was very glad to be able to learn more about the work that they do.

Maria

Maria is a Filipina pastor who has been living in the United States for eighteen years. She and I spoke for over two hours in a café together. She has applied for, and subsequently

been denied, a Green Card several times, and so her visa is tied in with her affiliation with the Evangelical Lutheran Church. This is a big source of struggle in her life, for while her denomination officially ordains gay clergy, she has experienced much homophobia within it. Maria is in the process of forming a new religious community composed of those who have not been able to feel welcome in traditional church settings.

Sue

I spoke to Sue under many layers of confidentiality. In order to protect her identity, I edited out her name, country, current city, type of degree, department, and the names of all organizations that she has been involved in. Sue identifies as Catholic, but does not actively participate in a Catholic community, as the oppressive hierarchy and patriarchy make it hard for her to do so. She has found some alternative communities to be part of, but is not completely satisfied with them, either. She has not told anyone in her family about her sexual orientation, and is out to very few people in her life in the United States. My interview with her was a difficult one as it was hard to figure out the appropriate questions to ask. Sue and I communicated extensively after her interview as we both wrestled with how to tell her story without giving away her identity. What remains of her transcript is somewhat segmented because of the extensive omissions, which in itself shows the struggles that she faces as a queer Asian woman.

Revisiting Cheng

Dr. Patrick Cheng's seminal article, "Reclaiming Our Traditions, Rituals, and Spaces: Spirituality and the Queer Asian Pacific American Experience,"⁵³ discusses spirituality and Queer Asian Pacific Americans. He begins by presenting two shared experiences of Queer Asian Pacific Americans, and then offers three solutions to remedy these wrongs. Dr. Cheng is a minister in the Metropolitan Community Church and teaches at the Episcopal Divinity School, so the examples that he gives are Christian in nature, but his framework is still applicable to non-Christians. Through interviewing a sampling of Queer Asian Americans, I sought to further examine Cheng's work and to understand the lives of these individuals.

Shared Experiences

Queer Asian Pacific Americans exist at the intersection of very broad and diverse identities. Earlier I discussed the identities at length, but it is worth acknowledging the multiplicity of experiences here, as well. There are a wide range of genders, sexual orientations, ethnicities, religious communities and life experiences encompassed by these terms. In spite of this, Cheng manages to isolate some commonalities. The two shared experiences that he offers are a "profound metaphorical homelessness" and "bodily alienation."⁵⁴ Both of these experiences are negative ones, and denote some sort of disconnection, whether from family and community or body and self.

The concept of a "profound metaphorical homelessness" was easy to observe in my subjects. Each individual discussed their need for a community where all aspects of their

⁵³ Cheng, "Reclaiming Our Traditions..." 235

⁵⁴ Ibid., 235

identity could co-exist. People even spoke of it directly, explaining that they wanted a community where they could be queer, Asian American and religious, but nearly all told me that they had not found that community.

Bodily alienation was harder to observe. This could have occurred, in part, because none of my questions directly addressed this topic and instead concentrated on religion and community. Perhaps my subjects had experienced this in the more secular realms of their lives but did not mention it because they knew that my study was about religion. In my quest to understand what Cheng wrote, I expanded his definition in a way that may surpass his intended meaning. Regardless of whether that occurred, I still find this paradigm to be a useful tool for understanding these interviews in a different light.

Profound Metaphorical Homelessness

The first shared experience that Dr. Cheng suggests is a “profound metaphorical homelessness.” He explains this as a sense of not belonging completely in any community. Families of origin may shun QAPAs, or at the very least may not fully accept them, either because of religious beliefs or cultural norms. Asian religious communities may shun them, as well, as many remain homophobic. QAPAs also do not fit into the mainstream queer culture because of its inherent whiteness. As Cheng says, “To be QAPA is to experience exclusion from multiple communities.”⁵⁵

In my interviews, I truly learned the meaning of profound metaphorical homelessness. I heard this struggle very clearly when Ryan explained that belonging to a Catholic Church was so important to him because it celebrated his Filipino heritage. He had

⁵⁵ Ibid., 235

tried to go to UCC and Episcopalian services, but he did not feel like a Filipino there. He said:

I know that I can't completely leave Holy Trinity because it has been amazing to be with all these Filipinos who embrace me as someone with Filipino heritage, who celebrate my Filipino and teach me and are with me and that's where I relate when you say you want to put those three things together. Because Filipino and Catholic are like that [makes gesture with hands close together].⁵⁶

Further along in the conversation, Ryan explained his difficulties in remaining Catholic. He had had so many alienating experiences with Catholicism, both within his church and in other churches. He explained, "I feel like I can't pray here very easily because the language is so oppressive because our lives are not embraced."⁵⁷ As Ryan went on, he explained some of the details of his other attempts to be part of more progressive Christian communities, but he eventually returned to Catholicism because he missed the different aspects of Filipino culture that enriched the church. Joseph, also present for this conversation, echoed many of these sentiments, as well. They both remained Catholic, which meant that they settled for their church only meeting the needs of the Filipino and Catholic aspects of their identity while finding fulfillment in their gay identities elsewhere.

I also encountered metaphorical homelessness in my interview with Michael. For the first half of our interview Michael spoke very positively about his experiences with his synagogue, Sha'ar Zahav, and about his family's acceptance of his sexual orientation and conversion to Judaism. After awhile, he shifted the direction of the conversation, and told me that he wanted to tell me about the negative aspects of being Jewish, gay and Filipino. He told a story about being at the San Francisco Pride parade where he had marched with his synagogue along with the rest of the Jewish contingent. He marched with two other Jewish

⁵⁶ Joseph and Ryan, xx

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Filipino men, all of whom were wearing *yarmulkes*.⁵⁸ A drunken reveler shouted at them from atop a bus shelter, and yelled at the three Filipino men, “You guys, you oriental guys aren’t Jewish!”⁵⁹ Michael said that though he had had many other experiences with bigoted people, this was his worst experience by far. Marching with other Filipinos from his synagogue in the middle of the Jewish contingent in the Pride parade should have been a place where all of his identities were able to coexist, but the man’s comments changed that. Michael said, “...it was almost like someone was trying to strip away my Jewishness. And not validate... render me not valid. And just completely wipe out... my identity.”⁶⁰ Though this was only one experience, it seemed to be emblematic of other experiences where he was excluded from a community based on other aspects of his identity.

Another instance of metaphorical homelessness was in a casual comment that Charlie made. I asked him about his cultural identity, and he responded in this way:

I identify myself as Chinese, probably, but I don’t know. I guess it’s like when I’m here people may think I’m Chinese, but when I’m back home, because I haven’t been back in Taiwan since ’87, people ... don’t consider me from there anymore, I mean after that long. So, I guess there maybe they think I’m American. You know... the way I dress, the way I act, or whatever.⁶¹

In this instance, rather than metaphorical homelessness having to do with not being welcome in a religious or cultural community, it had to do with the far broader experience of being an immigrant. In the United States his accent and facial features mark him as Chinese, but he has been in the United States for so long that in Taiwan he would be seen as American. The experience of losing a country of origin is a common occurrence in the experience of immigrants.

⁵⁸ A Yiddish term for small caps traditionally worn by Jewish men, an important Jewish ritual item

⁵⁹ Michael, xlvii

⁶⁰ Ibid., xlix

⁶¹ Charlie, ii

Metaphorical homelessness was very clear in my conversations. All of my subjects had experienced alienation from a community of some kind, and most had specific examples of their search for a community where their identity could be fully present. It is clear that this experience of alienation must be addressed, both by individuals and by religious communities or institutions.

Bodily Alienation

Cheng describes bodily alienation as self-awareness by QAPAs of their bodies being different from mainstream white culture because their bodies are Asian, and white is the standard by which attractiveness is judged. I have expanded Cheng's definition to include alienation from one's body because of the tension of one's body behaving differently than what society expects it to do. I mostly encountered this phenomenon in the form of individuals whose minds and bodies were attracted to those of the same sex even though they tried to not be. Bodily alienation may occur in secular realms, but for this project the religious realm will be the focus.

Maria, a Filipina pastor, described a bodily alienation where her beliefs were strong enough that she attempted to will her body to behave differently. She had always wanted to be a pastor, but her denomination in the Philippines only ordains men, thus she explored other career paths, but finally came to the United States so that she could attend seminary. She explained how when she was in seminary she dated men and suppressed her feelings for women. This was surprising because she had mentioned that in the Philippines she had been in relationships with other women. She wanted to be a pastor very badly, but she knew that in

order to be a young woman pastor it was expected that she would date other male seminarians. She said:

I loved being a pastor, that is the reason when I was in the seminary I actually thought I can make it without being gay. ... so I actually dated men so that ...I can change my destiny. And... I know I'm not going to be happy. Although I'm happy to be a pastor so this is the two conflicting realities of my life at that time.⁶²

This was one of several “Catch-22” like situations that Maria described in which two aspects of who she was seemed to be unable to coexist. She knew that she was attracted to women, but had to ignore that impulse so that she would be able to pursue her dream, and do what she felt called to do. Maria forced herself to be alienated from her body, even though it was difficult and brought her pain, because her religious calling was so strong.

For Charlie, bodily alienation took on a different form. When asked about how his mother reacted to his sexual orientation, he explained that she had a hard time accepting it. He had told me earlier that his mother was Buddhist, so I inquired whether her Buddhism affected her feelings on the matter. He explained that it was not her Buddhism, but rather that in China the continuation of a family lineage is very important, “...it’s just the Chinese tradition, like, you need to have children to continue the family line. That’s what’s considered the norm, or normal, right?”⁶³ He went on, and told me that he had never told his father, either, but also in our conversation mentioned that his father lives nearby and he visits with him once a week. Charlie is forced compartmentalize his life so that even though he lives with his partner, he still managed to see his father each week and avoid mentioning his relationship or any other of his interactions with the queer community. In this case, bodily alienation occurs by Charlie’s body not following cultural norms, and through compartmentalization that separates his life into very distinct spheres.

⁶² Maria, cxxi

⁶³ Charlie, viii

Dr. Cheng's image of bodily alienation is quite different from the sort of bodily alienation that I saw in my subjects. He gives examples of the fetishization of Asian bodies and the terms that get used to specify someone's dating preferences ("sticky rice" for QAPAs who only date other Asians, "potato queens" for those who do the opposite).⁶⁴ I did not observe bodily alienation in the way that Dr. Cheng describes it. While this could have to do with my small sample pool, or with the fact that none of my questions specifically addressed this topic, I believe that this occurrence was more than a simple omission. All of my non-single subjects were in interracial relationships, so, if this type of bodily alienation related to fetishistic experiences was a core part of their experience as QAPAs, I would have expected for it to have come up in conversation. No one spoke about their status as possessing an "exotic" or "foreign" body,⁶⁵ so that leads me to conclude that bodily alienation of the sort that Cheng observes was not present in my subjects, or at least is not relevant as a core aspect of their identity.

Solutions

Disconnection is at the core of both of the shared experiences that Cheng isolates. QAPAs can be disconnected from their family, community, or even their body. Cheng's solutions all seek to heal these wrongs by reclaiming. Again, Cheng is writing from a Christian perspective, so his examples include references to the Trinity and the sacraments. Several of my subjects are non-Christians, but with some modification, I was able to redefine

⁶⁴ Cheng, "Reclaiming our Traditions..." 236

⁶⁵ Ibid.

his message to include their experience, as well. Nearly all of my subjects discussed some sort of reclaiming in our conversations.

Reclaiming Spiritual Traditions

Cheng believes that one aspect of healing this disconnection is to go back into one's ancestral history and to seek to learn about and practice spiritual traditions that are no longer common. He gives the example that he is a Christian man, and that both his parents are Christian, but that that is as far back as Christianity goes in his family. He is Chinese-American, and his ancestors practiced a mixture of traditional Chinese religions. I found it confusing that he referred to his family's *religion* here, but later refers to them solely as *spiritual practices*. It seems almost to me that he is demoting their importance by acting as if Christianity is a true religion and he can simply pick aspects of these other traditions to incorporate. Regardless of whether this is intentionally or unintentionally problematic, Cheng's overall point is that by reclaiming these traditions, QAPAs are able to forge stronger bonds with their culture, and perhaps, by extension, with their family and communities.

Sue, an Asian student, identifies as Catholic, but is dissatisfied with Catholic religious life. She finds Mass to be sexist and too hierarchical, and has sought to find other venues in which to engage spiritually. She has taken part in a Woman Church and other LGBTQ religious spaces, but Zen meditation has become her most salient spiritual practice. Sue spoke with displeasure about the hierarchy present between people and God in organized monotheistic religions, and compared that to the East Asian traditions which she sees in a more favorable light.

[T]he East Asian...religious traditions have... very different understanding about transcendent, about spirituality... about the... the kind of person, in some ways, it's much more than the mainstream. That's why I ... don't feel easy to go back to the... the hierarchical church.⁶⁶

While Sue does practice a religious tradition that originated in Asia, it is not with the same intent that Cheng suggests. She does not explain that she has done it as a way of reconnecting herself to Asia, but instead offers it solely as a spiritual practice.

I did not find many examples of reclaiming spiritual traditions. Elsewhere in her interview, Sue spoke about looking into her history to find examples of same-sex relations, but that was in a manner unrelated to spiritual practice. Ryan explained his research into pre-Hispanic Filipino spirituality, and while the information he found helped him greatly, he did not begin any new practices. Joseph also spoke about how much he appreciated that Filipino culture and traditions were present in his parish, but it was not an act of reclaiming, but rather an appreciation of a continuation of a tradition. Though I did hear about some moments of reclaiming history, I did not see any direct examples of individuals reclaiming spiritual practices of their ancestors.

Reclaiming Rites and Rituals

Cheng believes that many Christian rituals can further the bodily alienation experienced by QAPAs. He explains that either searching for new rituals or reinterpreting existing ones, whether in one's tradition, or in other traditions, or even creating new rituals, can be very important in the process of healing. He also acknowledges that for some, Christian rituals in themselves are not alienating, if practiced intentionally. He gives the example of those who are Christian religious leaders who perform the ritual of the Eucharist

⁶⁶ Sue, clxv

but are aware of the connections between it and their own bodies and. “For them, the Eucharist signifies that ‘the Word became flesh and lived among us’ through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. That is, the Eucharist is a celebration of the goodness of the human body and God’s creation...”⁶⁷ Rather than see the Eucharistic ritual as an alienating one, they reinterpret it as one that affirms their lives and bodies. This reinterpretation is possible with rituals from any tradition.

Reinterpretation of ritual was being practiced by many of my subjects. Maria, an Evangelical Lutheran pastor, came out to her bishop only to discover that he was unwilling to remove her from her homophobic church placement. Her visa is tied into her job with the church, so she had to find another option for working in the church as a queer woman. Her solution was to attempt to build a new church for her denomination within her city, but the idea has changed since her initial attempts. She gathered members from a variety of sources, and has sought to create a community which meets the needs of each individual. Maria facilitates the services, but tries to create a non-hierarchical process. She puts together services that contain readings from a variety of sources, and also prayers of her own devising. Maria explained that she and the community, “...creat[ed] liturgies and now we have a core group who actually help me, and I’m welcome to their teaching, their leadership, our diversity...”⁶⁸ The group uses alternative versions of prayers and creates services that utilize “inclusive language plus it’s... very contemplative and lots of candles and no preaching... we... do communal reflection.”⁶⁹ While this community originated in the Evangelical Lutheran tradition, with current reinterpretations, it now occupies a sphere of its

⁶⁷ Cheng, “Reclaiming our Traditions...” 237

⁶⁸ Maria, cxxxix

⁶⁹ Ibid., cxxxiv

own. This process of reinterpretation has renewed Maria's connection to God and religion, and healed many of the wrongs done to her by religious institutions.

For Michael, the act of reinterpretation was done as a member of a community. Michael's synagogue created its own prayer book that brings together updated versions of traditional Jewish prayers alongside prayers written by members of the congregation. He explained that, "...the prayer book was inclusive. It brought all of the ... diverse voices of the *shul*⁷⁰... it's just ... very community-focused. Everything that Sha'ar Zahav does is very community."⁷¹ Michael explained his pride about the prayers that he had written. This was in sharp contrast to his stories of the prejudice he has experienced as a Filipino Jewish man. It was evident that being welcomed as an author in the prayer book of his synagogue affirmed Michael's connection to Judaism and his sense of belonging in his community. It gave him power to reinterpret his tradition, both for himself, and for his entire community, and validated his voice and experience.

Cheng believes that reclamation of rituals is a powerful step in helping individuals to connect to their religious tradition. It directly can provide healing by helping an individual to feel that they have agency over their own religious life. When done in conjunction with others, it can also help to bind a community together. Reclamation or reinterpretation of rituals appears very important to queer Asian Americans, and has helped many to engage with their religious traditions.

⁷⁰ Yiddish word for synagogue

⁷¹ Michael, liv

Reclaiming Sacred Spaces

Dr. Cheng explains that many QAPAs have experienced rejection from traditional sacred spaces such as churches or temples, which furthers their alienation from organized religion. He suggests that QAPAs search for other places in which they can encounter “Ultimate Reality”⁷² with other QAPAs. This can occur in a specifically designated space, such as a conference or meeting at an individual’s home, but could also mean viewing dancing at a club as an ecstatic spiritual experience. Cheng also suggests that the internet can become a sacred space through the conversations that occur on listservs and blogs. Finding sacred spaces can be an act of reclamation, but also of redefining the boundaries of where sacred spaces may occur.

One of the clearest examples of reclaiming spaces is the Talking Circle which Irene discussed at length, and Michael mentioned briefly. The Talking Circle is a group created by the Network on Religion and Justice for API LGBT people (also known as NRJ). Irene explained that the Talking Circle was founded because during NRJ meetings, “we found that as we were trying to schedule stuff and do events, people’s stuff was coming out.”⁷³ The members realized that there was not a venue for QAPAs to simply speak together in a safe space, and thus the Talking Circle was born. NRJ is an organization based in Christianity so the Talking Circle incorporates Christian elements, though non-Christians are welcome to attend. The format of the meetings are “a song... a prayer... and a check-in.”⁷⁴ Throughout my research the Talking Circle kept popping up, but I did not realize its power until I spoke with Irene. She described it as a radical space where individual’s lives and experience are validated by the simple presence of speaking and being heard. Even the name, Talking

⁷² Cheng, “Reclaiming our Traditions...” 238

⁷³ Irene, xcv

⁷⁴ Ibid., xciv

Circle, is simple, as is the concept, but Irene spoke of plans to spread them around the country. “Just being in a room with other API queer folk, Christians, like, that’s been very healing for a lot of them.”⁷⁵ Talking Circles are precisely the sort of reclaiming of spaces that Cheng proposes. They provide a source of healing for QAPAs who are able to look around a room and realize that there are others like them, and also provide a concrete community and a connection to religion.

Joseph and Ryan founded a group at their church that is a different type of reclaiming of space. Ryan was on the verge of leaving his job at the church because he felt very uncomfortable in the church as a gay man. He confided in a couple in the parish who asked him not to quit and told him that their daughter was a lesbian, as well. He went to the church leadership and asked for permission to create a group, Rainbow of Love, and asked Joseph to help lead it. Joseph explained that the group was only in its initial stages, but had created a mission statement that amounted to “We want to be the welcoming and inclusive... support... group... for... the parish. For LGBTQ and their families. And friends.”⁷⁶ Holy Trinity is a church that celebrates many cultures, and Joseph’s hope is for gay culture to be celebrated alongside Filipino culture or Vietnamese Culture. Though Rainbow of Love is not an officially Asian American group, it is still an act of reclamation by QAPAs, as that is who leads it. Rather than leaving the church because they were unable to fully represent all aspects of their identity, they sought to carve out a new space within the church where they could find support and community. In February of 2013, several months after the interviews, I followed up with Rainbow of Love, and their group seems to be being well received by the greater church community. The group has fulfilled both the goal of reclaiming a space for

⁷⁵ Ibid., xcv

⁷⁶ Joseph and Ryan, xv

QAPAs and other queer individuals, but also has shaped the church as a whole to be a more welcoming space.

The Talking Circle and Rainbow of Love both fit into Cheng's definition of reclaiming, and both have managed to accomplish a lot. Both are, to a certain extent, publically advertised so as to invite newcomers into their space, but also their existence is radical in itself. They both mix Christianity, queer people, and the Asian American community in a way that drastically alters the perceptions of all who encounter them. They are powerful, radical spaces and help to heal the disconnection, whether internal or external, between QAPAs and religion.

Conclusion

Cheng identified two shared experiences of QAPAs, "profound metaphorical homelessness" and "bodily alienation." Profound metaphorical homelessness was very present in the lives of all of my subjects, as all had the experience of feeling as if different aspects of their identity could not coexist, and that they had nowhere in which to be fully present. Bodily alienation was not central to the experiences of any of my subjects. Both of these experiences do share a common thread of disconnection, though, and disconnection seems to be a core aspect of the experience of QAPAs.

Cheng recommends reclamation as a key to heal from the disconnection experienced by QAPAs. He suggests that QAPAs reclaim spiritual traditions, rites and rituals, and sacred spaces. Nearly all of the subjects I spoke with have practiced some sort of reclamation, and

forged or attempted to forge, connections to other QAPAs, to spiritual traditions or histories, to rituals, or to sacred spaces.

Vivek seemed to be one outlier in this project. He has forged a religious life that he is content with, but has done it in a way that is different from anyone else I spoke with. He comes from a multi-faith family, and growing up in India he was exposed to many different religions. He is inspired by many religions, so much so that when I asked him what religion he identified as, he responded, “Well, all of them! I’m really drawn to many.”⁷⁷ He explained the complex identity that he had forged which involved connections to many religious and spiritual communities and practices. When asked to envision his ideal religious community he declined, explaining that he appreciated the multiplicity of his experiences, and that he would not want to only engage in one community. He explained that he “likes being able to walk into spaces that are uniquely what they are.”⁷⁸ Rather than shape and reclaim spaces or practices, he chooses to engage in a wide range of practices that all help to fulfill some aspect of his identity. Vivek does feel fulfilled by his religious experience, but does so in a way very different from what Dr. Cheng suggests.

Though not all of Cheng’s examples seemed to be directly relevant to the individuals I spoke with, his theme of disconnection being the problem, and reclamation being the solution does ring true. Nevertheless, these are only some of the experiences that make up the lives of the QAPAs. There are many other experiences, from deeply personal conversations with God, to the manifestation of religion in public spaces, which contribute to the QAPA experience. These will be explored in further detail in the next section.

⁷⁷ Vivek, lvii

⁷⁸ Ibid., lxx

Ideal Religious Communities

Though I did not know it initially, the most important part of my interviews was when I asked my subjects to describe their ideal religious or spiritual community. Some of them hesitated, and I prompted them to think outside the bounds of the current constraints of their religion, and to think broadly. The answers that they gave to this question were more organic and unscripted than those for any other question. Though nearly everyone found at least some aspect they would change within their community, some felt they had much farther to go before it would be realized.

Almost Ideal

Irene, a Filipina Methodist, began by saying that Pine United Methodist Church was her ideal religious community, which was surprising because she had described the United Methodist Church's oppressive stance on gay clergy. She then explained aspects that she would change about Pine, including the demographics so that Pine would cater to a wider range of ages. More importantly, even though Pine is one of the most progressive Asian American churches, she would want the church to be less heteronormative. The heteronormativity occurs unintentionally through aspects like the praise of young straight families, or the idealization of marriage even though not all members can legally get married. She also believed that churches must do social justice work, not just within their own community, but also globally. Her ideal community was very close to the one that exists currently, but with slight modifications around ideas of heteronormativity, demographics, and social justice.

Michael, a Filipino Jew, also told me that he had his ideal religious community in his synagogue Sha'ar Zahav. He appreciated that Sha'ar Zahav was welcoming and had all different ages of members. Before he joined, he was worried that it would not be diverse because it was an LGBT synagogue, but he was surprised there were not only gay men, but also lesbians, transgendered people, straight people, and children. It was not until much later in the conversation that he told me anything negative about his experiences with Judaism, all of which had taken place outside of his synagogue community.

Vivek's interview was different than the rest of my interviews, mostly because he does not have a sole community that he is part of. Rather, he told me initially that he already has an ideal religious experience in his life, but that it is "...experienced in diverse encounters. Sometimes, discrete, sometimes related."⁷⁹ He offered to try to imagine a community that met all of his needs and where all of these aspects occurred together, but as he spoke he realized that he appreciated the distinctness and diversity of these experiences. In thinking of places where he felt spiritually fulfilled, he listed places that were accepting of gay people, but acknowledged that he was only thinking of those places because of the nature of my research.

He also brought up another category of relation between religion and homosexuality, which is religions or religious communities that do not care about sexual orientation. I was surprised when he offered an example of being in a mosque where he and his partner were able to sit in peace. He admitted that the Imam probably would disapprove of them if they asked him directly about his thoughts on homosexuality, but for that moment, sexual orientation did not matter. He also gave the example of practitioners of Sufi mysticism who

⁷⁹ Vivek, lxx

are members of a community where they have intense spiritual experiences together but do not share anything about their personal lives.

Maria, a Filipina pastor, explained that in some ways she has her ideal community currently, but not in her denomination, rather she has it in the alternative community she is in the process of building. She explained the oppressive nature of her relationship with her denomination, which technically allows gay ordination, but in reality still had many homophobic practices. Recently, though, she began the process of building a new congregation. She brought up how her community had spent time writing together about what they would want for their ideal religious community. One point that she brought up was that racial diversity was important for her in her community, which Michael had also mentioned. She also talked about how her new community is not a queer community, but the existence of other same-sex couples and the fact that she and her partner can worship together makes it a safe space for her. She also explained the non-hierarchical nature of her community, and how everyone had a part to read during services. This especially stood out to me because she is a pastor, which often is a hierarchical position in a church, but she actively works to combat that.

Far From Ideal

Some of my other subjects felt that they had a lot farther to go before they would have their ideal community, which some believed would not exist in this lifetime. Sue had a hard time imagining her ideal community, and had to be prompted to keep describing it. She mostly described past communities that she had been part of and had appreciated, but seemed

to have trouble getting beyond the constraints of reality. She explained an experience with other women in her home country, some of whom were also Catholic, others who were different denominations, who would get together and discuss spirituality. She appreciated this community, especially when it expanded to include a social justice ministry. She also explained about the Woman Church that she had attended in the past, which she described as similar to a Catholic service, but composed of all feminist women, and much less hierarchical. It seemed to me that she kept describing woman-only spaces because being with other women, gay or straight, seemed to be more accepting, and easier to bridge the bounds of patriarchy and homophobia that usually bind the Church. It didn't seem that she believed that a community such as this could be large or mainstream, as she said:

...but it may be a very small community. You cannot expect to be a lot. Because you have to almost agree on all this stuff. There may be some people who'd like to do that, yeah. But it will be maybe just a small community.⁸⁰

As she spoke, it was clear the lack of agency or power she felt she had over her religious community. I had assumed that as an academic in a liberal institution she would have more resources to create the type of community she wanted.

Joseph and Ryan also discussed what they would need to do to create an ideal community, but they expressed a lot of doubt that it would happen in the foreseeable future. Joseph began with a description that followed the format of his existing community. He saw his ideal community as a Catholic church where the Priest is accepting, where he and his husband are able to pray together, and where gay culture is celebrated alongside the other cultures of the parish, such as Filipino and Portuguese cultures. When I turned to Ryan to ask if he would describe his ideal community, he immediately said, "Yeah, I can, but I don't

⁸⁰ Sue, clxvii

think it's ever going to exist in my lifetime.”⁸¹ I encouraged him to describe it anyway, and what he described still followed the basic schema of the Catholic Church, albeit much more radical. He envisioned a church where women were equal to men, where sexual orientation was a non-issue, and where Catholicism was de-colonized (though he did not use that term specifically). Though neither person saw this change as happening soon, both expressed belief that it would happen one day.

Shared Experiences

Each subject described their ideal community independently (with the exception of Joseph and Ryan), but several themes emerged that provide important insights into the needs of queer Asian Americans. While the following themes are not the only commonalities in my interviews, they seem to be representative of what many queer Asian Americans seek in communities: a space to be gay, Asian and religious, non-hierarchy, and one where their specific religious needs are met, either through belief and/or ritual.

Gay, Asian, and Religious

A theme that emerged was the strong need by individuals to find a place where they could be gay, Asian American (or Asian) and religious. This came in many variations, such as Joseph and Ryan who both spoke about needing to find a place to be gay, Catholic and Filipino, or Irene who spoke about being in a community where all the aspects of her identity were so accepted that she could simply be present. Vivek also spoke of the same issue,

⁸¹ Joseph and Ryan, xxx

saying that he desired a community where he “know[s] that my gayness and my spirituality can go together in the same space.”⁸² This was the refrain that I heard most often in my interviews, always in different incarnations, but present nonetheless.

For some individuals this emerged as a desire to be able to worship with their spouse by their side. Joseph told a story about the moment in Mass where everyone is instructed to give the kiss of peace. He explained that he and his husband “you know, we embrace each other, sometimes I give him a peck on the cheek and then we turn to other people and they’re like [*he makes a face and recoils*]... and they can’t make eye contact with us.”⁸³ This upset him greatly, and made him feel very unwelcome. When he explained his ideal community, it was one where gay couples are such a normal part of the landscape that no one thinks twice when seeing them together in church. Maria also found it important to be able to pray with her partner. She explained how much of a difference it makes to her that she even can call her partner words of endearment in front of other members of her community, and that they can help each other with their respective ministries. Vivek follows many religions, one of which is Hinduism. He explained that in Hindu temples, if a couple is there together, they will offer a joint sacrifice. Though his partner is not Hindu, he still always feels a pang of loneliness at these moments, and at times offers an internal prayer for his partner and him as a couple.

Sue explained how difficult it can be to find a religious community that is LGBT-friendly, ethnically Asian, and one’s specific religious faith. She said that many people realize that they cannot come out in their Asian churches or communities and then go to progressive white churches where they believe they will be accepted. She continued:

⁸² Vivek, lx

⁸³ Joseph and Ryan, xviii

That's not going to help you! Even if you go to queer, um, white gay church. ... if they want address the other layer... it's not always easy. Unless the church [has] the resources to, to deal with it. But most church won't. So it's just a very rare place to find all the resources.⁸⁴

Sue believes that addressing queer identity through a white lens will not truly address it for Asian Americans, and will not help them to form a cohesive identity. It is not clear how she envisioned this occurring, but it seems that it would necessitate a community composed of Asian or Asian Americans (perhaps from the same country or language-group), who are queer (or perhaps queer-affirming), and who belong to the same religious tradition.

Non-Hierarchical

Others explained that their ideal communities were non-hierarchical. Maria articulated this when explaining the community that she has been working to create. While she functions as the pastor of the community by writing the services, she asks for everyone who attends to lead at least one of the readings. Sue explained a similar scenario in her Woman Church where rather than one person giving sermons, everyone participates in communal reflection. Sue seemed to conflate hierarchy with patriarchy and heteronormativity. Perhaps she saw patriarchy as causing the hierarchical power structures, or believed that the power structures further the oppressive stances of the Church. Maria and Sue had two of the more negative church experiences out of all the subjects, and as a result have joined or created alternative communities

Michael also explained the non-hierarchical aspect of his synagogue. Rather than using the *siddur* (prayer book) published by the Union of Reform Judaism, Sha'ar Zahav created its own siddur composed of members' own prayers and readings. Additionally,

⁸⁴ Sue, clxxiii

congregants lead both Friday night and Saturday morning services, going so far as to even give the sermons on their respective days. He gave these as examples of the reasons as to why he loves being a member of Sha'ar Zahav.

All three of these subjects, Maria, Sue and Michael, no longer participate actively in the denomination in which they were raised. All have joined alternative communities which function somewhat outside the defined bounds of the denominations from which they were formed. Others, such as Irene, Ryan and Joseph, all explained their ideal communities as still being facilitated by a priest or pastor. This follows suit, because all three of them are committed to remaining within their denominations and are somewhat satisfied with them, so they would not have a reason to change this structure.

Belief and Ritual

My subjects mentioned both belief and ritual in their interviews. I did not specifically ask about belief, but several individuals mentioned it as the reason for their continued involvement in religion. Ritual was explained in more diverse terms, as it encompassed a wide range of religions and actions. Through analyzing the interviews, it emerged that belief was discussed most in my interviews of Christian queer Asian Americans, while ritual was much more visible in my interviews of queer Asian Americans of other religions.

Belief is the most difficult aspect to analyze in the complex equation of what makes up an individual's ideal community. It is often the answer for as to why a consenting adult would stay within a denomination where their life and the way in which they love are condemned. Belief cannot be outwardly observed in the same way the presence of culturally relevant customs or gender-neutral pronouns can be. Looking back on my interviews, it is

clear to me that I asked many questions as an outsider. So often I queried subjects as to why they have remained in oppressive denominations while thinking only about the community and practice aspects of these institutions, and forgetting that belief is a vital element, as well.

Ryan, a Catholic, concluded his explanation of his ideal community by saying that while he believed progress would be slow, he believed it would ultimately happen because of his religious beliefs. “[S]omeday it’ll happen, because I believe in God and the Holy Spirit and that they’re stronger than human beings, but it’s not going to happen soon.”⁸⁵ This served as a stark reminder that the interview was being conducted inside a Catholic church. The reason that Joseph and Ryan still take part in an institution that condemns their sexual orientations is that they are Catholics and believe in the Catholic faith. It really emphasized the complicated place that they occupy, where their belief in the Trinity is at such odds with the actions of their Church. Both spoke about attempts to leave the Church, but the integration of Filipino culture, along with their religious faith, pulled them back within Catholicism.

Maria, an Evangelical Lutheran, also spoke about the role of belief in her life choices. Some of this was made clear as she told about being called to become a pastor. She answered this call even though her denomination did not ordain gay people, going so far as to actually date men to fit what was expected of her as a seminarian. She also explained the conversation that she had when she told her sister that she was gay. Her sister had trouble accepting Maria’s sexual orientation, and asked her if that had been the reason why she became a pastor. Maria clarified that long ago she had cried to God asking why she was attracted to women, but had always received a positive response:

⁸⁵ Joseph and Ryan, xxx

I've never experienced rejection. In all of my prayers. And I do not know how to express this to you. I only felt love by God. I only felt grace and love. Not even forgiveness. There's no forgiveness. There's no sin to forgive in this area of my life. And I only felt grace and loved.⁸⁶

Though Maria's denomination is oppressive towards her as a gay woman, her relationship with God validates and empowers her and her identity. Maria explained that she talks about this with many young people who are in the process of coming out but feel oppressed or scared because of their religious beliefs. She tells them to pray and talk to God, and her faith is so strong that she knows that they will receive the same love and grace that she has felt. This answer to her prayers is the reason why Maria is a pastor, and the reason that rather than saying no to Christianity entirely, or at least leaving her denomination, she continues to stay within it and fight for its transformation. For Maria, her faith is what drives her to be a religious leader and to fight oppression to remain a Christian.

The rituals my subjects mentioned were from a variety of traditions, so it was more difficult to see their similarities. Michael explained his most fulfilling religious experience as the day he became officially Jewish. He bathed ritually in the *mikvah*,⁸⁷ and explained that he cried as the *beit din*⁸⁸ asked him questions about his conversion process. Though he had been studying Judaism and attending services for two years, this was the moment that he really felt like a Jew, and ritually secured his place as a member of the Jewish people. Though Michael spoke extensively about his Judaism, he did not mention his religious beliefs. Rather, all of the moments he spoke of as being significant had to do with experiences such as his conversion, or hearing a meaningful sermon.

⁸⁶ Maria, clv

⁸⁷ ritual bath

⁸⁸ the religious leader facilitating the immersion

Vivek also extensively spoke about rituals. He mentioned his participation in ritual, explaining that he sings regularly in Hindu temples, which serves as a sort of meditation for him but also provides him with a community. He also practices meditation regularly as part of *Vedanta*⁸⁹ classes and worships at Hindu temples. Vivek takes part in a wide range of rituals from many traditions.

Charlie, a non-religious Taoist, explained that in the Queer Taoist group they practice divination using the *I Ching*. Members ask questions when they have uncertainty in their life, and throw dice and then consult the chapter of the I Ching that corresponds to their number. Though Charlie is adamantly non-religious, divining is a ritual that he did not seem to be uncomfortable with.

All three men, Jewish, multi-faith, and Taoist, explained very different sorts of rituals that make up their religious or spiritual experiences, which made it hard to identify the commonalities between them. When compared to the Christian subjects, a clearer picture emerges. Perhaps queer Asian Americans have different needs for their community depending on their religion. It is easier to identify what Christian queer Asian Americans need as I had a wider sampling of them. It is much more difficult to identify what non-Christians queer Asian Americans might need, as I only had three, all of whom come from different traditions. This does point out the importance of realizing the lens through which religion is viewed in the United States. Christianity, as the dominant religion is the norm by which everything else is measured. It seems unavoidable, in this project, not to examine Christian versus non-Christian, as that is the clearest delineation based on the demographics of the study, but it still must be noted that this is being done.

⁸⁹ a form of philosophical teachings related to Hinduisim

What this shows is that there is not a single mold that can be reproduced to create communities that meet the needs of every queer Asian American. Each individual has different needs, including those formed by their country of origin, gender, religion and life experiences. The examples presented here are the different needs created by one's religion, but similar questions could be asked about any aspect of an individual's identity, and different answers to what an ideal community is would emerge.

Solutions

Several solutions emerged that helped the subjects to come closer to having an ideal community. Similar to the solutions that Dr. Cheng presented, these both involve a sort of reconnection. The first is finding oneself in one's history, which has connections to Dr. Cheng's example of reclaiming traditions. The difference is that this does not necessitate any sort of religious or spiritual action, unlike practicing a new tradition, but rather is accomplished through research. The second is a strong commitment to social justice, which serves to bridge the gaps between communities and helps the subjects to right the wrongs done to them or other queer Asian Americans. Both of these are empowering because they help queer Asian Americans to realize that they have agency in their lives and that their lives have validity.

Finding Oneself in History

Sue spoke about the significance of finding examples of same-sex relations in one's history as a way of proving that same-sex attraction is not solely a Western occurrence. Though I had encountered other authors who wrote about the significance of understanding one's history, I did not fully grasp the importance of this process until interviewing Sue. She referred to this cultural retrieval as one's "queer genealogy"⁹⁰ which emphasized the familial lineage aspect of it. She also spoke of needing to not simply seek examples of same-sex relationships and leave the matter, but also the need to understand the situation more thoroughly. She suggested that researchers ask the following questions:

⁹⁰ Sue, clxxiv

[E]ven though [same-sex relations] happens in...the past, under what cultural context? How... were all this kind of relationship...understood? ... [In] Ancient China, it's about the privilege of, of male elite men ... or government officers. Of course they have the privilege to... have relationship with both men and women. So [we must] understand it in a more critical way. ... do we need to copy this? The whole critical reflection...It's not just about retrieving historical experience.⁹¹

As a scholar, it is clear to Sue that same-sex attraction is not a new occurrence. She thinks that this knowledge is vital for queer Asian Americans to have, as it helps them to find peace and understanding. They are able to see that though others around them may not understand or approve of their sexual orientation, it occurred long throughout their history.

Ryan also has gained a stronger identity because of research into his ancestral history. He had done research about the pre-Hispanic Philippines where the religious leaders were either women or men who dressed as women who were known as the Babaylan. His research had inspired him to such a great extent that he emailed me before we met explaining about the Babaylan, and suggesting a scholar for me to contact. Through this research, he met up with the lead researcher on the Babaylan, and he described how she helped him put pieces of his life back together. After experiencing so much shame and confusion throughout his life about being Filipino American, and being gay, and also experiencing visions of his ancestors, he finally met with someone who was able to tell him that there were other people like him in his history. Ryan says:

And that's just so fascinating to think, 'Wow. In our ancestral past, before Catholicism people like us were held up and respected as spiritual leaders!' ... If we had been born in the Philippines 500 years ago, ... We would have been held up as models to the community. And in our Filipino community right now you can't.⁹²

For Ryan, being able to see himself in his history was incredibly inspirational and very healing. In the current Filipino community, he is not able to be out as a gay man and still

⁹¹ Ibid., clxxv

⁹² Joseph and Ryan, xiii

work in a Catholic Church, but perhaps, as a Babaylan, he could have been an effeminate man and a religious leader. Similar to Cheng, Ryan did not seem to have any sort of turmoil about identifying as Christian while taking part in or examining this pre-Christian tradition, as well. Reclaiming his history began a process of healing for Ryan that helped him reconcile the different aspects of his identity.

Ryan and Sue's experiences proved to be very healing and empowering for them. Though this research into one's history only emerged in these two interviews, both subjects spoke extensively about how important this process was. It is important to note that both Sue and Ryan had the resources available to conduct this research, and that many queer Asian Americans may not. One solution is for this kind of research to be published in a more accessible fashion. Asian American religious communities also should find ways to incorporate this sort of research into their collective history, and help to spread this knowledge to both straight and queer Asian Americans. If heterosexual Asian Americans were also exposed to this sort of research, it could help to gain more acceptance for queer Asian Americans, as being queer could be seen as part of a long historical lineage, and not as a modern or Western influence.

Social Justice

Many of the queer Asian American subjects desired a community committed to social justice. Though few mentioned it in the part of the interview that dealt with ideal communities, at other points they explained projects they wanted to begin, or justice issues that existed in their communities. Social justice serves several different purposes, including

connecting different communities, empowering individuals, and also changing norms, either within one's own community or elsewhere.

Irene believes that churches have a duty to serve not just their members, but the greater community. She feels that Reconciling Churches, or churches that are welcoming of gay people, should work particularly on LGBT activism, giving examples such as queer undocumented immigrants, or places where homosexuality is illegal. Pine, Irene's church, became Reconciling many years ago, and it is now a core, normal part of its identity. With this in mind, Irene feels that they must move on to doing new work and finding ways to support organizations that are not connected to larger institutions. Pine's commitment to social justice has helped it to connect to other organizations, like the NRJ (the Network on Religion and Justice for API LGBT people) and, as an Asian American church, they have used their power within the Bay Area Asian American communities to work for change for greater acceptance of queer Asian Americans.

Joseph and Ryan's work is directly related to social justice, as well. During my interview, the string of gay teenager suicides that occurred in 2012 was mentioned. The men realized that that was an issue that Rainbow of Love could address, and made plans to dedicate a mass to the victims. Joseph explained that "the response of the Catholic bishops to the suicides was just awful,"⁹³ so their idea was to offer an alternative Catholic reaction. The formation of Rainbow of Love is also social justice, as it works towards making the church a more welcoming place for queer people. Though neither Ryan nor Joseph referred to Rainbow of Love as a social justice organization, the group's very existence is fighting the status quo of the Catholic Church. In this case, their social justice work has helped them to remain within their community, as they work to change their community from the inside out.

⁹³ Ibid., xxv

The realization that others in their parish supported them, as well as the venue for creative change, helped both men to remain Catholics and to remain members of Holy Trinity.

Additionally, much of my conversation with Maria had to do specifically with social justice. Nearly every aspect of her life has to do with her work as an activist, even in the radical nature of the religious community she facilitates. The instance where her ideal of social justice emerged most strongly was when she explained other denominations that she has considered joining when Evangelical Lutherans felt too oppressive. She explained that she is at times jealous of United Church of Christ and Unitarian Universalist congregations because of their commitment to social justice. Much of the activism that Maria does is through religious organizations, such as working with undocumented students to have them share their stories in churches. For Maria, religious faith and a call to social justice are interchangeable.

All of these individuals specifically mentioned queer justice work that they believe must happen. One possibility for their commitment is that they realize that while they are, to some extent, safe as a queer Asian Americans, they are all aware that many others are not safe. This is a way for them to work on these issues, but it also helps them to become more grounded within their own communities through forging connections with others engaged in the same work.

Existing Communities

In addition to questions about their ideal religious community, I also queried my subjects on their current involvement in religious communities. The following are a sampling

of the communities in which my subjects are involved. All of them are religious and queer, but only two are specifically ethnically Asian. Each group is successful in different ways, and all meet different needs of queer Asian Americans.

Talking Circle

Several of my subjects had at some point been involved in the Network on Religion and Justice for LGBT API people (NRJ) Talking Circle group. The Talking Circle is a simple format where participants gather, sing a song or read a prayer together, and then all are given a space to talk. While the format is simple, it is a radical notion. It appears to be the only consistent Asian American queer religious space, at least in the United States. It is rooted in Christianity, but I heard from others, including Michael who is Jewish, that those from any religion are welcome. Irene explained that, “Just being in a room with other API queer folk, Christians, like, that’s been very healing for a lot of them.”⁹⁴ The Talking Circle is the community most specific to queer Asian Americans, but for many, it cannot take the place of a traditional religious service, as it is more of a “pastoral space.”⁹⁵

The Talking Circle currently only exists in the Bay Area, but Irene spoke about her desire to help spread the Talking Circle format across the country, and that it would be possible nearly anywhere as long as there were two queer Asian Americans to sit together and talk. She explained that when she has met queer Asian Americans from other parts of the country, they always are amazed at the existence of the Talking Circle, and they see a great need for it in their communities as well.

⁹⁴ Irene, xcv

⁹⁵ Ibid., xciv

The Talking Circle has a very visible online presence.⁹⁶ When this project began, there was little information about the Talking Circle online, but the website was updated in 2013. There now is more specific information about dates, times and meeting places, as well as a list of past topics and discussion points. Many of the topics they have discussed were very relevant to the questions that arose in this research, especially one from March 2009:

Some people question why API LGBT Christians who have felt excluded by their API churches don't just go to a ...church that is reconciling or open & affirming. It is important for many API LGBTs that their church is an API church. Why is this? Why don't API LGBT folks just go to White ... reconciling or open & affirming churches? Why is it important for us to create LGBT-affirming API churches?⁹⁷

This topic addresses many of the concerns that the subjects in this study brought up, and directly speaks to the necessity of the Talking Circle. The Talking Circle fulfils many needs by providing a strong community and a space to ask hard questions and receive support from other Christian queer Asian Americans.

Rainbow of Love

Rainbow of Love⁹⁸ is a group founded by Ryan and Joseph because Ryan felt so isolated by the homophobic stance of the Catholic Church that he considered leaving his parish. He confided in an older couple at the church who told him that their daughter was gay as well, and asked him not to leave. They contemplated what sort of action to take, and decided that the safest course would be to create a community that could bring together the LGBTQ members of the church along with their family members and other allies.

⁹⁶ "Talking Circle." *Network on Religion and Justice for Asian Pacific Islander Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People*, 2013. <http://www.netrj.org/?p=talkingcircle>.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ as noted in the appendix, this is a pseudonym to shield Joseph and Ryan's identity

The existence of a group like this in a Catholic Church is radical, even in the Bay Area. The group aims to shed light on the stories of the queer members, and to raise awareness of their plight to the rest of the congregation. It also serves as a way to support the queer members of the church and to help them realize that they are not alone. The church that hosts Rainbow of Love is very multi-cultural, and has events that celebrate the many cultures of the church. Rainbow of Love aims to celebrate gay culture alongside the Vietnamese, Filipino, and Portuguese cultures of the church. Rainbow of Love is mentioned once in the church's bulletin, but other than that does not seem to be advertised on the church's website. It is not a specifically Asian American group, but is lead by two Filipino American men, and about half the membership is Asian American. Rainbow of Love began in June 2011, so it is still in its initial stages, but it has created a voice for the queer members of the congregation, and helped the parish to become more welcoming as a whole.

Queer Taoists

The Queer Taoist group has been in existence for at least seventeen years.⁹⁹ They meet bi-weekly in members' homes or cafes to study a Taoist text, such as the Tao de Jing or Lao Tzu, and to discuss Taoism. They also sometimes practice divination by consulting the I Ching. It is a group that seems mainly to be composed of Caucasian and Asian American members. They advertise very publically on the internet, which may be because they are not housed within another religious organization so they have no reason to fear repercussions. Vivek and Charlie have very different religious views, but both are members of the Queer Taoists, which points to the diversity within the group. For Charlie, in addition to the group

⁹⁹ "San Francisco Queer Taoists." *Meetup*, 2013. <http://www.meetup.com/San-Francisco-Queer-Taoists/>.

being a source of community, it helps him to reinforce his Taoist beliefs such as “strik[ing] balance in your life.”¹⁰⁰ Vivek sees the group as a “very safe space to think about deep issues.”¹⁰¹ The Queer Taoists provides both an alternative queer community and a religious or spiritual space for its members.

LGBT API Bible Study

The LGBT API (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Asian Pacific Islander) Bible Study is a very unique organization. This seemed to be precisely the sort of community that queer Asian Americans need. Through this study it has become clear that there are many sorts of communities that meet the diverse needs of queer Asian Americans, but the LGBT API Bible Study is still very interesting in its specificity. There are currently two such Bible studies, one which Irene is involved with, and one which is led by Jess Delegencia of the Asian and Pacific Islander Roundtable of the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry at the Pacific School of Religion.¹⁰²

Irene talked about the API LGBT Bible Study at Pine. She explained that it switches between weeks with Bible study and weeks with music and meditation. It does not consist of solely queer individuals, but rather the LGBT title serves as a signifier that it is a safe space for queer topics to be discussed.

There is a little bit of information on each Bible Study offered on the NRJ website¹⁰³ and the Pine website,¹⁰⁴ but there is conflicting information about when the meetings are.

¹⁰⁰ Charlie, v

¹⁰¹ Vivek, lx

¹⁰² “Asian and Pacific Islander Roundtable.” *The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry*, 2009. http://www.clgs.org/programs/api_roundtable.

¹⁰³ “Bible Studies.” *Network on Religion and Justice for Asian Pacific Islander Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People*, 2013. <http://www.netrj.org/?p=biblestudies>.

Both the NRJ and Pine UMC are Asian American spaces that are LGBT-safe so they are able to be open about their queer events. Though the Bible studies, or at least the one at Pine, are not actually composed mainly of queer Asian Americans, they are two of the rare queer-friendly Asian American Christian spaces.

Congregation Sha'ar Zahav

Congregation Sha'ar Zahav was founded in 1977 by several gay Orthodox men. It now is a Reform Jewish synagogue that is “deeply rooted in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer sensibilities.”¹⁰⁵ While congregation Sha'ar Zahav is not an Asian American community, Michael explained that there are a handful of other Filipinos who are members there. Most studies about Asian Americans and religion would not include Jewish congregations, as Judaism is practiced by very few Asian Americans, but as Sha'ar Zahav is a very important community in Michael's life, so it is important to explain. Though Michael acknowledges that as an Asian American Jew he is in the minority, he explained how welcomed he has felt at Sha'ar Zahav. This congregation meets his needs as a queer Asian American by providing him with a religious community and a place to be with other queer people.

Commonalities

Each of the communities explained above meets various needs of religious or spiritual queer Asian Americans. Some, such as the LGBT API Bible Study, the Queer Taoists, and Congregation Sha'ar Zahav, and to some extent the Talking Circle, serve directly religious or

¹⁰⁴ “Bible Studies.” *Pine United Methodist Church*, 2013. <http://www.pineumc.org/?p=biblestudies>.

¹⁰⁵ “Welcome to Congregation Sha'ar Zahav.” *Congregation Sha'ar Zahav*. Accessed February 17, 2013. <http://shaarzahav.org/>.

spiritual needs by providing a space for queer Asian Americans to study or pray together. Others, such as Rainbow of Love, and more directly, the Talking Circle, offer a safe space for queer Asian Americans to be together and be open about their experiences. Whether or not the organizations specifically are Asian and queer in addition to being centered around a religion, they all serve to provide a community where queer Asian Americans can be open about who they are. For many people, this may be the only religious space in which many aspects of their identity are able to coexist, so they truly serve as a space where one can be queer, Asian and religious.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the role of religion in the lives of queer Asian Pacific Americans. During the study, very few, if any Pacific Islander voices were present, and none were subjects of the interviews, so the research became about the religious lives of queer Asian Americans instead. Religious communities soon came to be the focus, as an individual's internal religious thoughts are much more difficult to examine. Given the scope of this project, there never was a hope to have a representative sample pool, but rather the goal was to gather enough information to put together some of the pieces of this complex puzzle.

Demographics

This project began by examining the myriad of terms in English that are used to describe queer Asian Americans and their religious lives. Asian, Asian Pacific Islander (API), Asian American, Asian Pacific American, all with or without a hyphen, are a handful of the terms used to define the individuals whose lives were examined. Those are only the terms used to describe the broad identity group, and do not include the more frequently used terms that specify where one's ancestry is from, such as "Korean American" or "South Asian." In contrast, when I asked my subjects about their cultural identities I heard responses that dealt with nationalities and generations such as: "Chinese," "Second Generation Filipino American," "mixed-race, multicultural person of mixed European and Filipino background," but also those that dealt with other aspects of identity such as "activist," "child of an immigrant," and "Jewish." The responses made me question the validity of doing research

about an identity group as broad as “Asian American.” In fact, the term “Asian American” was only said twelve times by my subjects, and never was given as the answer when I asked about their cultural identity. Most of these occurrences were either names of organizations, or when Sue was trying to speak in broad terms so as to hide her identity.

The Pew Forum reports the following as the percentages of Asian American who identify as each of these religions: Christians- 42%, Non-Affiliated- 26%, Buddhist- 14%, Hindu- 10%.¹⁰⁶ This study interviewed five Christians of various denominations, one Jew, one non-religious Taoist, and one multi-faith person. There was no attempt to recruit participants based on the religious demographics of Asian Americans, but it is interesting to see how the religions of the subjects compare to Pew forum results. If the subjects of this study were divided into percentages, they would be: Christian- 62%, Non-Affiliated- 12%, Multi-Faith 12%, Jewish- 12%. Christians, Multi-faith individuals, and Jews would appear to be over represented, and Buddhists, Hindus, and the non-affiliated under represented. Again, though, the goal of this project was never to form a representative sample group, but rather to take a snapshot of the religious lives of a sampling of queer Asian Americans.

Also important is the skew of men to women in this survey. Five men were interviewed, while only three women were. This may seem like a small margin, but the men were much easier to find. When looking for subjects to interview, at a certain point I was in contact with twelve men and no women. Some of the men were ultimately unable to meet with me which resulted in the current number. The female subjects were all contacts of the male subjects to whom I reached out when I realized the disparity in gender representation. Important also to note is that I had no trans* individuals (perhaps with the exception of Irene

¹⁰⁶ Pew Forum (2012)

who explained that she sometimes identifies as “gender non-conforming”),¹⁰⁷ as well as no bisexual subjects, so this survey is not really about “LGBTQ” individuals but really “LGQ.”

Asian American Religions

In the Background section of this project, I examined a quote from the book *Asian American Religions* by Carnes and Yang. “The emphasis is on religion as a doing—rather than a believing—of ritual, worship attendance, charity, and age hierarchy—and an especially strong patriarchy.”¹⁰⁸ There are two distinct concepts represented here. One is on the importance of “doing” in a religion, rather than just about beliefs, and the other is on the structural aspects of religion.

When analyzing the interviews, I came across a noticeable divide between my Christian and non-Christian subjects. The Christians in the project spoke about God and about belief much more, while non-Christians spoke much more about the importance of practice. Upon re-examining the quote from Carnes and Yang, I read through the interviews again to try to understand if ritual was present in all of the subject’s religious lives or only the non-Christians. About an hour into my interview of Maria, she asked me about my religious tradition, and, when I told her that I was Jewish, she responded, “So it’s good because you also have rituals” and laughed.¹⁰⁹ Up to this point in her interview, she had not mentioned anything that I understood as ritual. She had mentioned, though, processions of saints in her home town. This did not appear to me, as an American Jew, to be ritual, but perhaps this is

¹⁰⁷ Irene, lxxviii

¹⁰⁸ Carnes and Yang, 5

¹⁰⁹ Maria, cxxxviii

what she meant. She also explained the Eucharistic ritual that her community had developed. Rather than the traditional process of the minister conducting the ritual alone, and with only bread and wine, in her congregation everyone spreads their hands out, and they bless the whole dinner. Perhaps she took the care to explain this ritual to me because, while belief is very important to her (she explained her conversations with God elsewhere in the interview), she also places high value on practice.

Again, ritual was much more direct in my interviews with non-Christians. As explained earlier, Michael spoke about his most meaningful religious experience being when he bathed in the mikvah and officially became a Jew, Vivek spoke about many rituals, including giving offerings in Hindu temples, and Charlie spoke about divining using the I Ching. Could it be that these religions place a higher value on ritual? Or is it simply that the Christian subjects also practice ritual, but that I, as a Western student, am so clouded by the Christianization of Religious Studies in the United States that I was unable to see ritual in their Christian practice?

These questions are answered in part by Victoria and Bhattar, two queer Asian Americans, who explain that, especially for Asian Americans, religion and culture are inseparable:

My use of the terms *Hindu* and *Indian* as being one in the same in this work is intentional. They are interchangeable in my mind because of the highly integrated presence that Hinduism and Indian culture have had in my life. I really cannot distinguish one from the other.¹¹⁰

Bhattar's example of Hinduism and India can be extended to any of these traditions. This was very evident through Ryan and Joseph, who explained that they had tried to join more progressive Christian churches, but returned to Holy Trinity because there was no Filipino

¹¹⁰ Bhattar and Victoria, 41

culture in the other congregations. Nearly every individual I spoke with explained the importance of their culture in their religious tradition. If the earlier quote about the importance of ritual is understood in this light, as including all the cultural actions that can be present in religious communities, then there is quite a bit more ritual present than is immediately visible.

The other half of the quote from Carnes and Yang is about the structural aspects of Asian American religions. Charity ties in to the strong commitment to social justice that Irene, Joseph, Ryan and Maria spoke at length about and desired in their religious communities. Patriarchy and hierarchy were also present in the religious communities of the subjects, but this was not something that they desired. Sue, Maria and Michael spoke about their desire for a non-hierarchical community, with more horizontal leadership structures. Ryan also spoke about his desire for a non-patriarchal Catholic Church where women were also ordained.

Carnes and Yang seem to be accurate in their portrayal of Asian American religions, as the subjects I interviewed were from a variety of traditions but all had many aspects that the researchers had isolated. It is interesting that some aspects of these communities were positive and desired by the queer Asian American subjects, such as the importance of cultural activities (ritual) and social justice (charity), but others were negative aspects that the subjects had attempted to change (patriarchy and hierarchy).

Queer Religion

Robert Goss was one of the formative authors in shaping my definition of Queer Theology. He calls for a Queer Theology that “turns upside down, inside out, and defies heteronormative and gay normative theologies.”¹¹¹ In 1999, he explained the normativity implicit in gay theology and wrote about the coming shift in how theology occurs. He saw “queer” as transgressing those boundaries and shocking us into a new form of theology:

Queer theory has also deconstructed the colonial category of ‘gay’ as white, North-American, middle-class, late capitalist, and even middle aged. Gay identity seems too hardened, too mainstream a category for adequate queer theological reflection, and too inflexible for developing a full queer politics of difference.”¹¹²

Goss views Queer Theology as radical and world-changing, and very different than Gay Theology. The viewpoint he articulates seems as if it would be liberating, and would expand the boundaries of theology as it currently exists.

Unfortunately, it seems that, despite the new label of queer, not much has changed in the nearly fifteen years since this article was published. Though queer is used as a more inclusive term, when Goss said, “Gay identity can be as confining as ‘closetedness’ in its minoritization and elision of the social-cultural differences of same-sex desire,”¹¹³ he could have been speaking of queer identity today.

Many of my subjects explained their complicated relationships with queer religious spaces. Ryan, Joseph, Sue, Maria and Michael had all attempted to become part of queer denominations, but, except for Michael, had left because of the “whiteness” or “maleness” of the religious space. Maria explained, that when she was coming out, she wanted to be part of a church with others like her. “I looked for a church where I can [see] as many gay people...

¹¹¹ Goss, 45

¹¹² Ibid., 50

¹¹³ Ibid., 45

worshiping together. So I went to MCC¹¹⁴ probably three times... it's heavily... uh... male. ... I mean gay men than gay woman... I didn't feel comfortable with that."¹¹⁵ She was looking for confirmation that there were others like her, that there were other queer, religious, Filipino women, but instead only found men at that congregation. It is similar to Ryan when he spoke about attending United Church of Christ services that also professed being LGBT-friendly, "I mean, I grew up with stories, you know, my Lola talking about the processions in our family home town and the statues and all that... And we have all that here in our church! ... And you aren't going to get that at a UCC." Even though his sexual orientation was accepted at UCC services, with the lack of non-dominant cultures it was still primarily a white space, thus not a queer one, either.

Near the end of his article, Goss explains what needs to be done to create a queer theological discourse:

Hopefully, we may expose all traces of privilege within our own theological discourse, any traces of American white supremacism, centrism, sexism... Thus we may become more responsible in making new hybrid voices accessible to ourselves, the academy, and our theological constituencies.¹¹⁶

This is an important call, and one which this project shows is still necessary. Though there are spaces, both religious and secular, that call themselves "queer" they are still behaving in ways that are emblematic of the problems that arise with the label of "gay." This study leads me to conclude that simply changing the terminology is insufficient. In order to create spaces that are truly transgressive and truly queer we must ask ourselves the same questions that Goss suggests, and come to terms with our own sexism, racism, American exceptionalism, and our other phobias that prohibit us from truly progressing.

¹¹⁴ Metropolitan Community Church, an LGBT affirming denomination

¹¹⁵ Maria, cxlvi

¹¹⁶ Goss, 52

Hierarchy of Identity

This project was envisioned with the assumption that queer Asian Americans place equal value on their queer identity, their Asian American identity, and their religious identity. Other possible identities were not taken into account, as it was assumed that the three aforementioned aspects formed the core of the subjects' identities. This assumption was first shaken by Irene, who mentioned activism and hip-hop when I queried her cultural identity. As I analyzed the interviews, I kept returning to the question of "Why do people stay as members of religious institutions that condemn their lives?" The answer I came to initially was that it is because of their belief in the God/gods of that religion and that they hope that one day their tradition will cease to be homophobic. I assumed that the oppressive religious spaces met their religious, and perhaps cultural needs, and that their queer needs were met elsewhere.

Upon further reflection, other answers to this question emerge. Perhaps the institutions that I see as oppressive only condemn the sexual orientation of queer Asian Americans, but affirm many other aspects of their identity, such as their commitment to social justice, or their identity as a member of a family and culture. Perhaps being queer is not a central aspect of the subjects' identities and I only assumed it is because it is something which makes them different. If I were interviewing straight Catholics, would I assume that all of them who had engaged in pre-marital sex felt that their lives were condemned by the Church? No, because I would not assume that their sexual orientation is a central part of their identity.

This project rides on the assumption of a hierarchy of identity. Unfortunately, I cannot truly answer the question as to what aspects of my subject's identities are most important to them, because their answers were clouded by their knowledge that this was a study on queer, religious, Asian Americans. It also is important to note that people's identities may be different in different settings. This can happen in different ways. Sometimes one can feel most strongly about one's identity when one is in the majority, and sometimes a strong identity can emerge when one is in the minority. For example, Michael might feel most Jewish when he is at his synagogue in a room full of other Jews, but he also might feel most Jewish when he is at a Filipino event that is serving pork, and as the only Jew he is the only one not partaking.¹¹⁷

I did not ask about the value that different individuals place on identity, but if this study were to continue or to be repeated, this would be a central question of the project. Rather than assuming that each individual would like a community in which these three aspects of their identity were met equally, I would like to allow more room for variation. I would also like to avoid the assumption that everyone wants one community that meets all of their needs, and be open to the possibility that for some individuals, multiple communities may be their preferred situation. All of this knowledge would need to be taken into account for further research on this topic.

¹¹⁷ As a Jew, Michael keeps kosher, which means that he does not eat pig.

Final Thoughts

Queer Asian American Theology is a field in its earliest formal stages, but that does not mean that the questions that have been asked in this study are being asked for the first time. A community to belong to is one of the fundamental desires of all people. In my interviews and the follow-up correspondences I had with my subjects, I heard such gratitude from people who were able to tell their story for the first time, and was thanked for my role in beginning to ask these questions. This shows how important it is to examine the intersection of queer, Asian American, and religious identities. Communities must be formed that meet the needs of queer Asian Americans, and that provide a space to be fully queer, Asian American and religious. While this space looks different to different people, this project found different aspects that can aid this process.

Dr. Cheng posits that reclaiming is the most important action for queer Asian Americans to undertake as they attempt to find religious communities. He offers reclaiming spiritual traditions, rites and rituals, and sacred spaces as the key steps to healing the wounds caused by this intersection of identities. Reclaiming does seem to be an important step, and while I found examples of individuals doing as Cheng suggested, I also found other vital steps for queer Asian Americans. Creating communities that are non-hierarchical is a way of healing from the insular nature of communities with a hierarchical leadership structure. Looking back into history to find oneself seems also to be important. Similar to an act of reclaiming, it helps for individuals to realize that there were same-sex relationships or gender nonconforming people in the history of their ancestry. A strong commitment to social justice, also, is often important, as it both strengthens communities but also gives individuals tools to fight the oppression that they see around them. Many people also expressed a necessity of

seeing others like them in their community, which perhaps is the single most important aspect. This ranged from Ryan and Joseph who had such a strong desire to have other Filipinos around them that they stayed in an oppressive church, to Michael who was content with his handful of Filipino friends at his synagogue. This seems to be something that all humans desire. No one wants to feel alone in the world, but that is precisely how many queer Asian Americans feel.¹¹⁸

I have felt honored to hear the stories of the amazing individuals with whom I spoke. I also questioned myself often throughout this project. What is my place in this project as a White woman? Do I have any right to be asking these questions? Why should these people trust me? Is this project really going to do anything if it is on such a small scale? Have I done enough background research? Do I know enough to interpret what everyone is telling me? A quote I discovered near the end of this project reflects well my goals in pursuing this topic, and the lens with which I hope I have worked. It is with this quote that I end this project:

The truth of it is that a person may have lived through his faith in a way that no outsider can match. But it does not follow that the outsider cannot have a better understanding because of trying to enter into that person's experience. Moreover, the outsider may see the context of that person's faith more clearly because he is just a bit detached... Further, we are all [human] and share certain kinds of feelings, so that the attitude of others is never totally alien to us. In any event, even if we cannot hope for perfect understanding, we can hope for deeper knowledge than we now have. It is one of the noblest aspects of human life that we can strive to look at the world not just through our eyes, but from the standpoint of others. We ought to be passionately committed to this kind of dispassion. It is one of the most important things in education... to foster empathy, standing in the shoes of others.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Cheng, Patrick S. "A Unicorn at the White House." *99 Brattle: a Blog for Progressive Theology and Critical Thinking to Transform the World*, July 26, 2012. <http://99brattle.blogspot.com/2012/07/a-unicorn-at-white-house.html>.

¹¹⁹ Smart, Ninian. *The Long Search*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1977.

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Appendix

Appendix A- Transcripts of Interviews

Charlie
San Francisco, CA
November 17, 2012

Charlie is a small and energetic man in his 50s. We spoke in a crowded bakery in downtown San Francisco close to his home. He laughed often throughout the interview, both when he did not know how to answer a question and also when he made frequent jokes.*

**Names with asterisks have been changed to protect privacy.*

How did you hear about this project?

Through Vivek. Basically he forwarded your email to his friends.

He and I spoke on the phone some. I think he opened quite a bit of doors for me through conversations.

How do you know him?

I emailed a bunch of different Bay Area groups, different queer Asian American groups. And he's part of one of them and he read my email and called me and offered to help.

That's so him! He's great. I mean, I've known Vivek for so long. I think since maybe '98.

For fourteen years we've been friends.

He seems like a really kind person.

I am curious about the terminology people use to define themselves. What terms do you use to identify your religion?

[hesitates]

Or your spiritual practice?

I mean, like I mentioned, right, I'm not religious at all.

But you're in the Taoist group.

I'm in the Taoist group. So... I don't consider what we're studying, to me, it's philosophical Taoism, right? I don't... but you may consider it, well, there's religious Taoism too, right, but to me, I don't know where you draw the line between the two, right? It's kind of hard. I mean, I'm definitely interested in studying the philosophical part of it, but you know, you were born in that culture, right? And then you kind of, where you study, and you realize that , "Oh wow, those things I already know," or, it's kind of like Confucianism, right, do you consider that a religion or not?

I don't know...

Culturally how do you define yourself?

What do you mean?

Like, do you call yourself... do you think of yourself as Asian American?

I'm Chinese.

Do you think of yourself as Chinese American? Or as Chinese? Or...

I identify myself as Chinese, probably, but I don't know. I guess it's like when I'm here people may think I'm Chinese, but when I'm back home, because I haven't been back in Taiwan since '87, people thought like, okay, they don't consider me from there anymore, I mean after that long. So, I guess there maybe they think I'm American. You know... the way I dress, the way I act, or whatever.

I've heard that from other people, too, who say that they feel that similar way, that when they go back home suddenly they feel like they're more of a part of where they live now.

I mean, because I live here almost, like, 30 years now, since '83, in the US. I went to Texas for my college, for my undergraduate. Yeah, so.

Are there any words that you use to define your gender?

I'm a man, right? Yeah.

For sexual orientation what do you call yourself?

Gay.

I want to make sure that I'm using the right terms when we're talking, so that's why I wanted to ask you first.

I'm a gay man.

I think you said that in your email, but I wanted to make sure so I don't call you the wrong thing.

There's no confusion there. [laughs]

You said that you're involved in the Taoist group? So how did you find the Queer Taoist group?

Through newspaper. The group put ads in the classified section. The classified section is for group meetings, or you know.

Was it in a gay newspaper?

Gay Bay Times, yeah.

I think we actually got a lot of people through that. In the old days. Nobody looks at the paper anymore.

Can you describe what you do in your group? Or what happens in the Taoist group?

You know, we meet bi-weekly, you know, at the café or at somebody's home. And then we'll read a chapter or you know, some text from a Taoist text. Like Tao te Jing or Lao Tzu, you know. And sometimes certain members may have a question they want to consult I Ching. So we will read an I Ching also.

Can you describe I Ching?

I Ching is, what you call it, divination, right? So basically you don't know what's going to happen so you ask I Ching to kind of predict. It's like an oracle, right?

How do you ask the I Ching?

There's many ways. But the simplest way is throw the dice.

You have head and tails, right? The head is the yang, tail is ying. So you throw six times and then you get ying yang or you know, a certain sequence, and then there's 64 different combinations in the I Ching. So it depends on your outcome. And then you read that chapter. And the chapter will tell you what's going to happen. It's very interesting.

Has that been helpful for you? Have you been able to ask questions of the I Ching and it's helped you?

Not for me. So far, my life is very stable I think. Yeah. And I've been very, I think since I was a child I've been always so confident about myself. Because I believe that, I think, that this is the Chinese way. I think I try to be humble but I also don't fear that I'm inferior also. Because it will be always people better than me at certain things, and there's always people not as good as me. So this is how you look at this world. And if you are buy into that, you know, you will feel pretty okay, right? I think so, yeah.

That's interesting.

I think that fundamental difference between...

I mean, difference between the basic fundamental education difference of East and the West, right, is, it's like the East we were little, you always get told that collective, that collective benefit is always higher than your benefit, but here it's, I think, it's quite different. But you know, I think why the Western always think that the East is wrong. That you shouldn't

suppress the individual desire. Like... but to me because you have been born, you buy into that. Like, you need to be yourself, or whatever. But sometimes, in the larger context, you shouldn't be. Because if you look at the whole universe, right, you really can't, because there're so many things around you. You need to strike the balance between yourself and everything else around you. Not just in nature, also in the whole society, so you need to look at the larger picture, not just me, me, me. You know "I'm the best."

I think I agree with you in a lot of ways.

This is the fundamental difference I see, so I am still adjusting.

So, is the Queer Taoist group, is it mostly people who are Asian, or...?

No, no, no. But we are a small group, you know. Like at the most, we have around twenty member. At the most. Constantly, like every meeting, we are like around five. Yeah.

I would say, like, five is our average. So it's a very small group.

Why do you keep going back? What do you like about being part of this community?

Because you kind of reinforce, you know, the Taoist belief. To strike balance in your life.

Right? Because you think about Taosim, it's all about balance, right? Like yin and yang. And then also about you know you shouldn't value material life that much, right? You shouldn't, and then... it's about governing, but, to a certain degree Lao Tzu is very adamant about how to govern. Right? He thinks the ruler should actually do nothing to govern. In today's world, it's almost impossible, but in his ideal world it's every country's very, very small. Like all those small countries. Because the large country actually causes the problem. Which is so true even today! [laughs] You think about... And then his ideal world, is like, all those small countries, you can hear the rooster crowing through the fence, the dogs barking, but they are, you know, by themselves.

So a lot of small countries together.

So they don't need to be overrun the other one.

I like that. It sounds like a pretty good way to do that.

So it's like things like that kind of attract me. You know, like the theory. Like, one chapter we just read, and you know the Tao, for Taoist, always think water. Water is the ultimate.

Because water always go through the low place. Because, like, when you have water, where will it go? It will go down to the lowest position. So people should learn from that, also.

Water is so powerful. It can destroy, think about Sandy, right? And then but it can float the boat. But you also depend on it. Without water there's no life basically. So you know it has a lot of things like that. And he also talk about how you need to master your life, basically. In a very rational way. Yeah. But I shouldn't even say "rational" because that sounds more Confucian. [laughs] But I think that the things that struck me the most is that Taoist is supposed to be non-judgmental on things. You know? Because everything is relative according to Lao Tzu. That's his center there. Like, if somebody say "this is good" but then maybe not good to another person. So to me that is very interesting. Like, you know, what is good, right?

Do you have an answer?

Or how you say "beautiful," right?

Like to me, Angelina Jolie, I can't stand her. She's the ugliest woman in the world. [laughs]

According to Chinese standard. Because you know, like, traditional Chinese beauty has the mouth like a cherry. And her, you can see. That's what we call a blood basin. A blood basin.

[laughs] Her mouth. I can't totally get why a Westerner think she's so pretty. It's like. But

I'm being judgmental. But I try to make it an exaggeration, right? It's to get my point. But to

me, it's like, one person thinks this way, not necessarily think it's true to others. But I always think if everybody in the world think like that, that's why I don't really buy into religion, in a way. Especially like Christian. The Western religions. The Eastern religion, Buddhism, Taoism, you know, I don't know much about Hinduism. All those are not try to impose their will on you. Or... it's like you aren't able to see a true Taoist come to you say "You need to convert, this is so good for you." But the Christian, Muslim, or I don't know much about Judaism, but you know, right, also they have this concept like "only one god." To me, like, why there's only one God? Why not many? Or none? It doesn't make sense to me. But it's like, you know, that's how I feel like. Today in the world there's so many problems, it's all these ideas around the Western religion. You know, it's like, "my religion is better than yours." Or, you know, it's like, still have that, after all those years, and the Christian to me is so preachy, also. They will think like, "Oh if you don't go to church, you know, or don't believe in God, you go to hell." Or something, right? To me it's like, that's nice. Because you come with me. They probably won't like that. [laughs]

So is your family, also, do they also follow Taoism, too?

No, no, no. I think most Chinese are non-religious. I would say that in English, you say "agnostic." Like, you cannot know, I mean, I shouldn't generalize my family because I have, I have three sisters and two brothers. So six children. One of the sister, she marry her husband, is very religious. Christian. So she go to the churches with him. So she mostly converted, like that. Yeah. My dad, my mom, they are, my mom goes to the Buddhist temple. I think since childhood she balance that. And then, of course, during the Second World War Two, the Sino-Japanese war, she was hiding Buddhist temple while Japanese was bombing Chinese cities. So she was saved.

Did the Japanese not bomb the Buddhist temples?

Yeah, they probably not.

So, because, they are, you know, Buddhist, too. So she feel like they're always protect her, yeah. But my dad is, doesn't believe in anything, basically. Or maybe it's like, you may believe it, but, to a certain degree you don't... I wouldn't say, practice, because again, whatever you do, you may unknowingly, you are practicing certain philosophy of it.

Does your family know that you're gay?

All my siblings except my dad. I never told him. I believe my mom knows. But she died in 1999. Umm, but before she passed away I'm pretty sure she knows. I think mothers always know. [laughs] But she had a hard time accepting it.

Do you think that, did her Buddhist beliefs have any play into her accepting it at all?

No. No, it's just the Chinese tradition, like, you need to have children to continue the family line. That's what's considered the norm, or normal, right? That's another thing I love Taoism. Because, again, what is normal? Right?

For Taoism, there's no normal?

There's no one set thing. That's why this philosophy, really, know, makes sense.

For your siblings, is it okay to them that you're gay.

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Do they live in China, or the United States?

All my sisters live here? Both of my brothers they used to live here. But my brother, my older brother, live in Shanghai right now. So he got a divorce. My nephews they are born here. They're in college now, actually, here. And my brother, still live in Shanghai, he start a

new family basically. And my younger brother, he went back to Taiwan. In the late 90s, when my mom not feeling well. And then he stayed. And then he also have a family there.

So you were born in Taiwan, right?

Yeah.

Do you go back often to visit?

Like, I said, I haven't been back since 1987.

So the first time I went back for two weeks, two and a half weeks, in 2010. With Daniel* [*his partner*] and two other friends. So I actually get to visit our old home in southern part of the island. I get to see my primary school, schoolmates. It's really nice. So I get to talk to them, like, old friends, neighbors, it's a really fun trip. And Daniel really loved Taiwan.

So maybe we'll go back to the island. Of course, you know, visit my younger brother. But they come every year, the whole family. Because my dad is here.

Does your dad live in the Bay Area also?

Yeah.

I see him every week.

What has been your most fulfilling or empowering religious or spiritual experience?

Is that a question that's relevant? I'm not sure.

I don't know. I mean, if you consider, I would think, like, some people think that philosophical Tao may consider spirituality, right? Part of that. But I don't even know the English word "spirituality," how that different from religion?

I don't know. When I say "spirituality" I mean it in a bigger sense. Concerning the human spirit, what makes us people, maybe. Again, all these words are hard to define. I'm thinking of it more, like... Like if I was trying to talk about a time when I felt a

really spiritual experience I'd think about times I felt really whole. Like things were right in the world, or I felt really rejuvenated by an experience. I think that's what I would call it for me, but I think it would be different for each person.

I think throughout my life I've been, I felt myself pretty whole. Like, study Taoism just reinforce that, basically. So, the group, I like the group because after all those years, I've been going to it since '95, so for 17 years all those members are almost like my family, right? So you see them, you talk about, you know, what's happening in everybody's life. So to me that thing itself is powerful, right? Kind of like group therapy or something like that. Yeah, you know, talk about your problem, or certain things. Yeah.

That sounds very valuable.

Is there anything else that you want to tell me in terms of this? That you can think of?

Umm... I don't know. I think maybe, as gay people a lot of people may feel that they, you know, that society won't accept them, or you know, like their family may not accept them. I think I'm lucky, right? But umm, I think for me I can see, like, a return to religion, or maybe their religion may help them to, I don't know how you say that, like, surpass that thing, I consider that. But I don't really see philosophical Tao as... But you can see, maybe in a similar way, because again, Taoism is non-judgmental, right? So basically if you're different, you're fine. You know? You don't need to be like everybody else. So, I would think they just need to be, you know, have confidence in themselves, you know? And maybe study Taoism.

The cure for the world's problems?

I don't know about that. But at least for yourself, self-cultivating.

Okay our food is getting cold, yeah? Let's eat it now, yeah?

Joseph and Ryan
[removed to protect their identities], CA
November 17, 2012

I met with Joseph and Ryan* in an office at the church that both men attend. When I met Ryan he immediately laughed and told me “See? I told you I look white, don’t I? I know I look white, but I am half Filipino!” A few minutes later while we were waiting to start I mentioned that my step-grandmother is Filipino, too. Ryan said “Really? Wow! Then we’re three Filipinos sitting together.”*

**Names with an asterisk have been changed to protect their identity. The city where the church is located has also been removed.*

Do both of you guys identify as Catholics?

Joseph: I identify as Catholic, yes.

Ryan: I’ve been friends with Joseph and his husband Colin for almost two and a half years.

And one of the things I liked when Joseph and I became friends and I was talking about my feeling that even though this is a welcoming church, it still until recently hasn’t embraced GLBTQ... I love what Joseph said, I’m not putting words in your mouth, but I always remember you saying you want to bring three important parts of yourself. That you’re gay, Catholic, and Filipino. And those are three things I share. I’m not fully Filipino but it’s really important to me. You got a little in you it’s fine... [both laugh] If it’s by marriage, it’s fine...

Okay... culture. What words do you guys use to describe your cultural backgrounds?

Joseph: Is Filipino American...? I don’t know what else... Child of an immigrant? Of immigrants? I’m first-generation... right? First-generation means the one that’s born in the United States? Okay, then I’m first generation. Umm... yeah... I... I kind of... I guess I’m kind of chameleon, I think... If I’m hanging out with a lot of Filipinos I’m Filipino, right? But if I’m not I’m an American with Filipino background.

When you’re in the Philippines... Have you gone back to the Philippines at all?

Joseph: I was eleven last time I was back in the Philippines.

But I remember going in 2000 to Guam which is very close and has quite a lot of Filipinos. And, umm, it was, it was strange, because I thought, “Wow, I’m in the majority here.” And I remembered sitting in a restaurant with my relatives, it was a pizza kind of a place, and... everybody at the restaurant was either Filipino or Chimoro, the natives of Guam, all workers were Asian, and... all of a sudden this group of, I imagine they were American servicemen, judging from their haircuts. I thought, oh wow, they really stuck out. I thought... I just looked, and I thought, oh wow, that’s weird, normally I wouldn’t, normally it wouldn’t be something I’d notice here in the United States. So... yeah, I guess.

What about you?

Ryan: So mine’s more complicated. I identify as mixed-race, multicultural person of mixed European and Filipino background. I’m also first generation. My mother was born and spent most of her childhood in the Philippines and grew up speaking our regional language called Bicol and Spanish. Yeah, so, yeah, for me, so, the hard part is identi-... reconciling my physical appearance which is European with a really strong cultural Filipino... yeah... And I’ve been in the Philippines and it is really bizarre because my mother’s aunts, my mother’s first cousins, my aunts and uncles and all my second cousins... And I love to show, I think I’ve showed you that picture of my mother and me and all of my family and there’s this big white guy towering over all these [laughing] short brown.... [laughing]

Can you speak Bicol?

Ryan: No, I’m studying Tagalog right now and my family in the Philippines has taught me some phrases in Bicol, but... yeah... The story I love to tell about being, I was in Manila in March and I stayed in my second cousin’s house, Eileen, and she’s like 30. And there’s a lot of white people who go to Manila for sexual tourism, people like my age, you know, and so,

I, it was so weird, and we were walking all around Manila and it looks like I'm this white guy with this young thing, and yet we're cousins. And she would say to the taxi people, "Oh, yeah, I need a taxi for my cousin" and they'd be like, "Oh yeah... your 'cousin' right..."

[laughs]

So going to gender and sexual orientation... How do you guys describe your gender and sexual orientation?

Joseph: I'm a gay man. Gay male. Yeah.

Ryan: Yeah, me too. Though one of the things I want to point out is all the research I've done in the past couple years on, umm, Filipino heritage, it's, there's Australian professor who has done, who did her doctoral thesis on pre-Hispanic Filipino... Have you seen this?

Yeah, you emailed me about it. The Babaylan?

Ryan: Yeah! The Babaylans, yeah, and Maria's going to tell you more about that when you see her. What's so fascinating that I found out is that among the non-Muslim Filipinos, the spiritual leaders were women or men who dressed in women's clothes. And of course you can't put the category "gay" on them, but the Spanish chronicles say there was all this same-sex stuff going on. And that's just so fascinating to think, "Wow. In our ancestral past, before Catholicism people like us were held up and respected as spiritual leaders!"

Joseph: That almost reminds me of they call it "two-spirited"... Native American...

Ryan: Yeah, yeah. If we had been born in the Philippines 500 years ago, 'cause Spanish didn't come 'till 1521. We would have been held up as models to the community. And in our Filipino community right now you can't.

Joseph: Not outside of my family, no you can't.

Ryan: I didn't come out to my family, and here I am, I just turned 50 and I don't have a wife and kids, so...

Do your families now, in the states, know that you guys are gay?

Joseph: Yeah.

Ryan: Yeah.

And do they know your spouses and stuff?

Ryan: He and I aren't spouses!

No, no, I didn't mean that. I meant, do they know your spouse Joseph, and I don't know your relationship status Ryan...

So, I know you guys are involved in the group here, Rainbow of Love*. Can you talk a little about that?

Joseph: We started back in like, January or February?

Ryan: Yeah, well the genesis of it is that this parish has been saying that we really wanted to be a welcoming and inclusive community and I've *[worked here]* for five years. So two years ago I just kept hearing how welcoming everybody was but I really didn't feel like we're welcome at all. I just thought, I have to quit, I can't take it. And the more I kept getting angry and finally a couple in our parish said to me, "Why are you angry?" and I told them why and they said "Wait our daughter's lesbian! We don't want you leaving because you're gay." And they said "We've got to have an action, we've got to do something," and I said if we make a fuss our pastor will get fired, our pastor is a lay person not a priest. We're the one Catholic church in all of northern California that's not run by a priest He's a married man in his early fifties with four kids. If they were to make a big stink about this church not being welcome to gays he would lose his job. So I said we can't do it that way. So we met in June of last year,

2011, and they said let's try to organize a group, and I went and talked to my boss, who also has a lesbian daughter and he said go ahead and start bringing people together. And I had mentioned in to Colin and Joseph, 'cause they're in the parish and they're like "Yeah we want to get involved." And then we had an initial meeting and you got chosen to be the co-chair. Yeah. Yeah. [laughter] And so basically since the initial meeting it's been I've stepped aside because my boss said "It's not your job to run the group, you step aside." So Joseph has been running it. So I should turn it over to you now.

Joseph: Yeah, so... he told a lot of what we're all about. Umm... Like I said it's probably fifty/fifty parents and allies of lesbian and gay people... And LGBT folk.

Can you describe what you do together?

Joseph: Well we're trying to just, like, kind of get a feel of who we are and what should we do... what should our mission statement be. The past two meetings we had were, it was a, uh, strategic planning workshop where we kind of brainstormed. We did all these little exercises and we came up with our mission statement. I can't say it off hand, but it is something like, uh, "We want to be the welcoming and inclusive... welcoming and support... group... for... the parish. For LGBTQ and their families. And friends." Yeah.

So what kinds of things do you plan on doing together?

[laughter]

Joseph: Well we're going to have coffee and donuts. After Mass. We're trying to put together, we want to do a World AIDS Day Mass on December first, but that's still up in the air. 'Cause we came up with this last week and it's like December first, that might be too soon. We might not be able to do it. And on top of that our pastor... pastor?

Ryan: Yeah, he's our pastor.

Joseph: Okay, our pastor said that he's concerned that our first event to the public is something that involves AIDS and HIV. He doesn't want us to be stigmatized, so... I don't know...

Do you have any other ideas of what you guys might want to do?

Joseph: Yeah we want to do a movie night... where we, uhh... have a gay themed movie and then talk about it afterwards. And actually I have a friend who, so I grew up here in [*this city*], I went to the Catholic school on the other side of town. And so a lot of people from that school went to the school here for elementary school. And so my friend who is, whose partner is a filmmaker, he entered this documentary on the world's, as far as he knows, the world's first transgendered gospel choir. And it won the best... the audience award for best documentary... at the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Film Festival. And we want to do a showing of that and have him come and talk about the process of making the movie, and... God, if we could, get some of the actual members from the choir to come and address the group. And we can open that up to the, to the parish...

Have you heard of the movie in God's House? I think it'd be really relevant.

Joseph: No.

Ryan: No, what's that?

It's about, it's interviews with Asian American families about, their, it's takes place at, partly at, the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies, their Asian Pacific Islander Roundtable made it. And it takes place at Pine UMC church that is somewhere in the Bay Area. It interviews a bunch of Asian American families who have gay children and they talk about their path to accepting their children. And it interviews some pastors,

and I don't know... It might be relevant to you guys. If you want I can send you the link.

Joseph: Please do.

Ryan: Yeah, "In God's House," let's remember that, yeah.

Especially because we have a number of Asians in our group. In Rainbow of Love.

Joseph: Yeah.

Some other things we thought about was, like, I mean, goals that we'd like to have... more gay people that would want to come to the... uh... parish and become members. Umm... people just kind of like, become such an everyday thing that like, "Oh yeah, they're mentioning gays and lesbians again," and nobody raises an eyebrow. You know that's kind of like, so that just kind of like, we'd make ourselves invisible so that we'd just blend in and we're an integral part of the parish. And nobody is, like, nobody is like surprised at our presence. Like you'd said that your grandmother was surprised... So that somebody from within the parish was used to it.

Yeah.

Joseph: Umm... like we were commenting on how, my husband and I don't feel comfortable, like when we do the kiss of peace. And, I don't know, have you been to a Catholic mass before?

Yeah.

Joseph: Toward the end of the mass we do the kiss of peace. And... you know, we embrace each other, sometimes I give him a peck on the cheek and then we turn to other people and they're like [he makes a face and recoils].

Ryan: Are you serious?!

Joseph: Yeah. They're like a little, they're like [recoiling slightly] "hi" and they can't make eye contact with us. And... And we're like, "Oh my God."

Ryan: Oh my God! I didn't realize!

Joseph: So...

Ryan: Wow!

Joseph: If we have more gay people they'll see that and they'll see gay families, gay couples with children, I don't know, maybe I'm imagining too far ahead of myself, but.. yeah...

That sounds like good goals.

Joseph: Maybe like a... maybe get involved in story night... where people share their stories of self. And have gay people or people from our group as parents of gay people or gay people themselves sitting and sharing their stories with whoever is in the meeting at that time.

Ryan: Anyway, we got a grant, uhh, this year, to improve our worship and our grant is called "God's Radical Hospitality" so we're bringing in a Mexican American Franciscan brother whose specialty is having people talk across cultural and racial lines and our pastor wants to get people from all these different groups in January and have this Franciscan brother lead conversations and the two questions will be "How have you felt welcome at Holy Trinity*" and "How have you felt unwelcome?" And he's going to ask you, because he thinks you'd be wonderful, if you feel comfortable, to talk about how you've felt welcome and unwelcome as a gay person.

Joseph: Yeah.

Ryan: And I think if you were to tell the story about the kiss of peace and people being like that, I think... Because we're trying to raise consciousness about a really tricky situation.

Joseph: My feeling is like, hey, you know the people leaving the Catholic Church in droves... We want to stay!

[laughter]

Joseph: We're gay people and we want to stay! I get... I get... I wouldn't say attacked, it's a strong word, but... I guess I'll say attacked by other gay people who say "How can you be a Catholic? How can you stay in this church that oppresses us?" And I say... "Yeah, the hierarchy oppresses gay... it advocates for oppressing gay people, but this particular parish is good. You know?" We try and we want to be a welcoming and affirming... I don't think we can use that terminology... but as close to that as possible!

Do you have any hopes for trying to reform the whole Catholic Church or are you just looking locally?

[laughter]

Joseph: No way! Just us. [laughter]

Ryan: Yeah, I mean, eventually it'll have to change, but not any time soon. On a wider level... yeah...

Umm... So... Going back a little bit, you talked about some, about ways that you've felt welcome here and other ways that you've felt unwelcome... Umm... But are there any other stories you have or events you've had or times when you've felt fully part of this or parts where you feel like I can't be fully myself here?

Joseph: Well aspects of this church make me feel really comfortable. Like I see a lot of people who look like me. We used to have concerts here when I was in high school. Our band, our symphonic band would hold concerts here. It's home. And, I don't know, it's, it's a comforting feeling for me.

Ryan: And that's where I resonate with him too. After Obama, well... it was really horrible growing up in Toledo years ago, and being part Asian and having an Asian mother and grandmother, it was just awful! So after Obama won, I got on the web and I looked at the 2010 census and I couldn't believe it. In 2010 Ohio was still 90% white, only 3.2% Latino, only 1.7% Asian and .01% Filipino! I was like, no wonder my family's so messed up! So that, I relate to what he says. Because I moved to the Bay Area seven years ago it's the first time I've been around all sorts of other Filipinos other than my family and so when I think about, that your question, too... I feel like I can't pray here very easily because the language is so oppressive because our lives are not embraced and I want to find, I try to find a way to go to the United Church of Christ once a month. To your ex-boyfriend's church. Because one of my friends is the Music Director there. [laughter] His ex-boyfriend is a UCC minister! Anyway, I want to go there once a month, but I know that I can't completely leave Holy Trinity because it has been amazing to be with all these Filipinos who embrace me as someone with Filipino heritage, who celebrate my Filipino and teach me and are with me and that's where I relate when you say you want to put those three things together. Because Filipino and Catholic are like that [makes gesture with hands close together], like Irish and Catholic. So if I were going to go to the UCC that'd be great, but there'd not be a lot of Filipino culture there.

Joseph: So I'd thought about going to an Episcopalian church. I have some friends who are Episcopalian, I enjoy going, but I was, I was like I feel welcome, but then again I don't, I feel like an outsider.

Ryan: It's not our tradition.

Joseph: No, it's not our tradition.

Ryan: I mean, I grew up with stories, you know, my Lola talking about the processions in our family home town and the statues and all that... And we have all that here in our church!

Joseph: Yeah!

Ryan: Yeah! And you aren't going to get that at a UCC.

Joseph: I don't want to be so Filipino-centric, but I also... there's Latinos and we have a sizable Igbo population, umm... Vietnamese. It really reflects *[our city]* and it's a really diverse community.

Ryan: Yeah.

Joseph: Yeah.

Ryan: So... that's what I love about this church.

So, the LGBT group is one example of this, but have you guys been involved in any other LGBT or Queer religious groups at other points in your lives?

Joseph: I did go to one or two meetings at... it's... a Newman Hall, at a Catholic church at UC Berkeley where I went. I would go to that church when I was an undergraduate and I wasn't out yet. But when I came out I felt like I could be more open there. They had... they had pride masses, and I remember they had this wonderful musician, he was the one leading the music for our pride mass at the Newman center. I just thought, "Wow, this is great, I could go here!" but it's a little far and then they started to clamp down on it. I would go to the LGBT... I think they called it Dignity... but Dignity's been purged out of the church.

Ryan: So I was going to say, I moved to Chicago 24 years ago I joined Dignity, the gay Catholic group, which at the time was really strong. And there's a lot, a fair amount, of Filipinos in Chicago so I made a fair amount of gay Filipino friends. I used to hang out with them a lot. It was my first opportunity to be around gay Filipinos! And again, they really

accepted me as someone of Filipino blood even though I don't look like them, so that was great! Yeah, I'm in touch with one of them on Facebook. Yeah... oh! Here's the bizarre thing! So when I was in Manila last year I found an anthology of gay Filipino writings and the first story was written by my best gay Filipino friend from the catholic gay group in Chicago. I was like "Oh my god, it's Jaime!" [laughter] I mean, I bought it in the national bookstore in Manila and there's Jaime's story! And we were friends.

[pointing at poster] So Joseph was saying that this was a musical thing that you wrote?

Ryan: Yeah, yeah. So, uh, basically I've been in therapy the last three years to deal with all these deep things with my family. So one of the things that came out was that when we were growing up in Ohio, my Lola, my Filipino grandmother who lived with us, my mother is from the Philippines, lived with us and yet the message we were given is because we can pass as white, is that, "White is the best, you gotta be white, the Philippines is something that is over there, it's all in Lola's bedroom and close the door. And once Lola died," which she did, "That's it." And I'm in therapy and I'm starting to pull all of this out. Wow, the truth to who my family is is in Lola's bedroom, I gotta take it all out of Lola's bedroom and put it in the living room to share. And really looking at that is what made me realize, "Wow, I gotta go to the Philippines." Because the message in my family was "You're never going back to the Philippines." And the message was so strong, my God, it was like, I was sitting at that computer and I was trying to buy that ticket, and one of my best friends from the church came in and said "You press that button and buy that ticket!" and I did! And that set me on a journey, of, wow, going there. So in that whole process of embracing my bi-racial heritage and my family in the Philippines I realized that I wanted to do a performance project on it and I wanted to call it "My Grandmother's Bedroom." And the name of it is in our local

dialect Bicol “An cuarto de Lola” it’s “Lola’s bedroom.” And here at Holy Trinity we have a “Holy Trinity’s Filipino Leadership” and I’m part of the group, so they sponsored the performance in October 2011 which is Filipino Heritage month. And it was great, we turned the whole sanctuary into a stage. I had about forty Filipino friends who were musicians... [laughter] Maria, who you’ll meet tomorrow, she has studied Muslim gongs, and so she came with all her Muslim gongs... yeah...

That sounds really cool.

Ryan: Yeah, it was really, really cool. And it was great because part of the performance, I, I was in our family home town and I had this vision of all our ancestors and I was on the beach. And they said to me “Tell our story. But don’t tell it from the colonizers, tell it from who we are.” And it was really powerful, and it was at night and I opened my eyes and there’s all the ancestors. And so... in this performance when I got to that part, when I’m on the beach and talking with all the ancestors, and Maria’s playing the gongs and it’s everything mysterious and all that. And then I go up to the, there’s like a mannequin that had the Filipino women’s shawl, and all of a sudden there flashed a picture of my Lola wearing Filipino traditional clothes in the fifties and she’s talking to a white audience. So while she’s being projected up there and I take the shawl and I put it on like that. And all my gay friends are like “[gasps] Oh my God! He’s going to come out in front of all these people!” And I didn’t, but in program it said that pre-Hispanic Filipino leaders were men who dressed in women’s clothes and the name of the prelude of my performance was the name of these leaders called “Asog.” So for anyone who’s paying attention I’m saying “I’m the Asog.” And that my ancestors in the vision had said “You are the Asog. You are the one who tells the story.” But to tell the story I had to put on women’s clothes.

That's so interesting! Wow.

Ryan: Yeah, so and Maria, well, the thing was, two people that you're going to meet, they both told me I had to do this. Maria, and also [*name removed to protect privacy*]. When I told them about this they said "You cannot leave the queer part out of this." But I'm doing it in a Catholic church, and yeah, but they said "The queer part of who you are is so essential that you got to have it in there somewhere." But you don't want to scare all those little Filipino Catholic ladies [laughter]. So, yeah, when Maria said "You gotta have yourself in there putting on those women's clothes!" But it was enough that people could decide they didn't see it.

Yeah. What were people's reactions to your performance?

Ryan: Oh, people loved it! What really gave me a lot of joy is Filipinos and Filipino Americans all love it. Like, we got to hear this! 'Cause, I told not only my story, but I told what I've learned of the story before me. So they're like "You gotta perform this and you gotta let more Filipinos know about it. You've gotta turn it into a DVD so Filipino American kids in high school can learn the history!" Yeah. So, I'm actually, because of my trip in March, I have three invitations to do performances in the Philippines in 2013. Including in the high school in the province where my white grandfather and my Filipino grandmother met.

Yeah, yeah.

Ryan: Yeah, so it's going to be really cool. So again, I have to do the gay part of it, but imagine doing it in the Philippines! So I have to be very careful. But I met a Nigerian priest, no a Ugandan priest, and I was telling him all about this, and he was like "You know, but in Filipino culture, like in our African cultures, honoring the ancestors is really important. So

you can probably frame it in a ‘The wisdom of our ancestors was that... women and men, women were our spiritual leaders and men who dressed as women.’ So you’re just simply honoring the ancestors. [laughter]

And so if someone wants to see that, they can see.

Ryan: Yeah, yeah. And, I’m going to have it all documented, too.

Joseph: It was a cool show, I really enjoyed it.

Ryan: Aww, thank you.

Did you get any negative feedback from people who saw through the gay part of it?

Ryan: No. No one, the only people who commented on the gay part of it were my gay friends. Like my friend was like “Ohh, I know what you were doing when you put on that shawl!” [laughter]

Another question I have is a big broad question, but... what has been your most fulfilling religious or spiritual experience and why? From my side it’s me trying to understand what needs to add up to make an experience where someone feels really whole and complete.

Joseph: Last year there were a lot of, I remember hearing a lot of pronouncements by the Catholic bishops against, well, against gay people, I don’t know how else to describe it, and I was just, I was really upset about it. And, for awhile I wasn’t coming to mass, I just, I can’t be there, so I heard about, I heard that Newman, up in Berkeley, was having a pride mass, well, not really a pride mass, but just a mass for gays and lesbians. Umm, I think, I’m thinking back now, it was around the time of all those gay suicides, and I, I was just sick of it, and the response of the Catholic bishops to the suicides was just awful. You’d think, you’d think they’d moderate their stance in light of that, but no, they just keep going. But this mass

came up at Newman, I turned to Colin, my husband, and I said, “I want to go to this because it brings two aspects of myself together, my Catholic self and my gay self, and my Filipino self will come along too!” [laughter] So, yeah.

Can you describe more about what happened at the mass?

Joseph: Well, it was all, they didn’t even hold it in the main part of the church, it was just in an upstairs meeting room. We’re all sitting around on the couches with these different lesbian and gay couples. And... we had mass. It was just a very intimate mass. And... it just felt good. I think I actually cried a little while I was there. Even just thinking about it now I’m getting a little weepy because it reconciled two parts of me that were kind of at odds with each other?

Did a priest perform it or someone else?

Joseph: Yes, a priest performed it.

Wow. And, so, was it mostly just a standard mass or were there parts of it that were, I don’t know, telling stories or something?

Joseph: It just felt much more personal. And just knowing that there were other, I mean, knowing, that there were, I mean, we knew that we were all gay and lesbian, and we’re there to celebrate a mass as gay and lesbian Catholics. That just really, really hit me. Yeah.

Ryan: For me I would say... the most powerful spiritual experience I’ve had recently was when I went up to meet this professor at Santa Rosa, Leny Strobel. The one who does all the work on decolonization and pre-Hispanic... the Babaylan. And when I’m sitting at her kitchen table and we’re talking for two hours and I’m telling her about my dreams and my experiences in the Philippines and then she was telling me these amazing things about how the Filipino indigenous spirit is passed on in a non-rational way. Deeper than all my mother’s

shame about being Filipino, deeper than the fact that I have white skin, the fact that I grew up in that family, the fact that I can go back to my indigenous home... I mean, I went to the graves of my great-grandparents in March, so she's saying, if the indigenous spirit is in your psyche, there it is, you know, you can't get rid of it, you know that's what all your dreams have been about, that's why you had to go, that's why your Lola appears to you. And... it was just so powerful and she totally affirmed that I'm not making this up, that this is me, in me, and it's true. And... and then she even, she gave me a blessing. She said "Welcome home," she says "Welcome home to your indigenous Filipino spirit," and she signed her book to me, "In Kapwa" means the Filipino spirit of connection and communion. So "In Kapwa, welcome home to your indigenous Filipino spirit." So I wasn't able to write her a thank you note for like a week and when I finally wrote her back she said "You know, I was sort of surprised that you didn't write me right away." And I said, "You know what, oh my God, you're totally right about Filipino indigenous spirit," my unconscious psyche sent me to the one Filipino woman in all of Northern California who is standing in the tradition of the Babaylans, the pre-Hispanic leaders. She is the Babaylan, she is, 'cause she is no longer Christian, she's out of Christianity, she's left it. She is the Filipino woman spiritual leader and healer. And Maria*'s the one that told me about her, another woman who is a Filipino spiritual leader. Maria's moving out of the institution now. You know? So I was like, wow, my indigenous spirit met Maria who sent me to Leny. All beyond my rational control. That's really exciting. Now I'm excited about you meeting Maria too. Just because Leny and Maria are friends. It's a circle.

Then how did you guys meet? It's like there's a network right here between Vivek connecting me to you...

Joseph: I met Maria through Ryan, yeah.

Ryan: And I met Maria because one of my good friends at Holy Trinity, a woman, she converted to Catholicism, she has a degree in Biblical language, specializing in Biblical Hebrew. She invited me to go with her to the national conference held on the feminine divine held in a church in San Francisco called “Her Church.” Have you heard of “Her Church”?

No, I haven’t, but that sounds interesting.

Ryan: Oh yeah! I mean, that’s a whole ‘nother thing. Her Church is still part of the Lutheran tradition. It’s all painted purple, it’s up on Portola Valley and it shows Jesus, it’s basically all about the Feminine aspect of the divine and every year they bring in all these internationally known theologians, woman theologians, so I went two years ago and... Maria was there! And... she was the only Asian looking person there. She looks Filipino. I asked her if she was Filipino and I said, “Oh I am too.” And then it turns out she had had a job here in [*this city*] and I worked here in [*the same city*], she introduced me to her partner Carol* and then I eventually introduced Maria to Joseph. Yeah...

That sounds like a really cool church.

Ryan: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. It totally is.

Well my next question is also a big broad question, but... can you imagine what your ideal religious community would be like? Like both of you mentioned combining these three aspects of yourself... can you think about what that would be like? What things would you do together? Who would be part of it? Who would be leading it?

Joseph: Leading it? You mean, like a worship service?

I’m thinking more so, like a community, can you describe what that community would be like. Like would it be a church community?

Joseph: I'm picturing a church community. Just a regular priest who's just open and ... you know like my sexuality is not an issue. Umm... I'm able to... sit with my husband and worship and... not get hassled. Yeah. And every now and then, you know like, we have a mass for like people who are like... you know... we celebrate the Filipino culture. We celebrate the Vietnamese culture of the parish. We celebrate the Portuguese and the Mexican. And then the gay culture. Something like that. We're an integral part of the parish. We have our pride mass or we have a mass to remember those who have died of suicides.

Ryan: That's something we should bring up! The gay suicide thing! 'Cause we have this whole school where they're not really allowed to talk about gay kids.

Joseph: Yeah.

Ryan: Imagine if we did something on gay suicides and we really involved the school and the teachers.

And had a mass in memory of teenagers who have committed suicide because they were oppressed for being GLBTQ. I think we gotta move on that. Because the priest here, Steve*, and we also had a priest, Father Carl* who left, they were so distraught about the gay suicides.

Joseph: Yeah.

In fact, my husband teaches at a Catholic school in San Francisco, and in the past four years they've had five suicides. Umm... one of whom he went to the memorial service and the father made some sort of a reference to, um, "My son was being haunted by these demons that, the demons lost. The demons lost, they didn't manage to take control of his, his spirit", and, oh my gosh, was he referencing the fact that he was gay, and... it's just awful.

Wow.

xxx

Joseph: "I'd rather have my son die than live his life as a gay man."

Going back to the question... can you think of what your religious community would be like?

Ryan: Yeah, I can, but I don't think it's ever going to exist in my lifetime.

That's okay.

Ryan: Oh yeah, so, my ideal religious community would be a Catholic parish where women were fully empowered where people of all different sexualities were empowered, where you could really, uhh, explore what Christianity will look like from each of the culture's perspectives. Because what Leny Strobel told me is that Jesus was a Babaylan! A Babaylan is a shaman. I was thinking, God, imagine an indigenous Filipino take on Jesus. It would be so cool! It would get past the Hispanic Catholicism. So that's the kind of Catholic, yeah it'd be a Catholic church where all that would be possible. It's not going to be possible ever. In my lifetime.

Joseph: I'll take his version. [laughter]

Ryan: Yeah, I mean, someday it'll happen, because I believe in God and the Holy Spirit and that they're stronger than human beings, but it's not going to happen soon...

When do you think the Catholic Church will... do you see a timeline in your head of how things are going to progress?

Ryan: Yeah, I mean, the power right now is that the Catholic Church is almost dead in Europe and in the United States, from our generation through to your generation most people who are raised Catholic don't go to church any more. So it's dying here, and I lived in Latin American seven years, and in Brazil it's losing ground and in Mexico, if you're educated, middle class, from my generation through to your generation, people don't go to church

anymore. So it's going to be really bad in Latin America in the next 30 years. The problem is, the Philippines, I mean, I couldn't believe how conservative, how strong the Catholic Church is in the Philippines. The conservative Catholic Church! I went to mass in Manila with my mom in our home town in the provinces and masses are packed with young people. So the church is counting on the Filipinos and the Nigerians and all these non-European countries. But the thing is when those countries start to go through modernization and women's roles, that's what the church is finally going to not continue on this path. But how long is it going to take? I don't know. But certainly the church is losing here in the United States.

How do you think it's going to change? Do you think it's going to be like, the Vatican is going to re-define its stances or do you think it's going to lose followers and have to change... or... how do you think it will... I'm just curious.

[laughter]

Joseph: I just, like, I don't know how, it's hard to fathom like, like Rome not existing as the, the Vatican not existing, but...

Do you think it will take having a non-European pope to change it?

Ryan: No, the problem is that they're worse! The Filipino...

Joseph: They're much more conservative.

Ryan: The Filipinos and the Africans, and... they're

Joseph: Oh my god I think of Uganda with its anti-gay legislation

Ryan: Oh yeah.

Joseph: Umm.

Ryan: What I think will be is that at some point the numbers are going to be so bad that some miracle, some pope will be elected who will say, you know...

Joseph: "I've had a revelation and we need to..."

Ryan: We need to bring everyone together to have some conversations. It'll come after lots of conversations and lots of people being included in the conversations that weren't even included in Vatican II in 1962. And when those conversations, when women are finally seen as fully partners in the conversation it's going to change. Yeah.

Joseph: I mean, I'm thinking basically like, an Episcopalian church with Catholic, with more of a Catholic demographic to it.

[laughter]

Joseph: That would be great. I mean, that'd be great.

Ryan: Yeah. An Episcopalian with a Catholic demographic, with Filipinos... And Mexicans aren't Episcopalian. Yeah...

Joseph: Another idea I thought of is like, you know how we have the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglicans broke off of that. What if the American churches broke off from that and we had the American Catholic church. But the trouble is that might end up being more conservative.

Ryan: Yeah, right.

Joseph: But if we get the liberal part of the American Catholics to break off, and form their own church.

Ryan: Well they are, they've left. The second largest denomination in the United States is all of those Catholics that have left the church. So... [laughter]

Are there things that you can think of that I should be asking or that you want to talk about?

Ryan: Well right away what came to my mind is family. But your family is all here and they're all accepting.

Joseph: Yeah, pretty much. I mean, I get in trouble if I don't bring my husband... [putting on a Filipino accent] "Where's Colin*? Why didn't you bring him? He has to, he has to learn to, you know, he has to be with his family. We're his family now!"

That's awesome.

Joseph: When we got married, my three, you see, I'm the youngest one by far. I have older siblings that are, they're actually my half siblings, my dad was 60 when I was born, so they're his family from, umm, first marriage. And... so... they came to my wedding. And... umm... they were completely accepting. And my oldest sister who's 77, they wanted to have a picture with my side of the family, and they called over Colin who was standing by his mom who was a little bit, she's good to me, but she's a little weirded out by the whole situation.

Ryan: Colin's Irish American.

Joseph: So they call over, across, they yell across the restaurant, "Hey brother, come here! We have to take a picture with the family!" And his mom's like, "Who are these people? They're his family now?" They consider him, he's part of the family.

What's it been like with your family.

Ryan: Well I have no relationship right now with my family in the United States. And I don't really want to get into that. And... it was great connecting with my family in the Philippines, but of all the ones I've met, the only one I think I'll be able to come out to is my second

cousin Eileen who's 30, she has a degree in Psychology from University of the Philippines. I didn't come out to her when I was with her but I think she'd be able to handle it fine. But I don't think my other second cousins... they're pretty conservative Catholic. Like, they're young, in their thirties, I mean they're from small towns in the provinces of the Philippines in the most Catholic province of the Philippines!

Joseph: Is it Bicol?

Ryan: Yeah, Bicol is known for two things. The women all become show girls because they're so beautiful, and the men all become priests. [laughter]

Which mean there must be a lot of gays there! [laughter]

Joseph: I'm just thinking about my own family's experience with gay people. My mom, I was still kind of feeling her out with how she would be, when I was on the cusp of coming out. She, she was pretty open to gay people, and, I remember umm, 'cause I have an uncle who everybody's pretty sure he's gay, that's her youngest half brother. And I remember as I was coming out I asked her, like, "So, you don't like Uncle Glasy so much, do you?" "It's not that I don't like him, it feels like he's always hiding something from me." And I was, just, oh my God, what a segue going to "Hey mom, by the way, I'm gay." Yeah. And she, and then she also had a, has a cousin who's lesbian, she's a lawyer. She lives in the Philippines, she never moved out of the Philippines, and she was my older sister's God Mother. Her Nina. And... I remember just going to the Philippines when I was eleven and I was with my nephews who were about my age. And we were going around and we go to, we're with my Auntie Rosa, who, as my mom said "tomboy." But they said "tomboy." So we go with her, she's showing us around, and we go over to University of Santo Tomaz, we go into this office building, and there's this lady who, she greets and introduces us to. She says

“I want you to meet your Auntie Fay.” I say “Oh, are you mom’s cousin too?” And they say “No, not really” “Oh, okay...” And then I, then I would call my mom’s and dad’s cousins “Auntie” and “Uncle” too. I didn’t get it at first. And then after awhile my mom would explain, “No, she’s, they’re... together.” That’s the most that she could say. She... she’d say “They’re together. They live together.” And she was fine with it. So.

Ryan: I wanted to share with us, I’m amazed with how, embarrassing or anti-gay, or embarrassing or confusing part of gay identity is passed on because there’s a Filipino word that’s used in lots of Filipino languages, “bakla”, which means an effeminate gay guy. I first learned it from my gay Filipino friends in Chicago 20 years ago. So when I went back to Toledo to visit my mom I asked “Hey, have you ever heard the word ‘bakla’?” And she got all red and embarrassed. And I’m just amazed that she’s, that she was a girl in Manila in the 30s and she heard that word. She knew the word from her childhood. That like, that that idea was so ingrained in the Filipino culture that she heard it 70 years ago.

Joseph: Isn’t Bakla, isn’t it the equivalent to me, wouldn’t it be gay? Or is it more like faggot?

Ryan: No, it means an effeminate gay man! So, “bakla,” there’s a whole “bakla” culture.

Joseph: Okay, I thought it just meant gay.

Ryan: No, it’s a putting down, yeah.

Joseph: Okay, okay.

Ryan: You think about bakla, you think about the parlorista.

Joseph: I know there’s another word, I heard, “abinabayo” or something.

Ryan: There’s “bading”?

Joseph: There’s so many dialects.

Ryan: Yeah.

Joseph: So this might have been my mom's dialect which is Besayan, or Buaray, specifically.

And, um, I thought, I thought I'd heard "binabayo" as like a mad word for gay people. I thought "bakla" was kind of matter of fact, like, "he's gay, he's bakla."

Ryan: No, it means effeminate, yeah. So, yeah, I was amazed because my gay Filipino friends were like, "Ohhh, you don't know what 'bakla' is! Well 'bakla' is like the effeminate fag." And I go back to my mother and she's like, turns red and gets really embarrassed.

Joseph: Interesting.

Ryan: I was like, wow, she heard that...

What I was curious about is that I said I was in Thailand before and in Thai the word for lesbian is "tom" and it's morphed from tomboy, and I'd heard the word "tomboy" for lesbian from Filipinos but I was curious if it was accepted to use to mean lesbian in the Philippines or only in America.

Ryan: Oh yeah!

Joseph: There's not as much of a pejorative feel to it. When you say "Oh yeah, she's tomboy" it's just matter of fact.

Ryan: Oh yeah, Maria will be able to tell you all about that.

Joseph: She speaks Tagalog.

Ryan: Yeah, but Maria's the one who first told me about what tomboy is. She said that people would call her tomboy.

So... are there any other things you guys think would be relevant to talk about?

Joseph: I can't think of anything.

Ryan: Well thank you so much for talking with us!

Michael
San Francisco, CA
November 18, 2013

In some ways Michael was the easiest person for me to interview. Both of us are Jewish, so I felt like I knew what questions to ask, and that it could be more of a conversation. He was so incredibly polite the entire time, and was very willing to tell me anything I asked, and tried to answer each question very carefully. Even though we met in a busy coffee shop, it still felt like a very intimate interview.*

After he spoke to me about his synagogue, I was intrigued, so he invited me to join him for Friday night services several days later. Going to the services was amazing, both to see people creating their own community and defining their own traditions, but also because I felt so welcomed by the entire congregation.

**Names with an asterisk have been changed to protect privacy.*

So, first of all, I'm kind of curious how information got dispensed, so... how did you end up hearing about my project?

Sure, I heard about your project through the East Bay NRJ group through Revered Deborah Lee's.

The Talking Circle?

The Talking Circle, yes, um. Because I've been a member of that coalition for years now, several years. Umm, and, I get all of their email blasts. And so whenever they have requests or whenever there's events it gets blasted out to all the members. So I saw this and I thought it sounds like a really cool opportunity.

Yeah it's interesting for me because I had read the other article about Asian Americans converting to Judaism and that you were in that article, too.

Oh wow.

And so it was, I got your email, and I thought "that sounds so familiar!" and I opened the article and I was like "oh, that is the same person!" [laughs]

Oh wow, wow. It's a small world, too! [laughs]

Did that answer the question?

And so I want to ask also about terminology so I can make sure that I'm using the, the right words when we talk.

Sure.

So what term do you use to identify your religion?

Sorry?

To identify your religion... what terms do you use?

My religion? Um... Jewish. Judaism. [laughs]

Umm... what about culturally?

Culturally, umm... I'm... Filipino, Jewish culture.

Umm... and also what about gender and sexual orientation.

Gender- male, I identify as gay. Gay male.

Great! No surprises there, I just want to make sure I don't make any assumptions about anyone.

Umm, so are you involved in a religious or spiritual community?

Yes, I am. Um, I'm actively involved in congregation Sha'ar Zahav. It is in San Francisco on Dolores and 16th street.

[laughs]

So can you talk about Sha'ar Zahav?

Sure. Sha'ar Zahav is a very interesting congregation. It was founded... over thirty years ago.

It could be more than that [laughs]. Umm... in the 70s. By three gay Orthodox men. And so... sort of that orthodoxy weaves through a lot of the, um, the... synagogue culture. And so... there's a lot of observance within the members, and... even though it's a Reform shul...

Oh, interesting!

It's a Reform shul, but people there are very observant.

Yeah.

And, it's, that's just the culture. And so there... uh... [unable to hear next phrase]... over thirty years, the rabbi is a lesbian, Rabbi Camille Angel. Umm... and it's a very LGBT friendly community and it's welcoming to everyone. So that's what I love about it. It's welcoming to everyone.

That's really cool. What, what do you think makes it different from a typical Reform, um, you said it's more observant than a Reform shul, um, I'm just kind of curious, as also a Reform Jew.

It feels, oh yeah, it feels like you're, when you're at service, you feel like you're in a Conservative... service.

Is there like a mechitza, like a divider or anything?

No, no, no, no divider. [laughs]

I hope not! With LGBT people that'd make even less sense.

Oh, no, no. But, but it's just... there's a lot more Hebrew... there's just, there's just... it's hard to describe.

That's interesting.

People who visit, people who visit who are Reform, they say, wow, it's a little less Reform than what I thought it would be.

That sounds interesting. I know I've heard of Sha'ar Zahav, I just couldn't remember in exactly what context...

So... oh, so, what do, so from being part of Sha'ar Zahav, what do you think you gain from being part of that community?

Um... a lot of things. I feel a, connected to my spirituality, I feel connected to my Jewish community... I... feel very welcome as, as a person who... I mean I... I don't really fit into a lot of... the boxes that people, I mean, LGBT, Filipino, Jewish and... this congregation is just very welcoming, again, to everyone. So whatever, however you identify, it's very, very welcoming. That's, that, what I really get out of it.

Do you feel any challenges from being part of it?

Um, the only challenges that I felt were... challenges that I sort of put on myself, because I didn't know what to expect when I first became a member. I had my own stereotypes of what I thought it would be. But really... I, all of my stereotypes were shattered, you know... I felt very included because they're very inclusive in everything they do. They, umm... the congregations goes out of its way to make everyone feel welcome. So... challenges... not really. Actually, not really.

So how did you end up finding, um, Judaism and Sha'ar Zahav, and all of that?

Sure. It was a very weird process because, as a Filipino I was, excuse me, I'm getting over a... I have a vocal cord issue, I have a nodule on my vocal cords, so, umm, I'm trying to, to careful the way I speak so that it doesn't make it irritated. So... um... so that's why if I have to speak in lower tones.

I can hear you fine, so don't worry.

Thank you. And so... I... As a Filipino I was raised Catholic because 95% of Filipinos are raised Catholic. And... I fell away from that, umm... probably during my college years. And so I completely fell away from religion around that time. And for many years of my life I

was just not very religious. And... about seven or eight years ago I decided to go back into spirituality. And so I went on sort of this spiritual quest, if you will... um... and... I spoke to different friends of different religions. I spoke to my Muslim friends, my Buddhist friends, my... Unitarian Universalist friends, and... so... um... I... met up with a lot of friends over the course of two weeks. And finally the very last friend I met up with was my Jewish friend, and, um... I was doing interviews, similar to what you're doing here, and I'd interviewed everyone on what do they believe in, what are some of the observances, what is as the very core of the various religions and... and just sort of what are the customs and... and things I should know. And... none of the religions really resonated with me until I got to my friend, who, the very last lunch I went to, I gained a lot of weight that week, [laughs], those two weeks, 'cause I met during lunch [laughs], and so I had lunch with everybody. And, um, and something about Judaism just resonated with me. And... really made sense. That's the way I can describe it. It just made absolute, perfect logical sense. I mean, it was just logical. And so... um... I asked my friend, I said, "What do you think I should do?" "Well I think you should see a rabbi! You should read on the internet more. Just learn more." So that's what I did. And the more I learned after I met with Rabbi Angel at Sha'ar Zahav, um, the more... it, it just felt... made sense. And I felt, at home, like very comfortable with... beliefs, with philosophies with customs, with everything. The culture. And that's how I knew, this, this was a perfect fit, this was it. And that's how, it all kind of came together. And then... I went through the two year conversion process, and they said to me, two years is actually a long time. Usually it's a year. But it took me two years because I... wanted to learn more, so... and that's how I... how it all came, came to be.

Are there any other Filipino Americans at Sha'ar Zahav?

Oh yes, there's, there's several of us. Uh... the difference, though, I think... if I have to think about each and every one of them, but I believe that I'm the only one who did it without a Jewish partner. In other words, the others have Jewish partners, my partner is Catholic. So... umm... I don't know how else to say it. But I did it more for me, not, not because of marriage or something like that. So... Um... not that that, I'm not making a judgment or anything. But I think that's... makes me kind of unusual at Sha'ar Zahav in that way. That I am... yeah. I just... [laughs]

That's a really interesting story.

Thank you! Yeah. It's kind of unusual I know.

No, it's nice. So... another question is how does your family... first of all is your family in the Philippines mostly or are they in the state?

We're all here. All in Fresno, California.

Oh, okay.

And in LA.

Do... do they know that you're gay?

Yes, I came out when I was sixteen years old.

Mazel tov.

Thank you, thank you. Yeah, I came out when I was sixteen, and... um... my family is very... kind of unusual Filipino family. They're super progressive, and so they were very accepting, and... that was many, many years ago. So they're at the point now, where... they're very... just accepting. Of everything in my life. And so...so... when I told them that I was converting to Judaism, they were like, "Oh wow. Another thing!" [laughs] You know so... It's just, it's actually my parents were there, when I uh... when I uh, had my, um,

welcoming, umm... ceremony, welcoming event at the shul. And... then they were there when I delivered my first, um, sermon, at the bimah. And so... it's just, it's... they, they've been very supportive. And they're different religions, of course. No one in my family is Jewish except me. Um, but they're very supportive. They, they, um, have come to services at Sha'ar Zahav. Um, I think in the beginning more out of curiosity, but then... they actually enjoyed the service and everybody made them feel very welcome so they kept coming back!

Do you ever go to their Catholic services too?

Um, I have, I have. But again, I was raised Catholic, so it wasn't... it wasn't anything new. It was kind of like, I've done this. [laughs] But they've, they've come to my services more than I've gone to theirs.

Um, have you ever been involved in any, umm... LGBT religious groups, like... queer spirituality groups or anything like that?

Meaning other than Sha'ar Zahav?

Umm... oh yeah... well... does Sha'ar Zahav label itself as a... like, LGBT synagogue specifically or is it...

The community labeled it that way. [laughs] That's what it's known as, but... it's, it's really, like I said, open to everyone. But it's become the LGBT synagogue, just because... the population. I mean, it's in the Castro. The population is overwhelmingly LGBT. You know? Umm... but they have, I mean, it's... it's... just a very, I can't quite describe it, I mean there's, there are, within Sha'ar Zahav, there's a transgender support group... there's a heterosexual support group... [laughs] I mean, there's all these, there's LGBT with children parenting support group... I mean, it's so niche, it's very niche. It's got every support group

you can think of within there. Which is, I mean, it's very inclusive. I don't know if that answers your questions.

No, that is, that's very interesting.

Can you think of what... what has been one of your most fulfilling spiritual or religious experiences? Whether it's been... Judaism, or being part of another tradition... or wherever it is...

Definitely Judaism. I, it happens all the time. There's always moments when I'm just overwhelmed with, just like an inner joy. Umm... whether it's a sermon from the rabbi... whether it's... a high holiday... whether it's my very first, um, when I went to service for the very first time at Sha'ar Zahav, it was during Hanukah, and I was just, like bursting out in tears, I don't know why. It's... at Sha'ar Zahav, my most meaningful moments, most memorable moments... and I can recall each and every one of those. Even my... very first sermon that the rabbi, that the rabbi gave during my first High Holidays that I attended. Her sermon... um... I, you know, it was just, there are moments that I just recall that were just very overwhelming for me. I mean, in terms of emotion and... and feeling. So... I don't know if that answers... I don't know if that answers your question... did you want me to be more specific or no...

I mean, if you can think of a... a specific story you'd like to tell, I'd love to hear it.

Sure, umm... okay, I'll give a different one since I've named, you know, kind of all the ones... I'm going to give kind of a different one. There was... a... rabbi-in-training at Sha'ar Zahav. Um... a transgender rabbi-in-training. And I don't know where he is now. Um... but he was, when he was doing continuous studies at our synagogue. Kind of doing a co-leading services with our rabbi, so it was really cool having the two service leaders like that. And

then our cantor, I mean it was just so amazing. And... um... this rabbi-in-training who is now a rabbi, at the time gave a sermon during, umm, it was Rosh Hashanah, it was for Rosh Hashanah, and the sermon was, about... umm... oh, it was just every time I think about it I get so... it was so beautiful. The, the sermon focused on... um... Shabbat. It was on the time, it's that magical time, when... we transition from day into night. At, you know, sunset, and you can't really pick the exact moment when that transition occurs, but it's just a magical time. You know? That was sort of the focus of it, and how... all the people... you know, transgender people are that... are... quote-un-quote twilight people because they transition as well. And in a sense... then, the, the rabbi focused on everybody and said, you know, all of us, in a way, are twilight people. Because we all go through some sort of metamorphosis or change in our lives. And... and... you know, for some of us it's a divorce, for some of us it's having a child for the first time, for some of us it's coming out... but, that's our twilight time. And it was just so, I was just so struck by that sermon. And I was like blown away. And I was bursting in tears, and I don't cry a lot, I don't want to make it seem like I cry all the time.

[laughs] Only at shul.

But there are moments when, I mean, there are some moments in my life that I am... something is just so breathtakingly beautiful that it brings me to tears. And I really don't cry a lot, I mean I really don't. I'm a very, I'm kind of the opposite actually, I'm kind of non-emotional, you know? But there are moments, and they happen usually with Sha'ar Zahav when I am just rendered in tears and touched by a sermon or something the rabbi says or something that the cantor says, or something that a fellow congregant says. The other thing about Sha'ar Zahav, and I don't mean to sound like I'm selling you the synagogue at all, in any way.

No, it sounds like a great place.

But it's like, the other thing that's unique, and it is a great place, the other thing that's unique about us that I love more than any other... I visited, part of my homework when I was converting was to visit other shuls, Conservative shuls, Orthodox shuls, you know. And there're all beautiful in different, in their own way, but what makes, what I really like about ours is that, and this can be for better or for worse, but... they... the... um... the committee, the ritual committee, the ritual committee... purposely wants different service leaders every Friday night. So they have... so there's a lot of lay leadership. And they ask upon different people to... um... lead service on Friday nights. In fact, they're trying to get me to do it in the future, and I'm like... when I'm not so busy I really want to, I would love to lead service. Like, every Friday night we'll get someone different. They'll have a different style, they'll bring a different sermon style... and it's like a potpourri, you'll get someone totally different on a Friday night or a Saturday morning. And there's some service leaders you can feel more... kind of an affinity towards, and you know... it's just really... different that way that it's just so varied. And that what makes it kind of exciting. And not that, not that you know the rabbi, I mean our rabbi I have no problem with her being the service leader every Friday night too, but it just lends to the diversity again, the diversity of the shul. I can go on and on about it.

So if you can think of what your ideal religious community can be can you describe it?

This is it. I mean, this, Sha'ar Zahav would be it. It would be just like this. Welcoming... open to all different types of... um... ways of thinking... Umm... yeah, just... just... the service leading on Fridays and Saturdays, the service leading is very diverse. Um... I love it. I truly, um... our shul... okay, even though our shul is, you know, have predominantly

LGBT, umm... members. A lot of those LGBT and the non-LGBT have a lot of children, so there's a lot of children at the shul, too. So it's very mixed, I mean it's, 'cause you know, I was thinking when I joined, oh, this is going to be primarily LGBT so there's going to, like, be no kids, it's going to be all older gay men. But no! There's a lot of lesbians, there's a lot of transgendered, there's a lot of transgendered couples that have children, I mean there's just... it's so diverse. And, and, I love that, I really, really love that, aspect about it. It shatters my stereotypes completely. So... Sha'ar Zahav is the ideal. For me.

That's wonderful. That's exciting that you have that.

And again, I don't want to sound like I'm selling the shul, it's just...

It's really okay. Umm... going back to... your... family, and being Filipino. You were saying that your family has been totally open to these things in your life... but has it been an issue at all with, like... family friends? Or I shouldn't say "has it been an issue," but... what has been the... the reaction of family friends towards your family's progressivism. Your family's fellow Filipino community.

Very accepting as well. Very accepting. They read about me in a newspaper .When was it... several months ago... Philippine News did a profile on me... part of it is also because I'm also an elected official.

Sorry, what?

An elected official.

Oh!

An elected official in county... so there was a newspaper article about me. In the article I felt it was really important to be out. So I was out. Um... I was talking about everything about me, like... being gay, being Jewish, being... all these things. The different facets of... of...

me. And my... father's friends emailed him and me and said "Oh I just read about you in the paper and we're so proud of and and... don't ever feel like..." just, it was very supportive. Very supportive. Very supportive. So again I feel very blessed, very lucky, because I know in other situations there are a lot of, umm... Filipinos who... you know, come out as gay, or change religions and they become disowned by their parents and they... their parents never talk to them again... and so I feel very lucky because my situation I think is rare. I want to say, I think, oddly, I think my situation is rare. I don't know, I can't speak for other Filipinos, but I think it's rare. The support that I'm getting from family and friends, is very rare. Yeah. **Well that's wonderful... yeah... well to be honest, that was a lot of my questions, but I'm curious about whether there's other things that you can think of that are important for me to know about, whether it's about you or it's broader...**

Well let's talk about some negative stuff.

Okay.

How about some negative? Because you've heard me being a cheerleader and all of that... I have to tell you the most, the most challenging moment for me as... a Jewish person. Was... so... I was marching in the pride parade with my synagogue, because... there's a religious contingent at the synagogue, er, at the pride parade. And... they put all the, uh, the, uh, the Jewish organizations together. Like... as one big contingent. So we're kind of at the end. And... so we're marching, marching, and everyone was having a good time and dancing and... just, just having a great time. And then... so, I was standing, okay, so you have to understand the layout, the situation. So I was standing in the middle, to my right was... another, umm... gay Filipino Jew, to my left was another gay Filipino Jew. So the three of us. We're wearing our yarmulkes and we're marching. And I even had a t-shirt that said, oh,

it's so funny, I bought it, where did I buy it? I got it at... where did I... in LA. It said "nice Jewish boy" on it. So we were walking, having a great time, and then someone, I don't know if he was drunk or not, I hope he was drunk. He yells out and he goes "hey you guys." And so of course we look up, we look at this guy who's standing up on like one of those bus shelters, he was standing on top of a bus shelter, and he goes "yeah, you!" so we looked up. And he goes "You guys, you oriental guys aren't Jewish!" He goes like that. And let me tell you, that, to me, was probably, and I've heard a lot of offensive things in my life that were hurled at me, and insults that were hurled at me, and that was probably the most, one of the most painful moments for me. Because it was almost like someone was trying to strip away my Jewishness. And not validate, and like, render me, like render me not valid. And just completely wipe out, you know, my identity. And that was for me very painful. And my uh... the person standing next to, Tony, said to me, "Michael just ignore him, he's such an idiot, he doesn't know what he's talking about. Just ignore him." And, and... I guess that is kind of an insecurity that I have of myself. Is... umm... is not feeling, Jewish, okay?

And, um... this, this, goes into something that I'd like to just share with you, is... is... um... kosher. Kosher. Umm... some of my friends who, who are Jewish and who don't really understand will say to me, well you know, umm... you know these are modern times and you're a, you're a Reform Jew. You know, you can eat bacon if you want, you know. If you want. And I say to them, well, first of all, umm... I do observe kosher, so I don't eat it, okay, and then they'll fire back to me and I'll say, well the reason that people did that before is because, if, if it's, if it's been sitting there for a long time, you know. It made a lot of people sick. We have refrigerators now. And then this goes to the very heart of why I do it. And I say, that's not why I do it, okay? I say, there are many reasons why I do it. One is that... it's

in the Torah. But second of all, second of all, for me. It reminds me of my Jewishness. And I say, every time I drink something, I eat something it reminds me of my Jewishness. And that is important to me, that's very important to me. And... so for someone to try to take that away from me, that is, for me it is one of the most painful things. Because I... I consider myself Jewish. Even if someone says that I'm not, or claims that I'm not. You know, so that's why... that's kind of... that identity, for me, is really, really important.

Yeah, yeah, I resonate with that a lot. I'm vegetarian, so I mean, I... I almost automatically keep kosher, but I think about that sort of thing like... yeah.

It's, every time I eat lunch, breakfast, dinner it just reminds, reinforces my Jewishness. And to some people, I mean, when I explain that, they're kind of, you need food to remind you that you're Jewish. And I'm like no, it's for me! And some people they, they just don't understand.

Yeah... to me I feel that way with fasting also. To me it's not just that it's written down somewhere. To me it's reminding myself of that commitment...

Yes.

...and making myself think differently for a day.

Yes. And that's exactly, that's how I feel, too. Especially during Passover. Which by the way, for me, is the most difficult. That is the most difficult, difficult, time for me. Because my diet is primarily breads, I eat lots of breads. So... oh my God.

For me, Passover is so hard. Just because... the bulk of my diet, I mean, my breakfast is oatmeal, it's what I normally eat every day, 99% of the time I eat oatmeal for breakfast. So I eat a lot of breads and grains. [laughs] So it's, uch, so hard! So hard.

But, yes, I just want to share with you kind of the negative thing, too. I know I've been sounding like a cheerleader, everything's so positive, But that would be like the negative things, when that kind of thing happens. And that happens, actually more frequently, unfortunately than not. When I meet people, umm, and even some Jewish people, when I tell them, like, why, they're kind of like that, and I'm like why? Why did you convert? And I'm just like, my God. Do I have to explain to you?

That's a shame.

It's like, just accept it! Just say, okay. Or, you know... but I mean, it's... And I get it and I get a lot from, you know, Filipinos, I get it from all... I mean. Cross section of society I get it from, I get the why. And when I get the "why" it's so insulting! It's like... why not? You know? Why, is it bad? It's like this automatic... makes it sound like it's bad. Then... I have to go to explaining mode, you know? And time to educate you mode. That part gets wearing after awhile. But...

So you said your partner is Catholic, right?

Yeah, he's Italian. He's a non-practicing Catholic. He only goes to church once a year.

For Christmas mass?

And barely even that. He'll do it when his parents go.

Do you guys ever go to each other's services.

He's gone to mine. 'cause like I said, eh doesn't really go to any, so... I mean, I've, I've said let me know when you go and I'll go with you [laughs] he's never went so I don't, I don't even think he goes! So... he's kind of fallen away. But, but he's gone to mine many times, many, many times. And I think for him it's more of a fascination. He's curious, and I'd say with my family they've never been to... umm... Jewish service. And so they're just curious

what the different rituals are... my dad will say "Well what is that, what is that thing they're taking out?" And I say "That's the Torah." [laughs]. And he's like... what's that... and like, why are they lighting, why is everyone going like that... [laughs]

But I think that's interesting, also. Because it makes you have to rethink things in different ways. When you have to explain them to someone else. That, like, you have to be like, why do I do this? Okay.

I, I, I mean I have no problem explaining. It's just like explaining when people are being insulting, it kind of becomes, you know, frustrating, But I kind of knew that going into it. I was forewarned by my mentor during the two year process. You're going to get insults, you're going to have people say bad things about you.

Was your mentor also Asian American? Also Filipino?

No, he was... Paul Cohen. Was one of the... I want to say... one of the close to the founders of Sha'ar Zahav. He was one of the original, kind of, you know. So his history with the shul goes way way back. So he knows... he's interviewed all of the various, the rabbimates. You know? So... he prepared me, he prepared me for... all of this so... it wasn't like, you know, I was totally surprised to get... now... but now it's better. I'm just you know... it's been years now. So I'm kind of, I get sensitized, or just used to it now. It hurts less, it still hurts, but it hurts less, but it gives me an opportunity now to educate people. So...

Well you were saying that Sha'ar Zahav has lots of other groups within it... Are you, besides going to services, are there any other aspects of it that you're involved in?

Umm... I used to be, umm... more involved on the, uhh, like the membership outreach side of things. Umm... but... less so now, because ever since I got elected to public office I don't have time for anything! Besides my full time job and being a public official! Going to all

kind of things, just, I hardly have time anymore, and... and so... it just, umm... I, I, and that's one of the things I try to go shul as much as I can still, but... it's so hard!

When are Sha'ar Zahav services?

They're on Friday nights and Saturday mornings. Friday nights are when all of the, sort of, fun and social people go, Saturday mornings are hard core people. Because Friday nights you'll get about thirty people. It's not a big shul. It's probably one of the smallest shuls in San Francisco. Probably in the top five smallest, we're, compared to the other ones, we're, they get thousands of people on Friday nights. I like this smaller community. So I'd say about thirty people on Friday nights. And then Saturday, I want to say like, ten people show up. They'll get a minyan but it's like... there's like the hardcore people, the ones who are more serious about it. I have gone to both and they're very different. Very, very different. Friday nights is one big social gathering... And, and then after shul, everybody like, you know, goes to dinner and goes out. They all go to the Castro! [laughs] I just have to go home, 'cause my bed time's usually like nine o'clock. Seriously, I have to be in bed by nine, I'm really weird that way. But it's, it's one big party on a Friday night.

[At this point he invited me to come along and let me know about the times for services and encouraged me to bring my grandmother as well.]

Sha'ar Zahav people are just very fun, fun people. Just on that alone. And the service is very unique. In the, umm... From what I've been told, okay, from others who go to LGBT, umm, shuls. Shuls like, around the country. Sha'ar Zahav... has this way of changing the genders on all of the [laughs] in the prayers. So the prayers are... very... unique. And... and... even our prayer book, which we just updated.

So you made your own prayer book?

Yes! After thirty years we finally updated it. Umm, and again... it uses a lot of gender neutral terminology in prayers... and stuff like that... And oh, actually I, I contributed to the prayer book, I wrote several of the prayers. And it was so much fun. Because again, the prayer book was inclusive. It brought all of the voices of the diverse voices of the shul to create this purple bound... it's about this thick, it's purple, with gold leaf writing. It's really, it's just really, a community, it's very community-focused. Everything that Sha'ar Zahav does is very community.

[We made more specific plans at this point for me to come to services that Friday night.]

Number seven. The most fulfilling religious experience. I think I kind of answered it, I don't think I fully answered it. Now, when I really think of it. And if I could point to one, single moment, it, umm, the day of, umm, stepping into the mikvah. When I became officially Jewish. That, for me, was... the day. Because, when my beit din was speaking to me, and asking me questions. I don't know if this was supposed to happen, and again, you're going to have different ideas of me, but when the beit din spoke to me, and asked me questions. Their questions brought me to tears. In a joyous way, okay? In a joyous way.

Yeah.

And that probably was the day that was the most, umm, most fulfilling was that day. Umm... granted, of course, I almost drowned in the mikvah. Because I did this summersault because I slipped and... aside from that, when the beit din and I were talking. Our conversation just, almost, was, it it, really, was just so intense. That was the most powerful, was when I became a... umm... March 8, 2005. That was, that was...

That sounds beautiful.

So I think I... yeah.

Well then I'll stop this. Thank you so much for everything!

[As we chatted more at the end, he made sure to tell me “mazel tov” too, when I mentioned my own queerness. It made a lot of sense in the moment, and showed the bond we had created in that short amount of time.]

Vivek Anand

November 18, 2012

Berkeley, California

We met at a coffee shop to speak, but it was too crowded so we walked down the street to a park. We sat on the ground underneath an enormous old oak tree for our conversation. He and I spoke on the phone earlier and he put me in touch with many of my other subjects. Vivek specifically asked me to use his real name in my project so that he could be a resource to others.

You heard about this project through Trikone?

Trikone.

Trikone means triangle in Sanskrit. So, it's an old name we've had, it's... probably one of the oldest, or the oldest gay South Asian organization in the United States.

So they got in touch with me because, I'm, you know, I know some of the people there, and they know that I have an interest in spiritual, umm, spiritual things. [laughs]

What kinds of things does Trikone do?

It's a social organization. Umm. Primarily. As time goes by it's becoming more, you know, also about information, education, and... activism. Umm... One important, conference they do is called Desi-Q and Desi-Q is a ... Desi means, like fellow countryman, which refers to all South Asians... And Desi-Q is a conference that takes place every couple years, ever four years, I think. And there's one in 2013 in San Francisco. Umm so that's one thing they do. Umm... they... have a website. They used to have a newsletter that was published regularly, now perhaps not so regularly. Parties, uhh... uhh... participation in conferences, national conferences. Like I went to NQAPIA which is National Queer Asian Pacific Islander Alliance conference in Washington DC this year. All sorts of things. Co-sponsorship with the LGBT festival... film festival.

I want to make sure that I'm using the right terms when we talk, so that's why I'm asking this question... what term do you use to identify your religion or spiritual affiliation?

You mean like, do I belong to a certain religion?

Yeah, umm, that or, umm, some people chose to identify themselves as things like "spiritual but not religious?"

I see, as an adjective to describe myself? Umm... You know there are some people... I describe myself as religious. And... when I tell people what that means, some of them think that what I'm describing is what they would call spiritual. Umm... but the reason I make it a point to say that I'm religious rather than spiritual is that I think that religious is a word that's been, you know, claimed for too long by people who are bigoted. And I don't think you can be bigoted and religious at the same time so I really want to take that back.

What religion is that, if I may ask, that you identify as?

Well, all of them! I'm really drawn to many. I'm sorry if it may be a little confusing for you.

It's okay.

But my heritage is that my father was born Hindu. He's from Punjab in North India. My mother was born Christian in Kerala in South India. Umm... when she married my father she converted and became a Hindu. So I was born into, sort of, for practical purposes, a Hindu household but one that was very respectful of Christianity and other religions, including Islam. Umm... So there is that heritage, and growing up in India you are really exposed to a really hybrid Hindu-Muslim culture and if you go to Kerala where my mother's from, Christian culture, too. Uhh... so those are my, sort of, three influences in the beginning. Then as I grew up my parents began to get exposed to Advaita Vedanta which is an Indian

philosophy that's connected in some ways to Hinduism but is really beyond it. And they met a man called Swami Chinmayananda, and Swami Chinmayananda, umm, began to teach the Bhagavad Gita in the mid seventies to people in English. And these, public discourses, so they were very influenced by him. Then we met a man called Shri Ram Mohan who was a Vedanta teacher and who was a student of Swami Chinmayananda and his pupil Swami Dayananda. So Advaita Vedanta, so we met him and he began to come to our home to teach a group in our home. So that became the foundation of my, my religion or my philosophy. After these early influences. Part of the influences was my grandmother who lived with us. She was a Krishna worshipper, umm, from the Mahanubhav Panth. So there's Advaita Vedanta, which has really stayed with me, and after coming to America in San Francisco when I was looking for a group of, umm, sort of, a group of gay people to hang out with, perhaps a spiritual group, one of the groups I heard of was Queer Taoists. And... I've been meeting with the Queer Taoists for twelve years. And... umm... Mmm... And then through music, I mean there are many other things that connect me to religion. So through music I have been connected to Hinduism, and to Islam through Sufi music through my teachers Rita Sahai and Sukhawat Ali Khan. Umm... and then, through Thomas, my present partner of seven years who's Catholic, again, a sort of re-acquaintance with the church. I go with him to the church whenever... half the times he goes, which is maybe every other week when he goes and I might go once a month. Umm...and it's been nice for me to reconnect with the church. Which is a different church from my mother's church, but umm, I really appreciate the Catholic faith. And... as a faith, as a faith, not as sort of a dogmatic religion. And... and... uh... so these have been these various sort, influences that are directly religious. But on the other hand I think there's a lot that's religious and spiritual which

includes thinking about archetypes, and inclusive thinking about human, humanity and values and philosophy and there's been all of that. [laughs]

So what things do you think that you gain from being parts of these communities? I imagine it would be different things from different communities...?

As a community. Right. Umm... Is that your focus? Is this research mainly about religious communities? Because in some sense, the reason I ask is that I think that, our spiritual identity is umm, is simultaneously a solitary thing and is also a social... thing. And is also a sort a thing without boundaries. Without boundaries, expands you beyond yourself, the social expands you beyond yourself. So is your study mainly about the social manifestation of religion?

No, I think, not really. I think that's partly just my, my background speaking though. For me, when I think of religion I think of community more so. See, I actually wrote down here, to remind myself, I wrote "community or practice."

I see...

To try and remind myself that I think, the language I'm using is...

It's sort of what you began with...

But I'm trying to look at more...

It's expanding as you see what people's ideas are.

Yes, I...

So what do I get though... So what I'd say... let's go with the first part of your question. It's what do I get from this community? ... Uh... Uh... Well you know, there's... through the religion of my mother and through the religion of my father... there's a sense of cultural affinity with other people. Uh... and association, uhh... more from the Hindu side than the

Christian side. With old stories with mythology, and... umm, so there're these, these figures that become part of your consciousness and subconscious, umm... connection to people, connection with archetypes, umm, a... a sense of what's important in life. And beyond everyday life and the material world, and... materiality. Things like that. Uh... uh... participation in ritual at home... in public... mmm... with a group of people and sort of marking time in some sense, marking cyclical time. Uhh... then the fact that a community, like the Hindu community in some sense, that the community, because of its resources and its strength and its commitment, nurtures new traditions. Spiritual traditions, monastic traditions that remain intact because of that. So the fact that this, you know, monastic, philosophical tradition of Vedanta which was revived by Adi Shankara in the ninth century or so. Uh... is still alive and of course, he says it's part, it's connected to the Vedas which is an even older tradition. Appreciating the power of a community to keep, uh, subtle truths alive by having a form that's more accessible and material, you know, temples and things like that. Umm... then coming here to the Bay Area, You know, wanting to connect with gay people but wanting an alternative to meeting them in bars and thinking, can I meet a group of peers who are spiritually inclined and are gay? So I can hang out with gay people but also re-access that spiritual community of Vedantins that I missed, or left behind in India. So the Taoists provided that very safe space to think about deep issues. And not, you know, be thinking about hooking up with people. Umm... and then more recently, more recently, more recently... In addition to that meeting with non-gay religious people, singing in temples, singing in churches and things like that. Being someone who's out to many people in that context but, perhaps, some key people, and knowing that my gayness and my spirituality can

go together in the same space. These are some things that communities, being part of that community has done.

And about the faith, what that does for me... It's really about getting to know my true nature and self integration. Umm... so... it's been less of a problem to me who's always been able to, always had access to teachers... so there's Shri Ram Mohan in India, Swami Dayananda, a man called Jim Gilman who teaches Vedanta here, a peer group like the Taoists. Even things like the church. And... sermons there. Umm... And... and then my musical teachers, umm, reading about, like, Jung, and even eros and psyche and through psychology, archetypes, so it's sort of connecting again to my true nature and my, my true, my identity with, with, with, yeah, types and archetypes, deities, umm... but also there's sometimes been groups, like there's the Brahma Kumaris I meditated with and sang with for a long time. Even though I'm sort of not really like mainstream Brahma Kumari. They've been very accepting of gay people including me and said that essentially we're, from their perspective, essentially souls and our identity is not gendered. So, so, it doesn't matter what sex we are, or what we do with our bodies, it's essentially that we are souls, so they are very accepting of all people. Umm, even though it doesn't mean that everyone who comes there is extremely liberal, or something, but they have this vision that we are essentially souls. Umm, from the perspective of Vedanta we are all consciousness, it's not that we are individual souls, we are all just consciousness.

Umm... one consciousness. So again there is no division there either. The aspect of some religions like Christianity or Islam, I would say a primary value is love. Having love for everyone, I think becomes the, the most important thing. So any attitude that denies that love, to me, betrays the religious nature of that, that faith and makes it not a faith any longer as

practiced by that person or those people. So for me I can't, I can't imagine religion being non-accepting of anybody because religion implies love and acceptance. And I know that's kind of, you know, it's not based on what realpolitik... on what's really encountered in the world, but... you know every institution in the world is corrupted and so is religion. But I still hold to the true root of that institution which I think it more important than its current manifestation.

You mentioned ritual... can you explain the rituals that you are a part of? Or that you participate in?

I think for me currently the most important ritual I participate in is singing. Umm... so it's sort of singing is a little bit like a moving... audible... mediation. Umm... But the subject may be secular potentially. So that's my closest connection. That's... umm... I... also think sort of meditation and spiritual study is something that I've done regularly for a long time but I'm not one of the people who sort of meditates every day... sitting in one place. But what I've done for a long time is do things like for instance I go every Monday to, umm, meet with Jim Gilman's Vedanta class, we study an old text and we meditate. So we meditate for a half hour and then we have a class for something like an hour after that. Umm... So that's one kind of ritual. It's almost like going to church but it's a meditation and discussion... teaching group which involves some kind of discussion. Meeting with the Queer Taoists is ritual... Umm... And then this is a complex one, I don't know what rubric you'd put it under. But is this about being sort of conscious all the time? Walking, sitting here with you, being aware of you, being aware of the trees, the grass, umm, and to have that space in every moment in life to just step back, okay, this is what my student is saying to me, step back, wow I'm really

getting triggered, so that awareness through everyday life is probably the most constant consistent ritual I engage in.

Paralleling my earlier question about what you gain from being part of these practices and communities... what parts of them are a challenge for you?

Umm... well sometimes, you know, I like going to a Catholic church, but occasionally something that happens in the Catholic Church is disturbing. So, that Catholic Church that I go to. There are other Catholic churches that I'm sure are even more disturbing. So for instance, we were once at a church when umm a sermon was being given and it was some sort of equation almost of, either unconscious or deliberate, of sinful people with animals and gay people or something like that. And... and it got a sort of rise out of me, and I wasn't sure what to do then... to stand up and say something... to make my protest felt. Umm... And it put off Thomas, my partner, to the extent that he didn't want to go back to that church. We did go again, but over time we stopped going to that particular church which is a seminary church. Just sometimes, sort of the old farts, something like that, sort of, sort of, teachers, I don't know, bloviate, and say these things to get a rise out of people, and um... and yet... you know, I'm sure many of the people studying to be priests are gay, umm.. I'm sure many of the priests are gay. And then I'm sure some of them have suppressed gay tendencies. It's so strange in this atmosphere where there are so many gay people something negative has been said about gay people. And... umm... and you know I'm not a confirmed Catholic... I take communion because to me as an Indian all spiritual food is the same thing. Umm... and I think that's something I knew about myself, so I know I can go and take communion... I don't think it matters what the church thinks. Umm... but on the other hand, I... you know, if someone ever asked me to not take it, I would, I would honor that, I respect people's space,

but... so anyhow, so why I'm saying that is because I'm not an established member of the community, I'm not someone who wants to make time to meet with the community regularly at meetings on Wednesdays and Fridays in an LGBT group and this and that whatever, some of them are enlightened enough to have those. Umm... so if I were really invested in the church I would bring this up with the community and ask that there be more tolerance. And many of the members might agree because we live in the Bay Area and we are more liberal. So sometimes something spoken is disturbing. Sometimes, umm, I might be in a space where, say in a Hindu temple, where there's a certain worship taking place and if the husband and wife happen to be together they're sitting together and making a certain sacrifice, an offering of a coconut and rice and flower and... and it all seems very sort of heteronormative. And if I'm there alone I feel lonely sometimes, you know, and Thomas doesn't care much to go to these temples unless there's a music performance or something like that. Umm... but sometimes in my mind I've offered an offering for him and me as a couple. So sometimes there's a discomfort of not belonging even though no one has said anything mean, in fact people are very sweet. Umm... I think that's what I can think ... of. Mostly because most of my contact with religion in the Bay Area has been in places where they're accepting of gay people. But sometimes I hear of something. I mean, I gave a speech at a certain church in the Castro, a Catholic church, Holy Redeemer or something like that, on the connection between Vedanta and Hinduism and Christianity for a Lenten series of speeches on Wednesdays sometime last year, or maybe earlier, two years ago. But that church now is changing, and... it saddens me... And then of course when I hear of communities through the newspapers and things like that, in other countries and other parts of this country, umm, that are very intolerant, that troubles me. Umm... and then it's, it puts me in a difficult position of

occasionally having to defend my spirituality and my religious faith in the light of sort of, you know, homophobia from people who seem to be in a position to speak for all of the religious institutions.

Is there a specific example you're thinking of?

Well, you know, Proposition Eight. Umm... Proposition Eight was very troublesome because it was supported by Catholics, by Mormons... Umm... so that was one. Umm... once I was interviewed for a... by this magazine called Mantram, me and some other gay people were interviewed, gay South Asians, for an article, and they also interviewed some other people, some priests, some Hindu priest they interviewed in Los Angeles who said that society can only be maintained through marriage between a man and a woman. And... you know, gay people don't get married in that way, in that sanctioned way, so... they're abhorrent to our faith, or something like that. I don't know where he gets this shit from, where he gets this interpretation from. It's true that Hindu religion relies very much as Christian, as Chinese religion does, on respect, respecting ancestors and offering, making offerings to them, and, uh, not Vedanta, but you know the more deity based aspects of Hinduism do rely on that, umm, but I don't see why a single person or a child or a gay person or a married gay couple or different groups can't make a similar offering, umm, and thus sustain society. I mean we sustain society in many ways, I'm a teacher, I'm a singer, I've been an architect. So I contribute to society in so many ways. Umm, umm, so I think there's certain, anyhow, you asked me what are the instances of things that upset me, and yes, when people say things like that it's upsetting, partially because it's a criticism of me, and a lack of acceptance of me, but also because it saddens me that religion is being taught by people like this who are so ignorant. Umm... you know I think wow it's so sad that the ones who have chosen to be the

leaders of religion and the ones who are honored as religious leaders by people are in fact people who are not spiritual who are not religious, who are just office holders in a scared institution, umm... And how can a scared office holder teach you about who you are and what your essence is? It's just ridiculous. Umm... so I'm sad also for the people who don't get the benefit of valuable spiritual instruction because those available to instruct are ignorant. Umm... what other specific instances... can I think of... That's all I can think of now but maybe something else will come up...

So does your family mostly live in India or...

So also to ask you before you go on, so my question, my answers are kind of complex and long... can you work with those answers or do you need me to be more specific?

No, they're definitely okay.

These aren't specific... it's not a questionnaire. It's just a guide to a conversation mostly.

Yes, sorry, what were you asking me?

Is your family in the States or are they in India?

My parents live in Bombay which is called Mumbai now. I have two, two brothers, one who lives in Pune, a distance from Bombay, with his wife, and his sons were raised there too, but they now, one is in Canada, and one is in San Francisco. Umm... and then my second brother lives in Bombay with his wife and two kids. Sons. And... and then I have here some cousins and you know, children of cousins who are grown up and married and they have children... I have sort of distant aunts and things like that. No one in my immediate family besides my nephew who studies in San Francisco. And he's been here for a year.

Does your family know that you're gay?

Yes, they do.

How do they, may I ask, how do they feel about it?

They, currently, after having known about it for many years, I just had a conversation with my father where he was very positive and was telling me you know, “I just really want you to know that we’re absolutely at peace with your being gay. I won’t go out of my way to tell people, but if anyone asks me I will tell them yes, you know, Vivek is gay. And if they ask me how long I have known I would say for a long time. Umm... And I did have a difficult time with it when you first told me...” This would have been, they would have first known around, umm, ninety five or something like that, nineteen ninety five, maybe, ohh... nineteen ninety six, around that time. So it was difficult for them in the beginning, my parents. And... umm... but he says, “But you know, over time I’m at peace now... we really love you... and we really love Thomas, he’s an amazing person...” So this is my dad speaking with me. My mom, umm, you know, doesn’t say things like that, umm. Like I don’t think she feels the need to make a statement. But, umm, but she’s very, been very loving and very accepting. And... umm... and then my brothers... I think they’re at peace, I think. The thing is I believe that once you’re an adult, you... have made a certain peace with yourself. You don’t need to go around asking people what do you think of me being gay? Because I don’t know, it sort of puts yourself in the position of a child a little bit. I don’t know... so I don’t ask them any longer. But they come to our home, stay here... My brother and his wife, my nephews... everyone is very loving and accepting of us, Thomas. My middle bother hasn’t come to the US but we’ve visited there and he’s been nice to us. But I’m not absolutely sure how much at peace he is at, but for the first few years, for a long time, even now to some extent, I feel a little pressure to keep my gay identity a little quiet in India. Because my parents live there, and their idea was that, they live there and I live here, and they have to deal with all of the

people's attitudes there. So they'd prefer if I'd not be too public in India about my being gay. And I honored that for a while unless someone was in contact with me, say a cousin who came to visit here or someone who asked me, and then I told them. Umm... so we decided that everyone in my world would know I was gay, everyone in their world wouldn't necessarily know that I was gay unless they came into my world and... took that information back with them. But as time goes by, umm... we relaxed those rules and I've taken, an ex-boyfriend to Kerala where my mother's from, I've taken Thomas to our home in Bombay, to family functions in Delhi and things like that. People know that he's a special friend of mine, and I suppose that most of them have concluded that we are a couple, and I suppose some of them know explicitly that we are.

What else do I have...

I have to say that I'm sorry that I've also encountered some direct negative comments from relatives in South India. One cousin told me "Why do you need to tell people about this?" and "This doesn't make any sense." And I sort of shared with him that this is who I was and I wanted people to know, and they didn't necessarily need to accept it, but I didn't want to hide it either. So I've had some, some negative reactions too... or someone telling someone else, "Why does he have to tell everybody?" and that person saying "Yes, I tell him not to tell everybody." So everyone tries to retain sort of this dual, these multiple relationships with me... Let me say one thing to me, let me say one thing to someone else. Gradually kicking and screaming, whatever, we're just dragging ourselves into the, the light, kind of, of honesty and openness.

My next question is kind of, kind of a big broad question... What has been one of your most fulfilling spiritual experiences? Or most... where you felt most fully whole... Or whatever that question means to you...

I have to think...

Please.

See there are personal moments and there are public moments. One public moment I'd speak about a little bit, it was, umm... in 2004 I was with my partner at the time, Philip, and I designed an entry for a competition for an interfaith sacred space. And it was just an ideas competition. And, umm, and Philip collaborated with me on that. And... we won that competition. Umm... we were among the four winners that were selected. It was exhibited at the Interfaith Center at the Presidio. Umm... and... it was... it was a spiritual expression and design and, umm... and we were a gay couple that did it. And we were sort of interviewed by the San Jose Mercury News. We went to the Parliament of World Religions in Barcelona and were on a panel where this design, the designers were looked at. People really liked how I seemed to have some Christian, some Wiccan, an understanding of what was essential about religions, about the multiplicity of expression that different religions require. Rather than making something characterless that everyone could relate to, it was full of a lot of complexity, archetypal objects, basic elements we as architects really learn to use. So just the way I look at life, I look at architecture, I look at religion. Umm... So that was sort of a public event over a period of a year or so that was really valuable.

A personal or sort of private event, umm...

You know it's a dramatic moment, I think being in Rishikesh and in the Himalayas with Thomas maybe three or four years ago. Umm... you know... washing our feet in the River

Ganga or bathing in it, and going up to the source of the river. Before we went to the source of the river, in Rishikesh climbing up this mountain, it was a sort of, Shiva Temple, umm, almost felt like a marriage to us. And then going up the mountain to the glacier where the Ganga River starts. Umm... it was just a very, very special personal and couple spiritual experience. But I have to say that the thing that allows all of this to happen is sort of sustained practice. So by going to Jim Gilman's Vedanta class every Monday evening for a couple of years now. And there was a gap before that and even before that I used to go. And Ram Mohanji's class in India. It's sort of a sustained practice in spirituality. And even through the Queer Taoists. That's sort of non-glamorous, but that's what allows you to have those peaks and those moments where like... I'd say those are the three things. Sustained practice, individual private moments, and sort of public moments.

If you can think of what your... maybe this needs to be two questions but you can decide... what's your ideal religious... or spiritual... community or practice would be like? Could you describe what you, what you think, what elements it would need in it? And how it would be?

See the thing is, umm, I have that in my life currently. But it's, but it's experienced in diverse encounters. Sometimes, discrete, sometimes related. But it might be interesting to postulate something where it could all happen together. Umm... I suppose it would be... You know... No, I don't think I want that. Umm... I think what I really like is, I like being able to walk into spaces that are uniquely what they are. I like being able to walk into the Newman Center which is a Paulist church in Berkeley, and being in the Catholic space, have their tradition. And have women speak, stand up and, you know, pray for the day when women will be priests, and pray for the people with HIV/AIDS, and gay positive priests speaking, a gay man

who was a priest speaking from the pulpit. So, I like having that, I like going to the Hindu temple that's accepting of gay people, I like singing in these places and other places. I almost am, I'm sort of happy with spaces that are... Since this whole study is about gayness, I'm sort of saying places that are gay positive. But I'm also very inspired by places that don't think about gayness at all, you know. But where I don't feel excluded in any way. Umm... and... uh... So I think my ideal is here, I have it in the Bay Area though music, community, study, umm... and then the integration of all of that into life which includes, you know, design, spaces for people because I have been trained as an architect and I teach architecture, you know, teaching, umm... so it's, yeah it's not a sort of, what do you call it, a paradise, or a... an Atlantis, it's an Atlantis that's present in multiple experiences.

You mentioned places that aren't necessarily gay positive but don't necessarily care about someone's sexual orientation... When you say that, what are you thinking about?

It's tough, right? For instance, okay, so we went to Istanbul, Thomas and I, and we went to mosques. And... I mean, I wouldn't say that one, that they don't care about your sexual orientation. If you went up and talked to the Imam about one's being gay, he'd probably, you know, criticize that, but every, but in every encounter we have, one doesn't discuss sexuality, so some of these mosques, like, you know, Sultan Eyup mosque in Istanbul, one of the most beautiful mosques we'd been to, umm, and it was a spiritual place, and we both felt that. So these places have their power for us. Whether or not the space comes with a gay positive message. Umm... That's what I mean. All these natural and man-made places. Umm... and there are even some practices... Some people go to a Sufi order or something like that, and they go regularly and they don't speak about their personal life, and they're only there for the spiritual connection. Umm... And... those are very affirming of one's true identity while

perhaps not engaging one's worldly identity. Umm... But if ever those spaces, umm, become phobic of one's worldly identity, then I think immediately they'd become unsafe, and... umm... not just unsafe, but sort of betray their, betray, I think their intolerance and their ignorance. Umm... and then one may have to alienate oneself from it, or think of it as a current manifestation of ignorance that will vanish over time. The thing, it's more difficult to me as to what to do with people who are enlightened, like the Dalai Lama, what to do with people who are sort of enlightened, whom I really respect, learn a lot from, may still in some ways preside over something that's not entirely gay-positive. Umm... that's tough for me. And I think that maybe they have some role they have to fulfill in the world where they have to be, a little suspect of us. But there's a spiritual role they fulfill that I can still learn from. Umm... You know, some of, the thing is, I'm quite, I'm quite tolerant of celibate traditions. There are people who believe that there shouldn't be any celibate traditions and that's the primary mistake, to expect people to be celibate means that they then do things that they shouldn't be doing, child abuse and things like that might happen. I think celibate traditions are fine, but they shouldn't be, there should be no pressure to be in them. So if one's really called to a life of celibacy whether one be straight or gay, umm, it's because you're moving away from sex, or moving towards immersion in a relationship with God, and may not be worried about one's relationship with other people. So... so in those monastic traditions of Buddhism or Christianity or Hinduism, I would expect people to be celibate, monastic, and for the leaders of those traditions to, to somehow hold that structure and not allow deviations in it. Umm... So I think it's okay for them to ask their monks and nuns to refrain from certain practices but again I would expect those practices to include any acknowledgement of one's physical nature, especially one's sexual nature, I mean to act upon it, you might recognize

that you have certain tendencies as a human being but that you're not going to focus on them. None of that's a sin in any way, it's just that, it's just one aspect of who you are, and you decide that in this lifetime you're not going to focus much on that. But, umm... But then gender is a tough one too, I mean as a man I'm in a position to be, unless I'm out as a gay man, I'm in a position to be ordained as a priest in almost any tradition, and I know women aren't in many. Umm... and I think that's problematic, too, so it troubles me, that, yeah, some aspects of Buddhism, some parts of Christianity, some parts of Hinduism, Islam, are not available to women. So I think that's also certain small-mindedness that we should lose. Umm... I stress the some aspect because I think there are many parts of religion including religious leadership that are available to women. You know, even in the most domestic way, even if all a woman can do is be the mother of a child at home or be the sister of a younger brother at home, they offer spiritual instruction to many people. Which might be the most important way of impacting or imparting religion. But even in sort of formal ways, you know, like, one of the, the main teachers at this Hindu temple where I sing in San Leandro, she's a woman, and... my father's mother's mother was a sort of a beginner nun in the Hindu temple in Punjab years ago. Umm... Then of course through music and the arts I think woman channel a lot of very powerful spiritual instruction. Um... theater, singing, painting, sculpture. Many of us have women teachers in schools, they can be an early model for us, how to, how to behave in the world, and that's spiritual instruction. Umm...

You talked about when you went to a mosque and it was a spiritual place... what does that feel like for you? When a place is a spiritual place or a moment is a spiritual moment?

Well it feels as if a place has a certain focus... umm... so it has a sacred, sacrosanct kind of feeling. Umm... I mean sometimes it's a, like a temple, or even a church where people are

singing, might be like a noise filled space or space full of sound, it doesn't have to be silent. Umm... but when the mosque I guess I was talking about, just, especially in a bright city to go into a cool space with filtered light, and be able to just sit there and not be expected to buy a tea or a coffee or drink, and have this space available for everyone, for all, I guess they would call God's children, umm... To just be silent and reflect, there's that.

Umm... but then there's certainly the sublime and the... the both in nature and in architecture. Umm... sort of the sublime experience which is sort of majestic and awesome and a little scary sometimes. And just very powerful, those kind of interior spaces, and... mountains and things like that too, and there I guess one would either access one's insignificance or the insignificance of one's concerns, or one's majesty and power. I mean, some, you alternate between those feelings. Umm... And then sometimes there's the feeling of, you brought up community in the beginning, in these places there's a feeling of, we are all gathered as a group, and we all care, and we are here, and that's sort of what I appreciate about the Newman Center, that there's a group of people that meets every Sunday that really cares about people who are disadvantaged, who cares about there not being war in the world, and cares about people who are sick and dying, and that, to me seems, I don't even think there needs to be a counterforce to materialism, I think it needs to be the main aspect of life, it's very, umm, I don't know how people live in the world just not having something like that. I don't... I would think that life would be very empty and... Umm... directionless without having an experience like that in your life in some ways.

Are there other things that I haven't asked about that you would like to share with me?

Or questions you think I should be asking?

Hmm. Well I think there's attitude, you know, there's a certain spiritual attitude both to life and to the world. Maybe one that has come to through our conversation but I don't know if it was especially asked about, so with that attitude there's almost nothing that's secular. So even this material world I'm talking about, so what it is, through a certain attitude one can even take pursuit of wealth as being part of honoring prosperity and the goddess Lakshmi and things like that. And the advantage of that attitude, which sometimes I doubt, is that you don't, you don't create an "other" or an "enemy" so even the person who is ignorant you just say this is a person going through their cycle, their spiritual cycle or a person moving through that, they'll be wiser some day, then you become responsible for the whole world, umm, not necessarily that you have to do something actively about it all the time, just being open that in fact, this whole creation is a manifestation of consciousness and therefore it's all sacred. Umm... So, you know, but on the other hand if you're someone like that, you don't know necessarily what to do when a country decides to be secular or separate church and state or something like that. I think to myself you can do all you want, but in my mind, in my experience, in my being I can't separate church and state because they're the same thing. Justice, for all, for all, umm... love for all... umm... care... umm... sharing responsibilities is, is the church, is the state. Is individual experience. It's all one. Umm... but I suppose, I understand the intention, the intention is to not have one power, exercise power, especially negative views of power, but, umm, but power is also something very beautiful and very internal, like an energy, and I would like it if power of spirituality or religion could inform life in America, life in India, umm, power in response to change and technology, and all that stuff, umm, so that's a sort of, a radical attitude and also very unfashionable attitude,

especially when religion has done so much harm in many countries including America...

but... that's, that's my attitude. [laughs]

I don't know if there's anything else. Well I think that the other thing is that as religious or spiritual practitioners it's natural for us to be very open to other spiritual practices, I think.

Umm... so... I'm very inspired by the way Native Americans look at the Earth and the ancestors, and consciousness. You know. And Thanksgiving's coming up, and I'm aware of all of the massacres that took place of Native Americans at the hands of settlers. You know, there is something beautiful that can be drawn from even the attitudes of people who came to America to have a, an ideal kind of life or something like that. I mean some of them are nuts, but, so, I'm really open to the highest in everybody and I'm accepting of the lowest in everybody. Umm... not necessarily ruled by it, umm, accepting of my, sort of, base expressions, and inspired by my expressions. We're all in it together.

Well, thank you very much!

[laughter]

It was a pleasure to talk to you!

To you too, Celeste!

Irene
Berkeley, CA
November 18, 2012

When Irene walked up to me and asked, "Are you Celeste?" I was surprised. From exchanging emails about her and knowing about her leadership in her church, I expected someone middle aged and dressed conservatively. Irene was around thirty, had a leather coat on, short hair, and had ears full of piercings.*

The notes throughout this transcript in italics and brackets are my attempts to obscure her identity.

**Names with an asterisk have been changed to protect privacy.*

So I have some questions here, but I really want to just... there's kind of as a guide, you're welcome to look at them too, we can look at them together... But... Well, I'm trying to think of where to start, umm... could I ask about these? About the... terms you use to define yourself? In terms of religion, culture, that sort of thing, gender, sexual orientation?

Umm... sure. Religion I identify as... I feel like I have to explain everything. For religion I identify, I identify as Christian, more specifically I identify as United Methodist. Umm... that was ingrained very deeply in me as I was growing up. Umm... mostly shaped from the Filipino American church. So... kind of different. Yeah.

So not Filipino Catholic, but Filipino UMC?

Yes.

Ahh.

Umm... culture-wise... Culture. Okay, so I... [laughs] let's see, I identify... I don't know if this is part of my culture, but I identify as second generation Filipino American. I grew up in Southern California. So... there's a really big Filipino American community there and I was raised in that setting. So I also, I also identify with hip-hop culture, and I also identify with, um, I guess more suburban urban culture. I was a graphic designer, I am a graphic designer,

so I, I... the art culture is part of that, too. Um. And activist culture. Yeah. I think... that's it. Yeah. Yeah.

For gender I identify as... uh... woman. Uh, sometimes I identify as... umm... gender non-conforming. Depending on how I feel. Yeah. [laughs]

I get that.

Sexual orientation... I do identify as queer. Yes. Why? What? [laughs]

The why was to kind of ask it...

For all of these?

These are partly notes for myself...

[laughs]

Like, what, I don't know, if you said something that I didn't understand

Oh okay.

These are mostly notes, um, so... um... could you... yeah it's, so everyone else I've talked to hasn't really been religious leaders so I'm trying to kind of in my head, think of these two sides of this conversation about where I want to talk to you both as a queer Asian American woman and also as a religious leader. So I'm kind of split in my head right now...

Right.

So I'm trying to figure out which direction to go in. Umm...

[laughs]

So... uh... you're a... mm.... So do you want to describe what you do at Pine?

At Pine United Methodist Church I'm *[involved in the leadership]*. Meaning that, umm, I'm basically, uh the one who *[edited to obscure her identity]* at that church. We do have a

Japanese-speaking pastor, too. Umm... I just got *[hired at]* Pine in late 2010. So I've only been there for a year. 2010? A year and a half I've been there. So I don't know what year that is. [laughs] So I've been there a year and a half. It was my first *[religious leadership job]*, um, before that I was doing my intern, so I went to *[school]* and I did my internship at *[a church]*, umm... and then after I graduated I was at *[another church]* for a year, and in that year I... umm... I was part of this project called JAMS. Justice, Art, Music and Spirituality. And umm... under JAMS I would help organize events bringing together the API Reconciling Churches. There are... at the time there were three. Um, now there are, I think, five.

Wow.

Umm... so I tried to, I tried to keep all those folks in touch with one another. And... doing events at least once every year. So I still continue to do that at Pine. At Pine itself, uh, we used to have a LGBT Bible Study led by Elizabeth Leung.

Yeah. And she lives in Cleveland now.

Yeah, yes. So when her position ended at CLGS, umm, and then, when her position ended at CLGS and she had to leave, um... I think that people at Pine, it became lay lead, and it was less about LGBT identity or LGBT topics, although they're welcome. It was just called LGBT because it's just a label to make it safe, recognize a safe space. And of course it comes up once in a while, you know? But then... after it being lay lead it started getting harder for... the young adults who were leading it to keep it consistent. So it used to be twice a month. Then it became once a month. And then so... I decided this past year to pick it up and do it every week alternating with prayer, music, meditation. Yeah.

I remember seeing that on your website.

lxxx

Oh, okay, so with our LGBT Bible Study it ranges from, the topics are whatever I feel like [laughs]. And whatever people request. Yeah. So... um... I think of the API reconciling churches, ours is the only one that has, like, a good amount of API LGBT folks. Um... the other API Reconciling Churches don't really know where to go since becoming reconciling. And with the events we hold, that gather the API Reconciling Churches, all my resources have come from Pine Members and NRJ. You've heard of NRJ, right?

Yeah.

So I was active with NRJ before, while I was in *[school]*. So that's how I met people I went to Pine, was through NRJ.

How did Pine end up becoming a Reconciling Church?

In ninety four, umm... I think because they're in San Francisco a lot of people had friends that were, um, affected by the AIDS epidemic. And I think what happened was that folks were finding that churches weren't really stepping up. Umm... yeah. And I think that people were hearing from others how, how much neglect uh... LGBT folks were, how much neglect they were experiencing, especially during that time. So they decided to become Reconciling. Although if you talked to members at Pine, it's not like, it's still not a big deal to them. But I have to keep reminding them that it is a big deal. And they said that the Reconciling, being called Reconciling hasn't really... like the fruit didn't appear until... maybe ten years later.

So you didn't start to attract LGBT members until ten years later?

Yeah, until like, 2000. Umm... and then the other Reconciling Churches, they're all historically Japanese American. So the other reconciling churches they, uh... became reconciling after... 2007? I think Buena Vista was the next one. And then from then on it's just been kind of domino effect. Yeah.

Cool.

So... yeah. So we pride ourselves that we're the first one, and now we actually have LGBT people in leadership. Because I don't think that happens in other churches really. Because we have people on trustees and other decision making bodies. Yeah.

Cool.

Yes.

Umm... So... how did you, er, how did you end up... deciding to go to [school]? You said you used to be a graphic designer?

Oh, [laughs], yeah I was a graphic designer in LA. And umm... I guess it was the graphic design life was too competitive in a way... Like, I, I was doing freelance stuff and I was just surviving doing freelance. But of course my parents wanted me to... to like have a living [laughs]. So umm... I had a corporate graphic design job. And umm... it was just so depressing. I don't know what it was about... I mean I can tell you what it was about it, but you know... other than just being in front of the computer for that long. And not really, it was more production based rather than actual creative. So it just... it just sucked. I, I was very sad every time I, I drove out there. Plus it was LA so it took me like one and a half hours to get there and two hours to come back home.

Oh.

Yeah. It just... yeah. Anyway, [laughs], and then so... I was in discernment a lot about what to do with myself throughout my youth I really hated to go to church. I didn't miss one Sunday until... well, there was one time, I didn't miss one Sunday until I was 18. And the one Sunday I did miss was because it was my birthday and I was sick. So my mom let me. Umm... So... I guess what... but, but throughout my time with youth group there were these

two retired pastors. They're alumni at *[school]*. So I told them. They, okay, here's what happened. Throughout my youth they kept saying "Why don't you go to *[school]*? You'd love *[school]*." And I was like "No, I hate church, why would I, no." And then, um, so... my graphic design career blahblahblah, and then I decided, I had a bargain with God. I was like if... I'm going to try getting my teaching credentials and if that doesn't work out, then I'll explore *[school]*... Right? So I tried to go, I went to *[college]*. Was there for a year, then found out that I'd have to spend an extra year there because even though I wanted to teach graphic design, they want me to know fine arts. But they don't do that the other way around. They don't ask fine artists to do a graphic design portfolio, [laughs] so I was insulted, so I... there were a lot of things happening in my life that made me feel like I wanted to move to the Bay Area. And then talk to those two pastors and said, "all right, I give in, I'll go to *[school]*." and they happened to be from the Bay Area, I mean going to *[school]*, too. Not thinking that I was going to be a *[religious leader]* at all, just wanting to see what would happen. And if I was reading all these things anyway, I might as well get a piece of paper that says I did. [laughs]

So did you have any other *[jobs]* before you came here?

Uhh... Not... Not really. I, I haven't, I mean, I was trying to be active in my youth group back home in Southern California, but they were going in a different direction and I didn't feel like I wanted to go in that direction. And when I did my field education here I was looking for non-profits to go to, to do my internship in. I didn't want to be a *[religious leader]*, I didn't want to do church. Umm... but then when I interviewed with these places I just found that they're... like really focused on one issue or another. Whereas I feel like at church there's flexibility, right? So I went to *[a church]* and at first the pastor there, he's like

“Why don’t you go to this Filipino church that I know,” right? And I was like “I don’t want to go to a Filipino church! I’ve been there my whole life. I want to go somewhere else.” And I know that [*this church*] is Reconciling. So that played a huge factor in my choosing to be there. Plus I found out about [*the church*] because they had an event about the extrajudicial killings in the Philippines. And that was the only church I’d ever experienced that cared about what was happening in the Philippines.

Yeah.

Even from Filipino churches. Yeah.

So... is Pine a Filipino church or no?

It’s Japanese American.

Oh yeah, you said that, sorry.

It’s the mother Japanese American church. So it’s the first, the first Japanese American Methodist church, and then from there all the other ones split off. So because of that, there’s this reputation that needs to be maintained [laughs], so as much as our church strives to be pan-Asian, at least, there’s still the Japanese culture that’s very dominant.

Cool. That’s interesting.

So... yeah, again, so some of these questions feel less...

I hope I’m not rambling too much.

No, no you aren’t at all.

Okay, [laughs].

I’m just trying to figure out how to, kinda, what direction to go here. So I’m sorry I’m,

I’m a little out of it, too.

Umm... so what challenges do you feel being part of the community that you're part of. And I know that you lead the community so I feel like it's a different question in some ways than it might be for other people.

The challenges... being part of the community... And the community I'm leading... okay let me think about it. Sorry.

Yeah.

[laughs]

Please.

All right. Well... I feel like I need to tell you how I got involved in NRJ, okay? So... So when I was *[in school]*, I was assuming that I'd be more... connected to the *[LGBT]* work that was there. And because being in Southern California I didn't really have... a race consciousness until I went to *[school]*, that's when I ran into a lot of... whiteness in the academic setting [laughs]. And so, umm, I ended up being more involved in PANA. And through PANA is how I found out about NRJ.

I'm trying to remember... what does PANA stand for?

Pacific North American Religious, leaders? Institute? Or maybe Institute for Pacific Asian, something like that.

I know I've heard of it, I know I've come across the name, I just couldn't...

So, um... So through that, so, so... I guess my race consciousness shapes a lot of the LGBT work that I'm involved in. So... the only challenge that I've run into as far as... as Pine... umm... it's so normalized at Pine. That's, it's good, it's very comfortable, people don't mind, like, I don't know, there's just something that's different at Pine. I think because it's mostly full of... people whose children are not in the area anymore. And it's people who

aren't... umm... necessarily, their family is not of the heteronormative... form. Basically. So I feel like that makes it very different. So the only, the only challenge I've run into is, umm... just... in general, defining, or not defining, but letting people know that API is much more diverse than... they use it, they used the term. So whenever I hear someone say that something is Asian, I like, put them in check, like, "Well what do you mean?" There's a dominance of East Asian representing everybody. So... that's my main challenge. It's not like, big, [laughs] like I don't have to like advocate for it or anything, but it's just the only thing that I see here and there. Can I tell you about *[another church]*, though? [laughs]

Yeah, go for it.

The challenge there is that I think... it's not normalized. Umm... during my time there. I was there as intern, kay? So I guess this probably shapes how people interacted with me. But because I couldn't be out... and at that time I wasn't out to my mom. Umm... they felt like they were, some people were concerned for my psychological well being. And I was like... I'm fine. [laughs] like, I'm okay. You know, not being out. I don't feel like I'm hiding. I just, you know, haven't proclaimed it, right? So at *[the church]* there's kind of this push, one of the leaders there... is really about, um... outness. And I feel like it's... how to explain it. I guess a lot of the leadership there is informed by the dominant white voice about LGBT issues. Because, um, some of the leadership there is involved with...Uh... Evangelicals... Concerned? Have you heard about?

No, I haven't.

It's supposed to be this group of evangelicals that are... LGBT affirming? But they're, they're still very conservative in many ways.

Do they think that it's okay to be gay but be, like, celibate kind of thing? Or like...

I don't know. I don't think they're that extreme. But it's like... they're not politicized. I guess is the thing... So like if you say... So if we're in a space... um... where there's people, people of color who are saying that they identify as queer... it's not uncommon for like a white person from Evangelicals Concern to say "You're not queer, don't use that word," and not see that they're a white person telling people of color how they should define themselves. So there's not this racial consciousness, political consciousness.

Yeah.

Yeah. Umm... Yeah. So you may want to [laughs] talk to folks who are involved in that.

Yeah.

Yeah.

A lot of the people in my church at Pine are ex-Evangelicals or ex-Baptists. Yeah, so they know the language. But they've... expanded their... meaning of what it is to be queer. And Christian. You know.

Umm... so is your, your family is also UMC, you were saying, right. So can I ask about how it was when you... when you came out... I guess I'm assuming that you're out to them, but I don't know that.

I, I came out to my mom. Um... I don't know if my dad knows. I let my mom... determine what my dad needs to know. [laughs] And, um... as for my... so I have older brothers. So the one several years older than me, I haven't formally told him. But, um, every time I go to Southern California, I like... look more and more gay. [laughs] So... [laughs] Umm... and then then my oldest brother I told him because I told his wife. Well, his fiancé at the time. Because I was struggling with some issues around, like, a breakup or whatever, and I wanted, I just felt like it was hard not to say anything. So I felt like telling her. And she was like, "I

think your brother would be okay with it, if you want me to tell him, I'll tell him." So she told him. And then... my mom, I was also dealing, I wasn't dealing with a break up, I was dealing with an ex getting married to a man.

Mmmmm...

[laughs] And then, [laughs] And then, and then that ex's marriage... put me into the closet a little bit. Because I was kind of banking on this denial thing, like... the one time I, one of my cousins from the Philippines, umm... so me and my partner, my partner at that time, we all went to the Philippines for a month.

Whoah.

Yeah, and then... so... like when was this? Maybe two years ago? Is it two? Or maybe 2008? Something like that, I'm not very good with years. [laughs] But a... So a relative called and then, and then, he... he called me at tomboy. Not to me, yeah.

But is that like, tomboy [said with a Filipino accent], like...

Yeah. He was like, "Isn't she a tomboy?" Um, I wasn't supposed to be part of this conversation, but it was on speakerphone so I kind of heard it. Then my mom was like "No, no, she's not a tomboy." And then my cousin was like "Well, what about, what about her friend that she brought?" And then she was like "Well she's getting married." And I was like "Oh hell no."

Ohh...

My ex's marriage is trying to make me straight!

Yeah... whoah...

So I got really frustrated. For, like, more so than usual when it comes to these things. And, umm... I had to talk to one of my friends in Southern California, and she was like, "You

don't want to be..." She was like, "How old do you want to be telling your mom, do you want to be like thirty-something and still not tell your mom, but for you to know?" So I came home and I finally had alone time with my mom and I was like, "Umm, yeah, me and, I don't talk to that person anymore". And she was like, "Why?" And I said "Because we broke up a long time ago." [laughs] But then she was like, "So, just cause you break up doesn't mean you can't be friends." Like, she was kind of mad about how we're not friends. I think she was mad at something else but that's how it came out. Um... so I, I eventually, like, after she was kind of scolding me about not being her friend any more, I was like, "Well it ended badly, you know, and it just, it's just hard for me." And my mom's like "Oh, okay, I understand, you know that people from my ex's culture, it's hard being queer, or being, you know, that way, is hard" And then she went on to talk about the other gossip in the family. So it's like it became nothing after that. I don't really talk to her very much about [laughs] relationship stuff. But I know that I can because I have a little bit. But not really. [laughs] **Umm... kind of switching gears a little bit, can I ask about... what do you think has been one of your most fulfilling religious or spiritual experiences...? Um... that you've had. I know it's a really broad question, but...**

Yeah...

Maybe, to me when I'm thinking of it, I'm kind of thinking about a time when you felt, like, most whole, or most like, this is, I'm getting what I need from this experience. It's intentionally broad, I mean, interpret it how you will... You can think of it in the past year if it makes it easier to narrow...

[laughs] I mean, it happens in a lot of little ways. I feel like I've really been blessed by being able to be [*a leader*] at Pine. I don't know where else I would be. Umm... So, just little

things like, even in *[conversations]*, knowing that, my... *[congregants]* can talk to me about... things about relationship stuff, and that it's just as normal to talk about any other relationship. Yeah. Umm... NRJ, I like, I like being in those settings a lot. Whether it's business meetings or they have Talking Circles. Yeah. I feel whole in those spaces because The fact that I don't have to separate out my identities... um... makes me forget about my identities in a way where I can just be present. Yeah. So...

That's an interesting way to think about it.

Yeah... times like that I really like, yeah. So once in a while it will dawn on me that I, I get to be in this space. [laughs] Umm... also the rich conversations I have with people, like, I can talk about... racial stuff and they'll get it. I can talk about queer stuff and they'll get it. Yeah. So just... Not having to be... not having to think twice about everything that I'm saying. Yeah. Makes me feel whole. That's a rare space. Yeah.

Well, kind of from that, then, can you think about what your ideal, like religious community would be? Like completely, like, head in the sky, it doesn't have to be based in reality.

An ideal religious community?

For you.

For me.

Umm... I guess Pine is close to what an ideal religious community is. Because it's multi-generational. We don't, okay, I guess the few things I would change, or would like, umm, I would like more kids, and... youth involved, and people from like, their forties to sixties involved. Because right now there's that gap. Umm... And... and... for people to just, to just be. Umm... an ideal religious community is also not one that's heterosexist. And that's

continuously working on stuff. 'Cause I feel like a lot of churches these days put so much value on young families, not really realizing the young families they're talking about is a heteronormative one. People praising marriages but not really recognizing that, you know, not everyone can get married [laughs]. Umm... an ideal... an ideal... religious community for me would also be one where everybody is feminist. I think that's keeping connected. Yeah. And, and, umm... A religious community that is not afraid to question things, that has enough faith to question. Umm... and is also a church that's... active. Not just, well there's this term that they're, the general board of church and society in the Methodist church is trying to push, it's this term called "glocal" where it goes beyond "act, act"...

"Think globally, act locally?"

Yeah, yeah, it's beyond that. It's seeing them as one and the same. Um... so I, an ideal religious community to me would, um, be active in that way. And be mindful in that way. And especially when we think about LGBT issues 'cause we don't think about the different layers that other folks are carrying, Like being queer and undocumented. Or being queer and... living in a place where it's against the law to be so. You know... umm... Like I recognize that we're, that a lot of the LGBT community is fighting for marriage equality which is... a great thing, but at the same time we need to keep working on the other issues as well for our LGBT folks globally. Yeah.

Does Pine do same-sex marriage ceremonies?

Um... we're not supposed to. [laughs] We're not supposed to, but there was, there was one. Um... this past July. And I, I had to bring it up to the Ad Council and get their okay on it. Um, because I wanted to make sure that if stuff went down, that I had their back. And then,

many of them were just insulted that we even had to ask the question. But they understood why, that we...

What was this council?

The Administrative Council, It's the decision making body of the church. It's basically made up of the chairs of all the committees.

Yeah, so, they were also, uh, they also wanted to protect me, too, because I am not *[edited to obscure her identity]*, so they wanted to make sure that nothing would happen to me. I like, introduced it and gave the opening prayer, but Debbie Lee did the wedding.

I know I've definitely heard her name. I remember.

Yeah, I bet. [laughs] So...

There's all these names and everything that I know I've seen somewhere but can't put into context.

So she, she officiated the wedding, and Debbie has been very supportive of the work, and she's been a really strong ally. So many people wish that she's queer, that she's queer but...

[laughs]

Have you heard about, have you contacted John Oda?

No, I don't think I've heard that name.

He was the pastor at Pine... so... I think he was the pastor at Pine for eight years. And then after him was Brenda Vaca.

Is he the one who's in the "In God's House" video?

No, that's Reverend Hanaoka whose wife goes to Pine still.

Have you been able to connect with him?

No, I haven't.

Um, John Oda is a really important one to contact. He's at Lake Park UMC now. So he was at Pine for eight years. And then Brenda, Tim, and then *[edited to obscure their identity]*.

So... yeah. In the span of three years Pine had different pastor every year.

That's hard.

Yeah... John, John was the other one who was there for awhile. He does a lot of work with the reconciling ministries and UMOC which is United Methodists of Color. Under the Reconciling Ministries stuff. But he... thus far isn't as active with NRJ. He's more with the... denominational things. Yeah.

Have you done any work with Jess Delegencia?

I've met his through NRJ. I really feel like... he understands the movement. And that it's a movement. So I really respect that about him. He also, and I also think that part of this knowledge of the movement is probably because of his experience in the Philippines. I don't know exactly what his experience is, but he knows the same organizations that I know.

Umm... yeah.

I'm curious because Bernie Schlager at CLGS told me about that... that... Jess has worked on making some sort of curriculum for churches and I didn't know if Pine was part of that at all?

Yeah, Elizabeth Leung started that. And um... she did try to talk to the different reconciling churches. But I don't know what the contributions. But we didn't try it at *[my last church]* and I don't know if it's been tried at Pine. Maybe during the reconciling process at *[my last church]* it was used? But we haven't really seen it yet.

I was just curious.

But, it wasn't finished yet before she left. I actually work with, worked for her one summer helping her compile the research and resources for that.

Oh good! Yeah, I'm excited to meet her. Do you, have you... do you know Reverend Kwok Pui-Lan? So I spoke with her... last year. She was at my school actually giving a talk. And she kind of helped, helped me start getting the connections, helped get the balls rolling. And she told me to talk to Elizabeth. But then Elizabeth was in Cleveland, which is, you know, like forty five minutes from me or something, so I keep meaning to, some time, go to Cleveland and talk to her. Pui-Lan was really helpful. She knows everyone, yeah.

Yeah, yeah. Cool. So, she, I think with... the work that Elizabeth has done... I think their stuff is more academic. Um, NRJ is more like...pastoral and... trying to resources the churches. Yeah. So... I don't know. And even if, if Jess does start using the curriculum, he would go through NRJ to do it. Because we're the ones who have the contacts, we have the ins, too, you know.

Yeah. Umm... well are there things that I'm not asking you that I should be asking you?

Umm... [laughs]

Anything else that you want to be telling me that I'm not, uh... that I haven't thought to ask?

Umm...

Are you trying to look at more the religious part of it or the... let me think... I guess NRJ, um, do you, the way that we make decisions in NRJ is that we're doing it as a collective. We're trying to find funds right now.

[We then discussed some of the details of the different aspects of NRJ.]

‘Cause NRJ is attempting, not that we’re attempting to, but we help do a lot of the work that CLGS is working for the API roundtable. Um, so what I really like about Jess is that he, um, the ministry is his priority, right? And not whether CLGS owns it or whether he owns it or whatever. So I really respect that about him. It’s been really helpful in this rift with PANA and PSR. Anyway... you might be able to talk to other people about that. For awhile the only thing that NRJ had was the Talking Circle. Not that it was the only thing, but, um, no yeah, it was the only thing that was happening for awhile. But it was... it was amazing that it kept happening. NRJ sent me one thing to Creating Change when it was in... Min... Minnesota? **Yeah, one of those ones, those M states...**

[laughs] So when I was there, I saw the need for it. Like, people across the nation have no space like that. So I’m wondering, well, my proposal to NRJ is that well, eventually, when we establish our base, that we can, um, at least transport our Talking Circle... ‘Cause it’s very simple format.

Could you explain it to me?

So Talking Circle... So Talking Circle, is, um... basically a pastoral space. Not therapy or whatever. But a space of support where... umm... there’s a... there’s a topic that someone, the facilitator of that time thinks of, so topics and questions. And so the time starts with a song... a prayer... and a check-in. And you can only talk if you’re holding this, we use a coconut shell, so you can only talk when you use that. And it’s basically a time when you, you can speak and people don’t have, they can respond or not. But, umm... it’s a time when we... respect what everyone is saying and we listen to what everyone is saying, It’s been a

healing space for a lot of folks. Just being in a room with other API queer folk, Christians, like, that's been very healing for a lot of them, even if the topic's not.

The NRJ is specifically Christian? No, not NRJ, I mean, the Talking Circle is specifically Christian?

NR... Talking, well, see, NRJ and Talking Circle, so Talking Circle is a project of NRJ because NRJ was having business meetings and we found that as we were trying to schedule stuff and do events, people's stuff was coming out. So we were like, whoah, we need a space where people can just process and let out their things and not during the business meeting, So Talking Circle... I think a lot of the prayers and songs come from the Unitarian Universalist book. But... it's Christian in that most of the people there have Christian experience and were raised Christian or Catholic. But it's definitely open.

Oh, okay.

Yeah.

So, so you can come and just like, air out all your stuff or whatever. So Talking Circle, even after PANA closed, Talking Circle was going on every month until now. Now that we're trying to reestablish.

Did it kind of dissolve for a bit?

No, it took a little resting period. But the thing is that, a lot of the people who were on NRJ, like a lot of the lead folks, so, um, like I'm one of the committed members, right? So myself, Lauren Quock and Debbie Lee, we would see each other socially, 'cause Debbie works on other justice issues, and Lauren and I would see each other socially. And it would just keep coming up, like "What should we do about NRJ? And what about the space?" and all this. So we... And Sharon Hwang Colligan... we, um, we really felt like... I think there were times

when we wanted it to just die. Not, you know, we're kind of letting go and seeing what would happen. We were expecting it to kind of, you know, die and turn into something else. But it didn't! There was always someone who wanted to have it and kept pushing it under NRJ. So that was a call for us to keep continuing the space. And to really realize that Talking Circle is a radical space. 'Cause what we're doing in that hour or two is...something that doesn't really happen very much around the world.

Yeah.

So if we can at least duplicate Talking Circles to other places, then... you know, NRJ can expand and truly be a national network.

Yeah.

Where else do you think could sustain a Talking Circle, like... are you thinking mostly, like, metropolitan areas, like here, New York, LA, those kind of spaces?

Yeah, at least. Um... 'cause I mean there are Bible studies that happen and stuff, but not specifically API ones. Or even if they have more API people, they don't call the space API, right? NRJ is the only one that will call it that.

Yeah.

So... yeah, when I went to Creating Change, and I saw the folks there that had signed up, they came from everywhere! Like, all over the country. Umm... and I feel like all you really need, because we've had small Talking Circles where there's only like three people, or even two. You know... "Where two or three gather..." You just need a few folks to start and then it'll naturally start to grow. That's been our experience. So we've had a lot of people come and go. We don't know what happens to the people who go. But new people keep coming. So

Talking Circle would be the easiest way to get the work to expand, along with, um, just sharing resources. And... umm... just being visible.

Yeah.

Yeah, that's the main thing. Yeah. Ever since I became a [*leader*] at Pine I've gotten emails about the LGBT ministry, a lot.

Cool.

Stuff against it, stuff for it... you know. But it's good to know that we're known for that.

Yeah.

Yeah, no, I definitely think I've seen Pine, also, the sermons that are on the NRJ website from Pine... and all over I keep running into it I feel like.

[laughs]

Which is cool.

Yeah.

Are there other things that are important for me to know to include in this conversation?

Um, I guess for what... what folks in NRJ are experiencing now is realizing the important of... of... being intentionally... political. Because we could just turn into like a church that is there to gather for... you know, it's easy for such spaces to just be for the service of the people who show up, right? So... we're trying to remind everyone that we're committed to a movement. That's something bigger than us. And not just a space where we can feel okay.

Um... and also, I think that our experiences, especially with what happened at [*the other church*] with some folks from Evangelicals Concerned, we run into more and more people that are not politically conscious, so...yeah. We're finding more importance in remembering

to be politically conscious and remembering to try to be intentional about, umm... building across justice movements as well... And trying to build, like I said “glocally,” nationally.

Yeah. Yeah.

I guess we’re trying to figure out a way to sustain ourselves as well. So we’re thinking about grants and membership dues. Stuff like that.

NRJ is thinking about those things?

Yeah... Pine, I mean, I have the privilege of having the United Methodist institution, just... backing us, [laughs] right? But, umm... yeah... I mean, it’s hard, it’s hard to kind of separate the two, because so many of the core people... Oneida, who’s in “In God’s House,” she’s, she’s an active member at Pine. And she’s in charge of the membership committee, of welcoming folks, so... anyway... it’s kind of hard [laughs] to just, you know, I think people do everything they can when they can. Yeah... but reminding us all that it’s really radical work is probably the most challenging part. Especially in the Bay. You know? We’re like in a bubble. We don’t remember that people have it hard, and that people are killing themselves and people are running away, you know...

Yeah. I live in a conservative, white, Christian part of the country, so I feel you...

[laughs] Yeah.

It’s different.

One thing, sorry if I’m talking a lot...

No, you’re totally fine, don’t worry about it.

So... one thing that we’re trying to do with Pine, the justice ministry, um... among other things, we’re trying to connect with ASPIRE.

What's ASPIRE?

Asian Student Promoting Immigrant Rights through Education... It's an organization for API undocumented youth and young adults. And some of those folks identify as LGBT. And so they... they kind of talk about the tension of layers that they're not out, they cannot be... it's difficult to be out because they're LGBT, it's difficult to be out because they're undocumented. So we're gonna... try to, um, next month really sit down speak with them... And ask how our church can really support their work.

Cool.

I think it's important for... for Reconciling Churches that if they're going to be involved with justice work... to have it makes sense with who your church is. And I really want to take advantage of the fact that we're an API reconciling church. Yeah.

Yeah, it's like you don't really start realizing things until you start making those connections. I think that's the advantage of Pine. Is that we have young, queer, queer young adults who are making these connections. And allies who are willing to be resources for us. 'Cause for other Reconciling Churches, like being Reconciling is one of their things. Right? But for Pine, like I said, it's normalized, so it's not about...it doesn't feel so tokenized I want to say. In other churches it kind of feels that way. Like, oh, today we're gonna, we have a... queer person, [laughs] we're gonna talk to them about their stuff. Yeah, so that's a big challenge in the API Reconciling Churches. Like how to really own being allies. Yeah.

Cool.

And really what can they do, I mean what can they do if they don't have LGBT folks within their congregation? That's an ongoing question.

Alright.

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[We then discussed for awhile about how to identify her in this interview without telling exactly who she is. She was adamant that I include the name of Pine because of its importance to the API LGBT movement. She felt bad that she wasn't able to be totally open about who she was, but feared repercussions from the denomination in case they were able to identify her. At one point she tellingly said, "Wow, what we have to do, it's so against everything that we've just been talking about. Like we have to like separate..."]

Oh! Has anyone talked to you about why the Japanese American churches are the Reconciling ones?

No, would you?

So, as I understand it, the Japanese American churches are at the forefront of being Reconciling in the API community because a few reasons. One of them being because of their internment experience.

Oh yeah! The video on the Pine website said that...

Oh! Yeah.

Or it hints at that maybe.

So there's that. And there's also... they've been here for more generations. And there's not that ongoing immigration that the other API churches experience. And so because of that I think there's... the theology is more progressive and they're a little more open.

Are Japanese churches primarily UMC?

There are some, there are some UCC, also. Umm...And, no, yeah. UCC and UMC are the ones, are the only ones that I really know of. Like the historical ones. And then there's the Buddhist churches.

Is there a difference between a Buddhist temple and a Buddhist church or are they just different terminology for the same thing?

They're the same. As far, I mean, if they're Japanese American I think they're the same.

I heard both, so I was curious.

I think it's a matter of culture. Because Buddhist churches will have the bazaars, Japanese bazaars, and festivals, that's more churchy. Yeah.

Oh, okay.

I think that's the main difference. It's a cultural difference.

Yeah.

Well, is there anything else that you think... umm...

Oh, sorry, [laughs] one more thing.

No, please, that's why I keep asking! I know there's more there...

So, Lake Park is a Japanese American church but they're starting to have more and more Filipino Americans go there. Like, it's a... it was a dying Japanese American church 'cause there were so many elderly people there, whatever, but there's some UCC Filipino churches and other people from United Methodist Church starting to go to Lake Park. And John Oda has kind of, I don't think they've gone through a process to say "We're Reconciling", I think he was just like "We're Reconciling" and then they're okay with it. So... hopefully the work there expands because right now the East Bay Bible study is there. And umm...

The LGBT Bible Study?

Yes, the East Bay one. The one that Jess leads.

So I'm trying to figure out ways for, um, how can we strategically sneak into the Filipino American churches and have them become reconciling, Because Lake Park is one where you have two Asian communities there, so... like, maybe it will spread to another Asian community. Yeah. 'Cause the Chinese churches are, are I think they're going to be the hardest.

Is there, why do you think that?

Language is a main thing. One of my friends who's the pastor at CCUMC, Chinese Community Church in Oakland. She worked at *[my last church]* too. Umm... she said that every... newspaper that's in Chinese, at least every week they have something, there's something that's anti-LGBT in there. But nobody in... NRJ, I guess would be NRJ, nobody in NRJ is, umm... I guess we haven't really thought about it. Is gonna counter that. In Chinese.

Is it because no one speaks Chinese in NRJ? Or because that wouldn't be the right thing to do?

I think sometimes it drops off, we forget about it, because we aren't really immersed in that life. But we have, we are finding more and more people who are capable of writing or at least speaking but we haven't really taken advantage of that yet. Yeah. I think for... Yeah, so, language is a main thing. And finding someone who has "authority," like a male clergy person. And also the Chinese Christian community is... because of the language thing and because they are immigrants... the community is a bit insular... and so... if one church is going to be conservative, then they're probably all going to be conservative. Yeah. [laughs] Not much variety for immigrant churches. For Filipino churches I think the issue is, what I've heard from Filipinos, is that it... it's a "don't ask don't tell" kind of situation. Filipinos are fine but once you start institutionalizing things, like putting them in writing, that's when it becomes weird. I mean like, if you go to the Philippines though, it's not even... it's not even like you go to a city and that's where all the LGBT people are... You just go to the Philippines and you look around anywhere, you're going to find one who's obviously, you

know, not of the... gender normative, right? So... it's really weird. So that's our only guess. Is that it's putting it in writing that feels weird. Yeah.

That's interesting. So a lot of my... the majority of the people I've been interviewing have been Filipino.

Oh really?

Somehow. Yeah, and also my step-grandmother is Filipino, and some other people in my family are married to people who are Filipino and one of them was talking about going to the Philippines and seeing people who were gay around, but it not really being talked about much. And some other people I was interviewing were saying kind of similar to what you were saying too. So it seems like it's a shared experience of it being okay as long as it's not too directly talked about.

Right.

Like maybe someone's partner being invited to family functions and being loved and accepted, but not necessarily saying "husband." That kind of thing.

It could also be...

Sorry, not to generalize too much. I realize that was...

Oh no!

... a big generalizing statement. Sorry.

[laughs] No, that makes sense. But yeah, it's... I think it also, it, it edges on being political, too. Probably. Because they know that it's something that our denomination isn't cool with yet. Yeah. So maybe that's why also. Filipino churches have a tendency to not want to be political.

Is the, umm... United Methodist... congregation pushing at all towards...

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The denomination?

Yeah, the denomination.

Oh, yeah.

Like to be Reconciling as a whole?

Yeah, there's a movement. John Oda would know, he would be the best one to know about that. Umm, but, even then, even then, I don't know. The conversation is... for me the conversation is always limited if we're just looking at the United States and if we aren't looking at the experience of people of color.

Yeah.

So...

Is the, is UMC a denomination that expands beyond the US?

Yes. We have central conferences, meaning not in the US. And, umm... the Philippines, I think maybe Korea, and Africa. And it's expanding in Africa. And the Philippines I heard you can't be a pastor unless you make your own church. So it must be expanding there too. Also California Pacific annual conference. It covers Saipan as well. So... it is pretty international in that sense. There's also I think in... is it Russia. I think Russia. Yeah. 'Cause I remember I met one delegate and I was like, "Whoah, why do we have a church in Russia?" So... yeah. Yeah.

So I think, I hear it's, the African delegates in the national conference that make it more difficult for it to pass. Umm... but, but, some folks, I've heard this one pastor from Africa, woman, I don't know if she's a pastor, but she's a very strong leader. She talked about how you can't just tell Africa delegates that you know, that it's okay now, all of a sudden, because... we're the ones who probably told them that it's not okay in the first place. So to

recognize the history of colonization so that we don't perpetuate the same colonial way of doing things.

Yeah. That's a really good point.

It's important.

Yeah.

So... she was like... "If you want to tell us that, you know, it's okay to be LGBT now, you've got to tell us why you told us it wasn't okay in the first place." Yeah. [laughs]

Wow. That's a good point. Yeah.

So... so I always think of that. I... I... don't like always pointing fingers at Africa [laughs] like we do.

I've heard that also with Catholicism, that too, of people talking about how to make Catholicism less... umm... less a lot of things...

Right.

Yeah, I think that's it.

Well if you think of anything else, feel free to email me, or anything like that. If anything else comes up.

How long are you in town?

Until next Sunday. So a week from now.

Okay, yeah. You really, really should talk to John. Because he can tell you denominationally. Because he's been to places... umm... Oh! And also MFSA.

Have you heard about that?

No.

That's the Methodist Federation for Social Action.

cvi

Uh... there's this one guy he's in West Virginia? Is that where Virginia Beach is? I'm sorry, I'm educated in America so I don't really [laughs] know anything!

East Coast geography makes no sense to me. I do not understand how it works!

So there's this guy named Haniel. Um... Garibay. You'll probably find him if you find MFSA. He was at General Conference of the Methodist Church and his main thing was to get the Philippine delegates to vote for LGBT stuff. So he'd probably be a good one to talk about in terms of internationally how they're trying to move things.

Cool.

I think... I think that's it. Oh one more thing! [laughs] There's this movie that Igglehurk... Do you know Igglehurk? International, Gay... damn dude.

What's it?

IGLHRC.

That's a really funny name

I think it's International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission. They have a video online about the LGBT movement in Asia.

Oh!

In case that's where you want to go.

So is it Asian American or Asians?

I was really looking at Asian American mostly. Umm... so I don't know. But we'll see, I don't know, it also depends how far, if I reach a stopping point I might try to reach farther.

Yeah.

Like, if I reach a stopping point before my due date I might try to go farther.

[laughs] Yeah

To be honest...

Okay. Cool.

Yeah.

Asian American... I think that's... I think that's...

Oh! One more thing. So another difficulty. I'm sorry, stuff keeps...

Please stop apologizing! You're helping me with my project a lot, so it's awesome.

[laughs] So another challenge for the API LGBT Christian community is stereotypes. Both on the API level and the LGBT level. Yeah, that's all.

What do you mean, so... stereotypes of...

Like, like, in the API communities, some API communities, vision to try to... consolidate or figure out what API is... like will go on stereotypes, typically, that's the easiest way to do it.

Like... "Oh, we all use chopsticks" and then it takes someone saying "No we don't," to switch that. Umm... so the same thing happens with... LGBT folks in terms of gender.

Like... I hear some, some, uh... API LGBT Christians even, saying that they can always identify who is and who's not because they like sports if, blahblah blah, all those stupid

things, so that's, [laughs] so along with trying to really show how diverse the API

community is, I think it's important to show how diverse the LBGT community is. And I've also experienced like some folks where the... where they were in the movement like old

school, have issues around that. Undoing stereotypes. And undoing, umm... or, really

looking at gender fluidity. And sexual fluidity. [laughs] Yeah. So... I think that's a main... I

don't know. One of the main core things that we need to work on as API LGBT community.

‘cause we’re trying hard to fight against this Christian stereotype, but we need to do all of it. Can’t just do one, right?

I think also what’s hard is that all of those identities are ones that are hard to put a box around, too, I know that’s something that I’ve encountered a lot in this. That’s why I wanted to start by asking about everyone’s identity terms. To make sure that I’m not assuming anything, I mean assuming anything about gender but also about how someone identifies in terms of any aspect of that. People have also asked me, like, “Well I will be in your project if I fit in to your parameters” and it’s been hard for me to say, well, I’m not Asian American, so I don’t want to tell you you are or aren’t. That’s up to you! You know? So... that’s something I’ve definitely come up against. Is trying to figure out where... yeah, how to... not, not, I don’t want to make this like a hard box but trying to figure it out. So it all comes to self identity to me, so like if you feel like you fit into this project then you do.

All right. [laughs] Yeah. That makes sense. It’s good. I mean, it’s been good talking to you about, about this kind of stuff. Not very many people... not very many allies are interested in what we’re doing, or even recognize the need for an API space. Um... have you... contact Oneida?

No, I haven’t.

Okay, she’s a good one to talk to also. She was there at the beginning of NRJ.

She’s the one who’s in “In God’s House” right?

Yeah. ‘Cause she can tell you about experiences that she had in starting Grace. I don’t know if you’ve come across that...

Starting what?

Grace...

Oh! I have, I definitely have come across it.

She's one of the lead, well you saw in the video, she's one of the lead people there. And she talked, and she also can talk to you about racial dynamics if that's what you want to look at. Because... umm.. I think she had a lot of, as she was trying to hold API LGBT Christian space, she had a lot of white men come in and some of them were like rice queens. And... some of them were saying, well... "I feel safe here so I'm Asian", you know? Uch. So, just trying to deal with that kind of stuff. I think she can tell you more about that. Because it's really hard for me to really... I can, uhh... allies are really important to me, and allies that actually work on their stuff is really important to me. Yeah.

That's also something I'm, I'm a little afraid of in this. Is that I don't want to, you know, be objectifying anyone. And like obviously I'm not Asian American myself, and so how do I... I mean, being queer also I guess I'm not completely an outsider, but trying to figure out how to, like... do I have any right to be writing about this or thinking about this if it's not my community. And how do I fit into this, it's... so... So I mean it's been in some ways gratifying to be able to talk to people who are willing to share their stories with me because it makes me feel like I'm a little more allowed to talk about it, or be doing this, I guess.

Right. Well thanks for asking those questions of yourself!

Thanks.

That's a huge part of, like, undoing privilege, right? Is recognizing that you have to ask these questions, you can't just do it. So... Thank you.

Well cool, it was wonderful to talk to you!

Maria
Oakland, CA
November 21, 2012

I met with Maria in a coffee shop in Oakland. She was my longest interview by far, and it really felt as if we could have talked all day. We finally stopped talking when her partner came to the coffee shop and reminded her that it was time to leave.*

The first several minutes where I asked her background questions about her identity were cut off. She described herself as a woman, Evangelical Lutheran, Filipino, and that she has lived in the States for 18 years.

**Names with an asterisk have been changed to protect privacy.*

... So when I first came out I, uhh... I normally call myself gay. Umm... gay woman, more than lesbian. Umm... and there's no term in our language that I know, in the Philippines.

Not tomboy?

Tomboy is, but, umm, I'm also a tomboy, but it doesn't capture for me, the essence of who I am. Uh... so I normally call myself gay, gay woman. Yeah, more than lesbian. [laughs]

So... can you talk about your involvement in... you're currently still involved in a religious community, right?

Yes, I am... I am still in the roster of the Lutheran, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. And I am... currently doing a... uh... church plant. So I'm in the assessment, uh, phase, where I'm testing. And uh... trying to see and learn more about the community. So I'm doing it in Emeryville area but in the north Oakland, South Berkeley, Emeryville Area.

So you're trying to start a new church there?

Yeah.

And so while you're involved in that are you still part of another church that you... attend services at?

No, I'm doing my services, my own services. [laughs]

Can you talk about that?

Yeah, yeah, I can do that. Well, the thing is that, is, I... I just started it so we only started to meet in August, and... umm... some of them are seminarians, some of them are young adults, and it's attracted more seminarians and now it's attracting, umm, well they are church people, but seeking, and not baptized Christians, you know what I mean? They are in, in this place where they are creating their own, their own path to their spiritual life. So... and I'm meeting these people little by little. I'm also meeting some, uh... Asian, umm... both queer and uh... not-queer, uh... but also in the justice although... uh... Asian American undocumented students. I have not invited them to our own community I'm actually walking with them in their process, I invite them sometimes, I actually had an event in our, in our, umm, home, we have a very small apartment, about for seventeen people because I met this, amazing young woman, uh... who talked about own, her own journey of being an undocumented woman and actually doing a direct action, in Philadelphia. Um... and was detained and everything. So... and I asked her to talk about her own spirituality and how it helped her to be an activist. So that attracted a lot of people. But I'm accompanying some of them here. They are living in San Francisco, some are in Berkeley. Um... and, and, their own emancipation. [laughs] I don't want to use that big word, but it is for them. It is. And um... culturally it's this stigma of being an "illegal" how they call them. And also... umm... and some of them are queer. So... And this is, oh... I'm in process of actually capturing their stories. Umm... And giving them an opportunity to share those stories in congregations.

So is the church you're starting still an Evangelical Lutheran church?

It is a Lutheran, it's sponsored by the Lutheran Church. But we are not learning how to, umm, we're still in the process of forming ourselves as a community. Umm... in fact that is a big question, you know, we are sponsored by the Lutheran church however, uh... we are

meeting other communities, so what is that for us? Those kinds of questions? And also, planting ourselves in a very specific place, what would that mean to be a Christian in Emeryville Area which is like an island.

What is the... is it not a Christian area, Emeryville?

Emeryville has only one church, a conservative evangelical church. And of, uhh... yeah. It's an evangelical church which excludes the LGBTQ community and most of the churches around the area are an ethnic specific. Meaning they're mostly, uhh... African-American. And there's only one, uhh, multi-cultural church that I know of which is a Roman Catholic, St. Columba.

Oh yeah!

Yeah, you have heard of it?

Yeah, that they have a big gospel thing together. My grandmother likes to sing with them.

Yeah! They actually grounded themselves as, umm, you know, they have an identity of African American and yet they are multi-cultural in some sense. Umm... but they in the border of Emeryville and Oakland, the border you know, if you go to actual café two blocks from each place are already Oakland there they are in Oakland but two blocks away Emeryville, two blocks will be South Berkeley. St. Columba is one of them, too, one of those churches. So there are churches, but Emeryville has no church, except for this new evangelical that started in 2000. So... what does that mean to do, also, a church in a umm... middle class, upper middle class, umm, one who can only, who has a thousand condominium for a hundred thousand, for a million, again, here that are north Oakland area where there is no even a Safeway, there is no grocery. This is our old neighborhood being bought now by, I

don't want it to be just a race issue, but also a class, by, all our young, umm... white couples can afford this places. Uhh, buy it from many generations African American living in those places. Umm... and then they are now displaced in some ways. But Emeryville has also a very good interesting story. Because the Shell... have you heard of Shellmound before, Shellmound?

Shellmound? I don't think so.

There are several Shellmound in the whole world, in California. One of the biggest ones was used to be in Emeryville. Shellmound's kind of a big shell, [laughs] because we are close to the coast and this is a port area too, very close to the Oakland port, and in fact if you walk to the marina they have on the most beautiful marina walks in the area but they flattened it and the Bay Street Mall is now where it is. And a lot of the bones of ancestors of the Ohlone tribe were taken away from that place and now they belong to, well the word belong is probably not the right word, but they are in the hands of the UC Berkeley. And some of them, they actually, they interned in an undisclosed place. So the Ohlone are, uh, Black Friday they have a protest and this is my third or second year, uhh, joining, so our group will be joining that. So our group is very small, so we have just been meeting for a few months, and as I've said we are defining ourselves in a different context in some ways. Very inclusive, and yet... Not only in terms of race, gender, but I'm attracting more of a white people than any other. Unfortunately [laughs]. Not unfortunate... it's good, it's good! But I'm, you know, my goal is actually, uhh, to... to have a multi-cultural, inclusive ones, and I've... I've actually connected myself to these evangelical groups, and yeah, I do a focus group right now about intentional communities in evangelical groups that just started, and talked about me being gay. [laughs]

Whoah.

Yeah, so it's kind of a little bit shocking for them, but it's okay. They're very generous.

Yeah.

What things do you think, do you feel that you're gaining from being part of this community?

Well for me it's, it's, umm, my own spirituality is changing in some ways. Not that that, I don't have strong spirituality, it's more that, that the word hospitality comes out a lot in our discussion. Umm, and also being a leader of a... umm... now predominantly white community in a very, but so intimate, umm, that like, this, this woman I'm telling you, the cat... is a seminarian, senior seminarian, who becomes a friend now. So we're taking care of her cat. And we go to our homes, so our homes are become their homes in some ways. So we've been meeting in public markets, so... a big open restaurants there, public markets, Emeryville, we've been in parks, we've been walking in Marina Park doing our own, umm, walking mediation. Umm... so we have done a lot, a lot things but at the same time we are going deeper into our own relationship, you know, with God, and really asking ourselves, even, what does even mean to be a Christian, and, take away all our baggage of denominations. Umm. Even though it will not, you cannot unload it, you know, especially for us who are cradle Lutherans, you know, some of them are not, but we have Episcopalians and Roman Catholics, you know, and this, this new person that is coming is a Jew who has been so interested and been coming for, umm, two months. So, it's, it changes who I am, and... also challenges me to... renew, renew what I mean to be a Christian. Umm... and the work that I am doing. So, so, it's every, every Sunday we have different liturgy.

Cool.

So... yeah. So that's been, it changes my own view of spirituality and what I believe, even. What I believe.

So my follow up question was going to be, what challenges do you feel from being part of that community? So I don't know if you already answered that in the same way, but...

No, there are many... The word community, will, I will, the challenges of being a gay person is kind of the big, the big issue here. It has, you know, the Evangelical Lutheran church in America we have, we define church in three expressions. It's in two expressions, one is the congregation, the other is the synod level, which is the geographically, and the last one is our church-wide. And since I actually serve also, my, the job that I held before coming here I was the regional officer for our Lutheran communion in north America, so I serve, Canada, and US, and our main, headquarters of our Lutheran communion is in Geneva, Switzerland. I also worked there before, I was the youth person, young adult...secretary

In Switzerland?

In Geneva, for one term. You know, so yeah, young adult position is only one term because you grow old. [laughs] So, I lived in Geneva and they when I came here I became a, a... campus pastor. At USC. Uh... in Los Angeles. And then I held that church diplomat position before I came here. Umm, so I... you... you know that the challenges will be different in those expressions, so when I was holding when I held those positions in, uh... in the international or global, and regional, I was not out. Umm... Partly because, umm, well, let me, let me do it this way. When I was in the seminary, I did not come out. I, my seminary, I went, I went to PLTS, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary which was known to be the rebellious, uh, seminary, where in early 1990s four men, gay men, uh, came out during their

seminary years. They are, the... notorious... but famous, you know, umm, group that actually changed and challenged the leader, the culture. One of them is still here, and very, a good ally, a supporter of what I'm doing. Umm... So the challenge was, umm, was of course the teaching of the church, you know, and the challenge also for me is cultural. Umm... my, my oldest brother is, was a pastor. He died in 2001, but I was in Geneva, too, I could not come out. My boss was from Madagascar. Who when we hired a, my administrative assistant, and... who is an effeminate, uh... Swiss guy. Very sweet, really. [laughs] Swiss, and sweet guy. [laughs] He asked me "Can you ask him if he's uh, gay?" and I said "Why?" So I really knew that it was not possible to, to live, to live a life like that. Yeah. So I have to, I have to, uhh, be closeted. Until 2009 they made a decision so I came, came out to my bishop in 2010, but it's not a very smooth process.

You said they made a decision in 2009? To...?

Nationwide. To... to... umm... to accept, uh... clergy in public... also if you are single it's fine. You don't have to promise, before when I was in the seminary I had to, if you're gay, you can come out but you have to promise that you would be celibate. And you, you, you gonna go through hell before they'll pass you to become a pastor. There're very few people they let through, even if they promise... the reality is that, umm... it's not really good. Uh, so the first challenge is that I heard, the first hurdle that I have to pass [laughs] was when I moved here in 2009 they passed it, I finish my term, or, actually they close the office . Uhh... which is also, almost the end of my term. Uhh... at the regional office. Umm... in 2010. Summer. Oh, I didn't know! I only came out in last year, 2011, March to my Bishop. But I've started coming out gradually since 2004.

So did you already, umm, were you already involved in a relationship with your partner at that point, but it's just that the church didn't know?

Uh huh. Carol* and I were together, umm, in Chicago. That's where the office was.

Okay.

I brought her to some of my church, you know, events. That time when she followed me, it's the economic crisis so she wasn't able to find a job. She has a PhD so she's in the academia. It was very hard for her because she's very out in her, umm, life, and in fact when she left her job in LA and say I'm going to be with Maria now, everyone knows in the... [laughs] she was the deputy executive director of a non-profit faith-based organization called Progressive Christians United. In Los Angeles. And... so she's very out and... and that's a big challenge for her. So, we, throughout my being a regional officer I was not out except for a few trusted friends at work. Which became her good friends, as well. It was, it was, umm, it was hard. It's very hard. Umm... I also came out, came out to my family... Only after when I was with Carol. When we were starting to date. But I been with another person before but I've never been out to everyone. Umm... when I was in Switzerland. So it's really, really terrible, really terrible to live your life like that. Uhh... How should I say this? I had the best, the best calls that you can imagine. Imagine my... When I was a youth... young adult person in the Global Communion I travelled all over the world, I organized young adults all over the world, the Lutherans, in order to address social issues. And... to be honest, sexual... we addressed sexuality but from a lens of HIV/AIDS. Not from the lens...

Like be careful don't get HIV kind of thing? Like don't have sex so you don't get HIV kind of thing?

Oh no, we are not like that. [laughs] But more on saying we are demanding our churches

to... to... be honest on a conversation of sexuality rather than saying don't... you know... we oppose the ABC. The ABC in... we did not oppose it but we would like to have... To concentrate on the C part... have you hear of?

No.

Abstinence, Be Faithful, Condoms. That's the ABC in early 2000. Umm... campaign of UN AIDS in Africa. And even in Asia, you know, the Asian agree, we call Asia at that time, the sleeping giant on... issue of HIV/AIDS, umm... which nobody, you know, everybody still focusing on Africa, on both Tuberculosis, you know, the Millennium, Millennium, uhh... disease, endemic diseases they're all focus on Africa, but we, we are... yeah,... Asia is not focus but in terms of, uh, percentage it's smaller, in terms of numbers it's going to grow bigger. Africa, yeah.

So anyway, we talked about that there was, there is a situation where in Asia where, uhh... the person that I... I invited to do the Bible study lambasted the young man from Canada because we invite one or two young people from other regions for them to have a taste of another region.

Cool.

Plus the young people from Asia will know what's happening from the young people from other parts. And he talked about... during that time Canada was in the process of legalizing, uhh... same-sex marriage. Umm... and... so he talked about that, that that is one challenge and how he supported it. And now, now he is a pastor, so... and I'm still in touch with him. So... he was, he was, really, really humiliated by this, umm... Chinese pastor. Umm... and... warned all the Asian youth not to succumb unto this Western thinking that is only a Western problem, all of these things. And he is an Old Testament scholar so I felt bad, at the

same time how can I... how can I... I actually talked underground, rather than be opposing in public. Umm... in that way. So, so there are so many hurdles to... to... so... when I came out in 2011 March that was terrible. I through that it's okay now but... so I lived here for 19 years. I'm still in the process of getting my Green Card. Because in 2009 our broken system denied my, my Green Card application. After applying for five years. So when I came back from Geneva in 2004 I started the process. They denied it in 2009. Luckily I was in Canada as an ecumenical guest at an event there. So I stayed there for four months... We went there... But when I came out, and... the policy was to... to change the, that you have to come out. Publically.

To...

To everyone.

Is this to get asylum as a gay person? Or is this just to have a Green Card in general?

No. It's not an immigration issue.

Your church?

Yeah. Immigration has another problem. The problem with the immigration was, uhh... because of DOMA, we could have actually addressed all the problems as soon as I got my... the denial. Carol and I could just marry in Canada, come back here as a married couple and we're okay. I don't have to go through... So the church actually hired a high profile lawyer in Chicago. Brought me back. It's a lot of money, they really paid this guy. Because there wasn't... anyway, it's a long, long story, but he, they brought me back, umm... so my, my immigration was tied up, or is still tied up with my job as a pastor. With the church, let's put it that way, much better. So... when, when they asked me to come out, I have to come out and that time I was helping a congregation in Hayward to be more multi-cultural and to do

college ministry because they are across Chabot College. And... but... I'm already having problems with the pastor who is, umm... and they, in a way, uh... saying it out loud that there is racism and there is sexism in this... umm... but it's, I found out that he is also a, a anti-gay person. But they, the option that they gave me was to, when I say "they" it's a bishop. But only two, one is to come out to this pastor which I'm for sure I'm going to lose my job and that means that, uh... in my... visa, I cannot not have job. Right? Because you have to be kicked out of the country. So... so... uh... for sure if I come out they will kick me out. Okay? The second option was to, because the... requirement is to be, uhh... you can be celibate. Uh... and then still be gay. And... the second option was to live separately from Carol. Those are the two options. And the second option, I said, you know what? I had a call in Canada before coming here. The reason why I did not go to Canada is that I do not want to bring Carol there and then she will have a problem in, she's the one who is going to have an immigration problem in Canada!

Yeah.

Yeah! Plus, the Canadian Church is, is less, um, tolerant, you know, that they only just, passed in 2011. So... and then you are telling me to separate from her. And second, so I told you that Carol is still looking for job. Can you imagine that? So, I am the one who's going to support now both of us in two households? So it's really ridiculous. So... those are the options they gave me. And I said to them so I'm going to do the first one because the second option is not an option. But since you brought me here to help me also to get my Green Card and now you actually uh... what you're asking me is for guarantee I will lose my job you have to have a third option and they said no there is no third option. So I left, umm... I am the youngest of the family. I cannot express my... if I'm not going to scream at them I'm

going to cry. So I was crying there because I cannot express my anger to these people. I said, “I really can’t believe that. I really can’t believe. There should be another option!” But I’m told there’s no more options. This is the rule. And I said but this is not just about the rule, you know! You create, when I came out to you, I didn’t mean to create a big event. I told to you, I said you are more privileged than my parents. I am not out to my parents who are back in the Philippines. I’m out to all of my family here in the United States. But I’m sure that they know it in the Philippines, but I have not... in Asian context in the culture, you don’t talk about it. And, it’s safer now to talk about it. But eventually I will tell my parents.

Umm... I’m, I’m strategizing now. My coming out process started in 2004 in Geneva, when I met Carol. I’m sorry I’m steering, but it’s very important in my coming out. Carol was number 13 in my list. In 2006. Six? Yeah. So I listed down all the people that I came out to. I went to counseling for the first time in my life. Just to go through the... the intense, umm... process. And I was in my thirties already when it happened, you know! And I loved being a pastor, that is the reason when I was in the seminary I actually thought I can make it without being gay. Umm... I, I have, there are men who are, you know courting me, so I actually dated men so that I can change uhh... I can change my destiny. And... uh, but I know I’m not going to be happy. Although I’m happy to be a pastor so this is the two conflicting realities of my life at that time.

Can I ask...

Sure.

Were you trying to actively make a choice of, like, you knew you were attracted to women but you wanted to try to date men to try to make yourself not be attracted to women?

Oh no.

Okay.

No. It's only to actually... to fit into the, the, uhh... category. That is for acceptable in public.

Did part of you know that you liked women or did you just shut off that side of it?

You cannot shut it off.

Yeah.

It was not my intention to shut it off. It's really just to fit into the... Let's put it this way. And I did not say it before. And in fairness to the men that I was, that I were... I was with. They were really, really fine men. Umm... I have to, I played the role of a... of a woman. [laughs] Although woman acceptable to society and to the church in order to fulfill my call as a pastor because I think this is really my call. I love being a pastor. I hate it sometimes too, but... this is where I'm, where I believe God is calling me. I'm a, I'm almost a third career person. I was a CPA, that's my first. I finish a church music, I have a degree in music in an institution that tried to contextualize liturgy and music in Asia. Um... And then I came here, I... the reality that I can now go to seminary, that was never a reality in the Philippines because the Lutheran church in the Philippines does not ordain woman. So it is just a matter of which is my priority at that time. My priority was I want to be ordained, I want to serve the church, I want to be a pastor. So... It's really playing a role but at the same time I really enjoyed the company of these, there are... they're really good men. Umm... But it's playing a role not to, not to actually, uh... I don't have that illusion that I will be healed or I will be, I don't have that [laughs]. I'm passed, I passed that. I'm passed that... that phase of my life. That isn't, was my teen years. Where there's more problems because there were more boys, right? [laughs] That possibility. But I passed that one, I don't have... It's more playing the role that

I want to fit in, to the category... I could be. So I could be ordained. So it's suppressing that reality, umm... it's, it's not suppressing my own emotions or my attraction but suppressing only... entertaining the possibility that I could be with a woman at that time, let's put it that way.

Right.

So... it took them ten months to... to... the synod and the national office because I'm supported by the national office in what I'm doing right now. And... it took them ten months. They did not have anything with, we met with them again. I brought my... my good friends. Umm... pastors who are, you know supportive of who I am. Umm... and they, they again said that these are the options and these pastors who I bring, I say... for the second meeting I brought Carol with me. And they didn't understand the DOMA and Carol said "We will not be there if there is no DOMA. Maria will not be actually begging for your help to... for her to get her Green Card because it's based on her relationship with the church. If we can just marry, you know, we will not be here." So... they're kind of "Ohhh, duhh." It's kind of very narrow, I don't know why, why they didn't know that. So, it's uhh, that's March when I came out, April was the second meeting, the first meeting, May was the second meeting, and then the only... there's in October, and saying let's take out this person from that sexist church and anti-gay pastor and... gave her, anyway I was brought here to actually develop that church on some level,. And I'm not being used because they are, very, they are suppressing that possibility for them. Umm... so they, let's take them her out there and put them in a position. So I started here only... around this time, too. When I started to, uhh... do this assessment of the possibilities. So last year was very difficult for us. And then luckily

towards the end of that process, October, after two weeks Carol got a job. So she's now working for the diocese of California doing youth and young adults and camps.

Is she also Lutheran?

No she's not, the diocese is Episcopal. So... yeah. She's Episcopal.

Is she involved in the church you're setting up, the community you're setting up, also?

Yes, yes. I'm also involved in her... umm... ministry in some ways. I tag along whenever she needs. And... uh... yeah. She, she's, uh, I'm an amateur photographer so I took pictures for her. For big events and times like that. And I support her, we support each other's ministry in many ways. So... yeah. So. The hurdle is always over for that. Then... the national office, I don't have to come out. I came out to the key people, umm, that relate to my work. Umm... so the bishop knows, the people here knows, I don't know what to say, I didn't come out to that pastor, I said, before when you're starting to come out, I always cry, I kind of, I was kind of in a post- post- posture of... still being embarrassed. But now that I come out, I always tell people I'm giving you privilege, okay, to know me more. So it's kind of now I have more... more confidence in, in who I am. Not, here is the problem. Confident out loud. Because, [laughs] I remember when I was a campus minister I came out to... my... uh... colleague, Episcopal colleague. And she said, "Maria, you know why you're not crazy? As a Filipina lesbian and pastor? And within this kind of condition?" She said to me "The reason why you're not crazy is because you, you're so honest with yourself. You came out to yourself earlier. You, you're living it. And, the, the craziness is just when you actually cross that in a society and now you actually handle because you know, I went through a process that this is my... I'm going to own it." That process of coming out, uhh, and I will do it when I wanted it, with who I'm going, and I strategize, who I'm going to tell it to. Uh, which I'm

not a very strategic person in terms of that. Actually, my friends call me, ah... spit fire. I'm the spokesperson whenever they are angry with another person I will be able to do that with gusto. [laughs] But in terms of that it's very hard. So... I, I'm out of that place and in the community it's not a big problem because we have another gay couple. Uhh... we have, uh... a woman who is, uhh... she's still going through the... she identifies as bi. But she's not with anyone right now. So, who knows, you know? And there are young women who come who are, kind of, they're straight and they're fine with it, with everything. So... Carol is always there. She, we call each other our terms of endearment to one another and "What's that mean?" [laughs] "What's the Tagalog word for this?" [laughs] "Oh I thought that you were asking for a food or something like that!" So, now, in the congregational level it's not an issue. The synod level I, I'm still going through some process. And the national level they are so far away unless I actually take a... another call, they... in fact right now they nominated me for another position in Chicago but I'm not planning to go back, I'm done with Chicago, probably.

Too cold there.

Too cold there! [laughs] Yeah, yeah, and this is more fun, they don't have [*name of the café we're at*] in Chicago! We had a great time in Chicago because, we love to, I love to cook. I always had party in my, my community. In fact right now I started a connection of, of network, of uh, old mainline denomination mission developers. And most of us are women. Just the fascinating part. And one of them is a Latina gay woman who I became good friends and she calls me Maria-God. [laughs] And I just [laughs] get an email today asking "Can I be the God Assistant?" So... these are the good possibilities that I'm hoping, umm... to connect with all those communities who are progressive and surround me with, with more, you know,

positive, uh... communities, so... the community that I'm, we're hoping to, um, is, of course, it, it cannot be inclusive. But they now, the, the other inclusivity that we are actually umm... so we are not fighting the kind of battle that a congregation on GLBTQ are fighting, We are fighting more of the class... umm... uh... diversity and race diversity. And how are we going to address that. So now we have this Jewish woman she is an executive in a Silicon Valley, umm... company. So you could imagine and then you have someone who is working for a... homeless shelter. So we are in one, some do not even have a job, some are students, some are seminarians so that is class. But also... it's not a... sexual orientation is not a problem, we can be who we are.

That's awesome.

Yeah, yeah. But the challenge is more on, I think it's more of, umm, institutional, I think right now it's institutional implementation of the rule that we made in 2009. We do not know how to handle it. And second we do not know how to handle it if it's a person of color. Where you know public is not public for us. Boundaries are different for us. And... cultural assumptions are different for us. The one, about it is also the immigration part. You know, we have to... What I'm trying to say is the equality issue. Of... uh... of bi-cultural couples. Umm... that is one also. I'm very, uhh, involved in immigration issues aside from that part of Asian American undocumented students I'm very much, uhh, involved in, uhh, Trust Act, bill here, it didn't pass, oh my God, I don't know how many times I been to Sacramento to talk to people about it. Umm... And also umm, we, we tried to, to, umm, be present in the detention center where they detain all the... immigrants, yeah. Ready for deportation and stuff like that. So... for me that is our unique voice here in California. Umm, and also the,

that it is, it is not a Latino issue, that there are many other communities, especially Asian, you know, we are quiet like that. There are very few that are speaking on that issue.

Yeah.

Yeah. So, umm... uh... I'm still in the process of connecting Asian, uh, students or young adults, umm, queer, young adults. Do... do you know the book, or no, not the book, the film "For the Bible Tells Me So."

Umm... yeah!

When it came out it was in... yeah, yeah. It's about five families.

Yeah.

But one of them is a Lutheran young man. One of the executive producers is a good friend of ours in LA. She's a Filipina born in Cambodia. [laughs] But anyway, and of course she's gay and married to... fascinating story. She actually married several times already and... and the Disciples of Christ pastor there, he's, he's the one who officiated. She's a good friend, first by Carol, they belong to... the same choir. But the, when they actually, it came out and we started to sponsor it in different places. I was the one who brought it to USC, I was planning to actually, to do it again here, because the more I actually talk to, uhh, pastors of color here, it's still a big problem. In many congregations. Umm... so I attend the Association of Asian Pastor, or priest of the diocese of California because we don't have, I don't have a lot of, of Asian pastors here. There are only two of us in our synod. And one is a Chinese who's, who's very conservative but she accepted me, so... she didn't say anything but I'm sure that she will tell me that I will go to hell. But we do not talk about it [laughs] about those things because there are only two of us and I really support her in all the things that she does. So... umm... so I'm planning to actually, to promote it and, and, be, be supportive. So in fact I met

a Filipina young woman in Emery, no in Mill's College, and she... she... has not come to our group but she would love to be a part of our community because she does not feel that she is safe to be who she is in her own United Church of Christ congregation, mostly Filipino, it's actually Filipino congregation in Fremont. So I said, "When you are ready, you come, and... uh..." In fact, she attended the transgender conference at PSR, Pacific School of Religion recently and I actually went there just to see her and support her. You know, it's her first big conference and surrounded by different people. So I met her there just to sort, give her a big boost and I'm happy. So... and she told me her story that her parents are still not... very... they don't, again, they don't talk about it. They already had a big fight before and now... umm... so I said to her, let's do it little by little. But, uhh, I'm praying for those and other communities to, in ASPIRE there are a few of them who are gay and they not find a community that can... can... accept them. Yeah. Uh, and hopefully when they find someone until, uh... immigration... immigration reform they call it CIR, Comprehensive Immigration Reform happen and they will not be able to do anything to, yeah. So... it's still in, in the process of doing that, umm, and, and I 'm actually preparing myself to... to before, before I can do a full blast of doing that, I need to be really out to my parents, umm... because uh, news fly to the Philippines and... I'm sure that they know it. Actually in 2009 I brought Carol because it's my parents' 60th anniversary and it's Carol's birthday was in the same, umm, month as my mom's. And so, on her birthday, you know Filipinos, we had, you know, lots of food, we did not invite anyone because she does not have any friends there it's only my family. We had so much food, in fact my nephew said, my nieces, like, "Oh my goodness, it's like a big party." [laughs] It is a party!

[laughs] My step-grandmother's Filipino, so I understand...

[laughs] Ohhhhh! [laughs] Okay! So you know how... like... it is offensive if you do not bring... to go... right? [laughs] It's like you're... you're cooking for ten million people. So, but, my mom was asking "Why do we having this food? What is happening? You're not leaving yet? You have two or three days still!" And I said no, it's Carol's birthday. So she asked me, call her, my mom's evangelical too, in terms of the word evangelical loosely, but, but more of, umm... she, when she speaks there is always Jesus, [laughs] And, umm, but she's a very prayerful person. Umm... And Christian, so, she said why don't you call her and I'll pray for her. So... umm... she didn't understand, Carol didn't understand whatever my mom said but I was very touched by that. And, umm, so I'm sure that my mom, my mom knows. My dad, he, he's kind of uh, who cares. [laughs] He, he doesn't say much, you know, as long as I have a good job [laughs] Yeah... Umm... very easy going my dad. So, I think... Yeah. Become to a place where, a time when I can do that. It's, it's hard because my sister who are in the Philippines are the ones who actually really, in fact physically hurt me when I was a teenager for suspecting that I was gay. So you could imagine how I, how hard it is. But I think... the good thing is she has a daughter now who's gay. Who came out to her. It's hard, but... you know...

Is she still in the Philippines?

She's still in the Philippines. In fact, I told my niece, I had already came out to her and I said, "You rocking, you know? I didn't do that when I was young." Of course it's a different time, but I'm so proud... This, this young woman is also, they said, she's my... my... junior. Everything about her is after me, so... I'm, I'm really... I'm really impressed. And proud of her for coming out. And she brings her girlfriend to the family, family events. So I'm... even more [laughs] and she introduces her as her girlfriend [laughs] She's more, uhh...

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Wow.

Well, not to everyone... at least her mom knows, her closest cousins...

People who want to see it see it and people who don't want to don't look kind of thing?

Yea... but she tells them. Those who are ready to see her as well. That's like... to see her through. So, yes so it's still, but, but, I'm excited about this possibility of... bringing some of this, some of this young people and sharing our struggles and... support one another.

Because the ASPIRE group I'm finding out that they are also not supported, supported in their own families. So... it's not, the battle is not over even though they are born and raised here they're still... uh... if you are second generation only, the, the battle is still there.

Do you find any other Filipinos that are Lutheran? Because I know Filipinos are mostly Catholic in the states here... Are there other Lutheran congregations? Other Filipinos around you?

No. There's one, one or two in Southern California. But they also, they tend to be independent, you know? Hard to for them to be independent. Yeah. I'm also out, there are only four or five Filipino pastors in the Lutheran, in the whole Lutheran church. I am out to the three of them. I'm not out to the two men, who are, both born in... born and raised in the Philippines because they are tricky, tricky... and again this is not just about coming out to them it's giving them privilege. I'm not so sure if I'm giving them that privilege to them.

Yeah, I get that.

So did I... there are different challenges. I still have challenges but not in the community where I serve right now. In fact, it's so amazing how... how I can just be who I am, and... umm... and have, uh, when, when I was serving in, in Chicago we decided to go to an Episcopal church, even though I was the LWF, the Lutheran officer for the whole region

[laughs] for the whole region and I do not go to the Lutheran church. No one knows! I come to the Lutheran once in a while... because we would love to... to... worship together. Now we miss it sometimes, but after, after we started this small group now we have to, we can't really worship with one another. In the morning we have different jobs because I'm still invited to preach in different places. Sometimes I visit those congregations that supporting our ministry and stuff like that. And she will go and have her own, her own work and visiting Episcopalian churches. But in the evening now we worship together. We pray together with a community that we're still forming and learning from one another. So... it's now in a good place. Yeah. Yeah.

Umm, could you talk about... about maybe what's been your most, like, fulfilling spiritual experience recently? Or it doesn't have to be recently...

Yeah, yeah. Well I think I partly responded to it because... as I've said this, so, um here is the, the, here is the fascinating part of being a mission developer. You have something in your head but you cannot just implement it right away, you know? And there is nothing to implement it right away, too. Right? You don't have any, you know a congregation any, so you gonna just teach them, no? Umm... I, I think, I think one of the... fascinating part of this is, umm... as I've said we create liturgies and now we have a core group who actually help me, and I'm welcome to their teaching, their leadership, our diversity, our... we talked a lot about identity. In this group. So our first meeting in ... sometime late August, we're in public market there were six of us. And there were four question that I actually umm... also prepared. So the first question is who we are. So we have this, I have print small papers and we would just write in quiet, in silence. Write who you are. Whatever you want to say. Or whatever you want to share. Whatever you think you are. So we put it on the, on the table

and I asked them can you pick something that is not yours, and then read it, read it! So, my... what I'm reading is actually from... a... gay man [laughs] so it's actually also HIV positive and he actually put it there and said it, you know? And hear our own... our own... from a different voice, who we are from a different voice. So I'm, we're already for me... for me... it's saying that this will be a diverse group, you know, and trying to lift that up. The second question is... is your actually your question here in number eight. If you want to find a community or you want to ... if there is a community you want to be a part of, how would it look like? So it's amazing, oh my God!

So you here have the opportunity to make it!

Yes! We wrote it down again, and we read, you know, umm... So it's quadrants, so that's about us. But our purpose is not to be just who we are... our purpose is actually to reach out to Emeryville area. So the third quadrants was who do we think our, is... the Emeryville people. And we are in a public market in a Sunday evening where families are relaxing and eating their dinner in this huge place. Um... so, it's, it's funny because there is a Latina young woman there you is from Argentina, no, no, El Salvador. And the question we asked is... describe a... a... um... not a, uh... yuppie... oh my god... the actual café people. Oh! Hipster! [laughs] So... [laughs] So... [laughs] One of our questions is describe a hipster and it's so funny! Really funny! And so... when... it's Carmen's turn and she said "What do you say hipster?" So we tried to describe it to her and she still cannot get it and so while in the middle of all this question someone passed and then Carol said, "Carmen, Carmen, there, there, that's a hipster!" So we're all looking at! [laughs] And it's kind of just random, but... and I saw, it's because one of the things that came out of that too, is that they're hipsters, some of them are hipsters, actual café hipsters, umm... umm... it's another café, uh,... oh

my goodness. There are four cafes we meet in in three blocks in that area. *[Name of café]* is one of them, and it's kind of the common people who live in the area, or some of them are families, some of them are students, but they are not that, that hipster. Hipster goes to *[name of café]*, so the family people or mixed people living in the area go to *[name of café]*, *[name of café]* is where the yuppies go. They are in their suits, you know... and nice dress nice shoes. And then... umm... *[name of café]* is for older, umm... older adults. Who live in the area and also work in Emeryville area so they are in coats as well and more expensive coffee. *[laughs]* More expensive place and stuff like that. So... so... that is... we actually, uh, write who we think live in Emeryville. And then in fact compare it already to who we are. You know? And then the last one is if there would be a community that we can be a part of, that Emeryville people can be a part of too, how would that look like. So we are comparing also this two ones that this is our ideal church or community and this area will be, the... one that... us and Emeryville people can actually come together. So... this really our ideal and one of them is, for example, very inclusive, you know? Racially diverse. Um... creative, innovative, umm... what else? It's fun, you know? Some often, too are contemplative, you know? Uhhmm... What other things... I'm so sorry... Actually! I can send it to you because I put it together already and... we, we go back to it all the time. And each person who actually becomes a new member of this congre- community... we don't have membership, you know? We invite them, would you like to have this... who you are listed here. We want to know who are coming here and be a part of what will be ideal... If you want to participate in this, uhh... umm... process that we are going through you are invited. So... and I've, uh, one time we are in pizza parlor, yeah. In San Sal Pablo. We talked about our values. So, there are very good values that I think we do not... in a congregation that has been there for a long

time. It's hard to... and we, now, that, that this values we need to learn how to live, too. So one of them is... deep engagement of culture. And tradition. So now how do you balance that one? So, umm... it... I can show, I can actually describe to you some of our events.

We, we, umm... in the beginning I don't want to be very, very creative. I actually brought in, umm... only the one of the vespers, you know the vespers, an evening prayer I really, really like, it's from New Zealand book of common prayer. It's an Episcopal one but it's inclusive language and they have an alternative Our Father, it's beautiful. And, I... I... I can actually mail it to you, the whole thing. And they really liked it and because it's inclusive language plus it's... it's... very contemplative and lots of candles and no preaching, No preaching.

We... we... actually do communal reflection. I... I just called it recently, I called it neo-lectual. Neo-lectual. So lectual is the ancient way of reading the Bible. You read several times and each part has its own, has some guided questions, but actually we form it in a different way because we have themes for some called this month of November our theme was, was actually hospitality. So we've been talking about hospitality. Umm... so... we... read the, the text three times, too. But in three different areas we're, we have different questions. Umm... to guide us. So... it's a more reflective. I prepare in some ways in order to rock it and also infuse some... umm... umm... writings of... a current, you know, contemporary mystic an spiritual leaders and also hoping I can get into the.. um... [unable to hear word] mystics. I love [unable to hear name] and those people. But also, to combine that one so last time we, we have... so I draw a lot from just contemp-, contemporary ones. And then give them, and in fact, sometimes we give, we define those... those messages, umm... so... that's what we do. Umm... so... the vesper and then recently what I did since this hospitality theme, I actually looked into some... umm... liturgical litanies. On hospitality and

revised it according to where we are. I just followed the form because it's a good form and then I will include what is happening in our own community. So we have litanies, we have commitments and stuff like that and just put it there. And we'll continue to do the communal reflection. Umm... we also do Eucharist. So we're now learning how to... introduce ourselves to see every Sunday it's kind of there is something different that I think will improve the way we welcome other people. So we introduce ourselves with a sentence or describe who we are. Umm... and then, uh, so now I am writing liturgies based on the... umm... the theme that we choose, yeah. In terms of this, umm... what have you been, your fulfilling the essential experience is... since I'm writing it, it's kind of good but people say that it's really good, yeah. I will be biased, Carol always say, "You know Maria, I've been hoping I will find this community, this is it this is what I've been hoping for." Umm... and every time you... I... as I've said she's academic so I've asked her to... sometimes do... edit if I miss a "the" or whatever. So... she reads it and says, "This is really good!" you know? And... so... it's an invitational, an invitational leadership. There's no assigned liturgist before we start. Umm...

So anyone can read the next part kind of thing?

We invite anyone who would like to do this... There's no rule... you can start anywhere... and I also prepare them that if there is the word silence there you are, you are welcome to how long you want it to be. And... and... I invite them that, umm, since we're most of us are from church experience, we, I invite them let's, let's teach ourselves to be comfortable with silence, you know and things like that. So in the beginning we prepare everything and everybody has something to read. And umm... since we've been in public places it's hard to sing, but last time we are in Del's apartment, we sang, but without guitar. I, um, I can play

guitar and others instruments but that time we didn't have guitar, and we sang it a capella and it was really nice. The... it was really nice. And it's both contemporary and meditative ones. So... so... I will, I will be biased that that is one that is... what I, what is for me very fulfilling. That it's inclusive, you know, our Eucharist, I don't speak the, the words of institution, we speak it together. Everyone. And I ask them no one makes this... there's no magic there, there's no voodoo. I always tell them, in the... in... in the Old Testament, I know, you know... they put their hands... in our culture... So we don't have a tradition yet, and we come from different cultures, so just... you know... stretch your hands on the food, not only the bread and wine. Because we have full dinner. Umm... and then we don't... here we haven't talked about this. I don't like people... not I don't like it... it's just that it's not our practice yet that the bread and wine will be served first and then the dinner. We put the bread there and the wine and as you get your food you can partake, take the bread and wine.

Does everyone take the bread and wine?

We have people who are... who... are going through AA, so they will not take the wine. But they will take the bread.

Do even the people who don't identify as Christian, will they still take the bread and wine?

They're welcome to. In fact, that was one of the questions that someone asked me. And he said "Well, I'm not, I'm not baptized," and I said "We don't care." And he said "What's the theology of the Lutheran?" and I said "Well it's the other way around, but we don't care."

It's not that we don't care. If this is, this is for us, we believe that it's for everyone. So... who, whatever belief that is, you know... but we also, we also say that you know, that in Jesus' time, umm... it's not only, I'm sure that there is fish, you know? They live near a lake,

you know? So... although, of course, the reason why the new churches now who are also emergent, the... the bread and wine is about simplicity, it's about simple, but... we... and during this eating we can talk about each other and then, we really close it, umm, and a benediction and we bless each other. Umm... and so I get some then, blessings from others. As well. Very relaxed.

That's beautiful.

Yeah. Yeah. Uh we have an altar set up there, wherever we are by the way, even in public market, even in parks. We always carry an icon or one candle and we bring it wherever we are. Yeah... umm... if, if I'm the participant, one of the, uh, University Lutheran Church is always, it's very liturgical but they do it in a very good way. Not the high church, but they do creative ones. So for me, for me those are the ones that, you know, is fulfilling for me. Umm, they have hierarchy, it's the pastor only does this or something, but I... that community is really, resonate to the things that we do. Umm... so... we're, we're still forming it so it's kind of loose. In a way. We're still small, so... less organization, you know what I mean? But when we become 50 it will be a different story. Umm... so things like that. So for me the fulfillment is about the inclusivity that you can hear everyone's voice. The other one, it's participatory, you know, umm... and... the, third one I think is, umm... it's, it's for, it's generosity. When people open their homes, um, in some places, in some instances, the... host also cooked, but I realized that for the seminarian last Sunday I said, it's fine, I can cook, I love to cook anyway. So for them to prepare their place and they, you know, made ginger lemon tea to start with, it was really amazing and prepare the table for us, as well. So... the, the generosity should be a part of it. Umm... uh... I think the third one is that, uh... we all have our own, umm, journey. And... I also ask, welcome to ask questions because not, my

questions are only to guide us, you know? And... we, we, that's that respect of... of... of... the the journey path that we are no matter where that is or... we are... and it's okay that there are beginners. I always, in my head, when I, I also steer in the, no, facilitate, the... the discussion because sometimes there are people who are more talkative and so... and not in a direct way, "What do you think?" No, I don't do that, but more in a... think of questions that will possibly be directed of those who are... searching than those who are already studying theology, you know? And... umm... so that is very inclusive so people who are still asking questions they are welcome to ask questions. You know? We don't... we try not to stop it. We just stop it because of time sometimes, because everyone kind of would love to listen. Umm... one, one interesting thing in our journey of having uh this religious spiritual community as we form it. The challenge is sometimes we compare it to what we have learned... so... when we're writing, remember the question of what kind of ideal community? Most of when they explain it they say "Oh because my... my church experience is like this and like this and like this." And so it's the opposite of it, "I don't want to be like this I don't want to be like this." So I always ask them, "Forget about what you don't want! But what will it look like if this is the one? Not because it's against or opposing, uh, what you have experienced before. The ones that you don't like, no. Let's not, not this one, but this is the one, you know?" It's hard to steer when they have... already... uh, I didn't ask you. What is your... religion?

I'm Jewish.

You're Jewish. Okay. Thank you. So it's good because you also have rituals. [laughs] Yes, so... umm... so we're learning, we're learning not to... umm.... Criticize our own... own faith journey, but rather, uh... it should inform us what is ideal for us. Umm... So... I think I

am I am more... I am more optimistic now than I was when I just graduated from seminary. Umm... fourteen years ago. My first church left, my first congregation just left the ELC this year. Because of the LGBT view. They do not know, I did not come out to any of them. Even though one of the members continue to communicate with me. And she shares everything that is happening there. I think she is sharing it because she is struggling with it. And I always tell her, umm... you know I'll pray for you and continue, to, just... just be there and the unfortunate thing is that she's gay. And they left because they voted not to be a part of an ELCA that is welcoming to gays. I, I don't understand I always tell her, I don't know where you're coming from, I'm so impressed that you continue to go to that church. I'm so impressed. Umm...

Can I ask... have you ever... I know you said you're a cradle Lutheran... have you at times ever thought about moving to a different congregation because of acceptance of LGBT issues. To find more acceptance somewhere?

Yeah! Even up to now because it's hard for us... I think the hurdle also for being a pastor is also my color, you know. In a predominantly white, racism is still there. And for women up to now, there are congregation who will say, who are not going to interview a woman, imagine that. So there are several hurdles, so now I have another hurdle. And... Episcopalian is the closest one. When I studied church music back in the Philippines, I lived for almost six years in a... in a... Episcopal seminary because the school is actually... together with the seminary... it's a separate entity but our building are kind of next to each other... we worship together... the seminarian and the music students. Because it's a church music school anyway. So I have... more special relationship with them. But I'm very... ecumenical, I did a lot of work in ... when I was Geneva in... the Lutheran World Federation office is also in the

same World Council of Churches which is ecumenical. Yeah? So I actually worked with them as well but the closest that I can think of is actually Episcopal, you know, although recently... I don't know if you heard about the vote in Europe... they have several voting, umm... communities, yeah. And the recent one is the laity didn't pass and the diocese it passed in different diocese but didn't pass in laity.

What was the issue?

Oh! Ordination of, no. Not. Women becoming bishop. Um... it didn't pass. In England. But... so... I think, I think that I... because of Carol as well. They actually, they teasing me all the time. "We told you you should be an Episcopalian." Yeah. But I think... UCC... because they are not, that... ritual... or liturgical oriented, sometimes I go but they are justice issue orientation, umm... you know... and sometimes even jealous of them or I envy their work. The Unitarian Universalist as well on justice issues they are really always out there. Umm... but, I, I'm , uh... realize that I'm really a Christian, so... umm... that is okay, I still work... In fact, the East Bay Immigration... Interfaith Immigration Coalition I work with a lot of Jewish people because it's only Christian and Jewish who are doing it together most of the time in this area. So it is, that is, yea... I think... Among the Christian denomination it is the Episcopal Church. But... oh... No, Patrick Cheng is a...

He's an MCC.

Yeah, MCC. But he's, he's teaching in an Episcopal divinity school.

Yeah, and uh... also part of how I got started in this is you know... Kwok Pui-Lan? She came to my school to give a lecture. She was the theologian in residence for a couple of days and so...

Oh woowwwww!

I met with her and she got me to Patrick and she helped me start the initial conversation with people.

Ohhh!!!!

She is amazing.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. She is, yeah. Then of course there's PANAAWTM, that's her, one of her babies, too. Sometimes I, PANAAWTM is kind of hard as well, you know? In terms of sexism, you know... our biggest, sometimes our biggest enemy are not the men, it's also women. So... Kwok Pui-Lan is amazing but in sometimes in some ways she's also the gate keepers, you know? But she's not the worst. But I've never seen her in that way, but other women I know in this PANAAWTM. I only attended once because they are so freaking exclusive.

Yeah.

I don't know how to break their, break into their community! So I didn't go anymore, even it was here in San Francisco recently. Why would I go? You know, they're... so... um... I told you about the UCC Latino woman. Her girlfriend is... is a Japanese, umm... she, she immigrated when she was eleven here. In fact she is the one who gave me this "Maria-God" nickname. She actually sent me an email yesterday saying about this, there's a magazine who would like to, umm... conduct interviews with Asian, uh GLBTQ young people. So... she wanted me to connect them with the ones I am already, umm... kind of walking with, you know? Umm... And learning from. They are my teachers, too. So... so she's very much connected and on... they call it, the, the acronym is so bad, but they said it's API Cutesy.

Oh yeah, I've seen that.

Yeah? So that's them, that's them. Um... unfortunately their first meeting, at the first meeting that I've seen coming up is December second but Carol and I put together a... a women's choir, they're only eight of us. Umm... and it's called Lady Parts, we call ourselves Lady Parts. We have a salon on December second the same time as their meeting. But if I... I'm planning to actually go. Uh... regarding this community in not the religious one, I want you to know that when I was in Chicago, so when I moved there in 2008, March 2008, uh and Carol was in LA, she really actually, almost force me to find a... queer community. And... she looked it on the web for me. She found all the names, all the people, and she found the next meeting where I should go. So I act-, I went to the I to I, the name is I to I, it's from Invisible to Invincible, that's their name in Chicago. And I, I met really amazing women who, who I went to their, um... to several events, umm... yeah. So, it, it's good, and then they had a project, too. Same there is a... I forgot the name of the project of... inter... I can probably send it to you... there is, it's in Oakland but they're roaming in different parts of United States taking pictures and stories of... of... Asian queer, um, people.

Oh yeah! I think I...

You know that?

I read about something recently that sounds similar. I don't know if it was the same project or not. But I know I heard about something that is like that.

This is the only one that I saw that is nation-wide. The I to I, they did it among us, the members only. And... hopefully they gonna compile it. So... that was, that's very nice that they did that. So... and I'm actually planning to do it with the new young people here. I'm interested with these stories of the... API, the ASPIRE people, and also the... I'm I'm also, um, doing, umm... advocacy with the domestic workers right now. It didn't pass again

[laughs]. I don't know how long we're gonna do that! It's been ten years. I only joined it two years ago. So... I'm already tired so you know... "Maria, we got to go to Sacramento!" "Oh my God..." But they have been there for ten years now. So those are the stories I would like to hear as well. But I to I really helped me. There's some older woman that are Chinese American I think she is second, third generation already. Oh I, probably even third, fourth generation Chinese. And she married, got married, and then of course divorced. And she was someone who was telling me you know, you always... you are in a high position, but you cannot come out. You say, your church, you are accountable, you said you are accountable to them. But they need, they are not accountable to you Maria because they cannot accept you. She was the one who was actually pushing me to be able to... And I said, always tell her "The right time." You know? "At the right time." And if I am a citizen, I actually could have actually come out earlier. Uh... it just so happened that time also when I was regional officer I was waiting for my Green Card so I cannot do anything that will... I cannot go to the protest you know? In fact... the fascinating story about this is on my way to Canada... Umm... I went a, vigil in... the detention center in Tacoma 'cause I was driving. The event was... the convention I'm going is in Vancouver... My friend called me and said, "Well, you know, it's still early Maria, come, it's 3 o'clock vigil, come before you go, you can reach before, before midnight you can reach the border." And I did! And I took a lot of pictures! And then the two days after, uh, I moved, I actually, even the day after I arrived in Canada, Carol called me about this denial or whatever. She was hysterical. I found that I cannot come back. She has to pack all our stuff. Yeah. It's really a bad, really a hard, hard, hard experience. Uh, I do not know what can happen to me. It just so happen that I have two sisters in Canada so I lived. [laughs] I have a family there!

How many sisters do you have? I keep hearing about more!

Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. I'm from a family of twelve.

Wow.

I'm the youngest of twelve. Yeah. And there are now ten of us. Two died. Already. But I'm the youngest and my oldest brother and I we have about almost seventeen years apart. And there are twelve of us. And the ones in Canada they are twins. So... and they are the oldest girls among the girls. So... That's a big family. Yeah. So in terms of community, I, I, I, love, community again, belonging is so huge in... not only among the young adults, right? That is the issue, But for me, uh, uh, my identity. It's so much, it, it mesh, you know? With a community. That sometimes I have to separate myself because I cannot define myself with it individually. Especially among the Filipinos, and I think with other cultures as well. Umm... so it's, looking for a community where I could be... finding Rena... the, uh, UCC Latina... woman pastor who is gay... it's, we only met recently. It's, it's a good thing and she, she's really looking also, searching for a community where she could be supported for what she's, on what she's doing. Umm... and then finding out this community hopefully, and café [name], also inside café [name] it's owned by a Filipina lesbian. Yeah. So... I been there several times too and... finding out who, I would like to be more involved in that. In that also what they are doing. There is also a book that you might be in interested. There are two or three stories, there of... Pinay, GLBTQ and that's Pinay Power. Yeah, Yeah. They might actually have it in... It's an anthology.

The anthology is called Pinay Power?

Yes, it's an anthology. And there are two or three stories... one of them is a very good story of coming out as a Filipina. It's a very good story and actually it captured my own sense of...

struggle that I had as well. Umm... the... have you seen the other... funny one. Story. It's a film and during my coming out, umm... process I was in therapy. Imagine going to therapy for Filipino is a huge stigma, right? But I went through it and actually, umm, was looking for a Filipina I cannot find one but I found a white woman who is actually, I really enjoyed... by the end of October, I said, I cannot come right now, can we do it on the phone. And she said, I said to her "Do you think I should actually not see you anymore?" And she said "Maria, I had been hoping that you would say that! [laughs] Because you know what, we're kind of just talking about your day, like... it kind of got..." she did not say that we are becoming friends... "I'm hoping it should come from you." It was really a good from October... first two months, really intense, weekly. The next several months, it's only, up to once a month. It was really an amazing experience. In some ways that I have the courage to do that and also... go through, umm... saying that I'm going to own this. That I'm going to own this. At that time I was also in a very difficult relationship. Because I left, I left a girlfriend in Switzerland. It was very hard for us. Very hard... And I was not out, I was not out, so... it was very hard. Umm... but it, it's a good, it's a good experience of coming out. It's hard, it's very hard. Umm... I think the hardest part of being an Asian woman is the... is really your family. Your culture. You know? Going through the process of are you protecting them? 'Cause that's what I thought was, I'm protecting them from pain. 'Cause I know they will not like me. You know? Umm... 'Cause I don't care about myself. I'm very... I'm... a risk taker. In fact when I was a teenage, when I was back in the Philippines... I had a girlfriend, I actually told her... I have a license now, I am a CPA, I earn this much, I said, "I can support us!" [laughs] I was twenty... twenty two.

Me too!

Are you twenty two? [laughs] But I was saying, “No, we cannot live in Manila, let’s go to another place.” And she said “Why? Do you speak Desaya?” [laughs] ‘Cause there are several languages, right? “No I speak English.” But anyway, that risk taking. Umm... during that time. And I know it’s, it’s a, ridiculous, proposal. I’m glad she did not say yes! [laughs] I don’t know where I would be at this time! But to, to find a community, where you can, you can identify yourself. So the movie that I went to... so I was living in West Hollywood. Well close, border West Hollywood and Korea town. Umm... Saving Face. You should see that! Netflix. Is... you’ll see some of the... there’s no church here, there’s no ritual here. But I think the cultural part of it, you, you will see how. It is important. And then... the other thing that the community. It’s not a community, but now I actually went to an MCC. When I was in LA. When I was in the process of coming out. I looked for a church where I can be anonymous but at the same time see, as many gay people... worshipping together. So I went to MCC probably three times. Just to see. It’s, it’s heavily... uh... male, yeah. Yeah. Um... I mean gay men than gay woman. So... I didn’t feel comfortable with that. Except that, let’s put it that way. I was so happy to be there. To worship in a different... context. So that was when I was still coming out. Umm... So I did that, so I did my own path of discovery. I went to a... a gay woman’s gay bar. The oldest one, The Palms, in West Hollywood. I don’t know if they’re still open. But they’re known to be the oldest lesbian bar. I only went there once because I got so afraid. I was reading, well, no no, it’s not afraid of, of, uh... danger, violence, no, no, it’s really fun. There’s music, there’s really fun one, it’s more of... so my first evening there I was just reading magazines in a very dim light drinking wine. And I was picked up already! [laughs] I was, uh... actually. This woman just bought me a... we Filipinos know. We can kind of tell. So she’s Filipina, probably second, third generation.

That, doesn't have any accent like me. So... she started to buy me more drinks! And on my third I said, no more wine 'cause I'm driving. And so I went to the, the bathroom and I didn't come back to my chair! I was so afraid! [laughs] Those kind of, I think, at least I experienced it. It's important that I know where it is. And there's this guilt feeling because I'm a pastor I don't want anyone... what if someone, you know... I serve college students. They can go anywhere. This is their place. I'm the one who feels not safe here. This is their... they feel safer here than in our campus ministry.

[we got distracted for several minutes and then came back to our conversation]

It's kind, I was just thinking of, you're very young... and when I was your age... [sighs] It's hard to live in the Philippines during that time. It was the eighties, you know? But I grew up with a... so my mom managed twelve children so we had help. And she manage the... so we, I lived up with my grandfather, my grandparents from my father's side. So my mom managed that kind of household, three generations, four generations. And so... I remembered there's an iron lady, you know, the one who ironing our clothes. You know Filipinos, we ironing all our clothes. Today I did not. [laughs] So it's unusual day for me! 'Cause Carol always teases me "Why are you ironing all of it?" This, this older woman has a daughter. And this daughter, she is... this is the problem with the Filipino mentality. It's like 1960s, seriously, so it's defined gender roles. So if you're a lesbian woman, you act and... and... act like a man. And then the effeminate male... Yeah, it's kind of like that, because of the gender roles... So because the gender role is so strong, like you identify... however, the partners of these people, this... more gender identified, they almost cross gender, right? Are the regular people, like us [gestures to me and her and laughs], and I'm sorry to say that, but regular looking, you know... We are, we don't have to be look... this way to say that you are gay...

But I walk with this woman who was like that. And I was so fascinated by her! And she's very quiet... she just do her work. She helps her mom. So she was with us for probably at least five years. So I know but I... I was thinking, I don't want also to dress like that, you know? Umm... but I was, I would like to talk to her but my mom, you know, it's kind of... umm... always ask me, "Go out and play, don't bother them! Just give them the..." She would let me like give them snacks. Oh, okay, you do, do that, then you can talk to them, but do not bother them. So, we don't, we don't, we don't look down on them. My mom is very saying... "They don't like to be... bothered Maria! [laughs] Don't do that!" But I was fascinated with that. And I grew up with all my hair stylists were all gay men. I don't go to a woman. I always say they mess up my hair! So those, those, kind of... then we have. We even have, you know in the Philippines we have a procession. We call it Maria Clara. They wear beautiful dress and they're like a queen. And then procession of saints in the Roman Catholic church. Well the... the gay community in my town decided they will have their own! [laughs] So it's so fun, fun, buy they cannot, no, it's, it's the discrimination is so great as you know, violence... if, if, if I gave... when effeminate gay men get killed it's like, "he asked for it," something like that. Or if a lesbian woman was raped, it, "she asked for it," you know? But it's no longer like that in some places. But still the discrimination is the church is stronger than anyplace else. So the, the belonging, the belonging I found, if you notice I actually, search is first in the secular world. Umm... then in the church. I did it like MCC, yes, but I went to I to I, but I went to this bar just to see myself in a different context. Because I'm not a bar person I love to sing, I love to dance, but it's not my cup of tea. And I don't have anything against it, because I went dancing with my, with my students. I am their designated driver! [laughs] But I always tell them, my, I have to sleep by three oh clock. So

by two thirty we're out of here! [laughs] I, I dance with UCC here, with USC, UCLA here. [laughs] It's really fun! [laughs] But I realize it's not really my... but, you know, to look, search for belonging. Umm... The first belonging, being belonged to a community, I first had it in the secular then in the church. That's the, the, it's hurtful for me as a pastor. But I realized it's okay, you know? Time will come. And... a patience, will you know, will, will consult something new. Which happened in 2009. I'll tell you a story, I know we have to go, but...

No, it's okay.

When it's 2009 I was supposed to be an ecumenical guest at the event of my own church because I'm LWF regional officer, I should attend this. I can't! I was in Canada. But there a live... uh... stream... streaming of the event. So we waited for that when it, when the vote happened. Carol and I were holding each other, we're watching, and then when here's the, the vote to us... you can imagine this. 67.67, 67.777 and... 33.333. So it passed. It needs two thirds. Exactly two thirds. Can you? It's so, and then the, so there was a, the big [gasp] and then the bishops said, "We committed ourselves to this so we will be in silence." So there was this... this... amazing silence. But both of us were actually jumping! We were not there so we were jumping [laughs] in the place, we were so happy! And I thought that I could come home earlier but it took four months to process my paper. But anyway I just want you to know this kind of finally it happen and I waited for a long time, for another two years to come out to the bishop. But I... it's still not good. Eventually I'll tell my story in the church because I want to... I'm not out to the Association of Asians of... leadership in my church. Because they're, they're really anti-gay. I'm glad I'm no longer a board member when it happened that they talked about this... because they would like to have a letter that will

umm, that will go to the whole church saying that the whole Asian community is against it. But I'm so proud of the Filipino representative and the Indonesian representative. They cannot do it together because the two communities are saying no. Um... so only the Chinese community actually wrote and really their strong language. Umm... so I, I have, I do not know if I will come out. Do I give them the privilege or not? I'm already an outsider in the communities, so... so... here, the word belonging and also, um, that it hard because you lose, you lose the community, especially for Asian community, you lose your home community, and... you gain other communities, too. Um... I was asked to do, as a mission developer in our church you normally be a mission developer for your own people, kind of a thing. But I always tell them they will not accept me unfortunately. It hurts me but they will not accept me. Anyway, theology and my ecclesiology means that, I, I'm a pastor for all. So I'm called to the whole church, umm... though I would like to have multi-cultural, I don't want my child to grow saying that how come my church is only Filipino and then I go to the cafeteria and all of my neighbors are different. So... so... that is the problem also, for me now. I'm... they can, they cannot put me in the box so they do not know what to do with me in the church. Because I refuse to... do a church plan for Filipinos. And I already know it! You know, I introduce myself and they love me, they love me very much. And then when I told them that I am gay, they don't call me anymore.

The Filipino community?

The Filipino community. Some of them... some of them are, you know? Especially the ones who were born and raised in the Philippines, you know? And... I love the older people because I miss my mom and my dad. But that's the reality. I cannot be a gay person to my own people. And second, third, fourth generation probably. It, it was easier for me to come

out to my nephews and nieces than to come out to my sisters. But that, again it's generational. And... and, yeah. And the thing is, the evangelicals now, the evangelical Christians. I think they are softening in their stance and that. They will not say they are against any more. But in their hearts they are against. But they will continue to be nice to you, to be kind, at least, at least be kind. In engaging with people like me, so... the Asian community even though. The Evangelical and Asian churches, even though they are, they are against it, I think they have learned not to be... to be... mean.

Yeah.

[laughs] Is that the word? Yeah, they are not mean. Because I have already done that with, um, New Hope Covenant Church. They are very, very accepting. No, no no, that is not the word. They are very nice to me. Yeah, yeah. So... there are things happening. But there are still a work to do. There is still work to do. Because, umm, imagine I'm already, I mean, I, I... serve in a high ranking position, I cannot be who I am. You know? Umm... so the more for other, uh... upcoming pastors. I don't know if there are... there who are... you know... Asian. Seminarians who... are, also gay like me. Umm... As of now I'm the only Asian gay pastor I know in the ELCA. I would love to have another, other company. But it's hard. So... umm... hopefully, hopefully time will come that I really will be able to tell my story and change, change, I cannot change them, you know? They can only change themselves. But... this, at least they will see that it, they cannot deny that there are people like me in our own communities. And I'm so sorry I'm a bit, late in the process. I just turned 47. Umm... and... I said, you know, in three years I will be 50 I should actually be able to do it now! [laughs] But as soon as I get my Green Card. I'm in the last process, so... last week I just did my biometrics so I told my friends I just... I... I said it to someone and Carol, Carol's boss said,

“Oh I feel safe now Maria!” [laughs] So you need all your finger printing because, you know, so I always tell that you feel safer now that I have... This is my third biometrics from your, from this government. I have... I do not know what to do with them anymore. But if you not feel safe it's not my fault anymore! [laughs] So... I'm hoping that by next, by early next year I will have and then I have more voice, you know? Then I don't have to, I don't want to put Carol in that position again. She was so afraid. I have not seen her really, really, you know, sad and angry of losing... and I have felt, I have felt bad too, I don't want to lose her. To be away for two months was already hard for us. And do not know what is going to happen to us. And for her to live with my sister who's a... [laughs] As you know, this family things happen, “Who are that?” “I don't know her too Carol, sorry!” [laughs] “At least we have free room! And yeah...” [laughs] It's hard, it's hard. All those, for bi- bi-cultural couple. And also bi-, it, it,... our denomination is not a problem for both of us. And she's willing because I, she's very nice. Willing if I'm the pastor, it will be in a Lutheran and I, I don't care, too if it will be an in Episcopal, Episcopal because we're hoping to have children so, an Episcopal baptism and stuff like that. It doesn't matter. I'm glad that it's not a big issue for us. For us.

[We got off topic for a bit and started talking about what it means to come from an Evangelical background and be gay. At this point we're talking about a friend of mine.]

Yeah, and so a lot of things you were saying resonated a lot with me. Because she's also from an evangelical fundamentalist family. Her family loves and accepts her girlfriend, but they very much see her as her best friend, you know? They don't want to see them as a couple, so they put it in a context they can understand. They invite her to all the family events, Thanksgiving, yeah... it's what they can process it as.

She's also from a huge family, where both her parents have so many siblings.

Okay, oh my God. [laughs]

So, she's not Asian, but... the Midwest and Asia are maybe more similar than we realize! [laughs]

So I can fit in to the Midwest, right now? [laughs]

But also probably because of the evangelical, umm, theology as well, you know? Is she? Um, What kind of evangelical is this? Is she Pentecostal?

No, no, uh... I think... mostly small town church that's just one church kind of thing. I think it might be technically Baptist?

But it's amazing how she was able to actually go through this process personally.

Yeah, I mean, a lot of things I can see her process that I, kind of parallel to that...

Did she go through the... crying to God and say "Why did you make me like this?"

Yeah, yeah.

Yeah, that's the first, the first reaction. Of, of, someone who is raised in a... yeah...

I remember when I was a teenager. I'm a very active youth leader. And I'm sorry I'm going to be a little bit boastful. I was very popular too in the youth group. So the most handsome guys he was my boyfriend. And... I remembered, my cousin who is very effeminate confided to me that he has a big crush to my boyfriend! And... and he said that, he said that, "I think I'm gay." That was the time he was... and we were sixteen, you know? And... and he's probably fifteen, you know? And I feel bad for for him and I was just saying, "What are you going to do now?" So eventually he told his, his dad, he told his past-, our pastor. And he was actually, and this is the saddest part. He was kind of almost exorcised. His dad beat him almost, kind of, to death, you know? And... and... the pastor kind of gave him this exorcism prayer over whatever... and I felt so bad! So she, he left the church, and when... now, aside from our problem of the he or she because we don't have that pronoun of... gender pronoun

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third person... um... he also became she. So now I'm referring her as she. And he ran away, left and became a famous dancer in Japan. Came back, he's a woman, you know? And now she's, she's actually accepted because she supports the family. In many ways. But... you, so you could imagine how, he, and he's again, this patriarchal system, cultural that we have, it's different if the gay man is a man, it's worse for a woman to be gay. We're kind of, our stories are not being told because we're not that important. But at the same time it's also worse because you already the dirt and you become more dirt, you know what I mean? You don't have any value and then you become less, no, or zero, negative even in the values in the value of who you are. And... and so... I was so afraid that will happen to me. And for someone who is trusted leader in a community, so how am I going to do that? And then I do have a lot of suitors among my, youth group, so... as a young woman, you know, I cried to God, "Why? Why God made me like that? Or why she made me like that?" Which I'm sure I did not during that time! You know, that was the question, you know? The thing is, and this is what I told my sister and I think it's important that... This is at least for me a spiritual experience, not in a context of a ritual, not in the context of a community, but... in my conversation with my sister. Umm... my sister is my best friend. I came out to her before I fly here in California when I was in Chicago, the first time that Carol and I were going to meet. And I... I wrote to her and I was, before I left for Tanzania, because the week before I was going to Tanzania and told her that I'm gay. And my niece, her daughter, "Oh I wasn't able to open, I cannot, we don't have any internet access," so I found out when I arrived that she has not read my letter. Can you imagine that? So I'm on my way to the airport I was crying and telling her, she said to me "Is it that the problem, that because you came to America?" I was like "No! No that's not true!" And she had another attempt, she said... "Is

that the reason why you became a pastor? You know?” And I said “No!” And so I told her, you know what? You probably, okay, I experienced asking God why I’m like this, but you know? I’ve never experienced rejection. In all of my prayers. And I do not know how to express this to you. I only felt love by God. Every time I actually blamed God for being me. And she, and after that, she never asked me any question again. So I said, in my own relationship with God, with the same God you are praying for, and you believe in, you are praying to and you believe in. It was only love. I only felt grace and love. Not even forgiveness. There’s no forgiveness. There’s no sin to forgive in this area of my life. And I only felt grace and loved. And she never asked me again. So, that, I think that is the most important spiritual experience. And I was only able to, to verbalize it when I was telling my sister, umm... why is it that I am still a pastor. I am a Christian. And I am gay. So, I... that I think that is the most important one. And it’s not in the company of the community but it’s the company of the one of the most important people in my life. And I always tell this, I always tell this story to many people who are going through the process. And I ask them, you know, what is that, what kind of relationship do you have with God? Who is this God you are talking to in your deepest sadness or deepest joy, being who you are? And I asked that to my niece, and she said, “We’re okay, too. We’re okay, too.” So...

[Her partner walks in to the café and joins our conversation. From here until the end I label who is speaking in order to differentiate between Maria and Carol’s voices.]

I had one question for you actually... that, um, I’m curious, after emailing... after emailing a bunch of people, almost everyone I heard from was men. I only heard back from men. And I emailed all those different listservs and had people email all these different things to me. And I heard back from twelve men and no women at all. And that’s why, umm, I emailed some of the men saying “Do you know any women?”

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[laughs] And that's how I got your name through Joseph and Ryan. I couldn't figure out if that was just a coincidence that only men emailed me or if there was something else there... do you think.... I don't want to assume anything, but I was curious... was it that that's who has more of a voice in conversations so that's why they are responding to me more? Or like...

Maria: Here in the area? If you don't mind, can you tell me some names?

I can't give names, I'm sorry, I don't feel comfortable.

Maria: Because probably I know them and I can ask, I can tell you why probably. No, I understand that, no, no no.

I emailed listservs not saying "I need men." I don't know if how I asked the question made it seem like I wanted men?

Maria: Ohhh!

I had no idea why really. I didn't know if you had seen that trend in other Asian LGBT stuff...

Maria: Umm... oh... I think one of the reasons in, in terms of Asian... I mean, even in church, in church, scenario, in MCC it's predominantly men. I think there's still the patriarchal system. We live in that. Umm... the second, scenario, I do not know why...

Carol: Can I ask which listservs you...?

A lot of different Asian queer groups I could find... I'm trying to even remember... All the different resource websites that has listservs... Asian American LGBT groups... Umm also, like Queer Asian Spirit which is a bigger national one that Patrick Cheng does? And the NRJ one... Umm... different things like that kind of. So things that, they

weren't, I didn't email any specifically male groups, I think I emailed some female groups and didn't get a response...

Maria: That's so, for that, that is the one, and the second as I've said, we're queer women of color already, and some of us are in the churches so it's harder for us, you know, uh, so that's what I understand. I know some, Asian, in fact, Filipino, lesbian pastors that I met in church in, but I've never seen her also friendly... But there are only few of us.

What's interesting is that all the women I'm interviewing are leaders in some way. In religious communities... So it's interesting that the men are almost all lay people. I didn't know if it was all coincidence or if there was something significant about that.

Maria: We are in a position of power already, in our, so we have a little bit more, umm... courage to do it. Uh, that's why. And, what did they... And I would say that the women that I'm, Asian women that I know of, the lay, you know, they're afraid to come out still. Especially if they are young, young, young people.

Carol: I was just thinking... So, you, you're looking to connect with people who are active in Christian groups?

No, just in general in religious communities?

Carol: In religious groups? It might be that women who are, identify as lesbian or queer and are still involved in religious groups are not out in their religious context. Unless like you're a leader and you've already decided that you're going to be out. For some reason, I mean I'm just thinking, this is not... in the context of, umm, you know, multi-cultural context, mostly white, but the Dignity Catholic group in a lot of places is almost all men. The women either say well to hell with this because patriarchy, why replicate it, or, umm, they find a more congenial space for themselves. So I don't know if maybe some of the religious groups

you've been trying to contact are kind of replicating that, you know, they tend to be all men, and not women in them. I don't know who's on the listservs you've been looking at.

That's a good point.

Maria: So I think it's, you know, coupled with that, maybe it's the places you're looking, and second that we are in a position of power now, and our, we are more, we tend to actually take, the, the, the responsibility to be role models, so if we cannot tell our story how could other people, young people, who we are encouraging to tell their story be able to tell their stories too. Umm... yeah... and that's for me, it's harder for us to invite them as well. I'm having within my community, they get excited. "Really? We can do that we can be who we are?" They cannot believe that! So... they are more... they are more careful. And... yeah. Because they are not out out yet. This is very important. Yeah.

Well in the future if you, I'll look into, I have the first book of Patrick Cheng but this is about, uh, spiritual experience, I'll look into it. And I hope in the future if I can read your report!

Yeah, I can send it to you if you like when I'm done.

Maria: Yeah, yeah. I'm interested. Because I'm telling you about how, how I would like to... really support this young people who are going though, umm, same journey that I did, but I did it in my thirties. [laughs] Well thank you very much!

Thank you so much!

Maria: Enjoy!

Sue

[removed to protect her privacy], CA
November 21, 2012

Sue and I spoke together under many layers of confidentiality. I got in contact with her through another person who I was planning on interviewing. Parts of this interview were hard to hear because of noise from another room nearby. Items in brackets reflect my effort to conceal her identity.*

Names with an asterisk have been changed to protect privacy.

So I wanted to ask first... how did you hear about this project? It was because of...

[another interviewee]?

Yeah, because I'm actually... I start here... with my first degree here. But I also do the certificate program. On... religion and sexuality. Which is, umm, offered by the *[school program]*. So I think since... since the time I start to study here, I mostly deal with the issue about... umm... yeah, homosexuality or queer issues and also... I also do, do quite some work about feminist. So... so most of the time if we, I, deal with sexuality issues, it's... quite about a... a feminist perspective. But, also I link to the queer issues. And also because I do a lot of, uh... postcolonial critique. So that's why I also go back for... Christianity... to... um... my own cultural context, and cultural resources.

Cool.

Do you know... Dr. Kwok Pui-Lan? She came to my school to give a lecture and that's also how I began...

Actually, I also know Patrick. This whole circle is very small. [laughs] Yeah, so... I know... I know... Pui-Lan and Patrick... and all these people... Elizabeth...

And so...

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My program is also the same, on this track. I am now in a program so I... I deal with both Christian tradition, my... my... cultural traditions. Yeah. And... try to use both post-colonial and queer critique on both tradition.

What... what religion do you identify as?

Catholic.

Catholic.

Yeah.

Also, what... um... you said you're from [country] originally?

No, no, [country].

Oh, I'm sorry!

Yeah, actually... one thing I want to know is... because in this field there's only... like... less than, we can, I can count... less than maybe five woman who are in similar programs doing this kind of work. It's hard to... you need to do a lot of work to keep... my identity confidential. I think.

Yeah, um... and that's something I want to ask you then. How do you... what would you like me to... how should I identify you? I don't want to identify you... what...

If you don't mention the school, where is the school, just briefly in United States. I think it's easier. Because nobody like me in [city], it's just too easy to, to know. And if you, if I say [country] it's even easier. You can say... just... um... an Asian student. Maybe...

Just say an Asian student studying in the United States.

Yeah, yeah... But... Yeah... Even if I mention from, umm... if you don't mention from [country] it's fine. But if you... say... umm... because if I mention about [religion] it's just

easy. That means it, it definitely either from *[lists several countries]*. So I just say... it's okay if you don't mention my school and just say I'm an Asian student. Is it possible?

Oh yeah, definitely. And if you want, here, why don't I... I want to email this to you before I submit it so I can make sure it's okay whatever I write. I don't want to mess up anyone's identity at all.

Yeah, yeah.

So... um... can I ask what terms you use to identify your gender...?

Umm...woman. Yeah.

And what about, may I ask, what term you use to identify your sexual orientation?

Here I just identify myself queer.

Great. Um... so are you involved, currently, in a religious community?

Yeah. I actually... yeah, the more I say the easier it is to identify to me...

I will send you all I write up so you can make sure it's okay.

Yeah... I'm still a Roman Catholic, but I go to a... um... kind of like a Woman Church.

Woman Church but it's a small... um... gathering for... our worship. At, um... At our member's home. So it's not in a regular church or a property. Um... basically, a whole bunch of, you know, Catholic feminists. And um... this... that is the basic religious community.

And... and... another, I used to, but things I seldom... I used to join the... um... the *[queer Asian American religious organization]* here. Because that is a... monthly *[gathering]*.

Um... I... I think after my... yeah... I think they have been moving quite a bit. And then I...

I... seldom join these days. Yeah, yeah, yeah. But I am still like a member of the list. And...

once in a while I go to mass.

Can you talk a little bit more about the woman's church and what kind... what kinds of things you do together?

Oh! Because of women... women are excluded from ordination in Catholic traditions. It was started over ten years ago by this group of Catholic feminists who wanted to... um... counter the patri- patriarchy practice in the church. So they designed, uh... that there should be more... umm... horizontal leadership to build such kind of community. And... also nobody preside the, nobody preside the mass, everybody participate in the liturgy to build... using a lot of body language instead of word, and nobody give sermon but we all give [unable to decipher word] on the gospel and the Bible and we share... and then we actually break the bread together. Rather than having a priest to consecrate bread. Yeah... and then we did the fellowship time after the worship.

Does it mostly follow the... the path of a traditional mass? Or is it a different style?

Close to... but not, because the mass you have the... first part, umm... is... the very first part is kind of like confessional of your sin. We wouldn't do that. But, umm... we still do the readings and then... the... and then the... the Eucharist part. So it's mainly reading and Eucharist part. So... close... yeah.

Cool.

And then... very... if the, even the Eucharistic prayer in the traditional church, they have a tradition you have to read and follow all this stuff. But in this because we want to invite participation, so... it's all improvisation. For the Eucharistic prayer by remembering what was... what happened in the last supper... so...

So did the, have you guys made your own prayer book that you use?

No, no. But they try to use the... um... Bible with inclusive language.

That sounds like a great community...

Yeah.

Um, so how did you... how did you find the...

Oh! Actually... So I took [*professor*]'s class and she introduce to some of the resources about... umm... woman churches. So that's why... That was the time I was look for a different type of church. I know I want to find more feminist community. So that's how she connect, help me to connect with this kind of community.

What... what do you feel like you gain from being part of the woman's church?

Umm... I think they really, uh... are critical of the... patriarchal and heterosexist tradition of the church. And... that helps a lot in... um... living, really, a different... uh... understanding about what a church community should be. What kind of leadership, yeah. So... And then we do a lot of our own reflection instead of sermons. It, on, on one level that means we don't continue to practice hierarchical leadership, and at the same time, the reflection is very personal, it really help, the real personal transformation. Yeah.

Yeah.

What, are there any challenges you feel that you have in participating in the church?

Yeah. Uh... still mostly this is a very white community. And... it's very complicated. I think the Asian churches, or Asian community or Asian American communities... I mean, Catholic community, are still very much... stuck in the... the colonial bias, or... inherit a lot of the colonial heritage. So... that's why I think they would like to adhere to the... very mainstream church culture or tradition. Some people who are more progressive they probably cannot go, or won't go. Yeah. So... it's like me... it's difficult to go.

Is your family still in [*your home country*] or are some of them here?

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Yeah, they are all in *[my home country]*.

May I ask... do they know that you're queer?

Oh no. Because, umm, I, I come, only after I come here I continue to explore up on my sexuality... queer... homosexuality... these kind of issues. So I haven't talked with them at all. But... um... because of all, I've been here *[many]* years now. And all these days thinking about... exploring all this stuff. So... so... only very close circles of friends know. Yeah.

Um... Oh! Are they also Catholic or do they come from a different tradition?

You mean, my family is not Catholic. Although...some of my siblings or cousin they are protestant Christian. Umm...

Then how did you come to be Catholic?

Oh, I study in Catholic schools. Yeah. In *[my home country]*. Umm... my, some of my friends here, they are Catholic, some are not. They are just Protestant Christian. Yeah. So... mixed, I should say.

Umm... have... um... so the woman's church is not a specifically, not specifically for gay women, it's for all women in general?

Umm...

The woman's church is not specifically for lesbians, it's for all kinds of women?

Yeah.

Sorry, I'm trying to put things in context in my head... what do you think has been one of your, I guess, fulfilling, spiritual experiences that you've... had... I know it's a big broad question, but...

Hmm... actually, I have restarted, with my Catholic background, even before I come here, I have known different kind of prayer practice, meditation practice. So...these days I do a lot

more... like a Zen... I don't know, Buddhist, kind of mediation. Um... I think back home my spiritual reality is very much affirming the custom. Yeah... and... because of more mainstream understanding about... a person's worth, or... umm... it's very much what you, everything dependent on God. The mainstream understanding. The relationship is very hierarchical between God and man. It's vertical.

Pardon?

They say vertical. But it's very hierarchical. But... I think... unless you know more the feminist understanding. Otherwise it's very hierarchical. And I think in other religious tradition... the East Asian...religious traditions have, have, very different understanding about transcendent, about spirituality... about the... the... the kind of person, in some ways, it's much more than the mainstream. That's why I have... because personally I don't... I don't feel easy to go back to the... the hierarchical church. And mass is just so slow for me... that's... Zen meditation becomes one of the most important spiritual practices for me...

Are there any...

And then the Woman Church, yeah.

Are there any specific traditions the meditation comes out of that you practice? Or is it out of your own devising?

Ohh! This is very common, Zen... or Buddhist practice. Yeah.

Of sitting mediation?

Mhm. Mhm.

If you could imagine your... like your ideal religious community or religious practice... can you think of what that would be? Totally be like, head in the sky, it doesn't have to be grounded in what exists now... Like maybe one that would fulfill all of the needs

you're looking for. Do you think there could be one community that could fill all of the different, all the different things you want from your own spiritual...

Maybe not. It's hard to tell. This... before I came here, actually, I had the... I have been very much, um, active in... uh... I have a lot of Protestant friends who also have a lot of, uh... dissatisfaction with the very normative church ministry or practice. So we have some kind of church together. Some kind of gather, let's call it. Not one to copy the church model... and then we have a lot of, umm... basically, women, most of them are lesbian women, but there's a few straight women. It was a good gathering to talk about different spiritual, about different understanding of theology. But it's not easy to become a church just because we didn't like [unable to decipher word]. Then, I came here... and then the gathering stop for a while. But, last summer, this summer, I went home and then one of my friend who started this gathering she eventually was able... because she work in a Christian organization, she start... she use her work capacity to start a, another church. Which is doing all the progressive ministry that... really have been marginalized from mainstream churches. So... this... and it also happens that... I think she is almost like the first ordained women who openly claim to be a lesbian. So she become... the... pastor for this church. And... those ministries is very important, like... they have ministry for sex workers. Ministry for... umm... doing... about social justice, so they deal with a lot of both human rights issues, democracy, political democracy. And um... also about environmental justice.

And is that happening here or someplace else?

No, back home.

Oh, okay.

This summer. I went to such a church.

So...yeah. This, uh, ministry which have been. I think they also try to do a ministry for, uh, queer women or lesbian women. So this is, this are all marginalized stuff that you won't easily find in the regular church. So they can be possibly the queerism I do.

Your queer community?

Yeah, but it may be... but it may be a very small community. You cannot expect to be a lot. Because you have to almost agree on all this stuff. There may be some people who'd like to do that, yeah. But it will be maybe just a small community.

And when you imagine your ideal community is it one that is based in Catholic tradition or do you think of one that's more multi-denominational?

Yeah... I wish but I don't totally... think it's necessary. I think... the past ten or fifteen years I kind of... appreciate more other... the... the... the... richness of... so many religious tradition in Asia. And it really help me to see different things and learn from each other. So I don't necessarily think it has to be. It's fine, it's good to have a community that...is mostly Catholic. If you want to work within a Catholic setting. But to become a church community or religious community... you can be something more... go beyond a particular faith tradition, I think. I think is very helpful to go beyond, yeah.

Umm... I know you said you don't necessarily go to the *[LGBT Asian discussion group]* anymore, but can you talk a little about what the *[LGBT Asian discussion group]* were, what happens with them...

I think... there's a time when they have been moved to the city. Then I haven't really joined any more. And these days because I think it's... the come, once they come back Sunday late

evening. It's just not, not a good time for me as a student... Sunday evening. Without a car... so... I think not a good time. It used to be on this campus. So it's not difficult.

But can you maybe describe a little bit of... what... like... what you liked about it or what you didn't like about it or kind of what happened at it?

I think in the *[LGBT Asian discussion group]*... people are able to share a lot of their... personal reflection... or perspective... and not... it's not about discussing about right or wrong. So... it's more to honor the reality... of each person. Yeah. So taking controversial issues, but people kind of just listen.

And everyone who goes to them is, umm... queer and, and Asian or Asian American?

Yeah... queer, Asian... and Asian American. And I think some kind of, not necessarily, maybe once in a while maybe an ally, but I am not so sure. Most, but maybe it's all...

Cool. Umm...

Are you able to get in touch with the *[LGBT Asian organization]* people?

Umm... I have a little bit, not so much. Not everyone responds to my emails... Umm... it's a busy time of year...

What other questions... umm... do you... when you're here are you part of an Asian community or are you mostly part of *[your school's]* community?

Yeah... mostly part of *[my school's]* community, but the community here they used to have a center to do a lot of... umm... ministry with umm... religion and race, so... Asian American... religious community... or Asian American community. So that is part of it. And then *[an LGBT Asian Organization]* used to be part of the... yeah... Umm... ministry. So... but the center has closed. And then also *[the LGBT Asian Organization]* moved out.

Yeah. Hmm...

Well here. Let me show you my questions, because I'm trying to... Right now I guess to be honest I'm trying to figure out what questions to talk about. What other things... are there other things that you think are relevant to talk about? What else is relevant to our conversation, because...

Maybe I should explain a little bit because... what I'm trying to get from the interviews is... I mean, I'm doing like ten interviews so that's not enough to get, that's not like, uhh, looking at the whole field or getting all the answers. I guess I'm just trying to get a diverse sampling of different experiences. Umm... kind of to understand what it means to be queer and Asian or Asian American and... what people want from their religious traditions. So what people need to feel that they can be fully themselves in their tradition. Because that's something I've heard from a bunch of people. That they want to be part of their community where they can be queer, they can be Asian, and they can be their religious tradition, too.

I... let me see... Yeah... I think in... in... either... Both the Catholic feminist group and even the *[LGBT Asian Organization]* group. It is a space that people can use their experience to reflect on their own, um, religious or cultural tradition that is important. Because the... I think the... the... heterosexism is still very much umm... in the mainstream church practice of ministry and theology and all this kind of stuff. So... to have a space that people can really talk about their experience and also to reflect on... the... reflect critically on our own... faith tradition is very important. Yeah. And I... And... because the queer experience is so... marginalized. So to have a space to have a self... mutual... mutual support. And also to really, also reflect on our own experience. We cannot say all queer experience is fine. But to also affirm what part of the queer... being queer or the experience is important. And how

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to... to... use the experience to... go back to retrieve the more... empowering... element of the... of our own faith tradition or cultural tradition is very important. Because theologian can do something. But like... what I do with theology... or religious studies... we actually. There is so... there is so limited stuff you can retrieve from the history. Even though you have a lot in history. But there is no way to ignore, no reason to ignore contemporary experience. How to understand sexuality because the whole understanding has to be changing. So to be able to engage both contemporary experience in... and, uh, your own faith tradition. I think both theologian and the queer community has a lot of collaboration to work together. Because it's hard, it's not possible to do a theology with just from the tradition. Then it's a, it also depends a lot on the context and experience to help to reflect on the... yeah. The... the... the... faith tradition. Yeah.

That makes sense.

Yeah, yeah. Yeah I think we have covered most of... the interesting thing for me is... for Asian American it can be... like a... an exclusion from both their identity as a Christian and also as Asian. Because I think both... have the mainstream understanding, or mainstream ideology is still very heterosexist. Although here I think, in the state, the past several decades people have make a lot of... efforts to really retrieve all the... um... Christian, retrieve from Christian tradition all the empowering of... resources... for the queer community. So you can see from history or even... with theology, or even biblical studies there is new understanding. To... to umm... to be able to, affirm the community of queer people. But for Asian there is still the [unable to decipher word] which is very difficult what I see from... but it's getting more research, at least, from my own cultural context. That... but these part of the issue is more complicated. Because... I have seen my, um, Asian American friends, it's very

difficult to retrieve the cultural world, because there're limited resources to understand the cultural stuff. And most of the time what it means to be Asian American is more just a very stereotypical understanding about a particular Asian cultural tradition. So... can be so... just so stereotypical. Because I think... there's a reason to that is... because of, um, the... umm... response to racism they have to, they want to become... um... much more Asian than the Asian. In Asia. [laughs] So... that is the... there is kind of this... this fixation is very much a result of racism. But they may not totally understand it. So that's why it make the, the identity is very rigid. It allow, it doesn't allow much fluidity or whatever an Asian. Uh... uh... amongst a specific, a particular ethnic identity. So that means for queer people to be really different of the mainstream, of, um, the... the understanding of the particular, uh... ethnic identity. Is very difficult. And even the, the resources to understand their own... ethnic tradition is even less in this country. In a foreign country. So to retrieve the resources for them is very limited. Yeah. Although maybe it's still kind of a little bit more if I'm *[culture]* because it's this long tradition, everything has quite some background and then, there's more scholarship. But there has been a little bit more work in the past you will see people have tried to retrieve. Oh! Okay, same-sex relation or queer, or they have a different understanding about same-sex love in different cultural context. So it is not necessarily a Western thing. It's important as the first step, okay people become gay. It's not about... losing ethnic identity or just want to be...gay in the American culture. But, um, this is not enough in some senses. Because if you go back to a particular faith tradition, there is, there should be more critical understanding about a certain queer practice or certain same-sex relationship. Is that all of find is not because it happens in the history everything is fine, but how to understand. So there are very important resources, actually, for... Asian Americans. Because... yeah. Of

course, these are more marginalized. But there are some, I can say, in the past decade we are getting a little bit, people are trying to dig into it.

Umm... can, you said that you're doing your [degree] now, what's your focus... what's your in...

Oh, umm, because I'm not doing the traditional, uh... area like, theology or biblical studies or Christian spirituality, um, my area is called [area of study].

Yeah, and actually I do a lot of, um, the methodology. I use a lot of cultural studies. So some people can put cultural studies with Catholicism or cultural studies with, yeah.

Cool. Umm... have you seen... er... maybe this is an obvious question, but... how has that... how has studying these affected your... your faith journey?

Umm... yeah... I think a lot of the... insight from cultural studies, like feminist critique, or post-colonial critique, or queer critique... is very helpful to see some of the worth in... in the faith. In the particular faith tradition or even in my own cultural tradition. So... because, like, in Catholicism, there's so many... kind of, like, just something, just passed down ages, they think that way. There's not necessarily right, or relevant. At this time. So... I think the conversation, or this dialogue with other disciplines like in cultural studies, how to reflect critically, more about the laws or traditions. And... in order to reflect on the cultural tradition, in fact, some of the critical theories, that's really helpful to look into that.

Because... you cannot say because this is tradition, this is a cultural heritage I think it's fine.

Are there other questions that I haven't asked that you think are important to address?

Oh, okay, yeah. Actually I want, why I want to mention, the, the two difficulty being, for Asian or Asian American, both those... I mean, Asian Christian or Asian American Christian is the colonialism or racism that they have to deal with in their identity. There is so many

different layers. And... all, most of them even people talk about... Asian theology... it looks fine to see, oh, all the good parts of Christianity... all the good part of Asian tradition... but... really it's more complicated, and you, when you look particularly at the queer experience... it can, it can be very marginalized from all different [unable to decipher word] you can think of, yeah. But... but I don't think you can just leave the tradition and go to another... it almost have to be with all these different dimension to really... critically retrieve stuff from your cultural tradition. And also to... to... also critically reflect on contemporary experience. Yeah. [unable to decipher word] I think a lot of the cross cultural or... interfaith perspective you know to see, understand sexuality, I think, in a much, in a very helpful way. Yeah, to see... there is no one understanding, single understanding about sexuality. Or eroticism. And also to understand the cultural context important to [unable to decipher word]...

Umm... do you... what do you think could be done to... I mean what exactly gain from an interfaith context to look at how different, to see that there's not just one understanding of sexuality and that sort of thing. Do you have any other suggestions of what could be done to help people, um, combine, no not combine, I guess, uh, find... like... I guess find ways to connect with different parts of their identity? Or to like, I guess, bridge the gap I guess is a better way to say it, or like bridge the connections there. So they can be whole.

I think people have been doing, like me, Patrick, we all have, we all trying to wrestle with all the different layers. So... you cannot, like, oh... it's hard to come out in ethnic Asian, um... cultural communities so you just go to white churches. That's not going to help you! Even if you go to queer, um, white gay church. It's difficult to... I don't think people have to, people

can, can go. But if they want address the other layer, it would be, it's not always easy. Unless the church is really, have the resources to, to deal with it. But most church won't. So it's just a very rare place to find all the resources. Although, although people like me in academia, we, we have a little bit better resources to retrieve from different traditions to deal with the issues. Yeah. I think ordinary people is not easy. Yeah. And also, how... I don't know how well the Asian community connect with the... their own ethnic, umm... group back in Asia. But some of this resources is helpful to know. But I, I doubt, although some of them may come [unable to decipher word], some of them may not have families or relatives back there. Or even know the language. So this is difficult in some way. Yeah. I think it depends on which ethnic group. Some are more, they have resources or documents. Yeah. So at the same, so that's why I think even though you make the best effort, efforts to retrieve what in your cultural tradition, sometimes you may not even find some. Then, I would say to rely on contemporary experiences also important. Yeah. Because there's just some, for some groups, just too limited resources. If you don't have history, if you don't have any historical backup. If your, if your ethnic groups happens to be more, oral tradition in passing down... the tradition, then, there is very [unable to decipher word].

What things specifically do you think people should be... you were talking about how it's important to understand your ethnic background, understand all... looking into your traditions. But... but what' specifically... Are you... what parts of someone's, like, home tradition, original tradition they should be looking back to? Like the religious part, aspect? Maybe you can't separate religion and culture...

I think it's both. Because people usually, you know, they, they will try to go back to find all this genealogy. More the queer genealogy. So... this kind of connection.

Oh, you mean like looking at, oh, like a thousand years ago there were same-sex couples kind of thing?

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah. That is the basic. People can do it. But I would, as an acade-, you know, as a... scholar, would push it a step further to ask... even though it happens in, in, in the past, under what cultural context? How... how... how... how were all this kind of relationship, or sexuality was understood? For example, most of the... same-sex relationship with... we have no problem with. Ancient China, it's about the privilege of, of male elite men. Like... for [unable to decipher word] or government officers. Of course they have the privilege to... have relationship with both men and women. So this, um, to understand it in a more critical way. And, you know, there's always power differentials in this. Do we, do we need to copy this? The whole critical reflection. So that's the thing that need to... reflect on, more deeply. It's not just about retrieving historical experience. Yeah.

That makes sense.

And especially, you know, even with women's experiences, even more difficult to find historical record. Even like in *[my country]*, you have long history but... lot of the historical record of discussion about *[this religion]* is not done by women, they were done by men. So although there are scholars who do woman history there are very limited resources. Then... how do you find the genealogy. It's very... very limited. Almost, you can say almost none. That's why I say why to understand contemporary experience also important not to rely on contemporary experience. Although you cannot really find so called the past. But it doesn't mean that you, you don't need to learn about, the limited resources, then you don't need to think about the whole issue, about contemporary experience.

Something Pui-Lan also talked about was the lack of language, the literal lack of language to talk about these issues with.

Yeah...

Is that something you think about? That comes up with you also? Or...

I think in the... past people don't talk queer. I mean in my own cultural tradition. They know... they don't necessarily have to figure out a sexual identity. What is important is... about that kind of uh... just appreciate the eroticism itself, the love and the passion itself.

So... they don't need, they not, they do not necessarily identify as queer or

blahblahblahblah. But also I think that another layer is queer is very new. Hard to

connect in the past. Is this or is gaps. It's one thing. But another thing is, um... I... Yeah,

how do you want to pose it, to talk about the language? What would be appropriate?

Because... so to talk about, um, sexual stories, um... I guess also... okay. You don't want to rely on religious language. Only. But even your cultural tradition you can talk about it...

but... I think... people's experience very different to talk about all this stuff. Very different from the mainstream religious language. Then... they articulate or understand all this stuff.

And also not all... not all culture talk about things directly. Like... in *[my country's]* culture

when they talk about passion and love. What is important is not about direct... concrete

description of experience. The best expression is something very poetic. Use imagery. So...

Yeah.

Poets do it very well. Ordinary people difficult or half half. And I'm not living in the ancient time. Some of the, the, quote we can use, people use. So I think, yeah, it's very interesting thing how to talk about it, too. Yeah. But I think people... still continue to do it. Because to describe the relationship. Or what actually, how people live their life. So, like, in *[another*

country] there's a... I don't know, I know more about [*my country*]... they encourage, um, lesbian woman to write novel, fictions, short story. To read to understand that kind of woman relationship or same-sex eroticism in that context to create something from their own experience. In... in [*my country*] you can see females in movies actually how... how people live their life. But I don't know I think that becomes attacks how people living experience. It attacks the language. It's... very subtle. It's more common people language if you use the everyday life to understand. It's very difficult to talk, but, um, yeah. As a academic you rely on certain thing. But contemporary experience or ordinary voices they may use a very different kind of language to talk.

Have there been new words that have emerged, do you think, to.... Like the word queer is a word that people have reclaimed and now they're using it as their...

For the next few minutes we discussed the specific identity terms used in her country. She explained that certain words have been reclaimed, but also that some people do identify as "gay," as well. She also explained that the term was mostly used in her country, and that she had not heard it used much in the United States, even among immigrants. An important part of the etymology of the term is that it is non-gendered and fluid, which is why many people are comfortable with using it.

Umm... are there... are there other things that you're thinking about that we should... that would be important for me to know or even other things you think I should look into?

Yeah I think the last question is interesting. Between ordinary people's life and the language and how... sex, sexual imagery is so poetic. Unless you really, really well trained and really well versed in... [*my country's*] literature... and all this... poem. Yeah... poetic stuff,

literary stuff. I don't know how you can talk things in a very poetic nice way. You know? Somehow... it's... it becomes, most of them people talk about sexual imagery in dirty jokes. But you don't want to be just dirty jokes. How to create something different. I think people are trying to do it in themes. Just to talk about their experience. Yeah... But to talk about the eroticism is more... not... an easily described by words. So if you see movies more imagery. They help people to connect, rather than, you know... how to say [unable to decipher word], what is more about looking at the imagery.

Well thank you so much for talking to me!

Oh, you're welcome. After you finish with this project are you... because you need to write a whole report, are you going to try to present in some way, or... publish the...

Well, at my school all the seniors do this Senior Independent Study that you work on for the whole year. So mine's for that. So I'm not exactly sure where the projects going to... how... where the endpoint is going to be.

If at a certain point you really have something written. Yeah, I would like to... yeah I would like to... if you want to share your endpoint I would like, it would be interesting to know and see.

Yeah I definitely would.

Yeah that would be good. Thank you.

Yeah, thank you so much!

Appendix B- Copy of Participant Consent Form

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY COLLEGE OF WOOSTER

Religion and Queer Asian Pacific Americans Study

Principal Investigator: Celeste Tannenbaum, Department of Religious Studies,
ctannenbaum13@wooster.edu

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Charles L. Kammer III, Chair of Religious Studies Department,
ckammer@wooster.edu

Purpose

You are being asked to participate in a research study. I hope to learn about the role of religion in the lives of Queer Asian Pacific Americans. I specifically want to learn about how religion is being used as a tool of empowerment by and with Queer Asian Pacific Americans. The data will be used for a senior independent study at The College of Wooster. It is also possible that the summarized data could be published at a later date.

Procedures

If you decide to volunteer, you will be asked to answer a number of questions about yourself and your thoughts and feelings on religion in your life and community. Interviews will be conducted once only, but you may be contacted at a later date if you give additional consent at the bottom of this form.

Risks

There are no significant risks to you for your participation in this study.

Benefits

There are no direct benefits to you for your participation in this study. However, if you wish to be provided with a copy of this research when it is completed, I will provide you with a copy.

Confidentiality

Any information you give will be held confidential. Your name or any identifying characteristics will not be used in any way. This interview will be recorded, but all tapes will be held securely and destroyed once the research has been completed.

Costs/Compensation

There is no cost to you beyond the time and effort required to complete the procedure described above. There will be no compensation for your participation.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

You may refuse to participate in the study. If you decide to participate, you may change your mind about being interviewed and leave at any time.

Questions

If you have any questions, please ask me at any time during the interview. If you have additional questions later, you can email me at ctannenbaum13@wooster.edu.

Consent

Your signature below will indicate that you have decided to volunteer as a research subject and that you have read and understand the information provided above. Your signature attests that you are at least 18 years of age or older.

clxxx

Signature of participant _____ Date _____

I agree to be contacted at a later date with follow up questions from the researcher: yes ___ no ___

If yes, here is the method by which I would like to be contacted: _____

You will be provided with a copy of this form upon request.