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“I Am Yellow and Beautiful”: Reflections on Queer Asian Spirituality and Gay Male Cyberculture

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Much theological reflection has occurred in recent years on the intersections of sexuality and cyberspace, including the online spiritual experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (“LGBT” or “queer”) people. This is not surprising, given how much of our social interactions are taking place online, whether through Facebook, Twitter, Skype, instant messaging, or virtual worlds such as Second Life. For example, a recent issue of the journal *Theology and Sexuality* included a theological reflection on the positive aspects of cybersex and

cyber-relationships. That article, “Transcendental Relationships?: A Theological Reflection on Cybersex and Cyber-Relationships,” argued that such experiences in cyberspace can lead not only to “sexual desire and sensual pleasure,” but also to the “sensuality and joy of religious experience.”¹ Similarly, a recent anthology, *Queer Spiritual Spaces: Sexuality and Sacred Places*, included a chapter on the various forms of LGBT spiritual practices in the online world.²

One aspect of queer cyberspace that has not been explored in much detail, however, is the negative impact of online racism and exclusion on LGBT people of color. This includes, for example, the blatant racism that exists within gay male cyberculture, which also has a detrimental effect on the spiritual development of LGBT people of color. For example, many of us who self-identify as gay Asian men³ have experienced blatant and widespread rejection in gay male cyberculture because of our race and ethnicity. This can lead to shame and self-hate, which in turn can greatly inhibit our spiritual development.

The widespread existence of racism and exclusion in gay male cyberculture, and the resulting self-hate experienced by many LGBT men of color, including gay Asian men, is not simply a matter of pastoral concern or spiritual growth, however. It is also a *theological* matter.

¹ Stefanie Knauss, “Transcendental Relationships?: A Theological Reflection on Cybersex and Cyber-Relationships,” *Theology and Sexuality* 15.3 (September 2009), 346.

² Kate O’Riordan and Heather White, “Virtual Believers: Queer Spiritual Practice Online,” in *Queer Spiritual Spaces: Sexuality and Sacred Places*, ed. Kath Browne, Sally R. Munt, and Andrew K.T. Yip (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2010).

³ In this article, I use the term “Asian” as an umbrella term that includes Asian Americans, Asian Canadians, Asian Australians, and other men of Asian descent who are in diaspora (i.e., living in areas with populations that are predominantly white or of European descent). Although this article focuses on the gay Asian male experience, I also want to acknowledge the important contributions of Asian lesbian, bisexual, and transgender voices and narratives. See *infra* note 11.

As feminist theologians have argued, beginning with Valerie Saiving's groundbreaking article "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," sin for many marginalized groups is not simply a matter of pride – or loving oneself too much – but it is also a matter of self-hate – or *not loving oneself enough*.⁴ Similarly, womanist theologian Delores Williams has argued that sin for many African-American women takes the form of feelings of "unworthiness" and "depleted self-esteem." According to Williams, it is precisely the "elevating and healing" of Black women's self-esteem that constitutes grace or "salvation" for the African-American community.⁵ That is, the antidote to the sin of self-hate is the grace of self-love and the intentional recovery of one's own sense of self-worth and beauty.

This article will build upon the theological insights of feminist and womanist theologians with respect to the sin of self-hate, and it will explore the ways in which gay male cyberculture inhibits the spiritual development of gay Asian men. To date, there has been little – if any – academic discussion of the theological implications of sexual racism in queer cybercultures.⁶ As such, this article will take the form of a series of theological reflections that explore various aspects of this multidimensional and complex topic. Rather than being the "last word" on this

⁴ For a helpful discussion of sin and feminist theologies, see Kay Carmichael, *Sin and Forgiveness: New Responses in a Changing World* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2003), 63-67.

⁵ See Delores S. Williams, "A Womanist Perspective on Sin," in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 147.

⁶ This article is derived from a panel presentation, "'I am Yellow and Beautiful': Queer Asian Reflections on Gay Male Cyberculture and Theology," that I presented on October 30, 2010, at a panel on "Exploring Gay Male Desire" that was sponsored by the Gay Men and Religion group at the 2010 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Atlanta, Georgia. Another presenter on that panel – Dr. Roger A. Sneed of Furman University – also addressed issues of race, LGBT sexuality, spirituality, and cyberspace in a presentation entitled "Who Is He and What Is He to You?: The Internet, the Down Low, and the Virtual Performance of Black Gay Masculinities."

subject, it is my hope that this article will provoke many additional conversations about the deeply interconnected issues of race, LGBT sexuality, spirituality, and cyberspace.

Part I of this article will trace the ways in which gay Asian men are often excluded and rejected in gay male cyberculture on the basis of our racial and ethnic backgrounds. Part II describes the ways in which this rejection can lead to the sin of self-hate and the inhibition of our spiritual development. Part III will trace the parallels between the rejection of gay Asian men in cyberspace and the exclusion of LGBT Asian voices in both LGBT as well as Asian American theologies. Part IV will examine the ways in which the antidote to the sin of self-hate is the grace of self-love, as expressed by the female narrator of the Song of Songs and womanist theologians. This article concludes with Part V, which describes some ways in which gay Asian men have used cyberspace to facilitate our spiritual development and to discover the grace of self-love.

I. Gay Asian Men, Rejection, and Cyberculture

Gay Asian men frequently experience rejection in cyberspace simply on the basis of our race and ethnicity. For example, recently a 26-year-old gay white man put on his Grindr profile that he was seeking “Friends and (maybe) dates,” but that Asians should leave him alone. (Grindr is a popular iPhone online cruising app for gay men that locates other gay men in one’s immediate vicinity for friendship and, more specifically, sex.) This profile was particularly offensive, however, because it ended with “And Asians, please leave me alone,” which perpetuated the offensive stereotype that Asian Americans can’t differentiate between their “I”s and “r”s.

It was bad enough that this Grindr profile singled out gay Asian men as undesirable social and/or sexual partners. It was even worse that the profile mocked gay Asian men based upon stereotypes of how we talk. As one outraged gay Asian online columnist – who was generally fed up with the “overt anti-Asian sentiment in the gay community” – wrote about the profile, “GET IT? He’s trying to be clever, and by ‘clever,’ I mean ‘a guy trying to win over white and/or Latino twinkies by putting down a WHOLE FUCKING ETHNICITY.’”⁷

Grindr is certainly not the only place in gay male cyberspace in which Asian American men are expressly told that they are not welcome. Recently, *Edge Boston*, a website for the LGBT community in New England, ran a three-part series on anti-Asian prejudice in the gay community. One of the articles observed that phrases like “No fats, no femmes, no Asians” and “not into Asians” are “virtually a mantra in personal ads” on gay cruising and hookup sites Manhunt.net or Gay.com.”⁸ In fact, these anti-Asian phrases are so well known that Alex Mapa, the well-known gay Filipino American comic, entitled one of his shows “No Fats, Femmes, or Asians.”⁹

Unfortunately, these experiences of rejection in cyberspace are all too familiar for those of us who self-identify as gay Asian men. Since the mid-1990s, gay Asian men have written

⁷ See Ernie Hsiung, “Blatant Anti-Asian Racism on Gay Websites Still Exist” (Sept. 6, 2010) on the 8Asians website at <http://www.8asians.com/2010/09/06/blatant-anti-asian-racism-on-gay-websites-still-exists/> (accessed March 31, 2011).

⁸ See Joseph Erbentraut, “Gay Anti-Asian Prejudice Thrives on the Internet” (Sept. 6, 2010) on the Boston Edge website at <http://www.edgeboston.com/index.php?ch=news&sc=&sc2=news&sc3=&id=109887> (accessed March 31, 2011).

⁹ See Jimmy Nguyen, “Gaysians Are Beautiful” (March 3, 2011) on the Advocate.com website at http://www.advocate.com/Society/Commentary/Gaysians_Are_Beautiful_Jimmy_Nguyen/ (accessed March 31, 2011).

extensively about our experiences of rejection from living at the intersections of both sexual and racial marginalization.¹⁰ On the one hand, we experience homophobia from the largely straight Asian American community. On the other hand, we experience racism from the largely white lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. As the gay Asian writer Eric Wat has written, “gay Asian men are run over at the intersection of racism and homophobia.” In other words, because of our sexual and racial marginalization we are “forever left in the middle of the road, unacceptable to those at either side of the street.”¹¹

One recurring theme in the writings of gay Asian men – perhaps arising out of the fact that we are never quite at “home” in either the Asian American or gay community – is a deeply held belief that we are not beautiful. This is often experienced in various social situations by gay Asian men. For example, Eric Law, a gay Asian American Episcopal priest, described his experiences of standing alone in a gay bar after coming out in college: “No one talked to me. No one even looked at me. No one invited me to dance. When another Asian came in, I felt competitive.”¹² Law also felt invisible and unattractive in other contexts, including the gay and lesbian college dances on campus.

¹⁰ Some of these works include Russell Leong, ed., *Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay and Lesbian Experience* (New York: Routledge, 1996); David L. Eng and Alice Y. Hom, eds., *Q&A: Queer in Asian America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998); Song Cho, ed., *Rice: Explorations into Gay Asian Culture and Politics* (Toronto: Queer Press, 1998); Quang Bao and Hanya Yanagihara, eds., *Take Out: Queer Writing from Asian Pacific America* (New York: Asian American Writers’ Workshop, 2000); Gina Masequesmay and Sean Metzger, *Embodying Asian / American Sexualities* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009).

¹¹ Eric C. Wat, “Preserving the Paradox: Stories from a *Gay-Loh*,” in *Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay and Lesbian Experience*, ed. Russell Leong (New York: Routledge, 1996), 79.

¹² Eric H.F. Law, “A Spirituality of Creative Marginality,” in *Que(e)rying Religion: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gary David Comstock and Susan E. Henking (New York: Continuum, 1997), 344.

In a recent op-ed piece in Advocate.com entitled “Gaysians are Beautiful,” Jimmy Nguyen, a gay Asian lawyer and diversity advocate, described experiencing similar feelings of invisibility and ugliness throughout his “entire adult life.” Nguyen asks: “Are Asian men unattractive to much of America’s gay community? Are we ostracized like others with ‘undesirable’ traits? The truth is neither black nor white, but some shade of grey. Yet this much is clear: It’s time for gay men to embrace a more universal vision of beauty, one that appreciates every color of our rainbow.”¹³

Law’s and Nguyen’s experiences of racism and exclusion are magnified in the relatively anonymous world of gay male cyberculture, where people take on pseudonyms, hide behind their computer keyboards and screens, and seek sexual and other forms of self-gratification to the exclusion of other values. Sadly, what is considered to be beautiful and successful in gay male cyberculture almost always revolves around whiteness. Take, for example, *Out Magazine*’s fifth annual list of the “Power 50” in the LGBT community. This list, released in April of 2011, contains no people of Asian descent and only one identifiable person of color (Perez Hilton).¹⁴ The gay Asian sociologist Chong-Suk Han, a professor at Middlebury College, has noted that advertising, news, and other media images on the Internet continually perpetuate the myth that the ideal gay person is a “young, very white” man. As a result, we gay Asian men often feel alienated and believe that we do not really belong in the gay community.¹⁵

¹³ Nguyen, “Gaysians Are Beautiful.”

¹⁴ See “The Fifth Annual Power 50,” *Out Magazine*, April 2011, <http://www.out.com/power50/index.asp?> (accessed June 1, 2011).

¹⁵ See Erbentraut, “Gay Anti-Asian Prejudice Thrives on the Internet.”

Positive, sexy images of gay Asian men are also largely missing from gay porn, which plays a significant role in gay male cyberculture. Twenty years ago, Richard Fung, a gay Asian Canadian videographer, wrote a provocative essay, “Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn.” In that groundbreaking essay, Fung argued that, with respect to “commercial gay sexual representation,” images of “men and male beauty are still of *white* men and *white* male beauty.”¹⁶ Asian men are nowhere to be found in mainstream gay porn videos. For Fung, “sex is a source of pleasure, but also a site of humiliation and pain,” in large part because there is “such a limited vision of what constitutes the erotic.”¹⁷ Furthermore, according to Fung, Asian men are defined by the striking absence of the penis. In contrast to stereotypes of extremely well-hung Black men, “Asian and anus are conflated.”¹⁸

Sadly, not much has changed in the two decades since Fung wrote his essay with respect to the major online porn websites and porn stars. These websites, such as BelAmiOnline.com,¹⁹ CorbinFisher.com,²⁰ FratMen.tv,²¹ and SeanCody.com,²² still cater largely to the archetypal gay male fantasy of college-aged, “straight,” muscular, lean, well-hung, and (very) white men. There may be some exceptions, but online porn featuring Asian men is usually limited to “niche” or “fetish” videos of emaciated Asian young men who are primarily bottoms – that is, who are penetrated anally but never are the penetrators – and are produced for consumption by rice

¹⁶ Richard Fung, “Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn,” in Leong, *Asian American Sexualities*, 184.

¹⁷ Fung, “Looking for My Penis,” 190-91.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁹ See <http://www.belamionline.com> (accessed May 29, 2011).

²⁰ See <http://www.corbinfisher.com> (accessed May 29, 2011).

²¹ See <http://fratmen.tv> (accessed May 29, 2011).

²² See <http://seancody.com> (accessed May 29, 2011).

queens.²³ Thus, the gay Asian body in online porn is either rendered invisible in a sea of whiteness on the one hand, or exoticized as an orientalist fantasy of passivity and submission on the other hand. Indeed, psychological studies of gay Asian men have identified this harmful dual dynamic of *invisibility* as well as *exoticization* within the larger gay male community.²⁴

II. Gay Asian Men, Self-Hate, and the Inhibition of Spiritual Growth

As a result of experiencing exclusion and rejection in gay male culture – both in the “real world” and in cyberspace – gay Asian men often feel shame and self-hate with respect to their racial and ethnic backgrounds. As noted above, this exclusion is not only a matter of spiritual development or pastoral care, but it is also a *theological* issue. For decades, feminist and womanist theologians have noted that sin is not only a matter of pride (that is, lifting oneself up too high), but sin is also a matter of self-abnegation or self-hate (that is, not lifting oneself up high enough). That is why the sin of self-hate that is experienced by many gay Asian men – which as we have seen is magnified by the relative anonymity and focus on self-gratification in gay male cyberculture – is something that must be addressed by the theological academy.

What are some examples of the self-hatred that is experienced by gay Asian men? Kent Chuang, a gay Asian man who grew up in Australia, felt during his teenage years that his Asian

²³ “Rice queen” is the gay slang term for white men – usually older – who primarily (if not exclusively) date Asian men. Conversely, “potato queen” refers to Asian men who primarily date white men. “Sticky rice” refers to Asian men who primarily date other Asian men.

²⁴ See Kevin L. Nadal, “Sexual Orientation Identity Development and Mental Health Experiences of Gay and Bisexual Asian American Men: Implications for Culturally Competent Counseling,” in *Culturally Responsive Counseling with Asian American Men*, ed. William Ming Liu, Derek Kenji Iwamoto, and Mark H. Chae (New York: Routledge, 2010), 213-34.

features were “deformities.” Chuang, like many gay Asian men who grow up in non-Asian countries, thought that “us ugly Asians couldn’t get a white boy so we settled for financial and emotional security with old rice queens.” In other words, Chuang believed that “Asians sacrificed youth for security, and rice queens sacrificed color for youth.”²⁵

This rejection often translates into intense self-hatred on the part of young gay Asian men, particularly in cyberspace. For example, William Tran, an eighteen-year-old Chinese American gay man, writes that “I find myself going into the GAM4GWM (Gay Asian Male searching for Gay White Male) or GWM4GAM Internet chat rooms on AOL, but why do I keep avoiding the GAM4GAM chat rooms?” Tran answers his own question by recognizing that “Tom Cruise and Brad Pitt are whom I grew up drooling over, not Chow Yun-Fat or Jackie Chan.” In other words, he has “grown up believing that White people are inherently more attractive and cool than Asians.”²⁶

This shame and self-hate can lead to harmful addictive behaviors in terms of drugs and unsafe sex in the futile search for acceptance. Guy Nakatani, a gay Asian teenager who died of HIV/AIDS in the 1990s, started drinking and having unsafe sex with older men during his high school years. Nakatani wrote that, “I had sex with a lot of people. I did it all, thinking that allowing them to penetrate me was how I was going to grab them emotionally. . . . More was

²⁵ Kent Chuang, “Using Chopsticks to Eat Steak,” in *Multicultural Queer: Australian Narratives*, ed. Peter A. Jackson and Gerard Sullivan (Binghamton: Harrington Park Press, 1999).

²⁶ William Tran, “GAM4GWM,” in *Troubling Intersections of Race and Sexuality: Queer Students of Color and Anti-Oppressive Education*, ed. Kevin K. Kumashiro (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 2001), 82.

better. . . . What I was doing I was not at all proud of, and I thought I would never admit to any of it My needs completely overwhelmed any judgment on my part.”²⁷

As the psychotherapist Robert Weiss has noted in his book *Cruise Control: Understanding Sex Addiction in Gay Men*, sex addiction is often the result of an “emotional void” that is the consequence of “low self-esteem.”²⁸ Indeed, as the gay psychotherapist Alan Downs has written in his book *The Velvet Rage* about the psychology of gay life, many gay men hide a deep sense of shame and self-hatred “behind a curtain made of crimson velvet.” This is necessary because this secret cannot be revealed to others or to oneself “for fear that it will consume him completely.”²⁹

Shame and self-hate also can result in the inhibition of spiritual growth, which compounds the harmful consequences outlined above. For example, John J. McNeill, a former Roman Catholic priest who became a psychotherapist after being expelled from the Jesuits for his ministries to gays and lesbians, has noted that “the chief threat” to the “spiritual health” of most gay people includes “shame and low self-esteem, which can in turn develop into self-hate.”³⁰ Although McNeill’s focus is on lesbians and gay men generally, his observation is

²⁷ Molly Fumia, *Honor Thy Children: One Family’s Journey Into Wholeness* (Berkeley: Conari Press, 1997), 235.

²⁸ Robert Weiss, *Cruise Control: Understanding Sex Addiction in Gay Men* (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 2005), 61.

²⁹ Alan Downs, *The Velvet Rage: Overcoming the Pain of Growing Up Gay in a Straight Man’s World* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2005), 16-17.

³⁰ John J. McNeill, *Taking a Chance on God: Liberating Theology for Gays, Lesbians, and Their Lovers, Families, and Friends* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 54. See in particular “Lifting the Burden of Guilt, Shame, and Self-Hate.”

equally applicable to those LGBT people of color who also believe that they are “flawed in some essential way” as a result of their ethnicity or race.³¹

Daniel A. Helminiak – also a former Roman Catholic priest, gay man, and practicing psychotherapist – has argued similarly that positive self-esteem is critical for spiritual development. For Helminiak, spiritual growth requires the “integration of all aspects of the person” and includes the goal of “actualiz[ing] a person’s fullest potential.” Because a person cannot reach her or his fullest potential without adequate self-esteem, a positive sense of self-esteem is critical for spiritual development.³² Although Helminiak’s argument occurs in the general context of LGBT individuals, his insights are especially applicable to LGBT people of color – including gay Asian men – who constantly experience messages in cyberspace and the media that we are not welcome and not fully part of the larger (white) gay community.

III. Gay Asian Men, Rejection, and LGBT Theologies

Unfortunately, cyberspace is not the only space in gay male culture in which gay Asians are excluded. Gay Asian men are also virtually invisible in the LGBT theological world – and thus experience a similar lack of beauty or self-worth. Although Asian Americans have been part of the gay liberation movement for nearly half a century – for example, Kiyoshi Kuromiya was a Japanese American pre-Stonewall homophile activist in the mid-1960s,³³ and Michiyo

³¹ Ibid., 56.

³² Daniel A. Helminiak, *Sex and the Sacred: Gay Identity and Spiritual Growth* (Binghamton: Harrington Park Press, 2006), 55. See in particular “Sexual Self-Acceptance and Spiritual Growth.”

³³ See Liz Highleyman, “Kiyoshi Kuromiya: Integrating the Issues,” in *Smash the Church, Smash the State!: The Early Years of Gay Liberation*, ed. Tommi Avicelli Mecca (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2009), 17-21.

Cornell was an Asian American lesbian who addressed the 1979 March on Washington³⁴ – gay Asians have remained largely invisible in the LGBT or queer contextual theologies that have arisen out of the gay liberation movement of the 1960s.³⁵

In particular, gay white theologians largely have remained silent about the pervasive racism that is faced by gay men of color, including gay Asian men. Despite work by feminist and womanist theologians with respect to the sin of self-hate, most gay white theologians have failed to address racism as a *theological* issue (for example, involving traditional Christian theological doctrines such as sin). For example, I have been unable to find any discussion of the gay Asian experience in *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, a recent 350-page anthology of queer theology.³⁶ Ironically, the subtitle of the anthology suggests that queerness is by definition a “western” phenomenon and has little (if anything) to say to “eastern” bodies.

Similarly, a recent anthology of writings about men and masculinities in Christianity and Judaism, *Men and Masculinities in Christianity and Judaism: A Critical Reader*,³⁷ is silent about the Asian male experience, a fact pointed out by my colleague Kwok Pui-lan during a panel about the book at the 2010 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Atlanta, Georgia.³⁸ Furthermore, writers in the gay male interfaith spirituality movement are often silent

³⁴ See Michiyo Cornell, “Living in Asian America: An Asian American Lesbian’s Address Before the Washington Monument (1979),” in Leong, *Asian American Sexualities*, 83-84.

³⁵ For an overview of the genealogy of queer theology, see Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury, 2011).

³⁶ See Gerard Loughlin, ed., *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007).

³⁷ See Björn Krondorfer, *Men and Masculinities in Christianity and Judaism: A Critical Reader* (London: SCM Press, 2009).

³⁸ This panel, entitled “Men and Masculinities in Christianity and Judaism: A Critical Response,” was sponsored by the Men, Masculinities, and Religions Group, and occurred on November 1, 2010. To Krondorfer’s credit, he is

about the issue of race and ethnicity, even though they often incorporate spiritual practices of the Two-Thirds World (such as Buddhism, Hinduism, or Daoism) in their work.³⁹

The silence of these LGBT theological writers on the issue of race is particularly troubling in light of the proliferation of contextual theologies since the 1960s. These contextual theologies have addressed a wide range of issues relating to race, ethnicity, and culture, and they include Black, womanist, Latin American, Latin@, Asian, Asian American, and Native American theologies. In fact, LGBT Black and womanist theologians such as elias farajajé-jones, Renée Hill, and Irene Monroe have written about the intersections of race, sexuality, and theological issues since the early 1990s.⁴⁰ However, very few gay white male theologians have addressed these issues in their writings to date.⁴¹

editing a special forthcoming issue of *CrossCurrents* that will include some of these missing voices and perspectives.

³⁹ For example, the gay men's spirituality movement includes organizations such as the Body Electric School that teach erotic massage techniques based upon tantric practices. See <http://thebodyelectricschool.com> (accessed May 29, 2011).

⁴⁰ See Elias Farajajé-Jones, "Breaking Silence: Toward an in-the-Life Theology," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Volume II, 1980-1992*, ed. James H. Cone, and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 139-59; elias farajajé-jones, "Holy Fuck," in *Male Lust: Pleasure, Power, and Transformation*, ed. Kerwin Kay, Jill Nagle, and Baruch Gould (Binghamton: The Haworth Press, 2000), 327-35; Renee L. Hill, "Who Are We for Each Other?: Sexism, Sexuality and Womanist Theology," in Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology II*, 345-51; Renée Leslie Hill, "Disrupted / Disruptive Movements: Black Theology and Black Power 1969 / 1999," in *Black Faith and Public Talk: Critical Essays on James H. Cone's Black Theology and Black Power*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), 138-49; "Rev. Dr. Renee L. Hill," in *A Whosoever Church*, ed. Gary David Comstock (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001); Irene Monroe, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place," in *Out of the Shadows into the Light: Christianity and Homosexuality*, Miguel A. de la Torre, ed. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2009), 39-58; "Rev. Irene Monroe," in Comstock, *A Whosoever Church*, 59-71.

⁴¹ Some exceptions to the rule have been Bob Shore-Goss and Gary Comstock. For example, Shore-Goss writes in *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up* that "shades, variants, and tonalities in queer theologies will develop in imaginative configurations that will stretch earlier queer theologies." See Robert E. Goss, *Queering Christ: Beyond*

IV. Countering Self-Hatred with Self-Love

As noted above, the antidote to the sin of self-hate is the grace of self-love. For example, womanist theologian Delores Williams has written that “elevating and healing Black women’s self-esteem figures into womanist notions of what constitutes salvation for the oppressed African-American community.”⁴² This section will explore biblical, theological, and ethical models of self-love that gay Asian men might draw upon in order to elevate and heal our self-esteem, particularly in gay male cyberculture.

A biblical model of the grace of self-love can be found in the Song of Songs in the Hebrew Bible. In the first chapter of that book, the female narrator – the Shulamite – boldly tells the fair-skinned “daughters of Jerusalem” that “I am black and beautiful” (*sehovah ’ani vena’vah*).⁴³ This assertion is particularly powerful because not only is the Shulamite able to come to voice as a woman and as a dark-skinned outsider, but she is also able to love herself and affirm her own self-worth – sexual and otherwise – as “beautiful.” Indeed, the Black liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s adopted the slogan “Black is beautiful” to reclaim notions of beauty and self-worth with respect to African Americans.

As the commentary on Song of Songs in *The Queer Bible Commentary* notes, it is likely that the “daughters of Jerusalem” are jealous of the Shulamite because of her love affair with the

Jesus Acted Up (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2002), 253. Comstock edited an anthology about welcoming LGBT people in the black church. See *A Whosoever Church: Welcoming Lesbians and Gay Men Into African American Congregations*, ed. Gary David Comstock (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001). However, Shore-Goss and Comstock remain the exception than the rule.

⁴² See Williams, “A Womanist Perspective on Sin,” 147.

⁴³ See Songs 1:5 (NRSV).

Beloved. Not only is she an outsider as a “dark-skinned territorial foreigner” and a “well-tanned worker in the field,” but because of her sexual relationship with the Beloved, the Shulamite becomes a “taboo person, at once fascinating and forbidden.”⁴⁴ However, by affirming her own beauty – and by ordering the daughters of Jerusalem not to stare at her because she is dark⁴⁵ – the Shulamite establishes her own voice and identity as someone who is beautiful in her own right. She is not “black but beautiful” (as some English translations have read), but rather she is “black *and* beautiful.”

The wisdom of the Shulamite is echoed in the writings of African American and womanist theologians who have emphasized the importance of self-love in their contextual theologies. A theological model of the grace of self-love can be found in womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas’ book, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*. In that book, Douglas traces the ways in which Black women’s sexualities were distorted by white cultural stereotypes during the era of slavery. One such stereotype was the “Jezebel,” or a woman with an “insatiable sexual appetite, being extraordinarily passionate, and being sexually aggressive and cunning.” The countervailing stereotype of the Jezebel was the “Mammy,” or the stereotype of “the perfect female slave” who was both “maternal and asexual.”⁴⁶

As a result of these distorting stereotypes, it has been especially important for womanist theologians to affirm their own intrinsic beauty through self-love. In other words, to be a womanist is to be a Black woman who loves herself, “regardless.” That is, the freedom to “love

⁴⁴ Christopher King, “Song of Songs,” in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, ed. Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache (London: SCM Press, 2006), 358.

⁴⁵ See Songs 1:6 (“Do not gaze at me because I am dark, because the sun has gazed on me.”) (NRSV).

⁴⁶ Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), 36-40 (Jezebel), 41-45 (Mammy).

whom one is” is “fundamental to the worship of God.” Indeed, the womanist theologian JoAnne Marie Terrell has argued that self-love is the “sine qua non of womanist thought.”⁴⁷

An ethical model of the grace of self-love can be found in the work of sexual ethicist James Nelson. Nelson has written about the importance of moving from self-rejection to a place of self-love. For Nelson, authentic self-love is “not a deadly sin.” Rather, authentic self-love is a “deep self-acceptance” that only comes “through the affirmation of one’s own graciously given worth and creaturely fineness, our ‘warts and all.’”⁴⁸ We need to recognize the fact that we are *imago Dei* – made in the image and likeness of God.⁴⁹ Nelson argues that, in affirming the goodness of our own bodies, we “lose the desire to control others, sexually or otherwise.”⁵⁰

Thus, gay Asian men must reclaim our sense of beauty by learning to love ourselves in cyberspace as well as in the theological realm. This can be a difficult task because gay Asian men – and Asian American men in general – are often defined by popular culture in terms of “one-dimensional images” that include caricatures of “foreign-born buffoons,” “wimpy, asexual nerds,” “gangsters,” and “computer geeks.”⁵¹ Furthermore, many gay and bisexual Asian men experience being “objects of fetishes” by members of the gay community.⁵² Psychological

⁴⁷ JoAnne Marie Terrell, *Power in the Blood?: The Cross in the African American Experience* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998), 138-39.

⁴⁸ James B. Nelson, “Where Are We?: Seven Sinful Problems and Seven Virtuous Possibilities,” in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, 2nd ed., ed. Marvin M. Ellison and Kelly Brown Douglas (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 99.

⁴⁹ Gen. 1:26.

⁵⁰ Nelson, “Where Are We?,” 99.

⁵¹ Christopher T.H. Liang, Amanda L.Y. Rivera, Anisha Nathwani, Phillip Dang, and Ashley N. Douroux, “Dealing with Gendered Racism and Racial Identity Among Asian American Men,” in Liu, Iwamoto, and Chae, *Culturally Responsive Counseling*, 68-69.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 77.

studies have shown that these images have a negative impact on the ability of Asian men to form “positive self-evaluations.”⁵³

Like the Shulamite in the Song of Songs, and like womanist theologians, gay Asian men must learn to love ourselves and recognize that we are made in the image and likeness of God. Sin for our community is not only pride, but also self-hate. The grace of self-love – that is, the antidote to the sin of self-hate – is not something that can be learned abstractly or intellectually. It is a grace that can only be experienced when we come to voice and when we recognize – and reclaim – positive images of ourselves in the world around us.⁵⁴

V. Recovering Self-Love in Cyberspace by Gay Asian Men

So how can gay Asian men recover a sense of self-love in cyberspace? To the extent that this recovery of self-love requires the grace of coming to voice – and recognizing that “I am yellow and beautiful,” to paraphrase the Shulamite woman in the Song of Songs – gay Asian

⁵³ Liang, Rivera, Nathwani, Dang, and Douroux, “Dealing with Gendered Racism,” 69.

⁵⁴ This move to self-love is not an easy task for gay Asian men in light of the historically negative cultural portrayals of Asian American men and masculinities. For example, Jachinson Chan has written about negative cultural representations of Asian American men. Such representations include the desexualized characters of Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan. See Jachinson Chan, *Chinese American Masculinities: From Fu Manchu to Bruce Lee* (New York: Routledge, 2001). Similarly, the gay Asian scholar David L. Eng has written about the impact of gender and sexuality on the racial formation of Asian American men. According to Eng, the “Asian American male is both materially and psychically feminized within the context of a larger U.S. cultural imaginary.” See David L. Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 2. Eng traces the ways in which the Asian American male has been associated historically with “feminized” professions such as “laundries, restaurants, tailor’s shops” and how the nineteenth-century antimiscegenation and exclusion laws created Chinatown same-sex bachelor societies that have negatively influenced how Asian American men are viewed to this day. See Eng, *Racial Castration*, 17. This, according to Eng, has resulted in the “racial castration” of Asian American men.

groups such as the Gay Asian Pacific Islander Men of New York (GAPIMNY) have used social networking, email listservs, and websites effectively to organize social events as well as protests against racism in the broader gay community. For example, there was an online action sponsored by GAPIMNY on Facebook during the fall of 2010 that was directed against certain New York City gay clubs that refused to admit (or made admission much more difficult) for Asian men.⁵⁵ Gay Asian men have also used blogs such as *8Asian* to publicize instances of racism in cyberculture, such as the Grindr incident described in Part I of this article.⁵⁶

Gay Asian men have also reclaimed images of ourselves within gay cyberculture. For example, the website of Asian/Pacific Islanders Queers United for Action (AQUA), the gay Asian group in Washington D.C., features photos of a broad cross-section of individuals from the gay Asian community,⁵⁷ as do the websites and Facebook pages of groups like GAPIMNY,⁵⁸ the Gay Asian Pacific Support Network (GAPSN), the gay Asian group in Los Angeles,⁵⁹ and the Gay Asian Pacific Alliance (GAPA), the gay Asian group in San Francisco.⁶⁰ These images are important because they resist the usual dichotomy of either invisibility on the one hand or exoticization on the other. Positive, sexy images of gay Asian men have also appeared in other

⁵⁵ See “Racism at NYC Gay Clubs: Request for Your Stories,”
<http://www.facebook.com/event.php?eid=137558232953262> (accessed May 29, 2011).

⁵⁶ See supra note 8.

⁵⁷ See <http://www.aquadc.org> (accessed May 29, 2011).

⁵⁸ See <http://www.gapimny.org> (accessed May 29, 2011).

⁵⁹ See <http://www.gapsn.org> (accessed May 29, 2011).

⁶⁰ See <http://www.gapa.org> (accessed May 29, 2011).

contexts such as the *Asian Pacific Male* 2010 pin-up calendar, with all proceeds going to the Asian Pacific Health Care Venture in Los Angeles.⁶¹

Similarly, gay Asian men's voices have started to emerge in the theological realm during the last decade, including in cyberspace. Some of the earlier gay Asian theologians included Eric Law,⁶² Leng Lim (also a gay Asian Episcopal priest),⁶³ and myself.⁶⁴ However, there are new theological voices emerging, including members of the Emerging Queer Asian Religion Scholars (EQARS) group. These emerging LGBT Asian theological and religious studies

⁶¹ Indeed, the Internet can be a site of healing – as opposed to pain – with respect to gay Asian men and mental health issues. In a recent essay “Using the Internet to Provide Support, Psychoeducation, and Self-Help to Asian American Men,” mental health professionals Tai Chang and Richie Phu Wong propose ways in which online resources such as Facebook and chat rooms can help Asian American men who are otherwise unwilling to see a psychologist or counselor. See Tai Chang and Richie Phu Wong, “Using the Internet to Provide Support, Psychoeducation, and Self-Help to Asian American Men,” in Liu, Iwamoto, and Chae, *Culturally Responsive Counseling*, 259-78.

⁶² Eric H.F. Law, *Finding Intimacy in a World of Fear* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2007); Eric H.F. Law, “A Spirituality of Creative Marginality,” in *Que(e)rying Religion: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gary David Comstock and Susan E. Henking (New York: Continuum, 1997), 343-36.

⁶³ Leng Lim, Kim-Hao Yap, and Tuck-Leong Lee, “The Mythic-Literalists in the Province of South Asia,” in *Other Voices, Other Worlds: The Global Church Speaks Out on Homosexuality*, ed. Terry Brown (New York: Church Publishing, 2006), 58-76; Leng Leroy Lim, “‘The Bible Tells Me to Hate Myself’: The Crisis in Asian American Spiritual Leadership,” *Semeia* 90/91 (2002): 315-22; Leng Leroy Lim, “Webs of Betrayal, Webs of Blessings,” in Eng and Hom, Q&A, 323-34; Leng Leroy Lim, “Exploring Embodiment,” in *Boundary Wars: Intimacy and Distance in Healing Relationships*, ed. Katherine Hancock Ragsdale (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1996), 58-77.

⁶⁴ Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011); Patrick S. Cheng, “Rethinking Sin and Grace for LGBT People Today,” in Ellison and Douglas, *Sexuality and the Sacred*, 105-18; Patrick S. Cheng, “Reclaiming Our Traditions, Rituals, and Spaces: Spirituality and the Queer Asian Pacific American Experience,” *Spiritus* 6, no. 2 (2006): 234-40; Patrick S. Cheng, “Roundtable Discussion: Same-Sex Marriage,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20, no. 2 (2004): 103-07; Patrick S. Cheng, “Multiplicity and Judges 19: Constructing a Queer Asian Pacific American Biblical Hermeneutic,” *Semeia* 90/91 (2002).

scholars include Mike Campos, Joseph Goh, Elizabeth Leung, Miak Siew, and Yip Lai-shan, as well as our ally Hugo Córdova Quero.

EQARS meets monthly over Skype to provide mutual support to its members and as a forum to discuss their theological projects.⁶⁵ As such, it is a positive reclaiming of cyberspace by gay Asian theological voices. Other online contexts for gay Asian theological voices include the Queer Asian Spirit listserv and website, which have connected queer Asian people of faith around the world for nearly a decade,⁶⁶ as well as the Asian Pacific Islander Roundtable pages of the CLGS website.⁶⁷

In sum, the exclusion of gay Asian men from gay male cyberculture, whether or not intentional, is a *theological* problem. Gay Asian men can only start seeing ourselves as intrinsically beautiful – that is, created in the image and likeness of God, *imago Dei* – when we start to love ourselves. The grace of self-love – as opposed to the sin of self-hate – allows gay Asian men to grow spiritually and to love our bodies and ourselves just as we are. Self-love requires that our images be seen and our voices be heard in discourses as varied as gay male cyberculture and gay male theology. And it is at the intersections of cyberspace and theology that gay Asian men can – and must – assert with pride that we are in fact “yellow *and* beautiful.”

⁶⁵ For more about the work of EQARS, see <http://www.eqars.org> (website forthcoming).

⁶⁶ For the Queer Asian Spirit listserv, see <http://groups.google.com/group/queerasianspirit> (accessed May 29, 2011). For the website, see <http://www.queerasianspirit.org> (accessed May 29, 2011).

⁶⁷ See http://www.clgs.org/programs/api_roundtable (accessed May 29, 2011).