

By

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Abstract

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Intro & Thesis

My journey through life thus far is as a persxn floating between identities and spaces; queer trans non-binary mixed race Filipinx American with mental health struggles. Existing within multiple margins brings different perspectives and experiences for myself, and connects me with others who also exist along various margins. This project explores concepts of home and belonging for people who embody queer trans diasporic identities. Society has created logics that “other” queer and trans people of color which may subject individuals to violence, exclusion, confinement, and make home a complicated space. Society also claims the concept of home as a space for belonging where individuals can be safe and their full selves. Due to these tensions, I look at how queerness and those displaced renegotiate and respatialize what home and belonging means for them. We find home and belonging within our own bodies, chosen family, community space, and in / through food. These are modes of resistance and survival that are not romantic through which queerness complicates and challenges notions of home and belonging. Home becomes the “other” as it does not hold us. Queer and trans people of color are constantly in a game of negotiations with this idea to create belonging, home, comfort for ourselves; re-spatialize.

Methods

This project is comprised of three methods: 1) three oral history interviews of individuals that I consider close in my life. These oral history are to enrich the ideas and connections within this paper with actual experiences from three queer trans non-binary people of color within the Asian American diaspora. Questions were asked to explore their personal histories and

experiences around identity, conceptions of “home”, queer journeys, navigating identities in different spaces, role of food, and more. All three individuals read through an informed consent form with me on the purpose of the interviews for this project, how their histories will be used, and received transcripts to review prior to inclusion within the paper. All three people signed and consented to support my project with use of their interviews as well as this project being uploaded into the online Honors Capstones database. These signed informed consent forms will remain in my files. 2) auto-ethnography to include my personal experiences with this topic. 3) a few scholarly and literary sources from people of color and queer writers.

Weaving these methods together I hope to show how personal and community / collectively based this project has been for me. I was inspired by Professor Damien M. Sojoyner’s book *First Strike: Education Enclosures in Black LA* which was auto-ethnographic with interviews. Professor Sojoyner is personally connected and invested with that work, and one can feel that through reading his book. I hold the same investment and connection with exploring queer conceptions of home and belonging, and want this paper to feel as though it is a community piece of activist literature. These concepts have been in discussion with myself and many people close to me. I owe this project to the folx in my life for sharing thoughts and experiences with thinking about queerness in relation to space and belonging in ways to challenge and create discourse on individualism, nation, rights and larger societal structures.

I also state with full transparency that all identities and experiences are complex, varying from person to person. In no way do I speak for any communities and identities that I hold close.

Lastly to note, there are factors beyond queerness that complicate conceptions of home and belonging such as religion, colonialism, class, patriarchy, violence, ability, language, migration, status.

Interviewee Self-Identifications

AK: “I identify as a second-generation immigrant, queer, genderqueer, Asian American and Taiwanese American; those are identities that have been slightly in flux. Over the last year, I have been thinking about what it means to have a hyphenated American last name and what it means to claim Taiwanese identity when my family identifies as from the Chinese diaspora but culturally I feel more related to Taiwanese culture. And I identify as a poet, writer, and organizer, and a bread baker.”

JP: “Okay, um. I identify myself as Vietnamese I guess in the Asian American diaspora but also second generation. My gender and queerness changes every now and then but I think right now the closest thing is a trans femme. I don’t consider myself a cis person and I like femme because I identify more with gender expressions of femininity and things like that. But I don’t consider myself a trans woman.”

MV: “I identify as a non-binary, demi-woman Filipinx femme. Yeah. Also, queer sexuality-wise.”

Logics of Othering & Normality

Before delving into my project, I want to share some context on the current sociopolitical state in which marginalized communities are existing within, and who is viewed as normal. Growing up, myself, along with most children, at some point learn by experience this feeling of “otherness.” There is a desire for us to be liked and considered normal. As I grew older, I began to feel more and more out of place without understanding the reasons. It was in high school when I realized, as a mixed race person, that I was not Asian or white but ambiguously in between while in proximity to brownness and Latinx people. I further felt no place of security as I came

to embrace my queer identities. Our society enjoy binaries; black / white, straight / gay, man / woman, American / foreign, good / bad, us / them, normal / other.

There are a few radical philosophers who explore power and concepts of “man”. I want to keep this understandable by recalling what I took away from discussions around those concepts from previous class discussions. Basically, there are bodies deemed normal and acceptable which hold more power over bodies deemed as different and not conforming to the standards constructed by those who have power. Hegemonic power within society is structured around bodies that are normal: white, cisgender, heterosexual, not disabled, male.

Those outside of these mainstream identities are “other”, non-normative bodies. This logic therefore “others” queer and trans people of color. Individuals who hold these and other marginal identities may be subject to violence and exclusion on an interpersonal and systemic level. Home and belonging can be more complicated, violent and even a site of displacement.

Current Political Context

“Instead of recognizing that the moral failure lies in society’s unwillingness to embrace different gender identities and expressions, society blames transgender and gender non-conforming people for bringing the discrimination and violence on themselves” (Injustice 7).

In 2011, a study was conducted by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the National Center for Transgender Equality to survey 6,450 diverse TGNC (trans and gender nonconforming) participants, and confirm how TGNC folx face injustices due to anti-trans bias, discrimination and violence within all sectors and spaces (Injustice 2). Structural racism along with these injustices do increase marginalization for black folx, especially trans women of color who are targets of violence and live in extreme poverty (Injustice 2). This study also looked at

family acceptance and resilience as important since home may or may not be a place of safety. They found that 43% of participants maintained most of their family bonds (Injustice 6). Overall, I find queer and trans people to be resilient and resourceful in finding ways around barriers despite adversity.

Analyzing the mainstream LGBT movement is important to highlight discourse during our current neoliberal era. Leading trans scholar, Dean Spade, analyzes the conditions that trans people are subject to and how law is producing vulnerability. His goals are to chart current trajectories of trans politics, and call for a critical trans politics which “demands more than legal recognition and inclusion, seeking instead to transform current logics of state, civil society, security, and social equality” (Spade 1). The mainstream equality agendas see “inclusion and reform are the solutions rather than abolishing or transforming the systems in place with deep root issues” (Spade 33).

My interviewees and myself share transformative visions for queer and trans justice where we can thrive. AK mentions how our movements center healing so we can achieve the change we desire while not leaving people behind. Our radical and critical queer and trans politics challenges liberal, rights centered politics of mainstream movements. We not only challenge mainstream society but also mainstream LGBT peoples. Our queerness aims to challenge and dismantle state logics of why we are excluded and othered. I argue that through our search for belonging in alternative ways, we continue to resist logics of submission. We resist and survive. Our existence and tactics of resistance challenge binary logics and normative ways of being to make our own space [re-spatialize].

Disidentification

“Disidentification is not always an adequate strategy of resistance or survival for all minority subjects. At times, resistance needs to be pronounced and direct; on other occasions, queers of color and other minority subjects need to follow a conformist path if they hope to survive a hostile public sphere. But for some, disidentification is a survival strategy that works within and outside the dominant public sphere simultaneously” (Munoz 5).

Munoz’s concept of disidentification for queers of color provides a framework for how I am thinking of re-spatialization. There is the current LGBT movement for inclusion and rights as well as normative beliefs of home and belonging. Queerness challenges both of these dominant spheres. We may not identify with being this “other”, yet, we do because we are not ever, at least in this present time, going to be deemed normal. There is power as we challenge logics of normativity while intentionally remaining separate from what is normal. We are creating our own realities, lives, and spaces. In relation to home and belonging, these concepts still hold to normative ideas. As queer trans people of color, we re-appropriate normative space of the home for survival purposes as we work through existing structures. We take back power by negotiating with existing structures to create space for ourselves and our needs.

AK: “I am- I was othered when I was seen as a womxn of color. I’m othered when I’m seen as not cis [gender]. I’m othered when I’m seen as queer because of my hair, my presentation. The fact that I’m basically running around screaming “I’m queer” with my life. There’s that othering. I think to the point where I can see that as just one aspect of my life, and not just constantly being aware of a gaze of otherness, that has been where liberation has felt possible and where being free feels possible.”

JP: “For me, queerness is a site of self-determination. Part of that is being able to determine who you are, by yourself, based on how you see yourself and how you relate to the world. Also, part of that self-determination is determining what you think deserves your energy, space and time. What you consider your home.”

Home

Home. What leaps into your mind when you hear “home”?

AK: “I think of home as literal and metaphorical. I think sometimes when I use it in the literal way like “I’m going home now.” I actually pause and think “what are the places that I call home.” I also say that I’m going home to the Bay [Bay Area in Northern CA] where my parents live. I say that I’m going home all the time to my apartment from work in Los Angeles. But I also feel a lot of different community space as homes like Tuesday Night Project [café] that I just mentioned has very much felt like a home to me. I think that there is home within community in how we hold space together, and there is home in other people as well and definitely in yourself. I would hope that folx have access to spiritual home in their own body, and spiritual home in other spaces whether it’s community or churches or mosques or synagogues or other places that feel that they can show up as their whole selves, including spiritually. I think there are so many manifestations of home.”

MV responds, “So, the first thing that comes to mind when I hear the word “home” is actually the Philippines...” They share how they were surrounded by family in the Philippines, and consider it their first home despite being born in New Jersey.

Ideologically, home is painted as a space of love, care and belonging. Individuals can be themselves and supported to grow. But this is not the reality for everyone. Different identities and conditions, such as queerness, can complicate this sphere or idea of home.

When I first shared with my biological mother that I was queer in high school, she sent me to therapy and we mutually avoided the topic for years. Her views on queerness are complicatedly impacted by colonialism in the Philippines which brought Christianity and Catholicism to the islands. Into my time at community college, she knew I was dating other queer people but hid in a deep hole of denial. This secrecy brought discomfort and tension into our relationship and home. Eventually, she snapped. There was no way I could be her “daughter.” Tension also grew with my biological father, I was threatened to leave. This was not the first time that I felt unsafe within my parents’ home which was painted as a happy Christian home. For over six months I was living out of my car and sleeping on couches. I was fortunate to have people that I trusted who let me stay over often. Eventually, I shared an apartment with a former partner and her family where we created our own sense of home amongst one another.

Ideas of home and belonging became complicated for me. There was loneliness and not belonging. Home became a point of departure and displacement. To survive, I sought out a space of home in other forms.

Tension & Romanticization

A romance of home can be for belonging with family. This idealized home is sacred, safe, and yours. There are contradictions behind belonging. One must negotiate desire to belong with safety and well-being. JP shares how home can be safe but also a site of trauma or of

conflict. “I think those are the polarizing forces that we learn how to hold because queer people naturally are able to a lot of complexity in our identities.

MV: “I’m feel like- I’m very guilty of romanticizing home as well because I’m very lucky and fortunate that I have a family that’s a lot more open-minded and not as messed up, you know, as others.”

While talking with MV, they shared a poem by Aimee Suzara called “Because going home isn’t always romantic.” Suzara makes a point that we need to stop romanticizing home in regards to homeland. She highlights colonialism and western influences on the Philippines especially as Pilipinx Americans and other western people idealize the islands. These histories are complex and contribute to our displacement. I took away how it is difficult being different and ambiguous to the world. This complication can be emphasized for queer, trans, and/or mixed race peoples going home.

JP explores this romance of homeland as a diasporic person. “I think for, in terms of racial identity, do I consider Vietnam to be my home? I consider it more to be like- it’s not home but it’s a site of origin, you know. I get really emotional when I look at the ocean, at a huge body of water. In Vietnamese, nuoc, is the word for water but also it’s country. It has several different connotations as well. I don’t consider it like a home because I know I wasn’t from there. My parents were but I’m not. I’m strictly American which sucks but [laughs]- it’s more like I feel if I die or if there’s a place where after death that we return to, I feel spiritually I’d be back in Vietnam. I feel that’s where I belong, and I feel I was displaced here.” JP’s thoughts deeply resonated with me. The Philippines is the home and origin for my mother’s family while my existence could only be made possible within the states as my father American. This space

within diaspora is complicated as we are not from our family's homeland but may feel a longing for that site.

With any discussion around home and land, we must acknowledge that we reside on stolen land from Indigenous peoples.

Body & Food

Queer and trans communities are resilient and creative. Individuals who face violence and loss of the normalized home space find other places for home. There is a creation of queer familial bonds and kinships through our bodies and food. When I was pushed out from my parents' home, I found pieces of home in other places and with other people.

AK shares about coming home to their body. This homecoming to self is vital. It can be challenging for queer people, and especially those who identify within the trans non-binary spectrums as not cisgender. We have been socialized to believe that our bodies are not normal as we do not identify with sex assigned at birth. AK planted a seed of thought for how important of a home our bodies are. We must care for and love our bodies. Our bodies are with us for life, and to love oneself is a radical act as we create space for ourselves in this world.

Briefly, my previous food pantry work with food [in]security over the past two years was as daily operations support for students to have access to canned and fresh foods. Our campus, UC Riverside, has some of the highest rates of food insecurity out of the UC system. I explored how complicated access to foods is, especially in relation to queerness and culture.

Food is a way that through and in, queer people can create this sense of home. Food is complex: a source of home, safety and comfort but also of disconnection and discomfort. We literally cannot live without food which is why I will delve into different aspects of food with

queerness and home. It also connects as a form of healing justice through caring for our bodies, reconnecting with culture and family, and forging bonds of care with others.

Food can connect with home and feelings of comfort beyond consuming. Cooking and food exist in relation to the kitchen space and table space. JP shares how “cooking was a way for me to express gender in a sense that I like taking care of people. I like listening to them but I also like interacting with people who are behind the kitchen. I remember it was such a thing that me and my friends were helping each other in the kitchen cook dinner and stuff.” Sharing food and eating with one another as a way for them to fertilize community.

As AK shared their home with me for the oral history interview, they were baking bread for a friends potluck. Bread is significant for AK. “Bread is great. Bread is carbs. I think bread baking came out of 1) my love for bread but also I started making jams a couple years ago...I think I’ve always been fascinated with bread making, and my friend who I met through Tuesday Night Café [Asian American open mic space in LA] had a sourdough starter so we both were baking bread. The idea of sourdough starter that’s alive and can generate food, and having it shared with other QTPOC communities is really part of what drew me into bread making.”

Food can also be a way to re-connect with family, culture and roots. JP shares how a few years ago they were interested in learning their mom’s recipes especially as their mom doesn’t write anything down. “Whenever I could, I went home and I asked her to share what-how she made things she always made for me growing up.” Through this JP learned more about Vietnam and gained a better idea of home and culture.

Return Home

AK describes plurality of home as a concept. There was a loss of home connected with their queerness but later a returning to home. “I felt this loss of home and this loss of family that was tied to my queerness, and this piece of misunderstanding or just inability to see past identity that it felt totally intractable. It was a loss that I carried for seven years until my parents finally came out to that set of parents for me and they asked about my partner and it was a conversation I thought would never happen but it felt like a homecoming.”

I shared how queerness was a catalyst for me to leave home and seek belonging elsewhere. Over the past few years, I have slowly been rebuilding my relationship with my mother and this idea of home. She has begun to accept that queerness is a vital piece to who I am. We have had to re-negotiate boundaries throughout our relationship so that I can have a sense of this homecoming.

“Disidentification is a point of departure, a process, a building. Although it is a mode of reading and performing, it is ultimately a form of building. This building takes place in the future and in the present, which is to say that disidentificatory performance offers a utopian blueprint for a possible future while, at the same time, staging a new political formation in the present” (Munoz 200).

Conclusion

Queer and trans people of color within the diaspora embody a complex positionality. This project sets groundwork for exploring concepts of home and belonging through personal experiences of individuals who have been navigating these complexities and seeking their own answers. Home can be a site of displacement, violence and discomfort which contradicts

romantic notions of desire and belonging. Since home is unable to hold queer and trans people with their whole selves, it is the “other.” We move towards home and belonging by renegotiating and challenging these concepts and larger societal systems. Through our personal survival strategies, each person finds their paths home with family, food, culture, homeland, and most importantly, to belong; both within their bodies and outside in the world.

JP: “I think it’s disingenuous to think there is ever a “safe space.” I don’t consider home to be a safe space, right. For me, it’s always a point of contest, a part where I have to fight or I have to learn how to live there or I have to demand or push for more. If I’m not fighting, I’m dying. And that’s all I have to say.”

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