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# BREAKING INTO THE CLOSET: NEGOTIATING THE QUEER BOUNDARIES OF ASIAN AMERICAN MASCULINITY AND DOMESTICITY

This article concerns Asian American queer masculinity and how the “coming out” process for gay Chinese men and their non-White immigrant families does not fit neatly within neat Western gender distinctions of public/private space. Using the film *Ethan Mao* as a primary text and case study, I argue for an intersectional approach to the coming out process for racialized sexual minorities. *Ethan Mao* is a film that tells the story of a Chinese American boy expelled from the home upon his family’s discovery of his homosexuality who returns to hold his family members hostage. The fictional story thematizes the indistinct spatial and symbolic boundaries of queer Asian American identity, masculinity, and domesticity. The film observes how gay men of color do not simply come out of the closet but break into it. Through an intersectional queer of color critique, I reconceptualize “the closet” as a synecdoche of the private home space, refiguring it as a contested site of belonging/exclusion to recognize the difficulties of “coming out” for certain queer racial male subjects.

*Keywords:* Chinese, family, coming out, Asian American, Whiteness, *Ethan Mao*

“Home” names a place of much ambiguity and violence for many queer subjects. On the one hand, it names the location of familial origins and traditional kinship ties—the place where one originally comes from and supposedly belongs. On the other hand, it marks a contested violent site of struggle that brings up harsh contradictions and unresolved issues. Due to the heteronormative ideas commonly associated with “home”, I believe it is necessary to always evaluate what it means to belong to, or even claim, a “home,” particularly for queer Asian American men. Many gay men of color are rendered “outsiders among outsiders” due to their dubious status and positionality as multiply marginalized persons within a White-

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dominated society and White-majority gay community (Aguilar-San Juan, 1998; Otalvaro-Hormillosa, 1999). Through a critical analysis of Quentin Lee's film *Ethan Mao*, this essay speaks to larger issues of race, class, gender and sexuality for young gay Chinese men in particular, and Asian Americans in general.<sup>1</sup> Informed by the ways Asian American subjectivities have been historically figured in the West as non-normative racial subjects antithetical to Whiteness, this essay deconstructs the construction of queer Asian gay masculinity and domesticity not from a positive "pro-gay" standpoint, but from an intersectional queer of color perspective honing in on how certain individuals and groups arbitrate multiple spaces of exclusion.

This "multiple outsider" status applies not only to sexual minorities of color but relates broadly to the historical experience of groups like Chinese Americans in the United States, the only ethnic group barred by federal law from immigration and citizenship under the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. Chinese racial exclusion, maintained legally for over six decades, created "bachelor societies," demonized as sexually deviant geographies full of opium-using sex-starved criminals, prostitutes, and polygamous non-nuclear families. Spatial ghettoization and institutional segregation forestalled any hope of the Chinese to approximate Anglo-American nuclear family formation, engendering commonplace and enduring stereotypes about the Chinese as alien foreigners and different from Americans, installing the gendered perception of Chinese women as hypersexual entities and Chinese men as feminized, emasculated beings (Espiritu, 1997; Ono & Pham, 2009).<sup>2</sup> A reconsideration of Asian American families in the light of queer social formation pushes against the popular tendency to posit them within heteronormative framings of Asian Americans as "model minorities" with good familial upbringing. From the long vantage point of Asian American history and U.S. racial history, "home" is not a stable referent of one's place of belonging, but a contested symbolic terrain that requires us to think about how "queer" subjectivities are constituted through race (Cohen, 1997).

In *Ethan Mao*, the central character is a young gay Chinese American, whose strong-armed tactics of revolt against his family reflect a more combative strain of queer youth politics, one that does not privilege familial acceptance/exile but advocates direct action and confrontation with the social structures that underpin one-dimensional ideas about Asian American kinship. *Ethan Mao* troubles the standard model of Asian American social formation, helping audiences and scholars to consider different states of racial, gender and sexual abjection to envision alterna-

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<sup>1</sup> The film is considered a Canadian product because of its Hong Kong and Canadian financiers. The meaning of "American" however can apply to Canada so when I refer to Asian American or Chinese American, it can also mean in allude to Chinese living in the North American continent, especially given the close shared history of anti-Chinese exclusion between Canada and the U.S. and Quentin Lee's permanent residence in the U.S.

<sup>2</sup> That the U.S. was not the only country that passed anti-Chinese legislation but also Australia, Canada and New Zealand suggests that Chinese exclusion is not only restricted to the U.S. nation-state but symbolizes the widespread impact of anti-Chinese sentiment from a global sense of White Supremacy and Eurocentric sense of "Western civilization."

tive multidimensional sites of home, desire, and belonging. For some but not all gay Asian American men, “coming out” to the family is not reducible to either familial embrace or ostracism—the two primary forms for coming out of the insularity of the gay closet. “Coming out” is a disconcerting, disorienting process that puts them face-to-face with what the family means to them. In the following, I discuss the ways Ethan “breaks into the closet” to usurp the basic premises and boundaries of Chinese American domesticity and masculinity. I first discuss how an intersectional queer of color critique is appropriate for grasping not simply race or racism but Asian American “racial formation” (Omi & Winant, 1994). Secondly, I launch into an analysis of the film, first from a socio-historical perspective about how the image of Asian American family is structured around particular enforced racial norms, and secondly, how Asian American families are inherently “queer” in their own way. I then move into accounting for the psychic costs of breaking into the closet and the emotional price one pays for invading the family home. Lastly, I discuss how such displays of dissident masculinity require further disciplinary action by the police state, breaking into the closeted space of ethnic communities and sanctity of the family home.

### QUEER FAMILIES AND GAY SONS

*Ethan Mao* is part of a movement toward the rethinking of Asian American queerness. The film’s director, Quentin Lee, is arguably the most well-known gay Asian filmmaker today. His works include gay-themed movies like *Flow* (1996), *Drift* (2000), and *White Frog* (2012)<sup>3</sup> as well as *Ethan Mao* (2004), all of which examine issues of sexuality related to queer Asian Americans and feature Asian male gay leads, a rarity in mainstream Hollywood films. Born in Hong Kong, later immigrating to Canada and now living in Los Angeles, Lee is a diasporic transnational subject, whose own liminal identity and estrangement from any singular place or locale is explored in the semi-autobiographical film *Ethan Mao*, where gay subjects feels not at home anywhere in particular. As one of the few gay directors of Asian descent working in the American film industry, Lee’s oeuvre rails against stereotypes of Asian American men and queer people in featuring strong Asian gay male characters, resisting the idea that Asian men cannot be leading characters, or that gay Asian men are weak social types. In his comments to the media about why he made *Ethan Mao*, Lee states, “We’re in a culture where being gay is accepted, but there’s still pressure to be liked by everybody, to be nice—especially among gay Asian teens.... I want to go against that conformity. Go out and kick ass” (Nakao, 2005, n.p.).

*Ethan Mao* is a film described as both a stylish thriller and an edgy gay teen drama, forwarding “a celebration of hybridization and bastardization” that shows

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<sup>3</sup> His first film was 1997’s *Shopping for Fangs* with Justin Lin. *Shopping for Fangs* presented a new way of cinema reflecting “Generasian X” artists presenting more sexy Asian-Americans. While Lin went on to achieve great fame as a mainstream director for *Fast and the Furious* and *Better Luck Tomorrow* with their heterosexual macho male aesthetics, Lee stayed independent as a queer artist, revealing the uneven treatment of straight and gay subject matter.

not only the racialized sexuality of queer Asian men but elucidates the very queerness of the Chinese diasporic family.<sup>4</sup> Quentin Lee's Canadian Hong Kong background moreover pushes U.S.-centric ideas of "Asian America" to grasp the unfixedness of racial, ethnic, and sexual identity in North America and how Asian American families reflect queer diasporic spaces of (un)belonging.

Employing what Roderick Ferguson (2004) calls a "queer of color critique," I recognize Chinese Americans as *racially queer* subjects—non-White subjects, persons of Asian descent in the U.S. are historically figured as "queer" subjects, closed off and excluded from the transparency of American public identity, culture, and citizenship. Queer of color critique is an intersectional feminist analytic which traces the racial formations of heteronormativity, where sexuality/queerness offers a lens through which race is elucidated. This formulation of sexuality through the queer analytic of race helps to grasp the marginal position Chinese Americans occupy in the U.S. social imagination as racialized "foreign others" and unwanted "aliens ineligible for citizenship," neither fully inside the nation but trapped in their own silos of difference.

In her groundbreaking *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) argues that queer sexuality constitutes a kind of "Third Sex" rather than following the dichotomy of homosexuality/heterosexuality, a gesture opening out onto a queer theory that tracks a continuum of sexualities, with the closet as an identity performance. Sedgwick's work on the genealogy of the closet proves useful in thinking beyond the public/private distinction that defines gender spaces and the ways the closet as a metaphorical trope of captive, invisible private identity compels individuals and groups to "come out" and be recognized as minorities within public domains of understanding.

Historically, Asian people have been construed as "queer" subjects. In the U.S. popular imaginary, where White men and women personify gender norms of masculinity and femininity, Asians constituted a "third sex" to the extent, for example, that Chinese women were deemed excessively sexual, while Chinese men were construed as a hypersexual threat to White women or as asexual domestic servants for White women and men (R. Lee, 1999). Chinese Americans found themselves sequestered within "Chinatowns and mixed-status families not wanting to be "outed" as undocumented migrant, kept in the closet so to speak, but needing to be ferreted out or exposed by coercive means as "illegal" or "communist" spies under forced confession programs and many government probes for over a century. Chinese migrant workers were excluded from forming nuclear families and naturalizing as citizens on the premise that they were polygamous and lascivious types who could not proximate Eurocentric values of sexual companionship (E. Lee, 2003). With a serious absence of women, Chinese male-dominated communities took on the appearance of "homosocial" environments, prone to criminal violence, prostitution, and drug addiction.<sup>5</sup> Scholars have long discussed the varied

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Ideological-cultural institutions such as cinema furnished and crystallized this abiding image of Chinese as inassimilable aliens. Popular images of "Fu Manchu" and the "Dragon Lady" embodied the *menace* of the "Yellow Peril" in tandem with the *docility* of "model minority" exemplars like Suzie Wong "China Doll" and "Charlie Chan." These depictions highlighted Chinese Americans as sexless and oversexed; passive yet aggressive; socially ambiguous but also culturally exceptional and distinct. Such far-

kinds of prejudice Chinese and other ethnic Asians face in this country and how the legacy of Asian exclusion defines the core of the Chinese and Asian American experience. This exclusionist history serves as a symbolic reminder that Chinese in America are “perpetual foreigners” *within* the American polity (Chen, 1991; E. Lee, 2003; Okihiro, 1994; Takaki, 1989), never fully “American” or normative citizen-subjects because their race puts them in the category of what historian Mae Ngai (2001) terms “alien citizen” (p. 8).<sup>6</sup> Thus, even when the Chinese Exclusion Act and similar anti-Asian laws were later rescinded and more “liberal” immigration policies enacted during the 1950s and 1960s, bringing in more middle-class Chinese professionals and families, the “shadow of exclusion” according to Ngai continues to overhang later generations of East Asians and Chinese living in North America. This shadow of exclusion can be interpreted as a kind of metaphorical or literary closet, one that needs to be deconstructed in terms of the ideological and moral constraints it holds upon contemporary Chinese American identity, community, and gender formation who must always be “outed” or forced into acceptance as “true” Americans.

Cast as domestic aliens within U.S. culture, Chinese Americans occupy the status of queer to the extent that their “historically disavowed status as racial minorities and members of the U.S. nation render them queer as such” (Eng, 2001, p. 18). Segregation policies create the male-majority living conditions that created the earliest Chinatowns, which functioned to cordon off Chinese men and some women from the rest of society in conjunction with the “feminized” domesticating labor they were forced to take up (laundry, personal servants, restaurants etc.). Under this gender-queer positioning, Chinese familial relations based on homosocial non-nuclear kinship networks stand out as aberrant from the conjugal Anglo-American family for being male-dominated but not entirely masculine, as patriarchal without many women.<sup>7</sup> Even with their nomination as “good” racial subjects in the post-WW II period, the imprimatur of heterosexual “normalcy” continues to elude Chinese Americans as a result of their permanent ascription of “racial unasimilarity” (Ngai, 2001, p. 37). While they may aspire to the ideals of the American Dream, they never qualify for the criterion of “Whiteness” underlying those ideals because of their attributed queerness based on race, sexuality, gender, and ethnicity even despite their proximity to Whiteness through class, which is why many Americans do not trust even Chinese Americans, as many are viewed as se-

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reaching contradictions then place Chinese-ness (and all its racist carnations) as the delimitations of American identity, the queer margins and extremities for an unmarked “White core” within the national imaginary.

<sup>6</sup> Ngai defines an “alien citizen” as those with formal U.S. citizenship but who remained aliens or foreigners the eyes of the nation.

<sup>7</sup> Up until the mid-twentieth century, for example, stringent legal barriers such as the Page Act of 1872 barred Chinese females from immigrating on the a priori reasoning that they were all entering for prostitution work; and even those who managed to arrive came under the scrutinizing purview of government officials for vice and sexual depravity in brothel-focal kinship arrangements. The conspicuous historic absence of women from the landscape left their male counterparts to inhabit “bachelor societies” — homosocial communities believed to be organized around decadencies such as opium dens, prostitution, crime syndicates and gambling.

cret communist spies prying into secret corridors of national security, needing to be ferreted “out” from their closet of privacy and secret activities (W.H. Lee & Zia, 2003). Their queer construction as abnormal subjects is important to keep in mind against the popular tendency to read Chinese Americans today as assimilated “model minorities” not dealing with any problems of discrimination or proud immigrant citizens who do not cause any agitation, especially for the state (unlike Black, Latino/as, and Native Americans).

Moving toward discussions of how minorities are differently marginalized from and included in U.S. society, a queer of color critique forces an intersectional analysis centered on the dynamic interplay of race, gender, class and sexuality that, according to Rod Ferguson, highlights “the gendered and eroticized elements of racial formations as offering ruptural—i.e., critical—possibilities” (Ferguson, 2004, p. 17). Rather than subscribe to the conceit that Chinese Americans deserve to be recognized as “normal” family-oriented Americanized citizen-subjects, a queer feminist of color framework recognizes the organizing power of categorical identity in determining the queer ties that hold and unbind families together. Given the historic construction of Chinese as “unassimilable” pathologized subjects in the U.S., how does one negotiate issues of homelessness as an existential condition of queer Asian diaspora (Otalvaro-Hormillosa, 1999), one in which “coming out” of the closet makes no sense since there is no exclusively private or public space of queer belonging? I turn now to the film *Ethan Mao* to answer this critical question.

#### TAKING BACK THE HOME BY FORCE

Set in a nondescript California suburb, *Ethan Mao* refashions the coming-out/coming-of-age story and ethnic “coming home to find roots” narrative for a postmodern milieu.<sup>8</sup> Described as a “psychological thriller ... about a family falling apart and sort of coming back together” (Kamala, 2005, p. 182), the film presents the exigencies of a boy’s battle with the family who disowns him for being gay. Director Quentin Lee wished to create a “teen rebel” icon for the younger generation (*ibid.*). What is remarkably different in this account of familial drama from the kind typically depicted in many contemporary films about gay children exiled from the home is the way in which it turns the familiar story of inter-generational conflict on its head. The film departs from the well-worn narrative of exiled gay teens that reconcile with their family or leave the family permanently. It does so by featuring a teenage gay Asian rebel returning from exile to torment his family for jettisoning him.

The treacherous journey to return home and taking back the family home space by violent force reverses the standard teleology of queer development—usually about adolescent escape or estrangement from the family followed either by coop-

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<sup>8</sup> This zeitgeist of course is defined by tastes of generations Q and Y. Generation Q stands for the newly emerging gay generation that is more openly brazen about their sexuality, coming out at an earlier age than previous generations. Generation Y stands for the civic-minded and political generation of youth born sometime in the 1990’s after their predecessors, the indifferently yuppie and wealth-obsessed Generation X. Coincidentally, in this same period a fully realized Asian American gay community and commercial scene emerged in the U.S.

tation into the gay community or acceptance and reincorporation into the original family. While gay coming out stories speak to the alienation of all queer youth, many fail to explore how racialized subjects are barred simultaneously from gay culture and mainstream White culture. In the titular character's desire to literally occupy and take back his home on his own terms, *Ethan Mao* dislodges the "model minority myth" and racial fantasy of the middle-class Chinese American family as a stable domestic institution foreclosed of violence, homo-social and queer possibility.

According to sociologist Mary Douglas (1991), the home can be a safe space but also one of tyranny where the "young wish to be free of its scrutiny and control" (p. 287), particularly when the ethnic dimension of the home-space provides the structured dimension of domesticity. The home doubles as the closet: the place where one is silenced or disciplined in regard to learned social scripts, the proper way to behave in order to function in society. In this regard, the queer act of reclaiming the original family home, as a reclamation of the silence of the closet, "sets up the psychic landscape of the loss of home and, more precisely, the significance of what it means to emotionally refuse the knowledge that home is lost" (Georgis, 2006, n.p.). For some, moreover, carving a space of home outside the family in public society is much too difficult.

"Coming out" and transitioning into the gay community poses a difficult choice for gay Chinese American men because such an act is complicated due to the ways race interacts with gender and sexuality in the United States (Bhugra, 1990; Hom, 1996; Manalansan, 1997; Wat, 2002).<sup>9</sup> Indeed, coming out as defined traditionally in U.S. mainstream gay culture presupposes the nuclear family as the *sine qua non* of heterosexuality, with the assumption of a fundamental difference between queer subjects and their heterosexual family which must be renegotiated or reprocessed through the queer individual's move towards familial and societal affirmation, becoming like "everyone else." Disregarding the imbrications of race and sexuality, however, fails to recognize that not *all* families are classified or seen as "normal."

The story commences with young sexually curious Ethan going online to meet older men for unsatisfying secret trysts and encounters. Later, his conniving step-mother mother, Sarah, discovers and seizes the boy's gay pornographic magazines, disclosing the incriminating evidence to Ethan's father. This exposure sets up the son's confrontation with the family patriarch who expulses the boy from the premises of the house. This moment of severance achieves its harshest injury and wounding by reframing the "coming out" predicament absent of any form of choice. "Is this what you are?" his father Abraham screams before continuing, "If I hadn't promised your mom before she died, I'd..." and before he could finish his sentence, Ethan shouts back "then what?" The father answers, "If you're really this, then you're not my son. And you gotta live somewhere else!" There appears to be no other option for Ethan other than indefinite ostracism for being gay within a supposedly upstanding Asian household. There are no attempts to discuss or process the situation; Ethan leaves promptly without another word.

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<sup>9</sup> Scholarship in sociology and psychology points to the unique difficulties gay Asians face in coming out compared to their White counterparts, especially in terms of explicitly disclosing in verbal and confrontational ways one's sexuality to family and friends.



Ejection from the family inducts Ethan into a derelict life punctuated by vagrancy, drug abuse, and commercial sex work. The boy turns to hustling, succeeding at this newfound trade because he was “just the right type” for mature gay male clientele.<sup>10</sup> Bewildered and lost, Ethan’s yearns for some permanent home; and one client propositions him with such a possibility. In one poignant scene, an older White man asks the 18-year-old boy: “Did you think about what we talked about? About you not having a home and maybe I could adopt you if you want. Living here would be better than where you’re living now.” Offering to fill the orphan’s void of a father figure and a home, the White man entices the teenager with a surrogate place to live but accepting the terms of this offer means Ethan must negate his old life while benefiting from what Vicente Raphael (2000) calls “White love.” In American popular culture, gay identity is synonymous with middle-class Whiteness, and to be a young gay Asian implies subsistence on Anglo paternalism. In gay dating culture such relationships are cohered around a fetishistic relationship between the quintessential “rice queen” or older White man who loves youthful Asian boys. The ensuing interracial affair will fulfill Ethan’s desire for emotional attachment to some type of family and offer a form of re-masculinization for his gay male identity (formerly supplied by the patriarchal Asian family) within a homosocial racial economy of queer desire.

If living outside the bounds of his family leaves Ethan deprived of a strong racial and class foundation, he potentially gains another in the form of symbolic or “honorary Whiteness” under the patronage of a wealthy White man (Tuan, 1998; Zhou, 2004). As cultural anthropologist Martin Manalansan (1997) argues, this model of becoming gay via Whiteness is embedded in Western assumptions of race involving distinctions between a “private” and “public” life, where “gay identity gains meaning according to a developmental narrative that begins with an unliberated subjectivity (usually ethnic) that culminates in a liberated modern, gay subjectivity” (p. 487). Universalizing constructions of the “coming out” process, Manalansan asserts, poses a particular trajectory of queer (male) liberation which elides racial and gender differences, particularly those related to Asian queer identity (*ibid*, p. 490). The telos of gay coming out which begins with feelings of insecurity, trauma, and abjection to conclude with visibility and confidence offers an “emancipated” sexual world entailing the abandonment of the rigidity of Asian cultural parochialism for the “free” lifestyle of homo-cosmopolitanism. In this developmental paradigm, “race” and “sexuality” are set up as diametrically opposed with White gay modernity serving as the vehicle for liberation from the suffocating “closet” and closed-mindedness of Confucian patriarchal familism.

According to Jasbir Puar (2007), the idea that the U.S. is a country increasingly accepting of sexual diversity and gays elides the continued marginalization and exclusion of queer non-White racial subjects. Such an idea buys into a liberal multicultural fiction of American democracy that does nothing but entrenches state policing of “alien” Orientalized bodies (i.e., terrorists), (homo)nationalism and racism through a newfound acceptance of (White) homosexuality. “Coming out” as gay in this homonationalist liberal context seems like a peaceful assimilationist

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<sup>10</sup> This desperate resort to tricking can be construed as fulfilling commonplace stereotypes of Asians as ready-made prostitutes for older Whites; “just the right type” mentioned in the film alludes to his small stature and Asian exoticism.

process, despite the underlying silences and violence such a transition suggests. It is here that queers of color must “break into the closet,” confronting all the buried social harms and moral injuries inflicted upon them rather than simply leaving or escaping from them.

Against such pressures to fall into the clutches of homonationalism and the arms of a White “daddy” figure, Ethan veers off into another course of action. For one, he forges an intimate relationship with a fellow hustler boy named Remigio—a romantic coupling which rejects Orientalist liaisons between young *gaysians* and older White men for the love found among poor queer youth of color. With the young Latino Remigio as a lover and ally, Ethan feels empowered and sets out on an irrevocable project to go back to the home from which he was originally banished. Refusing to accept exile as his fate for being gay—he never really chose to “come out” but was exposed—Ethan now seeks to *break into* the closet, forcing his way into the secret corridors of his family’s life. What began as a tale of losing “home” subsequently devolves into an armed struggle to take it back by any means necessary.

Ethan returns to his family’s house under the pretext of stealing his deceased mother’s diamond necklace (out of sentimental reasons) while his family is away on vacation. He manages to break into the house but before succeeding at his robbery plans, the family members unexpectedly return early from their outing. Abraham, the father, discovers the intruders and, as a result of a physical altercation with his dad, Ethan shoots his father in the leg and accidentally holds the entire family hostage, promising their release upon receiving the mother’s necklace, which turned out to be secured in a bank deposit safe not accessible until the bank opens a day later after the holidays. Trapped in the house with his kin, Ethan decides to exact revenge on his family, but this decision to stay forces him to grapple with the precarious circumstances in which he entangled himself.

Ethan’s home invasion transforms the personal alienation from the family into armed hostility and force against the family home.<sup>11</sup> It reconsiders acts of violence inside the home as unsettling critiques of Asian/American domestic formation. Offering insight into an emerging queer of color youth identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, his militant desire for acceptance unnerves his family and the threatening *demands* for acceptance by this former runaway gives context to the sometimes violent ways queer of color masculinities are conveyed.

Ethan’s transgression exposes the previous problems he has had with his father but also his stepmother. While the father is overbearing and strict, it is the stepmother Sarah whose deviousness and manipulations of the men makes her the true villain in this queer family story. During the hostage crisis, Sarah constantly reminds Ethan that this is his family which he *must* love and that he must act normally with them. Yet, Sarah plays the most perverted and twisted character in the film, whose craziness makes everyone else including Ethan look “normal.” It is Sarah who Ethan tries to humiliate in order to attain a privileged authoritarian position within the family. Resenting his stepmother’s original betrayal in leaking his gay lifestyle as well as her overwhelming power in the family, the boy deploys sex-

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<sup>11</sup> Not that Freud discounts any existence of homosexuality and abnormality within the structures of the family but his models often are posited as normative correctives for socially deviance such as incest, homosexuality, etc.

ist actions against her, which simply recode male domination as a way of thwarting female duplicity. The quest to take over the family home, then, is not entirely a benign enterprise as it takes place through sadistic control. Ethan binds Sarah in rope constraints and denigrates his stepmother, calling her a “bitch” while using firearms as a phallicentric form of duress and penetration into the home—things that reflect a crisis of Asian American masculinity supportive of violence to gain power (Chin, 1991).

In an end, a clumsily executed attempt to literally reclaim the belongings of the ‘home,’ and figuratively the memory of his dead mother, results in Ethan reasserting himself in his family as head-of-house. As we soon discover, not everything is right with this family.<sup>12</sup> Characters say and do out-of-the-ordinary things precluding any sense of normalcy. Stepmom Sarah, now tied up by the two teens, purposely urinates in her chair, grinning with erotic pleasure because she is denied visitation to the bathroom. When she is later released, the stepmother flirts with her teenage captor, Remigio, who she knows is gay and involved with Ethan. From earlier accounts, we learn that Remigio’s mother had left him years ago when he was a young boy to become an actress. Sarah herself is an aspiring actress, and the subtle hint of Sarah’s role-playing in ways reminiscent of the original mother and the foreboding sense of incest following this woman’s attempt to seduce Remigio underscores the current of illicit maternal impulses and violation of sexual taboos permeating the house. Antics such as these obviate not only the family’s sexual perversity but also queerness of the wickedness of the stepmother.

While Sarah’s strange behavior evinces the “queer” aspects of Mao familial relations, the once-widowed Abraham and his sons—Ethan and the effeminate (possibly gay) younger brother Noel are Chinese American.<sup>13</sup> Yet, the narcissistic stepmother Sarah and her diffident son Josh are racially ambiguous as their phenotypical features suggest that they are of mixed Asian-White ancestry. Sarah is constructed as a demonic shrew who exploits the conservative father, the latter of whom works hard in his convenience store to support her lavish lifestyle. Abraham’s marriage to a woman such as Sarah breaks the typology of a pure, good and “authentic” Chinese family, inasmuch as it figures forth the problematic of miscegenation. Problematically, the film sets up Sarah as the main instigator for conflicted relationship between Abraham and Ethan. An original act of betrayal sets this family drama up not really as a conflict between father and son but mother and stepson. This internal feminine domestic threat embodied by the stepmother looms large throughout the film meanwhile as other threats from outside the home intrude upon this domestic scene.

When Ethan shoots his father in the leg, the sound of the gunshot echoes throughout the vicinity and Mrs. Haversham, an elderly neighbor, rushes over to investigate. Ethan orders his younger brother Noel to deal with the woman, but upon meeting Noel at the door, Mrs. Haversham inquisitions the young boy by

<sup>12</sup> “Camp” is a queer aesthetic or style recognizable for its outrageousness and ability to deliver social commentary through satiric exaggeration.

<sup>13</sup> Not all the actors in real life are ethnically Chinese. David Tran who plays the brother is Vietnamese and Jun Hee Lee (Ethan Mao) is Korean American. This broad range of diversity provides and demands a pan-ethnic Asian American perspective to the film.

asking, "Do you know what day this is?" to which the frightened Noel responds, "Thanksgiving." Mrs. Haversham retorts:

*Exactly.* This is a very important national holiday so if you could please keep the noise level down which means *no* banging, *no* screaming and *please* don't play your Hong Kong action movies too loud ... [speaking slowly as if the boy could not comprehend English] do ... you ... understand?

The hostility and haughtiness reflected in the White woman's mannerisms intu- its racial animus toward the Mao family, revealing her annoyance with their pres- ence in *her* community, a locus of WASPish gentility that serves as backdrop to the family's internal ethnic drama. Her stereotypical assertions (*your* Hong Kong Ac- tion movies) and questioning (Do *you* know what day it is?) call attention to the big- otry of the people in surrounding area and ubiquitous supposition that Chinese are ignorant to "American" traditions like Thanksgiving. The neighbor's sentiments instill the family's presence as a contamination of the homogeneous sterility of her suburban bubble. For the Mao's, the woman's racism intimates the larger social structures that make "them" a queer target of discrimination from normative White bourgeois society, lumping all of them together as a group despite their problems with one another.<sup>14</sup> Mrs. Haversham's display of opprobrium recasts the discrim- inating gaze by which Chinese families are construed as dangerous "ethnic en- claves": cloistered communal spaces defined by insularity, secrecy, and craziness. This "closeting" of the Mao family shows how the Chinese family is "fully em- bedded in the historical specificity of the Asian American experience in this coun- try" with prejudice (Xing, 1998, p. 126).

The encounter demonstrates how assimilation into White America remains out of reach for the Mao's on account of the racial queer threat they symbolize (despite their middle-class lifestyle or perhaps due to its being aspired in proximity to wealthy Whites). In fact, it took Ethan's forceful return to the house to occasion some sense of domesticity in an otherwise chaotic scenography of the Mao family home. When temporarily released from bondage under Ethan's generosity the fam- ily tries to assemble a hastily improvised Thanksgiving holiday meal to diffuse ten- sions, overcompensating for the lack of unity. They try to gather around like a cohesive family but the family members know they are still prisoners of Ethan. This sets up an awkward performance of intimacy in the context of a hostage situation.<sup>15</sup> For a short while, the forced scripting of familial cohesiveness allows everyone to sit together in peace but as night falls; the trauma of Ethan's return to the home- space forces the boy to confront the interminable problems of his psyche.

<sup>14</sup> Lighting choices reflect a racial divide. For example, the glaring brightness of exter- ior shots stands in contrast to the melancholy hues and darkness of the interior; and most of the ambient lighting for the home (where the vast portion of the action takes place) is illuminated by natural light (read as purity and brilliance) penetrating the shad- owy depths and dark sanctum of the home, which is seen as sinister.

<sup>15</sup> However, while the family momentarily offers grace, Abraham prays that God will forgive Ethan for his "sins" alluding to both the criminality of Ethan's actions as well as the boy's homosexuality.

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 QUEER DOMESTICITY AND ITS PSYCHIC DISCONTENTS
 

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Dreams sequences splice the filmic narrative, making it difficult to discern what, as night falls, is real and what is not. During his time as a gigolo, Ethan experienced these same dreams. In the surreal dreamscape, two recurring nightmares haunt our protagonist.<sup>16</sup> One manifests a flashback memory of his deceased mother gazing stoically out a window and the other involves premonitions of his being murdered by his own father. This beloved Chinese mother looms large as a personification of the original past and childhood innocence; her deification stands in stark contradistinction to the castrating threat embodied by his father. These recurring motifs and the oneiric desires they convey indicate the home as both a dangerous and idyllic site. While Ethan hopes to repossess the memory of his mother by returning to the home to steal her necklace, the mission to reclaim the past ends up with him squaring off against his father who considers his son a “monster” and poses a hypermasculine menace to the boy’s self-esteem and development as a young gay boy.<sup>17</sup> In Freudian terms, Ethan’s abiding fear of murder by his father reveals the imposition of the symbolic Law-of-Father. Though Ethan physically has his father under his control, his nightmares point to his unresolved problems with and wariness toward Abraham reflective of an unresolved Oedipal Complex. According to Freud in his book *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1978), a young boy desires to assume the place of the phallus, driven by the immanent wish to kill the phallic father.

If we want to read Ethan’s dreams as psychic wish-fulfillments, it is evident that the young boy’s residual attachment to his mother draws on the need to seek reunification with the primal wholeness of being (and queer deification of femininity) she epitomizes. In Freudian psychoanalysis, a boy becomes a disciplined normal subject of society by deferring his desire for communion with this mother and delaying his innate wish to kill his own father. Feminist scholars and critics of psychoanalysis have pointed to its phallogocentric, hence male-centered approach and its inability to recognize female subjectivity and queer desire (Flax, 1990; Grosz, 1995). The phallogocentric structure of Western society and the “Law of the Father” stipulates a gendered identification with the male-driven superego and its rules of engagement, but this transformation assumes much in terms of sexual orientation and race. Desire under this heteropatriarchal configuration always constitutes a void, a lack that is never fulfilled because it is always in relation to the phantasmal desire for the mother, submission to the phallic authority of the Father (representing society at large), and refocusing the violent tendencies of the id into productive socio-sexual channels. This psychic process of resolving the infantile id-ego (where gender/sexual identity first manifests) might reappear in the sexual turmoil of later

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<sup>16</sup> Many of these dreams appear as hallucinations following use of drugs supplied by Remigio. Ethan’s constant insomnia and tense fears are elevated the longer he stays in his house.

<sup>17</sup> The names Abraham and Sarah are biblical allusions, referring to the story in which God promised and eventually granted the elderly couple the gift of a child, Isaac (a name alliterating with Ethan). In a biblical parable of faith and the tests of fatherhood, God ordered Abraham to kill Isaac, but before Abraham could commit such a terrible act, God relieved him of his duty.

teenage years—especially for gays who do not fit easily into gender norms. This psychoanalytic lens makes demands for a more thorough understanding of psychic burdens and costs imposed on Asian American male subjects due to their “racial castration” in American White supremacist society (Eng, 2011, p. 22). As literary critic David Eng reminds us,

The consolidation of the symbolic order is contingent up unstated norms of heterosexuality and Whiteness.... In their ideal form, heterosexuality and Whiteness maintain their compulsory power by remaining veiled and undisclosed. (2001, p. 142)

Though Freud was ambivalent about homosexuality, Eng believes sensitivity to matters of race within psychoanalytical frameworks provides clues into the complex libidinal dynamics of Chinese American queer identity.

At best, psychoanalysis enriches and supplements queer of color cultural critique by elucidating the gender/sexual development of gay male subjects like Ethan insofar as their return to the home-space involves a psychic “return of the repressed”—an encounter with the uprooted desires of early childhood “love-objects” and traumas represented by the mother/father. This mental return of the repressed as the physical return of the reject forefronts the myriad forms of racial/sexual exclusion that gave rise to queer kinship patterns for Chinese Americans. Thus, Ethan’s absent mother signifies the Chinese mother/woman missing from the early history of feminized male-dominated Chinese communities in U.S. society. Ethan’s psychic and material desires for reclaiming his mother’s memory invokes the disavowed (and unattainable) of pure family bliss, gender normativity, and sexual chastity incarnated by her. It reveals the absence of heteronormativity missing from the Mao family. Through these dreams, Ethan comes to recognize that his queer identity is a not a problem that can be resolved within the family home since “queerness” a liminal condition that marks the normative space he and his fellow family members already occupy. Individuals like Ethan do not evidence a queer departure from the family norm. Their family is already queer. To be Chinese and gay in America is always already to inhabit a commingled space of two queer subcultures.

The return to the home space fails to reestablish Ethan’s former place in the family, evidenced by the continual nightmares he experiences throughout the whole hostage ordeal under his family’s “queer domesticity.” Queer domesticity is a term employed by historian Nayan Shah, which he defines as the

variety of erotic ties and social affiliations that counters normative expectations ... [which] question the formation of exclusionary norms of respectable middle-class, heterosexual marriage ... [and] upsets the strict gender roles, the firm divisions between public and private, and the implicit presumptions presumptions of self-sufficient economics and intimacy in the respectable domestic household. The models of spatial arrangements, gender, and sexuality in the ideal of respectable domesticity contrasted with the fears articulated in White representations of the perverse spaces, anomalous gender roles, and deviant sexualities. (Shah, 2005, pp. 13-14)

Upon further scrutiny, Ethan’s family does not follow strict norms of gender and domestic respectability since the home space of the Chinese family in White dis-

course is a perverse site of deviant sexualities. Ethan's "dis-identification" (Muñoz, 1999) with his family helps him to apprehend the home place as both a fraught site of contestation and a place vital for his survival (against racism and compulsory White heterosexuality) marks it as "a marginally safe place to critique oppression outside its confines" (Johnson, 2001, p. 19). Once he recognizes his desire for familial belonging/identification is forever foreclosed to him and that it is possible to join the family again, his feelings of "racial melancholia" (Cheng, 2000) morph quickly into neurosis from the fear that perhaps he too cannot withstand the pressures and perversity of his own queer clan. Ethan's longing to rejoin the family and to relocate his mother's memory fractures in the face of the boy's aggressive acts against his own family members. This sense of longing and lack is captured by the absence of dialogue in the film, a text characterized by awkward silences, long moments of lusty stares that structure the disjointed scenes of the film, which ends with a *deus ex machina*.

Ethan seizing of control of his family and keeping them arrested by gunpoint leads to an explosive "breakdown of meaning" between meanings of cruelty and necessity, subjection and oppression, insider and outsider that bring him face-to-face with his own inescapable psychic space of abjection. Abraham, the father figure held up previously as a model for male emulation and deference is now at his son's mercy; the evil stepmother has been tamed. The son is no longer the ostracized castaway, the gay child threatened with castration by the father; now it is "Abraham" who is emasculated, fearing that his homicidal son will kill him and occupy the patronymic name of the father. Ethan must now renegotiate his positionality within his queer family that he now holds captive as his prisoners.

#### CONTESTING THE MYTH OF THE HETERO-NORMATIVE ASIAN AMERICAN FAMILY

Near the end of the hostage crisis, Abraham offers to take back his son and take him back into the fold of the family, a gesture of good-will to which an angry Ethan spurns by saying, "When I left that morning, I was no longer your son." As proof of this literal erasure, Ethan's face is etched out from all family portraits in the house. The boy's refusal to capitulate to the father's demands for his inclusion gives Ethan agency in the face of his father's attempt to once again determine his role in the family. In the morning, Ethan decides in a moment of rashness to give Sarah the lone responsibility of leaving the house and withdrawing the diamond necklace belonging to Ethan's biological mother from the bank; he is still intent on getting back the memory of his mother in any form. On her way there, however, Sarah rushes to the police to report the hostage situation at home. In this final act of betrayal, Ethan, is once again "outed", this time to the outside world as a queer criminal, one who holds hostage his own family. Law enforcement agents soon surround the house, placing the family under surveillance. The protracted family struggle ends with interruption by the police as a repressive state apparatus that threatens the collective binds of the family. Against this external threat from the racial state, the men in the house rally around one another against a common enemy, the father wanting to protect his gay son.

Gender plays a pivotal role in this domestic interplay of masculine power. The final unity of Ethan, his lover, his father, and brothers in the house (itself a rich metaphor for Chinese bachelor societies) is achieved through Sarah's disappearance from the home as well as her final act of treachery. The staged opposition of

Chinese men against the threat of hegemonic authority (embodied here by the police) is transacted through the negation of *femaleness*. Indeed, the film's idolatry of the natal (good) mother as a foil to the demonization of the (bad) stepmother serves to prop women up as mere ciphers for a male-centered narrative that suggests Asian men must confront their emasculated/castrated/feminized social status by "idealizing heteropatriarchy as the rational organization of society" and gaining manhood "through the recuperation of [*sic*] phallogocentric loss" and exercise of misogyny (Ferguson, 2004, p. 140).

*Ethan Mao* sets up the position of women as diametrically opposed and subordinate to men. Sarah's negative depiction buttresses what feminist film theorist Teresa de Lauretis (1987) considers the centrality of the "male hero" narrative with women as villains or minor objects of (sexual) interest. Throughout the film, Sarah stands out as arguably the queerest character of them all, the one undermining assumptions of familial domestic stability and sexuality, the one that cannot be normalized or disciplined, undermining the sense of personal worth for all the men in the family. Sarah is evil incarnate with no sense of conscience or loyalty to the family. Once Sarah vanishes from sight, the lurking threat of female power, coupled to the phallic threat of state surveillance, enables the men to put aside their differences and bond as a team to deal with external threats to the family.

I believe the short shrift given to Sarah and Lee's emphasis on the suppressed rage of maleness, masculine violence and male bonding—despite their complicatedness—plays into a gay male sexism that never gives women like Sarah full agency or emotional depth under the male auteur gaze and filmic narrative. For this reason, the only person who never achieves happiness, acceptance or love is Sarah. Secret plotting by this Asian Dragon Lady against her step son serves as the catalyst for a redrawing of the boundaries of Asian American masculinity/family to include gay and straight men, inducing the final stand by the Mao men as a single-sex unit against the police, now much stronger without Sarah's corrosive influence. The centrality of Asian American maleness is figured through a fairy-tale-like matricide, where the original good mother is dead and the mixed race stepmother faces a kind of social death. Literary scholar Richard Rodriguez (2010), speaking in the context of Latino/a families, writes, the heteropatriarchal force of ethnic male machismo and its attachment to the family organize gender roles and reproduces discrepancies between queer women and men of color, thereby underlining the need for a "provisional embrace of queer kinship" (pp. 15, 18). Ethan's Asian gay masculinity finds redemption in queer male kinship through the reproduction of gender norms and exclusions, where Asian masculinity is recuperated and unified through the hypersexualized elision of Asian women.

When asked about any possible redeeming qualities for the character of Sarah, and why she is depicted as pure evil incarnate, Quentin Lee responds that,

That's sort of coming from the point of view of the audience—I think that I enjoy writing her as a super bitch. Why not? We have these stereotypes of Asian women being submissive and she isn't, she sort of tries to be in control of her life, but the tragedy of it all is that she isn't, but she still tries to insist on this control, so that's sort of how I see it ... there needs to be some sort of antagonist, the movie starts off as the father being the antagonist, kicking out the son, but in the end, it turns out to be the stepmom. And it's more genre, less thriller, the type that you need to have an antagonist. And I don't think that anyone should have to come around (Tung, 2004, n.p.)



In reacting against “Lotus Blossom” Orientalist stereotypes of submissive Asian women, Lee unintentionally replicates the “Dragon Lady” crafty female villain trope and overbearing Chinese “Tiger Mom” archetype. Lee’s decision to label Sarah as a “super bitch” (an incompetent one because of her actual lack of control) and make her the film’s antagonist rather than the father exposes the sexism exhibited by gay men and the gendered derogatory ways gay Asian men view Asian women. This gendered perspective is cemented by the act of male bonding in the finale.

In a tense climactic scene, an anonymous police voice calls on the phone to urge the besieged captors in the house to surrender, an act that hails and interpellates Ethan as a criminal subject. What is interesting to recognize in this encounter is the state’s broad authority as regulator of social behavior and norms. No police officers are pictured in the film. The omnipotence of the state’s instrumentality and sovereignty is rendered opaque, its technologies of control made even more powerful by virtue of its transparency in contrast to the claustrophobic spaces of the Mao home. Insofar as the ending marks a confrontation between the family’s authority and the state’s, we see the father willing to use his power to save his son from excessive punishment under the police. Insofar as queer young men do not fare well in the prison system, Abraham offers to get a lawyer for both Ethan and Remigio so the two boys would receive immunity but this option seems infeasible given the dire circumstances.

The spectral violence exhibited in the film’s climax demonstrates state imposition in Asian American queer domesticity. It also shows the abridgement of Asian American masculinity to break into the closet, insofar as the family’s negotiation of Ethan’s gayness is nullified by the state’s desire to arrest Ethan. Moving from cultural foreigners within the national landscape into incarcerated racial minorities, the sheer force of the state policing apparatus offers the “racial naturalization” procedure elaborated by Devon Carbado (2005), which remains the primary “process or experience through which people enter the imagined American community as racial subjects” (p. 651). The Maos’ failure to be “normal” Americans or live peacefully in the neighborhood, and Ethan’s refusal to live a quiet gay existence, gives preemptive reason for the state to break into the family’s closet of secrets. Policing leaves a lasting reminder that those who are queer can never escape the arms and watchful eyes of the state. For Ethan Mao, his wanting to renegotiate gay life with the family is forestalled, his violent attempt to recapture the family home space exposed as a *perilous* threat to the larger social order. The attempted home invasion by the police displays the tenuous place of Chinese Americans in the U.S., illustrating how the imaginary division between “private” and “public” spheres does not really exist for racialized subjects and immigrant communities. Contemporary forms of state intrusion into the private lives of ethnic people’s extend Nayan Shah’s (2005) historical study of the intense public assault on Chinese “bachelor societies” for “vice,” actions which speak to the lack of domestic security and the pervasiveness of state violence within the lives of queered racial minorities.

Ethan is finally pushed to commit suicide in the face of all this pressure. In an act of selflessness, Remigio decides to turn himself in alone for the sake of his panic-stricken lover: “Listen,” Remigio reminds Ethan, “You don’t have that bad, there’s still a lot love for you and you can’t take that for granted.” The homeless, family-less Remigio tells Ethan that he cannot give up his family since their love for him is strong, reinforcing the stereotype of middle-class Asian American families bet-

ter-off than broken brown ones. Ethan does not believe that his “family” is enough as a source of love or protection and refuses this suggestion. Remigio then knocks Ethan to the ground and reminds the foolish boy, “You goddamn brat, they [the family] loves you.” The two lovers decide to stand together and submit to police custody as an indivisible queer couple. The family struggle concludes with Ethan recognizing the love of his family and his love for Remigio, another criminalized queer of color youth—all of whom are bound up to the lay of the land. They return to the dominant symbolic order not as free persons but yet as self-determined desiring autonomous subjects who still love one another despite the pressures of social intolerance and coercive state violence. Before Ethan turns himself over to the police, it is Abraham who turns to his son and says, “I’m glad you came home.” Yet ‘home’ here no longer represents the space of comfort or return to origins but a newly pronounced space of political and psychic contestation. The films thereby reminds audiences that love is the “preserver of life” as Freud once said whose power eventually triumphs over the death drive even though the instinct for death, killing and murder never dissipates (Freud, 1961, p. xxiv). This desire for love and survival in the face of fear, death and destruction defines the existential condition of so many queer men of color, where the positive wish for a better life can never negate the specter of death haunting life.

In a moment of daring, Ethan kisses Remigio in front of his father who passively accepts their relationship. Here, the struggle to win recognition from a once powerful masculine authority ends as the boys declare their love for one another before the eyes of the family patriarch. Though his initial reaction in meeting Remigio was hostile (Ethan ignored Remigio’s advances which made Remigio call Ethan a “little bitch”), Ethan’s feelings toward Remigio turns into a love contract that no one can break. No longer forced to accept compulsory heteronormativity in gay or mainstream society or his family, Ethan finds himself in an alternative shared space of queer belonging with Remigio. Admittedly, his detention by the state reinforces his subjection to cultural hegemony, but by not allowing audiences to read Ethan’s incarceration by police in terms of complete defeat, the film’s conclusion suggests the necessity of resisting the larger structural violence that institutes queer subjection through dissident articulations of desire. It reveals the incomplete project of ‘home’ and reclaiming it along with masculinity, boldfacing the constant need of queers to create or forge relations of love (for oneself and others) wherever one can.

Battling state violence through public displays of affection offers an instructive lesson to resist heteronormative oppression and attests to the power of individuals to challenge larger forces that constrain their racialized queer personhood and keep them silent in the closet. Ethan Mao walks through the door to be arrested but we never see any police officers placing him in handcuffs. There is a blinding shot of Ethan and Remigio entering a haze of light and this image leaves the question of his fate open; the amorphous Whiteness of a police state and American society engulfing the closeted darkness of the Asian American family home and queer identity. The director’s decision not to pictorialize the boys’ arrest ponders the possibilities of imagining freedom outside incarceration as the boys are assumed to enter (the equally homosocial queer space) of the jail or prison. The film gestures towards an emancipative politics of queer love, despite the always imminent threat of imprisonment, noting the ways multiply marginalized queer subjects are not only subjects of discursive power but how they are simultaneously agents of power despite their precarious futures and tumultuous pasts.

*Ethan Mao* revises the typical coming out gay story as well as narrative of Asian American immigrant family dramas, which typically focus on intergenerational problems to subvert “the notion of monolithic identities by emphasizing the process of ‘becoming’ rather than ‘being’” (Xing 1998, p. 126). The film’s conclusion offers no definite answers related to coming out, only the possibility to break in the closet and renegotiate the boundaries of family domesticity through an “arrested” queer Asian masculinity. As Asian American scholar Eric Reyes (1995) reminds us, queer Asian Americans must often access social sites (closets, homes, jails, gay enclaves, suburbs), which are heavily contested sites of power. Eric Reyes (1995) writes about the tension existing between queer desire and the Asian sense and ideals of place, both of which leave queer Asian Americans without some rooted place to call home. For this reason, they make do with the spaces available to them, transforming and breaking into those spaces in the process. Thus, *Ethan Mao* calls for a radicalized sense of queer Asian America and its attenuated forms of love for sexually “deviant” men. This militant queer politics of desire advances an anti-assimilationist narrative and emphasizes the power of queer actions (motivated equally by aggression and love) to challenge the violence that emanates from the outside and inside the home.

### CONCLUSION

Many Asian American queer subjects, to borrow a phrase from Homi Bhaba (1994), occupy “unhomely lives”—spaces of estrangement from traditional notions of “home” where *home* refers to both the domestic spaces of kinship and the nation. To be *unhomely* is not the same thing as being *homeless*; “home” can exist within interstitial spaces of intersubjective exchange insofar as

the recesses of the domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting. (Bhaba, 1994, p. 9)

If achieving or having a “home” entails normative identification with hegemonic heterosexuality and Whiteness or Asian American patriarchy, then Asian American gays might disavow these things for a defiant queer of color identity that breaks into the closet, an act of disidentification with familial silence/trauma/violence that does not forsake or assimilate into “the closet,” but rupture its racial, gender, and sexual underpinnings. Breaking with the norms and laws of society always comes at the threat of state retaliation. Resistance to racialized heteronormativity comes at a price for the queer subject as shown by Ethan’s arrest by the police.

Overall, the film’s affirmation of gay Asian male subjectivity and queer domesticity reacts to the social abjection of the Chinese American family and the popular negation of Chinese American manhood based on emasculation and feminization (Chan, 2001), but Ethan’s recuperation of manhood and family enact its own form of psychic and physical violence by disavowing women. For queer exiled youth of color such as Ethan, the plot of breaking into the sacrosanct space of the home and its memories rupture the normative domiciles of familial love, but also the unsettled gendered foundations and contradictory structures of domination that com-

pose such spaces. Multiply-marginalized queers are never really at home anywhere, but the film observes how they can at least find comfort within their own rebellious desires for “breaking boundaries and transgression and looking for connection” as director Quentin Lee puts it (Nakao, 1995, n.p.). To the degree that family, home, and closet are not stable referents of intimacy and privacy, but signifiers of a social matrix whose shifting boundaries are always being determined, queer men of color continue to demolish the neat categorical distinctions between insider/outsider, home/exile, closet/coming out through their own volition.

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