1. Going Home

Enacting Justice in Queer Asian America

Karin Aguilar-San Juan

We will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.—SALMAN RUSHDIE, *Imaginary Homelands*

The Problem of Authenticity

It is a funny thing to be writing an essay about going home when, at the moment, there is really no place I call "home." I was born in Boston but eventually left for Providence. I recently moved to southern California, which has always fascinated me. To go westward is, for an Asian American, to go home, in the sense that many Asian Americans have family in California, in Washington state, or farther west, in Hawai'i. But my immediate family is currently scattered around the Midwest.[1]

For many years, I have been concerned with the way we, as Asian American lesbians and gay men, think about going home.[2] Many of us simply cannot do so, at least not openly, because of the intolerance of parents, relatives, or friends who bristle at our "lifestyles." For too many of my friends, going home involves entering a closet of furtive whispers and private pain. Once I went with several AMALGM[3] members to a Boston suburb, where we had been invited by a friend to enjoy a sumptuous Filipino feast with her family. But since our host had not come out to her mother, we disguised ourselves by sitting around the living room in purposeful order: boy, girl, boy, girl. This superficially heterosexual arrangement made home a safe place for our friend, her mother, and ultimately for us. Without feeling threatened, we could continue our meal.

I am wary, here and in general, of portraying Asian American queers as being less able than other people to "go home." Home seems to bring forth intense and mixed feelings for everyone. It is not my intention to reinforce the idea that Asian Americans are somehow more squeamish about homosexuality, or sex, than is any other group. As far as I know, no one has systematically or by any standard measure compared homophobia in various racial and ethnic groups. But it is probably true that we feel that homophobia is most intense at home, wherever we construe that to be, because home matters the most. It seems that for many Asian Americans, home is a place where "Asianness" originates, a place made more compelling by the negation of an Asian American presence else-

where. Often, we look to the future with anticipation, hoping that the next time we go home, we can be out.

But I do not want to feed into the notion that as *Asian* Americans, we are somehow always foreigners in America, longing for home in another faraway continent. That stereotype conjures up images of exotic aromas and spicy foods and languages that we do not speak (but that somehow we understand through some feat of intergenerational and international memory). Indeed, because of the popular belief that Asian Americans are never really "at home" in America, I find the concept of "going home" so much more interesting to explore.

This essay is a commentary on the difficulties that arise whenever we evoke the notion of "home," "experience," or "community" as a claim to truth,[4] originary places, authenticating devices, or the grounding of metaphors in social movement activism or cultural representation. My shorthand for this issue is the "problem of authenticity," which has been addressed in other ways by other writers, some of whom I cite throughout this chapter. Authenticity is a problem because it suggests that our actions or our representations are true, universal, or just, without explicit criteria by which these actions or representations may be assessed. As I see it, the problem of authenticity particularly confronts communities organized around some aspect of identity. But it is not a problem that is the sole territory of identity politics. Claims to truth are the basis of any social movement; ultimately, the claim to justice is what drives movements for social change. My intention here is to provide some illustrations of the problem of authenticity as I see it, to offer some explanations for why it persists, and to suggest a possible solution. Throughout my discussion, "queer Asian America" is much more than a simple designation of a population group; I use the phrase to refer to the process of building a sense of collectivity, which, in its most utopian moment, strives toward community.

Home

In the winter of 1994, a group of Filipino American lesbian activists in the San Francisco Bay Area established The Beth and Vangie Legal Defense Fund (I refer to this group as the Fund). Beth and Vangie were fired from their jobs in a human rights agency in Manila when they became lovers. They filed a complaint with the Philippine National Labor Relations Commission and sought legal counsel from an organization called the Women's Legal Bureau. A network composed of thirteen lesbian and women's groups in the Philippines formed Advocates for Lesbian Rights (ALERT) to support Beth and Vangie's case against their former employer. The

Fund, established in San Francisco, opened chapters in other cities in order to garner U.S. support for Beth and Vangie in the form of money, petitions, letters of protest, and publicity. By June 1995, the Fund had produced a newsletter, *Breakout*, published an article featuring a Fund activist in a local lesbian newspaper, and collected a sizable sum of money. The Fund appealed to a collective sense of outrage and indignation at the unfair treatment of our two "sisters" in the Philippines.

Beth and Vangie's new relationship had become known among their twelve coworkers through a breach of confidence. Intra-office gossip eventually cost them their jobs and their privacy. Their employer, the Balay Rehabilitation Center, made the following accusations, citing them as reasons for the firing: (1) for Vangie this was an extramarital affair, (2) Beth and Vangie had "flaunted" the affair in the office, and (3) Beth and Vangie had lobbied for support. Balay also dismissed the four board members who had abstained from the decision to fire the two women.

I was fortunate to attend a benefit party for the Fund on one evening that summer. I had already spent the first part of that day "becoming Filipino" in San Francisco: accompanied by a good friend who helped me practice my broken Tagalog, I had visited a farmers' market full of Filipino shoppers and, later, helped my friend prepare a huge pot of chicken *adobo* and several pans of *inihaw ng bangus* (grilled milkfish) to take to the benefit party. Having spent my day this way perhaps increased my sensitivity to the complex dynamics that can sometimes inform U.S. organizing around issues in the Philippines. At several points during the house party, I became concerned with the way the Fund was positioning itself vis-à-vis Beth and Vangie and, by extension, vis-à-vis lesbian rights in the Philippines (let alone the rest of Asia).[5]

The primary purpose of the party was to collect money. People were invited to donate anywhere from $6 to $50 at the door. Food was free, but soda, beer, and wine were sold at a makeshift bar at the back of the patio. The atmosphere was congenial, and I think most of us were happy to be contributing to a worthy cause. When the night finally turned cold, we congregated inside the house, and the Fund members presented the story of Beth and Vangie. The story was punctuated by quotations from a letter written by Balay's director, Flora Arellano, to a San Francisco human rights commissioner named Jeannette Lazam. The letter seemed full of half-baked excuses for institutionalized homophobia. Arellano suggested, for instance, that Balay could not be homophobic, since Beth had been hired—and even promoted—despite Balay's knowledge of her sexual orientation. Arellano also implied that Beth and

Vangie's relationship was somehow in conflict with Balay's "family systems approach." Finally, Arellano referred to Vangie's husband and daughter as "the aggrieved party," whose rights were being unjustly overlooked. At that moment, I felt embarrassed for Arellano, and for the state of lesbian (and gay) rights in the Philippines in general. Maybe other people felt the same way; by the end of the evening, the Fund had collected $1,000.

It seemed that Balay's understanding of discrimination had missed the boat entirely. Several years ago in the United States, proponents of the Second Amendment to Colorado's state constitution saw gay rights as "special rights." In a sense, they wanted to restrict gay men and lesbians from the equal protection clause of the U.S. Constitution. When the Supreme Court struck down the amendment, it was a gay rights victory, but not because gay people won special rights. In fact, the Court did not have to recognize anything "special" about homosexuality in order to rule that the Constitution protects all citizens from discrimination, regardless of sexual orientation or any other criteria.[6] In the excerpts from Arellano's letter, I did not detect any statement showing recognition of the meaning of homophobia. Arellano's reference to Vangie's husband and daughter as the party whose rights had somehow been violated sounded to me a lot like Colorado's Second Amendment or, worse, like the Christian Right's obsession with protecting the "sanctity" of the nuclear family. Still, many Filipino families are, if not sacrosanct, at least closely knit, so I could imagine a lot of hurt feelings among the friends and relatives of the people at Balay.

Later I picked up a copy of Arellano's letter. Once I had read it more closely, I felt troubled by the ease with which we had demonized Balay the night of the party. Certain choice phrases had been taken out of context, allowing Arellano—and the Philippines in general—to be portrayed as culturally repressive and backward. The way we had jumped scale from the relatively small personal interactions among the Balay staff to the international correspondence between Arellano and Lazam to the organizational efforts of the Fund to protect "lesbian rights in Asia" made me nervous. I felt that we (as supporters of the Fund, San Francisco's Filipino dyke community, and possibly even all queer-friendly Americans) had endowed ourselves with all the powers of self-actualization and enlightenment that traditionally have been associated with modernity and Western civilization.

Worsening my fears about the missionary zeal I thought I glimpsed that evening, a friend paraphrased for me a comment that she had overheard during the party: "If worse comes to worst, we'll just bring Beth and Vangie here." I'm not sure whether "here"

meant the apartment, the city, or the country. But, in any case, the words encapsulated in my mind the fantasy of "home" as a safe haven for lesbians. It was a loaded statement, full of misleading implications. It was as if we could build our community simply by kidnaping and bringing "home" oppressed queers from all over the world.

The idea of bringing Beth and Vangie here might have been only a silly fantasy in the heart of one overly zealous activist. The fantasy is interesting, though, because of what I see as its colonial impulse: the desire to extend to Beth and Vangie all the freedoms and the luxuries we are thought to enjoy as lesbians in the United States.[7] I wondered to myself, with some sarcasm, *Could we be assuming that every lesbian in the Philippines wants a chance to be out in the Mission*[8] *and to be free to eat hippie-style tofu, fly a rainbow flag, wear freedom rings, and march under an "international" banner every year at the Gay Parade?*

Lost in the zealousness is a sense of community participation and struggle. What makes living in the Mission and marching at the Gay Parade so thrilling is not (I hope) the opportunity to buy more queer paraphernalia. I suspect that what makes it possible, even for a moment, to fantasize about queer life in the United States is that there are debates and discussions among lesbians and gay men that allow us to build a sense of shared purpose. When it is good (for example, when our daily lives are unencumbered by stereotypes and hostility), it can be really good. When it is bad (for example, when someone gets fired or loses custody of his or her kids), it can be made better by the efforts of people who come together to fight for recognition. For me, what makes "home" a desirable metaphor is the utopian prospect of building a community. Such interaction always involves a bit of insecurity and uncertainty. That, to me, is the joy of queer social life.

Truly, I do not know where in the world Beth and Vangie would be the happiest. Perhaps no place would be absolutely wonderful—or absolutely bad. But I would have been happier at the Fund benefit if we had engaged in a more thoughtful group discussion about home, family, homophobia, and colonialism. That night, I was concerned about the implication that our sense of lesbian freedom is universal. I do not want to be implicated in what seems a condescending gesture of showing lesbians in the Philippines the "true" path to freedom. This is a gesture I have associated with those U.S. feminists who reinscribe colonialist relations by subordinating the experience of Filipina feminists to the rubric of Third World feminism, thereby preserving the evidently neutral territory of feminism for themselves.

In some respects, the effort to support Beth and Vangie meshes curiously with the political trajectory of the Filipino colonial subject. In this trajectory, the Philippines is our first home, our starting point—but America is our final destination. The margin and the center are in this way clearly demarcated. By viewing Asia as the site of a denial of lesbian rights and America as the site of their defense and assertion, the Fund organizers verged dangerously close to reproducing a colonial myth. Coming out as coming home to the United States would be a sapphic twist on that myth.

Experience

growing up / for a long time / lost childhood
we began writing in secret
when confession, communion, confirmation
confession
taught us to lie

—ELSA REDIVA E'DER, "La Puente"

Just the other day, a young Filipino American man invited me to contribute to an anthology on Filipino American politics. He explained that he and his colleagues have become frustrated with the lack of Filipino American voices in public life and public discourse, an omission that seems particularly egregious given the relative size of the Filipino population in the United States (in 1990 we were the second largest Asian American group). He and I chatted briefly on the phone about the kinds of issues he would like to see covered in the book. Then he said (and I paraphrase), "And, if I'm not mistaken, you're a lesbian, right? Because right now, we don't have anyone writing about that." There was something so final in his designation of me that I was caught off guard. I thought to myself, *He's right, isn't he? What kind of lesbian am I, anyway? Am I the kind of lesbian he means?*

In retrospect, I take no offense at his comment, which I see as an honest invitation to talk about what it means to be a lesbian, a Filipina American lesbian, an activist, and so on. But there is an implication in the question "You *are* a lesbian, right?" that being a lesbian (whatever was meant by that) commands an authenticity of experience—not just any experience, but one that is, from a heterosexual perspective, a marginalized and mysterious experience. By answering, "Yes" to his question, I would be asserting myself, making myself known, validating the life I have so far lived. By answering, "No," I would be disavowing a category called "the lesbian experience." In the end, no matter how I answered the question, something would be deeply wrong.