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**Balanced Genitals:
YouTube Confessional Disclosures and
Signposts for Malaysian Gay Theologies¹**

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ABSTRACT

Although homosexuality in Malaysia has been condemned as a “crime worse than murder,” gay men continue to seek recognition, and resist oppression and discrimination. In this essay, I focus on two Malaysian men who identified as gay—a Malay-Muslim and a Chinese-Christian—whose appearances in an “It Gets Better in Malaysia” video project in December 2010 were subsequently posted on YouTube. These men spoke candidly on issues of sexuality, religion and theology, even at the risk of vitriolic antagonism from political leadership, and mainstream Islamic and Christian institutions. In light of Lacan’s notion of the phallus and James B. Nelson’s analysis of masculine spirituality based on male genitalia, I argue that the “hard” and “soft” approaches of these men in publicly identifying as gay men of faith to counter accusations of lack provide religious and theological signposts which are crucial in the future development of gay theologies in Malaysia.

Keywords: Christianity; gay; gay theologies; homosexuality; Islam; Lacan; Malaysia; non-heteronormative men.

1. I wish to thank Kent L. Brintnall and the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions in the earlier drafts of this essay.

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(Homo)Sex Talk in Malaysia

In Mohd. Ikhwan's "Sepetang di Kafe Oedipus,"³ two friends are ensconced in a café one evening after a visit to an art exhibition. Engaged in friendly banter on a host of issues that range from politics, Foucauldian philosophy and culture to homosexuality and religion, they are soon joined by another friend. The conversation reaches greater depths when insights are offered that religion in Malaysia is grossly manipulated in the political arena to preserve hegemonic power and vanquish enemies, particularly by moralistic denunciations of homosexual activity and the criminalization of gay communities.⁴ The "difficult relationship"⁵ between non-heteronormative subjectivities, mainstream organized religions and political power in Malaysia as captured in this fictitious Malaysian tale has been the subject of numerous academic studies. Some scholars have dealt with the role of politicized religion in the persecution of non-heteronormative persons in Malaysia, chiefly in Islamic circles.⁶ Others have, in varying degrees, examined the emotional upheavals that occur in the difficult negotiations between non-heteronormative Malaysians, politics, religiosity, spirituality and theology.⁷ Nonetheless, these studies have often gleaned data

3. Mohd. Ikhwan, "Sepetang di Kafe Oedipus," in *Orang Macam Kita*, ed. Azwan Ismail and Diana Derani (Selangor, Malaysia: Matahari Books, 2010), pp. 163–77. A free translation of the title of this chapter reads as "An Evening at Café Oepidus." *Orang Macam Kita* is the first Malaysian queer anthology in the Malay language (the national language of Malaysia).

4. My use of "gay" is in deference to the two Malaysian non-heteronormative men in this essay who appropriated the term "gay" for themselves. I am employing the term "communities" throughout this essay to acknowledge the diversity that exists among non-heteronormative men in Malaysia.

5. Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart (eds), *Introducing Body Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), p. 52.

6. See Farish A. Noor, "A Wake Up Call," *International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association* (2005), <http://ilga.org/ilga/en/article/478>; Julian C. H. Lee, *Policing Sexuality: Sex, Society and the State* (London: Zed Books, 2011); Walter L. Williams, "Islam and the Politics of Homophobia: The Persecution of Homosexuals in Islamic Malaysia Compared to Secular China," in *Islam and Homosexuality*, ed. Samar Habib (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010), pp. 1–22; Yuenmei Wong, "Islam, Sexuality, and the Marginal Positioning of *Pengkids* and their Girlfriends in Malaysia," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 16.4 (2012), pp. 1–14; Zaitun Mohamed Kasim, "Sexuality under Attack: The Political Discourse on Sexuality in Malaysia" (presented at the Sexuality and Human Rights in Muslim Societies in South/Southeast Asia, Jakarta, Indonesia, 2004), pp. 44–55, http://www.isiswomen.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=270&Itemid=135.

7. See Sharon A. Bong, "Not 'For the Sake of Peace': Towards an Epistemology of the Sacred Body," *Asian Christian Review* 3.1 (Spring 2009), pp. 50–68; Ismail Baba, "Gay and Lesbian Couples in Malaysia," in *Gay and Lesbian Asia: Culture, Identity, Community*, ed. Gerard Sullivan and Peter A. Jackson (New York: Harrington Park

from personal interviews that seek to safeguard the confidentiality and/or anonymity of the interviewees. This essay takes a slight detour as it focuses on the public and voluntary confessional articulations on YouTube by two professedly gay Malaysian men for whom religious beliefs hold great worth.

In this essay, I postulate that the complementarity of “hard” and “soft” approaches of self-disclosure as demonstrated by these Malaysian gay men of faith, and which I emblemize as “phallus” and “penis” based on theologian James B. Nelson’s work on the spirituality of balance in the “hard” and “soft” of male genitalia,⁸ is necessary in the development of Malaysian gay theologies. Gay theologizing recognizes, admits and celebrates the insights, experiences and situatedness of non-heteronormative men who claim their rightful position in and contribution to the ongoing crafting of God-talk, particularly by such men themselves in pursuit of their own spiritual, religious and theological well-being. My goal is not to pit “hard” against “soft” in order to favour one over the other. Rather, I wish to underscore the intimate, if not inseparable, link between “hardness” and “softness,” both of which are present in the YouTube project. I show how the voluntary disclosures of these gay men are representative of a wider discourse in which religion and sexuality are creatively wielded as tools of power in various forms in Malaysian politics, effecting the persecution of homosexual men. Then, I extend this discussion through recourse to the Lacanian signifier of the phallus and Nelson’s analysis. While cognizant of the limitations that are embedded in theological discourses that focus on gay identity politics,⁹ I have chosen to privilege men who identify as gay to highlight their “materiality of oppression and its operation in structural and institutional spaces.”¹⁰ In other words, I bring to the foreground men who embody the complexities of non-heteronormative sexualities in the

Press, 2001), pp. 143–63; Joseph N. Goh, “The Word was *Not* Made Flesh: Theological Reflections on the Banning of *Seksualiti Merdeka* 2011,” *Dialog* 51.2 (Summer 2012), pp. 145–54; Yik Koon Teh, “Politics and Islam: Factors Determining Identity and the Status of Male-to-Female Transsexuals in Malaysia,” in *AsiaPacifiQueer: Rethinking Genders and Sexualities*, ed. Fran Martin *et al.* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008), pp. 85–98.

8. James B. Nelson, “Embracing Masculinity,” in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, ed. James B. Nelson and Sandra P. Longfellow (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994), pp. 195–215.

9. See Robert E. Goss, *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003); and Claudia Schippert, “Implications of Queer Theory for the Study of Religion and Gender: Entering the Third Decade,” *Religion and Gender* 1.1 (2011), pp. 66–84.

10. Rose Wu, *Liberating the Church from Fear: The Story of Hong Kong’s Sexual Minorities* (Kowloon, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Women Christian Council, 2000), p. 53.

everydayness of Malaysian living, and who abide by their identifications as gay men. I wish to acknowledge that the diversity of Malaysian gay subjectivities eludes sexual fixities, and that Malaysian gay subjectivities retain a queer¹¹ complexion. My choice of these YouTube revelations does not entail an exhaustive indexing of elements for the future of gay theologizing in Malaysia—what I present are vignettes from the lives of two Malaysian gay men of different faiths for a discussion on future directions for gay theologies in Malaysia.

I embark on this project by examining anti-homosexual rhetoric in Malaysian laws and the news media. I also discuss the YouTube appearances of Malaysian engineer, poet, writer and editor Azwan Ismail,¹² and that of the leader of Good Samaritan Kuala Lumpur,¹³ Rev. Joe Pang, who both spoke candidly on political, sexual, religious and theological issues as part of an “It Gets Better in Malaysia” video project in 2010.¹⁴ This endeavour is one of many organized by *Seksualiti Merdeka* (Sexuality Independence), a sexuality rights festival which was first held in the state capital of Kuala Lumpur in 2008 to strive for freedom from homophobic and transphobic oppression in its activism.¹⁵ My selection of the two men is based on the vital insights that their voices yield on the convoluted relationship between their sexualities, desires, the political climate of Malaysia and their religious convictions. After I examine the repercussions of religion and politics on homosexuality, I show how anti-homosexual lashings by religio-political circles, and subsequent pugnacious methods of response by affected parties, revolve around

11. Here, I posit the notion of queer as “a postmodernist critique of biological determinism, or essentialism, and emphasizes a self-reflexive understanding of gender and sexuality.” See Karen Lovaas, John P. Elia and Gust A. Yep, “Shifting Ground(s): Surveying the Contested Terrain of LGBT Studies and Queer Theory,” in *LGBT Studies and Queer Theory: New Conflicts, Collaborations, and Contested Terrain*, ed. Karen Lovaas, John P. Elia and Gust A. Yep (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2006), p. 5.

12. Azwan Ismail, whose YouTube appearance is featured in my essay, is coincidentally one of two editors of *Orang Macam Kita*. At the outset, I make a reference to a book chapter in this anthology.

13. On October 4, 2012, Rev. Joe Pang announced on Facebook that the Good Samaritan Metropolitan Community Church had been officially registered on October 1, 2012 as Good Samaritan Kuala Lumpur (GSKL), an independent, community-based organization.

14. *Seksualiti Merdeka*, “It Gets Better in Malaysia,” <http://www.seksualitimerdeka.org/2010/12/it-gets-better-in-malaysia.html>.

15. For more information, see *Seksualiti Merdeka*, <http://www.seksualitimerdeka.org>. In 2011, the festival was banned by the Malaysian police after several Islamic groups condemned the event as deviationist. See Shazwan Mustafa Kamal, “Police Ban ‘Seksualiti Merdeka’ Festival,” *The Malaysian Insider*, November 3, 2011, <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/police-ban-seksualiti-merdeka-festival>.

lack and desire. Thereafter, based on my examination of Azwan's¹⁶ and Pang's bold appearances and verbal disclosures in light of Nelson's provocative essay on masculine spirituality, I propose some crucial signposts for the development of Malaysian gay theologies.

Homofortitude on YouTube

Antagonism towards homosexuality dons a religious garb in Malaysia. While section 377 of the secular Malaysian Penal Code criminalizes the act of *liwat* or sodomy in general,¹⁷ sections 2(1) and 25 of the Islamic *Syariah* Criminal Offences (Federal Territories) Act 1997 give *liwat* sharper contours as a punishable act by virtue of "sexual relations between male persons."¹⁸ This definition has blurred the lines between secular and religious law.¹⁹ Hence, *liwat* and homosexuality are often frighteningly conflated whereby phallic activities between men "are viewed with disdain as permutations of the transgression of legitimate and divinely sanctioned gender and sexual configurations."²⁰

I offer two examples. The first affects Malay-Muslim men. In section 25 of the aforementioned Act, Muslim "male persons" caught in sexual acts together can be subjected to fines, imprisonment and/or flagellation. It is in the *Syariah* law that the homosexual becomes a "species"²¹ that is carefully policed along the religious grid. In 2000, Abdul Kadir Che Kob, a leading official of the *Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia* (JAKIM) or Department of Islamic Development Malaysia, referred to homosexual persons as "shameless people" and homosexuality as a "sin worse than murder."²² Gay men are further vilified in the *Khutbah Jumaat* or Friday sermons that are posted on the official website of the *Jabatan Agama*

16. As many Malaysian individuals of Malay and Indian descent have no last names, I refer to and cite such persons in this essay by their first names.

17. This secular law is applicable to all Malaysians, regardless of sexual orientation. The Malaysian Penal Code is available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3ae6b5cf0.html>.

18. The *Syariah* Criminal Offences (Federal Territories) Act 1997 is available at <http://www.agc.gov.my/Akta/Vol.%2012/Act%20559.pdf>.

19. Zaitun, "Sexuality under Attack," p. 46.

20. Joseph N. Goh, "The Homosexual Threat: Appraising Masculinities and Men's Sexualities in Malaysia," in *Thinking through Malaysia: Culture and Identity in the 21st Century*, ed. Julian Hopkins and Julian C. H. Lee (Selangor, Malaysia: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2012), p. 168.

21. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 43.

22. Megaswary Ramakrishnan, "Homosexuality is a Crime Worse than Murder," *Time Asia*, September 26, 2000, <http://edition.cnn.com/ASIANOW/time/features/interviews/2000/09/26/int.malay.gay2.html>.

Islam Selangor (JAIS) or Islamic Affairs Department Selangor, in which such men are implicated in the erosion of morals and human values. Homosexuality is also placed on an equal footing with adultery and sex work, and seen as an evil side-effect of advancements in technology and communication.²³ The second example addresses gay Christian men. In 2010, Roman Catholic scripture scholar Rufus Bruno Pereira of the Archdiocese of Kuala Lumpur upheld the Church's stand on homosexuality as a "'morally disordered' condition."²⁴ His remarks came in response to Malaysian-born, gay activist-pastor Rev. Ouyang Weng Feng's comments that biblical passages used in anti-gay rhetoric were largely misinterpreted.²⁵ In a similar vein, the website of the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship Malaysia pronounces homosexuality as "incompatible with God's will as revealed in the Scriptures."²⁶ The website of the Evangelical Charismatic Churches of Malaysia has a list of theological, physiological, psychological and sociological errors of homosexuality.²⁷ When Ouyang announced plans to wed his male companion in New York and subsequently to hold a wedding reception in Malaysia, pastors from the various Malaysian Christian churches were once again up in arms.²⁸ Here, I wish to underscore the reality that the condemnation of homosexual behaviour by these churches unambiguously upholds the Malaysian Penal Code, which in turn sustains such condemnations.

This ominous cloud of homonegativity prompted *Seksualiti Merdeka* to create an "It Gets Better in Malaysia" video project in December 2010 in an effort to remind non-heteronormative persons of their potential to "live honest, proud, fulfilling lives in Malaysia."²⁹ Out of fifteen Malaysians with variant identifications of gender and sexuality who were

23. See examples at <http://www.jais.gov.my>. For recent examples of anti-LGBT sentiments in Malaysia which have been discussed within a theological reflection, see <http://www.malaysiakini.com/letters/217261>

24. Terrence Netto, "Error in Gay Priest's View, Says Catholic Preacher," *Malaysiakini*, September 5, 2010, <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/141982>.

25. Rev. O Young, "Bible Used to Justify Discrimination," *Malaysiakini*, September 7, 2010, <http://www.malaysiakini.com/letters/142155>. Rev. Ouyang is also known as "O Young" and "Ngeoo Boon Lin."

26. NECF Executive Secretary (Research), "Gay Church: A Response," National Evangelical Christian Fellowship Malaysia, <http://www.necf.org.my/newsmaster.cfm?&menuid=2&action=view&retrieveid=930>.

27. See Colin Hurt, "The Christian Perspective on Homosexuality," Evangelical Charismatic Churches of Malaysia, <http://www.eccmsia.org/articles/homosexuality>.

28. See "No Way to Gay's Big Day, Say Pastors," *Asiaone*, August 18, 2011, <http://www.asiaone.com/News/AsiaOne%2BNews/Malaysia/Story/A1Story20110818-294986.html>.

29. *Seksualiti Merdeka*, "It Gets Better in Malaysia." The nascent "It Gets Better" video project was the brainchild of Dan Savage in September 2010. See <http://www.itgetsbetter.org/pages/about-it-gets-better-project>.

featured, I chose Azwan and Pang for a more vivid contrast in terms of ethnicity³⁰ and religion, as well as to highlight the fortitude which marked their public online appearances in a nation that excoriated their sexual preferences. Although Azwan's two minute and forty-two seconds video clip was in the Malay language, English subtitles were provided and are reproduced in full below:

Malaysian laureate Shanon Ahmad once wrote in one of his novels, something like this: "Know yourself, know everything." He seems to be saying if we know ourselves, our bodies, feelings and thoughts, it is our right to tell others who we want to be. I am Azwan Ismail. I am 32 years old. I took a long time to know myself, to convince myself that I am gay, and after I am brave enough to say I am gay to other people. After 32 years, I have become strong and confident with whatever my future holds. There is no denial that it is hard to be gay in Malaysia, especially if we are Malay...because religious and cultural factors have defined our lives, telling us who we can be and who we can't. But we have to remember that what we are told by others, what we are told by our teachers, our religious teachers, our friends, are mostly are [sic] from a heterosexual point of view. They don't understand what it's like to be gay. We know ourselves better. And, we must take time and try to tell them. I am confident that things will get better. We have to gather our strengths from around us because there are people who can help us and give us the confidence to be ourselves to build our future as gays who are stronger. I hope you can find that strength and hold on to it so you can tell others confidently. "I am gay and I am okay."

It is vital to note that Islam and the Malay ethnicity are inexorably intertwined in Malaysia. Article 160 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia states that "'Malay' means a person who professes the religion of Islam [and] habitually speaks the Malay language."³¹ While the contents of Azwan's cyberpresence may appear mild, his disclosure as a man who was both gay and Malay-Muslim provoked the ire of more conservative Malaysian Malay-Muslims. Subsequent comments by fellow Muslims on his posting that took on a murderous tone disclosed a frightening revelation that his appearance could not remain a solitary venture.³² Azwan was a living sign that there are gay Malay-Muslim men in Malaysia whose sexualities co-exist with their Islamic faith.

30. Malaysia categorizes its 28.3 million inhabitants according to various ethnic groupings. See http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/download_Population/files/census2010/Taburan_Penduduk_dan_Ciri-ciri_Asas_Demografi.pdf.

31. The Federal Constitution of Malaysia is available at <http://confinder.richmond.edu/admin/docs/malaysia.pdf>.

32. See Sean Yoong, "Malaysia Gay Man Threatened over Online Video Confession," *Associated Press*, December 21, 2010, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/40762639>. Azwan's clip which was originally posted on YouTube was eventually removed for the sake of his safety. See <http://www.seksualitimerdeka.org/2010/12/taking-down-azwan-ismails-video-for-his.html>.

The English subtitles of Pang's four minute and twelve seconds video clip in Cantonese are quoted in part below:³³

Hi! I'm Joe. I'm gay. Since I was a kid, I knew I was different from others. Because of family and society, I could not be myself. But in the past few years, I realized the most important thing in life is to be who we are. But it is not easy to be who we are in Malaysia, and we have to pay the price. I became Christian when I was 16 years old. I believe Jesus loves me for who I am. But when I joined the church, everyone in the church told me homosexuality is wrong, so I repressed myself and did not allow myself to be gay. When I was 20 years old, I could no longer take it. I tried many methods...but it did not change me. Finally, I realized that I didn't need to change at all because God loves me for who I was... In 2007, I met pastor O Young. And from him I have learned that God in the Bible accepts our sexual orientations. We don't need to change at all. But we need the courage to take the first step to accept ourselves. We always tell people, "come out, come out." Actually, the most important part of coming out is to come out to yourself. We don't have to explain to anyone and no one has the right to change your sexual orientation. What our sexual orientation is, only we know. Some say homosexuality is not natural but whether natural or not, only we know it... No one pointed a gun to force you to be gay and also no one forces you not to be gay. This is to live the true love within us... It is possible to be yourself, it is not as difficult as we think in Malaysia. It will be better. Our future will be better. We have to take the first step and accept ourselves. Talk to someone you can trust or look for us. We are always here to support you.

Akin to Azwan, Pang's YouTube confession may not conjure images of bellicose subversion. Yet the very act of his public declaration, despite being heartfelt, still contravenes both Malaysian law and numerous church tenets. Pang positioned himself in direct opposition to many Christian churches of Malaysia by reconciling being gay with being Christian. His expressed association with Ouyang entailed a deliberate partaking of the antagonism besieging the latter, and a participation in the frontline of political, legal and ecclesiastical disapproval of homosexuality. Both Azwan and Pang "attack(ed) the stigmatizer"³⁴ by relocating accusations of lack in their oppressors, charging them with the injustice of excluding gay men from wholeness in Malaysian society and religious communities. I wish now to expand the discussion of this disabling ethos in which gay men often find themselves through a brief examination of Lacan's notion of the phallus.

33. The full video clip and subsequent posted comments is available at <http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=qxQljntpGe4>.

34. Andrew K. T. Yip, "Gay Male Christians' Perceptions of the Christian Community in Relation to their Sexuality," *Theology and Sexuality* 8 (1998), p. 44.

Elongating the Notion of the Phallus

The disclosures of Azwan and Pang are not mere personal tales of gay dejection. These YouTube appearances and their verbal contents are reflective of a greater religio-political reality. It is important to note that despite being a secular, democratic country, Islam is the official religion of Malaysia³⁵ and is far-reaching in many spheres of Malaysian life, including politics, ethnicity and citizenship. Hence, a Malay-Muslim leader who veers from the principles of Islam loses credibility, as in the case of former Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim who stands as an icon of the deployment of sexuality in religio-political agendas. The feud between then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and Anwar had culminated in allegations of sodomy that were brought against the latter in 1998 and once again in 2008.³⁶ The Malaysian media had contributed to a neatly packaged profiling of Anwar as a perpetrator of crimes, a social deviant who broke state and natural laws, an instigator and an abnormal homosexual.³⁷ It is the homosexual labelling through religious lenses that had most successfully demonized Anwar. His alleged victim had taken an oath in a mosque—a sensational event that was televised—to confirm Anwar’s culpability.³⁸ Mahathir had even commented that “homosexuals should not govern mostly Muslim Malaysia,”³⁹ an obvious reference to his main political nemesis. It is in Anwar that the birth of the Malaysian homosexual identity based on the act of sodomy is most evident. The construction of Anwar as a sexual aberration became the successful basis for the destruction of his integrity and subsequent political persecution.⁴⁰ Anwar’s downfall due to the gay charge suggested that his fate would befall all homosexuals, especially Muslim gay men, who dared to be brazen in their sexuality. While the power-loaded sexual sensationalism of a Muslim politician finds no Christian counterpart,

35. See article 3.1 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia. See also the press statement by Ambiga Sreenevasan, the former president of the Malaysian Bar, “Press Statement: Malaysia a Secular State,” The Malaysian Bar, http://www.malaysianbar.org.my/press_statements/press_statement_malaysia_a_secular_state.html.

36. Thomas Fuller, “Malaysia Opposition Leader Accused of Sodomizing Aide,” *New York Times*, June 30, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/30/world/asia/30malaysia.html>.

37. See Shakila Manan, “Re-reading the Media: A Stylistic Analysis of Malaysian Media Coverage of Anwar and the Reformasi Movement,” *Asia Pacific Media Educator* 1.11 (2001), p. 46.

38. See a video clip of this oath-taking ceremony at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NeEqIQ-AQ3w>.

39. “Former PM Says Gays Should Not Rule Mostly Muslim Malaysia,” *The Advocate*, January 9, 2007, <http://www.advocate.com/article.aspx?id=38649>.

40. James Chin and Chin Huat Wong, “Malaysia’s Electoral Upheaval,” *Journal of Democracy* 20.3 (2009), p. 74.

it would be erroneous to assume that Christians are exempted. A similar fiery rhetoric is used for non-Muslims. Commenting on Rev. Ouyang's wedding banquet in Kuala Lumpur on August 4, the Chief Minister of the Malaysian state of Malacca and chairperson of the Malacca Islamic Religious Council, Mohd. Ali Rustam, called on the Malaysian government to bring the "matter to justice" by insisting that the ceremony contradicted the nation's values and laws.⁴¹ Nevertheless, Pang's sexual disclosures as a Chinese-Christian Malaysian man differs in impact from Azwan's explicit revelations as a Malay-Muslim Malaysian man on Malaysian soil, whose "Malay-Muslim masculinity is exalted as an end to Islamization"⁴² and in whom intersecting investments of masculinity, ethnicity, religion and citizenship are greater.

Borrowing from a Lacanian perspective, I argue that the discourses on homosexuality in Malaysia circulate around issues of lack and desire from both sides of the fence. Official Muslim and Christian censures of homosexuality suggest that gay men are subjects of severe lack on many levels. Animated responses from Azwan and Pang shore up the lack of sensitivity on the part of religio-political powers in terms of the recognition of human rights, self-knowledge and personal agency. Gay communities are painfully aware that homosexual subjectivities are being manipulated in Islamic and Christian rhetoric through "moral authoritarianism,"⁴³ and that Islamic and civil authorities partake in such endeavours for political leverage. Apropos, I postulate that the issue of homosexuality is a trope for the desire of wholeness for all parties involved. In using Lacan's notion of the phallus in the Symbolic, I am not declaring an investment in male hegemony through the dismissive exclusion of women. Rather, my project is to investigate in men—the focus of my essay—how the subject desires to be that which it lacks in its striving for wholeness, for the subject cannot "aim at being whole...while ever the play of displacement and condensation to which [the subject] is doomed in the exercise of [the subject's] functions marks [the subject's] relation as a subject to the signifier."⁴⁴

From this premise, I wish to underscore a multifaceted reality for this present discussion in order to show how the phallus as a signifier "in

41. "Ali Rustam Wants Action Taken Against Gay Priest," *The Malaysian Insider*, August 8, 2012, <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/ali-rustam-wants-action-taken-against-gay-priest>.

42. Maznah Mohamad, "Making Majority, Undoing Family: Law, Religion and the Islamization of the State in Malaysia," *Economy and Society* 39.3 (2010), p. 377.

43. See Joanna Phoenix and Sarah Oerton, *Illicit and Illegal: Sex, Regulation and Social Control* (Portland, OR: Willan, 2005).

44. Jacques Lacan, "The Signification of the Phallus," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1977), p. 318.

the intrasubjective economy of the analysis, lifts the veil perhaps from the function it performed in the mysteries,"⁴⁵ and in which the establishment of both subjects relies on a condition of complementarity.⁴⁶ First, the phallus figures as religio-political and ecclesiastical homogeneity. The attainment of homogenous power is all-important in a bid for security for those who are politically and ecclesiastically secure, and it is apparent to them that this is best achieved through religious rhetoric. Political and religious hierarchies then discern that resistance to their agenda constitutes a lack, both politically and religiously. The inability to be the ultimate, exhaustive desire of those who are recalcitrant turns into frustration. The only resolution is to demand obeisance.

Second, the phallus stands as an adamant battlecry for the recognition of gay sexualities. Gay communities as symbolized by Azwan and Pang are aware that they have been grossly mutilated in the interest of power gains, thus construed as subjects of lack. That they are accepted only if they amend their wayward ways⁴⁷ further frustrates this desire. Azwan's words reflect the religio-political undertones of the country's homosexual discourse, as evident in his statement that "there is no denial that it is hard to be gay in Malaysia, especially if we are Malay (read Malay-Muslim)...because religious and cultural factors have defined our lives, telling us who we can be and who we can't." While Pang's words are based mainly on ecclesiastical experiences, he does not speak from a vacuum. His statement that, despite the odds, "it is possible to be yourself, it is not as difficult as we think in Malaysia" is indicative of Pang's resistance to anti-homosexual sentiments towards Christians which emanate from Malaysian religio-political dynamics, and which are condoned by church officials. Pang's view resonates with a statement from GSKL's webpage that "we are liberated from other people's definitions of who we are."⁴⁸ Azwan's and Pang's statements reveal how the disapproval of homosexuality has had an adverse effect on their religiosities as gay Malaysian men.

Third, the phallus conveys a poignant image of lack and desire. Both the anti-gay rhetoric and the responses of the two men display an urgency for completeness, although from polarizing perspectives. Through open, public declarations of sexuality that were positioned in

45. *Ibid.*, p. 285.

46. See *ibid.*, pp. 316, 319.

47. For examples of condemnations of Azwan Ismail and calls for his repentance, see comments at <http://www.ohbulan.com/video-jurutera-penulis-azwan-ismail-men-gaku-gay-berani-bodoh>.

48. Good Samaritan Kuala Lumpur, "Jesus Welcomes You," <http://gsmalaysia.com/mission.htm>.

direct opposition to the socio-political and religious norms of masculinity and men's sexuality, Azwan and Pang not only engaged in "examining and critiquing the power to name, and thus define and identify sexuality,"⁴⁹ but also actively challenged antagonistic heteronormative assumptions of religion and God in relation to homosexuality. Upon recognition that they had been inscribed as deviant subjects of social and religious lack, the two men were incited to respond. They inverted and assigned imputations of lack to their accusers who were touted as ignorant of the complexities of sexual and religious subjectivities. This was not solely performed through an abrasive "hardness" of transgressing homophobic socio-political and religious norms by public declarations of being gay in order to address issues of lack and wholeness. I understand the content of their words that evinced cherished notions of religion and God as "softness," which complemented the "hardness" in a powerful synergy to reclaim wholeness by discrediting accusations of lack.

"Hard" and "Soft": Signposts for Malaysian Gay Theologies

Azwan's and Pang's words indicate that the realms of religiosity and theology are important to them, as may be the case for many other gay men in multi-religious Malaysia.⁵⁰ Despite being repudiated by their religious authorities and cognizant of religio-political whirlwinds, Azwan and Pang did not abandon their sense of the sacred. Rather, they gravitated towards interstices that reconstituted official religiosities into sexuality-affirming religiosities and theologies. I draw attention to the crucial importance of gay male experiences of faith in a nation where the only legitimate male religious experiences are heterosexually designated. Such experiences form important springboards for future directions in gay theological designs.

James B. Nelson adds greater acumen to the discussion by building on Eugene Monick's insight that there is a religious element in male genitalia, "a religious quality to...phallic experience"⁵¹ that manifests itself in an integration of the "earthly phallus" and "solar phallus."⁵² Phal-

49. Jonathan Alexander, "Beyond Identity: Queer Values and Community," *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies* 4.4 (1999), p. 303.

50. 61.3% of inhabitants of Malaysia are Muslims, 19.8% profess Buddhism, 9.2% are Christians and 6.3% adhere to Hinduism. See http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=130;Itemid=89&layout=default&lang=en.

51. Nelson, "Embracing Masculinity," p. 198.

52. *Ibid.*

lic experiences incorporate “strength, hardness, determination, sinew, straightforwardness, penetration”⁵³ and emphasize power, domination, success—a certain “hardness.” Nelson then critiques Monick’s work for stopping short at the phallus as the sole image of the sacred masculine as it dismisses the penile aspect of male spirituality, which represents vulnerability, “relaxed humility”⁵⁴ and “quiescence”⁵⁵—a contrasting “softness.” In other words, Nelson proposes that a balanced, integrated approach to male spirituality must embrace both “hard” and “soft” approaches in order to attain a balanced complementarity.⁵⁶

I posit “hardness” in Azwan’s disclosure as courage in the confrontation of a gay Malay-Muslim man with the conservative Muslim populace, whereby even showing support or sympathy for non-heteronormative persons and their activities is regarded as *haram* (forbidden).⁵⁷ Azwan’s YouTube revelation appropriated a “hard” approach, as it enacted maximum Muslim homovisibility that was intolerable. The grating bravery of Azwan’s articulation lay in stark contrast to the usual submissive reticence from gay Malay-Muslims who often choose to express their sexualities with the utmost discretion, or who concomitantly lead secret “gay” and public “straight” lives.⁵⁸ The “hardness” of Pang’s revelatory discourses lay in his radical effrontery against the country’s often unchallenged socio-political, cultural and religious forces that either muzzle non-heteronormative persons or resort to corrective penalties for perceived deeds of transgression.

In responding to the cantankerous treatment by both state and religion through blatant disclosure—confronting “hard” oppressors with “hard” unconventional, subversive tactics of disclosure—Azwan and Pang allowed their inner hallowed spaces to surface and be included in the imbrications of their religious and theological assemblages. While applauding the two men’s zealous phallic forthrightness and realization that “lying low was not the answer to their problems”⁵⁹ in a nation that persecuted men like them, I am equally keen to empha-

53. *Ibid.*, p. 197.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 200.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 201.

56. *Ibid.*, pp. 204–205.

57. “‘Haram’ for Muslims to Join Unlawful Assemblies, Fatwa Council Declares,” May 6, 2012, <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/litee/print/malaysia/haram-for-muslims-to-join-unlawful-assemblies-fatwa-council-declares>.

58. For case studies underscoring such issues, see Baba, “Gay and Lesbian Couples in Malaysia.” My current fieldwork among non-heteronormative men in Malaysia as part of my own doctoral studies also corroborates this fact.

59. “Seksualiti Merdeka 2010: We are Family,” *Aliran*, January 16, 2011, <http://aliran.com/3897.html>.

size the “soft,” earnest content of their words which complements the “hardness.”⁶⁰

My references to “soft” or “softness” are indicative of the life stories, vulnerabilities, and religious and theological insights of these two men of faith as expressed on YouTube. In publicly uttering the phrase “I’m okay,” Azwan encapsulated the importance of courage, self-knowledge, self-understanding, self-confidence and interdependence as a gay Muslim which was evident throughout the entire corpus of his online disclosure. As a gay Christian, Pang echoed many of Azwan’s sentiments, but also added divine love and affirmation, self-acceptance, self-love and mutual support as antidotes for destructive sexual repression, as captured in the expression “to live the true love within us.” These words radiated with profundity from the two men of religious beliefs who spoke of self-discovery, constructive discernment, and positive assertions of God in relation to sexuality and hope. Azwan and Pang portrayed themselves as men who were aware that they did not suffer from any lack of wholeness by virtue of being gay, nor were they unrepentant villains of moral turpitude. Instead, what was lacking was acknowledgement on the part of religious and civil leadership that being both gay and religious was admissible in Malaysian lives. This portrayal assumed both “hardness,” or intrepidity of their YouTube appearances amid religious, socio-cultural and political antagonism, and “softness” as captured in their discourses as professedly gay men who spoke with conviction of their faiths. Subversive acts of visibility and sincere self-disclosures by men who come out as both gay and religiously inclined, who take civil and religious institutions to task for a dearth in theological inclusiveness, and allude to “God’s grace and liberation...both interpersonally and politically”⁶¹ lend gravitas to future developments in theologies of affirmative sexuality and embodiment. Gay Malaysian men who adhere to religious beliefs are thus called to be prophetic voices that proclaim the synergetic compatibility between non-heteronormative sexualities, faith, religiosity and theology based on their lived experiences, particularly if such voices are included in non-judgemental and sincere dialogues with Malaysian civil and religious institutions. Future gay theological projects would do well in continuing to foster a furtherance in the “hermeneutical enterprise”⁶² of diverse, evolving meaning-making in human, godly and sexual experi-

60. The body language of the two men in their video clips conveys an earnest sincerity that cannot be reproduced on paper.

61. Wu, *Liberating the Church from Fear*, p. 85.

62. Elizabeth Stuart, *Gay and Lesbian Theologies: Repetitions with Critical Difference* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p. 5.

ences of Malaysian gay men through “hard” and “soft” approaches of vivid, transgressive activism in their varied forms, and in sharing their stories of living out a “spirituality-sexuality nexus.”⁶³

Afterglow

Homosexuality is not only a thorny issue in Malaysia due to its resistance to gender and sexual norms. It has been utilized as a potent tool to secure the downfall of political enemies through religious interventions. The sufferings of gay communities in the midst of such manoeuvres were microcosmically captured as verbal snapshots of two Malaysian gay men—a Malay-Muslim and a Chinese-Christian—that were posted on YouTube. “Hard” approaches were taken by these men in their public online appearances in a country where civil and religious laws criminalize homosexual behaviour, yet “soft” approaches that bespoke their values, aspirations, convictions and religious and theological beliefs were also present. The future of gay theologizing in Malaysia needs to be built on the courage of visibility that subverts the silencing of gay subjectivities, as well as intimations of lived religious experiences by gay men themselves. Malaysian gay theologies need to manifest the reality that gay men of faith are Malaysians who, without succumbing to the weight of heteronormativity and heterosexism, aspire tenaciously and unapologetically towards their hopes and dreams for a better future in their homeland.

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63. Sharon A. Bong, “Negotiating Resistance/Resilience through the Nexus of Spirituality-Sexuality of Same-Sex Partnerships in Malaysia and Singapore,” *Marriage & Family Review* 47.8 (2011), p. 650.

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