

**“Pretending to Be Japanese:
Artistic Play in a Japanese American Church and Family”**

Courtney T. Goto

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I. Introduction

One might think that Americans of Japanese descent would not need to pretend to be Japanese simply because we are. But to be honest, I rarely feel Japanese since I was born and raised in the United States along with my parents and grandmothers. Japanese identity has been so long forgotten that we as a Japanese American community must create moments to remember who we once were. I would like to explore how my mother, Naomi Goto, facilitated these learning moments for me as a child and for her church through a form of playing “pretend.” Although playing pretend is usually considered a childish game of falsification or “make believe,” I would argue that “Pretending to Be” can lead to authentication.¹

Mom was a stay-at-home mother of two living in Sacramento, California, where she lives with my father, Leo Goto.² Though she has no formal training, I have always thought of her as an artist and teacher. Not only is she skilled in multiple forms of Japanese crafts, textiles, and flower arrangement, she’s taught these traditions to countless children and adults of Japanese descent, including me. In addition, Mom incorporates Japanese aesthetics in the liturgical art that she creates for her local church (Sacramento Japanese United Methodist), where she’s been a lay member for nearly 40 years. As a mother, artist, and teacher, Mom teaches through what I call “artistic play,” which is a way of exploring through art. “Pretending to Be” is one form of her artistic play.

In the following discussion, I focus on how Mom used “Pretending to Be” as a teaching mother, before describing how she draws on this same pedagogic form in art at church to strengthen cultural identity and promote theological reflection. In the end, I outline some implications of “Pretending to Be” for religious education and practical theology.

II. Approach

Though it may sound unprofessional, I call my mother “Mom” for several reasons. Referring to her as “Goto” would be too clinical and objectivist given the intimacy of our relationship, and as her daughter calling her “Naomi” would be disrespectful in my culture. Furthermore, referring to her as “Mom” acknowledges my location in relation to her and supports the reclaiming of women’s domestic knowledge and experience.

As feminist scholars have noted, women’s wisdom and experience, especially domestic experience, are often left out of the canons of curriculum. According to educational theorist Madeleine Grumet (1991), we continue to bifurcate home and school into private and public, rarely extending practical knowledge of home to our work in the public world because we deem it inappropriate. She writes that we must provide a language that reclaims and re-symbolizes domestic knowledge in order for it to inform the processes of education. She proposes that we start with narrative, which situates our knowledge in time and place.

¹ For this insight, I thank my brother Stan Goto, an educational theorist at Western Washington University.

² I have methodological reasons for referring to my mother as “Mom,” which I discuss below.

In a parallel move, some scholars in practical theology have called for recognizing the everyday sacred. For example, according to Bonnie Miller-McLemore, meaning for women can emerge even in the midst of domestic chaos, and spiritual grounding can be practiced in the most mundane of ways (even changing diapers), though religious traditions and the academy are afraid to celebrate biological processes, child care, and children as occasions for spiritual growth (2003, 154-5). As Grumet says, such practical knowledge is trivialized and therefore marginalized. In addition to Miller-McLemore, others affirm the everyday as a legitimate life-world in which meaning is made and the holy is encountered. Günther Heimbock argues that everyday life is a province of meaning that contains not just the same, the dull, and the irrational but also the potential to transcend the actual facts and to experience the holy. According to Heimbock, the central task of practical theology is to understand theologically “the relation of a human being as subject of his/her religion in close relation to everyday life reality” (2001, 108).

In this discussion, narratives and images are my data because they locate, situate, and contextualize a pedagogical approach practiced by one person with a particular family, community, and history. In discussing Mom, I do not attempt to be objective, as if I could divorce myself from my perspective as her daughter, rather I theorize about Mom and our family’s church having lived intimately with both.

III. Pretending on Girls’ Day

Every year on March 3rd my family celebrated Girls’ Day or *Hina Matsuri*, which means Doll Festival. In Japan, girls dressed in *kimono* serve sweets and display a traditional set of emperor and empress dolls, but in our American celebration of Girls’ Day I displayed a more motley collection. Since it was their day, I often placed the Japanese dolls, many of which were made by Mom, in front and center, but it also felt right to allow Charlie Brown, Snoopy, and other stuffed friends to join them on the periphery. I dressed in *kimono* but instead of serving treats to others, I was served my favorite dinner, which was *teriyaki* beef.

Mom was both the keeper and transmitter of the tradition, sewing my first *kimono*, making Japanese dolls, and cooking Japanese food. She ensured our celebration of Girls’ Day--not because she celebrated it as a child and not because it was common among Japanese American families raising children my age. My parents (my dad deserves credit as well) felt that I should have the opportunity to feel Japanese. On Girls’ Day, they too were at play, providing the illusion that I was a cherished Japanese daughter and the affirmation that made it real.

When I dressed in *kimono* and displayed my dolls, I was playing the “Japanese me,” following the tradition of my ancestors, but at other times I reverted to an American girl, the “not Japanese me.” Though Japanese Americans are constantly caught in this tension, we are rarely aware of it, but Girls’ Day gave me a liminal space to play with those identities. I loved wearing *kimono* and *geta* (wooden slippers) because they made me feel Japanese. They force a person to take dainty, mincing steps, unlike our loping American strides. It was a chance to sense in my body the contrast between being Japanese and being American, and to experience the two cultures pulling against one another like my legs straining against the fabric of the *kimono*. Yet Girls’ Day was also a time to practice the consonant flow of both cultures. To others, the clash of Japanese and American dolls might have seemed egregious, but to my child’s eyes it was not only beautiful but sensible--a display of cultures that existed in me side-by-side.

My family’s Girls’ Day celebration was what Jerome Berryman calls “Godly Play,” which is “the playing of a game that can awaken us to new ways of seeing ourselves as human

beings” (1991,7). Citing Winnicott’s object relations theory, he argues that the spontaneity that takes place in the intermediate area between “me” and the “not me” is critical. In such moments, a learner at play surprises herself with a glimpse of the true self. Again echoing Winnicott, Berryman claims that such play allows us to be not only with the true self but with the true selves of others, yet extending Winnicott he argues that such a practice is Godly, leading to spiritual knowledge.³

While “Pretending to Be” can be understood as Godly Play, it is also a form of artistic play, a term I created to place in conversation two partners (art and play) whose intersection does not appear to have been explored academically. Artistic play is the practice of exploration through artistic forms in which one opens oneself to unexpected transcendence, delight, or discovery.⁴ In this case, doll display and costuming on Girls’ Day were an exploration in cultural identity. And though it was a nonreligious ritual, it involved revelation about my heritage as a God-given gift. In her cooking, sewing, and teaching for Girls’ Day, Mom was practicing the everyday sacred even as she was using “Pretending to Be” as pedagogy. In this next section, I illustrate how she uses this same form to help church members construct theology.

III. Pretending at Church

Founded in 1968, Sacramento Japanese United Methodist Church (SJUMC) was a merger of two churches established by Japanese immigrants. According to my father, the church archivist, the church was the heart of the Japanese community in the 1890’s, providing not only worship services but shelter, food, and job assistance to those newly arrived from Japan. However, four and five generations later SJUMC’s sense of itself as a Japanese American church has eroded, a problem shared by many Japanese American congregations. The once bilingual service is now solely in English. The once all-Japanese American membership is now multicultural due to the high rate of out marriage. Framing the crisis succinctly is the question: “Why remain a Japanese American church?” Recently members have discussed whether the church should drop the word *Japanese* from its name. Mom addresses this problem through artistic play, challenging others to consider what it means to be a Japanese American Christian.

On All Saints’ Day several years ago, Mom hung two rows of blue-and-white *yukata* (cotton *kimono*) from the ceiling of the sanctuary, and she tacked a single *yukata* to the cross above the altar. For weeks Mom had collected *yukata* from church members, but they couldn’t imagine how she would use them. However, what they saw made sense as the pastor told the story of the 26 Christians who were martyred in Nagasaki in 1597, a story rarely told in Japanese American churches. The martyrs included 20 Japanese and six Franciscan missionaries who were identified as threats to the government and put to death by crucifixion and the spear.

In this installation, which I call “Floating Saints,” Mom engages the congregation in “Pretending to Be” Japanese. On one level, the *yukata* functions as a metaphor for the Japanese Christian body and more specifically the congregant’s body. Seeing the *yukata* hung from the ceiling with outstretched sleeves, one can easily imagine a Japanese body being crucified. Provoking a visceral reaction, “Floating Saints” illustrates Frank Burch Brown’s claim that art

³ While Berryman’s use of Winnicott is helpful, he relegates Godly Play to children’s ministry through his examples. Even his chapter on adults at play involves adults facilitating Godly Play for children in the church, which limits the implications of his work for adult education.

⁴ My definition of artistic play is influenced by preliminary fieldwork with the founders of InterPlay, Cynthia Winton-Henry and Phil Porter.

partly mediates the body and becomes the body's self-disclosure, allowing the body to speak to the mind. He also argues that the body finds in the work of art an extension and evocation of its own capacities, pleasures, and sensibilities (1989, 103, 109). In this case, the *yukata* become an extension of people's own bodies, helping them to imagine (and perhaps even feel) how the Japanese martyrs suffered.

On another level, the *yukata* function performatively to help people "feel Japanese." According to C. Nadia Seremetakis, artifacts (in this case, *yukata*) can be a powerful means of perception and cultural meaning-making. She writes:

As a sensory form in itself, the artifact can provoke the emergence, the awakening of the layered memories and the senses contained within it. The object invested with sensory memory speaks; it provokes a re-call as a missing detached yet antiphonic element of the perceiver. The sensory connection between perceiver and artifact completes the latter in an unexpected and nonprescribed fashion because the receiver is also the recipient of the unintended historical after-effects of the artifact's presence or absence. (Seremetakis 1994, 10-11)

In this case, the *yukata* are invested with sensory memory, how it feels to wear *yukata* as I described wearing *kimono* on Girls' Day. As you can imagine, *yukata* also bear with them layers of cultural meanings and histories for Japanese Americans, all of which they bring to their encounter with the *yukata* as "floating saints."⁵ Seremetakis might argue that the artistically rendered *yukata* dictate a certain cultural/theological meaning, possibly interfering with the never-before-experienced meanings that artifacts call forth. However, I would argue that the installation involves a double *poesis*—first as people encounter the *yukata* as artifacts and second as art. Seremetakis fails to address how context affects the perception of artifacts, which is especially relevant as they become art. In this case, *yukata* take on more significance when they become liturgical art, being presented in a way never before seen by the congregation (i.e., in the context of crucifixion). What is created is still consistent with Seremetakis' definition of *poesis*, "the making of something out of that which was previously experientially unmarked or even null and void" (1994,7).

"Pretending to Be" takes on a different tone when it comes to the *yukata* nailed to the usually empty cross. Here again, people can identify with Christ's suffering as the *yukata* functions as an embodied metaphor layered with rich cultural meanings and sense memory. In addition, the Christ *yukata* contributes to a growing Asian theology that claims the Christian story as its own in ways that are culturally resonant. Dressing the cross with a *yukata* is like Japanese woodblock artist Sadao Watanabe depicting Christ serving sushi at the Last Supper. While this might sound odd to a Westerner, substituting rice for bread as the body of Christ makes sense to an Asian Christian (Takenaka 1986, 34-5).

As transitional objects, the *yukata* (like my Girls' Day dolls and *kimono*) create a liminal space to play between the "Japanese me" and the "not Japanese me." More often than not, people have no means to tease out what it means to be Japanese American. Like other Asian

⁵ According to Burch Brown (1989, 55), art exists in a somewhat indeterminate state, and its plenishment comes only as the beholder responds, not to what the artist has actually created, but to what the beholder constructs on the basis of the work as well as what she brings to it.

Americans, we are a liminal people.⁶ On one hand, we are born in America therefore we are not Japanese citizens, yet on the other historically Japanese Americans have been made to feel that we are not American enough. Like Girls' Day, "Floating Saints" provides an opportunity to play with these dual identities. Even more subtle, bodily experience takes an important pedagogical role in "playing Japanese." In this installation and my family's celebration of Girls' Day, feeling Japanese is not simply a matter of cognition but of kinesthesia and sensuality, even if experienced as body memory as in the case of "Floating Saints."

IV. Imagination

To the growing body of scholarly work on imagination, "Pretending to Be" offers some new insights for religious education and practical theology. If we as educators want to provoke learners' imagination, Mom's art at church suggests that we should consider how to facilitate an encounter with the unexpected. In "Floating Saints," everyday *yukata* are transformed into art and made sacred. Had Mom stacked them on the altar, they would not have the same effect, but artistically rendered they make people take notice, activating people's imagination. According to Maria Harris, imagination "looks at reality from the reverse, unnoticed side; as such, it is the mind's glory, the ample fullness of intelligence, rather than the thinness of reason alone" (1991, 9). Providing an unexpected spark for imagination, "Pretending to Be" unsettles learners' stuck ways of thinking and perhaps even being, allowing them to reflect anew on Christian faith and cultural identity. However, Mom does not use novelty simply for its own sake, rather she matches the form and content of "Floating Saints" so well that its effect is arresting.

Harris also argues that imagination finds its rooting in biography and body, making comprehension "more comprehensive and comprehending" (1991, 9). For religious educators, the question becomes one of how to provoke learners' imagination through body and biography. We saw in the case of Girls' Day and "Floating Saints," the freeing of imagination involves not only the mind but the senses, yet the senses are culturally laden. Through art, Mom makes ordinary *yukata* emerge from what Seremetakis calls "stillness," which is "the moment when the buried, the discarded, and the forgotten escape to the social surface of awareness like life-supporting oxygen. It is the moment of exit from historical dust" (1994, 12). I have no doubt that most of the *yukata* in "Floating Saints" came from dusty closets, far from the consciousness of everyday life, however these artifacts became more "real" in their transformation to art. They had power because they were still significant in what Seremetakis calls people's "sensory landscape" (1994, 8). Once *yukata* are no longer rooted in the sensory experience of Japanese Americans, people will no longer be able to imagine the connections between themselves and the 26 martyrs in quite the same way. When links to body and biography are broken, imagination fails to take flight.

By provoking the imagination, "Floating Saints" moves a community toward what Daniël Louw (2001) calls "practical theological aesthetics," which enable a person to think in terms of metaphors and images, stimulates the imagination to come up with possibilities and images that give meaning to life, and creates a world that can lead to the rediscovery of everyday experience.⁷ According to Louw, practical theological aesthetics must assist in the reframing of

⁶ Fumitaka Matsuoka makes this argument in his 1995 book, *Out of Silence: Emerging Themes in Asian American Churches*, United Church Press.

⁷ He cites J.J. Degenaar's 1993 article, "Art and Culture in a Changing South Africa" in *Suid-Afrikaanse Tydskrif Vir Wysbegeerte* 12-3.

existing God-images, presenting metaphors that not only provide new ways of conversing about God but correspond with contextual issues that speak to our quest for meaning. In other words, he writes, “[i]n practical theological aesthetics, imagination should therefore toy with new images which can portray God in terms of contextuality” (2001, 99). We saw how the Christ *yukata* did exactly that—providing a new, culturally relevant image of God to “toy” with (as Louw puts it).

Of course the congregation’s theological reflections would not be possible without Mom doing theology herself, though she has no formal training. Not only did the making of her art require theological thinking, the art itself makes theological claims that are not merely personal statements, but rather are rooted in experiences both individual and communal. “Floating Saints” is a direct result of our family’s experience of being Japanese American, her practice of art, her faith as a Christian, and her teaching as a mother. What this suggests is that play, domestic knowledge, and everyday experience can be important sources for theology. This case points to the extent to which such wisdom remains unrecognized and unclaimed, even by the practitioners themselves. Though many like Mom are unable to articulate why they teach the way they do, they have an untapped wisdom that needs to be reclaimed and re-symbolized, as Grumet says.

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