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Theory in the Interstices: Queering and Transing Religious Studies, Religioneering Trans and Queer Studies¹

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On a cool October Sunday in 2007, two nuns went to Mass. Their new archbishop was presiding in their parish for the first time, and they were interested to hear his homily and to see how he interacted with their community. They sat prayerfully through the service, approached the altar to receive the Eucharist at the appointed time, and mingled with welcoming parishioners afterwards. One thanked them for being there. Also at the Mass, and for similar reasons, were members of other parishes. Several were part of a conservative men's group and had travelled about eighty kilometres to be at Mass that day. They weren't entirely focused on the service, though, because at least one of them spent quite a lot of time taking video recordings of the nuns on his cell phone. That footage quickly went viral, accompanied by outraged claims of hate crimes from conservative Catholics and self-righteous glee from progressives (see KnowTrth 2007; Crawford 2018; Wilcox 2018). What seemed to alternately enrage and delight these audi-

1 I am deeply honoured to have been selected to deliver the 2019 Temenos Lecture. This project has benefited greatly from the comments and queries of audience members at the Queer Shepherds conference, and from the questions and critiques of members of Undisciplined Normativities, the research group on queer and transgender studies in religion at the University of California, Riverside. Special thanks to Danielle Dempsey and Taylor Riley for extensive feedback, to Allie Arend for expressing generative doubts, to Kori Pacyniak for in-depth education on cosplay, and to J Selke for helping me to better hone my clarity.

ences most was the footage of Archbishop George Niederauer respectfully serving the Host to two nuns clad in traditional black and white, with their signature white makeup artfully edged in around facial hair and bright but tasteful decorative touches on their habits.

As may be evident, the nuns who attended this particular Mass do not belong to a Roman Catholic order. One of them is a practising lay Catholic in what these nuns call their secular lives; the other is a Buddhist who mistakenly thought it would be disrespectful not to participate in the full ceremony. But their order is religiously unaffiliated, even though it is over forty years old and is active on four continents. Its members hail from many different religions and from none at all; some are staunch atheists, while others are neopagans, Buddhists, Jews, practitioners of Hindu-based new religious movements, Anglicans, evangelicals, and indeed, Roman Catholics. Many are gay men, but the order welcomes people of all genders, embodiments, and sexualities to join. Although they take vows for life, this group is a volunteer order; the nuns only appear, or 'manifest', on occasion, often once a week or less. And while each chapter is called a 'house', the latter is a term of art drawn from their emulation of Roman Catholic orders; in fact, other than the occasional situation where members of a house are partners or roommates, these houses are not actually residential. They are not celibate, either, apart from the occasional member who may be asexual or temporarily between partners. And having been founded in San Francisco's Castro District in 1979, these Sisters have historically had an especially strong commitment to safer sex education and advocacy. These are not your grandmother's nuns, nor are they the nuns made so lovably familiar by Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*. If anything, they are more like the love children of Andrews' Maria von Trapp and the famous drag queen Divine. The nuns whom Archbishop George Niederauer served without so much as a blink at the Mass at Most Holy Redeemer in the Castro District of San Francisco were Sister Σplace. and Sister Delta Goodhand, of the San Francisco House of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence.

As word spread of Sister Σplace. and Sister Delta's attendance at the Mass, reactions were strong, and sharply divided between delight and horror. All of these reactions, though, rested on the same two assumptions: that the Sisters' consumption of the Eucharist was sacrilegious, and that it was deliberately so. Opponents of the church crowed with delight that the nuns had successfully disrupted Mass; conservatives, whether Catholic or not, reacted to the alleged disruption with outrage. But watching the video of the two Sisters quietly and respectfully taking Communion, one is faced with a puzzle. Where, precisely, is the disruption?

Although I am unaware of anyone making this connection explicitly, some commentators seem to have had in mind the famous Stop the Church protest at St Patrick's Cathedral in New York City in 1989. The Sisters were there, too, unbeknownst even to many other members of their order – in fact, the protest marked the founding of the New York City house (Hysterectoria 2012). Performance artist Ray Navarro was there, enacting a feminist and gay liberationist Jesus (Petro 2017). Most infamously, also in attendance was an affiliated protestor who went beyond the die-in in the cathedral aisles during Mass by crumbling a consecrated communion wafer in protest against the Church's policies on AIDS, same-sex desire, condom use, and women's rights to their bodies. Although, as Anthony M. Petro has argued (2015), both this protestor and Navarro – and, indeed, the protest as a whole – can easily be read as religious or specifically Catholic, both detractors and supporters perceived these as irreligious or anti-religious acts engaged in by irreligious or anti-religious people. The same assumptions were made about the Sisters, and while they are probably mistaken assumptions in the case of the Stop the Church protest, they are definitively mistaken assumptions in the case of the Sisters at Most Holy Redeemer. So why do people at both ends of the political spectrum make such assumptions in the first place?

At the core of this story is an insistence on the part of queer, straight, transgender, and cisgender people alike that queerness, gender variance, and so-called 'true', 'real', or 'proper' religion cannot go together (Wilcox 2019). This is not just a popular assumption; it pervades queer theory and sexuality studies, trans studies and gender studies, and religious studies too. Often the only allowable exception to this rule comes at the price of homonormativity (Duggan 2002) and cisnormativity. In other words, there is sometimes space for gay men, lesbians, and even more rarely bisexual and transgender people who have invested deeply in assimilationist, 'we-are-just-like-you' tactics of gaining inclusion to also be allowed access to 'proper', 'real' religion. Typically, the homonormativity and cisnormativity that are expected in such cases include regular attendance at a mainstream, widely accepted religious organization. We might call this the 'add-queers-and-stir' approach to queer and trans inclusion in the study of religion, in that it involves adding a largely inert ingredient to an already established mixture. Adding a more active ingredient, such as Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence partaking in the Eucharist, quickly moves us back beyond the realm of so-called 'real' or 'true' religion. In what follows, I explore the contours and possible causes of these persistent and troubling separations of queerness, transness, and religion, and I suggest several areas in which queering and

transing the study of religion and what we might call religioning queer and trans studies can offer all of us generative new pathways in our scholarship.

Opiates and fakes

The terms ‘opiates’ and ‘fakes’ summarize two of the most common assessments of the intersections of queerness, transness, and religion. For example, in his 2012 book *Gaga Feminism* famed queer and trans studies scholar J. Jack Halberstam abandons whatever shred of nuance there might be in the book when he makes a fleeting foray into the topic of religion. ‘When it comes to gender norms and sexual mores,’ he writes, ‘religion really is the root of all evil, and that cuts across many religions ... religion is a no-no and God has got to go-go’ (Halberstam 2012: 28). Most of us have heard such broad and flat dismissals of religion before, of course, many of them inspired by Karl Marx and a few, in queer studies at least, by Freud. But having been cast as neurotics themselves for many decades by the famed father of psychoanalysis and his intellectual descendants, most queer and trans folks seeking to dismiss religion seem to prefer not his theories of religious neurosis but Marx’s more sinister dismissal. Religion, in the eyes of Halberstam and many others like him, is the opiate of the queers. Interestingly, Halberstam goes beyond materialist analyses when he declares – albeit grandiosely and probably somewhat facetiously – that religion is the root of all evil. It seems that he never stopped to consider where his idea of evil came from in the first place, because Halberstam engages in a religious narrative, ironically, in order to dismiss religion. This should give us pause not only because of Halberstam’s oversight but also because it brings us back to the issue of assumptions. What is Halberstam assuming about religion, in addition to a lurking Islamophobia, that allows him to make this sweeping claim? To answer this question, we must first consider the alternative representation of religion as fakery.

In 1974, sociologists of religion Ronald Enroth and Gerald Jamison published the first book-length social scientific study of a gay religious organization. Their slender volume entitled *The Gay Church* reported and analysed their findings from attending services primarily at the Metropolitan Community Church of San Francisco (MCCSF). The Metropolitan Community Church, or MCC, had been founded in Los Angeles just six years before the book was published, and MCC San Francisco was one of its earlier branches. Now a denomination, the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, or UFMCC, has over 200 congregations in 33 countries around the world (UFMCC 2020). When I first discovered Enroth and Jamison’s book

as a graduate student researching MCC for my doctoral thesis, I was excited to see that the sociology of religion had been so forward-thinking, and that I had such a strong lineage of research to draw on in my own work. That was before I read the book. I was unaware at the time that Enroth and Jamison were conservative evangelical Christians, and that Enroth had been heavily involved in the Anti-Cult Movement; if I had known this background, I would have read their work with more trepidation. But discovering the dismissive ways they represented the gay men they had studied was hardly the first unpleasant surprise I had experienced with regard to sociological approaches to the study of religion and queer communities, so although I was disappointed, I was hardly shocked.

While *The Gay Church* is of little help as a secondary source, except to the extent that one can read beneath the overlay of Enroth and Jamison's prejudices in order to discover the voices of gay Christians in the early 1970s, it is of significant value as a primary source for studying the curious barrier that scholars and activists alike have built between queerness, transness, and so-called 'true' or 'real' religion. These two sociologists dismissed MCCSF as just another gay cruising ground. The carefully crafted services, MCC's unique weekly communion practice – these all counted for nothing, because Enroth and Jamison took them to be a sham, a cover for the real purpose of the weekly gathering: to find a date. But how many straight people have sought and found partners in religious settings?

Whether they be old-school matchmakers, youth prayer circles, or even Minder (a dating app for Muslims), religious spaces have always functioned as locations for seeking an appropriate mate. Surely, Enroth and Jamison were aware of this; surely, they would not have disapproved of, for instance, a heterosexual Christian singles' night. So, it seems what did not belong in church was not simply the desire for a romantic partner; what did not belong was *queer* desire. Gender variance did not belong, either; there's no shortage of commentary on male femininity in the book to go along with the prurient dismissal of churchly cruising. It seems that MCCSF got dismissed as fake religion because it was a queer and trans space. Moreover, it seems queer and trans people, in Enroth and Jamison's reading, automatically encode sexuality, even if they are only looking for someone to have coffee with and are planning to save sex for marriage. So, part of why 'true' religion, queerness, and transness cannot go together, in these logics, is that religion and *sex* don't go together – at least for these authors and for others who think similarly. In fact, the convergence of sex and 'true' religion appears to be possible only when the religion is orientalized, as attested, for example, by the queue stretching well back into the nineteenth century of white, elite,

male scholars and esotericists eager to delve into the hidden secrets of the Tantras. To better understand this state of affairs, a brief exploration of the concepts of religion, sexuality, and gender is in order.

Religion, Sexuality, and Gender as Social Constructs

Scholars such as Talal Asad (1993), Tomoko Masuzawa (2005), and Meredith McGuire (2008) tell us that the concept of religion as we know it today – a universal human phenomenon that takes forms similar enough that they can be identified, classified, and compared across cultures and historical periods – is a social construct, a socially useful fiction that, once invented by socially dominant groups, took on a life of its own. While they have no objective, universal existence, social constructs nonetheless are real in their effects. Thus, ‘religion’, while the brainchild of Enlightenment philosophers seeking peace between Christians and, likely, justification for the rampant spread of European imperialism, has become today both a personally important word for people around the world and a strategically important concept – so important that it appears as a borrowed word in languages without a comparable concept.

Along the course of these developments, religion came to be defined on the basis of belief, especially in Global North/Global West cultures.² Although there may be Protestant influence here, this definitional focus has a great deal to do with the Enlightenment emphasis on the reasoning individual. Reasonable individuals, after all, could agree to disagree on matters of religious doctrine, but the more such matters were separated from practice and subjected to the laws of reason the less likely it was that they would disagree to begin with. Further, as Enlightenment thinkers pondered the ‘true’ purpose of ‘true’ religion, they focused on ethics. Still today, many of us hear this phrase from our students and in public discourse: the ‘true purpose’ of ‘true religion’ is to provide guidance for an ethical life. This remains an argument, too, for teaching basic religious literacy in state-sponsored schools, in countries that allow for such a curriculum.

The more reason and ethics came to the fore in the definition of religion, the more practice – especially that taking place outside of official settings, which meant much of what women, poor people, colonized people, and other non-dominant groups did – became magic, and officially unapproved

2 For the term ‘Global North/Global West’ I am indebted to the organizers of the ‘Fucking Solidarity’ conference, part of the Queering Paradigms conference series, which took place in Vienna in September 2017.

beliefs became superstition. True religion thus came to be aligned not only with reason, with texts, and with mainstream, culturally Christian, Global North/Global West values, but also with elite men, and typically elite men of northern and western European heritage. The mind–body dualism that Enlightenment philosophers inherited but also intensified thereby came to characterize religion as well. ‘True’ religion, or at least evolutionarily advanced religion, came to be that of the mind, whereas that focused on the body (or practised by people defined as body – the Enlightenment’s others) took on the labels of superstition and empty ritual. When combined with the emphasis on individualism, particularly in its Protestant religious versions, this set of intellectual, social, and cultural developments also produced a narrative of ‘spirituality’ as individualized religion that may draw on but is ultimately independent from institutional religion (see, among others, Parsons 2018). Which is preferable – religion or spirituality – depends on one’s attitude towards questions of communalism and individuality. From an individualist perspective, religion may provide a space for developing spirituality, but the latter is far more important than the former, and the former may even inhibit the latter. From a communalist perspective, religion provides guidelines, clarity, and cohesion, whereas spirituality is a sort of anything-goes, unstructured, selfish navel-gazing. It also bears remembering that the same person may have wildly differing approaches to religion and spirituality, depending on which religion or spirituality is under discussion at the time.

Religion, in the academic logic that grew from these developments and is with us still today, is cerebral, logical, orderly, sombre, and ‘civilized’; it has an institutional or communal form called religion and an individual form called spirituality. Superstition, on the other hand, is embodied, irrational, ‘primitive’, and wild. Over time, more traditions came to be accepted within this definition of religion, but always at the same cerebral, elitist price. There is no room here for bodies, sexualities, or genders, so the ones who have come to represent ‘true’ religion are those who inhabit the privileged unmarked categories of European and European-derived cultures, those whose embodiment disappears into the woodwork because it is the norm: elite, heterosexual, masculine, white men (see also Ramberg 2014).

As the narrative of religion as a natural, universally shared feature of human culture was consolidating in nineteenth-century Global North/Global West discourse, a similar narrative was developing around sexuality and gender that, like the concept of religion, also demarcated the lines between ‘proper’ and ‘improper’ enactments of both and tied propriety tightly to

elite, Christian, European and European-derived norms (Tobin 2015). Like religion, sexuality and gender became not only universalized but tightly essentialized. Indeed, not only did these developments link gender and sexuality, like religion, intimately with race and with ideas about civilization; they also connected them with religion. A solid taproot of scientizing narrative increasingly bound civilization, whiteness, European imperial descent, masculinity, and reason to cerebral, individualist forms of Christianity – in many regions, Protestantism, in others the Catholicism of the counter-Reformation – or to Christian-influenced beliefs such as Deism. Whether those clustered attributes admitted masculine, same-sex attracted men fully into their circles varied across history and geography, but aside from this occasional exception the growing European association between same-sex desire and gender variance through the model of the invert rendered most if not all same-sex desiring and gender variant people like women. If assigned male at birth, they were feminine; if assigned female, they might be deviant, flawed, or inverted women, but they remained women nonetheless (see also Valentine 2007).

By default, then, with certain exceptions, same-sex desiring and gender variant people came to be aligned in these narratives with the body. Since true religion had come to be defined as cerebral, they, like the Enlightenment's other others, could not – and still cannot today – be truly religious. Many heterosexual, cisgender people continue to promote this narrative; ironically, so do those who wish to reclaim embodiment, and who therefore reject religion as a fundamentally heteropatriarchal, cisgender institution. Between these two poles of queer/trans and religious opposition are those queer and transgender people who are fighting for their own lives and souls, forced to push for religious inclusion by continually shifting the eye of judgement away from their own bodies.

Among the consequences of these intertwined histories is the persistent insistence of religious studies on opposing normative scholarly work – by which many writers in the field seem to mean both work that presumes the existence of a world beyond the human and work that departs from the strict so-called 'objectivity' of normative but erased cis white heteromascularity to embrace anti-racist, anticolonial, socialist, feminist, trans, crip, and queer perspectives. Among those same consequences is a similarly persistent insistence in queer and sometimes trans studies on refusing any possibility of a world beyond the human, and in casting all engagement with such a world as distraction, false consciousness, and the like. Such refusals also align queerness and transness with a modern, Western compulsion toward

secularism, leaving little space not only for religious queer and transgender people but also for the experiences and insights of gender variant and same sex desiring people of colour and indigenous people. Yet some people are thinking – and practising – differently. What does it look like, and what would it look like, to do queer studies, trans studies, and religious studies together, beyond the ‘add-queers-and-stir’ approach?

Epistemology of the prayer closet? Religion, transness, and queerness in unexpected spaces and compromising positions

Trans studies/queer studies and religious studies have more in common than many of their practitioners are aware. One of the areas in which they are most aligned is in their very approach to their topic: all three fields understand their core focus to be socially constructed. In this section, I consider two sets of co-constituted categories, or conduits of power, that I argue cannot be fully elaborated without the tools of all three fields: the confluence of sex, gender, race, religion, and imperialism; and that of religion, economy, and the state.

Sex, gender, race, religion, imperialism

Because the Enlightenment’s others tend to stick together (I mean this literally; the categories are sticky, viscous), each of these categories leaches into the other in mainstream cultural representations and in state responses to them. As Megan Goodwin points out, for instance, in *Abusing Religion: Literary Persecution, Sex Scandals, and American Minority Religions* (Goodwin 2020), religion is both racialized and sexualized. Goodwin analyses twentieth-century bestselling books in the U.S. that purported to expose the scandalous sexual treatment of white women and girls in minoritized U.S. religions like Islam, polygynous Mormon groups, and Satanism. But while non-dominant religions are the target in each case, as Goodwin makes clear, the narrative turns on tales of sexual perversity and the representation of the religion as deeply, ontologically other – in ways, she argues, that not only underscore the racialization of Islam but expel even white religious minorities from whiteness.

Although Goodwin focuses on the intersection of non-dominant racial, religious, and sexual categories, we can also trace the other side of this same coin: in the U.S. and, I would argue, in much of Europe and its other settler colonies, ‘true’ religion continues to be cast in both popular narratives and

government policies as aligned with whiteness and cisgender heterosexuality (see Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2004; Runions 2014; Seitz 2017; Kruttsch 2019). The irony of all of this, as Goodwin emphasizes, is that the majority of sexual abuse in fact takes place in precisely these spaces.

In a forthcoming book project on the intersections of queer theory and religious studies, Yannik Thiem inverts the common analysis of the racialization of Islam to argue that race is also, as he puts it, 'religionized' (Thiem 2019). Whereas Orientalist stereotypes of Islam have historically been subsumed in generalizations about Arabs – or, in earlier centuries, in the racial category of 'Semite', which rolled together stereotypes of Jews and Muslims – Thiem argues that in some cases today that dynamic has been reversed. This reversal allows racism to occlude itself under the cover of 'rational' opposition to certain religions, and likewise effaces the whiteness (as well as the Christianity) of secularism. With racism a constant yet ostensibly forbidden presence in much of the Global North/Global West, and with the elision of the categories 'Muslim' and 'terrorist' so widely and readily available that Myanmar's military has made use of it (in European languages specifically) to excuse violence against the Rohingya people, Thiem's argument seems not just reasonable but even self-evident. Likewise, the widespread violence in the U.S. against anyone with brown skin following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 – a Native American woman was even told to go back where she came from – indicates the religionization of race through the trope of terrorism. And we need look no further than the atrocities at Abu Ghraib, or the more quotidian inclusion of two men kissing in a Dutch citizenship film in the mid-2000s, for the intertwined sexualization and religionization of race.

In many ways the third combination of these categories, the racialization and religionization of sexual difference, is most obvious in the losses incurred by dominant religious and racial groups – white Christians, or in many cases specifically white Protestants or Catholics – because of cultural biases and state strictures against non-dominant sexual or gender identities. Jasbir Puar has argued, for instance, that movements for same-sex marriage rights are often driven by white gay men and lesbians whose sexuality has caused them to be deprived of the dividends of whiteness in a white supremacist society – dividends that are far less accessible to queer and trans people of colour no matter how homonormative, homonational, or cishnormative they may be (Puar 2007, 2017). Likewise, while the right to queer and transgender ordination is critically important in the many societies where conservative approaches to Christianity kill souls and often result

in bodily death, at the same time when queer and transgender people of colour and those from minoritized religions are dying in the streets and in refugee camps just like their straight and cisgender counterparts, it's hard to overlook the racialization and religionization of both gender variance and same-sex desire, as well as the colonial and imperial contexts in which these dynamics are rooted.

The elision of race, religion, sexuality, and gender in the context of global imperialism allows both allies and opponents to cast queer and trans people as simultaneously white and irreligious; as Danielle Dempsey argues, this is precisely the dynamic underlying Pope Francis's repeated attacks on what he calls 'gender theory' (Dempsey 2020). I imagine Halberstam would be a bit surprised to land in the same camp as the pontiff, but in many ways his argument about religion being the root of all evil when it comes to gender and sexuality is simply the opposite side of the Vatican's coin.

This same elision allows white supremacist states to discredit black and brown people as too religious, or as not belonging because of their actual or ascribed religion. Widespread Islamophobia and French *laïcité* are easy examples, but so too are the old debates about the secularization of Europe (e.g. Bruce 2011), in which what was often actually being tracked were changes in the religious practices of white Christians and whites of Christian heritage, casting aside as implicitly un-European or at least unimportant anyone who was not Christian or whose family had arrived in Europe in the past few hundred years and thereby fundamentally misrepresenting the status of religion in Europe at the time. Similar flaws, of course, attended much of the secularization debate in the U.S., with the added complication that in that country even white people insisted on being religious (e.g. classically, Finke and Stark 1992).

A third consequence of the elision of race, religion, sexuality, and gender in the context of global imperialism is its ability to simultaneously occlude and reinforce the all-consuming hold of Protestantism on culturally Protestant states, especially those that claim secularity. This case is particularly stark, and particularly well-developed, in the U.S. context, where historians tell us that at least since the nineteenth century European immigrants who adhered to minoritized religions – mostly Judaism and Catholicism – gained the grudging acceptance of their new home by altering their religious practices to be more like Protestantism (see Orsi 2010; Sarna 2019). Catholics downplayed the large public displays of saints' festivals that particularly characterized southern European folk practices, for instance, and established Catholics in the U.S. tried to avoid association with recent

immigrants who brought decidedly non-Protestant practices with them to the country. Likewise, Jewish congregations added pews, hymns, and sermons to their services, integrated genders within the synagogue, and even curtailed their adherence to dietary laws. The Reform movement that originated in Germany was popular among many of the earlier Jewish immigrants to the U.S. not only because they agreed with its principles but also because it helped them to avoid the worst of anti-Jewish violence and discrimination through appearing more like Protestants.

But Protestantism also takes many forms. As African Americans, many of them Protestant for generations, discovered when the major black denominations began to grow, the forms of Protestantism that were culturally rewarded were both white and middle- or upper-class. In other words, Protestantization as a route to assimilation or acceptance is in fact a route to, or through, whiteness. And as many minoritized racial and religious groups have experienced in the U.S., cisgender heterosexuality is a necessary part of this religio-racial citizenship package. Jasbir Puar (2007) argues that homonationalism both restores the rewards of whiteness to white queers and offers partial access to the dividends of whiteness to certain queer people of colour; I would add to her argument that Protestantization is not just a religious parallel to homonationalism but, in fact, its corollary. Although I have made this case in the specific context of the U.S., I would suggest that it is also applicable in at least some parts of Europe and its other settler colonies.

Religion, economy, and the state

These considerations lead, perhaps inevitably, to the state and to the connections between religion, the state, and economic structures. These connections are, to be sure, a very longstanding concern among scholars of religion, tracing back as far as the work of Max Weber. While I am interested in the relationship between certain forms of Protestantism and capitalism, however, I want to trace a different set of connections than those Weber examined. My argument, first outlined in an online publication in 2017, playfully suggests that rather than the so-called 'separation of church and state' governments that claim to be secular, at least in the Global North/Global West, actually enforce the separation of church and *sex*. This argument also brings us back to the Sisters, ACT UP, and the ubiquitous communion wafer.

Why were the protestor at Saint Patrick's who crumbled the Host, and the Sisters at Most Holy Redeemer who consumed it, portrayed as not only irreligious but even anti-Catholic? It is not especially difficult to imagine

a Catholic theological explanation for the wafer crumbling, after all: the protestor could have accepted the consecration and even the transubstantiation involved in the ritual, but rejected the divinity or the authority of the superhuman being invoked in the consecration; he might have rejected the efficacy of the consecration itself, on the grounds of claims to the celebrant's unrepentant sinful nature; or he might have rejected the efficacy of the consecration on the grounds of a rejection of the celebrant's theology. Likewise, Sister Splace and Sister Delta Goodhand were far from anti-Catholic, even if they might have taken issue with the approach to Catholicism advocated by the conservative men who filmed the service.

The explanation for the public denial of religiosity to these queer activists also cannot simply lie in popular portrayals of Catholicism as conservative and closed-minded, because many popular portrayals of the religion in fact paint it as loving, accepting, and even liberatory. Activists working for the inclusion of other marginalized groups, such as those involved in the United Farmworkers' Movement, are perfectly legible as Catholics in the public imaginary, so why are these activists not legible in the same way? Some would say the illegibility stems from the Sisters modelling themselves after Roman Catholic nuns, but in many contexts (and indeed, among the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence themselves) such imitation is considered not sacrilegious but complementary. What the Sisters at Most Holy Redeemer and the protestor at Saint Patrick's do have in common, however, is their identity as gay men. I would suggest that the communion service in the Castro had a disproportionately powerful public impact because of the Sisters' violation of three key tenets of the neoliberal state: the privatization of religion, the privatization of sex, and the separation of church and sex.

Classic articles in queer studies by Lauren Berlant, Michael Warner, and Lisa Duggan have argued that over the course of the 1980s, neoliberal economic principles infused the cultures in which they were being put into place, developing into a set of cultural and political principles. According to Berlant, Warner, and Duggan these principles began to impact gay and lesbian activism by the early 1990s (Berlant and Warner 1998; Duggan 2002). Central to these principles were privatization and deregulation – not just of industry, as neoliberal economic principles dictate, but of culturally powerful phenomena such as religion and sex. With religion deregulated, as Jakobsen and Pellegrini argue, culturally dominant religious groups – especially the politically active ones, such as evangelical megachurches and parachurch organizations – gained increasing power while also using the cultural mandate of privatization to keep minoritized religions behind closed

doors (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2004, 2008). Likewise, the neoliberal principle of privatization lured increasingly open queer communities back into the closet, making privacy the price of their deregulation, whereas straight, cisgender people continue to enjoy widespread visibility of their sexuality and gender (Berlant and Warner 1998). Finally, because of the privatization of religion, the privatization of sex, and the older factors discussed above, within these neoliberal regimes religion and sex cannot interact, and certainly cannot do so in public, unless they are part of dominant groups. Thus, evangelical Christians can have highly successful public sexual ministries for heterosexuals, but queer nuns cannot take communion in habit without violating the principle of the separation of church and sex.

At the same time, religious traditions and the state remain close companions in a number of the so-called 'secular' states of the Global North/Global West. As with all unmarked dominant categories, however, the religion in question here is the dominant one, in most cases Christianity and often specifically Protestantism. The latter has played a less-than-subtle role in the U.S. government since its inception, inspiring everything from art to opening prayers for congressional sessions to major narrative tropes in U.S. popular culture, such as the saviour narrative and the conversion tale (see Albanese 2013). Furthermore, the very concepts of secularism and the privatization of religion have Christian, perhaps specifically Protestant, roots (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2004, 2008; Sanchez 2019). So, the much-vaunted separation of church and state is clearly misleading; the true separations come in the form of the privatization of religion, the privatization of sex, and the separation of church and sex.

In lectures at the Collège de France in the late 1970s, Michel Foucault was already arguing that neoliberalism was becoming a mode of governance and far more than an economic system; intertwined with this argument is the development of his concept of governmentality as an important node of connection between states, economies, and bodies (Foucault 2008). The production of disciplined, docile, governable bodies both stems from and benefits economic systems and particularly the neoliberal state. But where does religion come into biopolitics and governmentality? One might begin by considering any number of commodified forms of spirituality – yoga and mindfulness meditation have come under significant academic scrutiny in this regard, for instance (e.g. Jain 2015; Purser 2019; Lucia 2020) – but I want to turn our attention to play.

Forms of play designed for adults, which I call 'grown-up play' to indicate that they include non-erotic as well as erotic forms, have seen a marked

uptick in popularity in the past few decades. Cosplay, where people dress up as fictional characters and attend gatherings and often massive conventions such as Comic-con, is one example. Furrries, people who dress up as anthropomorphic animal characters, also fall into this category. Brooklyn, New York has seen a growth in grown-up playgrounds in the past decade ('Adult Playground' 2014), and festivals like Burning Man, where people can take on different names and identities, and just – well – play have exploded in popularity and size. The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence emphasize joy in their mission statement. Perhaps play is also the draw of some aspects of Neopaganism today; certainly, Reclaiming Wicca, in particular, values and encourages playfulness (Salomonsen 2002). And although these communities have long roots, is it simply coincidence that practitioners of BDSM (bondage, discipline, dominance, submission, sadism, and masochism) refer to scenes not just in theatrical language but also as play – without the indefinite article that would make the word mean theatre, as in 'a play'?

Grown-up forms of play are often *very* grown up. Games that children play become professional sports for adults, with high pay-checks, high stakes, and often highly serious fans. But though some aspects of Comic-cons and festivals have moved in this direction, for the most part the movements that continue to grow retain at least a search for innocence; these newly popular forms of grown-up play also try to retain their light-heartedness and fun. Where do they fit within regimes of governmentality? Certainly, some are commodified – it's become increasingly pricey to attend a burn, for instance, and someone who wishes to set up a well-appointed BDSM dungeon can expect to put out a lot of money to do so. Yet these forms of play, I think, are not – or at the very least, not *yet* – commodities in and of themselves.

On the other hand, grown-up play is often considered by participants to be a form of or a space for spiritual expression. Is this spirituality in the service of governmentality and the neoliberal state? It would not be difficult to make this argument in the context of expensive yoga retreats in exotic locations, where the mostly white practitioners disconnect from the world around them and focus on finding their bliss in their stylish new yoga pants made by just the right company (Lucia 2020). But in considering this question further, I think we can take guidance from the clearly too-easy rejection of religion in which queer and trans studies have historically engaged. If we think with scholars like Foucault and Butler (e.g. 1990, 2004) about power, conceptualizing it as a set of interacting forces to which there is no outside, no space beyond the walls from which to lay siege, then does play perhaps also offer spaces of resistance from within the regime of neoliberal

governmentality? Does spirituality do the same? Questions like these are driving my new book project on leather spirituality in queer and transgender communities.

Subjectivity, subjectivation, affect, desire, resistance

Considerations of governmentality and subjectivity point towards a more direct consideration of the insights that the study of religion has to offer to queer and trans studies. In several areas of late, these fields have been working along parallel tracks; each has been developing interests in and analyses of certain phenomena, but largely without interacting. In this section I consider four areas where such interactions would, I argue, take both fields to an entirely new level. These are performativity and ritual, queer subjectivities and embodiments, queer desires, and temporalities.

Worlding worlds: performativity and ritual

In an incisive study of contemporary devadasis in South India, anthropologist Lucinda Ramberg writes of ‘worlding worlds’, the process by which people bring certain conceptions of the world into reality (Ramberg 2014). We all world worlds, and we do so not only, or perhaps not even primarily, through thinking about them or conceptualizing them. We do it through action, through practice. By conducting pujas, marrying both female-bodied and male-bodied women to the goddess Yellamma, and living in a world where the goddess is real, the devadasis with whom Ramberg worked worlded a world in which Yellamma plays a major role, one in which refusing the call of the goddess results in severe affliction and even death. The activists and government workers who oppose the devadasis worlded a world where Yellamma either is fictional or is properly (heterosexually) married and domesticated, and through persuasion, coercion, and direct force they attempted to replace the world of the devadasis with their own.

The idea that worlding a world brings it into being, into reality, through practice resonates with the concept of performativity. Indeed, in a telling moment that she has tended to disavow when questioned eagerly about it by religionists, Butler herself has referred to the repeated, citational enactment of gender as ritual (1990: 178). Whereas conversations about the application of this idea rarely move beyond considerations of whether gender is like religion, or of whether ritual studies and performativity might be useful in combination (but see Armour and St. Ville 2006; Mahmood 2005), I think

the idea of worlding the world gives us a broader tool that allows us to sidestep the often-awkward conversation about the relationship between performativity and religion. If we can understand the citational reiteration of established norms as worlding the world, bringing worlds into reality, even in the case of subversive citation (as Butler suggests may be the form taken by resistant performances of gender), we can understand the performative nature of gender as one facet of a larger sociocultural process, and the performative nature of ritual as another facet of the same process. We might come to a better understanding of how ritual and gender function together, or of how resistant forms of ritualization can bring non- or anti-normative subjectivities into being.

Queer subjectivities and queer embodiments

Those very non- and anti-normative subjectivities are also far from new; consider Yellamma herself, for instance. Even though the very core of queer and trans studies is rooted in resisting normative subjectivities, these fields, like most academic fields, have been profoundly resistant to the idea that subjectivities beyond the easily perceptible world might exist. Ramberg, though, makes it clear that part of living in the world that her teachers world is living in a world where Yellamma is real. Deities and other spirits are among the very few forms of anti-normative subjectivity that queer and trans studies have generally been unwilling to accept. Some, like the enlightened goddess whom the famed Buddhist monk Shariputra challenged about her embodiment, can even change their bodies – and the bodies of insolent humans like Shariputra – from female to male or vice versa with lightning speed. Are they too queer to be queer?

As Roberto Strongman argues (2019), the African diasporic traditions that developed in the context and the aftermath of the transatlantic slave trade, as well as the West African traditions from which they stemmed, have an understanding of the self that differs radically from the Enlightenment self that so strongly influences even the most radical of trans and queer theorists. Because these traditions world worlds in which superhuman beings communicate with their human communities through spirit possession – co-presence, as Aisha Belizo-de Jesús (2015) has termed it – they have also developed philosophies of the self that explain precisely how possession functions. Strongman terms this philosophy *transcorporeality*, which he defines as ‘the distinctly Afro-diasporic cultural representation of the human psyche as multiple, removable, and external to the body that functions as

its receptacle' (Strongman 2019: 2). He uses the cashew pear as an illustration of transcorporeality, because with this fruit the seed (the cashew nut) grows not inside but down below the fruit itself. If the psyche is external to the body and is removable like the cashew is from the cashew pear, then it can travel without the body, as some people believe happens in certain kinds of dreaming or trance; it can be kept elsewhere for safe keeping, but with serious consequences if the body dies in the meantime; and it can be set aside temporarily to make room for another consciousness, which is what happens in possession. Like the existence of spirits and deities, co-presences and transcorporeal selves are subjectivities that are queerer than queer.

Another deeply queer form of subjectivity exists in many of the worlds that indigenous communities world; anthropologist Ana Mariella Bacigalupo calls these sentient landscapes (Bacigalupo 2019). In the communities with which she works, the mountains are not only sacred but alive and sentient; they have consciousness, will, and agency. For this very reason, one group with whom she works with in northern Perú accepts spiritual tourists from the Global North/Global West with open arms. Whereas for many indigenous peoples the spread of spiritual tourism is a necessary evil to be accommodated, a way to keep the people alive through the money that comes with the tourists but also a compromise and commodification of their traditions, many Moche and Chimu people understand the spiritual tourists who visit them to be creating an unbreakable bond with the sentient mountains. This bond carries responsibilities that cannot be shirked, because the mountains can reach across space and impact those who neglect their duties. Thus, in accommodating spiritual tourists, Chimu and Moche people are recruiting allies for the sacred mountains that U.S. resource extraction, neocolonialism, and their own need for survival under these oppressive forces are currently forcing them to mine.

All of these queer subjectivities – goddesses who marry human women and who can make a woman out of anyone they marry, selves that are external and removable, co-presences, sentient landscapes – may seem distant and exotic to an audience in northern Europe. But let us not forget the profoundly queer subjectivities closer to home, such as the one that has been haunting this work throughout: the capacity of a thin flour wafer to become a human/divine body through a ritual properly performed by the right person. Jack Halberstam may think religion is the root of all evil, and Pope Francis may think gender theory is ideological colonization, but there at the heart of Roman Catholicism is a strikingly queer form of subjectivity and embodiment.

Queer religious desires

Not that the queerness of Roman Catholicism has been lost on the many queer people, Catholics or not, who have arched a suggestive eyebrow at the idea of eating the body of Christ. Queer – in particular, gay – Christian theology abounds with the recollections of Roman Catholic gay men who gazed in erect adoration at the beatific and divinely alluring body on the cross throughout their adolescent years (e.g. Goss 2002, but see also Rambuss 1998). These authors, of course, are hardly alone; the history of Christianity echoes with the ecstatic voices of mystics who desired Christ. Some are famous, like Hadewijch, who described feeling ‘outwardly satisfied and fully transported’ when Christ embraced her, or Catherine of Siena, whom he married with his circumcised foreskin as the ring (Bynum 1992). Others are less well known, like the eighteenth-century Moravian brothers who engaged in homoerotic worship of the side wound of the crucified Christ (Peucker 2006). Certainly, we must also include contemporary evangelical Christian women who join their Roman Catholic sisters (though more temporarily, they hope) in celibate marriage to Jesus until such time as a worthy husband comes along. Familiarity can make single evangelical women’s marriages to Jesus, or even the more permanent and official marriages of Roman Catholic nuns, seem unremarkable. Yet these, too, are profoundly queer forms of desire and of relationship. It is both interesting and telling that a devadasi’s marriage to Yellamma strikes many people as far more exotic than a Catholic nun’s marriage to Christ.

Superhuman beings, to be sure, are caught up in human desire and sexuality in settings well beyond Christian ones. Sometimes they make use of those desires to help humans, as with the medieval Japanese Buddhist tale of the bodhisattva who took the form of a beautiful young man and became the lover of a monk in order to help him towards enlightenment (Anonymous 1998). Sometimes, as with the fierce and hungry goddesses of the early Tantras, they grant immense powers to those practitioners who can feed them appropriately with semen, allowing the practitioner in turn to access superhuman powers through the consumption of their vaginal fluids (White 2003). And on a somewhat tamer level Sufi texts record that one way of realizing oneness with God is for practitioners (all men, in this case) to gaze upon an attractive male youth (Babayán 2008: 265, 268). Again here, religion offers us – and rather nonchalantly, at that – a plethora of queer and trans embodiments, desires, and relationships.

Queering time

Given all of this troubling of the self-assured, Enlightenment-based sense of what religion, spirituality, bodies, gender, and sexuality are, it should come as no surprise that queer questions of temporality are also incomplete without attention to religion. In the context of cultures that claim to be pluralist and/or secular but that clearly bear the footprints of centuries of Christian influence, we would be remiss not to question the origins of those societies' understandings of time. As thinkers ranging from queer and trans theorists to philosophers and theologians have taught us, time can be conceptualized in many different ways. Some models of time are linear, and some of those have both starting and ending points while others have neither or only one. Some models of time are circular – for instance, our division of time into minutes, hours, days, and months that repeat on a regular basis – and some are spiral, repeating but with a difference each time. Both geometrically and temporally, spirals are hybrids between circles and lines.

Christian temporalities are generally linear, with a fixed starting point at creation (because even though God pre-exists creation, time is typically said to begin then) and either a fixed stopping point or a fade into eternity at the arrival of the Kingdom of God, the end times and the end of time. Christianity is not the only religion with a linear model of time, to be sure, but in Christian-based cultures there is a reasonable likelihood that linear models of time are drawn from Christianity. This likelihood, then, suggests that both the models of time that queer theorists have critiqued and those they have offered as alternatives should be re-examined with an eye to their origins.

Reproductive futurism, for instance, is a model of society but also a mode of time in which, as Whitney Houston sang, 'the children are our future'. This model makes children immensely valuable, and therefore in need of intense protection; it also makes having children desirable, even the ultimate purpose in one's life. Focusing our attention on the future and the children (the future generations) as what matters, the temporal model of reproductive futurism is both linear and teleological. It might even be described by sociologists of religion as progressive millennialism (Wessinger 2000). But queer modes of rejecting reproductive futurism also encode their own models of temporality. While Lee Edelman (2004), who coined the term 'reproductive futurism', refuses a future at all, insisting on presence and disruption as both resistance to and reclaiming of the dominant representations of gay men as anti-reproductivist, authors who push back against Edelman's narrowly white, cisgender, male model of queerness and his rejection of any future find themselves back in the realm

of linear, teleological time. José Esteban Muñoz (2009), for example, offers a set of queer utopian visions that, while still dismissive of any connection between children and queer futures, nonetheless point to a liberatory (and sometimes libertine) telos. Can there be utopias without linear time? What are the temporal modes of queer utopias? How do Christian temporalities inform queer utopian dreaming, and where might it get us to address those connections consciously and intentionally, rather than blinker ourselves to them by failing to perceive the unmarked dominant category of Christianity that shapes such ostensibly secular radicalism?

Conclusion: resistance in the messy interstices

The interstitial spaces between religious studies, trans studies, and queer studies turn out to be quite messy. There are sexual fluids and fluid bodies, deities and spirits mingling and sharing bodies, desires, selves with humans. There are sentient mountains who bring visions and responsibilities to spiritual tourists, leatherfolk experiencing spiritual ecstasy under the flogger, *tantrikas* consuming vaginal fluids from a goddess, Christians eating the son of God. It's literally messy – bring a napkin! – and conceptually messy. But most of us who do transgender studies, queer studies, or religious studies also have this in common: we know that when things get messy is precisely when they get interesting. We know that the mess is generative, that it offers some of the most important insights, that when things are a bit untidy, we are probably beginning to really understand what we are studying. So here, where transness and religion and spirituality and queerness flow together, where things get really messy, is where we stand to gain the greatest insights.

This is also where the greatest possibilities for resistance may lie, as many scholars working at these intersections have noted. In dismissing religion out of hand, queer and trans studies lose the opportunity both to understand repressive forces more thoroughly and to find even greater spaces for trans and queer resistance, not so much in the sense that specific religious beliefs or practices may offer greater liberatory potential than others, but in the sense that queered and transed spaces, subjectivities, and modes of being are themselves spaces and enactments of resistance against a cisheterosexist world. In this final section, I briefly touch on some examples of these spaces of resistance from my work with the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence: religionfuck and serious parody.

I draw the term 'religionfuck' from the activist and gender studies concept of 'genderfuck', which means, basically, 'fucking with' or disrupting

gender. Genderfuck places apparently clashing gender markers together in the same space, and in so doing it often radically disrupts binary gender norms. Genderfuck drag might take the form of a heavily bearded person with an unshaven chest wearing a slinky cocktail dress and stilettos, or someone with a man's haircut and a flat chest speaking in a soprano voice. One could argue that the 'reveal' of the drag performer, the point when the performer removes parts of their costume to reveal that the body underneath is not the body that a cissexist audience would expect, is also a form of genderfuck.

In writing about the Sisters, I have argued that the order engages in a related mode of 'fucking with' religion, and in acknowledgment of that parallel I term this mode 'religionfuck'. As I write in *Queer Nuns*:

If genderfuck challenges and even undermines cultural assumptions about the ways in which genders, bodies, and desires cohere, then religionfuck might be said to challenge and undermine cultural assumptions about the ways in which religious identities, roles, practices, beliefs, and appearances cohere. Religionfuck makes use of performance to raise pointed questions about so-called 'proper' religious embodiment and the authority of religious establishments to dictate the boundaries of religious roles (Wilcox 2018: 85).

One way in which the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence engage in religionfuck is by raising questions about what exactly a nun is, who has the authority to say, and why. For instance, Sister Soami, originally known as Sister Missionary Position (the name is slang for a normative sexual position), tells a story from early in the order's history of a time when the brand-new San Francisco house joined in a protest at the University of San Francisco, a Roman Catholic school. Walking across campus after the protest had ended, Sister Missionary Position encountered an irate Roman Catholic nun who demanded to know why he was wearing her habit. Sister Missionary Position recalls that he pointed out brightly that *she* was wearing her habit and *he* was wearing his own (Soami 2012). At its heart this amusing story indexes a contestation over who can claim the category of nun, and who cannot.

The Sisters do claim that category, and quite seriously, even as they also enact a stinging parody of the Roman Catholic Church and indeed of other aspects of Christianity. In another early protest Sister Vicious Power Hungry Bitch took a list of the order's demands and 'nailed' it to the door of a famous San Francisco cathedral in intentional imitation of Martin Luther, but with one crucial difference: she used a Lee Press-On Nail, a fake fingernail. I call this form of engagement 'serious parody', which I define

as 'a form of cultural protest in which a disempowered group parodies an oppressive cultural institution while simultaneously claiming for itself what it believes to be an equally good or superior enactment of one or more culturally respected aspects of that same institution' (Wilcox 2018: 70).

Serious parody of religion, specifically, is a form of religionfuck. Both serious parody and the broader category of religionfuck offer generative spaces for resistance to the cross-currents of power that course through norms of gender, sexuality, and religion. As I move into my new book project on spirituality in queer and trans leather and BDSM communities, I'm asking similar questions in an even more embodied sense. Many people in these communities find their spiritual engagement routed through intense bodily experiences. Tantalizingly, those very queer medieval Christians who described ecstatic experiences of Christ were also engaging in physical practices of pain and pleasure, with the ultimate top: the divine itself. What possibilities for resistance arise when top and bottom are both human, yet the ecstasy remains?

In this work, I have ranged over a number of promising intersections between trans studies, queer studies, and religious studies. I have moved from the co-constitution of sex, race, and religion to the intertwining of religion, economy, and the state, and I have indulged in a whirlwind tour of the queerness and transness of religion, from worlding worlds where goddesses are real to worshipping the side wound of Christ to reproductive futurism as progressive millennial temporality. I have argued not only that these are fascinating and fun intersections to explore, but that they matter far beyond our own pleasures, because it is also in the messy interstices that we can find the chinks in the armour of power. In this day and age, more than ever, we must find every route to resistance we can. Neither queerness, nor transness, nor religion can be set aside in that quest.

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