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QUEERLY FAITHFUL:
A QUEER-POET COMMUNITY AUTOETHNOGRAPHY ON
IDENTITY AND BELONGING IN CHRISTIAN FAITH
COMMUNITIES

SEPTEMBER 21, 2016

MAJOR RESEARCH PROJECT

Completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Master's in Social Justice and Community Engagement
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I want to be compost
By Eric Van Giessen

*There is a moment
characterized by
a two hour mould of my face
on the pillow,
or by
a two kilometre
shuffle in circles
passed the greenery
and tennis balls
when clarity comes*

And flees just as suddenly.

*Each keystroke becomes
a backwards production—
a furrowed finger dance
marked by
a desperate remembering
of that moment of clarity.*

*With each hesitant
tittle and dot,
a wonder
at how words error
and devalue walked stories.
And yet, unsaid
too often means unshared;
Can one enrich and destroy
all at once?*

I want to be compost.

*To gather these sacred stories
and allow their potency
to decay into words
that sew fertile grounds
for justice to bloom
in once barren soil.*

*The smell of that
earthy blackness, that
nourishing impetus
might just be enough
to mourn on the out-breath
but to feast on the in.*

*However...
does that make
this research
a willing act
of personal
and communal
violence?*

Or...
 is it not so clear,
 more queer,
 more fuzzy,
 more sacred:
 like a sacrificial burning
 like the flaming
 resurrection story of the phoenix
 resurrection story
 resurrection story
 perhaps
 my clarity has come!
 ...
 and it flees.

INTRODUCTION

The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized. This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are—until the poem—nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt. That distillation of experience from which the poetry springs births thought as dream births concept, as feeling births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding.

— Audre Lorde 2007: 36

Mine is a story adorned in privilege. A bouncing baby boy brought up in a middle-class abode on a suburban street. Loved and affirmed, able-bodied and bodied in a skin tone that I did not notice—I did not have to. I had completed the seventh grade before I realized that not everyone was a Christian; that not everyone was taught to believe what I professed to believe. My story has been told, time and again, and again, and under scrutiny my vocation is shutting up and listening.¹

And yet, I proclaim with Lorde (2007) that for me too poetry has not been a luxury (36). Within my story too is woven a thread of systematic rejection, manifest in the utterances of my own (loved ones), the teachings of those deemed knowledgeable, and the told stories pointing toward my absent future—clarified between the lines. My story is not one of sweeping hegemonic overthrow but of the staggering stride of a queer man seeking to reconcile and

¹ For critical material on the blunders of self-proclaimed allyship see McKenzie, 2014: 138.

reimagine faith and sexuality through poetic distillation. Yet in this reconciliation and reimagination, I hope to uncover a modest chisel which might be useful to those working away at the foundations of oppression—seeking to make space for social justice.

This is a community autoethnography: a story of many, borrowed from the mouths of a few, and told by one tentative tongue.² A story that plays with poetry as I played with poetry—or rather clung to it—to make sense of dichotomies that my lived experience seemed to falsify. Using poetry and narrative, this research study aims to reveal the ways in which the presented dichotomy of LGBTQI+ and Christian identity manifests itself in six queer bodies/selves. How is it that we can be Christian and queer? Moreover, how might we invest in the reciprocal growth of a faith community that roots itself in a religious tradition caricatured in social consciousness by its institutionalized homonegativity (Yip 2015; Sherkat 2002)? How do we find belonging in a community that is known to speak of our day to day lived experience as an ‘issue’ to be debated³ or a disorder to be healed?⁴ When crossing the threshold of our churches hand-in-hand with our partners may augment our membership with contingencies? When conservative Christian propaganda proclaiming that “homosexuality is incompatible with human nature” is distributed at Pride events to our LGBTQI+ peers (Wong 2016)? What might it look like to stride, queerly faithful, through the false dichotomies that confront us as LGBTQI+ Christians? It looks like us. It looks like me. A lived story of stubborn belonging and re-invented identity. Despite the

² As will be explained below, the Queerly Faithful project was comprised of the efforts of six co-researchers who came together to build relationships, to articulate identity, and to act as agents of justice in our communities through sharing our experiences.

³ See the Christian Reform Church of North America’s Synodical Agenda 2016: https://www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/2016_agenda.pdf

⁴ See various ‘ex-gay’ and reparative therapy programs: *Celebrate Recovery*, *People Can Change*, and *Your Other Brothers*

whispers of disapproval: we reserve a place for ourselves in the pew—singing with gusto.

CONTEXT

Dichotomous constructions that pit Christianity (and other religious traditions) against liberal political movements that have won rights for LGBTQI+ people are unhelpful to the creation of a more just society. Such categorizations create artificial divisions that undermine the efforts of LGBTQI+ Christians to effect change in their communities by pressuring them to compartmentalize⁵—or closet—their spiritual or sexual selves. These constructions also reinforce discourses that claim there are no queer people of faith *in* Christian churches and other religious communities—effectively giving permission to religious leaders to ignore the concerns of LGBTQI+ religious activists.⁶ In some queer spaces, the secularity that is interwoven with much of the dominant discourse around LGBTQI+ identity construction has invited a hostility towards religion—further marginalizing LGTBQI+ persons who participate in these spaces while continuing to practice their faith.

Despite the persistence of discourses that dichotomize religion and sexual difference,

⁵ Yip's (2015) explanation of compartmentalization is helpful here: "Among LGB religious actors, one of the most commonly deployed strategies to reduce tension and conflict is to compartmentalize their religious faith and sexuality. This strategy involves a conscious effort to conceal their sexual orientation in heteronormative spaces such as a place of worship or the family, where they know being open about their sexual orientation could potentially exact a high cost. Thus sexuality is deliberately downplayed in such spaces, and religiosity is sometimes heightened to overcompensate for sexuality. The presentation of the heterosexual self (i.e., acting the heterosexual role) is therefore crucial in this context, at least in signposting one's ability to conform to heteronormative religious and cultural norms such as marriage."

In contrast, in spaces that are deemed safe, LGB religious actors foreground their sexuality, and their religious identity then assumes a secondary position. Interestingly, these safe spaces, including the LGB community, could be inhospitable to those who profess religious faith due to the anti-religion undercurrents of such spaces, which arise from the connection between LGB identity and secularity in the dominant discourse of LGB identity construction" (125).

⁶ See, for example, Hunter (1983), Ammerman (1985), and Roof & McKinney (1987).

some LGBTQI+ Christians are refusing to remain closeted in their communities.⁷ For those queerly faithful individuals who choose not to abandon Christianity altogether, then, their lives become embodied challenges to these hegemonic norms.⁸ This paper is an exploration of the lived experiences of a handful of those queerly faithful individuals, and the ways their stories intersect with social justice movements that seek to disrupt hegemonic systems of power and privilege.

The challenge of navigating intersecting religious and minority sexual identities is not unique to those participating in *Christian* faith communities. Scholars have documented LGBTQI+ experience in communities and with individuals who profess Islam (Habib 2010; Kugle 2014; Rahman 2010, 2014; Yip 2005a, 2005b), Judaism (Ariel 2007; Halper 2011; Schnoor 2006), and Buddhism (Jackson & Cook 1999; Leyland 2000) among others. This project is limited in scope by its autoethnographic nature and as such focuses on facets of *my* experience within Christian faith communities as these experiences resonate and conflict with those of the five additional co-researchers. Many religious traditions, however—and the communities that practice them—present unique and overlapping challenges to the LGBTQI+

⁷ I have intentionally chosen to use the term *sexual difference* here, and will continue to for the remainder of this paper. The term was introduced to me in a lecture given on intersectionality by Michael Blair (a current member of the General Council of the United Church of Canada). Blair criticized the use of the term *diversity* in favour of *difference*. Diversity, he claimed, is a term that has been over-used to describe the presence of a notable number of racialized persons in a community. Not only does the term diversity connote reference to racial or ethnic difference (and in so doing downplay other differences: ability, sexuality, gender, etc.), but also carries with it an implication of interpersonal harmony. While a diverse community may be one that celebrates difference, the term seems to downplay the tensions that are key to democratic community. Lastly, the term diversity connotes, to my ears, categorical fixedness. A diverse community is one in which differences have been identified and labeled. Blair advocated for the use of the term *difference* as an alternative - a term that directly opens up conversation about *valuing* difference, dissent and disagreement as a part of healthy, flourishing, equitable societies. The term also creates avoids the risk of essentializing experiences through categorizing and emphasized the unique manifestations of identity in each individual's story. By using the term *sexual difference*, I hope to problematize the hegemonic construction/preservation of sexual norms (oftentimes by religious institutions) and disrupt the categorization of hetero and queer sexualities.

⁸ These queerly faithful bodies become sites of social change. For more see: Butler 1990a, 1990b, 1993; Foucault 1978.

people that call these spaces home. The stories of the participants in this project centre around the dynamic reconciliation and interaction of Christian and queer identities, particularly as these identities are not recognized within the communities to which each participant belongs, as well as exploring participants' re-actions to these relational conflicts. A future study might utilize a comparable methodology to interrogate similarities amongst experiences of belonging and identity in a *variety* of religious communities. The current study focuses on the experiences of six LGBTQI+ Christians who participate in Protestant, Anglican, and Ecumenical faith communities.

The aims of this study are to queer the lines drawn between Christianity and sexual difference, to give evidence to the existence of queer people seeking to make meaningful contributions to Christian faith communities, and to explore some of the social and political implications of queerly faithful ideologies. In this paper, these aims are bolstered by the evocative, reflexive, probing presence of poetry. The peppering of poems used throughout this narrative allows for the intrusion of emotional and spiritual knowledges into the study in ways that traditional prose transcripts might not have captured.⁹ This paper is paired with a zine publication that presents all of the poems produced through the Queerly Faithful project (and the knowledge they carry) in a creative and accessible format.¹⁰ I will further explain the role of the poetry and the zine publication in the sections of this paper that follow.

⁹“Poetic representations can provide the researcher/reader/listener with a different lens through which to view the same scenery, and thereby understand data, and themselves, in different and more complex ways. It is, therefore, a powerful form of analysis” (Sparkes, Nilges, Swan, & Dowling 2003: 155).

¹⁰ “Zines are a medium where people can share ideas without the censorship of the dominant culture. They are a ‘do it yourself’ (DIY) sort of publication, where they are primarily created and distributed by hand... Zines are a revolutionary tool utilized to combat oppression and bring to light social injustices in an artistic, creative, critical, genuine and uncensored way to promote equality, social justice and social change” (Desyllas & Sinclair 2014: 299; see also Schilt 2003; Zobl 2009).

This study focuses on participant experiences of belonging and identity in their communities and seeks to explore the following research questions: How do LGBTQI+ identified persons speak about their identity in relation to their respective faith/queer communities? How does a queerly faithful identity unfold in the lives of these six LGBTQI+ Christians? What are the socio-political implications of the lived experiences of these participants?

COMMUNITY AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

The Queerly Faithful project can be described as what Ellis, Adams, & Bochner (2011) define as community autoethnography:

Community autoethnographies use the personal experience of the researchers-in-collaboration to illustrate how a community manifests particular social/cultural issues. Community autoethnographies thus not only facilitate “community-building” research practices but also make opportunities for “cultural and social intervention” possible (279).

The participants in this project acted as co-researchers and collaborators who worked together with myself as a ‘complete member researcher’ (Anderson 2006) to produce knowledge about what it looks like to be queerly faithful.¹¹ Community autoethnography is a subset of what Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez (2012) call *collaborative autoethnography*.¹² The Queerly Faithful project differs from most collaborative autoethnographies in two significant ways: (1) the co-researchers in this study are not all established academic researchers and (2) the mandate of the project is not solely to obtain meaningful *results* but just as importantly to foster

¹¹ “The autoethnographer is a more analytic and self-conscious participant in the conversation than is the typical group member, who may seldom take a particularly abstract or introspective orientation to the conversation and activities. But the autoethnographer’s understandings, both as a member and as a researcher, emerge not from detached discovery but from engaged dialogue” (Anderson 2006: 382).

¹² “We ask you to imagine a group of researchers pooling their stories to find some commonalities and differences and then wrestling with these stories to discover the meanings of the stories in relation to their sociocultural context” (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez 2012: 17).

community, to deepen relationships, and produce communal knowledge through storytelling. Through dialogue with each other this community collaboration enriched our insight into our own identities in our communities and allowed us to stand in solidarity with each other as we assert our belonging in a community that has often rejected our membership (see appendix #1).

As will become apparent in the literature review that follows, a small but significant multi-disciplinary collection of research has been done on identity construction amongst LGBTQI+ Christians. Where the Queerly Faithful project contributes to this collection of knowledge is in its emphasis on approaching the subject with a *queer sensibility* (Holman Jones & Adams 2010: 204): namely, the employment of community autoethnography as a queer method to explore the nuances of Christian LGBTQI+ identity, as well as in the use of poetry as data, interpretive device, and reflexive medium. The Queerly Faithful project's community autoethnographic approach combined with the inclusion of arts-based research methods in the form of poetry and collaborative art-making offers new knowledge to the subject that privileges participants' expressions of their own lived experiences and infiltrates all stages of the project with a queer sensibility. These approaches will be explored in greater detail in the methodologies section of this paper.

STRUCTURAL PREVIEW

One of the ways that I have invited a queer sensibility into The Queerly Faithful project is in the structure and style of this paper itself. The combined use of poetic language and narrative arc as well as academic language and prose analysis serves to challenge conceptions of 'proper' social science writing and positions the writing itself as a method of inquiry (Prendergast, Leggo & Sameshima 2009; Richardson, & St. Pierre 2005; Richardson 1993).

Poetry is used in multiple ways throughout this paper. Poems such as the one on the opening page, “I want to be compost,” were written as reflexive expressions that invite the reader into my experience as I wrestle with articulating methodology, theory, and data presentation. These poems are meant to serve as reflexive contemplations that invite the reader into the questions and challenges of producing a fixed document to present the findings of a queer project that resists fixedness. By blurring the lines between narrative/storytelling and social science writing, I invite the readers “to become coparticipants, engaging the storyline morally, emotionally, aesthetically, and intellectually” (Ellis & Bochner 2000: 745).

I have also used poems written by the participants as *data* to highlight and complement the analysis and discussion around emergent themes from the project. These poems are paired with prose quotations pulled from the transcripts of our multiple gatherings and together form the data from which my thematic discussion proceeds. In the appendix, the Queerly Faithful Zine publication can be found. The conflicts and tensions between this paper and the zine publication stand as a reminder of the constructedness of this exploration and should prompt reflection on the problematics involved in producing static documents to represent fluid, becoming selves. I encourage you to peruse the zine before reading this paper further, and to question my exploration of the data based on your own evocations and reflections.

After exploring some of the relevant literature pertaining to the Queerly Faithful project, and tracing the interwoven theoretical framing and methodology employed in the project, I then construct a story which introduces a number of the emergent themes from the project that require further research and exploration in future studies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It has been less than fifty years since homosexuality was decriminalized, thirty-five years since the Toronto bath-house raids (often considered Canada's 'Stonewall') and less than fifteen years since same-sex marriage was legalized in Canada. In 2016 alone, the Anglican Church of Canada voted to allow clergy to marry same-sex couples (Folkins 2016; Perkel 2016; Thompson 2016), the Mennonite Church of Canada voted to allow congregations to decide their own position on same-sex marriage and LGBTQI+ membership (Dick & Benner 2016), and the Christian Reformed Church of North America voted to explicitly disallow clergy involvement in same-sex marriage ceremony (Postma 2016) as well as affirming its stance on homosexuality as a "condition of disordered sexuality."¹³ Even without mentioning the violently polarized debates around access to bathrooms for transgendered individuals in North Carolina, or the devastating Orlando massacre in which forty-nine LGBTQI+ (largely, people of colour) were murdered, LGBTQI+ equity in mass society and particularly in Christian faith communities continues to be an unfolding process with distinctly divergent trajectories.

What implications does this context have on a review of the literature that is relevant to the various elements of this study? While the unfolding social climate around sexual difference, gender identity and religion does not render the literature that follows irrelevant, it must be acknowledged that the social landscape upon which the identities and faiths of the participants involved in this study are realized differs significantly from even that of a year ago. It is important that research and exploration into religion and sexual difference continue as the dialogue between new theologies, nuances in faith development, the politics surrounding

¹³ Homosexuality. (n.d.). Retrieved September 08, 2016, from <https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/position-statements/homosexuality>

identity, and LGBTQI+ equity unfold. The personal stories that make up social science inquiry shift as the political, social and religious climate maps the terrain. As such, up to date interdisciplinary study around lived experiences of LGBTQI+ identities, particularly as these identities intersect with religious identities and faith communities, continue to add important insight to sociological literature. If Foucault (1978), and other queer scholars, are correct in asserting that “bodies both constitute and are constituted by systems of power” and that “bodies might serve as sites of social change” (Holman Jones & Adams 2010: 209) then research, such as the Queerly Faithful project, that explore and illuminate the social relations in which those bodies participate are vital contributions to the creation of a more just society.

THEOLOGICAL CAPITAL

One of the significant shifts in the religious social landscape around LGBTQI+ lives has been the cultivation of what Andrew Yip (2010) describes as “theological capital” (42). Yip claims that by challenging heteronormative scriptural interpretation, contextualizing scripture in its historical situatedness and proclaiming the relevance of socio-culture shifts on theological understandings, religious scholars have forged out the “theological capital” necessary for social and political conversations to be possible (42). These efforts to construct a reverse religious discourse¹⁴ around sexual difference appeal to an hermeneutical ethic—or as Yip (2010) describes an “ethics of reading texts” (41). Religious scholars assert that “text is neutral, but the reading of it is not, since the reader engages with the text from a specific standpoint, reflecting her/his [sic] own ideological, political, cultural, and socio-economic leanings” (Yip 2010: 41).¹⁵

¹⁴ Reverse religious discourses, here, are works that “[challenge] the truth claims of the heteronormative dominant discourse” (Yip 2010: 38) in religious scholarship.

¹⁵ These hermeneutic approaches to scripture are built upon the work of postmodern and poststructuralist thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler.

The Bible, then, can quickly become what Thatcher (2008) calls a ‘savage text’ if ‘neutral’ readings of specific passages are elevated above overarching scriptural themes: Christ’s embodiment of love and grace (5). Religious scholars advocating the embrace of sexual difference adopt a social justice lens wherein scripture is meant to lead to the ‘enhancement of humanity’ rather than be used as a tool of violence or oppression (Yip 2010: 41; see also Goss & West 2000; Lozada 2000; Mcfadyen 2000; Yip 2005a).

It is crucial to highlight the work of these religion and sociology scholars because much of the scholarship around faith development and LGBTQI+ identity fails to acknowledge the ways in which theologies and frameworks for scriptural interpretation (i.e. faith *content*) impact identity development and belonging in Christian community. The presence, and prevalence of texts which de-stigmatize homosexuality in the Bible, which highlight stories of same-sex affection, and which develop theologies that account for LGBTQI+ lived experience are central to any exploration of LGBTQI+ Christian identity.

Yip (2010) categorizes the reverse religious discourse constructions amongst Christian scholars into three inter-related forms: defensive apologetics, ‘cruising’ texts, and sexual theology. Defensive apologetics are works that “aim to [re-contextualize] textual passage/verses [sic] which have been conventionally deplored as an indisputable basis for the moral exclusivity and authenticity of heterosexuality, and the unacceptability of homosexuality” (Yip 2010: 37). The tendency for extremist Christian groups such as the *Westboro Baptist Church* to quote the Bible as a supposed neutrally homonegative text has incited a swath of defensive apologetic works attempting to debunk the hegemonic assumption that the Bible is an unequivocally anti-gay text. Arguments for the interpretive and contextual nature of scripture have been made by

religious scholars (Boswell 1980; Brownson 2013; Goss & West 2000; Hanway 2006; Himbaza, Schenker, Edart & Guevin 2012; Jordan 1998, 2000; Long 2004; Macourt 1977; Rogers 2009; Stuart 1995, 2003) and more recently by academic activists hoping to disseminate this alternative hermeneutic outside the walls of academia (Helminak 2000; Lee 2012; Michaelson 2011; Vines 2014). Some scholars have also begun challenging fixed sexual/gender binaries in an effort to destigmatize trans bodies (Isherwood & Althaus-Reid 2009; Cornwall 2009, Mollenkott 2007).

The second form of religious scholarship expands its scriptural analysis beyond the six or seven scriptural verses that explicitly mention same-sex intercourse. Yip (2010) dubs these ‘cruising texts’ as they scan through scripture to uncover “same-sex eroticism, intimacy, and sociability” (39). These texts seek to illuminate the existence of same-sex intimate relationships in scripture (King 2000; Koch 2001; Stone 2001) arguing that heteronormative theology has downplayed scriptural passages that offer spiritual guidance surrounding same-sex intimacy. Goss (2002) and Moore (2001) have attempted to ‘queer’ Jesus by emphasizing his critical and subversive posture in the face of political and religious authority (i.e. enmeshing himself with the socially disenfranchised—including sexual dissidents). Guest, Goss, West, & Bohache (2006) have produced a comprehensive queer Biblical commentary that approaches scripture with a queer sensibility. These ‘cruising texts’ highlight the restricted heteronormative lens to which religious scholars tend to default to when interpreting scripture and carve out positive space for queer identities and ontologies in scripture-based religious discourse.

The last common form of reverse religious discourse construction seeks to “fundamentally overhaul theology, not only in relation to the body, gender and sexuality; but most importantly the character of the divine and the humans and their relationships” (Yip 2010:

40). The goal of these works is to reimagine a theology that celebrates and embraces embodiment and experience as sacred teaching tools: a sexual theology (Yip 2010: 40). These theologies reject the spirit-body divide and assert an intimate relationship between sexuality and spirituality (Althaus-Reid 2000; Bohache 2003; Cheng 2013; Loughlin 2007; Nelson 1992; Rudy 1997; Stuart 1997; Thatcher 1993). They also aim to create space in traditionally heterosexist theological frameworks—such as marriage—for committed same-sex relationships (Boswell 1994; Jordan 2005; Stuart 1992, 1995; Thatcher 1999, 2003).

The strenuous effort represented in the literature above by both queer scholars and heterosexual allies has created sufficient space in the Christian religious discourse for LGBTQI+ justice and rights conversations to become viable. Without this theological capital, religious communities might simply veto appeals to justice for the LGBTQI+ community on the grounds of scriptural/theological clarity surrounding the ‘sin’ of homosexuality. For LGBTQI+ Christians the disruption of the homosexuality = sin equation allows for the seeds of pride to be sown (Gross 2008). With this pride, and a conviction that Christ was an advocate of justice, LGBTQI+ Christians have the capacity to engage in broader social and political issues as well as advocating for access to nourishing spiritual spaces and faith communities. The participants in the Queerly Faithful project entered our discussions with much of the knowledge represented above under their belts. The theological capital these knowledges create provides ideological grounding for many of the poems that form a large portion of the data for this paper.

SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

The work that has been done by religious scholars to construct a reverse religious discourse within Christianity around sexual difference has been complemented and bolstered by

social science research that highlights the stories and lived experiences of LBGTQI+ religious actors. The bulk of the research done in the social sciences concerning LBGTQI+ religious actors has been on how queer people construct meaningful religious and sexual identities (Rodriguez & Ouellette 2000; Yip & Page 2016; Walton 2006) as well as how these identities may influence their scriptural interpretation and religious practices (Bardella 2001; Gross 2008; Gross & Yip 2010; Sherkat 2002; Talvacchia, Pettinger & Larrimore 2014; Toft 2014; Yip 2003, 2015). Many of these studies speak to the resilience of LBGTQI+ Christians, and the dynamic ways that these individuals have learned to trust their own lived experiences as spiritually significant or revelatory.

Focusing more explicitly on resiliency, some scholars have investigated various management strategies that LBGTQI+ persons have employed to cope with and work through the presented tensions between religion and sexual/gender difference in their church environments (Foster, Bowland & Vosler 2015; Gross & Yip 2010; Levy & Lo 2013; Reygan & Moan 2014; Wilcox 2003, 2005; Yip 1997, 2005a, 2005b) and in public space (Valentine & Waite 2012). Other scholars have explored the discourses around sexual difference in churches: examining how church communities speak about homosexuality (Moon 2004; Young 2008), how misunderstandings about the *cause* of homosexuality affect discourses about same-sex unions and homonegativity (Whitehead 2010; Whitehead & Baker 2012), the limitations of tolerance as a religious or socio-political response to LBGTQI+ justice issues (Young, Shipley & Trothen 2015), and generally complicating the historical narrative that assumes religion and sexual difference to be in opposition (Shipley 2014; White 2015). In many cases, homonegativity in churches has pushed LBGTQI+ people to form their own religious communities (Maher 2006) or

to move beyond traditional institutions and find spiritual nourishment in less formal spaces (Boisvert 2005; Browne, Munt & Yip 2010; Gray & 2005).

Faith Development Theory. While the majority of the content of this paper is an examination of self-conception and identity performance, one of the links between the socio-political conversation around identity and the religiously oriented literature above is in the field of developmental psychology. Faith Development Theory is one example that was developed by James Fowler (1995) and presented in his book, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development*. Originally articulated as a stage theory, postmodern criticism has prompted Fowler (2001) to crosscut his theory with a typology. Though the shift towards a system of types resolves a number of postmodern concerns about regarding faith development as a sequence of linear stages, the somewhat prescriptive, fixedness of Fowler's psychological exploration clashes distinctly with the queer sensibility adopted in this study. While the 'findings' section of this paper does lay out a series of themes, the reader should understand these themes as inadequate attempts to reify fluid and vacillating experiences of identity into a communication medium. There are certainly faith developments or shifts represented in the Queerly Faithful data, however, my choice here has been to focus less on why these shifts occurred or how to 'progress' through these themes and more on how these personal shifts are socially or politically relevant, as well as how attention to these testimonies might further equity for LGBTQI+ people in Christian faith community contexts.

Fowler's (2001) articulation of the triadic structure of faith development is helpful, however: "There is the self, there are the primal and significant others in the self's relational matrix, and there is the third centre of relational engagement—the ultimate Other, or the centre(s)

of value and power in one's life structure." (165). All three of these dimensions are woven through the stories and poems of the participants in this project. In the case of the Queerly Faithful participants, we explored how relationships with self, faith community, and Christian deity influence belonging and the ways that faith and sexuality or gender identity manifest in our lived experiences.

Within the field of developmental psychology, scholars have explored counselling practices and therapeutic techniques for individuals experiencing 'cognitive dissonance' (Mahaffy 1996) and how to "facilitate spiritual exploration" (Kocet, Sanabria, & Smith 2011: 163) for LGBTQI+ individuals that seek counselling support for religious/spiritual identity concerns (see also Goodrich, Buser, Luke, & Buser 2016). While these studies provide exciting insight into the questions and stories that LGBTQI+ religious actors bring into a counselling setting and how counselling practices might shift as a result of these findings, the focus of the Queerly Faithful project is on bearing witness to the lived experiences of LGBTQI+ Christians how these experiences hold social and political relevance.

IDENTITY - RELIGION, GENDER AND SEXUALITY

Another section of the literature describes how LGBTQI+ religious actors resolve their inner conflict regarding their spirituality and sexuality through a series of linear stages of identity (Cass 1979, 1984; Fassinger 1991; Savin Williams 1988, 1990; Troiden 1979, 1988). The majority of these scholars tacitly accept binaried understandings of gender and sexuality and are white, cis-gender, men and focus their research on experiences of identity resolution amongst white, cis-gender, gay men. These stage models adhere to a general pattern that begins with a

lack of cognizance of one's sexual orientation, followed by a stage of identity immersion that progresses toward identity integration.

More recent literature exploring the lives of people who identify as bisexual (Bradford 2004; Heinrich & Klein 1993), two-spirited (Brown 1997), people of colour (Boykin 1996; Crow, Brown and White 1997; Manalansan 1993; Wilson 1996) and disabled (Clare 2015) serves to challenge these linear stage-model understandings of identity. Many of these studies highlight the inadequacy of stage-model conceptions of LGBTQI+ identity formation to account for the myriad of intersection identities that nuance that construction. This inadequacy has resulted in alternative understandings such as D'Augelli's (1994; see also D'Augelli & Patterson 1995; Klein 1990) 'life-span model'. Bilodeau & Renn (2005) argue that:

The D'Augelli framework addresses issues often ignored in other models, presenting human development as unfolding in concurring and multiple paths, including the development of a person's self-concept, relationships with family, and connections to peer groups and community. This model suggests that sexual orientation may be very fluid at certain times in the life span and more fixed at others and that human growth is intimately connected to and shaped by environmental and biological factors (28).

Other scholars further problematize binaried conceptions of gender identity by arguing that gender is a product of social interaction rather than being dictated by genitalia (Butler 1990, 1993; Halberstam 1998; Wilchins 2002). Compared to the literature on sexual orientation, there is limited research exploring religious and sexual identity amongst transgender or genderqueer individuals. This is a significant gap in the literature that future studies will need to address.

Scholars that explore identity as a social construction (Troiden 1985) effectively undermine hegemonic heteronormativity and in so doing render non-heterosexual identities as meaningful and legitimate. These conceptions of identity, however, undermine years of essentialist Christian advocacy which has championed the politically expedient phrase: 'God

made me this way'. While queer theorists such as Butler (1993) use constructionist language in their exploration of identity, they attempt to escape the essentialist/constructionist debate by focusing on how identity is performed and interpreted in its social and political context:

As a critical sensibility, queer theory tries to steer clear of categorical hang-ups and linguistic baggage, conceive of identity as a relational achievement (thus removing identity from essentialist and constructionist debates) and commit itself to a politics of change (Holman Jones & Adams 2010: 204).

The focus here is not whether an individual was *born* LGBTQI+ or how identity categories are *constructed* through social relations, but on how individuals carve out meaningful existential moments in relation. I will be employing this queer approach to identity in the discussion that follows.

LIVED RELIGION

The small body of literature where the multi-disciplinary scholarship represented above converges, and where the Queerly Faithful project is located, is the study of 'lived religion' (Hall 1997; McGuire 2008). Scholars such as Roof (2001) focus less on the psychological processes surrounding faith development and more on the ways that 'scripts', practices, and personal agency are rooted in and shaped by institutions and community influences (i.e. faith communities). Andrew Yip (2015) has focused on LGBTQI+ "religious social actors' diverse experiences in managing such tensions in everyday life and on their social and political implications" (120; see also Gross & Yip 2010). Yip uses large segments of transcribed quotes from interviews with LGBTQI+ religious actors to investigate the everyday manifestations of tension between individual's sexual and religious selves. Yip's insistence on interdisciplinary scholarship that entertains faith development, theological belief, and sociological implication is rare with more 'lived religion' research being conducted by religious scholars interested in

theological construction (Talvacchia, Pettinger, & Larrimore 2015; Thumma & Gray 2004). The content of these important works overlaps with the process of identity synergism articulated later in this paper. It is my hope to contribute to this small body of literature by adopting a queer sensibility to explore the lived religion of six LGBTQI+ Christians in 2016. By exploring the experiences of these individuals it is my hope to draw attention to the social and political relevance of these lives while bringing attention to the need for easier access to spiritually nourishing faith communities for LGBTQI+ individuals.

METHODOLOGY

*This spring sun beckons a labour,
a creative toil
and a turning of soil that may just seed life.*

*In these hands I grasp the coarse wooden handles of my tools—
edge and point;
curve and blade—
determined to make their way on and in the earth in
a way to each their own.*

*A garden
wed to a feast of harvest
that may have caught dandelion root
if not for the source of these broken calluses:
these tools.*

*By these hands...
these hands...
By these shoulders I wield the sinewed strength of these hands—
opposing thumbs;
muscle and nails—
determined to make their way on and in the earth in
a way trained and toned...these tools.*

*By these shoulders...
these shoulders...
By this self I mind the gyrations of these shoulders—
bound and free;
fixed and fluid—
determined to make their way on and in the earth in
a way strong and stable...these tools.*

*By this self...
these selves...
By this performance I play with the world as it worlds—
biased and blind;
achieved and denied—*

*determined to make their way on and in the earth in
a way subversive...knowing and showing...these tools.*

*Beckoned to this creative toil
this turning of soil may just seed life,
and these tools...
these tools...
have a way to each their own.*

- Eric Van Giessen

*"My intention is more radical: find and deploy methods which allow us to uncover the hidden assumptions and
life-denying repressions of sociology; resee/refeel sociology. Reseeing and retelling are inseparable"*

- Richardson, 1993: 705

A queering of methodologies makes an exploration of methods perplexing at worst and playful at best. The "shifting sensibility" (Holman Jones & Adams, 2010: 204) of a queer approach invites the researcher to a praxis which undermines the distinctions that make the conceptualization of 'method' possible (Plummer 2005). The choice to adopt a queer sensibility, then, is a determination to engage with methodology playfully: to invoke the ironic (i.e. using queer theory as a tool), to pair the paradoxical, to queer thresholds, and to blur binaries in an attempt to "resee/refeel sociology" (Richardson, 1993: 705; herising 2005; see also Kane 2004).¹⁶ When the rule of a critical posture is added to this play, the goal is to "challenge the epistemologies and methodologies that dehumanize and depersonalize those on the margins" (Strega, 2005: 215), to dig up and disturb the hidden dynamics of power in social science research, and to engage playfully with the tools left before me in search of liberation.

To succeed at this 'game' then, the method or tools utilized in this project must (1) affirm the humanity of the participant-researchers and invite the reader into their fleshy personhood, (2)

¹⁶ In using the term *play*, it is not my intention to diminish the rigour or thoughtfulness of social science research. Rather, it is a term that lends itself to a queer and phenomenological ontology. In order to construct and share meaningful interpretations of worldly phenomenon one must position oneself, acknowledge the limitations of that position, and interpret the unfolding perceive reality in a communicable form. A reflexive acknowledgement of this epistemology allows a researcher to intentionally adopt (or *play* with) positional limitations to produce a variety of meaningful interpretations. Unacknowledged or unmitigated researcher bias, the phenomenon in question, and the reader of the produced interpretation (the *playmate*) present additional limitations (the *field of play*) with which the researchers' methodologies or theories interact. This is research as *play*.

expose and disrupt the power dynamics involved in academic research and (3) further a social justice mandate academically and practically through fostering community and producing resources that advocate for dignity and equity in the communities involved.

THEORETICAL FRAMING

These Lesions
By Eric Van Giessen

*These lesions compel me
inviting me graciously
to join in the carnage.*

*That illness
That plague
That sweeps through the study
of things and things.*

*These badges of puss
and scabby corners
are my VIP declaration
in this epidemiologically
raucous affair of competency.*

*How might my mucic traces
infect these patrons of pandered
establishment:
fixed frameworks—
disguised diseases of their own.*

*Made-out in the blur
four walls,
a roof,
and a threshold—
posted with femme seraphim
brothers aw(e)fully
queerly
established
each with lesions of her own.*

This queering also occurs in the questioning of theoretical boundaries and in the reimagining of metaphor. I take Laurel Richardson's (2000) challenge to conceptualize "theory as illness" (940). Understanding disciplinary conditions to be intentionally chosen ailments that limit my creative exploration beckons me to deeply comprehend the myopia of my theoretical lesions. Playfully, then, I have attempted—in this study—to engage in a conversation about fluid

identities, their performance, and the re-posturing of belonging through queer theory and community autoethnography.

Queer theory beckons me to a critical sensibility that views identity as a fluid and relational-achievement and empowers my rejection of the dichotomies that LGBTQI+ Christians negotiate. Approaching community autoethnography with this queer sensibility allows me to observe and bear witness to the deep meaning present in the multiplicity of lived experiences of the Queerly Faithful participants and prompts me explore how these embodied lives might “serve as sites of social change” (Holman Jones & Adams 2010: 209). Hegemonic knowledges portray Christian faith and sexual difference as dichotomous social groupings and ideologies. A queer sensibility insists on the disruption of these assumptions through the exploration of subjugated knowledges that add complexity and nuance to these understandings. By turning in on our own experiences as LGBTQI+ Christians, the Queerly Faithful participants were able to explore and expose not only our experiences of struggle and oppression, but more importantly our stories of affirmation, resistance, imagination, creation, and productivity.

I take up community autoethnography and poetry as queer methods in response to Holman Jones & Adams’ (2010) call for a methodology that “not only works against canonical methodological traditions and ‘disciplining, normalizing, social forces’ (Seidman 1993: 133) but also one that satisfies the call and need to provide a pragmatic, accessible way of representing research, a way that devotes itself with ‘grounded, everyday life’ (Plummer 2003: 522)” (197). Collaboratively producing knowledge about our lives through poetic exploration; privileging those expressions as “practical and powerful [methods] for analyzing social worlds” (Richardson 2000: 931); insisting on the fluid, processual unfolding of the phenomena being explored; and

representing the research in multiple formats (i.e. this paper and a zine publication) all represent the “oppositional form of consciousness” (Holman Jones & Adams 2010: 211) characteristic of a queer sensibility.

A conversational theme that was highlighted after one of our gatherings was the concept of being ‘drenched in queerness.’ In choosing the topic for my MRP, designing the Queerly Faithful research study, interacting with my co-researchers, creating the zine, and writing this paper, it has been my goal to actively drench this project in queerness. As a result, the theoretical framework and the methods utilized in this study blur with one another to the point of synergy. I invite you, the reader, to evaluate the success of my efforts.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

There were three stages to this community autoethnographic project: a talking circle, a poetry sharing circle, and a zine publication. In what follows, I will give a brief profile of the participants, explore some of the project’s scope and limitations, detail each of the phases of the project, and then explore my practice for co-researcher check-ins and some ethical considerations worth noting explicitly.

*Profile.*¹⁷ In addition to myself, the Queerly Faithful project involved five participant-co-researchers, each with varying degrees of involvement in the project. Participants were selected based on interest in the project, self-identifying as LGBTQI+ Christians, and confidence or willingness to write poetry or poetic reflections on our conversations. A recruitment poster was distributed via social media, as well as being shared with LGBTQI+ and Christian church networks in Toronto and Kitchener (see appendix #2). Several participants had prior relationships

¹⁷ To read self-composed profiles of each of the co-researchers who contributed poetry to the project, see Appendix #5 (the Zine) in the section entitled: “About the Poets” (page 55).

with myself, and all but one participant was connected to an LGBTQI+ Christian support organization called *New Direction*, based out of Toronto. All five additional participants attended the initial talking circle, four contributed poems, three attended the sharing and interpretation circle, and one other participant was closely involved with the planning and design of the zine publication. Denominational affiliation or background varied but was limited to Protestant faith communities. My role in the project was as both lead researcher and participant: I contributed my own experiences to the talking circle, wrote poetry and offered interpretations at the sharing circle, and edited the zine publication in consultation with the other participants.

Scope and Limitations. The scope of this MRP is necessarily modest due to the constraints of length, time, and budget, and as such it has many limitations. The lived experiences of the small number of participants in this study are meaningful and valuable to explore, but by no means represent the experiences of all LGBTQI+ Christians. The results of this study are not meant to be generalizable in the traditional social scientific sense: I made no attempt to randomly select participants or ensure a sampling group representative of the broader population in terms of gender, ethnicity, ability, or class. I did, however, seek out participants with a wide range of life experiences. Participants in this project offered their experience of LGBTQI+ identity and belonging while identifying the ways these experiences were nuanced based on racial identity, physical disability, mental health, gender identity and a myriad of other intersections.

The culture and practices of Christian faith communities in regards to LGBTQI+ inclusion also vary significantly based on denomination, spatial location and membership. As such, rather than seeking a generalized portrayal of Christian communities, the validity of this

study is rooted in its pursuit of what Ellis and Bochner (2000) call verisimilitude: Do the poems and my exploration “[evoke] in readers a feeling that the experience is lifelike, believable, and possible” (751)? Is the reader able to have a “vicarious experience of the things told” (751)? And how *useful* are the results of this study to the furthering of a social justice mandate (Bochner 2002)? Rather than attempting to provide *the* story of LGBTQI+ Christian experience of identity and belonging in faith communities, this project audaciously constructs *a* story rooted in the lived experience of six embodied individuals and appoints you, the reader, as the judge of its resonance with your own experience, how effectively it invites you to empathize with others who are different from yourself, and how effectively it evokes a call to action for justice for your LGBTQI+ Christian peers.

Another notable limitation of the Queerly Faithful Project is its lack of exploration around the distinctly different experiences of the trans and genderqueer participants. While conversation surrounding sexual orientation and same-sex relationships are not always positive within Christian circles, the fact that these conversations are happening *at all* privileges the experiences of LGB people by recognizing their presence in Christian faith communities (less so for bisexual people). This recognition is largely absent for Christians who identify as part of the trans spectrum. Transphobia, lack of education within faith communities, and the absence of a robust religious and sociological literature contribute to this marginalization. The theological capital that has accrued through literature around LGB lives, scripture, and theology as explored above has not adequately included or recognized trans experiences. While it is my hope that the efforts represented in this research project would ripple out to result in equity for all LGBTQI+

people, it is vital that more research and exploration be done in the future to recognize the unique experiences of trans and genderqueer individuals in their faith communities.

Phases. As previously mentioned the primary research collection and knowledge transfer portions of the Queerly Faithful project can be separated into three phases. After meeting with each of the participants one-on-one to review the project details, all six co-researchers gathered to participate in a talking circle. Participants were invited to respond to a list of questions prepared beforehand covering a range of topics in relation to LGBTQI+ experiences of belonging and identity in each person's respective communities (see appendix #3). The co-researchers came to the collective decision that questions would be answered in a popcorn format (i.e. no predetermined order) with the option to pass, and the opportunity for response and questions following each share. After all of the questions had been addressed, there was a short period of collective brainstorming where co-researchers were invited to identify persistent or common themes that worked their way through the talking circle conversation (see appendix #4). These themes then became non-restrictive prompts for poetry and poetic reflection. Themes were sent to the participants via email, and they were given the opportunity to add themes that were missing from the list. Participants were encouraged to submit or write poetry based on the themes from this list that resonated most with their experiences, but were also prompted to produce poems focusing on storytelling or emotional translation of a meaningful/painful/resistive moment experienced in their faith/queer communities.

The second phase of the project was a period of independent work where participants were invited to reflect on the thematic prompts, or facets of their own story in the form of poetry. The goal for each poet was to write between five and ten poems to contribute to the project. Five

poets contributed a total of thirty poems ranging from four to eight poems each. A second circle was then held where poets were invited to choose three or four of their poems and read them aloud to the group. Following each reading, the poet was invited to contextualize or interpret the poem before the rest of the participants offered comments and questions. Four co-researchers attended this gathering. These two gatherings make up the data collection segment of the research project. The transcripts from both gatherings, drawings, and notes contributed by the participants, the lead researcher's field notes, as well as the thirty poems were considered data for analysis and inclusion in the project.

Lastly, myself and one other participant gathered to curate and creatively frame these thirty poems into a zine publication for distribution. The artwork that can be found in the zine has multiple sources: participant doodles from the two circle gatherings, artwork designed by myself, and art commissioned to an external artist.¹⁸ The zine publication is meant to be a knowledge transfer product from the project and serves multiple functions: (1) encouraging and supporting the creative skill of the participants, (2) making the knowledge produced through this project accessible to a non-academic audience, (3) fostering community and solidarity amongst the communities to which the participants belong, (4) advocating for LGBTQI+ Christians in their faith communities by insisting conversation around LGBTQI+ inclusion be rooted in the lived experiences of LGBTQI+ Christians themselves, and (5) connecting LGBTQI+ Christians without supportive networks to community resources such as *New Direction*. The zine

¹⁸ Due to the community building aspect of the Queerly Faithful project's mandate, I tried to include anyone showed an active interest in participating. While none of the project participants showed interest in designing art for a zine page, I did use some of the doodles and sketches from our two gatherings as imagery within the zine, and Steph who acted as the artistic consultant on the zine portion of the project connected me with an external artist who had expressed interest in contributing. One of the primary aims of the zine is to bear witness to LGBTQI+ Christian lives and their investment in their Christian faith. Including another voice in the form of imagery for the zine only served to widen the reach of the completed zine and encourage creative expression of these important experiences.

publication is a crucial element of the Queerly Faithful project in that its purpose is to produce a resource that might make a meaningful contribution to the participant's communities and be a catalyst for dialogue and movement towards more equitable spaces.

Co-researcher check-ins. Most collaborative autoethnography research projects involve the co-participation of a number of *academic* colleagues to explore a subject area in co-authorship (Cohen, Duberley, & Musson 2009; Chang, Longman, & Franco 2014; Eguchi & Spieldenner 2015; Hains-Wesson & Young 2016; Hernandez, Ngunjiri, & Chang 2015; Martinez & Andreatta 2015; Sanders, Parsons, Mwavita, & Thomas 2015). The Queerly Faithful project differs from these studies in that I am the sole author of this paper who is making an attempt to represent the collaborative efforts of a group of both academics and non-academics to represent the social phenomena in question. In an attempt to remain true to the collaborative autoethnographic spirit,¹⁹ I regularly conducted informal co-researcher check-ins through face-to-face conversation, email, or social media correspondence, as well as explicitly inviting co-researchers to ask questions and guide conversation during our gatherings. While the constraints of time and master's degree authorship requirements restricted the level of involvement the participants could have in the data presentation and analysis phase, I tried to maintain an open and invitational approach throughout.

Ethical considerations. The sole authorship of this paper raises an important ethical consideration: the successful completion of this project benefits all of the co-researchers, but not equally. While the project may have achieved many of the aims mentioned above, one unnamed

¹⁹ "In a collaborative autoethnography, each participant contributes to the collective work his/her distinct independent voice. At the same time, the combination of multiple voices to interrogate a social phenomenon creates a unique synergy and harmony that autoethnographers cannot attain in isolation." (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez 2012: 24)

goal was for me to successfully receive a graduate degree. In choosing how much to ask of my co-researchers, this accreditation was certainly a factor. While the co-researchers were provided with a modest honorarium for the poems they contributed to the project, the remainder of the benefit to these participants were intangibles: community, self-knowledge, artistic recognition, fulfillment from participating in advocacy work, validation of the importance of their story, etc. The power differential represented in this difference in benefit must be named and its impact on the findings of the study interrogated. Despite my attempts to mediate the effects of this power differential, the letters that will appear behind my name on completion of this project remain an inevitably problematic piece of the process and product of this project.

Another considerable ethical component of this paper is the co-researchers' choice to attach their real names to both their quotes and their poetry, as well as my choice to respect that decision. While an entire paper could be written around the choice to be named in the Queerly Faithful Project, I will simply highlight two facets of this rationale. First, the participants in the Queerly Faithful project are artists who take pride in their creative expression and deserve recognition for that work. While many of the poems used in this project were written for the Queerly Faithful zine, the poems remain the property of the participants, and may be used and shared beyond this project in any way the authors see fit. To utilize participant poetry without naming the poet would fail to adequately recognize the creative labour, artistry and knowledge involved in the creation of the poems.

Second, the participants in this project are familiar with hiddenness and privacy to the point of self-harm. The open, named involvement of each of the co-researchers in this project represents a rejection of the shame that has kept these stories hidden inside ourselves for much of

our lives. Many of the participants are all too familiar with the consequences of openly revealing our lived experiences and the risk involved in that process. Naming, then becomes a statement of pride, and as such represents a moment of hegemonic disruption. Honouring our experiences by attaching our names to them affirms the value of these stories and marks a refusal to closet our identities in reaction to the stigma surrounding queerly faithful lives. Participants were not coerced into using their own names, and each one chose to do so after multiple conversations about the possibility of utilizing pseudonyms.

METHODOLOGICAL RATIONALE

Over and Again They Fly
By Eric Van Giessen

*Over and again they fly
these truths of mine—
out over the horizon
that stretches before me
and behind me.*

*A great gift! To be who I am
and you who you are—
precious are your stories
your words
and your songs.*

*Will you play with me?
Will you strain to perceive
new horizons?
Will you dance with me,
and spin me?
Over and again we'll fly!
and truths we'll find
out over the horizon.*

*Within our dance there is
silk and ribbon, there is
dirt and sweat;
and we will play games
with different rules
with dissonant steps—
our toes swollen from
the other's confidence.*

*Over and again they fly
these truths of mine—
dancing with your horizon.
Let us embrace at our elbows*

*back to back
turned outwards and sing out
our invitations
to dance with us;
to play
and in our spinning
may we find a new liberation*

*A great gift!
Precious are your stories,
your words,
your songs.*

I've chosen to use the above methodology for several interconnected reasons. First, being a white/male/cisgender/settler person, formulating social justice research that not only addresses *topics* concerning equity and freedom, but also accounts for the ethical ramifications of my embodiment and positionality as the researcher struck me as a perplexing notion. My response to this dilemma was to explore my own experiences of marginalization, and locate these stories amongst peers with resonant experiences: namely, experiences of being a LGBTQI+ Christian in 2016. Such an exploration does not presume to understand or articulate the complex, and diverse experiences of *all* LGBTQI+ individuals who have grown up in Christian faith communities, nor does it negate the influence my privileges will have on the outcome of such a study. Nevertheless, I have done my best to avoid the 'othering' that has been so common in the history of ethnographic research. By involving myself in the project as a complete member researcher (see Anderson 2006), and inviting the co-researcher participants to help guide the project, it was my hope to explore and present the lived experiences of marginalization and resistance in this population group while mediating the amount to which the participants felt 'studied.' While participants were fully aware that this was a *research* project, gatherings and discussions were facilitated as community building exercises and grassroots advocacy work in action.

Pairing queer theory with autoethnography and poetry allows me to focus on “[extracting] meaning from experience rather than [depicting] experience exactly as it was lived” (Bochner 2000: 270). As Holman Jones (2005) articulates so clearly, the epistemological and ontological roots of autoethnography invite me to “view research and writing as socially-just acts; rather than [having] a preoccupation with accuracy...the goal is to produce analytical, accessible texts that change us and the world we live in for the better” (764). Community autoethnography allows me to reflect on the experiences of marginalization and resilience offered in the sharing circles and seek out ways to creatively communicate that lived experience in a cohesive narrative. In this way, community autoethnography as a method, “attempts to disrupt the binary of science and art” (Ellis et al. 2011: 283). My experience and comfort level with producing artistic works is the second reason I chose to use autoethnography and poetry as methods in my study—these methods are conducive to both the exploration and communication of my own lived experience.

As I wrestled with my own experiences of marginalization in my faith community I turned to poetry as an outlet for reflection and understanding. A great deal of my story involves a lived tension amongst the binaries of faith and sexual difference, sacred and “worldly,” sinful and saved, straight and gay (see Steph Chandler Burns’ poem *trinity*). The structures around me made it clear that my identity as a queer man of faith did not fit into the ‘real world’ order. My solace in the face of this dichotomous landscape was to embrace the ambiguity and fluidity of poetry. Poetry functioned for me as a space to explore the tensions of life and find the beauty in them; to rest in confusion; to sit queerly in my faith.

As I considered how I might expand my project beyond solely my own experiences of oppression and resistance as a queer man in Christian faith communities, I wondered if other LGBTQI+ identified Christians had similarly found a home in poetic expression. By inviting other queer poets to compose poems of their experiences wrestling with identity and belonging in their communities, I hoped to situate my story amongst a more verisimilitudinous human experience: one of rejection and marginalization, as well as resistance and community building. As mentioned previously, the poetry also serves to make the “findings” of my research more accessible than a traditional research project composed solely in academic prose. The zine publication that we compiled serves as a vivid reflection of the lived experiences of these queerly faithful individuals and in so doing perhaps deepens the reader’s capacity to empathize with our stories.

Finally, embedding poetry in this community autoethnographic project makes a claim for the need to blur the structures of validity and knowledge. By adopting a methodology considered “outside” of the traditional bounds of social science research and claiming it as a meaningful contribution to sociological thought, the project embodies a queering of the in/out groupings that result in the marginalization of queer people in faith communities. My chosen methodologies bring intention not just into the content of this project, but the form of the project itself:

The use of poetry situates me too as poet and reminds the reader through its very form that, as poet, I too am the poem. I resymbolize what occurred in the group according to my own life and experiences. I cannot do otherwise. There is no one true account of what happened and how it affected each, or any, of us (Walsh, 2006: 990).

Through use of collaborative autoethnographic methodologies that invests in community, narrative and poetical forms of communication that invite emotional and aesthetic engagement, by acknowledging that the participants are experts on their own experiences, by understanding

identity as meaningful and useful and always becoming, and by leaning into a social justice mandate the Queerly Faithful project is critical, evocative, and queer.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The constraints of time and length for this MRP project mean that this paper covers only a very particular facet of the knowledge produced through this collaborative research project. The focus of the data and discussion that follows was determined through individual coding of transcripts and poems using NVIVO software as well as informal discussion with the participants about the dominant themes within our dialogue and writing. These themes were then woven together to produce the analysis below as a fixed picture of a set of fluid experiences.

Research in this area tends to talk about religious and sexual identity as distinct dimensions that bear a history of tension and conflict within an individual's conception of self (Gross 2008, Thumma 1991). This schematic lends itself to the investigation of "identity-related efforts" or actions (such as church attendance) and the ways in which individual LGBTQI+ Christians compartmentalize or reconcile these conflicting dimensions of their identity: "dual identities" (Gross 2008: 77) or "sexual and religious selves" (Pietkiewicz & Kołodziejczyk-Skrzypek 2016: 1573). For the participants in the Queerly Faithful project, framing religious and sexual identity as distinct dimensions of the self that require theological or psychological *reconciliation* in order to arrive at an 'integrated self' would render an inaccurate and oversimplified analysis.

Pitt (2009) as well as Rodriguez & Ouellette (2000) explore examples of what Troiden (1989) calls "identity synthesis" and focus on "individuals' experiences of identity integration between their sexual orientation and religious beliefs" (Rodriguez & Ouellette 2000: 333). Many

of the stories told throughout this project reveal tensions in *relationships* with people in both faith communities and queer communities. These external tensions had a significant impact on the participants' sense of belonging in these communities as well as their willingness to "be their whole self." When speaking about the de-compartmentalization of their sexual orientation and religious beliefs, however, the dynamic transcended a *moment* of 'reconciliation' or 'integration'. Participants spoke of their Christian faith and queer identity becoming ongoing performances of each other. More than simply identity *synthesis*, participants in the Queerly Faithful project articulated experiences of an unfolding identity *synergism*. Upon de-compartmentalizing their religious beliefs and their sexual orientation the participant's experience themselves as *queerly faithful*: LGBTQI+ Christians whose faith and sexuality continuously nourish and enrich each other.

The external, relational tensions experienced by the Queerly Faithful participants encouraged them to relocate their conception of belonging in faith community: belonging is no longer founded in membership in a particular Church community or denomination, rather it is rooted in reciprocal, spiritually nourishing relationships with other (often LGBTQI+) Christians.:

For me, what's important for it is that [my faith community is] a place that I can find encouragement in. I've always gone by this idea that we're designed to be in community with one another and that's something that is important to me: is that we can support one another in that, and bond with one another and learn things from each other. (Christopher Ong)

These faith communities, which are often detached from denominational or institutional structure, allow for firmly rooted understandings of belonging that created the space for the participants in this project the move beyond *integration* into identity *synergism*. In these community contexts, participants were able to live into and harness the tensions between their lived experiences and the religious diktats that surround them while challenging queer

communities to be aware of ways in which hegemonic ideologies creep into their spaces. With this fleshy spirituality, Queerly Faithful participants emerge as voices of social justice advocacy within Christian discourses, but also more broadly as embodied disruptions of hegemonic notions.

In what follows, I will highlight poetry and quotes from our collaborative work that focus on experiences of external relational tension, relocated belonging, intersectionality, and identity synergism. Each of these themes requires further theorization and exploration, but for the purposes of this study I will focus on inviting you as the reader into our experience. These themes emerge as nuances, affirmations, and criticisms of the work of other scholars and are in need of further development and study at a future date. In choosing which themes to explore in the midst of this paper, it was imperative that I avoid essentializing or isolating moments that are intrinsically interconnected and complicated. The themes that follow, then, explore a trajectory or an arc that inform and connect to one another. While perhaps the heart of this exploration is the ways in which what I call *identity synergism* takes a subversive posture against hegemonic systems that function within both faith communities and queer communities, the exploration of experiences of external tension, of relocated belonging, and of intersectionality, establish the grounds by which identity synergism becomes possible.

RELATIONAL TENSIONS IN COMMUNITY

A Visit To Church - By Maxx Wolting

Enter.

Smile.

Sit down.

Turn to say hello.

Receive stares in return.

Smile.

Act okay.

Fake smiles with fake hellos.
Smile.
Act okay.
Listen to the music.
Stand.
Sing.
Sit down.
Sitting.
Listening.
Enjoying.
Aware of the whispering.
The staring.
The pointing.
Smile.
Act okay.
Hold back tears.
Make them think you're strong.
Pass the offering plate.
Smile.
Act okay.
Stand.
Sing.
Smile.
Act okay.
Pray.
Smile.
Act okay.
Exit.

The participants in Queerly Faithful project expressed, with some variation, that at the time of the study, we accept our sexuality as a part of our unique personhood, integrate our sexuality into our interactions with peers, and view our sexuality as a part of our divine ‘createdness’ rather than cause for divine rejection.²⁰ As Yip (2015) articulates it, our “sexuality is not a sinful appendage of [our] personhood but the core of [our] spiritual [selves]” (132). This internal harmony between one’s religious belief and sexual orientation, however, does not always precipitate the elimination of relational experiences of conflict or tension within Christian or secular queer spaces.

²⁰ The most notable variation is Maxx’s experience in recently coming out as a trans man. While Maxx’s exploration of his sexual orientation and faith life demonstrate integration and synergism similarly to the other Queerly Faithful Participants, the unfolding of his gender identity/expression is yet in process and requires its own complex and nuanced integrative work. The beginnings of this integrative work are represented in Maxx’s poem “The Needle.”

When asked to describe the relationship between her faith and sexuality/gender identity,

Steph used the word “complicated,” clarifying that:

Complicated is not really complicated for me. It's complicated in my interactions with other people. I'm pretty comfortable with where I'm at, but people don't get it. Identifying as bi...my partner is a cis white male and he makes me look straight. So, being in a church community, then, I'm assumed to be one way which has benefits and detriments. (Steph Chandler Burns)

Many church organizational bodies have reopened or are beginning to reopen their conversations regarding their theology and doctrine concerning LGBTQI+ inclusion. Despite this potential progress towards inclusion, many churches remain largely heterosexist and homonegative spaces (Sherkat 2002, Yip 2015). In Steph's experience, the relational tension in her faith community manifests itself as passive confusion and erasure (non-recognition) of her bisexual identity. Her relationship with her male partner often allows her the privileges of being assumed heterosexual, but also functions as a barrier to her sense of belonging in her community: “when I get passionate about LGBTQ conversations in the church, people just think I'm a really passionate ally and that is so frustrating--it's personal for me.” While the integration of Steph's faith and sexuality are demonstrated in her pursuit of a graduate degree exploring queer theology, her successful performance of this identity in her faith community is hindered by heteronormativity in the form of bisexual identity erasure.²¹ This subtle form of marginalization represents a relational tension that was resolved through a relocation of Steph's sense of belonging in Christian community.

²¹ It is important to note that this bisexual erasure also happens in queer communities. Steph's relocated belonging, as explored in the next section, has been attached to academic spaces where bisexual identity is recognized more readily: “When I do show up to queer events or groups I have to prove my queer cred. It's like if I mention my partner, if we talk about partners and G comes up, then I feel like I have to push who I am even more, or he offsets it. Which is frustrating. And I also feel like I can't bring him to things. So I feel like I can't go to pride with him or something. But I also want to share that part of my life with him. So it's a juggling act I haven't quite figured out” (Steph Chandler Burns).

Maxx's experience as a young trans man has prompted a more active sort of exclusion as made evident by the poem that opened this section: *A Visit To Church*. The church that Maxx grew up in has become what he describes as an 'unsafe space'—where expression of his full self has made him feel othered:

Unsafe Space - By Maxx Wolting

*This place was supposed to be my home,
my safe space. How has somewhere I used
to belong turned into a place of stares, whispers
and pointing fingers as I take my seat? Sitting
amongst those who used to greet me by name
with smiles and handshakes, who can barely
look at me now. These are the people who have
caused me to no longer attend church. A place
I used to consider safe and friendly is now a
place of loneliness and confusion. This was my
home, I no longer want anything to do with it.*

The stares and whispers that Maxx highlights in *Unsafe Space*, as well as his former faith community's unwillingness to address him using male pronouns (to recognize his gender identity), and their decision to continue calling Maxx by his birth name deeply affected his sense of belonging in that community. As a result, Maxx excused himself from his faith community for several years. Though he felt unsupported in his faith, he expressed that this lack of support had little effect on the stability of his Christian identity:

Identifying as a Christian matters to me because it's how I was raised, it's engrained in me-- everything that my parents taught me, that I learned in Sunday school that I learned in school-- because I went to a Christian school from kindergarten to grade 12. Everything that I learned there was, it's just in me. (Maxx Wolting)

My own experience with faith community resonates with aspects of the previous two participants' stories. While remaining closeted within my church, decompartmentalizing my own sexuality gradually made me feel isolated within the community I called home:

As I started to acknowledge my queerness I became more and more aware of the prevalence of heteronormative stories. Not necessarily biblical stories, but in pastoral analogy. Especially—and not just heteronormative stories, but heteronormative marital stories—marriage was talked about a lot. Family was talked about a lot. Parenting was talked about a lot. And as, at that time, a single

man who was struggling with my sexuality, I felt very isolated and excluded...I wrote down 'lack of couches', because the church has been so much of a home for me and there came to a point within that church that there wasn't anywhere for me to sit, and that was unsettling. I left a little sore every time. (Eric Van Giessen)

With each step I took towards an integrated self, I felt more and more isolated within my community, and I began to recognize that the discourses and culture of my faith community were heterosexist and hindering my movement towards living an integrated life. Christopher Ong potently articulates this internal movement towards wholeness and external conflict with community in his poem called, *Code Switching (excerpt)*, in which he explores the limitations of language:

*Although I was becoming whole again,
others thought I was falling to pieces.
They saw my queerness a brokenness to be healed
and fasted on my behalf,
hoping their prayers might intercede for me.
Their eyes no longer focused on the person in front of them,
but the fractured self they hoped would return.
Treated this quilted heart a Frankenstein unworthy of love,
like I would have been better off a pile of rotting body parts.*

Christopher's faith community was unwilling to hear and respect his spiritual journey towards wholeness through the coalescence of his spiritual and sexual self. His community prayed for healing, hoping that Chris would return to the 'fractured self' that they perceived as healthy, while Christopher experienced healing through inviting his sexual orientation to become a part of his faith and consequently to become part of the community in which he practiced his faith. Christopher's belonging in his faith community began to unravel as those around him refused to walk with him on his journey by recognizing his queerly faithful identity.

Michiko shared their experience of growing up as a young queer person in the United Church of Canada and witnessing their faith community's conversation about whether or not to allow same-sex marriage ceremonies to occur within their walls:

As a teenager, I remember when marriage was, when gay marriage became a thing in Canada, and the way that the United Church of Canada dealt with it was that they let each congregation have a vote on whether or not their church would decide to perform these marriages. And in my church, I ended up having to sit through these roundtable discussions that the congregation had. I was fourteen at the time, and confused and questioning, but I was like, "Pretty sure, I'm not straight." *laughs* And I had to hear all of your classic homophobic bullshit that people say when they have this debate. And that stuck with me. Then the church had the vote and they decided, hypocritically, that the ministers could perform gay marriage outside the church, just not in our building. And, so, it was just the hypocrisy of it was so apparent to me. It was like, you know that it's wrong, but yet you still don't have the faith or courage to fully live in to this. At that point, I just stopped going to church. I was like, "I've had enough of this." And I was angry, and I was atheist, and I identified as bisexual, and all that stuff that I think for me I've always felt like queerness came first, and I would just give up on the church and that was that. (Michiko Bown-Kai)

Michiko later returned to their Christian faith and is studying to become an ordained minister in the United Church of Canada. Michiko returned to the church "unapologetically queer" and admits that with this decision, "there's a need for an armour and a thick skin in some spaces." The decision to boldly confront heterosexism and homonegativity in their faith community, however, disrupted their capacity for authenticity and their sense of belonging in its own way:

There is, I think, an authenticity that gets missed because there's a softness to me that I do want to share with people that I can't when I have to challenge them or be strong or am pushing back against their bigoted views. So, yeah, I think that's the part of me that I struggle with the most: is the parts of me that are depressed, and sad, and traumatized that are the ones that people often don't want to invite. (Michiko Bown-Kai)

As a result, Michiko confesses they are no longer looking for belonging within the traditional church structures. Instead, they've relocated their belonging in the broader church through building a faith community based on reciprocal, supportive relationship rather than geographical or structural similarity.²²

Here we see that while most of the participants in the Queerly Faithful project have managed to integrate their faith and sexuality, heteronormative power dynamics in their

²² Upon meeting another Christian, the question that follows is usually: Which church do you go to? In other words: To which faith community do you belong? While the participants in the Queerly Faithful project might have churches that they attend on a regular basis (that gather in a fixed church building), belonging in Christian faith community is no longer attached to membership of or regular attendance at a faith community with a fixed geographical location. Neither is belonging depended on affiliation with a denominational structure. Rather, belonging and community is rooted in intentional, ongoing, reciprocal relationships with other Christians, through ritual, dialogue, and knowledge production (i.e. documents or statements).

traditional faith communities continue undermine their sense of belonging. Rather than allowing this marginalization to erode their newly integrated self, the participants have found ways to relocate the foundation of their understanding of belonging:

LGBT in the CRC
By Eric Van Giessen

*The CRC church taught me that I was loved
and formed with intention
that Christ died with me in mind
and would like to join me on this path of life.
That I am beautifully and wonderfully made
knit together
except for that part
that's a sign of the worlds brokenness.
God's radical grace suddenly had conditions
in the fine print on the church bulletin.
Queers need not enter
and if they insist they must keep silent
for their words don't fit in our stories.
These words, in fine print were so small I never actually read them
but the wording, the jokes, and the subtle suggestions
made them crystal clear.
You made it quite clear that I didn't belong:
another issue to debate while I contemplated
suicide and learned well that
lifelong self-hatred would be my mantra:
Approved by the silence of my church family.
Deep and profound loneliness,
The fabrication of a heterosexual facade,
Isolation in community - These were my Sunday school lessons.
Thankfully while the Church is supposed to be Jesus to the world
Jesus speaks in other ways
He redeemed me, he called me beautiful,
He spoke to me in a still small voice and told
me that my sexuality is a gift and a burden.
So with these broken tools I proclaim my
belonging in Christ's body - I have left the CRC
choosing a relationship with the triune God over
and abusive church family.
I will praise Him with or without you,
but my hand is open
still bleeding from your silence
but open
to you and to the LGBTQ communities.
I am walking the path that God has set before me
prayerfully and critically
but holding on to the promise of God's unfailing grace.*

RELOCATING BELONGING

I'm not necessarily always looking for inclusion or a sense of belonging structurally within the church. I'm okay being a queer odd ball, just offering that challenge to the church continuously...

In a lot of ways, I feel like my faith community has been who I've pulled together here and there from doing different things and going on Tumblr and searching the queer Christian tags and following everyone...I've got these connections of queer theologians and other non-binary queer divinity students from across North American. And so, I feel like social media ends up sometimes being the community of faith that I depend on the most: for the most affirming liturgy or theological statements. (Michiko Bown-Kai)

For the participants in the Queerly Faithful project, the heterosexism or explicit homo/transnegativity common to many of our faith communities meant that we sought to reframe or relocate our belonging away from institutional membership enacted through attendance at a particular church building, and towards a more fluid faith community characterized by reciprocal, supportive, spiritually nourishing relationship, vulnerable story sharing, and rituals that affirm our existence as queerly faithful bodies.

Michiko has developed their faith community through social media websites and community projects such as the Queerly Faithful project. Other participants have connected with organizations such *New Direction*, or the *Gay Christian Network*. *New Direction*, an organization is based out of Toronto, which facilitates what they call *Generous Space Groups*. These groups offer spiritual care and support to LGBTQI+ Christians and seek to “eliminate fear, division, and hostility at the intersection of faith, gender, and sexuality.”²³ These groups meet in houses, restaurants, and church side-rooms, and provide community and support for LGBTQI+ Christians as they move towards integrating their sexual orientation, gender identity, and faith life:

There are communities in which I do feel I can be my whole self, such as *New Direction*. Because I find that that's where there's the overlap. That's where I don't have to worry about coming out as Christian or coming out as gay in that community, and that's where I am able to be my whole self, my whole self, and really express who I am...*New Direction* has been a great place for me because I've been able to find a safe space where I can figure things out myself without fear of being treated as if I'm less than. (Christopher Ong)

I'm so happy for finding myself in a place where people accept me as both gay and Christian. And I think that, the *New Direction* group is my new faith community, and I would consider that my

²³ Retrieved from their website: newdirection.ca/what-are-we-about

church...I consider my Wednesday nights--because I go every Wednesday to Richmond Hill and Toronto and go every Wednesday and so I consider that my church...Coming to *New Direction* and being able to ask those questions to the people that I need to and having those mature souls in the room is definitely helpful. It's allowed my faith identity to blossom or...it's like a little bulb, a flower bulb, that's started to blossom again after being dormant for a while. (Maxx Wolting)

In these communities, events that mark the coalescence of one's faith and sexuality into an integrated self are celebrated and ritualized. Maxx, who had been excluded from taking part in the sacrament of communion at the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) he grew up in, was able to participate at a *New Direction* gathering. This event was marked and celebrated within the *New Direction* community as it would have been in the CRC church for any non-queer young person.

Queer-body affirming rituals such as Pride celebrations become sacred events where difference is cherished and affirmed. In our gatherings, we joked about Pride as a sort of "gay baptism":

I Am - By Steph Chandler Burns

*I took a pilgrimage
Down busy highways
Commuter lots and subway stations
Through crowds of gold and rainbows,
Flowers, glitter,
shoes of every size,
stations overflowing with travellers on the road:
Metallic beads, water guns
Our manna and our honey*

*Towards Toronto, promised land,
For Sunday afternoon service
Holy of holies for God's queer children*

*This, my church:
Imperfect, queer
Parade floats an altar
Rainbow vestments
Amongst rainbow flags
"Love is love" reflects that God is love
Bringing meaning to God's name
"I am who I am*

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"Love is love" reflects that God is love
Bringing meaning to God's name
"I am who I am"*

Steph's poem shows how the lines between queer identity and Christian identity begin to blur and overlap. The mantra's that make a Pride parade possible begin to take on a theological tone, and the interrogation of power and privilege represented in Jesus' life begins to infiltrate and affect how one expresses, affirms and challenges action in queer spaces:

Promised Land - By Steph Chandler Burns

*Promised land
An imperfect church,
Distinguished guests in exile:
Black Lives Matter, Canaan matters.
White queer freedom, promise
Built on the backs of others
Are we God's chosen queers
or do we say so to take up space?*

INTERSECTIONALITY

Before moving into a discussion on identity synergism, it's important to recognize the ways in which participants in the Queerly Faithful project felt other aspects of their identity contributed to experiences of marginalization in their communities. Participants' experiences of marginalization due to their religious beliefs, sexual orientation, or gender identity were complicated even further by the prevalence of racism, ableism and mental health stigma within

faith communities as well as within many queer communities. The mass shooting in Orlando happened a few days prior to our first Queerly Faithful gathering, and the erasure of both racial and ethnic identity and sexual orientation of the victims in the media coverage highlighted the continuing challenges of being a racialized queer body in 2016 (Laing 2016). Christopher Ong contributed a poem to the project that reflected on this whitewashing and LGBTQI+ erasure:

We Will Not Be Put On Silent (excerpts) - By Christopher Ong

*As the morning sun rose over Orlando, Florida, June 12th 2016
the body count came pouring in
49 killed, 53 injured
A devastating blow to a community of LGBT people of colour...*

*...That day, social media was buzzing.
Everyone was looking to the leaders of today to use the power and authority they hold to speak to this tragedy.
And we grieved together.
we grieved for the lives that were lost,
we grieved for the people who were injured,
we grieved for the loved ones who were impacted,
we grieved for our safety,
we grieved as our very existence got erased from media coverage right before our eyes,
and we grieved because a hate crime by any other name is just as painful.*

*This refusal to acknowledge why people died gives a whole new meaning to whitewashing tombs;
painting the lens of our experience to make our deaths more palatable to the masses.
But this slaughter is not meant to leave you feeling comfortable.
When injustice creeps its way up your spine and chills you to your bones,
remember this feeling.
Remember this feeling as we stand in solidarity,
as we raise our voices high,
trying to keep our head above the waves as their silence floods over us.*

This sectional interjection is not present here simply to give a timely nod to intersectionality, but to disrupt and disturb the notion that heterosexism and homonegativity exist independently from the hegemonic systems of power that privilege white, able-bodied, heterosexual men and to a slightly lesser extent white, able-bodied, monogamous, gay men (homonormativity).²⁴ This paper focuses on the lived experiences and written poems of the participants in the Queerly Faithful project, and as such it may seem to simply reflect on individual instances of marginalization and

²⁴ For more information on homonormativity, see Podmore 2013.

exclusion for people from particular identity categories. Let this interjection serve as a reminder of the social and cultural aspects of these intensely personal experiences and the complex, intersectional nuances that underlie each shared story.

In our conversation around experiences of marginalization in our communities, Michiko importantly pointed out that in both Christian and queer spaces:

...experiences of racism will be one of the determining factors in whether or not I feel safe or included. So, in the church, The United Church of Canada is very white, and so that's something that I deal with. But then also in the queer community as well. And so, racism within queer community and queer spaces is much more of a barrier than me identifying as Christian. (Michiko Bown-Kai)

While the predominant focus of the Queerly Faithful study is on experiences surrounding Christian and queer identity, Michiko invites us to remember that both of these communities continue to function using racist frameworks that privilege white, cisgender, male, able-bodied, monogamous individuals. The efforts made in this project to critique the structures that stigmatize LGBTQI+ Christian people must also question and critique the ways that those structures privilege white, able-bodied men. Without insisting on this intersectional approach the Queerly Faithful project risks the perpetuation of the very hegemonies it seeks to disrupt.

QUEERLY CHRISTIAN: IDENTITY SYNERGISM

Laugh Lines - By Eric Van Giessen

*I hope my eyes are framed
with creases wet with stories
from laughter that leaves a
pleasing looseness to my skin
in all the right places.*

*The joyful weight of these subtle folds
contend with the frustrated
furrows of my brow
bent and contorted
deep and gnarly with concern
and a concentration made necessary
for a vigilant defence
held with a lightness
so as not to reveal its weight.*

*I intend for the safe space humour
that rumbles from my gut
in an uncontrollable rhythm
might become a new ritual:
a sacramental visioning
of unabashed joy
symptomatic of a forgotten shame—
an affirmative guffaw
resounding my as-is belovedness.*

*These creases announce
the rejection of a conditional in
in favour of a scandalous gospel
that reclaims a subversive axis
in an otherwise quaint story.
For the out are our priests
and our teachers
and the Church has no walls
no eligibility form or entrance fee
only extra seats with cushions.*

*I have no regret
for these furrows
only sadness at their making
and a decision to balance them
with laugh lines
and the easy peace
that comes with knowing
I belong at the table,
and my Priest and I
can laugh together.*

It is important to emphasize, once again, that the experiences of identity synergism explored below - the beneficial or hopeful aspects of being queerly faithful - should not be essentialized: our capacity to laugh and to play and imagine a queer Saviour are only part of the story, and are oftentimes built upon years of tension, marginalization and struggle. The Queerly Faithful participants are examples of LGBTQI+ people who have chosen to remain invested in our Christian faith, which often requires trusting our own lived experiences and personal relationship with the divine over the doctrinal, theological, or informal dictations of leaders and friends in our faith communities:

Maybe we should stop asking people how they can be queer and Christian, and ask people how they can be Christian and homophobic. (Michiko Bown-Kai)

This discussion of identity synergism knowingly queers some of the lines between theology and sociology. In order to invite you into the depths of our lived experience, and to understand the socio-cultural relevance of these emergent queer Christianities, I must speak about the ways in which identity synergism disrupts hegemonic conceptions of the Christian gospel. Scriptural interpretation, and theologies are not immune to the structural systems of power and privilege that penetrate social institutions. The questions become: Who benefits from heterosexist, binaried interpretations of scripture? How do claims to divine authority mask or excuse homonegative, homophobic, transphobic, and oppressive actions within faith communities? How does the emergence of queer theologies in the lives of the Queerly Faithful participants mark subversive, counter-hegemonic action, and what relevance does this have for the Christian Church and discourses that frame religion and sexual difference as mutually exclusive?

A paradigmatic and epistemological shift takes place when LGB religious actors, having learned to trust their own positive lived experiences, turn shame and guilt into pride and courage, unleashing an emancipatory energy that liberates and transforms not only their own lives but also the institutional and cultural underpinnings of the religious space. (Yip 2015: 132)

The continually unfolding coalescence of queer experience and religious belief that Yip describes as “emancipatory” is what I am choosing to dub *identity synergism*. This ongoing dynamic process transcends mere static integration and manifests in the blurring of queer and faithful world-interaction. The queerly faithful person begins to understand their Christian identity as a performance of their queerness and their queer identity nuances/nourishes their spiritual exploration:

I feel like my gender, my sexual orientation, my faith - it's all queer. And so the queerness is the thing that makes these two things interconnected and mutually informing. So I feel like my queerness is a part of my spirituality and helps me figure out what it means to be Christian, but also that there's something about me being Christian that feels inherently queer as well. And so that these two things go back and forth and inform each other. And that when I think about God, love and liberation in the world that that is an inherently queer thing. It's who I am, it's also how I experience. (Michiko)

Christian theology is known for being rife with binaried explanations: soul and body, right and wrong, elected and condemned, jew and gentile, in and out. Steph has found that her lived experience—“my identity--who I am--my walking the line between straight and not straight”—has given her a lens for identifying and disrupting binaried scriptural interpretation, as well as a deep resonance for the queerness of Christian concepts like the *trinity*:

trinity - By Steph Chandler Burns

*queer or christian
straight or gay
male or female
jew or gentile
slave or free
paul or peter*

or one family under God?

*we polarize
yet strive for a God
who deliberately shows a queerer way:*

trinity: community

*trinity: a life between binaries
a tying together: a three cord strand
identity connected to each other, even through difference*

*radically three in one and one in three
creator and redeemer and sustainer
no dichotomy, just trinity*

The Queerly Faithful participants seek out a Christianity that is relevant to their social and political life: one that rediscovers a divine figure that rubbed elbows with those on the societal margins, that raises the intentional createdness of sexual difference to theological relevance, and that disrupts the clarity of binaries for a more radical, paradoxical, mysterious divinity:

Such A Cloak (excerpt) - By Eric Van Giessen

*Let us discern how
our queer cloaks
blur the I and them
and when redeemed
from their mothly abode
might shroud difference
as divine*

*and morph the homogenous
into radical relevance.*

This queerly faithful posture also beckons one to reimagine the history of the Christian tradition in favour of faith communities that rejected societal norms and celebrated their otherness:

My understanding of the history is that in the earliest Jesus movement, they were called followers of the Way, and people started mocking them as Christ-ians in the city of Antioch, and they sort of went "Yeah! We'll take that because it's kind of true: little Christ, and we actually have to take that kind of seriously." And so I think for me it's a way of integrating. I think the good news of the gospel is thoroughly queer, when we look at it a little more closely. (Rob Walker)

This identity synergism also impacts and empowers conceptions of faith community that become more about developing safe space for spiritual exploration and growth through personal and communal spiritual discernment and less about doctrinal compliance or agreement on fixed theological truths. As Michiko so aptly describes, our experience on the margins equips us and affirms the sacredness of these sort of holistically safe spaces:

...people who have had the opportunity through communities to heal from experiences of otherness, I think often learned skills and know from their own intuitive experiences what it means to hold space for other people. And I think that there's something incredibly sacred about being able to offer that gift to other people. To be able to open up the space for...to pull away assumptions and to pull away people's baggage and preconceived notions of what's happening, and just to say, this is here for all of us to feel safe. And I think that's a space where the Spirit can be present. (Michiko Bown-Kai)

The final part of identity synergism that I'd like to highlight as explored in the Queerly Faithful project is what we described as "fleshy spirituality." The coalescence of one's spiritual and sexual self requires bold affirmation of one's sexuality as theologically relevant. Far from distasteful to our Creator, our queer embodiment and the queer sex we have become important elements of our faith-life:

Fleshiness - By Rob Walker

*I wanted to write a poem about fleshiness, about the Incarnation,
about the goodness of being
a queer body
in God's fabulous world.*

*But then I realized
I might have to be vulnerable about the kind of sex*

I have (or want to have), the kinds of things that move me when I am in close contact with men, the surge of love I often feel that might be virtually indistinguishable from the entangled, moaning fleshiness of "Gawd I want to kiss you!" and "I want to fuck and/or be fucked by you!"

And I wonder if this discomfort I feel has at least as much to do with me as it does with you, and our mutual failure to talk about, let alone trust in, the fleshiness of the Gospel.

In our aptitude for problematizing binary-laden ideologies and theologies, our insistence on a gospel that problematizes systems of power and privilege, our capacity to hold space for difference, and our cultivation of a fleshy spirituality, queerly faithful Christians present more than simply an integrated identity but one that continuously harnesses the tensions between queer and Christian hegemonic ideologies, problematizes them, and forges the path toward a queerer Christianity.

However, it is not solely in Christian contexts where queerly faithful actors disrupt the status quo. As Yip (2015) explains, in spaces where LGBTQI+ people feel safe, religious identity tends to be downplayed as queer communities "could be inhospitable to those who profess a religious faith due to the anti-religion undercurrents of such spaces, which arise from the connection between LGB identity and secularity in the dominant discourse of LGB identity construction" (125). Rob notes that,

...in secular queer spaces, I sense that I'm looked at as the enemy, Like, "what are you doing in bed with the enemy. Your God is homophobic and transphobic," you know, "congratulations for getting over your psychological..."--there was a guy who actually said to me: "Congratulations for managing to get over your psychological abuse by reconciling with your homophobic and transphobic God, but I literally don't want to talk to you." Like, okay! (Rob Walker)

The same binary that portrays LGBTQI+ identified people as outsiders in religious circles has the potential to infiltrate queer communities and portray Christians as 'them'. Queerly faithful

individuals not only proclaim their belonging in Christianity but also insist that their spirituality is not in conflict with their belonging in queer communities. It's important to note here that there is good reason for many LGBTQI+ people to have lost their trust or interest in things affiliated with the institutional church, and it is important for LGBTQI+ Christians to recognize the atrociously homophobic history of the global Christian church. However, if queer communities desire to uphold their commitment to creating safe space for difference, diversity, and self-expression then surely spirituality is not an exception.

We are now prepared to discuss a transient definition for identity synergism.²⁵ It is not my intention to manufacture a fixed explanation of identity synergism, but rather to use the term to talk about the ways that the queerly faithful experiences represented in this project transcend the term integration as used in the related literature. Just as identity is neither stable nor permanent, the term identity synergism is transiently useful as a way of articulating the meaningful presence of something beyond integration in the lives of the Queerly Faithful participants. Synergism is not synonymous with integration wherein two things become one—the idea that compartmentalization has been dismantled and a stagnant integrated unity remains—rather it is, in the case of sexual orientation or queerness and Christian faith, that the distinctions between faith and sexuality blur to the release of a productive, unfolding identity synergism. There remains a sense to which integration is an apt description of one's internal self, but it fails to account for the ways that one's questioning of self is redirected to a questioning of structural oppression in community. An established trust in the authority of one's lived experiences, and one's belonging as a “child of God” enables a leaning-in to the tensions between those lived

²⁵ “Queer theory revels in language's failure, assuming that words can never definitively represent phenomena or stand in for things themselves” (Holman Jones & Adams 2010: 207).

experiences and the assumptions and dictats emerging from faith communities or religious circles as well as the queer communities we inhabit. One's very existence becomes a challenge towards hegemonic authorities in both of those realms: a challenge to clearly set out ways of being, a challenge to stories and interpretations which privilege heterosexual, white, male bodies, and a challenge to powers that silence spiritual exploration in queer communities. Identity synergism then, is meant to describe the ongoing process—made possible in part by the presence of spiritually nourishing faith community—of reimagination and productive interrogation that unfolds amidst the ongoing integration of the Queerly Faithful participants' sexual and religious selves.

CONCLUSION

Look at these arms, touch this body, this is the thing that you refuse to see as possible. (Eric Van Giessen)

When asked to describe the relationship between his faith and his sexual orientation one of the words that Rob Walker used was 'offering'. In the context of Christian faith communities an offering is a gift and a responsibility: a freely given investment in the growth of one's community. An offering is given in faith, trusting that God will provide for one's needs. Rob's presence as a queerly faithful Christian in his community then, is a freely given investment in the growth of his community that rests upon trust in God's provision for Rob's sustenance:

I heard a story from a black gay preacher named Peter Gomes and he wrote a book called *The Good Book* before he died. And he came out during the civil rights movement and so all the voices were saying you cannot be Christian and gay, you cannot be black and gay. And he replied, "on my best days, I said, I offer my life as evidence to the contrary." And I think being a postulant for ordination and lots of people are watching my life and going "how does this work," I offer my life as evidence to the contrary of all these harsh thing that they want to say--they might not be true, you might want to watch me and see how that works. (Rob Walker)

In the face of binaried conceptions that would dichotomize religion and sexual difference, the Queerly Faithful project participants offer our lives and the experiences documented in our

poems as evidence to the contrary. Our refusal to be silent, our proclaimed belonging in the ‘body of Christ’, and our rejection of ideologies that would have us compartmentalize our sexuality and spirituality positions us as social justice advocates within our faith communities, and within any structure that reinforces systems of oppression. We are still writing our stories, and the unfolding of what it looks like to be queerly faithful continues with our every breath.

The findings above represent a few of the common themes present in the participants’ articulation of their queerly faithful identity. The nuances of identity synergism explored in the participants’ poems as well as our talking circle transcripts reveal how queerly faithful identities unfold in the lives of these six individuals. The participants’ embodied disruption of the hegemonic discourses that dichotomize religion and sexual difference begs us to interrogate the accuracy of socially constructed binaries and to illuminate social structures that privilege ‘normative’ identities while oppressing difference.

Identity synergism as explored in this study is a way of being in the world that disrupts and undermines systems that marginalize non-normative identities through a refusal to acknowledge our existence and our meaningful lived experiences. Finding belonging in safe spaces and communities of faith that recognize queerly faithful identities and provide spiritual nourishment and support to LGBTQI+ Christians provides the relational grounding for identity synergism to be possible. Traditional Christian faith communities should also be aware of the consequences of their homonegativity/heteronormativity in the form identity erasure and non-recognition of queerly faithful identities. Heteronormative religious spaces hinder belonging for LGBTQI+ Christians and silence the rich knowledges present in the lives of queerly faithful community members.

The potency of the Queerly Faithful project is its insistence on the meaningfulness of queerly faithful lives and stories. Let this paper, and the accompanying Queerly Faithful zine be a blatant, provocative proclamation of our existence, our dignity as people worthy of justice (i.e. access to spiritually nourishing spaces), and our collective and individual wisdoms emergent from the synergy of our Christian/queer identities. The zine publication will serve as a social justice tool that will be distributed to churches, community groups, university campuses, families, LGBTQI+ organizations, and more to make this proclamation loud and clear. It is my hope that by reading the Queerly Faithful zine, the readers might question their preconceived notions of Christianity and sexual difference and perhaps interrogate the ways in which categorical assumptions constitute acts of violence against fluid, dynamic, unfolding lives.

The emergent themes discussed above should also highlight the need for continual critical research around LGBTQI+ identities as our sociocultural landscape shifts and changes. Future studies with more time and resources might broaden the scope to include other religious traditions in search of resonances and distinctions in experience. Further exploration and development of identity synergism as a concept might also serve to build upon and critique the literature surrounding LGBTQI+ identity. Another study might focus in on the nuanced experiences of trans and genderqueer Christians and advocate for more and better conversation about spiritual support for trans people. Lastly, there is a need for more studies that allow a queer sensibility to penetrate research design and implementation and that challenge the notion of normative social science research while disrupting the notion of normative social phenomena.

I am resistant to producing a tidy, conclusive paragraph. I would much rather leave you unsettled. Wondering what might be missing: letting you fill in the gaps. A reminder that I am

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Appendix #1: Co-researcher reflections on the Queerly Faithful Project

“This was one of the most life-giving projects I have ever been involved with. It was refreshing to reflect with other Queer-identified Christians on how our queer identities are precisely God-given. Often, I feel discussion around LGBTQ* roles in the church discuss our gifts *despite* queer identities, but it was incredibly refreshing to speak with others about how God uses queer identities with purpose, that we are disciples precisely *because* of these experiences. This project created the unique opportunity to embrace my whole authentic self and engage in faithful discussion and creation of resources to contribute to the church's mission of justice for all. Its hopeful to know there are communities of people where this is possible and encouraged, and I truly believe the work that results from this project has the great potential of cultivating more of these spaces.” (Steph Chandler Burns)

“The Queerly Faithful project was awesome for me. I found time to just sit and write again, something I haven't done for years. I'm excited to be able to share how I feel and have felt, with others who can potentially relate. I enjoyed meeting others who have struggled with similar situations as me. It was helpful to be able to meet others who could empathize with me as well.” (Maxx Wolting)

“Being part of the *Queerly Faithful* project moved me. Not only did I get to be with queer Christian friends, but the artistry and thoughtfulness struck me constantly. This small community, it seems to me, believes that we have something that we offer the Church for its evangelical task (this framing is taken from Anglican theologian Oliver O'Donovan). One of my heroes, the queer Episcopalian theologian Mark D. Jordan, said in his book *Telling Truths in Church*: “We need to learn to write about our loves.” This is not necessarily because we know who we are before we start writing, but because God meets us in the writing--there is both a giftedness and a negotiation. I think poetry (which is already a mode of doing theology) might be a particularly beautiful and messy way to explore this writing of the self. (We also 'write' icons, which facilitate an inspired and mediated material encounter with the reality of God. So many Christians don't think queer Christian lives are possible. Even those who think they are possible want them to be comfortable for the majority, to fit into the paradigms that we already understand about Christian life and practice. In many ways, we do--and I (speaking for myself) want to refuse to be a heretic. On the other hand, there is a challenge that can be heard, there is a sort of shattering that can hit much harder, when poetry and arts are the media of engagement. This project was very important to me, and I hope it will be useful to the academy, yes, but even more to my friends and lovers who are looking for, in Mark Jordan's words, “a basically adequate way to speak without lying” about queer and Christian fleshy lives.” (Rob Walker)

“Queerly Faithful has been extremely meaningful to me. Since I can remember, I have processed the world around me and my experience by trying to put pen to paper. Over the past few years, I have been given more and more opportunities to share my writing with others. For most of my life, I have had to remain quiet about many of my experience in life for fear of rejection. Queerly Faithful is one of a few spaces that have given me a voice again; holding nothing back. One of my favourite aspects of this project was being able to listen to my co-writers experiences and written works. Being able to connect and bond over our shared passions was something that I wasn't quite expecting. There was a level of appreciation and genuine joy as we listened eagerly to each syllable of each other's poetry. Each of us were able to find connection points in other people's words as we hooted and hollered our sympathies.” (Christopher Ong)

“The Queerly Faithful project felt like I was getting to know my family, and inviting them to know me. The depth of wisdom and insight in each story contributed to this project felt like an unfathomable gift. I sincerely believe that not only did we do good, productive, creative work together, but we also sewed seeds of lasting friendship build upon vulnerable sacred moments overflowing with laughter, strength, anger, grief, beauty, and pain. Being amidst other queer Christians who are passionate about their God, their faith, and their capacity to invest in a more loving world was such a nourishing experience. I cannot wait to continue these conversations, and create more spaces where queerly faithful identities are celebrated.” (Eric Van Giessen)

Appendix #3: Prompting Questions for Talking Circle

1. Use three words to describe the relationship between your faith and your sexual/gender identity/orientation? Explain.
2. Does your sexual/gender identity/orientation affect your sense of identity or belonging in your faith community?
 - What role does your faith community (or lack thereof) play in your life?
 - Have you ever felt excluded from your faith community?
 - Why does identifying as a Christian matter to you?
3. Does your faith or spiritual life affect your sense of identity or belonging in the queer community?
 - What role does the queer community (or lack thereof) play in your life?
 - Have you ever felt excluded from the queer community?
4. Are there other factors of your identity that intersect with/impact your experience of faith/sexuality? Explain.
 - Do you feel that you are able to ‘be your whole self’ in the queer community? In your faith community?
 - Does your behaviour change in each of these communities? If so, how?
5. Is there anything that’s missing in our conversation that you see as important to this conversation? Are the things you’ve been writing captured in our conversation?

Appendix #4: Non-restrictive Themes

- Humour
- Fleshiness/Incarnation/Embodiedness
- Intersecting identities
- Christian as/is Queer
- Fuzzy/Unclear boundaries on space
- Safety/affirmation (enabled to feel safe)
- Ritual
- Orlando
- Tension
- Stereotyping
- Drenched in Queerness
- Queerness makes the good news tangible (they nourish each other)
- Behaviour
- Lived Religion (personal) VS Institutional Religion (communal)
- Where we're taught to find God vs. where we actually do
- Self-love
- Gnosticism (mind & body)
- Breaking down binaries
- Patriarchy
- Erasure/invisibility

Appendix #5: Queerly Faithful Zine

See below.

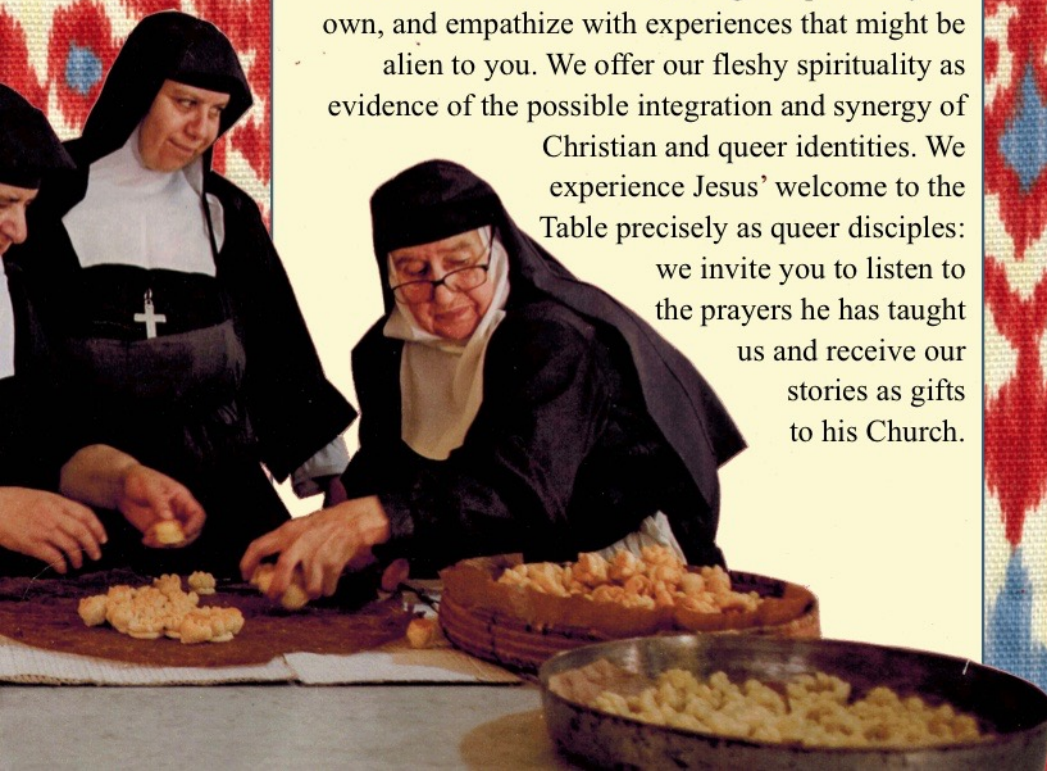
QUEERLY FAITHFUL

Thanks to all the poets and artists who made this zine possible: your vulnerability, artistry, wisdom, and faithfulness gave this project its vibrancy and weight. Thanks to Dr. Vanessa Oliver and Dr. Michael Woodford for your sage advice and support throughout the Queerly Faithful project and to Steph Chandler Burns for your keen eye and excitement as we curated the zine. Thank you to Wilfrid Laurier's Social Justice and Community Engagement Program as well as the WLU Graduate Enhancement Fund for providing funding for the printing of this zine, and to all those allies and friends who proofread and brainstormed with me between pages (Ruthi Knight, Julie Cairns, Ashley Skorobohacz, Jodi Spunar)
- Eric Van Giessen

Many of the contributors to this zine are connected to one another through LGBTQ+ Christian *Generous Space Groups*. These groups are run by *New Direction*, a nondenominational Canadian ministry that offers spiritual care and support to LGBTQ+ Christians and families and equips churches and denominations for healthy dialogue at the intersection of faith, gender, and sexuality.

If you want to support safe spaces for LGBTQ+ Christians to explore their faith, please consider contributing to their work by making a donation through their website at <www.newdirection.ca/donate>.

QUEERLY FAITHFUL is the fruit of a community autoethnographic research project (fostering relationships and producing shareable knowledge through collaborative self-study and storytelling) under the same title. The poems herein offer a glimpse into the lived experiences of five queer Christians. Our hope and prayer is that you might resonate with our stories, recognize parts of your own, and empathize with experiences that might be alien to you. We offer our fleshy spirituality as evidence of the possible integration and synergy of Christian and queer identities. We experience Jesus' welcome to the Table precisely as queer disciples: we invite you to listen to the prayers he has taught us and receive our stories as gifts to his Church.



o r d e r o f s e r v i c e



WELCOME

Hide and No Seek - Christopher
Such A Cloak - Eric



INVOCATION

Don't Fit The Mould - Maxx
Inner Teenager - Rob
Laugh Lines - Eric
Down the Rabbit Hole - Christopher



CONFESSION

Tolerate Thy Neighbour - Eric
Fleshiness - Rob
Unsafe Space - Maxx
Promised Land - Steph



COVENANT

Labels - Christopher
Covenant - Steph
LGBT in the CRC - Eric



WE WILL NOT BE PUT ON SILENT

We Will Not Be Put On Silent - Christopher
Reaction - Maxx
CRC Synod 2016 - Eric
We Are The Same - Maxx
Good Friday - Steph



MESSAGE

To Be A Stranger - Maxx
Scripture Passage
Dear Ruth - Steph



COMMUNION

Trinity - Steph
Intercourse - Rob
We Used To Feast - Eric



PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Code-Switching - Christopher
#menno2016 - Steph
A Visit To Church - Maxx



PRIDE AND THANKSGIVING

Pride - Maxx
I Am - Steph
The Needle - Maxx



BENEDICTION

Holy Spirit - Rob



ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS



Hide and No Seek

By Christopher Ong

When I was a child,
I played hide and seek like I was a professional.
I treated it like an Olympic sport that one day
I would bring home the gold
I was a secret agent
I was a tiny ninja
I was some mutant combination of the two, and I knew
I was something special

Hide and seek was my favourite game
Life didn't seem so lonely when all I had to do was
work hard enough, look hard enough and
next time,
I would be the one sought after

When I was 9 years old, my older brother told me to go hide ...
that was the day I learned that when people tell you to hide,
they do not always intend to look for you afterwards

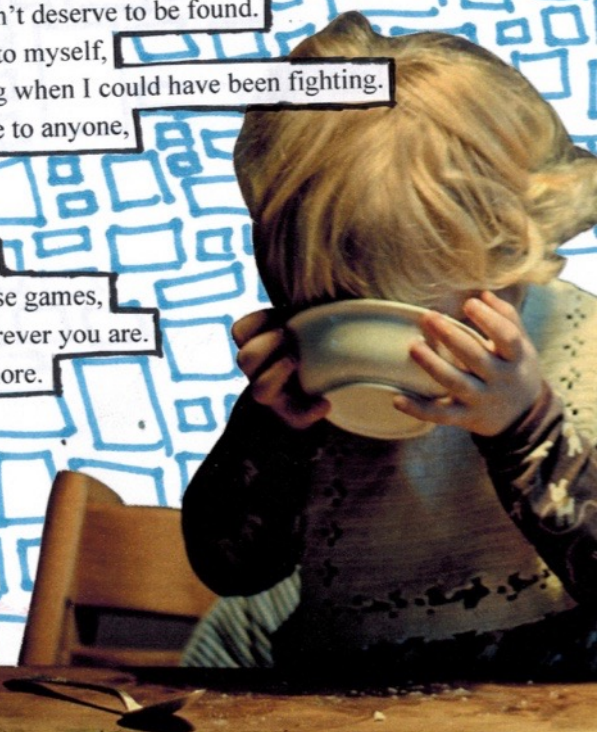
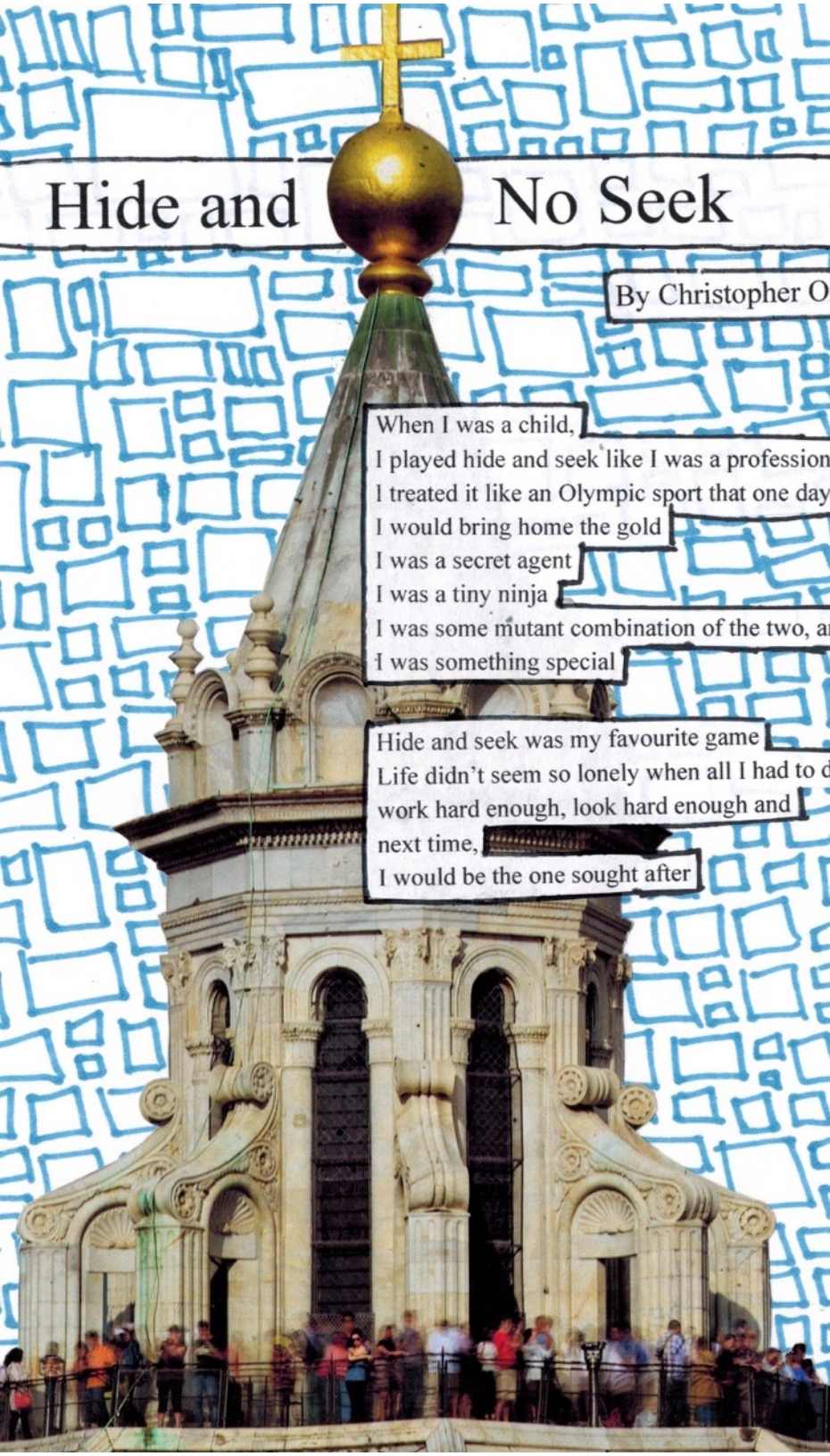
As I grew older,
I realized the church was one big game of hide and no seek
There were parts of me the Church didn't like to look at
parts they wanted to remain hidden
and in order to keep things locked away for as long as possible
they formed bullets from silver spoon pacifiers and
raised a generation to be afraid of closet doors
telling them only monsters lived on the other side

It taught me they would rather skeletons in the closet
than bother to come looking for me

I spent so long in hiding,
I started to defend my captors,
convincing myself that I didn't deserve to be found.
But this is an apology letter to myself,
for all the time I spent hiding when I could have been fighting.
It was not my intention to lie to anyone,
especially myself,

I was only trying to survive
But I am tired of playing these games,
So come out, come out, wherever you are.
You don't have to hide anymore.

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Such A Cloak

A cloak slouching in the closet
neglected and secret
remembered for its aroma
now cultivating a stench.

Hidden to guard it—
safe in the dark
and lonely.

And the moths came.
This secret cloak
became a skin seething
eaten, stretched and bleeding—
crying for care,
attention,
love.

Fibres of self
torn from self
unless exposed and mended
with many assiduous
soft hands.

The hands of His bridegroom
mending to wholeness
a hidden one:
Fleshy and spirited
in a sacred weaving
so fine as to repute its Maker.

Soft and strong
such a cloak
is not fit for a closet.
Such a cloak
when worn and honoured
reveals a deep magic
a colourful sagacity
inclined to nourishment,
to life,
and the way anew.

Safely draped in a uniform
pressed and pleated
into straight lines,
we equate unity with
uniformity
fearing difference.

Let us discern how
our queer cloaks
blur the I and them
and when redeemed
from their mothy abode
might shroud difference
as divine
and morph the homogenous
into radical relevance.

Such a cloak,
is not fit for a closet.

By Eric Van Giessen

Don't Fit the Mould

It seems no matter where I go I don't fit in, I'm



not fully male so I don't quite fit the manly mould,

but I'm too male to belong to a group of females.

Whenever I'm at church I'm not Christian enough

to belong to the place I've attended my entire life,

and whenever I'm out with certain friends, I'm not



gay enough to fit their standards. Being queer is hard

because without a specific gender how can I be gay?

I don't feel adequate enough in my own skin to belong.

By Maxx Wolting

INNER TEENAGER

Note to self:
Be very gentle with your inner teenager
when surrounding yourself with beautiful queer men.

By Rob Walker



I met someone recently whom I found so beautiful that it was hard to be around him. "Use whatever pronouns for me that you would for yourself—I'm genderfluid."

I saw him for the first time on Grindr, and wondered if he would be one of my people gathering to grapple with being queer Church in the world—a queer Michelangelo's David.

And then I watched his gender presentation change subtly from day to day—moving however the Spirit and his own inner life led. The last time I saw them, they wrapped themselves in a shawl, with tassels that were almost like *tallit*, and offered healing prayers to people grappling—with systemic violence, #BlackLivesMatter, the #Pulse shootings—with a feminine and flowing grace.

I wanted to kiss him so badly my heart ached. (I don't usually give my heart permission to think further ahead than a kiss.) But I don't know how to cross contexts quite yet, between Grindr and a healing service.

In the middle of a workshop the day after the healing service, I find a reason for the ache: Sometimes, I do not believe I am as sexy as the men around me. So, my inner teenager and I make a holy decision: to affirm, as an act of faith, that we are as sexy as the boy we ache for, dancing, wearing his *tallit*; which is to say, to be gentle with each other.



I hope my eyes are framed
with creases wet with stories
from laughter that leaves a
pleasing looseness to my skin
in all the right places.

The joyful weight of these subtle folds
contend with the frustrated
furrows of my brow
bent and contorted
deep and gnarly with concern
and a concentration made necessary
for a vigilant defence
held with a lightness
so as not to reveal its weight.

I intend for the safe space humour
that rumbles from my gut
in an uncontrollable rhythm
might become a new ritual:
a sacramental visioning
of unabashed joy
symptomatic of a forgotten shame—
an affirmative guffaw
resounding my as is belovedness.

These creases announce
the rejection of a conditional in
in favour of a scandalous gospel
that reclaims a subversive axis
in an otherwise quaint story.
For the out are our priests
and our teachers
and the Church has no walls
no eligibility form or entrance fee
only extra seats with cushions.

I have no regret
for these furrows
only sadness at their making
and a decision to balance them
with laugh lines
and the easy peace
that comes with knowing
I belong at the table,
and my Priest and I
can laugh together.

Laugh Lines

By Eric Van Giessen

Down the Rabbit Hole

TO BE HONEST, WHEN I WAS WRITING THIS I WAS UNSURE OF HOW A LOVE POEM WOULD BE RECEIVED BY OTHERS. IN THE PAST, I FELT LIKE I COULDN'T EXPRESS FEELINGS OF LOVE, INFATUATION, OR ANYTHING AT ALL THAT RESEMBLES "EROS" BECAUSE OF MY COMMITMENT TO CELIBACY. HOWEVER, WHEN I DECIDED TO REMAIN CELEBRATE MY FEELINGS OF LOVE DIDN'T MAGICALLY GO AWAY. I STILL CATCH MYSELF FALLING MADLY IN LOVE, BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN THAT I AM NOT SERIOUS ABOUT MY COMMITMENT EITHER, AND WHO SAYS I CAN'T LIVE IN THE MIDST OF BOTH.

I never felt like falling...

till I fell

I had seen all my friends go through it before chasing after that special someone like lovesick lemmings they hurled themselves off cliffs

just to get that weightless feeling one more time.

It didn't matter how many broken bones, or broken hearts lay at the bottom the moment that gravity caught them, it was as if they took a big hit of nitrous gas

big goofy smile, stretched across their face, defying all logic, and lasting weeks to months at a time

I didn't understand it.

What sense was there in such a reckless endeavour?

What would drive a person to take that leap?

However

when I first met you, reason went out the window Sure I had crushes before; men who I couldn't stop looking at But while they were the object of my eye, I only seemed to fly for a moment a short fall, Seconds before my heart hit the ground Fleeting, shallow, selfish

A short hop off the street curb

But with you, That feeling never seems to go away, I fell down the rabbit hole but I never seemed to reach the bottom and suddenly, I wished this feeling would never leave me

This love is mysterious, Unseen but very real A force that draws me closer And while falling for you I ... missed the ground, Caught in your orbit I fell for you over and over again

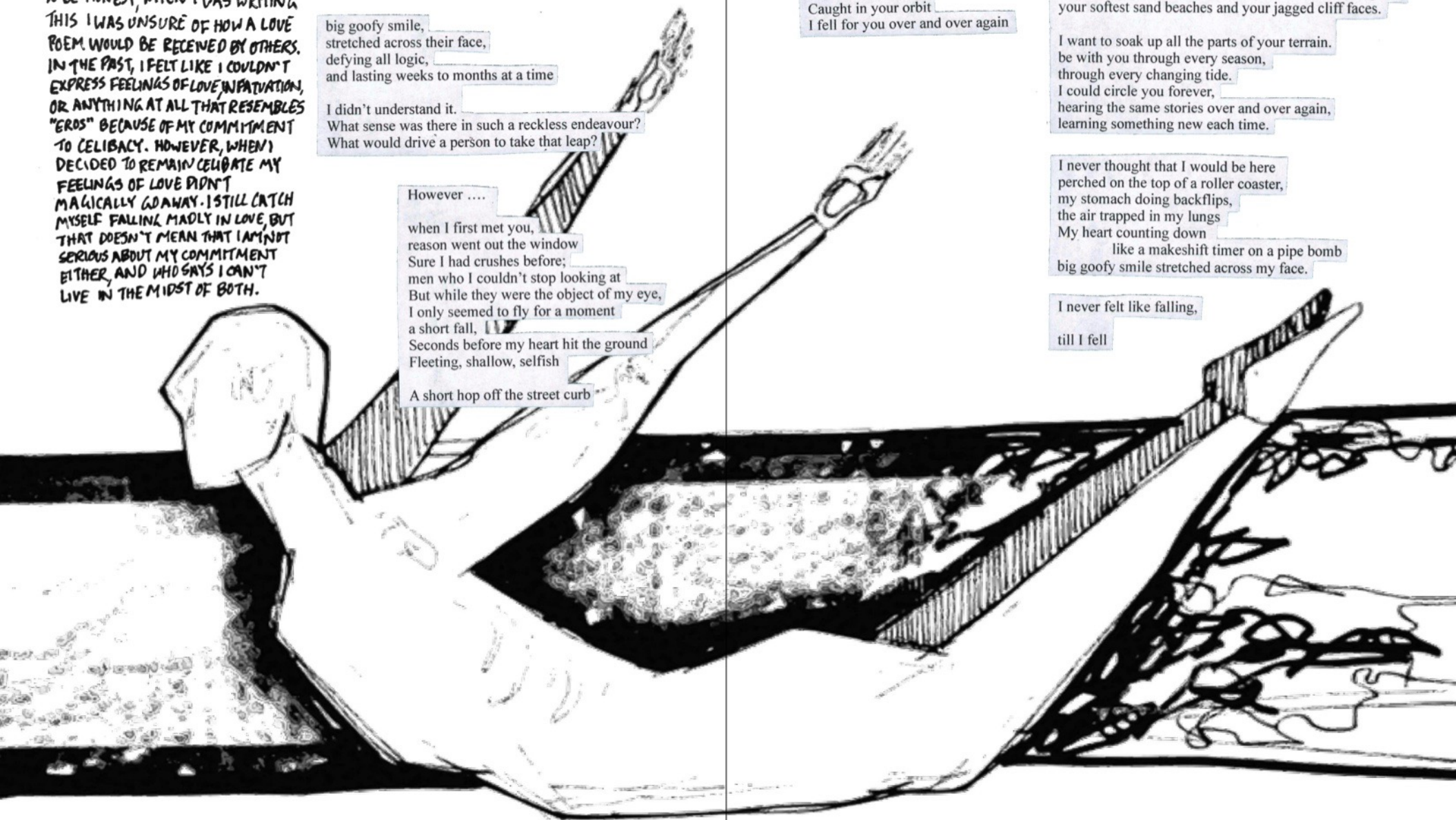
By Christopher Ong

Flying over your surface, I map your intricate geography, The mountain tops and deepest valleys of your life, Your abundant rainforests and your scarce desert regions, your softest sand beaches and your jagged cliff faces.

I want to soak up all the parts of your terrain, be with you through every season, through every changing tide. I could circle you forever, hearing the same stories over and over again, learning something new each time.

I never thought that I would be here perched on the top of a roller coaster, my stomach doing backflips, the air trapped in my lungs My heart counting down like a makeshift timer on a pipe bomb big goofy smile stretched across my face.

I never felt like falling, till I fell



Tolerate Thy Neighbour

By Eric Van Giessen

"And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart,
and with all thy soul,
and with all thy mind,
and with all thy strength:
this is the first commandment.

And the second is like, namely this,
Thou shalt *tolerate* thy neighbour as thyself.
There is none other commandment greater than these."

Did I cite it rightly?
Aye, never hast thou felt more intimately the love of God
than when thine Christian neighbour tolerates thee in earnest.
Embraces thy *life* whilst placing thy '*lifestyle*'
(never the twain shall meet)
in that comfortable non-controversial cloud of
neighbourly tolerance.

Together we shall walk as sinners,
tolerating kin to kin
and hating our sin.
So simple this spirituality
schismed from this body...
this incarnation.

There must be more than this...
Was it love?
Perhaps
a love that rejects tolerance
for the more
intimate gaiety of proclaiming
thou art beautiful
you are beautiful
because the One who proclaimed it good
proclaimed you good.

And in you I shall celebrate
a glimpse of the One
ushered to me from you
in a way perfectly designed
beautifully incarnated
in your flesh and spirit
woven together
in an outpouring of love
and joy
so you *may* love
and find joy
in each other.

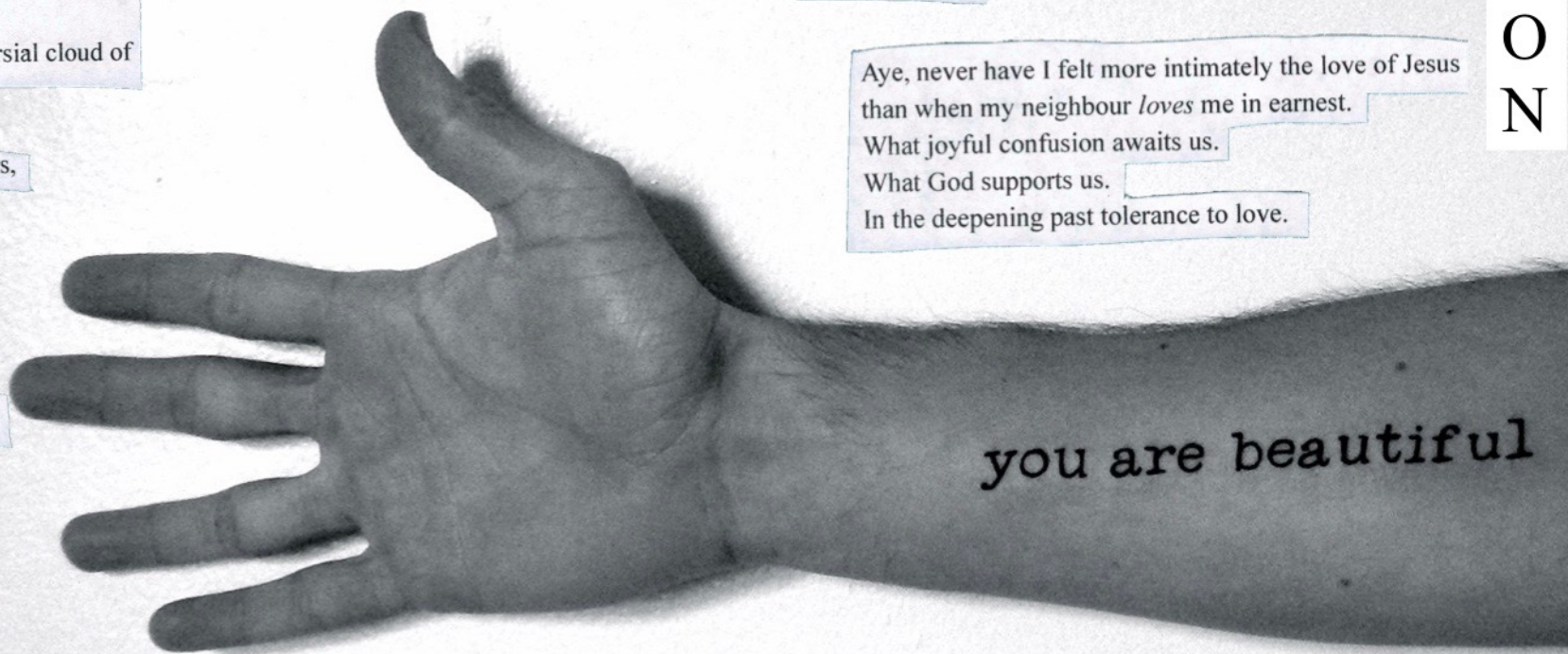
What gayety.
What love.
What commandment.
What invitation.

Aye, never have I felt more intimately the love of Jesus
than when my neighbour *loves* me in earnest.
What joyful confusion awaits us.
What God supports us.
In the deepening past tolerance to love.

you are beautiful



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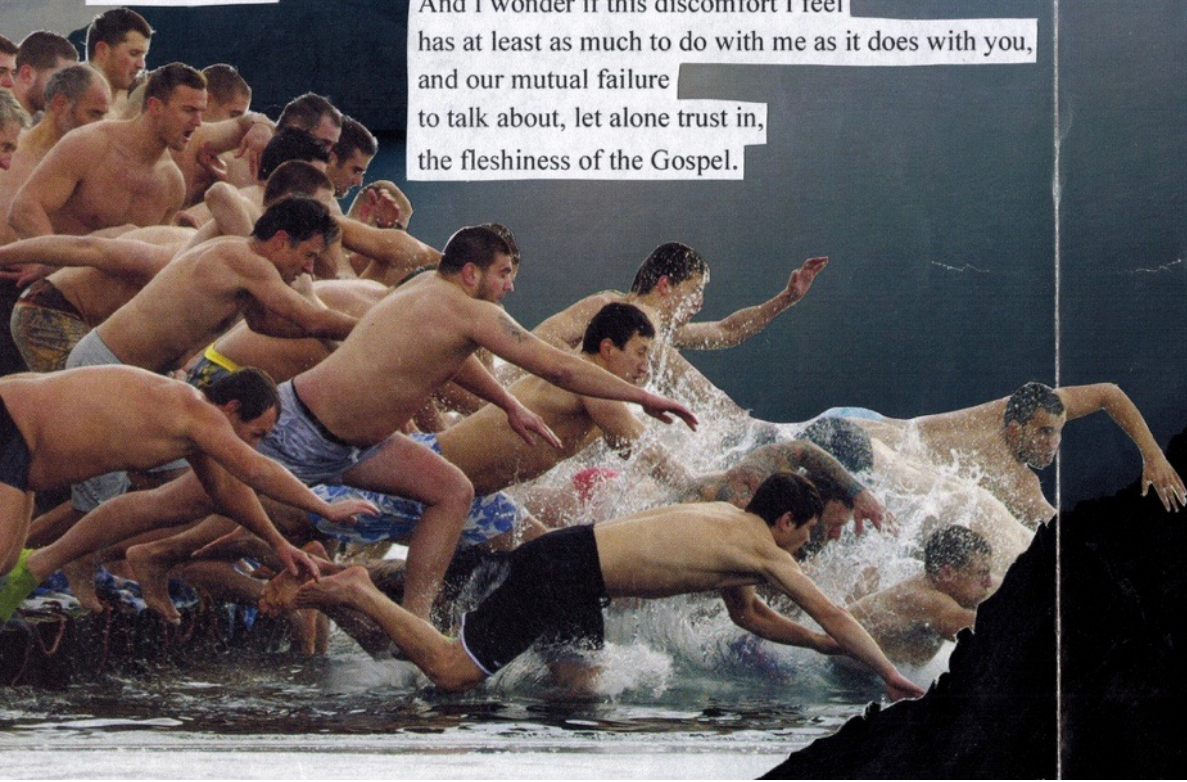
Fleshiness

By Rob Walker

I wanted to write a poem about fleshiness, about the Incarnation, about the goodness of being a queer body in God's fabulous world.

But then I realised
I might have to be vulnerable about the kind of sex
I have (or want to have), the kinds of things that move me
when I am in close contact with men,
the surge of love I often feel
that might be virtually indistinguishable
from the entangled, moaning fleshiness of
"Gawd I want to kiss you!" and "I want to fuck
and/or be fucked by you!"

And I wonder if this discomfort I feel
has at least as much to do with me as it does with you,
and our mutual failure
to talk about, let alone trust in,
the fleshiness of the Gospel.



Unsafe Space

By Maxx Wolting

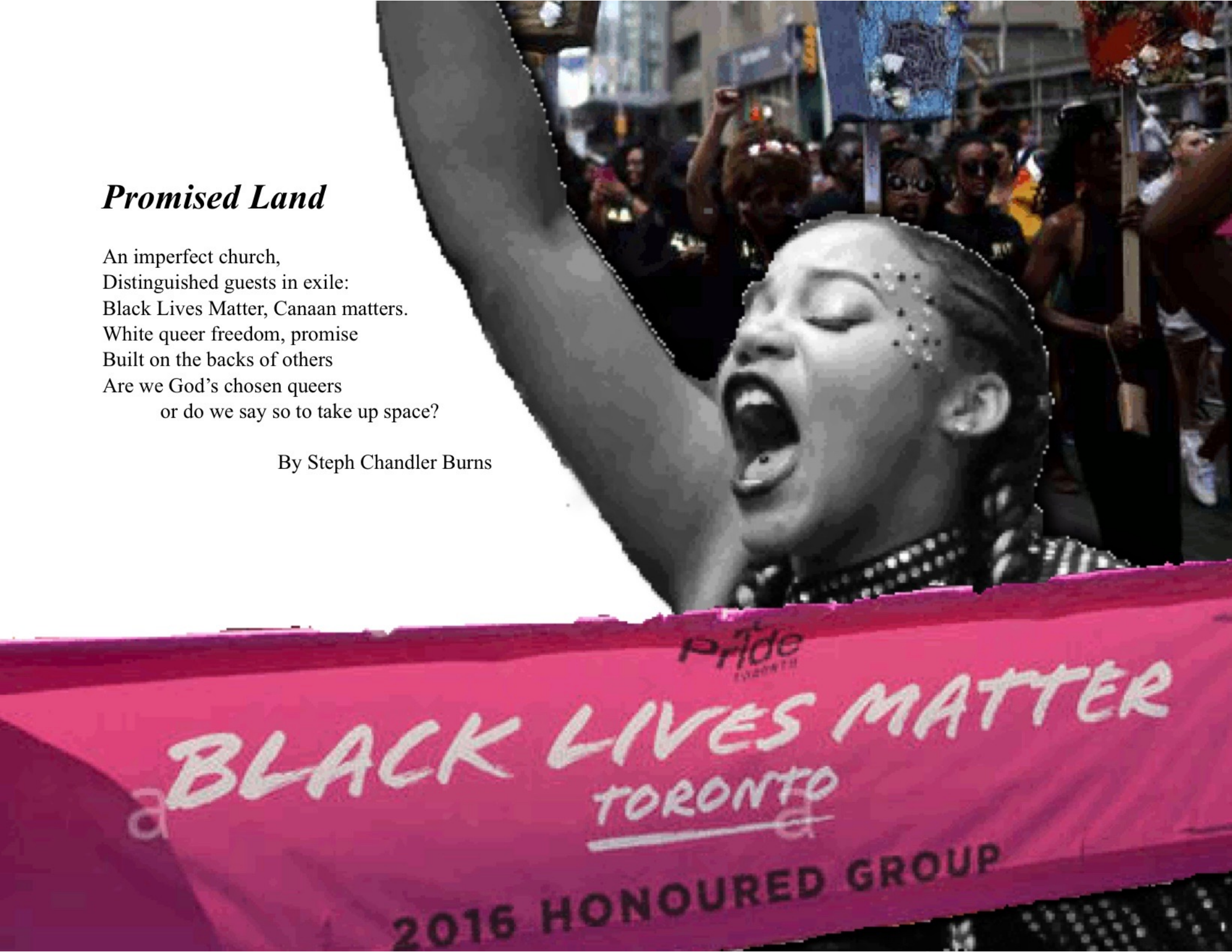
This place was supposed to be my home,
my safe space. How has somewhere I used
to belong turned into a place of stares, whispers
and pointing fingers as I take my seat? Sitting
amongst those who used to greet me by name
with smiles and handshakes, who can barely
look at me now. These are the people who have
caused me to no longer attend church. A place
I used to consider safe and friendly is now a
place of loneliness and confusion. This was my
home, I no longer want anything to do with it.



Promised Land

An imperfect church,
Distinguished guests in exile:
Black Lives Matter, Canaan matters.
White queer freedom, promise
Built on the backs of others
Are we God's chosen queers
or do we say so to take up space?

By Steph Chandler Burns



Labels

I used to think of labels like a bad rash,
they itched,
they scratched,
they rubbed me the wrong way,
and so I cut them off my clothing without delay.

They were uncomfortable to wear and changed the way others looked at me.
Only the most popular brands were acceptable
but I could only wear what I was given.

Ashamed, I sewed in counterfeit tags the other kids wore,
trying to hide what makes me different.
But all I was doing was trading in one irritation for another.

You cannot acclimatize to something that is not your own
and you cannot win when it comes to labels.

But we cannot escape them.

From the very start,
Adam named all the cattle, fowl, and beasts,
because as humans we are built to label and define,
But more than that we were built to discover.
There will always be new things to explore,
new things to dissect,
and naming is one of the tools of a finite mind.
Taking the limitless and making it more manageable.


So,
if I really must choose labels to bear,
I will adorn my attire with labels of my own choosing.
Ones I feel comfortable to explain who I am to the fullest of my ability.
I will no longer bear the weight of the labels you force on me.

Instead I will wear these hand-me-down clothes with pride,
because I will not feel shame for dressing myself in a label that generations before me

fought to be recognized as
legitimate.

I am tired of calling myself something that I am not,
and if one word gets in the way of you trying to understand me,
then it makes me wonder if you ever really cared about me in the first place.

By Christopher Ong



The rainbow (flag) stretched across the sky:
Never again

Never again, God promised
And yet, we are blamed for the floods

Never again, God promised
And yet suicide rates erase diversity
Queer and trans* members, cut from the Body

Never again, God promised
And yet, time and time again
Proclamations of God's punishment
God is angry

Reminders of God's punishment
For how God made me
But God promised
Never again

Never again will I wipe out my people
Never again will anger and hatred overcome
Never again will the world break under wickedness

So I wait
For fulfilment of God's promise
Made under the Pride flag

Covenant

By Steph Chandler Burns

LGBT in the CRC

by Eric Van Giessen

The CRC church taught me that I was loved
and formed with intention
that Christ died with me in mind
and would like to join me on this path of life.
That I am beautifully and wonderfully made
knit together
except for that part
that's a sign of the world's brokenness.
God's radical grace suddenly had conditions
in the fine print on the church bulletin.
Queers need not enter
and if they insist they must keep silent
for their words don't fit in our stories.
These words, in fine print were so small I never actually read them
but the wording, the jokes, and the subtle suggestions
made them crystal clear.
You made it quite clear that I didn't belong:
another issue to debate while I contemplated
suicide and learned well that
lifelong self-hatred would be my mantra:
Approved by the silence of my church family.
Deep and profound loneliness,
The fabrication of a heterosexual facade,
Isolation in community - These were my Sunday school lessons.
Thankfully while the Church is supposed to be Jesus to the world
Jesus speaks in other ways
He redeemed me, he called me beautiful,
He spoke to me in a still small voice and told
me that my sexuality is a gift and a burden.
So with these broken tools I proclaim my
belonging in Christ's body - I have left the CRC
choosing a relationship with the triune God over
an abusive church family.
I will praise Him with or without you,
but my hand is open
still bleeding from your silence
but open
to you and to the LGBTQ communities.
I am walking the path that God has set before me
prayerfully and critically
but holding on to the promise of God's unfailing grace.





We Will Not Be Put On Silent

By Christopher Ong

The telephone is ringing,
ringing,
ringing,
"Hi! I'm not by the phone right now,
leave a message and I'll get back to you when I can"
Beep

As the morning sun rose over Orlando, Florida, June 12th 2016
the body count came pouring in
49 killed, 53 injured
A devastating blow to a community of LGBT people of colour.

Before tears could stain the headlines of the morning newspaper,
Family and friends fumble their phones,
desperately maneuvering contact lists through nervous ties.
Each ring of the phone a torturous reminder that last words
might be spoken through answering machines,
and each silence between drawn out by a million prayers
that very thought is wrong.

Reports say that as investigators surveyed the aftermath
that cellphones of the deceased wouldn't stop ringing with
calls and messages from loved ones,
A grim musical accompaniment to this gruesome scene;
A macabre orchestra of ringtones.
How haunting it must be to carry lifeless bodies
while the sound of their soul still lingers in the atmosphere.

That day, social media was buzzing.
Everyone was looking to the leaders of today to use
the power and authority they hold to speak to this tragedy.
And we grieved together.
we grieved for the lives that were lost,
we grieved for the people who were injured,
we grieved for the loved ones who were impacted,
we grieved for our safety,
we grieved as our very existence got erased from media coverage
right before our eyes,
and we grieved because a hate crime by any other name is just as painful.

This refusal to acknowledge why people died
gives a whole new meaning to whitewashing tombs;
painting the lens of our experience to make
our deaths more palatable to the masses.
But this slaughter is not meant to leave you feeling comfortable.
When injustice creeps its way up your spine and chills you to your bones,
remember this feeling.
Remember this feeling as we stand in solidarity,
as we raise our voices high,
trying to keep our head above the waves as their silence floods over us

But we will not let these waters sink us,
like 49 cellphones,
We will not let this injustice be passed over unheard
We will continue to ring loudly as we grieve.
A thunderous uproar,
An indigent S.O.S.

And although it might make you uncomfortable,
we will not be put on silent!

CRC Synod 2016

Knees tucked tight under my chin,
I find myself watching a spectacle
more tedious than televised golf.
Clearly there was a handbook
that I failed to review...
or else the signposts have been
intentionally disguised so as to
ensure the SOS of the foreigner.
I have my passport ready,
my birth certificate with a detailed
family lineage and a plaqued
certificate of CRC competence—
just in case my confusion
becomes cause to question my belonging.
A docket of white men adorned with
glasses and a short-sleeved
button up uniformity speak
spaciously about the need to affirm
a motion to provide spiritual leaders
with clearer guidelines on how to
exclude me and to address my issues.
As a call to clarity, some brandish bibles,
causing the Book to jitterbug before
the delegates - as if it was
to dance for its life tonight.
“This book provides all the answers
we need with unbridled clarity!”
Except when it doesn’t...and exhaustive
interpretation and illustration
is necessary - a notion that is highly
irrelevant to the current cause.
Amongst the casual bashing and
hell-speak, tears and thoughtful warnings
are spoken to the deep exhale of
the thousands watching paint dry.
To those tears—to those allies
I curtsy in a gay huzzah:
your tears kept the paint wet for a
few moments more.
But it would dry and dry the same:
a putrid eggshell-white...
rainbow free since 1973 and beyond.

I weep because I wanted to write
a different poem.
One where “Do you take this man”
could blessedly christen
my father’s lips someday—
a sacred oneness sealed with a
once forbidden kiss—
I weep knowing all too well that those
110 say aye’s—with ‘Biblical’ surety—
tipped the pill bottle
into my sisters mouth
to resounding applause
some belly singing the tune
“Victoryyyyyyy in Jeeeesus...”
while others with dry mouth
search for a song yet unwritten and
too often sung.
In my dreaming, I wonder
what might have been if
I was there to stare into their eyes if
I’d danced across the stage
with a with a pride-flag cape if
we’d arrived in hordes to circle
the CFAC and pray hand in hand
the Holy Spirit as our swaying song—
her mysterious moving turning hearts.
Now I pray patience and courage
to write that unwritten song
to wear my cape with pride
and to grasp those hands
firmly till our bones ache and
those grinding knuckles become
a tinitic drone in their ears
a reminder that we are here
we are queer and we will not
permit the domicile of our
Mother’s house by hatred and fear.
May the Sustainer sustain us.
May our anger be used for justice.
May our sorrow peel away the paint
and reveal the Kingdom.

By Eric Van Giessen

We Are the Same

You call yourself a Christian,
yet you despise my friends
and the people I call family
despite sharing the same
beliefs. You push me out of
your pews saying that we
cannot worship the same
God if I bring my love with me.
Why is it that as the beaten and
broken, we're held together
better with each other, than
if we were to try to get help
from you? How do you not
see that I am exactly the same
as you are, that we are exactly
the same? How does this make
me so much more of a worse
person than you are?

By Maxx Wolting

Good Friday

For Kevin

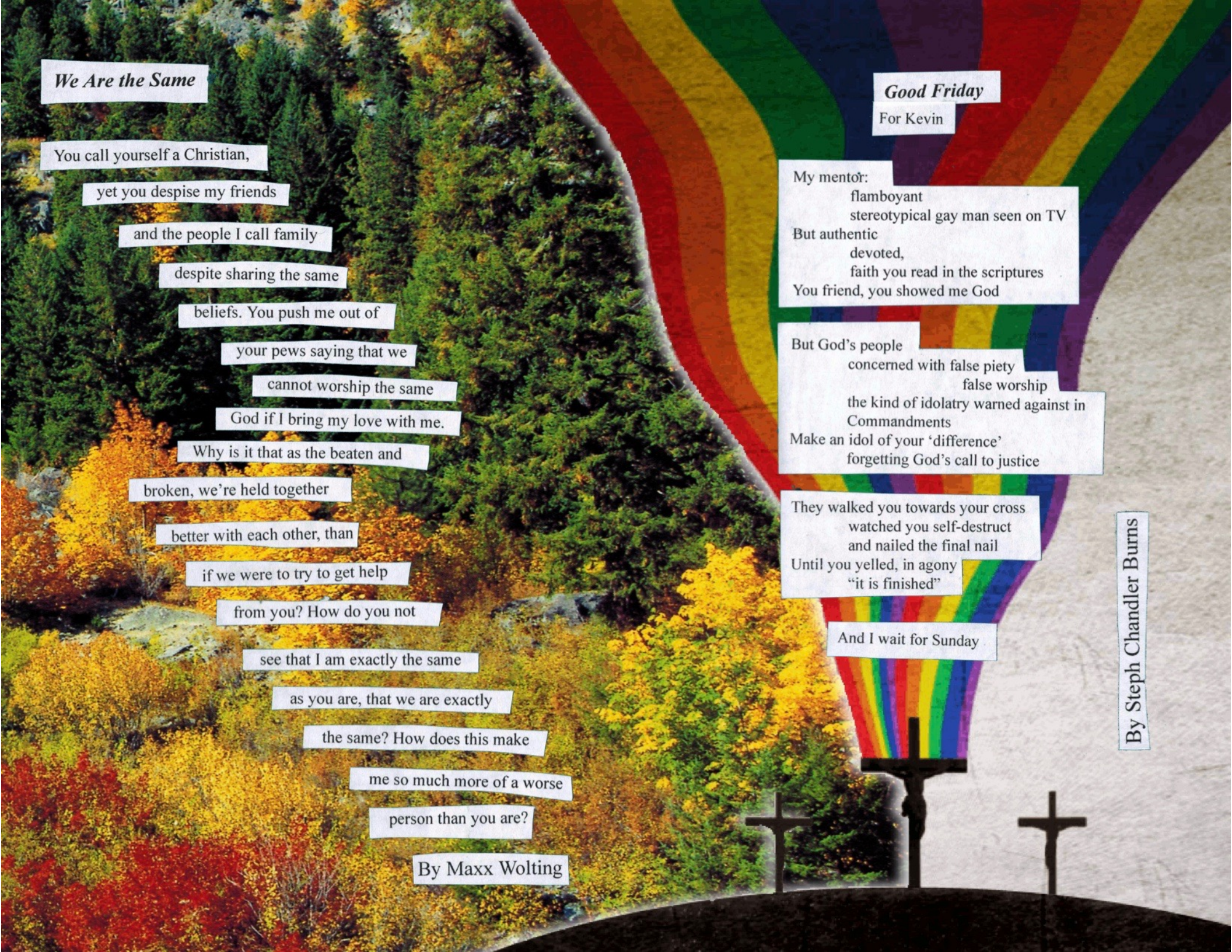
My mentor:
flamboyant
stereotypical gay man seen on TV
But authentic
devoted,
faith you read in the scriptures
You friend, you showed me God

But God's people
concerned with false piety
false worship
the kind of idolatry warned against in
Commandments
Make an idol of your 'difference'
forgetting God's call to justice

They walked you towards your cross
watched you self-destruct
and nailed the final nail
Until you yelled, in agony
"it is finished"

And I wait for Sunday

By Steph Chandler Burns





ESSAGE

To Be A Stranger

To be a stranger is to be in a house,
But not feel at home.

To be a stranger is to have
countless friends,
But not know where to fit in.

To be a stranger is to have the pen,
But not know how to write.

It is to have the words,
But not know how to say them.

To be a stranger is to hear the music,
But not be able to play it.

To be a stranger is like being
that one key on the keyboard
That never gets played.

It is to know there's colour,
But not be able to see it.

To be a stranger is to have feelings,
And not know what to do with them.

To be a stranger is like being in the majority,
But still feeling like the minority.

To be a stranger is to walk away
from the heat,
And still get burned.

By Maxx Wolting

Être une étrangère est d'habiter une maison,
Mais ne se sent pas chez soi.

Être une étrangère est d'avoir
d'amis, nombreux,
Mais ne sait pas s'intégrer.

Être une étrangère est d'avoir un stylo,
Mais ne sais pas comment écrire.

C'est d'avoir les mots,
Mais ne sais pas comment les dire.

Être une étrangère est d'écouter la musique,
Mais ne pouvoir pas jouer.

Être une étrangère est comme
Étant le seul qui touche sur le clavier
Qui n'est jamais joué.

C'est savoir il y a les couleurs,
Mais ne les voit pas.

Être une étrangère est avoir les émotions,
Et ne sait pas quoi à faire avec eux.

Être une étrangère est être la majorité,
Mais se sentir comme la minorité.

Être une étrangère est de marcher
loin de chaleur,
Et encore se blesser par cela.

ISAIAH

CHAPTER 58

CRY loudly, do not hold back;
Raise your voice like a trumpet,
And declare to My people their transgression,
And to the house of Jacob their sins.
2 "Yet they seek Me day by day, and delight to know My ways,
As a nation that has done righteousness,
And has not forsaken the ordinance of their God.
They ask Me for just decisions,
They delight in the nearness of God.
3 "Why have we fasted and Thou dost not see?
Why have we humbled ourselves and Thou dost not notice?"
Behold, on the day of your fast you find your desire,
And drive hard all your workers.
4 "Behold, you fast for contention and strife and to strike with a wicked fist.
You do not fast like you do today to make your voice heard on high.

5 "Is it a fast like this which I choose, a day for a man to humble himself?
Is it for bowing one's head like a reed,
And for spreading out sackcloth and ashes as a bed?
Will you call this a fast, even an acceptable day to the Lord?
6 "Is this not the fast which I chose,
To loosen the bonds of wickedness,
To undo the bands of the yoke,
And to let the oppressed go free,
And break every yoke?
7 "Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry,
And bring the homeless poor into the house;
When you see the naked, to cover him;
And not to hide yourself from your own flesh?
8 "Then your light will break out like the dawn,
And your recovery will speedily spring forth;
And your righteousness will go before you;
The glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.
9 "Then you will call, and the LORD will answer;
You will cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.'
If you remove the yoke from your midst,
The pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,
And if you give yourself to the hungry,
And satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
Then your light will rise in darkness,
And your gloom will become like midday.
11 "And the LORD will continually guide you,
And satisfy your desire in scorched places,
And give strength to your bones;
And you will be like a watered garden,
And like a spring of water whose waters do not fail.
12 "And those from among you will rebuild the ancient ruins;
You will raise up the age-old foundations;
And you will be called the repairer of the breach,
The restorer of the streets in which to dwell.

Cornelius Calls for Peter

10 At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!"

Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked.

The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea."

When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.

Peter's Vision

About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

"Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."

The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate. They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.

While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."

Peter went down and said to the men, "I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?"

The men replied, "We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to have you come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say." Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.

The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa went along. The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. But Peter made him get up. "Stand up," he said, "I am only a man myself."

Talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?"

Cornelius answered: "Four days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me and said, 'Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.' So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us."

Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

Then Peter said, "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

ACTS

Dear Ruth

Dear Ruth,
I wonder: did you love Naomi?
As you cleave to her, did your heart ache
More for her than it did for Mahlon?
Did you grieve as you watched your love become bitter?
As she cried for a God, convinced God didn't hear her?
Did you worry as she sent you out to the fields?
Did you fear a beginning to the end of you two
Or delight to provide for a lover?
Did you anticipate the end of the day
Exhausted from work
And the look, when home, on your lover's face?

Dear Ruth,
On the day you saw Boaz in that very field
Did your heart leap for joy, or did you quiver in fear?
Was there guilt as a second lover came near?
I wonder, did you also love Boaz?



COMMUNION

By Steph Chandler Burns

trinity

queer or christian

straight or gay

male or female

jew or gentile

slave or free

paul or peter

or one family under God?

we polarize

yet strive for a God

who deliberately shows a queerer way:

trinity: community

trinity: a life between binaries

a tying together: a three cord strand

identity connected to each other, even through difference

radically three in one and one in three

creator and redeemer and sustainer

no dichotomy, just trinity

Consider for a moment, o Christian man:
Is it possible that you are having sex
—or intercourse even more intimate than sex—
with Jesus at the Eucharistic table?

And is the reason many want the table to be closed,
controlled, polite and clean
the same reason we want our lovers, especially our women, the same way?

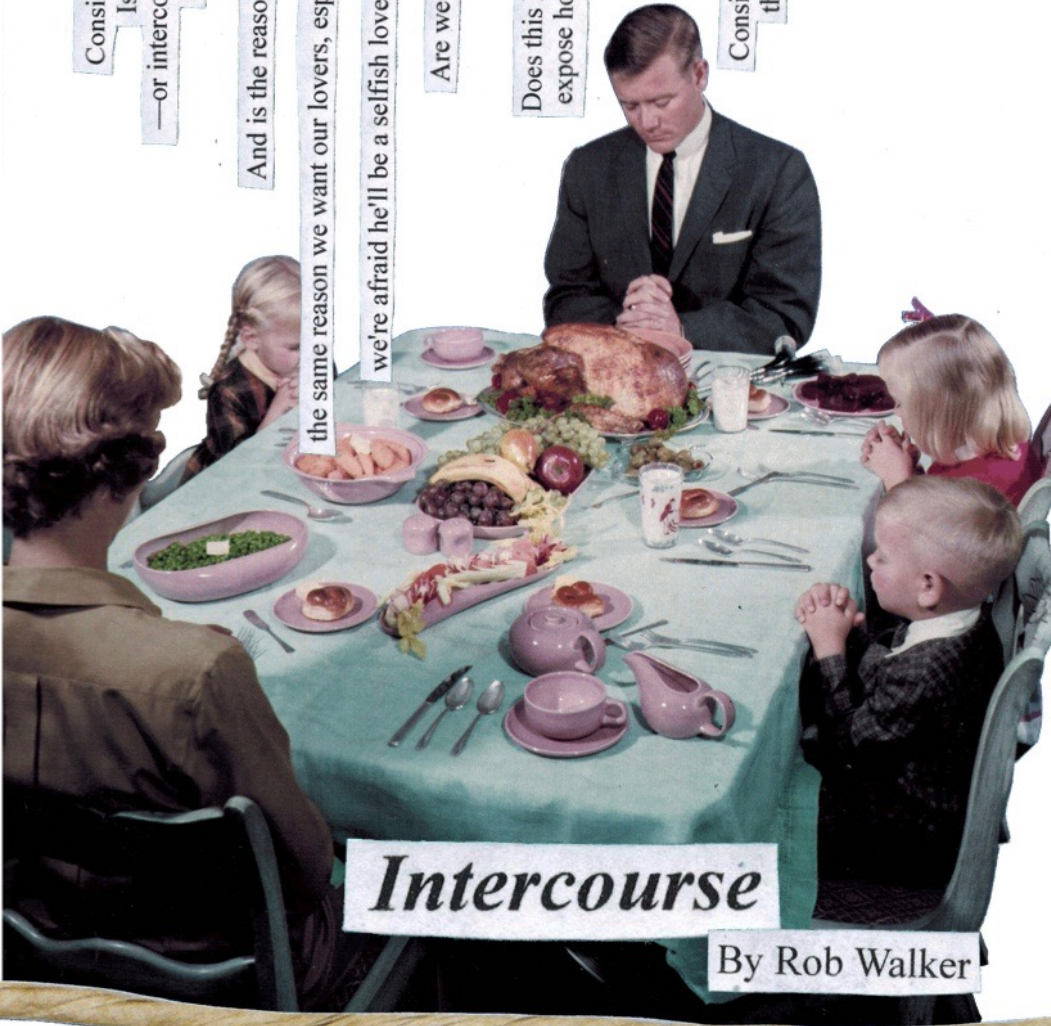
Are we too polite to tell Jesus
we're afraid he'll be a selfish lover, solely driven by his own orgasm,
as we often know we are?

Are we too afraid of what our own orgasm
will tell us about our
vulnerability?

Does this Feast, this Course, this Intercourse,
expose how toxic we are, even to ourselves?


Consider for a moment, o Christian man,
that all of these things might be true,
and come anyway:

We must learn the joy
the jouissance,
of Love moving in us.



Intercourse

By Rob Walker



We Used to Feast

We used to feast on communion
the blood of Christ
in sample sized plastic cups
prepared to sanctify the Body.

Symbolic, yet transformative
the wise ones told us.
A significance imbibed
via catechismal interrogation.

Yet still we feasted with
fistfuls of fluffy flesh chased
by welches tart tang.

Tugging on my mothers sleeve
with tongue graped purple
"Can we leave yet?"

Once seen as scandal
today I perceive a deep insight
in our eager hands.

Let the little ones come to me:
a childish faith presented
with abundance will feast.
Symbolic, yet transformative.

Abundant grace given
we stand with hands open
yet too often denied
by a self appointed priest.

Even the dogs eat the crumbs
which fall from the table
and dogs we are not.

With guarded hearts
we knocked
upon the Carpenter's door
and with delight
he unveiled a bigger table:
a gift dusty'with time
yet built with me in mind.

Here we feast on communion
the blood of Christ
in swimming pool punch bowls
prepared to sanctify the Body.
Symbolic, yet transformative.

There is room at our table:
He gave us extra chairs,
and we love dinner guests.

By Eric Van Giessen



PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

By Christopher Ong

Code-Switching

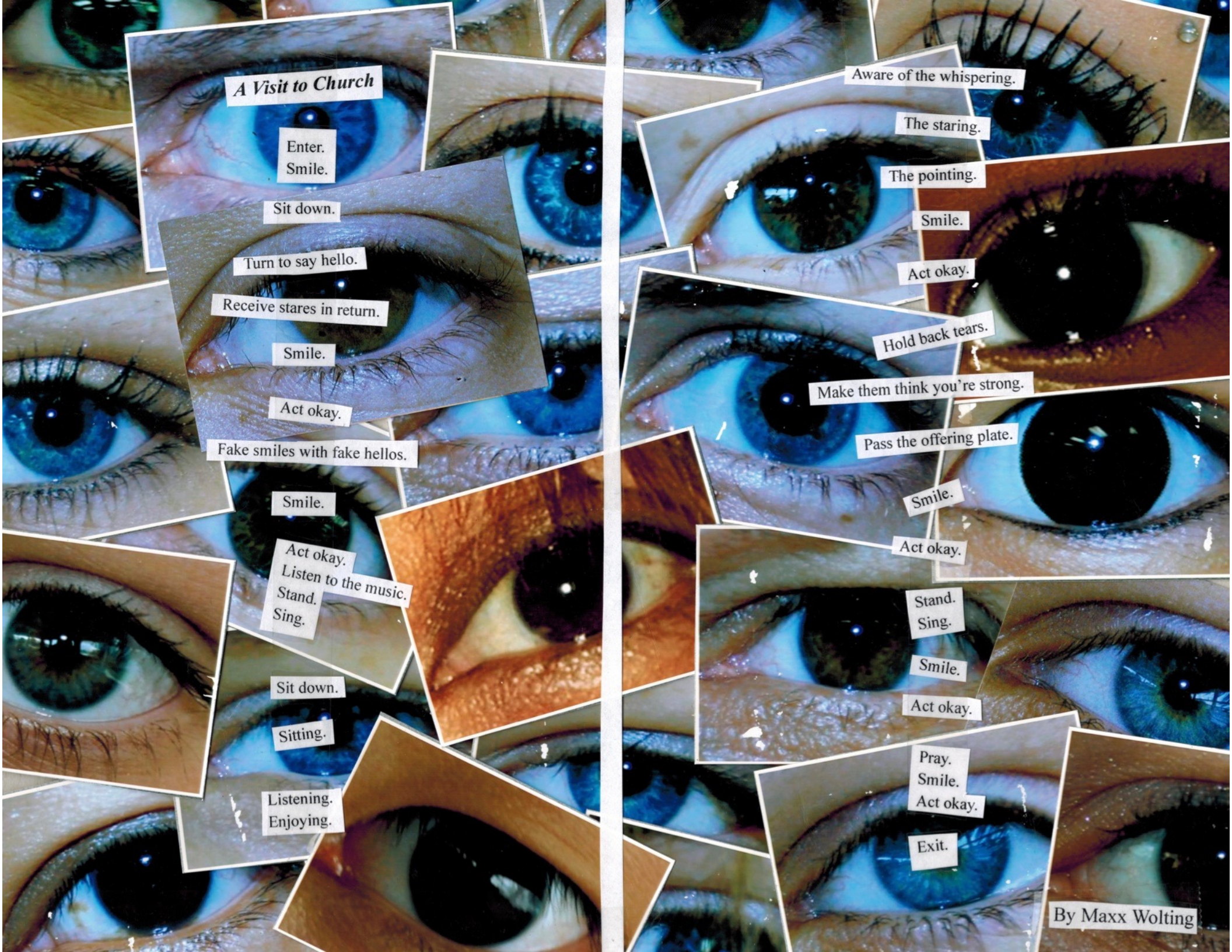
Code-switching is a linguistic phenomenon where a speaker alternates between two or more languages, or language varieties, in the context of a single conversation. The speaker is often unaware of the mental hop-scootch that takes place on their tongue as they stitch together various identities into one patch-work language.

The first time I experienced code-switching was while coming out as gay in the church.

As a kid, I was afraid of being alone it's so easy to see what makes you different as reasons for others to push you away and as Christians we are taught to walk through life in obedience; unity often mistaken for uniformity and so I started compartmentalizing my life; Breaking my speech up into dialects to mute the parts of me that made people uncomfortable. Hiding the things I felt that people wouldn't understand.

But you can only break yourself into pieces for so long before you ache to be whole again. I was a foreign tourist asking for directions, and this poor soul in front of me only understood every other word out of my mouth. A queer vernacular they could not digest. When I first started coming out, you'd think I was speaking a different language. Their eyes widened, smiles were forced, and everything from the shoulders up became a bobble head. I was a foreign tourist asking for directions, and this poor soul in front of me only understood every other word out of my mouth. A queer vernacular they could not digest.

Although I was becoming whole again, others thought I was falling to pieces. They saw my queerness a brokenness to be healed and fasted on my behalf. Hoping their prayers might intercede for me. Their eyes no longer focused on the person in front of them, but the fractured self they hoped would return. Treated this quilted heart a Frankenstein unworthy of love, like I would have been better off a pile of rotting body parts. and even though you look at me like I have gone mad, like a devil has taken hold of my tongue as I illogically weave between lexicons ... I will continue to code-switch. Because your language doesn't have a word for queer Christian and I cannot describe my experience using a framework that was built to exclude me.

A collage of various human eyes, some blue, some brown, some looking directly at the camera, others looking slightly away. The eyes are of different ages and ethnicities. Text labels are overlaid on the collage, providing a sequence of actions for a church visit.

A Visit to Church

Enter.
Smile.

Sit down.

Turn to say hello.

Receive stares in return.

Smile.

Act okay.

Fake smiles with fake hellos.

Smile.

Act okay.
Listen to the music.
Stand.
Sing.

Sit down.

Sitting.

Listening.
Enjoying.

Aware of the whispering.

The staring.

The pointing.

Smile.

Act okay.

Hold back tears.

Make them think you're strong.

Pass the offering plate.

Smile.

Act okay.

Stand.
Sing.


Smile.

Act okay.

Pray.
Smile.
Act okay.

Exit.

By Maxx Wolting



#menno2016

I shouldn't have to be brave.
The church should be a safe space

I shouldn't have to be brave
God calls the poor in spirit

I shouldn't have to be brave
All I ask is justice

I shouldn't have to be brave
I just want to live, authentic

Church should be a safe space
No need for me to tough it out

Church should be a safe space
Towards the Kingdom of Heaven for the poor in spirit

Church should be a safe space
Justice for widow, orphan, outcast, and queer

Church should be a safe space
So I can be whole

You shouldn't need me to be brave

By Steph Chandler Burns

Reaction

Why do you have to be like this? Why can't you see my happiness? Why are you putting your feelings in front of mine? You think how you feel is just way more important than my overall life. You can't tell me how I feel, how I don't remember my 3-year-old feelings, but excuse me, I'm a lot closer to 3 than you are. I have memories and feelings that you don't even know about, and letting you tell me how I feel is suffocating. I've done that before; I have the scars to prove it. What makes you believe that your happiness is so much fucking better than me living as my true self. Who the hell do you think you are? I don't care that the same blood runs through our veins, you've only added to the scars.

By Maxx Wolting



RAYERS & THANKSGIVING

I Am

I took a pilgrimage
Down busy highways
Commuter lots and subway stations
Through crowds of gold and rainbows,
Flowers, glitter,
shoes of every size,
stations overflowing with travellers on the road:
Metallic beads, water guns
Our manna and our honey

Towards Toronto, promised land,
For Sunday afternoon service
Holy of holies for God's queer children

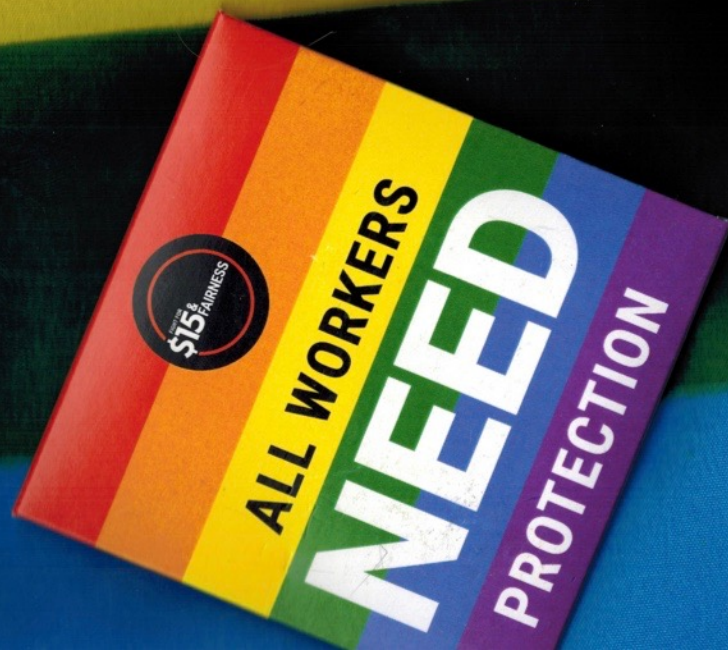
This, my church:
Imperfect, queer
Parade floats an altar
Rainbow vestments
Amongst rainbow flags
"Love is love" reflects that God is love
Bringing meaning to God's name
"I am who I am"

By Steph Chandler Burns

Pride

The colours, the music, the noise!
The outfits, the makeup the people!
There really is no other experience
like this. Watching people walking
by in awe of their openness with
the world. Permanent smile on my
face as I march alongside my brothers
and sisters; surrounded by the ones
who fully love me for me. The ones
who accept me. The ones who get
what it's like to stand out. Finally
a place where I fully belong!

By Maxx Wolting





The Needle

I've never been afraid of needles, but watching them inject this one into my leg was totally different than any of the other times I've been given an injection. This time, they were injecting my manhood into my leg. This time they were injecting the elixir that is giving me the strength to fight my way through each and every day. This needle is my favourite needle. I'm not afraid of it, or what's to come because I know that this needle is just the beginning of who I'm going to be. This needle is the needle that has finally brought me back to life. This needle has allowed me to be totally 100% free. I love this needle.

By Maxx Wolting



BENEDICTION

Holy Spirit

Warning:

The Holy Spirit is queer,
and gentle,
and full of fire.

Which is to say:

She can fuck you up at a moment's notice.

Now, my queer friends,
My fellow lovers of Jesus,
I dare you:

Believe the Gospel.

By Rob Walker

ABOUT THE POETS

CHRISTOPHER ONG is a 24 year old, gay, cis-gender male. He was raised in the Associated Gospel Church but is currently in the middle of a transition. He holds a traditional sexual ethic in regards to homosexuality and is attempting to remain celibate in response. He is open to the idea that he may be wrong and his perspective is open to change in the future. In his spare time, he enjoys playing volleyball, reading, and camping.

ERIC VAN GIESSEN (EDITOR) is a learner, writer, artist, justice seeker, and community builder. He identifies as queer and grew up the son of a Christian Reformed Church planter. Glimpsing the unique beauty in others brings him life, as does hiking, singing, reading and playing with ideas.

MAXX WOLTING is an outgoing, fun-loving trans man who loves to spend lots of time with his friends and family. He also just so happens to be a nurse. He grew up mostly in the Christian Reformed Church, but attended The Salvation Army from time to time as well. Maxx is just your average dude with a desire to write and share it with whomever he can.

ROB WALKER is gay and disabled, and accepts whatever pronouns you use for yourself. He's a not-so-closeted Trekker, Gleek, and Pentaholic; it's also easy to get his attention by recommending a book that's changed your life.

STEPH CHANDLER BURNS (ARTISTIC CONSULTANT) is a bisexual-identified Mennonite who is currently entering her second year of study of a Master of Theological Studies in Waterloo. When not studying or fighting inequality, Steph can be found playing board games with her partner, sleeping, or hanging out with her two cats.

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