Queering Jesus: LGBTQI Dangerous Remembering and Imaginative Resistance

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ABSTRACT
Queering Jesus is a call to remember the danger of the story of Jesus. The primary aim of this article is to offer a comprehensive survey of the representation of queer Jesus. Building upon the deconstructive work of Johannes Baptist Metz and the notion of the dangerous memories of Jesus's suffering and death (memoria passasionis), this article tries to make sense of the deconstruction of heteronormative and cisgender constructions of a white, male Jesus that supports the exclusion and oppression of queer folks. Queer constructions of Jesus in biblical interpretation and popular media are accused of being blasphemous fictions, while the same charge can be levied against the constructions of heteronormative and cisgender Christian churches who marginalize and stigmatize LGBTQI people. The imaginative remembering of the dangerous story of Jesus empowers queer folks to liberate and create a queer Jesus who allows LGBTQI Christians to experience the liberating presence of Jesus, to experience themselves as beloved, and to empower them to take back an inclusive Christianity.

KEYWORDS
Jesus; LGBTQI; Memory; Queering; Christology

Introduction
Critics will say that a “Queer Jesus” is a perverse or blasphemous fiction, invented by queer folks for reasons of self-justification, or accuse me and other LGBTQI Christians of being deviant. Jesus was never “queer” and to claim otherwise, as some LGBTQI folks in the 21st century do, is anachronistic. But this criticism can equally be levied against the ecclesial and theological construct of a cisgender and heteronormative Jesus during the last two millennia. Jesus has been hijacked by ecclesial and political powers since the time of Constantine and right up to the present. White, Western, conservative Christians who claim Jesus as white, male, cis and heterosexual, weaponise a Jesus who is socially constructed to oppress and exclude LGBTQI people and other minorities. Those in authority make such a Jesus culturally and hegemonically privileged and normative for white, male, and heteronormative patriarchal Christianities. In this context, the primary aim of this article is to offer a comprehensive survey of the representation of a queer Jesus.

Many conservative Christians read the Bible from a social location of power and privilege with consequences of exclusion, blaming or victimizing marginalized groups, and oppressing them, while justifying the lifestyles of the privileged. Such privileged location
influences interpretation and supports certain cultural ideologies of Christian nationalism. Moreover, it has a capitalist agenda, which Luis Menéndez-Antuña refers to as the multi-billion dollar “industrial biblical complex;” it spreads biblical texts, interprets and publishes them, and deploys them for ideological, economic, and political agendas.\(^1\) Strains of conservative Christianities collaborate and support an imperial plutocracy based on an unbridled capitalism that privileges whites, males, heterosexuals, nationalist ideologies, and higher economic classes.

In addition, they also subsume the subversive memories of Jesus in the gospel tradition through a biblical amnesia that deflects attention to spiritualized salvation. On the theme of memory/forgetting, postcolonial theologian Kwok Pui-lan reminds us, “memory is a powerful tool in resisting institutionally sanctioned forgetfulness.”\(^2\) Remembering the erasures of particular minorities and their absent voices disrupts the sanctioned ecclesial/theological amnesia of the dangerous memories of Jesus. Recovering from this amnesia poses significant challenges to the legacy of Roman colonial rule and imperial religion. The traces of this history are incorporated as selective, sanitized memories into dominant, privileged Christianity. Such a Christianity weaponises a “sanitized Jesus” as white, male, and celibate to exclude women, LGBTQI folks, immigrants and refugees, Indigenous, and ethnic and racial minorities. It supports a male, white patriarchal Christian antinationalism that promulgates gender fundamentalism, racism, and erotophobic agendas, including destructive reparative therapies that claim that there is no salvation outside of heterosexuality.

One lesbian student in my queer theology class had internalized this toxic ideology so thoroughly that she claimed, “Jesus was perfect; thus he had to be heterosexual.” And this is the dominant public imagination of Jesus. As Marcella Althaus-Reid argues, “Jesus has become a monopoly with strict control on spiritual production of meaning and exchange.”\(^3\) In many Christian denominations, alternative sexualities and diverse genders are disordered, and thereby constructed as sinful and evil. LGBTQI people suffer religious abuse at the hands of heteronormative Christianity. This is psychologically damaging and even traumatizing. Heteronormative and cisgender Christianity justifies the exclusion of queer folks as does the long history of Christian erasure of Jesus’s sexuality.\(^4\)

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4 Greenough argues that the silence around Jesus’s sexuality deflects from understanding the Romans’ humiliation of Jesus as sexual abuse. Chris Greenough, *The Bible and Sexual Violence Against Men* (London: Routledge, 2020), chapter 3; in particular, 70-74.
Alternatively, I propose here that queering Jesus is an imaginative strategy of remembering the story of Jesus as dangerous, as daringly deconstructing privileged and sanitized readings, and refiguring constructions of a queer and subversive Jesus within LGBTQI exclusion and suffering. Resurrecting such memories threatens cisgender and heterosexist meta-constructions of Jesus. The cisgender Jesus is interpreted as male and heterosexual in the image of Jesus as the bridegroom (John 3:29), but Jesus the bridegroom is complicated in medieval spirituality when priests and other male religious figures are feminized as brides of Christ. This cisgender male complication is further obfuscated with the supposed white, cisgender Jesus metaphorically constructed as the male head of the female church. Male members of the church are feminized in this structure, but what of the role of Jesus himself here?

Affective Juxtapositions: Dangerous Memories and Lives

Carolyn Dinshaw, a medievalist specializing in sexuality and gender, articulates a queer desire to juxtapose affectively and imaginatively the past with the present, as a way to “touch across time.” She claims, “queers can make new relations, new identifications, new communities with past figures, who elude resemblance to us but with whom we can be connected partially by the virtue of shared marginality, queer positionality.” Dinshaw stresses a queer historical impulse to think through an affective and complex engagement between texts and figures with contemporary queer lives. Such affective queer engagements with the past provide the opportunity to form queer subjective identity and queer Christian formation. The desire to make relations with a text or figure in the past—such as Jesus of Nazareth—is present in numerous contextual, post-colonial and liberation-theological readings of Jesus, God’s Christ, as “one of us.” Such affective juxtapositions and constructions of Jesus face similar criticism from privileged Christians who oppose the Black Jesus, the Lesbian Christa, the Bisexual/Transgender Christ, the Hispanic Christ, the Earth-loving Jesus, or the Queer Jesus. It has been claimed these constructions are bizarre inventions, blasphemous, heretical, or self-justifying fictions. But the outsider Jesus can be perceived through the lenses of the specific traumatic suffering and oppression of particular marginalized groups. And in doing so, Jesus is remembered and imagined as “one of us.” The Jesus logion in Matthew 25:40, “as you did

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7 See Miguel de la Torre, Reading the Bible from the Margins (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002); Kwok Pui-lan, Postcolonial Imagination & Feminist Theology, 168-185.
to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me,” provides a hermeneutical principle of the Christ as presence in the “least” or those excluded; it reflects a principle of solidarity that marginalized and abjected groups use in their counter-constructions of Jesus.

Drawing attention to the legitimacy of the notion that Jesus is like and with the abjected, James Cone points out that “White theologians in the past century have written thousands of books about Jesus’s cross without remarking on the analogy between the crucifixion of Jesus and the lynching of black people.” He argues that white theologians deflect white Christian attention away from the great American sin of white supremacy manifested in the horrendous violence of slavery, the Jim Crow period, and the lynchings of Black men. Shelly Rambo gives an example of the affective memory of Cone’s comparison of the trauma of Jesus’s crucifixion with the American mob lynching of Black men:

This gaze is a gaze of the cross as it is handed over to who remain. Cone’s vocabulary of trauma—the terror of lynching, the haunting memory of brutal suffering. The questions Cone poses to the theologian are questions about what it means to be one who remains as witness to the terror of the cross. How do we receive the memory? How do we make sense of this event in its persistence?

Cone stresses how the Black community engages and reads the gospels from the underside of history, a position of brutal suffering and oppressive exclusion; the Black community claims Jesus as one of their own through the lynching tree, “buried deep in the living memory and psychology of the black experience in America.” Cone details how the Black literary imagination of lynching perceives the Black Christ as countering the white Christ used by white Christians to justify slavery and horrendous violence against Black people. Thus, Cone provides an example of the deconstruction of the white Christ with the memories of traumatic suffering that empowers resilience and resistance: a dream of an alternative vision of freedom and inclusion. The Black church archives the dangerous memories of Jesus that create prophetic resistance and resilience, including in the civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black Lives Matter movement of the present.

Another contribution to the archive comes from John Caputo, who perceives Jesus as a prophetic deconstructionist, asking the question, “what would Jesus deconstruct?” Caputo’s intention is as follows:

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10 Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 166.
to sketch a portrait of alternative Christianity, one that is as ancient as it is new, one in which the “dangerous memory of Jesus” is still alive—deconstruction being, as I conceive, a work of memory and imagination, of dangerous memories as well as daring ways to imagine the future, and as such good news for the church.¹²

Jesus’s prophetic deconstruction becomes a dream of the future, a call to prophetic action. For Caputo, the hermeneutical force of the dangerous memories of the suffering of Jesus is grounded in theopoetics of God’s kingdom.¹³ Caputo makes the connection that the deconstructive force of the dangerous memories of Jesus troubles institutional Christianity with repressed truth: the truth of the marginalized.

Many Latin American liberation theologians were directly influenced by the post-World War II political theology of Johannes Baptist Metz, which centralizes the deconstructive remembering of the dangerous story of Jesus and his death as memoria passionis. Metz quotes Origen (184-253 CE) in an extracanonical saying of Jesus: “Who is close to me is close to the fire; who is far from me is far from the kingdom.”¹⁴ Metz claims this logion is an authentic saying of Jesus and continues,

It is dangerous to be close to Jesus; it is to be inflammable, to risk caching fire. Yet only in the face of danger does there shine the vision of the kingdom of God, which through him has come closer. Danger apparently is the basic category for self-understanding of the new life in the New Testament.¹⁵

There is danger in the stories of Jesus and his alternative ministry, but also liberation. It is precisely because of this that “subversion and rebellion has its indispensably hermeneutical place.”¹⁶ For various liberation movements, the dangerous memories of Jesus challenge the myopic, patriarchal and imperial Christianities that over-stress heavenly salvation at the expense of the embodied Jesus who sought social reform and change.

Moreover, remembering has a ritual and concrete function of making present the divine: “in whatever place, I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you (Ex 20:24).” Dangerous remembering ritually creates attentiveness to God’s liberative presence and is still involved in the hermeneutical process of engaging the figure of Jesus. The act of remembering the dangerous stories of Jesus’s subversive action, and of his suffering and death is imaginatively and contemplatively juxtaposed to the acts of rebellion and to the sufferings of minoritized groups. Metz claims that Jesus’s dangerous

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¹⁵ Metz, *Love’s Strategy*, 143.
memory opens marginalized readers to an imaginative solidarity with Jesus’s resistance and death and refigures their remembered solidarity with Jesus into re-telling their own story of suffering and oppression. Catholic theologian Elizabeth Johnson writes:

Dangerously remembering the dead in solidarity with their suffering and hope of the future blessing needs to be accomplished by a mysticism of lamenting unto to God. There is no positive meaning in unjust radical suffering that destroys persons. We must take the full measure of its negativity, refuse to ignore or spiritualize or glorify it. Then this affliction becomes a live question that must be addressed to God. In prayer, we cry out, protest, lament, shout indignation, say this should not be.17

Jesus is perceived as one of the oppressed; God is present in the suffering and death of Jesus and the God of liberation remains present. Narrative retelling becomes an emancipatory remembering of God’s liberative presence in the story of Jesus and his suffering and thus awakens a contemplative awareness of God’s transforming presence in creative configurations and interpretations of the suffering of marginalized people. God’s liberating presence is not merely located in Jesus’s ministry but anticipated in hermeneutical remembering. As Mary Catherine Hilkert observes:

Retelling the story of the past harbors the possibility of retrieving the history of those who have been dismissed as insignificant. As the stories and spirituals of black slaves illustrate so powerfully, retelling the story of suffering people becomes a “subversive” way of reinterpreting history, criticizing oppressive power, and empowering the impulse toward liberation.18

Liberation theologians claim that God’s liberating Word is present within the dangerous remembrance of the Jesus story and its refiguration with oppressed lives. For Christians, God’s presence is inclusively revealed in Jesus and extended to the reconfigurations of the Jesus story. God’s compassionate solidarity and empowering presence lies with them in their struggles for freedom. God’s transforming presence lives anew in retellings of the Jesus story that empower liberative action.

Queer folks, too, read the dangerous story of Jesus through the lens of their marginalized experience of suffering and exclusion. They refigure their own story in solidarity with dangerous memories of the Jesus story. How is it possible for LGBTQI Christians to live within a heteronormative, cisgender, and patriarchal Christianity? The marginalized Jesus is reclaimed by queer imaginations that counter powerful religious and imperial power structures that exclude us. Queer Christians discover Jesus Christ with forgotten memories and imagination.

Perverse Dynamics of Queer Imagination

Queer imagination overlaps and has many similarities to postcolonial imagination. Kwok Pui-lan describes feminist postcolonial imagination as historical, dialogical, and diasporic. Postcolonial and queer theologians and biblical scholars refuse to take the assumed uncomplicated, privileged, racist and heterosexist readings of Jesus presumed by white, heterosexist Christianity. They insert complications and multiplicities into their deconstructive readings with subversive and challenging alternatives. Boaventura de Sousa Santos describes this task as follows:

memoria passionis...sees strengths and alternative possibilities in defeats. The wisdom it gives rise to is as contemplative as it is active; it is a global storehouse of remembrance and vision that converts the past into an energy to empower the present and strengthen the not yet or perhaps of the future.

Santos argues that these dangerous stories are similar to open-ended parables allowing imaginative recontextualization within marginalized experience that empowers resistance and group belonging. Postcolonial and queer imaginations perceive the absences within heterosexist and cisgender constructions of Jesus and juxtapose the “queerness of Jesus” with their Christian queer lives to strengthen their resistance by envisioning queer alternatives. They recreate the parabolic, open-ended dangerous story of Jesus to include themselves. In this sense, Jonathan Dollimore explores queer imagination as a paradoxically perverse dynamic:

Perversion was (and remains) a concept bound up with insurrection. More generally, and in the light of that history, I want to recover as not only a culturally central phenomenon, but a category from which two concepts emerge that are crucial for insurrectionary critique: the perverse dynamic and transgressive insurrection.

Queer imaginations inspire perverse insurrections outside parabolic stories and symbols that challenge cultural heteronormative and cisgender orthodoxies. The queer is a targeted group, and in spite of and out of the pressure of dominant opposition, queer imaginations create new, living parables of resistance and resilience, notably through camp-style performances and social parody.

Dollimore’s perverse dynamic illustrates the cultural-political repression of every “perverted” queer. Our queer imaginations encapsulate what is culturally and religiously stigmatized as perverse, but they are creatively deconstructive and indecently constructive by activating what Dollimore describes as insurrectionary transgressive re-

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20 Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South* (Durham, Duke University, 2018), 58.
inscription: “A principal medium of transgressive re-inscription is fantasy, not fantasy of transcendence so much as the inherently perverse, transgressive reordering of fantasy’s conventional opposite. It has to do with inverting elements of this world, recombining its constitutive features.”

It is our own, queer polymorphously perverse imaginations that unleash our repressed, perverted desires into creative and new alternative stories with reinscribed values, symbols, and resistant living.

**Jesus the Queer Pervert**

Many LGBTQ Christians embrace the deconstructive, prophetic ministry of Jesus and by doing so, they perceive and reinscribe Jesus as a queer from their own queer lives and sensibilities. Queer critic Michael Warner writes, “Jesus was my first boyfriend. He loved me personally, and told me I was his own.”

My own Catholic youthful infatuation with Jesus moved later into an erotic relationship. This inspired me to undertake a Foucauldian genealogical archaeology of “Christian Homodevotion to Jesus,” exploring how through history, men erotically attracted to men found self-acceptance in Jesus’s homoeroticism. There is a dangerous *gestalt* in the Jesus story that allows queer imaginations to recognize Jesus’s queerness.

In Luke 23:2 the chief priests deliver Jesus to Pilate with this charge: “We found this man perverting (*diastrephonta*) our nation.” “Perverted” here denotes a turning the wrong way, a deviation, or being diverted from, not Freudian sexual perversion. Here religious authorities turned Jesus and his troubling praxis over to the authorities to crucify him for his perverse political and religious behaviours. LGBTQ theologians, Christians, and artists rightly see Jesus the pervert, with whom they can identify, as persecuted and murdered by empire and co-opted religion. The pervert Jesus lacks middle-class respectability, male and heterosexist constructions of authoritarian, patriarchal and heteronormative Christianities.

Queer biblical and theological scholarship has flourished in the last decades, unleashing perverse imaginations to read the scriptures and reclaim the historical Jesus as queer. Dale Martin speaks of the gay imagination as reading the gospels through a male

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22 Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence*, 324.
25 Goss, *Queering Christ*, 113-140.
homoerotic gaze. He notes that nowhere in the gospels does Jesus say that he loves a woman. The closest example is when Jesus is said to love Martha, Mary, and Lazarus (11:5). Martin adds how other instances in John are glided over: Jesus taking his clothes off, washing his disciples’ feet, seductively flirting with Peter, and his intimate relationship with the beloved disciple. Martin points out that when heterosexual interpreters encounter the beloved disciple, surely even some of their imaginations stray into homoerotic territory. According to Martin, Jesus exhibits queer behaviours:

Flirtation, titillation, intimacy, love taken to the edge of orgasm, are often sexually more intense than mere intercourse. May that explain the intensity of Jesus’s passion? ...Jesus is certainly not a normal man—not even a “natural” gay man. He ends up looking very singular—very queer.28

Tim Koch delineates this homoerotic gaze as method for interpretation by actively cruising the scriptures. Koch argues, “cruising is the name gay men give to using our own ways of knowing, our own desire for connection, our own savvy and instinct our own response to what attracts us and compels us.”29 Koch introduces an approach to biblical interpretation that relies on an intuitive attunement to homoerotic signs of other gay men. This “gaydar” is a sensuous and embodied attentiveness that catches our eye and arouses us erotically. Applied to the textual Jesus, gaydar catches our eyes and even textually flirts with us. But this task raises a dangerous subject of the silence of Jesus’s sexuality. Our threatening sexualities endanger the ecclesial erasure of Jesus’s sexuality.

There are two scriptural verses that have excited male erotic imaginations: the youth in Gethsemane who sheds his clothes and runs away naked, leaving his linen cloth (Mark 14:51-52) and the beloved disciple (John 13:23).30 Robert Williams identifies the youth as Lazarus: “Jesus was the passionate lover of Lazarus, a young man who became his disciple. When the two of them met, there was that electricity we have learned to call limerence or love at first sight.”31 Williams expanded his intuition of Jesus’s erotic relationship in an unpublished novel The Beloved Disciple.

28 Martin, Sex and the Single Savior, 100.
30 Jeremy Bentham was the first homosexual man to understand this as a sexual encounter between Jesus and unnamed youth. In his unpublished manuscript, Robert Williams interpreted this as a graphic SM sexual encounter between the Jesus and the unnamed youth whom he identified as the beloved disciple. I read the manuscript and asked him to tone it substantially down. He had Jesus bottom for the youth. HarperSanFrancisco apparently turned down the manuscript because it was too controversial.
The second passage is the beloved disciple who, in a gesture of intimacy, rests his head on the chest of Jesus (John 13:23). Ted Jennings presents an extensive analysis of the homoerotic relationship between Jesus and the beloved disciple.\(^{32}\) There was also Morton Smith’s controversial publication of the Secret Gospel of Mark in the early 1970s, which presents a fragment of an account of a youth raised from the dead who comes, wearing only a linen cloth, to spend the night with Jesus.\(^{33}\) The erotic implications of the fragment by a well-known scholar as Morton Smith offered credibility but were too explosive for churches and biblical scholars. Smith was publicly criticized as forging the textual fragment to justify his gay lifestyle. Still the scholarly debate rages on whether the fragment was forgery or credible. Secret Mark plays on the erotic imaginations and beliefs of gay men that Jesus loved men as well.

Jay Johnson notes how queer bodily desires respond to finding God in human flesh. He responds to Marcella Althaus-Reid’s insight that God chooses to speak with bodies: “the body of Jesus still speaks with the voice of divine desire, a voice echoed, if only faintly at times, in every moment of our bodily yearning for intimacy and wholeness, for reconciliation and communion.”\(^{34}\) God enfleshed in Jesus seductively invites embodied and erotic responses, including from gay and bisexual men; they introduce their own bodily desires into their imaginative encounters with the bodied and sensuous Jesus. An outcome-based discernment of these homoerotic reinterpretations of Jesus may lead LGBTQI people to find grace in a queer Jesus and to discover that God finds them beloved, desirable, and amazing in their being proud and out. This was a common experience of gay self-acceptance and coming in my pastoral ministry in a predominantly queer church. Founded in 1968, the Metropolitan Community Church provided a safe haven where LGBTQI folks could come out and be Christian. Such alternative and welcoming churches of queer Christians led to the development of open and affirming Protestant denominations and the waning of alternative queer churches. Many queer Christians were nostalgic and wanted to return to their churches or to a mainline denomination accepting them, blessing their marriages and ordaining them to ministry.

**“Out of Place” Jesus**

The notion of Jesus as a counter-cultural rebel, anti-imperial protester, and religious pervert appeals to LGBTQ Christians. Jesus was often weaponised against queer folks, women, non-normative and non-white people. Queer Christians intuitively take up the


“out of place” Jesus to deflect Christian hatred and empower their actions in reclaiming a queer alternative. Norwegian biblical scholar Halvor Moxnes uses queer theory to analyse Jesus as culturally “out of place” or in queer space. Queer is construed as “questioning settled or fixed categories of identity, not accepting the given orders or structures of the places that people inhabit.” Moxnes traces what Jesus says about eunuchs (Matt 19:12) to a polemical exchange between Jesus and his opponents, taking up “eunuch” as a slur against him and his disciples and transforming the statement for his ministry. Moxnes writes, “to imagine Jesus or his disciples as eunuchs, as men who were physically unfit for marriage, unable to perform sexually, is perhaps an unsettling picture.” A eunuch lacks the characteristics that define a “real” man, and Jesus uses it a countercultural symbol of gender to destabilize masculine space by creating an ambiguous or liminal gender space.

Jesus uses eunuch queerly, as “a protest against fixed categories... It defied categorization. It did not fit into the categories of either male or female.” He calls men who considered themselves as failed men, out of a cultural ideology of hegemonic masculinity into a countercultural masculine itinerant movement; as Moxnes notes, “by leaving to follow Jesus they experienced the effects of separation: into a liminal stage, outside the known structure of their household and their village society.” Moxnes observes how queer theologians and readers use queer to identify gender variant and sexually different, non-normative outsiders. He inclusively recruits and invites folks to an egalitarian table fellowship without hierarchies; he recruits outsider disciples to create alternative families of choice.

Transman Lewis Reay uses Moxnes’s study and others to argue that Jesus is a “gender queer, virgin born, intersex, transman.” Reay continues, “Jesus takes on the role of ‘outsider,’ thereby challenging the very image of what masculinity is and the form that God would choose to appear to men (and women and everyone else).” Postcolonial scholar Tat-Siong Benny Liew explores the gender-blurring, transvestite Jesus and dragging before Pilate in John’s Gospel. Jesus’s gender fluidity of performing a female/slave

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36 Moxnes, *Putting Jesus in His Place*, 75.
37 Moxnes, *Putting Jesus in His Place*, 74.
38 Moxnes, *Putting Jesus in His Place*, 89.
39 Moxnes, *Putting Jesus in His Place*, 71.
41 Reay, “Towards a Transgender Theology,” 155.
action in washing the feet of his disciples and his performance as a drag-king threaten Roman imperial power built on masculine conquest and the ethno-masculinist ideologies of the nationalist high-priestly party. Similarly, Justin Sabia Tanis understands Jesus’s resurrection as a transitional paradigm for gender reassignment of trans folks for an experience of death and rebirth.\(^{43}\) Pastorally, this has led to a baptismal-style renaming rite for gender transitioning Christians. In my pastoral ministry, I had had several transgender folks and one intersex person request re-baptism and renaming rituals. They argued that they were becoming the person whom God called them to be and felt the need for such celebrations that ritualize changes in their lives. Baptism celebrates the death of the old self and rebirth in Christ, and there was need to celebrate a newly reborn Christian.

Althaus-Reid proposes a Bi-Christ, an embodied Christ who undermines cisgender, mono-thinking of hetero Christ, adding sexual gendered fluidity and imagining Christ beyond dualism.\(^{44}\) She pushes the boundaries with her proposal of Christ as Xena, a warrior princess who is not passive, wears leather, is fiercely passionate and boundary breaking. Xena Christ projects a lesbian persona, empowering female Christa, who breaks social rules and conventional gender boundaries.\(^{45}\) Lisa Isherwood comments on the Xena Christ:

> A leather princess hanging on a cross, declaring love for the woman she loves. This is a queer Christ indeed, one that challenges images on many levels. She is not passive, she is leather and dyke. She is courageous and transgressive just as Jesus of Nazareth was. She is the sort of Christ that women need, one who will free them from preconceptions.\(^{46}\)

Perhaps Althaus-Reid’s greatest contribution is that Christ’s incarnation has an inclusive fluidity expanded into intercarnations in the indecent, erotic lives of queer folks.

Following on from the queer imaginations of Christ, Jesus’s ministry can also be queered. Diarmuid O’Murchu understands Jesus’s parables and healing narratives as dislocating queer stories or turning the world upside-down:

> They (Jesus’s parables) defy the criteria of normalcy and stretch the creative imagination toward subversive, revolutionary engagement. They threaten major disruption for a

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\(^{43}\) Justin Tanis, *Transgendered Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2003), 142.


\(^{46}\) Isherwood, “Sexuality and the Person of Christ,” 284.
familiar, manageable world, and lure the hearer into a risky enterprise, but one that has promise and hope inscribed in every fiber of the dangerous endeavor.⁴⁷ Jesus’s empowered companionship or God’s reign is radically queer in its inclusivity attracting queer outsiders.⁴⁸ They identify with Jesus as queer outsiders. O’Murchu writes, “Jesus is into queering on a big scale. And we need to remember that he is doing so at the service of a new vision, the Companionship of Empowerment (kingdom of God).”⁴⁹ He continues, “for Jesus the Companionship of Empowerment recognizes no enclaves, and no form of ostracization. There are no more outsiders! Everyone is in—irrespective of their religion, their state or condition.”⁵⁰ Jesus welcomes outsiders such as despised Samaritans and even a Roman centurion in a pederastic, relationship with his boy (Matt 8:15-13, Luke 7:1-10) into his envisioned community.⁵¹ Jesus is out of place with heteronormativity; he subverts the prevailing heteropatriarchal, cis-gender ideologies, welcoming outsiders.

Uncloseted Devotional Contemplations

Queer imagination is expressed through contemplative devotional, gazing and encountering a fleshy Jesus. There are cross-cultural occurrences in mystical traditions of men in an erotic-spiritual love with a male deity. Jeffrey Kripal speaks about the fiction of a straight Jesus, for he claims that “Jesus’s homoerotic sexual-spiritual orientation” remains problematic: “What would a straight man need to love the divine as a gay man now can?”⁵² Michael Kelly and Jeffrey Kripal have explored how homoerotically-inclined men are naturally gifted in their love of a male god and finding with him spiritual union

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⁴⁸ I use the “reign of God” as a compromise term to avoid the patriarchal kingdom. John Dominic Crossan translates Jesus’s intention of his usage of kingdom as “companionship of empowerment. J. D. Crossan, The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in Years Immediately After the execution of Jesus (San Francisco, HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 337. I prefer the use of “kin-dom” that includes the notion of empowered companionship and Jesus’s Jewish creation-centered spirituality in contrast to imperial religion. It would more space that I have here: see, Robert E. Shore-Goss, The Insurgency of the Spirit: Jesus’s Liberation Animist Spirituality, Empire, and Creating Christian Protectors (New York, Lexington Books, 2020), 73-94.
⁴⁹ O’Murchu, Christianity’s Dangerous Memory, 61.
⁵⁰ O’Murchu, Christianity’s Dangerous Memory, 62.
and integration. It is this comparative perspective that contextualizes devotional homoerotic envisioning that gazes upon the enticing body of Jesus. There is the messiness of embodied feelings and erotic desires which are embodied into queer bodies and their incarnational imaginations. Heteronormative, cisgender distortions of incarnational imaginations suppress unorthodox desires through dis-incarnational imaginings of incarnation. Institutional Christianity colonized and still attempts to colonize female bodies, queer bodies, disposable bodies, disabled bodies, and all sorts of different, non-normative and non-binary, non-white bodies. Yet, incarnational imagination argues that God speaks through all forms of bodies, including indecent and queer bodies. As Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood claim, “That God is in flesh changes everything.” Erotic bodies matter because we meet God in bodies and outside of ecclesial control. God still speaks through God in embodied senses, perverted and indecent desires, and the erotic imaginations. Queer imagination represents an epistemological rebellion of embodied desires and imagination against coercive heteronormative, cisgender Christianity.

Mark Jordan speaks about the celibate closet of the Catholic priesthood:

A group of men kneel in a room for long periods to contemplate a figure. Their focus is a mostly naked man who wears only a cloth to cover his conspicuously absent genitals. His nude and curiously unsexed body is represented to an audience as the central object of love. They regard its every detail as overcharged with affective significance. A number of the kneeling men are homoerotically inclined, although pledged not to engage in any voluntary use of their genitals. And they have this rule: They can never ask whether there is any connection between that representation of the naked man and their own erotic inclinations.

Jordan and others have discussed the ecclesial strategy covering of the genitals of Jesus. Jordan claims, “Nothing underneath the loincloth—take that as an emblem for our thought about Jesus’s body. The loincloth is not so much a rag as a magical cloth that makes things disappear.” Ecclesial camouflaging of Jesus’s genitals is subverted continuously as crucified Jesus incites homoerotic passionate desire among Catholic priests. Donald Boisvert cruises the desirable body of Jesus on the cross. He and many other Catholic gay men experienced erotic feelings for Jesus:

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Rather, I wish to contemplate the figure of the Christ as a source of erotic desire and occasionally, fulfillment. As I glance at the countless images and statues, especially that of almost naked, muscular man hanging on a wooden cross, silently inviting my contemplation, I also recognize his attractiveness as a powerful source of homoerotic longing. I have no doubt that my first religious palpitations were intensely caught up subconsciously with this desirable figure of a man, just as I am certain they still are. In panoply of male holy figures that of Jesus holds a place of honor and passion. Boisvert traces such gay desirous longings to the mystical tradition that fosters both homoerotic and heteroerotic communion with the sensuous Jesus. God speaks erotically through Jesus’s body and through other bodies.

Richard Rambuss finds such sacred eroticism as “closet devotions” in English devotional literature. This tradition still lives on in devotional eroticism among Catholic gay men, who find Jesus’s body enticing. Boisvert writes, “As gay men fix their tearful eyes on the crucified Jesus, infinitely desirable in his gashed and vulnerable beauty, they find themselves transfigured into his spiritual partners, and they can imagine themselves one in and with him, lovers in a dangerous time.” Boisvert’s erotic devotion is not unique. Gay episcopal priest Malcolm Boyd writes,

But in Christ, I find more gay qualities, vulnerability sensitivity, someone who emptied himself of power, who lived out a gentle but as strong person that also broke social tabs and found sterling qualities in a number of people who were despised by the society they lived in. He is very much a gay archetype in understanding what it means to be gay.

Many others, including myself, speak about erotically contemplative infatuations with Jesus and how such a relationship helped many to come out and find themselves beloved.

Popular spirituality writer Henri Nouwen commissioned gay artist Robert Lentz to create an icon that “would help him consecrate his homosexual emotions and feelings to Christ.” Lentz created a Christ the Bridegroom icon, with the beloved disciple embracing Jesus.

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59 Rambuss, Closet Devotions.
60 Rambuss, Closet Devotions, 171.
64 Kittredge Cherry, Art That Dares: Gay, Jesus, Woman Christ, and More (Berkeley: AndroGyne Press, 2007). The icon can be viewed at https://qspirit.net/john-evangelist-beloved-disciple/
Christ the Bridegroom became a metaphor for his own struggle and liberation. He placed it opposite his bed so it was the first thing he saw in the morning and the last thing he saw at night...it was a physical reminder of what he most wanted; for someone who talked so passionately about the Word made flesh, the icon became a means of grounding, in the incarnation, his own struggle.\(^{65}\)

Nouwen places himself in the icon, envisioning himself as passionately embracing Jesus—while struggling with his homosexuality. Many gay men struggle in their devotional closets to find themselves seduced, loved, and liberated by Jesus the bridegroom.\(^{66}\) In the movie Priest, the gay priest agonizes over his vocation to the priesthood because of his homosexual attraction: “I sit in my room sweating, I turn to him for help. I see a naked man, utterly desirable. I turn to him for help, and he just makes it worse.” I and many other Catholic men, priests, and laymen, have found the naked Jesus utterly sexually desirable, calling us to pursue a relationship, and many of us have discovered that we were utterly desirable to Jesus.\(^{67}\)

Rambuss claims, “The prayer closet is a structure that stills resides at the core of Christianity, though often now as a site of denial and scandal.”\(^{68}\) Sacred erotic contemplation of the male Christ-the-bridegroom may be judged by the spiritual rules of discernment (Ignatian Spiritual Exercises 31-327, 328-336), paying attention to an outcome-based determination whether or not a person finds over time a sense of peace and self-acceptance or intensifying self-hatred, accepting sexuality as embodied grace or feeling sexual shame and guilt, finding joyful pleasure or not. Kelly delineates such discerning experiences in the autobiographical stories of eight men, integrating their sexuality and spirituality, a mature growth on a path for union with God.\(^{69}\)

**Popular Queer Decolonization of Jesus**

Queer folks liberate Jesus’s fleshliness imprisoned within Christian heteronormative and cisgender theologies—promoted by the biblical industrial complex and aligned with authoritarian politics. Queer imaginations have unleashed perverse impulses that re-inscribe Jesus within a variety of artistic mediums. Anthropologist Will Roscoe reclaims Jesus in the shamanic tradition of same-sex love, while in Jesus in Love, Kittredge Cherry

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\(^{65}\) Ford, Wounded Prophet, 2473.


\(^{67}\) Goss, Queering Christ, 139.

\(^{68}\) Rambuss, Closet Devotions, 135.

\(^{69}\) Kelly, Christian Mysticism’s Queer Flame, 102-227.
re-imagines a bisexual, transgender Jesus, who is also an erotic mystic, manifesting a gender fluidity.\textsuperscript{70}

The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence are Queer Drag Clowns, whose work in the LGBTQI community employs serious parody and queer critique. These clown-drag nuns involved themselves in queer activism, major fundraisers for LGBTQI and non-queer social services and charities. They utilize carnivalesque rituals of clowning, mischief-making, and parody of heteronormative culture and oppression. Because of the large number of religious folks who are abused and traumatized, they are committed to stamp out shame and guilt and spread joy. Like Jesus’s upside-down, deconstructive ministry, the Sisters use parody to mimic sacred ritual and celebrations, for they are committed to a mission to stamp out sexual guilt and shame and promote erotic joy. In annual Easter day festivals in San Francisco, the Sisters hold their indecent “hunky Jesus” contest to anoint a new King of Kings.\textsuperscript{71} They select a sexy saviour in a carnivalesque festival that celebrates erotic Jesuses in a variety of masculine expressions. Queer folks bring their innate skills at camp, social parody, and ironic mimicking to performance rituals.\textsuperscript{72} The use of such parody by marginalized groups is well documented by Dennis Denisoff:

One particular aim for which parody has proven to be especially well-suited is the undermining of normative idealization by oppressed groups and individuals, trying to negotiate their own positions within society...Through its reliance on double meanings, parody effectively questions the possibility of any such thing as an original, with the term coming across for many gender and queer scholars as misnomer for the privileged codes of the dominant ideology.\textsuperscript{73}

The Sisters’ hunky Jesus festival expresses a carnivalesque resistance to Christian erasure of Jesus’s sexuality and the demonization of queer sexuality. This annual event attracts thousands of people.

Parody and camp are both tools for subversion in the queer imagination. Mark Jordan writes, “Camp is transverse desire, resistant freedom.”\textsuperscript{74} He cites Althaus-Reid’s

\textsuperscript{70} Will Roscoe, \textit{Jesus and the Shamanic Tradition of Same-Sex Love} (San Francisco: Suspect Thoughts Press, 2004); Kittredge Cherry, \textit{Jesus in Love} (Berkeley: AndroGyne Press, 2006).


\textsuperscript{73} Dennis Denisoff, \textit{Aestheticism and Sexual Parody 1840-1940} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 304.

description: “Transversality is the flow of ideas and experiences, like a drunk walking in zigzag patterns, while bringing together odd, dispersed elements, not necessarily in harmony.”

Queer camp disrupts heteronormative sexual and cisgender cultural codes. Althaus-Reid writes about Jesus as the transvestite Santa Librada, a hybrid, divine cross-dresser positioned between Christ and the Virgin Mary that represents the poor and is worshipped as a saint and martyr among the urban poor. She states, “Librada does not make of Christ a woman, neither of Mary, a man. It makes of Christ a Christ dressed as Mary, and of Mary, a woman occupying the male divine space of the cross.”

Santa Librada subverts the colonial heteronormative and patriarchal confinement of Christ and Mary with subversive gender fluidities. On Netflix, there is a Brazilian film portraying a gay Jesus and weed-smoking Mary. Jesus comes out the wilderness with a young gay companion named Orlando, and they are erotically involved. In the series, Brazilian Catholics have no problem with a drug-using Jesus, but they have a difficult time accepting him as gay, since it challenges patriarchal masculinity.

Fundamentalist Christians and the Catholic League lead counter attacks of blasphemy and censorship campaigns against different contextual representations of Christ. Kittredge Cherry, founder of the Q Spirit blog (http://qspirit.net/), worked with gay artist Douglas Blanchard on The Passion of the Cross: A Gay Vision, which depicts Jesus as a contemporary gay man who suffers and dies from fundamentalist Christian hatred in 24 stations of the cross.

Blanchard looks to murdered LGBTQI people due to homophobic and transphobic violence: “All our murdered dead, known and unknown, are images of Christ crucified.”

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75 Althaus-Reid, The Queer God, 49.
76 Althaus-Reid, Indecent Theology, 82.
80 Cherry and Blanchard, The Passion of Christ, 21-22.
81 Cherry and Blanchard, The Passion of Christ, 22.
The crucifixion of Jesus is remembered in the stories of violence and murders of LGBTQI folks by imperial Christianity and supporting culture.

The British transwoman Jo Clifford wrote and produced a one-woman play, *The Gospel According to Jesus Queen of the Heaven*, at the Edinburgh fringe festival. She claims that playwrights are dangerous to the general public. The idea of a transgender Jesus was as repugnant as a gay Jesus. In her preface, Clifford claims, “Jesus does not help me. Jesus is part of the institution that silences me.” Queen Jesus, in the play, proclaims, “Because I, Jesus of Nazareth/ was and am of them/ I always was queer/ I always am queer/ and I always shall be queer/ from now until the end of time.” Like Blanchard and the general queer Christian movement, Jesus is one of us.

Finally, Terrence McNally’s play *Corpus Christi* has received threats and protests from the Catholic League and other Christian fundamentalist groups as it opened at the Manhattan Theater in 1998 and was forced to close down two weeks later. As a former Jesuit, I was aware that the Jesuits produced over hundred plays in Europe in 17th and 18th centuries and worked to resurrect the play in October 2006 at my church with a cast of men and women. *Corpus Christi* was wonderfully and emotionally received in Los Angeles, and the unchurched cast became a postmodern church among queer folks who had experienced years of religious abuse and exclusion. Joshua/Jesus is bullied by homophobic students in high school. The play also depicts the tender love of Judas for Joshua and their exchange of rings, as well as the condemnation of Joshua by Pilate as the King of Faggots. Perhaps one of the most dramatic points is the scene with Joshua/Jesus officiating at the marriage of Bartholomew and Thomas, with the background music of Pachelbel’s Canon. James Langreaux brought Ian, a heterosexual Christian friend who believed in reparative therapy (namely, that homosexuals can “change” to becoming heterosexual) to one performance. At the scene of the crucifixion of Jesus, he recounts:

My friend jumped out of his seat and ran to the front of the stage, (“Oh my God, Ian...what are you doing?”) With reckless abandon and utter humility, Ian leapt upon the stage and fell on his face where he wept loudly and kissed the actor’s feet.

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Langreaux’s description of his friend Ian’s reaction continues with how this left members of the audience starting to weep. One of my congregants, meanwhile, faithfully attended all the performances in Los Angeles. Audiences were often moved to tears.

Conclusion

Thomas Bohache writes, “The queer Christ animates his/her followers to speak to others in their own language: this tells me that there are many diverse ways to tell the Christ story and to share the Christ Spirit.”86 Our queer remembrances of the story of Jesus matter because their embodied desires disrupt the heteronormative, cisgender Christian stories. Walter Brueggemann warns, “Every totalitarian regime is frightened of the artist. It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of the imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing alternative futures to the single one...as the only unthinkable one.”87 Our queer imaginations retrieve and liberate Jesus, queer and out of place in his culture and out of place in heteronormative, cisgender Christianity. Our queer imagination engages the dangerous stories of Jesus and perceive him as queer. This process has resulted in the direct experience of God’s liberating love in queer experience, discovering themselves as beloved by God, and empowered in their struggle for freedom and fight for a just and inclusive Christianity and society.

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