

WHO'S THE "WE?"
FUTURITY AND THE FORMATION OF SPIRITUAL AND SEXUAL
SUBJECTIVITIES

By

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...religion seems antithetical to radical queer thought, yet it is so insistently engaged with the relation between bodies and time that it also seems ripe for queer exploration.

–Elizabeth Freeman

When we refuse to sever or chose between different aspects of our identity we create a new situation.

–Judith Plaskow

... new identities hardly cancel out the old ones; rather, the two coexist uncomfortably, even agonistically. It is precisely in that space of uncomfortable coexistence—where competing stories and contradictory identities resist each other—that new (unknowable) possibilities emerge

–Lynne Huffer

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During the course of “dissertating,” one is given a great deal of advice—much of it asked for, some of it helpful. One particularly helpful piece of advice (one that I’m told is relatively common) that I was given was to conjure up a metaphor for writing your dissertation: to see it as a pilgrimage one makes that changes them in the process; or to see it as a house (or boat, or some other large thing) that one builds, that requires blueprints, multiple steps, smoothing out the edges; or to see it as a kind of puzzle that one has to find all the pieces for and then put together...

One metaphor that I turned to throughout my project that was useful for me was to view my dissertation as something I was a fetus growing inside me, something I was slowly giving birth to. While I’ve never had a child, I liked the idea of the dissertation being something that was exciting but arduous, something that took a long time to gestate, something that would develop better if I was healthy, and whose own development depended on me abstaining from (too much?!) alcohol... Another thing that strikes me about pregnancy as a never having been pregnant person is that, while the expectant mother is the one carrying the thing, she is aided by a whole host of people: other mothers who’ve done it who can say what it is like, doctors who give expert advice and assistance along the way, supportive friends and family who offer encouragement and who bring you ice cream (with pickles sometimes, cause cravings are weird like that), etcetera. While people invoke the phrase “it takes a village” for raising children, it seems like that reality begins even before that.

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Finally, my doctoral studies, and this dissertation, would not have been the same without the mentorship (not to mention the scholarship) of my external reader, Kent Brintnall, and, of course, my dissertation advisor, Ellen Armour. I saved writing my thanks to Kent and to Ellen until the very end, because I really did not have the words to adequately express my thanks to either of them, and honestly, I still do not. But alas, since I have to turn this thing in... Both Kent and Ellen, in distinct ways, introduced me to scholarship that was pivotal to my project, gave enormously helpful feedback to my work that was specific, rigorous, *and* generous—that pushed me to think more deeply, coherently, and critically (as well as, for that matter, charitably), and modeled, through their engagement with my work, through their own scholarship, and through just the ways they engaged me as a young scholar and human being, the kind of academic I aspire to be.

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Beyond my committee, there are so many other professors whose teaching and mentorship have shaped my work. I'm fairly certain that had I not studied with J. Kameron Carter at Duke Divinity School, I would have never begun to do more than dip my feet into the waters of theology. Dr. Carter first opened my eyes, and continues to help me see, what kinds of imaginations and possibilities that theology can engender and perhaps even help enact. I'm so very grateful for Dr. Carter's work, guidance, wisdom, and support throughout the last ten (!) years. Relatedly, I'm also especially grateful for what I learned from Willie Jennings. His classes, writings, and words of wisdom helped first spark my interest in theology and continue to shape it deeply. Along with J and Willie, I want to thank Brian Bantum, who I had as a teaching assistant during my first theology course with Dr. Carter. Not only did Brian put up with the myriad questions and challenges I raised throughout the semester, he encouraged them and engaged them in a way that built up my love of theology. Moreover, particularly at the beginning of my doctoral studies, he was especially generous in dispensing advice I found invaluable in surviving the new, scary, waters of doctoral studies. Thanks for taking the time to grab a cup of coffee with me at all those AAR's, Brian! Finally, Mary McClintock Fulkerson first nurtured my love of feminist theology, and her teaching and work have shaped and inspired my own in so many ways.

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As (nearly) anyone who has written one knows, writing a dissertation is hard. Often, the struggle—at least for those of us with a penchant for verbosity—is not in not knowing what to say, but determining what *actually* needs to be said and then figuring out how to say those things relatively clearly and succinctly. I think that my final act of dissertating, writing these acknowledgements, has been where this has been most the case—the most challenging, arduous writing for this project I've done/will do. Because not only is it inevitable that I have left out many folks to whom thanks are given, but I also have assuredly failed to adequately capture the degree of gratitude I have for those whom I have mentioned here.

Dedicating her excellent book *Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe* to her teachers, philosopher of religion Mary-Jane Rubenstein supplements her dedication with a quote from Plato's dialogue on the nature of knowledge, *Theaetetus*, where he writes: "For my part, I have already, thanks to you, given utterance to more than I had in me." Echoing Rubenstein (and Plato) here, I dedicate this dissertation to my teachers. Not only have y'all enabled me to give utterance to more than I have in me, but in doing that, you have also un-done me, and have given me the space and insight and and and (read: a whole lot of things that I cannot even begin to name!) to allow the people I encounter, the things I read, and even my own work, to un-do me, in exciting, life-giving ways. Thank you.

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INTRODUCTION

“It’s easier to leave than to stay. I can’t handle seminary anymore. ~~It~~—It’s not worth it.” Those were Brian’s last words, the end of a short note scribbled on a yellow legal pad for his friends and family right before he hung himself from the bar of his bedroom closet on December 23rd, 2008. Brian was the only other person I knew then who shared the experience not only of being queer and Christian, but of being in seminary too. He was one of my closest friends. We would talk regularly, chronicling our moments of joy, lamenting our pain, and dreaming about things improving. Yet in the midst of Advent, a time of celebration and hopeful anticipation, Brian felt neither. Precisely in the moment where salvation and hope were to be most salient, Brian ended his life—his physical death a mimesis of the social and emotional death he experienced at the hand of fellow Christians.

“For me, the genesis of theology is pain,” writes feminist theologian Wendy Farley. “When my heart is broken, I expect theology to walk with me.”¹ Like Farley, pain has birthed and formed my theology, particularly (though certainly not only) pain around sexual and gender identity: Brian’s story, so many others like it, my own experiences as a queer woman in the academy and the church, the list goes on... I turned to theology as a traveling companion and guide, “pain seeking understanding.”² Over the past few years, as theology shifted from a guide for the journey, to being (part of) the journey itself, Brian’s story—the pain it reflects, has

¹ Wendy Farley, *Gathering Those Driven Away: A Theology of Incarnation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 2. I actually shared the story of Brian’s suicide in my application essays to doctoral programs in theology. I use the word theology here in the singular for stylistic purposes, and in order to mirror Farley’s claim. By using the term in the singular, I do not mean to suggest that there theology itself is singular or that it is bound by a particular dogmatic or even disciplinary agenda. Rather, I use theology in the singular to represent the discursive field of study—represented in a multiplicity of beliefs, claims, and practices. At times, I reflect this more overtly by speaking of theologies, but it is important to note that the use of the singular does not presume a singularity in either content or form.

caused, represents and symbolizes—has haunted me. The genesis of theology for me has been pain, yes, but I have also come to see that, when it comes to sexual and gender identity, the genesis of pain for me has been theology. In classrooms and casual conversations, from behind the pulpit and the lectern, reading the words on the page (or projected on a screen) of a text, theology has been a significant source and site of pain for me: directly, in my own experiences as a white queer woman; indirectly, through hearing of the pains others have suffered at the hands of religious beliefs and practices; and at the interstices between the two, through friendships and relationships with others who have had similar experiences—like Brian. Just as the pain has multiple sites and manifestations, so too does the theology that has engendered it: from overt condemnations of homosexuality and commands of adherence to clearly defined gender norms and roles, to more subtle assumptions made and upheld about what is normal and proper that pepper theological discourse and that shape religious practices, to the shaming weight of silence.

This project seeks to explore, and challenge, one of these ways that theology functions as a source and site of pain around and in regards to non-normative sexual and gender identity. In *God and Difference: The Trinity, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Finitude*, Linn Tonstad explains that, while her book “engages queer theory, it is not a book about whether queer persons should be included in the church.”³ Tonstad argues that Christian debates over sexuality generally “produce exhaustion and boredom and have done little to advance thinking about sexuality or to deepen theological reflection,” and explains that she is more interested in exploring the questions of “where in the theological imaginary are heterosexism and heteronormativity grounded and maintained?,” and, can “resources internal to the Christian

³ Linn Tonstad, *God and Difference: The Trinity, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Finitude* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 3.

theological imaginary be found to render those grounds unstable?”⁴ While this project turns more explicitly to questions of belonging than does Tonstad’s (which will soon become more clear), I share her sentiments here.⁵

The Christian debates about sexuality and inclusion in the church that Tonstad, and I, seek to move beyond were often expressed and reflected in how people understood and accounted for Brian’s suicide. Many were (and still are) quick to attribute Brian’s suicide to a social and ethical failure of the Christian community to live into its beliefs, or saw it as an indication of a weak, heterodox theology (his and/or the communities he was a part of). Others read his death as a failure of will, that succumbing to the pressures of conformity or to the policing of pleasure produced a burden that he saw as too heavy to handle—in effect, that he needed to make peace with either community *or* freedom, that at least when it comes to Christianity and same-sex acts these are two distinct options.⁶ You get the prize behind door one or behind door two. To want both is greedy, and not how the game works. In short, these accounts locate fault with *either* the individual or the community, and their remedies to fix the issue (or, perhaps more accurately, prevent future occurrences of it) reflect where they locate that fault.⁷ These interpretations are all valid, at least in part, and it is not unlikely that all of them,

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ While this project is not an argument centered around whether queer people should be in the church, in examining how queer identities relate to Christian identities via formation it does have implications for queer “inclusion,” as does Tonstad’s trinitarian engagement with questions of difference, her final chapter especially addressing said themes as she posits an “apocalyptic eschatology.” See *God and Difference*, 254–86.

⁶ This works both ways—that either same-sex acts are inherently sinful and thus have no place in Christian community, or that Christianity is inherently homophobic and there is no place within it that could hold or affirm same-sex relationships or desires.

⁷ Figure 1.1: The “sexuality debate” framework. Accounts given to make sense of or explain Brian’s suicide could generally be mapped out in this way, with the problem and respective solution differing depending of where one locates the blame or fault.

and many others, bear some truth. We will never know all of the pieces at play, at least when it comes to Brian, not only because the person best able to explain the reasons, feelings, and experiences that prompted his action is no longer here to do so, but moreover, because stories are never so simply reducible.⁸ Nor, it is vital to add, are potential solutions. The respective solutions within the broad framework of the debate often failed to attend adequately, if at all, to the *stakes* within and *limits* of their proposed solutions.⁹ What might be lost—ethically and theologically—with conforming to (and often for the sake of) community? Or, conversely, what is at stake with making inclusion the ultimate criterion for theological validity?¹⁰

| Site of Blame/Approach | Problem | Solution |
|---|---|------------|
| Individual (Brian) | Desire for pleasure and freedom (sin as selfishness?) | Conformity |
| Community (the church/ seminary) | Failure to recognize and/or affirm difference (sin as exclusion?) | Inclusion |

This accounting for/of Brian’s suicide is reflective of the nature of Christian debates over queer inclusion in the church.

⁸ At the very least, such tragedies are never fully understandable or reducible in this life/on this side of the eschaton. This is one of the many points Jack Halberstam makes in their critique of clear-cut “secular” responses to queer suicide (see fn9 below), arguing that “looking for hard and fast reasons for suicide, particularly in young people, is a fool’s game and it ignores the multiple pressures facing young adolescents on account of the messed up worlds that we adults pass on to youth.” Jack

⁹ This, I think is what Tonstad is largely referring to when she remarks that these debates “have done little to advance thinking about sexuality or to deepen theological reflection” (*God and Difference*, 3). This critique is by no means limited to the theological/religious realm—a number of scholars and activists have criticized and challenged the scope and purview of “secular” reflections and interventions regarding queer suicide. *Social Text* dedicated a “Periscope” dossier to the theme of queer suicide (“Queer Suicide: A Teach-In”) featuring critical analysis from Jasbir Puar, Jack Halberstam, Ann Pellegrini, and others. Puar, for instance, begins her reflection with the straightforward claim that “There are many things lost in the naming of a death as a ‘gay youth suicide,’” going on to reflect on a diversity of factors that nuance such analysis: the intersections of race, class, and gender with sexuality; the role of media in surveillance and social belonging; etc.... Jasbir Puar, “Ecologies of Sex, Sensation, and Slow Death,” *Social Text*, Periscope, Queer Suicide: A Teach-In (November 22, 2010),

http://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/ecologies_of_sex_sensation_and_slow_death/. Puar and Halberstam, along many of the other contributors, take particular aim at Dan Savage’s then-popular “It Gets Better” campaign, challenging its simplistic, shallow, and “saccharine” analysis and approach.

¹⁰ Figure 1.2: The “sexuality debate” framework, with potential “stakes” included.

I started my doctoral program seeking to better understand Brian’s story, to “press against the simplicity” not only of the somewhat surface level problem-solution accounts of “the issue” that were offered to make sense of Brian’s death that the debates over queer inclusion are grounded in, but also, more significantly, of the theological claims that were used in and for these respective accounts of said issue, that sought to make sense of his death by turning to by some clearly identifiable, and thus easily solvable, point—that “this kind of thing happens” because of some kind of doctrinal or scriptural/hermeneutical misinterpretation that can be easily solved by X (i.e. we just all need to understand that we’re made in the image of God, homosexuality meant something different in bible times, etc....) or to some kind of moral failure that can be easily remedied by Y (Christians just need to learn how to disagree better, read more charitably, be more hospitable...) ¹¹ These theological claims offered different ways of understanding and addressing the “sexuality debate framework” (see figure 1 in footnote 7 above), turning to different theological sites (i.e. systematics, ethics, hermeneutics) and/or sources (i.e. experience, ethnography, doctrines) in order to challenge, rethink, broaden, or

| Site of Blame/Approach | Problem | Solution | Stakes |
|--|---|------------|--|
| Individual (Brian) | Desire for pleasure and freedom (sin as selfishness?) | Conformity | Eradication of difference/oppression |
| Community (the church/seminary) | Failure to recognize and/or affirm difference (sin as exclusion?) | Inclusion | Eradication of identity/theo-logical coherency |

¹¹ See footnote 2 above. The examples I give are not to make light of the way these theological loci have been deep and rich resources for making sense of and challenging LGBTQ or other kinds of social exclusion or suffering. While it is true that these loci *are* often easily offered as quick balms, this is by no means always the case; moreover, even in many of the situations where it is the case, it is often a manifestation of a kind of theological trickle-down effect, where more “rigorous” analyses are pared down to their most distillable element, often at the expense of the larger theological framework/rationale. Also, re: my algebraic analogy that some doctrinal or scriptural misinterpretation could be solved by X—the Christological pun was very much intended!

complexify the content of (or even at times the ways of approaching) the problem and solution columns.

Whereas (I perceived that) much of the scholarship around identity addressed the middle of the framework—the accountings of the problem and solution—addressing, analyzing, and constructing different accounts (and again, in doing so, often complexifying, challenging, and transforming said accounts), I was interested in critically examining the bookends of said framework—of how we understand identity, and of the stakes that come into play in light of those respective sites (and how we understand them). In brief, I wanted to rethink the ways we thought about and constituted the different “players” in the debate, in order to attend to, and remedy, the stakes of the respective solutions. I wanted to think about gender and sexual identity theologically in ways that sought to be theologically liberative, that honored difference and individuality, *and* theologically faithful, that aligned with the community and tradition that people like Brian and myself claimed and sought to be faithful to, and be a part of. I wanted a way of thinking about Christian identity that took seriously both belonging and community, on the one hand, and difference and freedom on the other? Because, in seminary, and in the Christian communities he grew up in, Brian did not experience belonging and freedom together. His sexuality marked a kind of difference that demanded sublimation or erasure to experience belonging in Christian community: he could have community *or* freedom, but not both. Like me, and like Farley, he turned to theology to walk with him, to make sense of his pain, but it offered no reprieve. Instead, it led him closer and closer to the ledge, until he saw no other way but to jump off it.

As a student at Duke in both the Divinity School and the programs in Literature and Women’s & Gender Studies, I was especially shaped by two discursive frameworks rather

popular in their respective contexts: postliberalism and poststructuralism (/postmodernism).¹²

Via the latter, being introduced to theorists like Foucault and Butler was shaping me to understand the “self,” our individual identities and the categories we make of them and align them with, as being socially and discursively/linguistically constructed, and to see those constructed identities then as neither natural/inherent, nor stable/static, nor neutral. Learning to think critically about our understandings of the self as being *formed*, the self as subject, I began to see and attend to how categories and norms came into play in stories like Brian’s (and mine, for that matter), operating as a “preemptive and violent circumscription of reality” by “establish[ing] what will and will not be intelligently human, what will and will not be considered to be ‘real,’” and thus setting up “the ontological field in which bodies may be given legitimate expression.”¹³ *This* was the problem, and theological discourse, at least the things I had been reading, had just misplaced focus by turning to whether same-sex desire was acceptable.

Poststructuralist and postmodern critiques of the inherency and stability of meaning, accounts of the constructed nature of reality (and, by extension, of the self and the ways in which we categorize and understand the self—of identity), and analyses of the ways in which those constructions and claims of meaning are shaped and guided by power—particular were (amongst other things) key resources that enabled me to think critically about and address the “sexuality debate framework” at the level of *the individual*. Theology just needed to show how norms are not natural, and how stable identity categories do not really matter, how they are even

¹² It is beyond the scope of this introductory comment (and footnote) to explicate the nuances of the terms postliberal, poststructural, and/or postmodern, and of how they function here as signifiers of particular academic (disciplinary and institutional) trends. I turn more explicitly to what I mean by these discourses and how I draw upon them in the following two chapters.

¹³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 10th anniversary edition (New York: Routledge, 2006), xxiii.

problematic! I began my doctoral work seeking to do just that, seeking to “examine the ways theology has operated in the modern West to undergird exacting social processes and produce conformable subjectivities, and to explore potential constructive theological and ethical responses,” turning to christology and soteriology to frame my question and ground my “solution.”¹⁴ Poststructuralism gave me a *methodological* framework, turning to power to understand and examine the construction (and claimed naturalness) of identities, and resources for an *ethical* framework, illuminating the costs of taking these constructions as givens or as ideals.

While I planned to turn to doctrine to pursue my question, it was postliberalism that framed and enabled my inquiry. I was struck by the similarities between poststructuralism and postliberalism—the critiques of metaphysics and propositional truths, the emphasis on narrative, the recognition of identities as not only expressed through but formed by language...¹⁵ I was interested in exploring how theology might be useful to deconstruct the “epistemic regime of presumptive heterosexuality” that was limiting in terms of *both* sexual and gender identities!¹⁶ Postliberalism enabled me to attend to these questions in and through addressing and examining (and attending to the concerns of) *Christian community*.

Paralleling poststructuralism, postliberalism gave me a theological *methodological* grounding to make the kind of critique I wanted to make about sexuality and gender as features of identities, and elevated Christian identity and its formation in such a way that justified a

¹⁴ The quoted text is from my statement of purpose when I applied to the Ph.D. program Religion (Theological Studies) at Vanderbilt in the Fall of 2010.

¹⁵ I address this overlap in chapters one and two. For more on the similarities and points of overlap between the two discourses, see also Charles Hawkins, *Beyond Anarchy and Tyranny in Religious Epistemology: Postliberalism, Poststructuralism, and Critical Theory* (Landham, MD: University Press of America, 1996).

¹⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xxviii.

destabilization and deconstruction of other markers of identity. Moreover, postliberalism similarly provided me with an *ethical* grounding for my aims, as I could situate and justify the importance of attending theologically to what might seem to many as superfluous or tangential to the real, important work of theology. If our theologies are shaped by, as well as shape, our communities and their practices, which seek to correspond with and reflect/bear witness to God, whom we see as the ultimate expression/fulfillment/vision of the good, then it is ethically important to care about how our theologies and religious practices are impacting people (in this instance, people who have been marginalized due to their sexuality).¹⁷ If the credibility of a religious system, of faith, “comes from good performance, not adherence to independently formulated criteria,” couldn’t we say that the suffering of so many sexual and gender minorities in Christian congregations and contexts is evidence of bad performance that at the very least bears examination?¹⁸ Theology would (continue to) be my resource and guide as I tried to think more deeply about gender, sexuality, and identity in and for Christian communities.

As I pursued this poststructuralist, postliberal turn to individual identity as a liberative and faithful (and more interesting!) way to approach these questions, on the one hand I continued to be captivated by the possibilities for and of theological critique and imagination offered by social constructivist views of identity formation. On the other hand, however, in my doctoral studies, I often found myself turned in directions I did not foresee, which is of course what good

¹⁷ Outlining Lindbeck’s postliberal framework, DeHart describes how “practitioners of...religion are those who can and do with at least minimal competence employ these categories [which enable construal of and reference to the Good and the Real] in shaping their lives, with whatever degree of success.” He continues, noting how, within this frame, “corresponding to God is more like an event to be realized than an acquired state; and this realization is a function of the concrete actions of the persons involved, a *matter of their performance*.” Paul DeHart, *Trial of the Witnesses: The Rise and Decline of Postliberal Theology* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 81, 82 emphasis mine.

¹⁸ George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984), 131.

training/education should engender—reading a new text or scholar that I had not encountered before that made me see things differently; finding myself distracted by another topic entirely, either by interest or necessity; developing interest in, even occasionally captivated by, themes I previously scorned....¹⁹ These things, along with and driven by the passage of time, have both broadened my inquiry and pressed me more deeply into it. Brian and his story have continued to loom as a specter.

As I kept coming back—being drawn back—to the question of identity, I came to a few realizations about my turn to theology to destabilize and challenge gender and sexual normativity, about my perspectival shift from a kind of “column” (problem and solution) focused analysis and intervention to a “row” (identity and community) focused one: (1) First and foremost, yes, a turn to theology could be a useful tool and resource for critiquing gender and sexual norms and for supporting an account of identities as socially and linguistically constructed. That being said, however, (2) this destabilization of gender and sexuality by and in Christian theology did not seem to really pan out in practice(s), or even in theory (read: in theologies) for that matter, at least not in my own experiences or in ways I had hoped it to. Which, then, (3) led me to revisit the very notion of the place of theological discourse to be that of “solving” a problem or debate.

“On the ground,” in my own experiences and those of friends and colleagues I talked with, preaching a destabilization of gender and sexual norms ended up functioning, or at the very least being read, as a kind of power play that worked to affirm the norm and deny and foreclose

¹⁹ I even found myself interested in metaphysics for a time, *and* trinitarian theology! Though I never went so far as to find myself interested in speculative metaphysical elaborations on the trinitarian formula—everyone has their limits!

the full variety of embodied difference.²⁰ This is of course a critique that feminist theologians have made against theo-ethical calls for self-sacrifice—that eschewing selfhood, or particular categories of it, functions to further oppress rather than liberate women.²¹ Preaching a gospel of social construction did not seem to function to challenge or critique oppressive norms; if anything, it enabled them to reign unchallenged, and occasionally served as defensive ammunition against their challengers.²² And theologically, a small handful of theological works had come out calling for or claiming, in different ways and on different grounds, a destabilization of normative identities. While I initially found this turn heartening and exciting, I continued to find myself disappointed by the accounts, finding them wanting theologically and ethically. (I turn to two [or three, depending on how loose one might be in terms of the categorizing my analysis in chapter two] of these accounts at length in this project, but I am getting ahead of myself/will come back to this shortly.)

I had come to realize that my turn to identity as a way to “press against the simplicity” of the accounts I read as reductive was in many ways performing the same thing I was critiquing. While I was “moving beyond” arguing for queer inclusion in the church, I was operating inside of the same framework that those kinds of arguments were in a number of ways. On a most basic

²⁰ In my first year at Vanderbilt, I was asked to co-lead a womanist-feminist dialogue with/for Divinity students. In one of my first meetings, I challenged gender, and race, as “ontological” categories of identity. My quick dismissal ended up leaving many students, especially some Black M.Div. students, feeling particularly ostracized, vulnerable, and offended. I had failed to take fully into account the ways in which not only did these categories of identity serve as points of pride and personal identity for many, but also challenging the categories themselves was read as challenging the ways in which they functioned as real sites of both community and oppression.

²¹ For one of many examples, see Lisa E. Dahill, *Reading from the Underside of Selfhood: Bonhoeffer and Spiritual Formation*, Princeton Theological Monograph (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2009). Dahill challenges Bonhoeffer from a feminist standpoint, attending to the ways that Bonhoeffer’s calls for self-sacrifice and locating the self as the fundamental site of sin can be detrimental to feminist (theological) aims.

²² For instance, within the Womanist-Feminist dialogue setting I discuss above in fn20, my critique of ontological categories of identity was read as—and very much could be used in service of—an argument that we live in a post-racial or post-gendered world.

level, what I was critical of—explanatory of constructive reduction to some key point in/of the “columns,” I was doing in and through the “rows:” the problem is P (sexual/gender norms, our viewing identity as ontological or essential) and the answer is Q (destabilizing our understandings of gender) which we can do through adding a particular reading of XYZ theological resources (soteriology, Christology, etc.) that we find something useful in. Moreover, the nature of my critique took a kind of self-contradictory turn: proposing an account of/for the narrative destabilization of the self through a stable narrative of Christianity! And finally, related to this, my critique assumed to at least some degree that this paradigm—this “sexuality debate framework”—was, in fact, what was at issue. I may have disagreed with the parameters of the framework, or how it operated, but I nevertheless assumed that this was the nature of the debate and it simply needed to be approached from a different angle. While on some level I *was* asking, “where in the theological imaginary are heterosexism and heteronormativity grounded and maintained,” on another level, I was assuming that the framework of the sexuality debate *was* the imaginary itself, rather than part of the imaginary’s function.²³ Or, to offer a different metaphor that may (or, admittedly, may not!) be more illustrative, within the sexuality debate framework, I was critiquing the materials being used rather than the design for the framework itself. I may have sought to be a bit more nuanced in my critique, asking to peel back the wallpaper and see what kind of lumber was being used, and I may have thought that by rethinking what lumber was used, it would change the nature of the building, but the blueprint was still the same.

To come back to a comment that I made earlier—my remark about realizing that when it came to non-normative sexual and gender identities, the genesis of *pain* has been *theology*...

Theology had been (and continues to be) a rich resource, and I have found solace, hope, even joy

²³ It is important to note that this does not imply that I am suggesting that there is one imaginary or that it functions in a unified or stable or coherent way.

and freedom, in turning to different types of “theological lumber” as I sought to better understand gender and sexuality within a Christian framework —finding christology to be durable and available in abundance, easy to work with but demanding close attention and care to create a product that is both sturdy and beautiful, like oak; deeply appreciating trinitarian theology but finding it difficult to work with and thus relegating it to the more master craftsmen and women, like I might with rosewood; especially favoring theological anthropology for its relevance, diversity of forms, and pliability, similar to pinewood, etc.....²⁴ Yet I came to realize that the way the “building” was framed, I continued to run into walls, and even the softest of woods like pine still hurts when you run into it or bump your head against it. What might it mean to rethink the framework itself, to critically examine *how* it is set up, and, significantly, *why* it is designed the way it is?

Looking at the sexuality debate framework as a whole, it is clear that a tension at the heart of the frame, motivating the respective approaches, is a tension between belonging and community, on the one hand, and individuality/difference and freedom on the other. This is evidenced in the ways the rows in the framework are set up, and how they play out—if the issue lies within the individual (and their sexuality and/or gender), conformity is called for; if it lies within the community (and their beliefs about sexuality and gender), inclusion is called for. Within the former, individual intrahuman difference must be eradicated and conformed for the sake of community. Within the latter, theological identity (/coherency/faithfulness), *its own kind of belonging*, gets squashed for the sake of the individual and their potential, now suddenly less meaningful, belonging. It is difficult to belong if there is not really a community to belong to.

²⁴ I admittedly have zero expertise in or knowledge of wood-working or carpentry, and learned this information about the various types of hardwood and softwood from Wikipedia.

Again, there is the prize behind door number one, and a different prize behind door number two, and one cannot have both. Is this wall a given?

This dissertation explores precisely this, asking: is there a way to do community in a way that is, on the one hand, faithful (to the history and aims of the community, to tradition), and on the other hand, takes difference seriously and embraces difference, not merely including differences and thus (potentially? likely?) foreclosing difference itself by assimilating it by and into a norm? Ultimately, I am asking this question about difference in the broadest, and at the same time—paradoxically—most particular, sense of the term.²⁵

From a queer theoretical perspective, interrogating and challenging heteronormativity is focused most immediately on sexual identity but is certainly not confined to that. Rather, a queer theoretical approach is concerned with the ways in which difference, and with it freedom and flourishing, is foreclosed—subsumed by and assimilated into norms, delimited as discrete, stable, and classifiable identities (a topic I address in depth in chapter two). As chapter one and part II will demonstrate, I address difference in the broadest and at the same time most particular sense of the term by engaging with the ways in which the theologians whose accounts I explore themselves engage difference. I critically examine their approaches to difference by operating within the bounds of their own aims. George Lindbeck's postliberal turn to difference is

²⁵ Put another way, and as chapter one and part II will demonstrate, I address difference in the broadest and at the same time most particular sense of the term by engaging with the ways in which the theologians whose accounts I explore themselves engage difference—I critically examine their approaches to difference operating within the bounds of their own aims. In regards to Lindbeck's postliberalism, his turn to difference is broader—it is ecumenical and ecclesial, seeking a kind of recognition and affirmation of difference across faith communities. For Coakley and Jones, the focus is on gender and sexual identity, particularly difference that is marked as minoritized or marginalized, i.e. women and lesbians and gay men (neither Jones nor Coakley focus on any length at other minoritized or marginalized sexual identities such as transgenderism or bisexuality. My own absence of attention to these particular sexual identities is precisely due to my engaging the question of difference on these theologians' own terms).

ecumenical and ecclesial, seeking a kind of recognition and affirmation of difference between faith communities. Feminist theologians Sarah Coakley and Serene Jones focus on gender and sexual identity, particularly women and lesbians and gay men. Neither attends at any length either to the rest of the LGBTQI spectrum or to how race informs being a woman or being gay or lesbian. Though I cannot make the case here, my assumption/hope is that my own attention to difference in this both broad and specific way opens up space for other marginalized identities.

One of the things that I had found so helpful in both postliberal and poststructuralist discourses was that the “wall” between the individual and community was not a stable one, but rather, there was a kind of relationship between the rows, a recognition that individuals are formed by communities, and communities are defined by and formed by the individuals that comprise them.²⁶ And, as I mentioned briefly earlier, there was a (small) handful of theological accounts of gender and sexuality that were cognizant of this and tending to the relationship between the individual and community—how each sphere, each row, was *formative* of and for the other. Yet, as I also mention earlier, while I found these accounts promising and hopeful, I always found myself disappointed, finding them ultimately unsatisfying, wanting. *Why* did I find them unsatisfying? What did they fail to address or tend to for me? This dissertation explores precisely this question.

Whereas Tonstad’s text explores the question of “where in the theological imaginary are heterosexism and heteronormativity grounded and maintained” by turning the trinitarian theology, to the “gendering of the God-world relations,” my project locates and turns to a different “quilting point,” theological anthropology; more specifically, this project explores how theological anthropology is understood and expressed as *formative*, and how that formative

²⁶ Many poststructuralist thinkers in particular have also suggested that neither communities nor even individuals constitute stable, enclosed entities.

nature and process of our identities is expressed, shaped, and structured methodologically and ethically.²⁷

Having zoomed out, so to speak, to examine the framework as a whole rather than particular features of it, raised the question not only of the relationship between the “walls” of the different problems and solutions, but of the task and role of theology itself. If, per Farley, theology is prompted and formed by pain, and is that which accompanies us as we journey through life, is its role or task that of problem solving, of determining the right ethical configuration of right action or the right methodological configuration of determining said action? Or, is it perhaps that the inversion of Farley’s claim was true for me, that the genesis of pain was theology, in large part precisely because of these efforts to solve the problem or fix the puzzle of the sexuality debate? That this framework itself was formative, seeking a particular theological vision of and for the self and/in community?

* * *

What claims do our “theological imaginaries” make about identity, not only in the concrete and explicit claims made and debated about, but more implicitly, in and through *theological methodologies* and the claims they make about the nature, task, and operations of

²⁷ Interestingly, Tonstad also turns to theological method, explaining that the structure of her book “is an argument for thinking differently about theological method—that structure performs (rather than describes or justifies) an interplay of different methods” (*God and Difference*, 3). Whereas Tonstad turns to method performatively, making an implicit argument about how it functions, I turn to theological method explicitly, critically examining how it functions in and towards claims about identity (theological anthropology). I take Tonstad’s performative turn towards theological method as an affirmation/argument in support of the aims of my project (whether I am able to do it [well] is a whole other story/question!), Moreover, I read the methodological implications and illustrations of her critical and constructive project as a paragon of the kind of attention to method and the theological claims that both undergird particular methodological moves, and that concomitantly produce (intentionally or not) particular ethical claims and social effects. One might also continue with the (bad) building metaphor by thinking of Tonstad’s analysis being a critique of the doctrinal foundation, whereas I am critiquing the theological imaginary that grounds heterosexism/heteronormativity by looking at the layout of the building...

theology (in effect, about theology's own identity)? About *ethical frameworks and directives*, about how we are to live in and with our identities, and, significantly, how our identities are formed? What theological and theoretical assumptions undergird and fund these claims?

In asking these questions regarding identity and its formation of our theological imaginaries, with Brian's story still looming in the background, a clearer image emerges of a concern that shapes, and is shaped by, this imaginary: how do we understand Christian identity *as it relates to* other identities—in this instance, to non-normative sexual identities? How is this relationship assumed, navigated, and operationalized, in and through methodology and ethics? What is assumed about identities and how are they constituted as being formed? More pointedly, how is the relationship between Christian identity on the one hand, and intrahuman difference (particularly regarding sexuality and gender) on the other—and the *navigation* of these identities and of the relationship between them—adjudicated and expressed socially?²⁸ This project turns to *formation* as a key site where these questions are worked out, asking: how do we think theologically—methodologically and ethically, as well as doctrinally—about the relationship(s) between Christian identity and sexual and gender identities in ways that takes seriously both belonging and community, on the one hand, and difference and freedom on the other?²⁹

²⁸ This question of the relationship between Christian and other identities is by no means a new one, and has taken shape in a number of methodological and ethical forms, a topic I will address in depth in the first chapter of this project. In the first chapter, I also speak at length on why this project addresses *both* sexual and gender identities, and how they connect within the scope of my study.

²⁹ I include doctrine in recognition that doctrines fund and are funded by these other processes/avenues. As Kathy Tanner explains, "Methodological questions in theology are never finally independent, however, of more substantive theological commitments." *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 63. Similarly, Paul DeHart, as a kind of apologia for his monograph's methodological focus, that "will inevitably appear to some a dismal enterprise," offers as a kind of reprieve the point that "that method in theology is inextricably bound up with substantive doctrinal issues, and that relieving some of the methodological obscurities will bear dividends in the area of dogmatics." DeHart, *Trial of the Witnesses*, xv.

As I kept thinking through the formation of identity offered in these accounts, I realized that I had to attend precisely to this question of formation, to how identity was understood as (being) formed in these respective realms. That turning to this *process* (and accounts of it), and how it is configured methodologically and ethically, was a turning to (and revealed some assumptions about) time and directionality—about *futurity*.³⁰ Yes, these accounts recognized and tended to identity as socially constructed, recognized how norms functioned oppressively, and sought to challenge and/or call for an undoing of those norms, and thus called for/claimed an embrace of difference, theologically. In and through turning to theology as a resource, these accounts offered a kind of queer inclusion that affirmed and maintained theological identity and coherency—they addressed the “stakes” of the respective approaches I charted of/in the sexuality debate framework.

Yet, while these accounts have been critical (in varying ways and to varying degrees) of identity claims, they do not apply the same level of critique or understanding of social construction to *Christian* identity. Indeed, Christian identity is seen as the solution to the problem of difference. Christian identity is assumed/understood, and functions, as the *end* to which other identities are subjected and/or understood to relate. Formation is understood and functions methodologically and ethically—it is conceptually described and normatively prescribed—in a way where Christian identity is stable, hierarchical and teleological, the ideal end towards and through which other identities are formed...or, rather, un-formed. As such, these laudable theological accounts of identity undermine their own aims of being liberative, inclusive,

³⁰ Christian identity and gendered and sexual identity are neither formed nor understood (to be formed) in the same way. This project focuses on how the processes of formation are understood and narrated in relation to one another within feminist theological accounts, and turns to futurity as one of the key sites where that relation is constituted and claimed.

and faithful.³¹ Christian faithfulness and belonging still demand a kind of social conformity, a subsumption and erasure of difference towards a particular account of religious identity. The locus of the norm has shifted to Christian identity, but the norm remains stable and singular, which still forecloses on difference.

This is particularly disappointing in Coakley and Jones' cases. They attend to how normative gender and sexual identity "formation" is delimiting, but they fail to attend to how *Christian identity formation* might also be so, and in a way that forecloses on difference (and, therefore, flourishing). They fail to consider carefully enough that Christian identity, too, might be what Foucauldian scholars call subjectivizing: subjugating and oppressing one's "self" precisely in and as it shapes it as such.³² While these methodologies might turn to narrative to critically understand and examine Christian identity as well as sex and gender identity, the ethical aims of those analyses differ—that is to say, norms of Christian identity become the ethical ends *of* and response *to* gender and sexual identity formation, and are not themselves challenged or destabilized. Moreover, this movement is uni-directional and prescriptively and linearly teleological. Gender and sexual identity and formation are destabilized by and formed towards Christian norms and practices, in service of a singular Christian identity.

In these ways and more, which I will explore at length as I turn explicitly to various accounts, these accounts operate with what I refer to in this project as methodological-ethical frameworks. These accounts, like this project, seek a kind of generous orthodoxy, a retention of

³¹ In chapter one, I discuss in depth how my critique in this regard is an internal one, turning to Kathryn Tanner's reflections on this approach in *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice*. See also fn40 below.

³² In *Are the Lips a Grave: A Queer Feminist on the Ethics of Sex*, Lynne Huffer explains that "modern sexual subjectivity comes at the cost of what Foucault, following Deleuze, calls *assujettissement*: a subject-producing subjection that simultaneously creates and subjugates sexual subjects within an increasingly differentiated grid of deviance and normalization" (31). I further explain this term and its relevance to my project in chapter one.

faithfulness to tradition on the one hand, and an openness to difference on the other.³³ Yet, in displacing norms from propositional truths to practices of formation, each of these accounts make their particular ethical vision of Christian identity the prescriptive singular telos to which other identities must yield, a formation that they envision as proceeding in a uni-directional, linear fashion. The descriptive methodological task ends up serving a particular ethical vision; one that forecloses on difference. As I will soon come to explain and argue, in this way, they operate under the aegis of straight time. In operating with this methodological-ethical framework, these accounts at best fall short of their goal: a generous orthodoxy that makes space for difference.

By this point, I have hopefully explained the “problem” that this project diagnoses, critiques, and seeks to constructively speak to—that, as one answer to Tonstad’s apt question of “where in the theological imaginary are heterosexism and heteronormativity grounded and maintained,” I suggest certain methodological-ethical accounts of formation. These methodological-ethical frameworks operate with a future-oriented vision of formation that makes a stable, singular vision of Christian identity the ideal end to which other aspects of identity—sites of intrahuman difference—must not only understand themselves in relation to, but subordinate themselves to, be transformed in relation to, and thereby be stabilized by.

This dissertation is my attempt to better articulate and argue for that answer, as well as tend to the latter half of Tonstad’s question, of whether (and if so, where) can “resources internal to the Christian theological imaginary be found to render those grounds unstable?” Before I proceed, a few key questions must be addressed/attended to in order to understand and frame my argument, which I offer as a chapter outline of this project.

³³ For more on this term, in particular its origins and uses in postliberal thought, see chapter 1, fn1.

Turning to the methodological-ethical frameworks that undergird and fuel accounts of formation as the “where,” immediately begs the question: *how* do these frameworks ground and maintain heteronormativity despite their expressed goal, in some cases, of challenging, rather than affirming said heteronormativity? This project argues that heteronormativity manifests not only (or even necessarily) in explicit claims that methodological-ethical accounts of identity and formation make about gender and sexuality, but in claims that they make or assume about *formation and time*. This is the focus of **Part I. On Futurity and Formation**.

Chapter One of this project, “On Futurity and the Methodological-Ethical Frameworks of Formation,” outlines and elucidates in more detail the *object* of my critique—what *are* methodological-ethical frameworks of formation, and how do they serve as a kind of imaginary of/for theological anthropology? Specifically, how do they speak about and to the relationship between Christian identity on the one hand, and intrahuman differences on the other? My project seeks to first/primarily identify this framework as a site that merits critique. I begin by examining the way time and formation function uni-directionally and prescriptively within certain methodological-ethical frameworks in Christian theology. I turn specifically to postliberalism and contemporary critical engagements with it as paradigmatic of this methodological-ethical turn in contemporary theology, and thus the appropriate place to start. I expose within the work of George Lindbeck in particular this prescriptive uni-directionality that characterizes methodological-ethical frameworks.

I turn next to queer and feminist poststructuralist theory, specifically to theories of “queer temporality,” as a critical lens.³⁴ The queer turn to temporality—to interrogating epistemological

³⁴ I explain queer temporality at length in the second chapter of this dissertation. For more on this discourse, see especially: Carolyn Dinshaw et al., “Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 2 (2007): 177–195.

assumptions and conceptual categorizations about the ordering of time and space and how we think about (ourselves in relation to) past and future—has been amongst the most significant recent turns in contemporary queer theory. This body of work has demonstrated how, like subjectivity, our temporal/spatial frames are constructed by and bound up in desire and power, manifested through norms that presume origins and prescribe ends. And, just as queer theory has reflected at length on the oppressive and exclusionary effects of categorical norms, particularly for gendered and sexual minorities, queer temporality has demonstrated how undergirding “straight” logics of time and space hold the same ethical and political import.³⁵ This project argues that theological accounts of formation often operate within “straight time and space.”

Queer temporality provides the language and footing for my critique of the uni-directional, prescriptive teleological ways in which gender and sexual identity formation is understood in relation to Christian identity formation. Spatially, social norms are constituted as Christian identity is delineated from (and hierarchalized in relation to) sexual and gender identity; temporally, a prescriptive teleology aimed at (or, perhaps, for) stable Christian subjecthood that subsumes sexual and gender difference. **Chapter Two**, then, “On Futurity and/as the Telos of Formation: Introducing Queer Temporality” provides the background for these claims, and offers an introduction to the discourse of queer temporality and its relevance to and for this project, situating queer temporality in relation to my critique of methodological-ethical frameworks of formation.

³⁵ Elizabeth Freeman, for instance, highlights how straight time, what she calls “chrononormativity,” “shapes flesh into legible, acceptable embodiment... through temporal regulation” in ways that normalize, limit, and oppress. Lee Edelman critiques the temporal enterprise he names as “reproductive futurism: terms that impose an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable...the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations.” See Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 3–4; Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.

In doing so, in Part One, I further contextualize and situate my thesis, and outline the methodology and scope of my project—explaining and examining in detail this methodological-ethical framework of and for formation that I am critiquing in conversation with queer temporality, outlining further how and why queer temporality serves as a kind of hermeneutical lens for my analysis. Here, placing queer temporality and theological analyses of methodological-ethical frameworks in conversation, I argue that, and explore how, temporality, teleology, and normativity are marshalled together in methodological-ethical frameworks of formation in ways that undermine these frameworks’ aims, and that produce and reify formational processes that ultimately undermine attention to and an affirmation of intrahuman difference.

In the two chapters that comprise the middle of this dissertation, **Part II. Feminist Methodological-Ethical Frameworks in Straight Time**, I examine two different feminist frameworks that also fall victim to the problem I am naming. Both theologians present a vision of flourishing that affirms or seeks (in different ways and from different theological bases) Christian community/belonging amidst intrahuman difference, particularly regarding gender and/or sexuality.³⁶

³⁶ Figure 1.3: An outline of the body chapters in table form:

| Chp | Author | Christian identity <-> Sexual/gender identity | Focus | Theological starting place |
|-----|---------|---|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 3 | Coakley | Sex/gender <i>transformed</i> towards Christian identity (via practices) | Self | Methodology |
| 4 | Jones | Tension this side of the eschaton-claimed, transformed <i>some...stabilized</i> | Socially-embedded/ situated self | Doctrine |

While this chart undoubtedly unfairly simplifies these respective accounts, I think it offers a good overview of the different approaches. It is also important to note here that in this focus on gender and sexuality as the particular sites of intrahuman differences that I, following Coakley and Jones, explore, given the limited scope of this project I admittedly fail to focus adequately on other immensely significant sites of intrahuman difference such as race, class, disability, etc. For more on this see fn25 above, and see

Chapter three, “God, Sexuality, Straight Time, and the Self,” examines Sarah Coakley’s *methodological* account of *self*-formation in which sexuality and gender are *transformed* by and toward Christian identity. While not directly or explicitly engaging with poststructuralist thought, Coakley, like many poststructuralist thinkers, is cautious about the productive force and effects of formation, and offers a methodology that seeks a kind of un-forming, an un-handing of mastery in and through practices of prayer and contemplation. In this chapter, I argue that, while Coakley’s seeking of un-mastery is laudable, and a step in the right direction, it sets up a framework where sexual and gendered identity is not so much un-done as it is transformed *towards* a different form of mastery aimed at realizing a stable, teleological (vision of) Christian identity.

Whereas the methodology she constructs/offers, “*théologie totale*,” proposes and seeks to engender an account of formation that “inculcates mental patterns of ‘un-mastery,’ . . . opens up a radical attention to the other, and instigates an acute awareness of the messy entanglement of sexual desire and desire for God,” I argue that (and examine how) *théologie totale* functions to untangle the knot of desire, to clean up rather than affirm the “mess.”³⁷ Turning to Lynne Huffer’s reflections on narrative and Jack Halberstam’s scholarship on failure as resources—to the work of two queer theorists who turn, in varying ways and degrees, to temporality—I argue that Coakley methodologically undermines her own aims. I critically examine the temporal directionality of her “eschatological” critiques of gender performativity and her subsequent claims about the effects of prayer on gender and desire, and show that her account do not so much un-do but rather re-makes our sexual and gender identities.

especially my discussion of intersectionality vis-à-vis Lynne Huffer’s work on the subject in the context of her account of narrative performativity in Chapter Five, 214ff.

³⁷ Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay “On the Trinity”* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 43.

In **chapter four**, “Eschatology, Essentialism . . . and Excess?” I examine Serene Jones’ *doctrinally*-rooted account of formation. Jones’ account gets closest to the queer temporal framework I am calling for. Nevertheless, I argue that Jones too operates with a logic of straight time that undermines her aims. Like Coakley, Jones also turns to eschatology to ground her claims, the eschatological again marking a kind of stable ideal toward which our identities should be formed. While Jones is sympathetic to the poststructuralist notion of gender as performative and socially constructed, she nevertheless wants to claim a version of womanhood that is stabilized—or as she puts it, “centered and directed”—by, through, and within Christian identity, as feminist theologians are “trying to speak the truth of the matter about women’s nature and God.”³⁸ I will examine how this stabilization of womanhood via Christian identity (in this instance, Christian doctrinal recognition of women’s nature, the “bold, normative, and powerful” doctrinal claims that are “powerful enough for persons to stake their life on”) frames and understands its claims through a straight temporal logic.³⁹

In offering these respective (diverse) case studies, I demonstrate that, while both of these accounts are laudable in many ways—they attend to concerns about gender and sexual identity, their frameworks call for flourishing and communal belonging amidst difference, and their accounts seek to engender and embody these visions through formational practices—the accounts of formation that undergird these visions, and the methodological and ethical frames that ground these accounts, undermine their laudatory aims.

Engaging these topics under the aegis of straight time creates several obstacles to realizing their laudatory goals; these methodological-ethical frameworks obscure and fail to fully

³⁸ Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 61, 53.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.

contend with (i) negative “subjectivizing” effects of even positive identity formation within the sphere of Christian formation,⁴⁰ (ii) limited epistemic access, on theological grounds (anthropology, eschatology), to what constitutes the good/what flourishing looks like, and how said limits might impact a stable telos of flourishing, and thus, they (iii) foreclose on the theological and ethical possibilities of and in *un*-formation.

Does this project argue then that the insights of queer temporality countermand methodological-ethical accounts of formation, or render queer theoretical commitments incommensurate with them? Quite the contrary, this project ultimately aims to better think ethical-methodological accounts of formation of/and identity in the service of a robust theological vision that seeks belonging amidst difference, and difference amidst belonging. In short, this project also suggests that, yes, absolutely there are “resources internal to the Christian theological imaginary [to] be found to render those grounds [read: this methodological-ethical frameworks] unstable?”⁴¹ This is the subject of the final section of the essay, **Part III.**, Who’s the We? Queer, Christian (Un-) Formations and Futures.

In **chapter five**, “Virtue with No After? Towards a Non-Normativizing Askesis: (A Framework of) Formation in a Queer Time and Place,” I expound upon/build from the theological critiques I raise in the previous chapters and begin to propose a theological

⁴⁰ See fn32 above.

⁴¹ Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 3. The constructive nature of my project highlights that this project offers an *internal* critique, which is something imply here but make clearer in chapter two and demonstrate in chapters three and four. In *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice*, Kathryn Tanner examines the relationship between Christian beliefs and practices and their social and political effects, in order to ““show how Christian beliefs about God and the world may be disentangled from a history of use in support of a status quo of injustice and reconstituted as a resource for commitment to progressive social change” (vii). Tanner explains that her critique is an internal one—that she is operating with the logic that Christian beliefs and practices can deployed self-critically over-and-against the ways they have been used for harm. This project seeks to do precisely this kind of critique, towards methodological-ethical accounts of formation.

alternative. Here, I return to DeHart and Tanner's work that I first explored in chapter one, turning at this point to their constructive claims to, in conversation with the arguments of this project, suggest an ethical-methodological framework of formation that affirms difference in its vision of flourishing. This chapter also concludes by moving beyond reflection on the undergirding frameworks to gesture towards a vision where formation is a process of continual *undoing*, in and through relations with others. Drawing on Lynne Huffer's notion of narrative performance, I offer a retraversal of Jones' feminist re-framing of justification and sanctification as both a practice for and possibility of envisioning and engendering formation in a way that honors difference.

Placing queer insights on sociality (space) and ideals (time) alongside theological reflections on these themes, this project argues that certain methodological-ethical accounts of formation and identity perpetuate the very problems they seek to remedy and undermine the aims they set out to accomplish. This project ultimately seeks to wrest these accounts of identity, community, and formation from "straight time," and proposes an alternate frame, an anti-telos, of belonging in difference. I argue that an ethical- methodological account of formation that engenders flourishing, approaches "the future" not by asking "how do we secure or obtain it?" but rather, "who is the 'we' that make up and enact it?"

**PART I.
ON FUTURITY & FORMATION**

Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable garland, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.

- 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, NRSV

Maybe we need to consider that you don't get "from here to somewhere else." Maybe we need to imagine anew, "We're here, we're queer, get used to it," not as the positive assertion of a marginalized identity but as the universal condition of the subject caught up in structural repetition. That's what makes queerness intolerable; even to those who call themselves queer: a nonteleological negativity that refuses the leavening of piety and with it the dollop of sweetness afforded by messianic hope.

- Lee Edelman

...meaning resides in the process itself.

- Ann Cvetkovich

Methodological awareness always follows the application of a method; it never precedes it.

- Paul Tillich

Theological reflection on time, about *the future*, tends to generally fall within the purview of eschatology, the study of "last things," the branch of theology that explores and reflects on the end of history, the ultimate destiny of humanity. While I turn to eschatology as a resource (in chapter five) and as a theological site of examination (in the two case studies that comprise the body of this dissertation), this is not a dissertation *on* eschatology. My turn towards time is in trying to examine and understand its role and place in relation to theological reflection about identity, which traditionally resides in the sphere of and is understood as theological anthropology. While this *is* a project in, or that at least speaks significantly to and on, theological

anthropology, it does so in a very particular way, narrowly focusing on how theology understands the relationship *between* Christian identity and gender and sexual identities. While I hope the ramifications of my project extend across gender and sexual identities, my focus in this project is on women and non-normative sexualities, given that minoritized gendered and sexual identities are often those that are marked as different or other over-and-against a rubric of normativity often calibrated by (white) heterosexual masculinity.¹

As the introduction makes clear, this project is not merely descriptive or explorative—it is largely critical, but ultimately constructive; it has particular aims, seeking a liberative account and vision of subject/identity formation that affirms gender and sexual difference/diversity and that challenges and counters how subjectivity is produced, assumed, and claimed in ways that reflect and produce norms and ideals of (binarized and hierarchized) gender and (hetero)sexuality, norms and ideals that foreclose difference and that ultimately oppress. Put more bluntly, it is looking for a way to understand Christian identity alongside gender and sexual identity, and how formation happens in both (and in the relation between them) that doesn't result in people denying differences for the sake of conformity, and that certainly does not end up in suicide. These aims are based upon particular assumptions about (sexual and gendered) identity as socially constructed and formed, assumptions I outline and address in chapter one. Here, what is important to foreground is that these assumptions exist within this project, and are not the *subject of* this project. Unlike a lot of very important, vital work in theological anthropology that shares the commitments that guide this dissertation, this project does not

¹ The hope and intent being that attentiveness to those differences opens up space for differences within and amongst more normative and privileged identities to also be addressed and affirmed. Relatedly, I use the term non-normative sexualities here rather than LGBTQI as my analysis is limited and unfortunately does not attend specifically, certainly not at any sufficient length, to transgender and intersex individuals, though I do hope and believe the main points of my argument can and do extend to non-normative gender identities as well—doing so explicitly here was just beyond the scope of this project.

provide a theological examination of or outline a theological rationale for or of gendered and sexual differences.² Put another way, this project doesn't seek to theologically understand, account for, or affirm gendered and sexual differences (and particularly, those who are marginalized and oppressed due to their sexual and gendered differences—read: women and those who identify as LGBTQ), but takes an affirmation of said difference as a theological starting point, and from there, seeks to explore and challenge others who also claim, to varying degrees, such a starting point.³

Moreover/relatedly, this project's main aim is not even to seek or provide a theological justification for its assumed critique of heteronormativity. I have the luxury of assuming this as a theological given within this project because most of the scholars I engage with here (amongst others) have already done that work. What this project *is* focusing on, then, is how, even amidst accounts that have as a goal (to varying degrees/levels) the critique of heteronormativity and affirmation of gender and sexual diversity, these goals are betrayed in and through accounts of formation, through how we understand and account for our Christian formation in relation *to* our gendered and sexual identities. To briefly restate some key questions that guide this project that I raised in the introduction: how does Christian identity, and our formation into and by that identity, relate to—overlap with, parallel, intersect with, challenge, run up against—gender and

² A thorough accounting of this strand of feminist theological anthropological scholarship is beyond the scope of/tangential to my argument here, but to offer just a few examples, bearing in mind that these are merely some examples, not an exhaustive or authoritative list. See, for instance: Michelle A. Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image: An Introduction to Feminist Theological Anthropology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007); Dolores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013); Rosemary Ruether, *To Change the World: Christology and Cultural Criticism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001); M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).

³ Included in the LGBTQ “umbrella” are non-normative sexual identities as well as non-normative/non-cis *gendered* identities. It is also important to note here that I am using sexual difference in the broadest sense/to refer to differences within and of sexual identities and practices (not, as in the case of French feminism, as a term to mark the difference between male and female).

sexual identities? How might exploring the relationship, and reflection on it, aid feminist theological inquiry and praxis—particularly in conceiving of belonging amidst differences?

This question pervades our contemporary politically-polemical culture. In a recent article (January 2016) in the *New York Times*, entitled “Hallelujah College,” Molly Worthen examines how evangelical Christians are struggling with understanding and embodying their faith. Like this project, Worthen (in a far shorter, more journalistic manner) examines how these students are navigating the tensions of spiritual, faith formation in relation to how they understand and inhabit other identities. Worthen observes that Christians at secular colleges are pursuing spiritual and faith formation through Christian study centers and undergraduate academic journals of Christian thought. Worthen narrates how, through these avenues, evangelical Christians are seeking to understand and affirm their own identities in the midst of university cultures abuzz around and committed to “identity politics,” what Worthen reads as “shorthand for the left’s effort to empower oppressed groups by elevating the authority of their experiences as women, queer people, or visible minorities,” particularly in light of the boom in campus activism around Black Lives Matter, sexual assault, and LGBTQ rights.⁴ Worthen observes that these (evangelical) Christian students are contending with how to understand, articulate, and shape their faiths in relation to how other identities are constituted, that they observe a tension between these facets of subjectivity.

One of the students Worthen highlights in her article, Philip Jeffrey, a junior at Columbia involved in both a Christian study center and undergraduate Christian journal, explains the tension as such:

The thing you’ll run into with any of the campus activists that I’ve encountered is this

⁴ Molly Worthen, “Hallelujah College,” *The New York Times*, January 16, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/17/opinion/sunday/hallelujah-college.html>.

idea that human nature is a collection of identity categories, that I as a human being am composed of a gender identity, a sexual identity, a racial identity and so forth... Their perception of Christians, or of religious people more generally, is: 'O.K., these are people who have this one identity category, religion, and the religion they identify as is overstepping its bounds. It's telling my gender or sexual identity how to act.' The Christian response has to be: There's something more to what a human being is than just these collective attributes.⁵

As Worthen puts it, these students have an understanding of their faith that challenges the cultural norm that implicitly demands "a tacit agreement to refrain from all but the most anodyne universal truth claims: to each identity her own."⁶ How does one understand Christian identity, the formation of it, and the truth claims it proffers, in relation to and in the midst of other identities and the politics surrounding our understanding of them? What does it mean to be formed and shaped Christianly? How does Christian formation relate to—how does it shape? How is it shaped by? —our other identities? These are the kinds of questions this project hopes to explore and speak to: how do we—and should we?—understand and account for Christian identity in light of and amidst our contemporary culture, especially given our current cultural attention to what Worthen names as "identity politics," and the philosophical and sociopolitical insights that have engendered this turn to said politics.

On the one hand, this project aligns with and affirms Jeffrey's sentiment, suggesting that yes, Christian claims on identity lend themselves to a "something more," more than an ossification of any singular identity claim, an account of identity that sees it as more than a collection of different identities that Christianity then builds upon. On the other hand, however, in doing so this project also holds Christian identity claims to this critique. This project argues that Christian theological accounts of identity and formation destabilize and lend themselves to something more than *any* singular category or claim of identity. One's Christian (/religious)

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

identity, accounts of it, and formation in/of it, are also challenged by the “something more” that Christian theology suggests and offers. This, I would suspect, is not something Jeffrey would likely agree with/is likely not the direction he would go.

On what grounds am I making this critique? *Here* is where I turn to time, and more specifically, to the insights of queer theory on time. Formation is temporal—we have visions of what ourselves and/or our communities could, and should, look like in the future, that we seek to attain. What do queer theoretical insights on the self *as* formed—and the delimiting and potentially damaging and foreclosing, if often inadvertent, effects of that forming—that I alluded to briefly in the introduction imply about the process of formation itself? How have these insights been taken up in more explicit analyses and reflections about that process? A turn to time, and how time functions formatively as a framing construct, in the service of particular norms and ideals, as well as what is assumed *about* time, has aided and furthered this broader theme/inquiry on the constructed nature of subjectivity and the role and place of power in the forming and categorizing of subjects.

Here is also where I turn to methodological-ethical frameworks as a certain articulation of the nature and task of theology, and what it calls us to do/how does it ask us to live, in light of/relation to (our current) culture and context (the importance of which Worthen’s story highlights). Moreover, as this section will come to show, I turn to queer temporality and these theological frameworks together, placing them in conversation with one another, finding them to be mutually resonant as well as productive. What I am identifying *as* methodological-ethical frames are given that label in large part precisely because of their temporal movement and orientation. How we understand, account for, and rely on time reflects and reproduces certain methodological assumptions and ethical (and political) aims, as scholarship in queer temporality

has demonstrated. Exploring those interconnections, this project argues and seeks to show, is deeply and mutually illuminating. The task of this section is to outline these two themes/resources—methodological-ethical frames and queer time—that are vital to my argument, and begin to explore how they relate.

CHAPTER ONE:

ON FUTURITY AND THE METHODOLOGICAL-ETHICAL FRAMEWORKS OF FORMATION

Two narratives frame this project. On the one hand, there is Brian's story, which introduces this dissertation—his suicide prompted by his failure to find a space within the church or its theology that embraced a specific difference, his homosexuality. On the other hand, then, is Phillip's story, recounted by Worthen in the *New York Times*, which introduces this section of the dissertation—his frustration with the tension between his faith and cultural identity politics, and his seeking in Christianity of a “something more.” Taken together, these narratives expose a conundrum at the heart of the theological projects I engage in the chapters to follow: the tension between normative Christian identity and openness to difference. As a project in theology, this dissertation looks internally to the Christian tradition in order to explore what it might look like to have a theological account of religious identity and formation that is both faithful to the tradition *and* embraces difference. To do so, it explores and makes interventions in the areas of theological methodology and ethics (and their relation to one another).

How *does* theological methodology connect to ethics? How does it connect to the questions this project raises about identity? And what does temporality have to do with any of it? In this chapter, I outline and critically examine how methodology and ethics have been marshalled together in particular ways, creating what I come to name as methodological-ethical frameworks of formation. While these frameworks name as a goal rendering Christianity more open to differences, they also move uni-directionally and linearly, seeking to direct and form our identities towards a particular telos—towards a singular, prescriptive normative vision of what that telos is—which ultimately forecloses difference. More specifically, this chapter examines how “postliberal” theology has been turned to as one key resource for a “generous orthodoxy”

that is faithful to tradition and open to difference. However, as I show, the shift to practices that first developed in the postliberal turn has bound methodology and ethics together temporally in such a way that differences within the believing community are impeded; obscured and/or assimilated into uninterrogated norms.¹

As I explained briefly in the introduction to this project, I had been drawn to postliberal thought because, like its progenitors Hans Frei and George Lindbeck, I was interested in this balance between creativity and contemporary engagement, on the one hand, and commitment to the classic tradition and Christian faith on the other. I had been particularly interested in how postliberal thought had sought to strike this balance by turning to narrative, language and practices. I was drawn to its vision of the Christian tradition as a story to be read and participated in, with freedom and space for different practices and performances, based on different cultural contexts and norms, to be a part/continuation of the story.

While I was also particularly interested in the ethical *implications* of postliberalism (a point I return to later), closer examination of *how* the methodological was aligned with those tasks, how it was ultimately bound to the ethical, proved the point at which it no longer entirely read to me as generous, as truly open to different manifestations and iterations of Christian practices, to difference within Christian community. In trying to identify and diagnose the cause of what I perceived to be a kind of hostility particular to non-normative gender and sexual identities, I began to discern in certain iterations of postliberal theology particular configurations of methodology and ethics—of determinations of the nature and tasks of the theology and the

¹ I use the term here as a shorthand referent that has a kind of common parlance in certain postliberal or postmodern/Emergent Christian circles, that stems from what Hans Frei, a “father” of postliberal theology, called a “generous, liberal orthodoxy,” in reference to the theology of John Calhoun, a mentor and scholar who had significant influence in Frei’s “overall disposition towards and understanding of the nature of the Christian tradition.” See DeHart, *Trial of the Witnesses*, 5. I also place the term postliberal in scare quotes here for reasons that will become clear later in the chapter.

pursuit of the good in and through Christian practices (and good performance of those practices)—that foreclosed on its goal of *generous* orthodoxy. This binding, I argue in this project, operates in a way that is singular and prescriptive, uni-directionally privileging and elevating particular aspects, practices, and/or understandings of Christian identity in a way that ungenerously forecloses and denigrates differences within Christian communities.

Here, before delving into the details of my argument, it is important to note—the focus of this chapter is the methodological-ethical binding/framework that I am arguing is identifiable in and developed via particular strands of postliberal thought. The framework itself is what interests me, particularly as it has manifested in particular ways in regards to how the relationship between Christian identity and gender and sexual identities is understood and adjudicated in certain feminist theological projects. This chapter is not a critique of postliberalism itself, which is to say that the critique I make here is not limited to, or even focused on, postliberalism writ large—in large part because what, and who, defines postliberalism is contested, unclear, and/or not a singular, cohesive approach.² This is a central point DeHart makes in his text *Trial of the Witnesses, The Rise and Decline of Postliberal Theology* (a text I draw on significantly in this chapter). DeHart charts how not only does the term unhelpfully conflate the distinctive approaches and contributions of Hans Frei and George Lindbeck, the genesis of the label has veered from the original focus on methodological concerns. The idea of postliberalism has evolved in ways that can be read through “rubrics of disappearance (of a unified conceptuality of postliberalism) and dispersal (among several parallel or divergent avenues of exploration)” as

² It is also important to note here that neither of the two feminist theological methodological-ethical frameworks I examine in subsequent chapters explicitly claim postliberalism, and only one of the two (Jones) has been directly/explicitly associated with and shaped by the “postliberalism” of the Yale School. That being said, Coakley has been read as part of the postliberal approach. See, for instance, Christopher J. Ashley, “Liberation and Postliberalism,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 64, no. 2–3 (October 2013): 120.

well as “displacement,” where those influenced (directly and indirectly) by Frei and Lindbeck “have altered the discussion of the nature of theology in ways that seem to supersede or transform the earlier modes of dichotomizing theology in ‘liberal’ and ‘postliberal’ terms.”³ As such, in seeking to “initiate a fresh engagement with [Frei and Lindbeck’s] thought,” DeHart explains that he “wishes to bury ‘postliberalism’ not to praise it,” as the term obscures how those rubrics of disappearance, dispersal, and displacement have functioned.⁴

With those vital points in mind, in the pages that follow, I focus on a particular way in which methodology and ethics are bound together and operate in a uni-directional linear fashion towards a particular prescriptive telos as it manifests in the work of George Lindbeck. Lindbeck’s “postliberalism” pursues a generous orthodoxy by attending to the “grammar” and “language” of faith. That grammar and logic undergirds his particular version of the more broadly operative methodological-ethical framework I seek to critique—and of which his work is a paradigmatic example. An examination of Lindbeck’s thought, and of key theological critiques of it, reveals a pattern where the normative is not so much destabilized or broadened, but rather displaced from cognitive propositions/truth claims onto practices and the formation of identity itself. This pattern, illuminated in Lindbeck’s approach, continues to manifest in feminist theological reflections on formation. Before turning to Lindbeck, however, it is important to first offer some background on the history of the relationship between theological method, identity, and formation—to set the scene for the postliberal response.

³ DeHart, *Trial of the Witnesses*, 49. DeHart points out that “postliberalism as the privileged conceptual framework for appropriating these two theologians has quietly dissolved, even as the field of their influence has become, sometimes anonymously or at one or two removes, wider than ever” (43).

⁴ *Ibid.*, xiv, 54.

I. Theological Method and Christian Identity (and Formation)—Intersection or On-Ramp?

Formation is central to the Christian life. It is central to life in general—we *are*, inevitably, formed and shaped throughout our lives whether we recognize/are intentional in such forming or not. Within the Christian tradition, the formation—the disciplining—of our (spiritual) lives has a deep and rich history, rooted in the sacrificial acts and teachings of Christ and rooted in Paul’s portrayal of the Christian life as a race, with the “punishment” and “enslavement” of the body and the mind vital for success (see, for instance, 1 Corinthians 9: 24-27, which is one of the epigraphs that begins Part One). Since Paul, Christians throughout the ages have sought to run the race that is the Christian life well, albeit with a variety of different (at times contradictory) ideas of what a race well run looked like: is it *eudaimonia*, the good life/flourishing, like the Greeks suggested? Is it *imitatio Christi*, living in imitation of Christ? Are those two related? Relatedly, Christians have turned to equally varied (and again, at times contradictory) sets of training strategies and racing techniques in their efforts to run the race well—from the Desert mothers and fathers’ withdrawal from society to the desert to devote themselves to prayer, to the (Neo-) Platonist inspired turn to philosophical contemplation, to the Ignatian spiritual exercises of discernment, to modern Protestant morning devotional practices and publications (i.e. “Our Daily Word”), etc.

Amidst and in light of the varying approaches to the race that is the Christian life, theological reflection has been vital, and multifold. The work of theology in and for Christian formation has, of course, been central in and for articulating, evaluating, and envisioning what a well-run race might look like.⁵ What does it mean and look like to be formed in the likeness of

⁵ Even the Greeks struggled and contended with what *eudaimonia* entailed and looked like. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1999), Aristotle explains: “Verbally there is a very general agreement; for both the general agreement; for both the general

the crucified and resurrected Christ? What might we learn from reasoned reflection on and analysis of the Christian tradition: its texts, doctrines, history? A number of doctrinal and other theoretical loci arise, and intersect, at this point: Christology (who is the Christ that we worship, follow, and seek to emulate?), theological anthropology and hamartiology (what does it mean to be human in light of who this Christ is? How does sin impact our running of this race?), the doctrine of sanctification (in light of who Christ is and who we are, what does the process of becoming like Christ mean, look like, and entail?), which of course in turn calls for reflection on the relationship between sanctification and justification, which leads us to matters of soteriology, etc. etc.

Christian theology has played a vital role not only in the vision of Christian life and formation, in what the good life is and/or the imitation of Christ means and/or looks like, but also in how one might go about running the race towards said vision well. While more extreme acts of spiritual discipline, of *askesis*, were largely relegated to monastic communities in the 4th century, attention to the training and practices necessary for the cultivation and sustenance of Christian living has remained a focus of Church teachings throughout the centuries.⁶ Theological

run of men and people of superior refinements that [eudaimonia] is, and identify living well and faring well with being happy; but with regard to what [eudaimonia] is they differ, and the many do not give the same account as the wise. For the former think it is some plain and obvious thing like pleasure, wealth or honour” (§21; 1095a15-22).

⁶ *Askesis* (ἄσκησις), defined as exercise, practice, or training, is the root of asceticism/ascetical theology. While of Attic (classical) Greek origins, it is a significant theme in the Christian tradition. See Samuel Rubenson, “Christian Asceticism and the Emergence of the Monastic Tradition,” in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 49–57. For more on the relegation of stricter asceticism to monastic communities, see, for instance, Richard Valantasis, *The Making of the Self: Ancient and Modern Asceticism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2008) especially “Asceticism or Formation? Theorizing Asceticism After Nietzsche,” pps. 80-100. Foucault, and the theorists of religion who engage his work, also speaks to the genealogical shift of *askesis*. See for instance, Mark Vernon, “‘I Am Not What I am’—Foucault, Christian Asceticism, and a ‘Way Out’ of Sexuality,” in *Religion and Culture*, by Michel Foucault, ed. Jeremy Carrette (New York: Routledge, 1999), 199–210; Edward F. McGushin, *Foucault’s Askesis: An Introduction to the Philosophical Life* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007).

discourse has sought to speak to and inquire about what training—what practices, disciplines, virtues—will form us towards Christ and the good life. This, of course, is the discipline of ethics, or moral theology in the Catholic tradition, within Christian theological studies.

The relationship between theological doctrines and discourses, on the one hand, and ethical reflections and “applications,” on the other, has not been singular, simple, or unidirectional. Theologians have grappled in multiple ways and relied on multiple doctrinal, hermeneutical, and methodological resources to reflect upon and understand what it means, and what it looks like, to follow Christ. As Christian thinkers in the years, turned decades, turned centuries, following Christ’s life, death, resurrection, ascension, and promise of return, what it means to wait, and to live in the midst of the waiting, has been subject of much reflection, especially for the early Christian thinkers who had to begin to reflect on what constitutes Christian identity and practice in light of the fact that this waiting is taking a bit longer than expected—as history and culture is changing.⁷ Questions of faithful religious identity, of discipleship and formation, have been entangled with questions of temporality. What does it mean to follow Christ, to be a Christian, in light of the fact that Christ has not come back yet, as cultures and times change? How does (and/or does not) seeking to follow and be formed in and by Christ look different in different contexts?

This question of what marks Christian identity in and through time and (different) space(s) is, of course, a theme that is central for theological reflection, particularly in regards to theological methodology. Methodological reflection in theology—how is truth determined? What sources and tools enable that determination? How does theology understand its nature and

⁷ See, for instance, Christopher M. Hays, *When the Son of Man Didn't Come: A Constructive Proposal on the Delay of the Parousia* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016); Victoria Balabanski, *Eschatology in the Making: Mark, Matthew and the Didache* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Hays, *When the Son of Man Didn't Come*.

tasks?—is inextricably intertwined and bound up in questions of Christian identity.

Methodology serves as a resource/tool for understanding and speaking to and about Christian identity and also comes to be a site of contention, debate, and energy in and of itself in light of cultural changes, as, for instance, Christianity, and theology, had to understand and (re-) articulate itself and its aims in light of the Enlightenment turn to reason and the scientific method.⁸

In his book on theological method, Paul L. Allen points out that while there is a great deal of theological literature that *refers* to theological method, “books [that] demonstrate *how* thinkers think about God and related themes,” that “far fewer books deal with methodology as a topic unto itself.”⁹ One key reason for this, he explains, is that theologians find method uninteresting, too philosophical, or both, that “clarifying one’s methodology instead of doing theology is like sharpening a knife without cutting into anything.” He goes on to explain that the point of his book is to challenge the belief of dullness or irrelevance— rather, the “sharpness of one’s knife determines how well one is able to cut.”¹⁰ This project looks at the “sharpness of the knives” and the impact of those “knives” on how gender and sexual identity are understood in relation to Christian identity. More significantly, perhaps, this project looks at how theological understandings of the relationship between gender/sexual identities and Christian identity might

⁸ Examining the history of theological method, Paul Allen notes how beginning with Descartes’s *Discourse on Method*, “the discovery of method was an embrace of a ‘prejudice against prejudice,’ a move against the bias Descartes perceived on the part of the teachings of the Christian church and the prejudice that this tradition thus fostered” (Paul L. Allen, *Theological Method: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012), 6. He goes on to chart the various ways theologians challenged and responded to this claim, constructing and articulating their own methodologies.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

draw our attention to the sharpness of certain knives in particular.¹¹ How does theological method relate to Christian identity? This section addresses what may initially seem like a question with an obvious and commonsensical answer by exploring how, on the one hand, theological method has been turned to in order to understand and debate and articulate what defines Christian identity, and, on the other hand, how Christian identity and practices associated with it have been turned to as a methodological resource.

In order to understand this relationship, this binding of methodology and ethics in shaping/forming identity, it is important to offer a very brief historical sketch of approaches to theological method as it relates to Christian identity. It is far beyond the scope of this section (/chapter/project) to offer a detailed historical outline, let alone analysis, of theological method, not to mention it is a project that has already been done many times over, from many different angles.¹² Here, I broadly historically trace theological methodological orientations, focusing on methodological and theological aims and in order to demonstrate how method has been complexly bound up with Christian identity and formation. Given the necessary breadth of this tracing, I explore how method and identity are interconnected by turning briefly to scholarship on theological education, particularly to David Kelsey's historical analysis in *To Understand God Truly* and *Between Athens and Berlin*. Theological education is admittedly more broad than theological methodology, but there is nevertheless significant overlap in orientations and approaches, as the nature and tasks of theology is part (and parcel!?) of the nature and tasks of

¹¹ To the actual sharpness of the knife compared to claims about it—does the knife cut as much as the catalog or door-to-door knife salesman (or, perhaps to be more contemporarily accurate, the ad on Amazon.com) says it will?

¹² Allen's text on theological method that I have relied upon here serves as one of many useful introductions to the theme and the range of approaches.

theological education.¹³ A turn to Kelsey's analysis reveals further the significance of that overlap. From there, I turn to one discursive site in theology where a turn to methodological-ethical frameworks becomes clear in order to further elucidate the object of my critique, as well as to begin to outline the content of my critique (which I then turn to in section two).

§1. Method and identity in theological education: paideia vs. Wissenschaft

In *To Understand God Truly*, Kelsey asks: what is theological about a theological school. In an essay summarizing the work for a broader audience, Kelsey writes that a school is “‘theological’...to the extent that everything done in its name has one overarching goal: more clearly to understand God and to understand everything in relation to God.”¹⁴ This aim, Kelsey points out, has been pursued in two distinct ways that are often at odds, and perhaps incommensurate, with each other. Kelsey signifies these two approaches as Athens and Berlin respectively, using a geographic metaphor that also has temporal salience. The approach of Athens, Kelsey explains, was the approach of the ancient Greeks and from there, the ancient church. This approach to (theological) education was one of *paideia*, a Greek word that meant “‘schooling,” “‘culturing,” and “‘character formation.” The aim of *paideia* in ancient Greece, Kelsey explains, “‘was to form in the souls of the young the virtue or *arête* they needed to function as responsible citizens,” to form them towards “‘the Good.”¹⁵ By the time of third century AD, as Christianity began to develop as a religion, early theologians like Clement of Alexandria and Origen took up *paideia* as a model for religious formation, and its vision shifted

¹³ Especially given the predominance of theological studies in many theological educational curriculums, and, in/via Schleiermacher's time/work, the status of theology as “‘the queen of the sciences.”

¹⁴ David H. Kelsey, “‘What's Theological about a Theological School?,” *Christian Century*, February 5, 1997, 131.

¹⁵ David H. Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological about a Theological School?* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 65, 67.

from the shaping of virtuous political agents to “preparation for that conversion of soul which would bring religious knowledge of the Divine.”¹⁶ Again, the overlap with and implications for theological method are clear—within this vision of paideia, knowledge of God comes in and through the formation of the self towards the Good and virtuous, towards God.¹⁷ One’s spiritual practices—the formation of one’s religious/spiritual identity—were vital, central, to *how* knowledge and understanding of God was to occur, to theological method.

A shift occurred with the advent of modernity and the Enlightenment turn to reason and rationality. Not only did the Protestant Reformation result in an opening of methodological procedures (and debates) about the place of Scripture and experience in relation/addition to tradition, but the Enlightenment turn to rationality and the search for (the determination of) objective truth indelibly shaped understandings of (the search for) (theological) knowledge.¹⁸ Here, the turn to method became explicit, a turn to the procedures for determining truth, which meant an embrace of “prejudice against prejudice” as Descartes put it in his 1637 text *Discourse on Method*. Allen explains that Descartes embrace of method was “a move against the bias [he] perceived on the part of the teachings of the Christian church and the prejudice that this tradition

¹⁶ Ibid., 69.

¹⁷ Ibid. He continues, explaining “Paideia had to do with the interior and entirely private life” (69).

¹⁸ I recognize that modernity, and/or identifying something as modern, is far more nuanced and contested than I presume. For instance, while modernity is generally perceived as a break with medievalism, scholars recognize that the reality is more complicated. Troeltsch, for instance, called the Reformation a “second blooming” of the Middle Ages, a kind of modification of, rather than break with, medievalism. (Interestingly, similar pushback and calls for nuance have been proposed against the presumption of a clean break between modernism and postmodernism. See, for instance, Ellen T. Armour, *Signs and Wonders: Theology After Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).) Additionally, modernity is often conflated with the Enlightenment, whereas the reality is more complicated. As James C. Livingston points out in volume 1 of excellent textbook on *Modern Christian Thought* on the Enlightenment and the nineteenth century, not only is it a caricature to suggest that there is *an* Enlightenment, that it is actually a “far more complex and variegated phenomenon” (that rather there were many “Enlightenments,” many strands of it “sharing certain crucial ideals but also reflecting distinctive thought processes”) and, moreover, that modernity is not exclusively associated with, and has not been exclusively shaped by, the Enlightenment. James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought: The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century*, 2 edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 3.

thus fostered.”¹⁹ The scientific method became *de rigueur*, and shaped, and was institutionalized by, education. As Kelsey puts it:

The Enlightenment involved major changes in what counted as “inquiring,” “knowing,” and “understanding,” and research universities institutionalized those changes. When the research university became the normative model of the excellent ‘school’ a new and quite different set of methods and aims came to dominate schooling, including theological schooling.²⁰

This is the other approach to theological education that Kelsey examines, “rooted in the modern research university, for which rigorous ‘scientific’ research or *Wissenschaft* is the defining goal.”²¹ Theological education was particularly shaped by this vision not only by virtue of the influence of culture and the times, but because with the founding of the University of Berlin, theological education was included within the research university, and thus takes on the vision of *Wissenschaft*, and also shifts its focus from the formation of virtuous souls to the “production of ‘professionals.’”²²

Whereas with *paideia*, method stemmed from Christian identity and practices, with *Wissenschaft*, method—via reason and rationality and the panoply of methodological resources aligned with them (i.e. empiricism, metaphysics, subjectivism, etc....)—preceded any claims of Christian identity and practice in its search for the truth (truth which was, now, scientifically and/or rationally determinable). This explicit turn in modernity to method impacted and shaped

¹⁹ Allen, *Theological Method*, 6.

²⁰ Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly*, 83.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

²² *Ibid.* Within this frame, character formation was still vital, but its function shifts. Kelsey explains how the founder of the University of Berlin, Wilhelm von Humboldt, was interested in how liberal arts schooling “transforms the character,” but does so “on the basis of the unity of human civilization and scientific work, the unity based on the modern ideal of humanity” (81, en6). Kelsey goes on to explain how this “modern ideal of humanity,” is an Enlightenment view, with a particular view of rationality at its core, one defined by the idea of scholarly research that yields net increases in knowledge. To have one’s character “transformed,” in this frame, Kelsey explains, is to have one’s rational capacities brought out and honed through learning how to be an expert researcher (81).

what tools theologians turned to in order to reflect on how we know and what we know about God. This in turn sparked a great deal of reflection and debate in 18th and 19th century theology about what marks Christian identity, with a shift to the content of belief becoming a definitional marker, at the very least, *of* identity—what must one believe? Can one believe it differently? Is Christian identity defined by belief or practice? etc....—questions which then link back and are intertwined with further insights and debates over methodological tools and resources (what procedures and tools can/should theology turn to in order even answer said questions), as well as a host of concomitant doctrinal claims and debates regarding the content of different Christian truth claims as well as what claims were central in and for *claiming* Christian identity.

In short, with the advent of the Enlightenment, method(ology)—the explicit attention to method that came with the turn to rationalism and the scientific method and its effects on what constitutes truth—comes to play a significant role in terms of adjudicating what defines Christianity and thus what constitutes Christian identity. Attendantly, the arena of methodology becomes its own topic of reflection. A debate ensues, then, about whether and how Christian identity (however so defined, hence the necessary circularity at play here) should impact methods, especially insofar as theology (as professional knowledge production) relied on modern “secular” knowledges and procedures.

Methodology was thus inextricably bound up in conversations about Christian identity and truth claims, and vice versa. Debates ensued over what the nature and content of Christianity was, what it meant to be a Christian in light of those claims, and, related to—perhaps connecting—both, what the task of theology was, what its aim, its *orientation*, was. Was theology an academic or a religious enterprise: how did it determine truth? What sources did it turn to do so? How were those sources decided upon as authoritative? For what ends? Paideia

saw theology as a religious enterprise, aimed primarily at the formation of Christian selves and communities, where religious identity and practices shape and inform truth claims, whereas *Wissenschaft* saw it as academic, and apologetic, aimed primarily at making the faith legible to and through contemporary scholarship and culture, where determined truth claims shape identity and practices.²³

While Kelsey points out that models of contemporary theological education by and large fit into/are guided by one of these two approaches—paideia or *Wissenschaft*, Athens or Berlin, which generally map onto pre-modern and modern theological methods/epistemologies—theological *methodology* and the questions it engaged with about Christian identity continue to develop alongside and in light of the times. Work in philosophical and cultural studies began to detail the limits and failures of Enlightenment philosophies and principles, particularly in the wake of World War II. Late and post-modern philosophies and critical analyses developed that challenged the possibility of objective knowledge and universal human experience, examining how both these features of modern thought reflected particular configurations of power and social order. In a different, but not altogether distinctive, vein, Neo-Orthodox (especially Reformed) theologies also had, on similar grounds, challenged modern theological capitulations to Enlightenment rationality, exploring and challenging how this has so deeply distanced modern Christianity from its history and tradition and thus rendered Christianity illegible. Scholarship in

²³ Figure 2.1: A chart distinguishing the historical shift in approach in the relationship between Christian identity and theological method:

| Pre-Modernity | Modernity |
|-------------------|---------------------|
| Identity → Method | Method → Identity |
| Paideia | <i>Wissenschaft</i> |
| Religious | Academic |
| Formational | Apologetic |

It is important to reiterate here that/how the apologetic emphasis is not a polar opposite to the formational (see n18 above). Moreover, the frame of paideia vs. *Wissenschaft* is a narrative we give *about* post-Enlightenment theology, whereas the realities are more complex.

theological method continued to debate about the nature of Christian identity and task of theology in the midst of changing culture, and within that, in light of these cultural and theological influences, what has come to be known as postliberalism developed, which is the topic I turn to now.

§2. *Theological methodology beyond revision vs. resistance: the postliberal response*

Surveys of modern Christian thought and practice outline how Christianity, and theology, responded in one of three general ways to the question of how to understand and inhabit Christian identity in the midst of cultural shifts: resistance, revision/reinterpretation, or accommodation.²⁴ Christian institutions and communities, as well as theological methodologies, either resisted modern insights and the methods that went along with them, sought to reinterpret their faith and theology in light of such insights and values and/or to reinterpret modern insights and values in light of their faith and theologies, or they sought something between and/or beyond the two, accommodating their theologies, and to varying degrees their religious practices and their understandings of their own identities, in light of modern insights and values.

With the influence of late and post- modern philosophies and Neo-Orthodox theologies, and from a growing recognition of, and dissatisfaction with, the increasing polarization between theological responses to modern cultural shifts, postliberalism was born. As DeHart explains in his tracing of the inception and development of postliberalism as a methodological movement, “the question of how theology can creatively rethink the Christian tradition and yet contribute to the maintenance of its identity [...] was the crux of the quarrel [that] crystallized around Lindbeck’s and Frei’s thought,” which resulted in them serving as the key figures/representatives

²⁴ Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 2.

of postliberalism.²⁵ Offering context, DeHart explains that upon the end of World War II, different brands of Neo-Orthodoxy (and *nouvelle théologie* amongst Catholics),

had been able to hold together the adventurous progress in theological understanding with retrieval of the great mainstream traditions of Christian teaching, *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement*. As Frei and Lindbeck, along with many of their generation saw it, it was just this expansive, creative middle ground that was collapsing before their eyes during these years, threatening to leave theology polarized between conservative repristinators on the right and, on the left, radicalized progressives who seemed prepared to ‘emancipate’ Christianity from the entire doctrinal tradition which had given it its shape.²⁶

The still gestating postliberalism perceived this tendency towards either resistance (repristination) or revision (emancipation) and sought to forge a path of a kind of accommodation and reinterpretation, or rather, a continued interpretation of how Christian identity is understood in the midst of a changing world—or as DeHart put it, fueled by a “quiet but determined resolve to find new paths back to a critical and creative retrieval of the classic tradition.”²⁷

While postliberalism developed as a kind of third way that sought to “balance the twin demands for faithfulness and change” in light of questions and debates about the nature and task of theology in light of a changing culture, it quickly became positioned and/or utilized against then-dominant liberal and modern “revisionist” theologies, as it saw these theologies as largely abandoning Christian tradition and identity in capitulation to contemporary cultural methods and norms.²⁸ Despite the difficulties of defining postliberalism that DeHart charts at great length and

²⁵ DeHart, *Trial of the Witnesses*, xiii.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁷ *Ibid.* It is also important to note again that the term postliberal/postliberalism is admittedly one with some baggage, which makes defining the term a complex and contested process. DeHart explains that “Though the label [of postliberal] is not thrown around nearly as much anymore, the idea continues to lead a somewhat fitful existence despite its invincible vagueness,” and his text on Frei and Lindbeck’s thought and the development of the “postliberal” project illuminates the problematics of the moniker (xiii).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, xiii.

with precision, he offers a definition of postliberalism that frames it in relation to said “revisionist” approaches, defining it as

the attempted construction of a distinct approach to Christian theology’s basic procedures and self-understanding which self-consciously and systematically opposes itself to specific and identifiable concepts and methods of academic theology (putatively dominant since at least the beginning of the nineteenth century) which are labeled ‘liberal,’ ‘modernist,’ or ‘revisionist’ and which are seen as covertly threatening or undermining the basic theological task of enabling Christian witness.²⁹

Of particular concern to developing postliberal critiques was the “emancipating” of the particularity of Christian faith by/for the sake of a universal truth or essence that could be claimed or accepted *apart* from any faith. As James Kay puts it in his account of postliberalism and its impact on preaching, developing postliberal theologies were critical of the “apologetic strategy of grounding or correlating particular claims in some broader claims that can be universally accepted apart from faith,” in grounding faith in those claims in order to show that Christian claims correspond or correlate to reality/truth on other grounds.³⁰ These developing critiques read , and were subsequently concerned about, modern liberal theologies’ expressions of (/as?) a “need for radical reconstruction and ‘revision of the entire self-understanding of Christianity,” and how that often manifested in ways that were sharply (albeit to varying degrees) critical of the Christian doctrinal tradition.³¹

²⁹ Ibid., 1–2. While DeHart defines postliberalism in an at least somewhat oppositional relationship to revisionism, he immediately nuances and critiques the delineation between the two as a false dichotomy. See especially Chapter 4, pp. 148ff.

³⁰ James Kay, *Preaching and Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2007), 106. For Kay, postliberalism was critical of these theologies especially due to their due to their “assumption or contention that all knowledge is derived from malleable modes or ways of knowing that are historically and culturally specific and contingent. Thus, epistemic claims made within these contexts are not, by definition, sufficient to sustain the claim of universal certitude” (106-107).

³¹ DeHart, *Trial of the Witnesses*, 20. DeHart charts in detail how the differences between the two are not exactly as stark as many paint them to be. Yet, recognizing that this is how they developed—and thus pointing in part to his critique of the label itself—DeHart *defines* postliberalism in oppositional relation to these modern liberal revisionist theologies. James Livingston writes that, for “Lindbeck, the failure of modern theology may be reversed if it will forego its experiential-expressive [read: revisionist] effort to

That being said, while this developing thought was critical of modern liberal theological (methodological) proclivities, it did not embrace the alternate pole of resistance to or refusal of contemporary cultural shifts and insights—it is, after all, called *postliberalism*, not *antiliberalism*. To circle back to Kelsey’s historical charting of theological education, one could say that, whereas, within a pre-modern, *paideia*-oriented framework, identity preceded method, and within a modern, *Wissenschaft*-oriented framework, method determined and adjudicated identity, postliberalism sought a kind of both/and; attention, via the tradition and contemporary cultural and philosophical insights, to the relationship between knowledge, identity, and procedures for determining knowledge (read: method). How did postliberal thinkers go about doing this, and what might that approach—and more significantly—theological critiques of it, have to say about methodological-ethical frameworks of formation?

II. Discerning Directionality: (Lindbeckian) “Postliberalism” as a Paradigmatic Methodological-Ethical Framework

In explicating and evaluating Lindbeck’s theology, DeHart quickly highlights the important point that Lindbeck’s effort to maintain Christian identity but understand it creatively and contextually was propelled and “dogmatically guided by ecclesiology: the task of articulating the continuity over time of a people of witness, faithfully proclaiming to the world God’s coming salvation in Christ.”³² Given this guiding emphasis, Lindbeck’s theology traded in

find points of contact between Christian belief and universal modes of human religiousness, and return to the Christian communities own identity as it is continually shaped by its reading of Scripture” (Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 523).

³² DeHart, *Trial of the Witnesses*, 58. Or, as he puts it later, “Lindbeck is grappling with the dialectic of change and continuity in Christian belief and practice, and formulates the cultural form of its perpetuation as the interplay between a public system of signs on the one side and shifting subjectivities and their experiences in changing contexts on the other. *The theological problem which occupies him is that of the*

methodological as well as ecclesial/ethical motivations and moved in differing directions accordingly—seeking, on the one hand, to *understand* what marks Christian identity in shifting contexts, and on the other hand, to *affirm and continue* Christian identity.³³ From early on in his career, Lindbeck sought to explore how, in an increasingly pluralist society, Christian “unity might be possible in spite of doctrinal diversity,” and in doing so, made a methodological turn, examining “how doctrines can be understood as rules, and of the importance for the classic orthodox consensus of ‘reinterpret[ing] the world in terms of the Gospel’ rather than vice versa.” This, then, engendered a circling back to the ethical, to the turn to formation, as “the combination of sectarian social formations unified by catholic interconnections calls for a strong emphasis upon catechesis and socialization of members.”³⁴

Lindbeck, again, sought to strike a kind of balance, remaining faithful to tradition while also having relevance in and to the contemporary culture. He wanted theology to attend to its internal commitments to religious communities (as in *paideia*), as well as its external commitments to academic/scholarly communities (as in *Wissenschaft*).³⁵ Over-and-against what he saw as the revisionist threat of the emptying of religious particularity in favor of a universal essence, Lindbeck sought a return to Christian identity more explicitly and directly, in terms of both what that identity might consist of/how it might look in relation to culture (ethics) as well as what it means to do theology in alignment with/affirmation of that identity (methodology).³⁶ But this was not a confessionalist retreat, a return to a pre-modern conception of Christian identity

accessible locus of stability and identity for the community within this concrete process” (170, emphasis mine).

³³ Ibid., 61, 62.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Frei similarly sought to strike a kind of balance in this way, with his five typologies, and his privileging of the “middle” approaches. See Ibid., 129ff.

³⁶ Lindbeck’s emphasis here was guided by both apologetic aims and the “freeing” of Christianity from its antiquated past, and was shaped largely by Barth’s “secular sensibility.” See Ibid., 133.

based on ancient cultural norms or the accompanying methodological norms and tools of pre-modern theology. In pursuit of a faithful and yet generous rendering of Christian identity, and the methodological determination of what marks such a faithful and generous identity across time and space, and shaped by a panoply of intellectual influences—from the broad theological impact of NeoOrthodoxy and transcendental Thomism to significant prevailing intellectual trends in sociology of religion and philosophy of language, to the then-developing debates in theological method and identity happening amongst his colleagues at Yale—Lindbeck looked to ground Christian identity in Scripture and tradition understood as a narrative that is to be participated in and continued. As Livingston explains:

For Lindbeck, the failure of modern theology may be reversed if it will forego its experiential-expressive [read: revisionist] effort to find points of contact between Christian belief and universal modes of human religiousness, and return to the Christian communities own identity as it is continually shaped by its reading of Scripture.³⁷

In turning to the Christian tradition as a story, Lindbeck saw a middle way between confessionalism and revisionism—occurring through discerning (methodologically) and participating in/adhering to (ethically) a grammar or language and accompanying set of practices.

While these are two distinct concerns and aims within Lindbeck’s project, the relationship between them is a “fuzzy” one, and made fuzzier in scholars who take up Lindbeck’s work for their ethical and ecclesial projects.³⁸ The fuzziness in the relationship between method and ethics/ecclesiology arises from Lindbeck’s turn to what grounds Christian identity (its fundamental claims) and that which inculcates it—to language, practices, etc.—methodologically to articulate the role of theology in the academy, to adjudicate its external and

³⁷ Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 523.

³⁸ See DeHart, *Trial of the Witnesses*, 57.

internal commitments. He ends up developing a theory of religion that, in short, in many ways enabled and justified a way for theology to attend to both its ecclesial/internal and academic/external commitments.³⁹ In this effort, Lindbeck developed a complex constellation of theories and approaches—a “cultural-linguistic” theory of religion, a “regulative” or rule theory of doctrine, and an “intratextual” approach to theology, that he outlined and explored in his now renowned text *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*.

At the outset of his analysis of Lindbeck, DeHart points out that an assessment of Lindbeck’s theology, particularly of “the argumentative force of *The Nature of Doctrine* depends on seeing how [these three different theories] are related over the course of the book.”⁴⁰ DeHart proceeds to parse out and examine the relationship between these theories in great detail. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to re-rehearse DeHart’s analysis, the subsection that follows turns to DeHart’s work to outline the ways in which the methodological-ethical “fuzziness” in Lindbeck’s theology manifested in ways that were ultimately unidirectional, where a particular understanding of the (ecclesial/) ethical came to function as the telos that theological method served. Given this configuration, Lindbeck’s theological framework fails to sustain its goal of being generous or open to difference by positively evaluating the effects of different cultures and contexts on Christian identity.

On my reading, DeHart shows how the themes of time, teleology, and norms are marshalled together in Lindbeck’s frame, making it a paradigmatic example of a methodological-ethical framework. While Lindbeck’s theology is often described as postfoundational because it eschews cognitive propositions as the hallmark of Christian identity, DeHart’s analysis identifies it as foundational in a different kind of way. Its account of Christian identity, the grammar that

³⁹ Ibid., 25.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 65.

discerns it, and the practices that define that identity sets a normative (methodological) direction of interpretation that adjudicates faithful (ethical) practice according to a singular, linear path. As DeHart puts it, for Lindbeck, Christians derive (from Scripture) “a single, systematic set of ways of generating ‘Christian’ interpretations of one’s cultural surroundings which is of sufficient clarity and detail to guide and norm the theological interpretations demanded of the present community.”⁴¹

Following my explication of DeHart’s reading, I turn to one other theologian, Kathryn Tanner, whose critique of postliberalism further illuminates the methodological-ethical framework of formation operative in postliberal thought and the problems with it. In her book *Theories of Culture*, Tanner demonstrates how the methodological turn to practices gets bound to normative ethical visions of Christian community and action. Challenging the delineation between Christian practices themselves (first-order theology) and theological reflection on those practices (second-order theology), Tanner demonstrates how this distinction obfuscates the “contestable character of any particular proposal for giving clarity and systematic coherence to the theoretical aspects of Christian practice.”⁴² Not only does this methodological move fail to attend to how academic theology is “a kind of Christian social practice in its own right,” but it implies that the “first-order” practices “already exist as some consistent whole on the level of

⁴¹ Ibid., 173.

⁴² Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 73. Tanner does not attend in the same ways to the differences between Lindbeck and Frei, which is a critique DeHart makes of her analyses. “Tanner accuses postliberals (loosely defined as followers of Frei and Lindbeck) of making the negotiation of Christian identity a purely ‘internal’ discourse to which external perspectives play only a negative and optional role,” DeHart explains. “However relevant [Tanner’s] indictment might be in regard to other thinkers associated with postliberalism,” he continues, “it cannot be regarded as an adequate description of the Frei investigated in this chapter” (Ibid., 145).

practice” and that “second-order” theological reflection “is doing nothing more than laying out the elements of that whole in the proper order.”⁴³

Drawing on postmodern anthropological scholarship on culture, Tanner challenges the notion of a discrete singular, static Christian culture with a cohesive set of practices, and show how this notion undergirds postliberal thought and praxis in ways that obscure dominant, and at times *dominating*, interests, and in doing so, forecloses difference. The critique Tanner makes of the undergirding spatial logics of postliberal methodological-ethical frameworks parallels, and serves as a kind of model for, the critique I make in this project of the undergirding *temporal* logics of *feminist* methodological-ethical frameworks. To turn first to DeHart’s reading of Lindbeck.

§1. DeHart and/on the “directionality” of Lindbeck’s intratextuality and/in a cultural linguistic approach and regulative theory of doctrine

At the end of *The Nature of Doctrine*, Lindbeck proposes an “intratextual” method for pursuing normative meaning within a religious system—for doing the work of theology. Because Lindbeck situates intratextuality as a method that is most “compatible with [his] cultural-linguistic approach,” it is important to first briefly elaborate on Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic account of religion and subsequent regulative or rule theory of doctrine, and how he understood it in opposition to cognitive-propositionalist and experiential-expressivist approaches.⁴⁴

Lindbeck eschewed, and situated his own theory as counter to, both a cognitive-propositionalist account, where “church doctrines function as informative propositions or truth claims about objective realities,” and an “experiential-expressive” approach that “interprets doctrines as

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁴⁴ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 114.

noninformative and nondiscursive symbols of inner feelings, attitudes, or existential orientations.”⁴⁵ Drawing on anthropological, sociological, and philosophical work on theories of religion, Lindbeck offers his own alternate approach. He explains that in this view,

emphasis is placed on those respects in which religions resemble languages together with their correlative forms of life and are thus similar to cultures (insofar as they are understood semiotically as reality and value systems—that is, as idioms for the constructing of reality and the living of life. The function of church doctrines that becomes most prominent in this perspective is their use, not as expressive symbols or as truth claims, but as communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude, and action.⁴⁶

Lindbeck explains that this “general way of conceptualizing religion” is what he calls “a ‘cultural-linguistic’ approach, and the implied view of church doctrine will be referred to as a ‘regulative’ or ‘rule’ theory.”⁴⁷ As DeHart succinctly puts it, Lindbeck’s “basic move is to see the ‘carrier’ of continuity as locatable within the semiotic code that rules the symbolic idiom which defines Christianity” rather than in ultimate propositional truth claims or in symbols or expressions of transformed human experience. “In its function of defining the identity of the community itself,” DeHart explains, “the semantic network is ‘prior’ to either of these usages of it.”⁴⁸ Within this frame, a generous orthodoxy, or, as Lindbeck puts it, “reconciliation without capitulation” is possible.⁴⁹

Intratextuality is then the method through which theology fulfills its aim of “giv[ing] a normative explication of the meaning a religion has for its adherents,” contra to an “‘extratextual’ method [which] is natural for those whose understanding of religion is propositional or experiential-expressive” in that the “latter locates religious meaning outside the text or semiotic system either in the objective realities to which it refers or the experiences it

⁴⁵ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 17–18.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 18.

⁴⁸ DeHart, *Trial of the Witnesses*, 170.

⁴⁹ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 18.

symbolizes, whereas for cultural-linguists the meaning is immanent.”⁵⁰ For Lindbeck, theology is judged by three key criteria, its faithfulness, applicability, and intelligibility.⁵¹ Lindbeck’s approach attaches these criteria to three concepts: faithfulness to intratextuality, applicability to futurology, and intelligibility to skill.⁵²

Intratextuality is the most important of these criteria, as “it determines the way the other two concepts, futurology and skill, are to be understood.”⁵³ Futurology, in fitting in this schema, is the task of discerning, in contemporary contexts, “those possibilities and junctures where Christian practitioners can become actively engaged as a sign pointing toward or furthering the salvific vision of the future ‘encoded’ in the Christian interpretive scheme.”⁵⁴ Skill, finally, also fits within this framework that privileges intratextuality/faithfulness, as it is treated as a “special problem of applicability,” and “points to this emphasis on Christian practice.”⁵⁵ In offering these concepts, Lindbeck links what he reads as key criteria for assessing the authority of a community’s claim to be Christian to his cultural-linguistic framework.⁵⁶

Particularly significant for the purpose of this chapter is how intratextuality fits within Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic approach and regulative/rule theory of doctrine. The cultural-linguistic approach sees “the meaning of faith [as] immanent to the semiotics of Christian

⁵⁰ Ibid., 113, 114.

⁵¹ Ibid., 112.

⁵² Lindbeck also loosely associates each criteria with a type of theology: faithfulness being the key concern of systematic or dogmatic theology, applicability being the aim and function of practical theology, and intelligibility belonging to the realm of foundational or apologetic theology, though he notes that “each of these concerns is present in every theological discipline” (Ibid.).

⁵³ DeHart, *Trial of the Witnesses*, 91.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 96.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 97.

⁵⁶ DeHart points out that it is at this point where “the general consensus break[s] down and competing visions of the nature of theology and its procedures take over.” He highlights how, in Lindbeck’s account, “when different types of theology are in question... conflict arises over the very meaning of the criterion itself, or how to apply it” (Ibid., 91).

reading and practice,” and intratextuality is how that meaning is determined and adjudicated.⁵⁷

The task of the *theologian* within this frame is a descriptive one—as DeHart explains, theologians “as such do not make authoritative decisions about the identity of the community. They come to terms with an identity already there, presupposed by the speech and practice of the community they are a part of.”⁵⁸ The theologian’s role, then, is:

to try and discern the shape of the ‘deep grammar’ of Christian faith through description and analysis of the basic texts of the community... Theologians would then be in a position to examine the actual doctrinal formulations of the community to determine what rules they instantiate and how well they do so, and to propose alternative formulations if need be.⁵⁹

Continuing, DeHart points out that “Lindbeck is clear that reformulations of doctrinal rules are often necessary, but only as a way of doing better justice to the rules themselves, not to change the rules,” and explains that “the theologian cannot pass judgment on the validity of a community’s doctrines as such.”⁶⁰

Within Lindbeck’s frame, method is dictated by and directed towards a particular vision of faithfulness, to what I, in my choice of terms, refer to/understand as a particular ethical vision. DeHart is again helpful: “To put it crudely,” he explains, “theology practices intratextuality as a descriptive practice in order to enable the intratextuality inherently involved in the communal

⁵⁷ Allen, *Theological Method*, 213. It is also important to note here that Lindbeck’s turn to intratextuality is not directly or explicitly connected with his cultural-linguistic theory of religion and regulative/rule theory of doctrine, though DeHart points out that a number of thematic ambiguities in the latter might have “infected” the former (DeHart, *Trial of the Witnesses*, 78). Moreover, DeHart explains that though Lindbeck sees intratextuality as being most “compatible” with a cultural-linguistic approach, that “the relationship between a cultural-linguistic view of Christianity and an intratextual form of Christian theology seems neither exclusive nor necessary” and that intratextuality is also utilized in other models (Ibid., 90).

⁵⁸ DeHart, *Trial of the Witnesses*, 78. Later, DeHart explains that the “adjective ‘intratextual’ is a modifier of the general activity of the systematic theologian, which is on Lindbeck’s understanding primarily a descriptive activity. Systematic theological proposals are to be judged faithful or not to the extent that they offer a proper description of the Christian faith, however adventurous the terms of that descriptive may be” (Ibid., 92).

⁵⁹ Ibid., 79.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

practicing of the religion to ‘work better’ in its specific circumstances.”⁶¹ Method has particular ethical outcomes *as its ends, as its telos*, and it moves directionally in pursuit of that telos—as “the theological significance of the ‘intra’ is to mark the correct ‘direction of interpretation.’”⁶²

James Kay (and others) refer to (Lindbeck’s) postliberalism as “antifoundationalist” because there is not—there cannot be—any “appeal to an encompassing or foundational cognitive procedure to mediate in principle between the Christian world of meaning and other cultural world.”⁶³ Instead, for Lindbeck:

...theology seeks to commend the intelligibility of the faith to outsiders by, in effect, inviting them to become insiders; it is a matter less of ‘translation’ than of ‘catechesis.’ As he puts it, ‘Instead of re-describing the faith in new concepts, it seeks to teach the language and practices of the religion to potential adherents’ (ND 132).⁶⁴

Or, as Gabriel Fackre puts it, “within [Lindbeck’s] postliberalism the answer to the question, ‘how is Scripture authoritative?’ is ‘according to socialization in the community’s conventions, which are subject to revision with continuing community engagement.’”⁶⁵

Faithfulness shapes and guides this telos, but as determined by what is already normative within Christian religious communities/practices. So construed, faithfulness subsumes differences that manifest within the communities themselves. The majority practices and norms “win,” so to speak. Religious practices and the “grammar” and “language” discerned from them, do more than describe a particular iteration of religious practice in a particular time and place, they prescribe how one must behave/what one must participate in in order to be faithful. Certain

⁶¹ Ibid., 93.

⁶² Ibid., 95.

⁶³ Kay, *Preaching and Theology*, 106.

⁶⁴ DeHart, *Trial of the Witnesses*, 97. Or, as he puts it earlier, “Socialization into a religion’s language-game thus becomes privileged situation for theological interpretation and critique of that religion” (27).

⁶⁵ Gabriel Fackre, “Narrative: Evangelical, Postliberal, Ecumenical,” in *Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 129.

language, practices, and forms of faith become indicative of and necessary for quality reflection on the content and claims of faith.⁶⁶

Yet, drawing and building on David Kelsey's work, DeHart points out that "the church's language itself stands in need of constant correction from the God it is witnessing to. Is not the church's 'language' (the cultural networks of discourse which constitute Christian communities) itself under God's judgment?"⁶⁷ DeHart explains, and charts in detail, how within Lindbeck's frame, "a *descriptive* account has shifted imperceptibly into a search for *norms*."⁶⁸ In his close reading of the different types of intratextuality Lindbeck outlines (the semiotic, the world-encompassing, and the scriptural), DeHart points out that

Lindbeck seems to envision the ability to derive from the New Testament texts a single, systematic set of ways of generating "Christian" interpretations of one's cultural surroundings which is of sufficient clarity and detail to guide and norm the theological interpretations demanded of the present community.⁶⁹

He proceeds to point out two kinds of questions that might be put to this notion: first, does the canon "in fact exemplify a single network of interpretive semiotic applications which can be unambiguously derived from them?" and second, does this set of varied applications "in fact form a 'system' with the kind of coherence and mutual co-implication that would make sense of a clear distinction between 'intratextual' and 'extratextual' interpretations?"⁷⁰

⁶⁶ This is a, if not the, key way the ambiguities in Lindbeck's regulative theory of doctrine manifest in his theological method of intratextuality. See fn53 above.

⁶⁷ DeHart, *Trial of the Witnesses*, 155. DeHart cites David Kelsey, "Church Discourse and Public Realm," in *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck*, ed. Bruce D. Marshall (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 30.

⁶⁸ DeHart, *Trial of the Witnesses*, 167. DeHart addresses intratextuality in depth in chapter two (see pps. 90-100), and in chapter four (see pps. 171-184).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

DeHart outlines how intratextuality “pivot[s] around the idea of a relatively fixed structure of meaning in Christian practice.”⁷¹ This fixed norm is teleological, engendering a clear, directional path in and of interpretation; DeHart explains that “Lindbeck is confident that interpreting the canonical Christian scriptures ‘in terms of the meanings immanent in the religious language of whose use the text is a paradigmatic instance’ will still serve as a crucial ‘control’ on faithful theological interpretation.”⁷² What is seen as “proper” Christian practice predetermines faithful interpretation—or, as Lindbeck himself puts it, the credibility of faith “comes from good performance, not adherence to independently formulated criteria.”⁷³ But how is performance judged as good? For Lindbeck, this is determined by and in and through the Christian community, but what is determined to be Christian community, and who decides? Moreover, given that the theologian’s task is merely descriptive, there is no space within theology to judge or critically challenge the norms of a community. What DeHart’s reading of the interpretive direction in intratextuality points out is that, while not a foundational cognitive procedure or set of claims, it is foundational nonetheless, as it is predicated upon a particular set and reading of religious practices that are themselves regulated and normed, normed in such a way that they cannot be challenged or criticized theoretically or analytically.

This turn to “good performance” makes sense given Lindbeck’s concern with the maintenance and future of the church, but also reveals a limit to the generous and/or open claims of this frame as a method, as it seeks to direct and mold difference in a particular way rather than affirm it and be even perhaps truly shaped by it. For Lindbeck, good Christian theology is not only faithful (marked by/through intratextuality) but also applicable and intelligible. Lindbeck

⁷¹ Ibid., 95.

⁷² Ibid., 95.

⁷³ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 131.

understands and narrates applicability as “futurology,” arguing that a purpose of theology is “to shape present action to fit the anticipated and hoped-for future.”⁷⁴ DeHart points out that applicability as futurology reflects Lindbeck’s ecclesiology, particularly his concern for the future of the church and the Christian faith. DeHart explains that

The ultimate test is simply the cumulative process itself, which means the ongoing maintenance of the church’s witness. Christianity will live or die by its capacity to continually reshape a people of witness in ever-changing situations and deepen its encounter with the Good and True. Theology subserves this communal endeavor.⁷⁵

Lindbeck’s methodology operates to ethically/spiritually *form* and shape identity in a particular way, towards a normative vision of faithfulness revealed in and through the “ongoing maintenance” of Christianity throughout time.

Read in light of the concerns of this project, I would argue that Lindbeck’s methodological(-ethical) framework is generous in that it seeks to enable shifts in form as the Christian tradition moves throughout time and manifests in different spaces. That is, it accounts for how the tradition might be faithful as it takes different forms in different cultural milieus. But what of difference within communities themselves? And how are the ways in which those communities are constituted and perpetuated themselves problematic? Who is the ‘we’ that determines what marks faithfulness, and how does that function to foreclose and marginalize difference? This is, of course, a key question this project seeks to examine, challenging methodological-ethical frameworks as insufficiently attentive to this concern. I turn to how this theme of difference *within* communities (and the constitution of them) connects with themes of

⁷⁴ Ibid., 124.

⁷⁵ DeHart, *Trial of the Witnesses*, 99. DeHart explains: “A futurological approach to the practice of the faith means working to discern in a contemporary context those possibilities and junctures where Christian practitioners can become actively engaged as a sign pointing toward or furthering the salvific vision of the future ‘encoded’ in the Christian interpretive scheme” (96), and notes how “pointing to” and “furthering” are juxtaposed in way that is deliberately ambiguous (96, fn41).

the future and survival of those communities in the next chapter on queer time, but first, to further/more explicitly explore how this constitution of communal categories (and, by extension, their boundaries) operates within Lindbeck's methodological-ethical frame, I turn to Kathryn Tanner to examine how this too reflects a directional/teleological logic that forecloses generosity and difference.

§2. Tanner and/on the "directionality" of first v. second order reflection (and the attendant spatial logic/implications)

Like DeHart, Kathryn Tanner critically examines Lindbeck's postliberal theology as a method for addressing questions of Christian identity, and illuminates how these (Lindbeckian) "postliberal" methodological moves operate with and towards particular ethical ends.⁷⁶ Whereas DeHart interrogates *how* the language and practices of Christian communities inform method, outlining in Lindbeck a subtle but significant shift from descriptive resource to prescriptive norm, Tanner calls into question the *what*—what defines Christian identity—operative in that shift. What counts as Christian language and practice and the "grammar" that stems from both, and how is that categorized and adjudicated? In her book *Theories of Culture*, Tanner seeks to "tackle the question of Christian identity, both as a boundary issue that concerns the relation between what is and is not Christian, and as an issue that concerns what positively unifies Christian ways of life." She does so by turning to contemporary (postmodernist-influenced) anthropological scholarship on the notion of "culture."⁷⁷

A postmodernist account of culture, Tanner argues, challenges how postliberalism posits Christian identity in relation to broader culture(s), and challenges how theological methodology

⁷⁶ See fn44 above.

⁷⁷ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 63.

and ethics rely upon these assumptions.⁷⁸ Tanner outlines how modern accounts of culture are mirrored in/through postliberal Christian theology, and how postmodern anthropological critiques of the modern understanding, and subsequent definitional correctives, deserve attendant theological reflection.⁷⁹ Postmodern critiques and correctives to “culture,” Tanner explains, reveal in modern expressions and usages of said term an inattention to the realities of historical processes. Attention to those realities calls into question the modern view of culture as internally consistent and coherent, stable, distinctively discernable and identifiable, self-contained units that reflect and provide a sense of consensus and social order.⁸⁰ Postmodern critiques reveal how modern accounts of culture fail to grasp/attend to “the power dimension of meaning,” how “power is at stake in the interpretations of beliefs, values, or notions with a cultural currency.”⁸¹ At best, this failure to grasp the power of meaning-making that manifests through cultural adjudication results in the anthropologist becoming “unwittingly or not, a champion for the status quo.”⁸² These assumptions and omissions in and about culture reify norms and leave unquestioned how power and privilege operate in a given context.⁸³

Tanner applies this postmodern critique of “culture” to Christianity, to theological reflections where culture is wielded as a label for the world, for the historical particularity of Christianity over and against the world, or for accounting for differences in Christian beliefs

⁷⁸ Tanner’s argument is directed to postliberalism in general, but in this project, I apply her critique specifically to Lindbeck, in large part due to DeHart’s compelling argument on the differences between Lindbeck and Frei and the limits of postliberalism as a coherent, cohesive approach.

⁷⁹ See *Ibid.*, 24ff, n63.

⁸⁰ See *Ibid.*, 38–55.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 48.

⁸³ “What makes the modern notion of culture wrong is not the bare claim that culture is an ordering principle,” Tanner writes. “What is wrong is the *way* culture is talked about as an ordering principle: the idea that culture is an already constituted force for social order simply waiting to be imposed upon or transmitted externally to human beings who passively internalize or mechanically reproduce it” (*Ibid.*, 50).

across time. In light of the insights of this scholarship, Tanner argues that it is wrong-footed (at best) to speak of Christianity as *a* particular culture or way of life.⁸⁴ In short, Tanner critiques a notion of Christian identity as *spatially distinctive*—from other forms of identity, from non-Christian identity, from the broader “culture,” etc.

In her chapter on method, on the nature and tasks of theology, Tanner takes aim at *both* sides of the postliberal v. revisionist “debate,” explaining how both of the respective approaches operate with this dichotomous, distinctive notion of culture. Of the latter, she explains that “the whole *raison d’être* of a method of correlation hinges on assumptions about culture as a summary of human universals;” conversely, the former presupposes that Christian truth claims and cultural contexts are “independently generated wholes.”⁸⁵ Both approaches, she explains, “prejudge the nature of the Christian social practices within which theology is lodged.”⁸⁶ Of particular relevance to this project is how Tanner reads this prejudgment as manifesting in and through postliberal methodological reflections on Christian practices.

Postliberalism positions theology as a second-order reflection *on* Christian practices but overlooks the fact that “academic theology is itself a material social practice...not mere theoretical reflection on material social practices,” Tanner argues.⁸⁷ She explains that this distinction between first and second order reflection,

implies that those beliefs and values already exist as some consistent whole on the level of practice and that the academic theologian is doing nothing more than laying out the elements of that whole in the proper order they already have with one another. Thus, postliberal theologians might say that on their understanding of academic theology the

⁸⁴ Tanner instead suggests the notion of a “style” – the manner in which Christianity adapts the material it borrows and makes its own, as well as a *task* defined and pursued by “a community of argument” (Ibid., 156).

⁸⁵ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 66, 107.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 68.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 73.

theologian is simply describing (or redescribing in technical language not characteristic of Christian practice generally) the internal logic of Christian practice.⁸⁸

The turn to practices as a way to discern the content of Christian truth claims and uncover a kind of narrative logic or grammar, Tanner explains, is not merely a descriptive task, but “has a normative component whereby some first-order Christian practices, and some second-order ways of making sense of the logic of those practices, are criticized.”⁸⁹

The (incorrect/problematic) spatial distinctiveness of (Christian) culture (that is especially assumed by postliberalism), reveals as well as (re-)produces a *directionality* that, I want to suggest, makes this methodological frame a methodological-ethical one. As Tanner puts it:

... postliberal talk of describing the internal logic of first-order practices strongly suggests that second-order theology does nothing more than *uncover a logic internal to those practices themselves*; the task of second-order theology is simply to make explicit what is already present there in an implicit, unformalized manner. Presumably *only one logic is implicit in the practices, to which a second-order theologian is merely to conform*. . . . [the second-order theologian] criticizes and recommends changes in only those particular Christian practices that deviate from “the” logic or grammar of the faith, a logic or grammar that second-order theology seems simply to be tracing according to its already-established outlines.⁹⁰

Although Lindbeck seeks to be both faithful and generous, the logic/grammar/narrative of Christian identity charts a singular, normative path in and through those practices. The ordering or emphasis may have shifted—practices, rather than propositional claims, now serve as the primary distinguishing marker of Christian identity—but there remains a singular normative logic uncovered within or through Christian practice.

In her turn to postmodern anthropological work on culture, Tanner’s work challenges the presumption that Christian “identity” and “culture” are distinctive and separable from other

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 74.

⁹⁰ Ibid. emphases mine.

cultures of which Christians are a part. As she puts it, “Christian identity does not mean in any strong sense that all Christians share a common set of beliefs and values.”⁹¹ Tanner demonstrates how postliberalism’s (more specifically, Lindbeck’s) articulation of distinctive Christian identity and culture via identifying a grammar or language —its claimed task of “uncover[ing] a logic internal to those practices themselves”— “deflect[s] attention from the constructive activity of the academic theologian” and thus deflects attention “from the contestable character of any particular proposal for giving clarity and systematic coherence to the theological aspects of Christian practice.”⁹² In doing so, it participates in and perpetuates a foreclosing of difference by and to dominant cultural norms.

§3. *What’s time got to do with it? Methodological-ethical frameworks, formation, and the future*

Given this descriptive to prescriptive, methodological to ethical, multi-directional and co-constitutive to uni-directional and linear move that DeHart and Tanner chart, it is not surprising that Lindbeck’s account was embraced by some in theological ethics to call for a distinctive Christian community and way of life, that “a recondite discussion of theological method had become a question of the very survival of the church’s witness in a secular culture.”⁹³ The turning to and identification of particular Christian practices and language was taken up explicitly as a resource for Christian identity formation, as theological ethicists like Stanley Hauerwas who drew on Lindbeck to “begin fashioning a powerful model of the use of orienting narratives in the establishment of identity and in ethical decision making.”⁹⁴ If, as Lindbeck put it, the credibility of faith “comes from good performance” and the methodological task is largely

⁹¹ Ibid., 124.

⁹² Ibid., 74, 73.

⁹³ DeHart, *Trial of the Witnesses*, 36.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 30.

about determining what marks that good performance, the ethical task is to perform well.⁹⁵ Or, as Lauren Winner puts it in *Characteristic Damage*, her (forthcoming) monograph theologically and historically examining the effects of sin on Christian practices, “In the postliberal theological account, practices are generally not ambiguous. They are the things that constitute the church, the things that shape baptized people into disciples of Christ.”⁹⁶

This ethical turn to practices is a shift from the initial methodological turn, as DeHart points out, that as both DeHart’s and Tanner’s analysis suggest, is intimately tied to Lindbeck’s postliberal frame. Good Christian practices are revealed through the Christian narrative and tradition, but the Christian story cannot be interpreted or fully understood apart from participating in the practices of it. By extension, it is a small step to claim that faithful Christian identity and witness cannot be furthered without such participation in said practices. Lindbeck’s postliberalism functions, for this project, as a paradigmatic methodological-ethical frame because of the way in which it binds methodology and ethics together, towards a particular vision that intends to enable generosity and recognize a multiplicity of forms of expression.

In their respective analyses, however, both DeHart and Tanner illuminate how, within Lindbeckian postliberalism, the methodological aim of seeking to understand and articulate the nature and tasks of theology in shifting culture, seeking a faithful but generous account of Christian identity goes somewhat awry. DeHart shows that what was initially a descriptive turn to practices rather than doctrines as Christian identity’s ground becomes prescriptive. The goal of a “generous orthodoxy” that balances continuity and change ends up sacrificing theological generosity to ethical orthodoxy; difference—especially *within* Christian communities—to

⁹⁵ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 131. See also DeHart, *Trial of the Witnesses*, 97.

⁹⁶ See Lauren Winner, *Characteristic Damage*, forthcoming, with permission. Winner traces how, following postliberalism, the turn to the practices in Christian academic scholarship across disciplines and sociopolitical orientations is overwhelmingly a commendatory one.

sameness. Tanner's diagnosis of the root of the problem is a spatial one, in a sense; postliberalism adheres to a modern concept of cultures as internally the same and externally differentiated from one another by clear boundaries. But embedded in both their critiques is a temporal diagnosis. The ethical accounts and visions serve as the directional telos to which the methodological aims bend. The particular prescriptive, ethical norms remain the same over time and thus determine in advance what faithful practices—and thus faithful identity—are to be. Faithful generosity capitulates to a singular theo-ethical teleology.

The concern for and of the future is what both grounds and guides these ethical visions and the methodological-ethical frameworks that pursue them.⁹⁷ As DeHart points out, the future, the survival, of the church motivates Lindbeck's approach—as he seeks to preserve a unified Christian identity amidst an increasingly pluralist and secular society, and thus seeks effective Christian witness within such a society in order to preserve and maintain it into the future.⁹⁸ Moreover, the future shapes Lindbeck's methodological attention to cultural and contextual differences—to practices and language. DeHart charts how, for Lindbeck, shaped by his Lutheran heritage and its emphasis on history and language mediating the gospel, salvation was

⁹⁷ Virtue ethics, for instance, is another framework that reflects this methodological-ethical binding—it is no surprise, I think, that in theological ethical scholarship, virtue ethics and postliberalism are closely linked. Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre is a key example of this link, arguing in *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd edition (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007) that “excellence of character and intelligence should not be separated” (154). Modern moral discourse has failed, MacIntyre argues, because of the Enlightenment-born bifurcation of thought and practices, the separation of knowledge from communal narratives. MacIntyre turns to the virtue ethics tradition, to Aristotle (and Thomas) as diagnosis and corrective: thought and practice are (and should be) held together and oriented by a common telos, rooted in “notions as those of a practice, of the narrative unity of a human life and of a moral tradition... a shared vision of and understanding of goods” (258). Intellectual reflection shapes ethical action/practices, but those actions and practices should also shape intellectual reflections and the claims that come from that. On the one hand, methodology becomes the discursive space to claim, adjudicate, and discern that relationship; on the other hand, however, methodology becomes subjected to and impacted by that relationship, as the very act of determining the nature and tasks of theology is predicated on particular practices and performances.

⁹⁸ See DeHart, *Trial of the Witnesses*, chapter two, especially the section on “Orthodoxy and Society after Christendom.”

not ontologically located in the soul, but rather eschatologically located in the future.⁹⁹ Thus he was compelled to account for and understand the work of theology in seeking and furthering manifestations of that faith, towards that future.

Given this methodological turn to practices that is driven by a concern for the future, right practices—those that are identified as faithful Christian practices—do the work of enabling and securing such a future.¹⁰⁰ From both the methodological and ethical sides of the equation, the future is, again, both ground and guide. Concern about the future and what it means for Christianity is bound up with and to particular singular normative visions of what faithful Christian identity is, which is reflected in and furthered through the linking of methodology and ethics.

In this chapter, I have sought to demonstrate how, in Lindbeck's theology, the ethical serves as the telos to which the methodological is unilaterally directed and bends. There is a singular, prescriptive, normative vision of an ethical telos of what Christian identity is to look like and what practices embody and achieve it. While, in this chapter, I have turned to Lindbeck's postliberalism as a paradigmatic example of the kind of methodological-ethical framework I am examining and ultimately critiquing, it is precisely that, paradigmatic. In the body of this project, I show how similar frameworks manifest in feminist theological accounts of

⁹⁹ DeHart, *Trial of the Witnesses*, 64.

¹⁰⁰ Interestingly, to circle back to virtue ethics, for MacIntyre, practices themselves are defined by their orientation towards a good future and their ability to move towards that, by their teleological direction. He explains: "By a 'practice' I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which *goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence* which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. Tic-tac-toe is not an example of a practice in this sense, nor is throwing a football with skill; but the game of football is, and so is chess. Bricklaying is not a practice; architecture is. Planting turnips is not a practice; farming is. So are the enquiries of physics, chemistry and biology, and so is the work of the historian, and so are painting and music." (MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 175 emphasis mine).

Christian identity and formation—accounts that, like Lindbeck’s postliberalism, are concerned with the future and maintenance of faithful Christian identity and seek to be generous and open to difference. For Lindbeck, the scope is broader—his investment in affirming difference is ecumenical and ecclesial, focused on the differences between different Christian faith communities. For Sarah Coakley and Serene Jones, the differences that matter are those of gender and sexuality, both as aspects of contemporary individual identity and as the subject of feminist intellectual and social insights made in our contemporary cultural milieu.¹⁰¹ Just as DeHart and Tanner call into question (in different ways) the teleological ethical aims and emphasis of Lindbeckian postliberal methodology, I call into question and challenge how this framework manifests in the accounts of formation that are central to these feminist theologies.

In her critique of the postliberal methodological-ethical turn to practices, Tanner argues that postmodern insights on culture suggest that “one cannot appeal to something underlying or behind the surface of these changing patterns of actual use that will sort out in advance what new uses of Christian notions will turn out to be right or wrong,” that one cannot predetermine based on an assumed identification of a kind of grammar what right practices will be throughout time, how they will continue to look.¹⁰² “*Proper future practice cannot therefore be figured out ahead of time,*” she continues, laying out multiple options of such predetermination—such as “the rules or depth of grammar those practices follow”—as insufficient.¹⁰³ Again, in her critique of the spatial logics of Lindbeck’s postliberalism, Tanner raises questions about how time factors into such frameworks and turns to practices. In this project, I turn explicitly to theories of queer temporality as a critical resource for challenging methodological-ethical frameworks and/as uni-

¹⁰¹ See fn25 in the introduction above for more on this.

¹⁰² Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 79.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

directionally, prescriptively, normatively teleological. But first, it is important to introduce in more detail what queer temporality is and to begin to situate its relevance for this project.

CHAPTER TWO

ON FUTURITY AND/AS THE TELOS OF FORMATION:

INTRODUCING QUEER TEMPORALITY

While Lindbeck and his successors were caught up in debates in theological methodology that swirled around the question of Christian identity in a changing world, in queer theory a different kind of conversation around identity and its formation was soon to take place, one that, in raising questions about LGBTQI religious belonging and gender/sexual difference, is crucial to my project.¹

In the last chapter, I explored how Lindbeck's particular strand of "postliberalism" combined method and ethics in a distinctive, directional way—marshalling temporality, teleology, and norms together to and around (Christian) identity. DeHart's and Tanner's critiques demonstrate how norms are not so much destabilized or broadened, not so much reframed in light of and by the social and cultural context, but rather displaced from doctrinal propositions on to the practices and formation of identity itself. Moreover, although Lindbeck's aim was to balance normativity and difference, he defaults to a *singular, linear way* (a method) of determining ethical norms; one that, moreover, presupposes particular *ethical aims* linked to a presumptively singular (for each community) vision of Christian identity. This effectively ignores, suppresses, and/or obscures difference *within* each believing community. Lindbeck thus

¹ It is important to note that my use of LGBTQI here includes *nonnormative* sexual *and gender* identities. The theologians I address in Part II, Sarah Coakley and Serene Jones, are doing feminist theology, and are thus focused on (cisgender) women. I, in large part, engage their accounts in relation to their own aims. But as this chapter will come to show, my critique also calls into question the terms and borders of their analyses, identifying and calling into question their focus on cisgender women without attending to gendered nonnormativity.

threatens the generosity and “creative retrieval” he so seeks.² And, feminist theologians who have employed a similar logic in their accounts of formation likewise have, however implicitly or unintentionally, undermined the aims they seek of faithful flourishing amidst (gendered and sexual) difference (a topic I will address shortly, in part two of this project).

Queer theory’s turn to similar themes—identity and formation, practices and norms, communal belonging—illuminates this failure, offering to theology insight in locating and diagnosing the problem I have named, the ways in which difference is foreclosed in methodological-ethical frameworks of formation. Tanner’s and Dehart’s respective examinations of postliberalism demonstrate the ways in which practices, norms, and identity are tethered together and directed towards as well as by a particular end, and highlight the ways that such tethering might be inconsistent with Lindbeck’s aims and/or problematic. Queer theory not only illuminates additional dimensions to this process that I am referring to as a methodological-ethical frame, but also offers insight into how such a framework functions to foreclose difference. In its addressing of three different, increasingly broad loci—subjectivity, sociality, and temporality—queer theory offers insights that are particularly relevant to my project. This chapter will outline these loci and address each in increasing detail. While the object of queer theoretical analysis increases in breadth and scope, the relevance to the particular questions of this project also paradoxically or inversely increases in specificity. Honing in on queer temporality, I argue that these methodological-ethical frameworks operate in what José Esteban Muñoz calls “straight time’s chokehold.”³ Turning ultimately to queer temporal debates on futurity, I begin to challenge the uni-directional, prescriptive teleological ways in which

² DeHart, *Trial of the Witnesses*, 14.

³ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 182.

methodological-ethical frameworks understand gender and sexuality in relation to Christian formation, a task I take up in detail in part two.

I. Queer Theory, Formation, and Normativity

Addressing the formation of individuals as coherent subjects with discrete classifiable “identities,” how that subject formation shapes and is shaped by social norms and communal identity, and finally, how presumptions about and uses of time, as an identifiable, linear, narrative movement that forms subjects in/and communities, each of the loci of queer theoretical analysis on this trajectory illuminate how difference is ignored and suppressed and the consequences of that suppression, with increasing clarity and relevance for this exploration of feminist accounts of formation.

§1. Subjectivity: power and the formation of the “self”

Whereas spiritual formation and Christian identity have often been emphasized and elevated in theological discourse and practice, recognized as substantial in and for the Christian tradition (as the last chapter and introduction to this section has already explored in small part), a significant insight of queer theory has, conversely, been a critique of “discipline,” a critical recognition and interrogation of how bodies are policed and subjects are simultaneously constrained and constituted, as actions are turned into categorizable identities, formed by and according to particular norms and ideals.⁴ Throughout his oeuvre and prefiguring the emergence

⁴ This is not meant to be an overarching claim about the Christian tradition nor meant to be set as total polar opposite to queer theory. The Christian tradition is, of course, not monolithic or simple, and there are many threads and trends within the tradition that offer narratives that differ significantly from a notion of identifiable “positive” identity construction via particular practices of spiritual formation. For instance, on the one hand, Foucault was critical of the monastic tradition, seeing monasticism as “one of the earliest

of queer theory as such, French theorist Michel Foucault posits and charts this process, tracing how power functions discursively and *productively* in the very construction—and from there, control and containment—of “subjectivities, of (deviant) “identities:” the mad/insane, the delinquent/prisoner, the homosexual.⁵ In what is now one of the most oft-quoted and well-known passages of the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault writes:

The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality... The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.⁶

Foucault’s insight that power operates positively and productively, that there is a “regime of power-knowledge-pleasure that sustains the discourse on [in this case] human sexuality,” begins to illuminate the ways in which notions and processes of identity and formation are not neutral, only to be judged by the ends to which they aim, but are already working to regulate and ultimately normalize and constrain difference.⁷ To extrapolate briefly on this insight...

Foucault begins *History of Sexuality* volume 1 by challenging the widely held assumption that sexuality is repressed (what he calls the repressive hypothesis), as well as the notion that

paradigm structures of this disciplinary regime” that produced docile bodies (Jeremy Carrette, *Foucault and Religion: Spiritual Corporality and Political Spirituality* [New York: Routledge, 1999], 118). On the other hand, scholars like James Bernauer point out how Foucault’s work in various ways supports a kind of negative theology, that his work holds “a worldly mysticism” that can be read in terms of a “spiritual corporality” (James Bernauer, “The Prisons of Man: An Introduction to Foucault’s Negative Theology,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 27.4, no. 108 [1987]: 178). For more on this, see McGushin, *Foucault’s Askesis*.

⁵ The term most Foucauldian scholars use for this construction of subjectivities, which they get from Foucault, is not identity but *personnage* or, translated, character. As Mark Jordan puts it, “Across his analyses, Foucault attends to power’s creation of characters, whether for its agents or its victims” (*Convulsing Bodies: Religion and Resistance in Foucault* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2014), 142). The language of identity is, rightly, contested, but I retain it here given (1) the ubiquity of the term (in many instances, used as a synonym precisely for *personnage*) in American queer theory, and (2) the importance of Christian identity in and for theology.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 43.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

speaking about sexuality means that we are liberated. Tracing how power has functioned in and through talk about sex and sexuality, Foucault charts a shift from talk about sex *to* talk about sexuality, as the movement from church confessional to therapy couch shifted the terms of confession from “what I did” to “who I am.” Foucault refers to this historical-cultural shift to where “sex is constituted as a problem of truth” as *scientia sexualis*, a discursive practice where sexuality is explained and categorized—and thus constituted—through psychoanalytic and scientific discourse.⁸ Foucault offers a list of how the “immense and traditional extortion of the sexual confession [came] to be constituted in scientific terms,” in short, of how sexuality is produced: a clinical codification of the inducement to speak; the postulate of a general and diffuse causality; the principle of a latency intrinsic to sexuality; the method of interpretation; and the medicalization of the effects of confession.”⁹

Thus, Foucault demonstrates that sexuality as we understand it has a history of its own, a history that is bound up in regulation and power dynamics: that sexuality is an *effect of power*, not simply the “truth” that power acts upon. Mark Jordan offers a succinct summary of Foucault’s analysis: “Sexuality is the specific correlate of a recent form of power-knowledge, a science that characterizes the modern period. To explain our ceaseless speaking is to explain how we became subject to that science or, rather, how we came to be formed as subjects for it.”¹⁰ In this recognition of the cultural construction of sexuality, of identity, by discourses and practices of power, Foucault articulates how the body (and beyond—one’s desires, interpersonal and

⁸ Ibid., 56.

⁹ Ibid., 65, 65–67.

¹⁰ Jordan, *Convulsing Bodies*, 102. He continues, explaining that, according to Foucault, “Sexuality is just the kind of object that sexual science needs. Subjects defined by reified sexual desire come into being because the new science must exercise its power on them. The language of sexuality is not a representation of preexisting entities, of persons or their intrinsic properties. It is dictated by the shifting tactics, the adjusted operations, and the continuously calibrated effects that constitute science” (103).

psychic schemas, etc.) is controlled in and through (in part) the productive construction of (categories of) identity. Humans are made—and make *themselves*—subjects, which “imposes a law of truth” on the individual, “which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him.” As such, this makes the individual “subject to someone else by control and dependence.”¹¹ Though we think that claiming or asserting identity is a paradigmatic sign of our freedom, Foucault identifies it as a form of power exercised over us. In claiming identity, one assumes and presupposes it as a given, and one thus affirms its formative, disciplining powers on our lives. This led Foucault to muse that, perhaps, “the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are.”¹²

Foucault’s work on power, sex, and the emergence of sexuality as a “truth,” demonstrates how actions become reified as “identities,” and how those identities become a way that actions are in turn regulated, through the presumption and production of norms.¹³ How, though, does this process of categorization and subsequent regulation function to foreclose difference? While Foucault’s insights certainly gesture to ways in which this constitution of “sexuality as one of the prime categories of normalization” engendered and demanded a heterogeneity determined and produced via regimes of power-knowledge. However, it was theorists drawing on his work—as well as on the psychoanalytic thinkers whose work shaped queer theory, Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan—that turned explicitly to the question of sociality, normativity, and queerness that made this link particularly clear.¹⁴

¹¹ Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (July 1, 1982): 781.

¹² *Ibid.*, 785.

¹³ See fn5 above re: a discussion of my use of the term “identity” as a kind of shorthand, vs. the Foucauldian language of *personnage* or, translated, character.

¹⁴ Jordan, *Convulsing Bodies*, 102.

§2. (Anti-) Sociality: normativity and (queer un-) belonging

Just over ten years after Foucault published his first volume of the *History of Sexuality*, and still three years before queer theory was coined and taken up as a term, Leo Bersani turned to how not just sexuality, but gay sex itself, resists normalization and, from there, resists sociality. In his now (in-)famous essay, “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” written in relation and response to the then-very-much-current AIDS crisis, Bersani not only calls bluff on the practice of gay sex as counter-culturally redemptive—scoffing at the notion that gay bathhouses are some sort of “Whitmanesque democracy,” and pointing out that subversive effects do not presuppose subversive intentions—but also trenchantly critiques the ideology behind the notion of (gay) sex as redemption, a false ideology that has been “rendered obsolescent,” which has been one of the fortunate, however ironically, byproducts, of “the homophobic rage unleashed by AIDS.”¹⁵ For Bersani, the rectum is a grave, in that the “passivity” of gay male sex is “suicidal,” because, for men, to accept penetration is to be feminized. As Bersani puts it, “there is a legal and moral incompatibility between sexual passivity and civic authority. The only ‘honorable sexual behavior consists in being active, in dominating, in penetrating, and in thereby exercising one’s authority.”¹⁶ Bersani points out that this is evidenced even in “anatomical considerations,” which reflect not essentialist claims but recognition of the effects of power. He explains:

Those effects of power which, as Foucault has argued, are inherent in the relational itself... can perhaps most easily be exacerbated and polarized into relations of mastery and subordination in sex, and that this potential may be grounded in the shifting experience that every human being has of his or her body and its capacity, or failure, to control and manipulate the world.¹⁷

¹⁵ Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” *October* 43 (Winter 1987): 206, 213.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 212. Bersani here references Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 2, specifically chapter 4; see 212 en16.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 216.

In short, for Bersani, the (hetero-) normative “ideological exploitations of this fantasmatic potential” for mastery and power is a reflection of male power, and for gay men — or women (gay or straight) — to embrace it is to reify said power.¹⁸

Instead, Bersani suggests that gay men (and presumably all women) should embrace what the discourse (or lack thereof) on gay male sex during the AIDS crisis reflects — the “loss of control” in sex, the “radical disintegration and humiliation of the self,” epitomized by the “seductive and intolerable image of a grown man, legs high in the air, unable to refuse the suicidal ecstasy of being a woman.”¹⁹ From a different angle, Bersani, like Foucault, challenges the ways in which sexuality has been linked to the formation of the “self,” a self governed by particular social norms, and suggests that (gay) sex is counter to this subjectivizing notion of sexuality—that the “self which the sexual shatters provides the basis on which sexuality is associated with power.” Continuing, he argues that “it is perhaps primarily the degeneration of the sexual into a relationship that condemns sexuality to become a struggle for power. As soon as persons are posited, the war begins. It is the self that swells with excitement at the idea of being on top.”²⁰ Given this relationship between sexual passivity and civil authority and norms, Bersani argues that the gay community should embrace sex for what it really is: “anticonmunal, antiegalitarian, antinurturing, antiloving.”²¹ At the heart of Bersani’s critique was the notion that gay sex and those who engaged in it were inevitably counter-normative, and that freedom and pleasure meant embracing that.

¹⁸ Ibid. This ideology, Bersani asserts, has “a long and inglorious history” reflected in and through male power.”

¹⁹ Ibid., 217, 212.

²⁰ Ibid., 218.

²¹ Ibid., 215.

In his monograph *Homos*, Bersani elaborated on the critique he began in “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” speaking now, in 1995, from a time when AIDS is no longer in the forefront and queer theory has now become a “thing.”²² Citing now-canonical queer theorists Monique Wittig, Judith Butler, and Michael Warner, Bersani addresses the reticence or “aversion to ‘homosexuality’ on the part of self-identified homosexual activists and theorists.”²³ Acknowledging how there are “excellent historical reasons for this distrust,” Bersani suggests that “these suspicions of identity are necessary [but] they are not necessarily liberating.”²⁴ He continues explaining that, because “deconstructing an imposed identity will not erase the habit of desire, it might be more profitable to test the resistance of the identity from *within* the desire.”²⁵ *Homos* is his attempt to do just that, and, again building on “Rectum,” he argues that within gay desire, there is “a revolutionary inaptitude for heteroized sociality [which] of course means sociality as we know it.”²⁶ Queerness, or, as Bersani puts it, “homo-ness,” demands—or, perhaps, merely *is*—an eschewal of “assimilation into already constituted communities.”²⁷ Instead, the goal for Bersani is an “anticommunal mode of connectedness we all might share, or a new way of coming together,” a

²² See Teresa de Lauretis, “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities. An Introduction.,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6, no. 2–3 (1994): 296–313. Teresa de Lauretis is known for coining the term queer theory; a professor of the history of consciousness at University of California Santa Barbara, de Lauretis organized a conference with the goal of articulating “the terms in which lesbian and gay sexualities may be understood and imagined as forms of resistance to cultural homogenization, counteracting dominant discourses with other constructions of the subject in culture” (iii). In order to capture this sense of resistance, to call into question what it has meant that “‘lesbian and gay’ ... has become standard currency” and to “both transgress and transcend” the liabilities that come with those identity markers, de Lauretis called the conference “Queer Theory: Gay and Lesbian Sexualities” (v).

²³ Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 1.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

“redefinition of community itself, *one that would be considerably less indebted than we are now to the communal virtues elaborated by those who want us to disappear.*”²⁸

Bersani’s analysis in “Is the Rectum a Grave?” and *Homos* marked the beginning of a prominent set of approaches in queer theory dubbed the “antisocial thesis.” As Robert Caserio explained in a panel on the theme at the 2005 Modern Language Association convention, “Bersani’s formulation and others like it have inspired a decade of explorations of queer unbelonging.”²⁹ While queer theory as a discipline has critically interrogated subject formation and its normalizing and constraining effects, it has spurred different answers or solutions to that critical analysis. The antisocial thesis in particular has identified, challenged, and sought to resist investments in subjectivity and how subjects have been formed socially, shaped by various sources of power-knowledge, recognizing within that social formation a process of normalization and assimilation that still fails to recognize and embrace difference.³⁰

To offer one brief example: rather than, say, assimilating or broadening marriage norms to include same-sex relationships, antisociality challenges the very investments in heteronormativity. This is a theme Michael Warner addresses in *The Trouble with Normal*, directing his critique to the “state regulation of sexuality.”³¹ Warner recalls how queer thought around the time of Stonewall resisted the seeking of legitimation by and through same-sex

²⁸ Ibid., 10, 131 emphasis mine.

²⁹ See Robert L. Caserio et al., “The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory,” *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (May 1, 2006): 819. The panel discussion, and this published roundtable that resulted from it, included Lee Edelman, Judith Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz, and Tim Dean.

³⁰ As Lynne Huffer puts it in *Are the Lips a Grave?*, “the differences between the intersectional and antisocial strands of queer theory revolve...around differing investments in subjectivity” (17, n47). Also, while the focus here is on difference in terms of sexuality, as Huffer’s claim about subjectivity and Bersani’s account of antisociality gesture towards, the critique of norms and their disciplinary, subjectivizing effects extend beyond the realm of sexuality. For that reason, I use the term difference here, and at various points throughout this chapter in particular, without specifying it as gender or sexual difference.

³¹ Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*, New Ed edition (New York: Harvard University Press, 1999), 88.

marriage, arguing that, amongst other reasons, this was because it “resisted any attempt to make the norm of straight culture into the standards by which queer life should be measured” and “insisted that much of what was taken to be morality, respectability, or decorum was, in practice, a way of regulating sexual pleasures and relations.”³² Pointing out how the seeking of legitimacy via gay marriage has “rendered inarticulate” those who do not fit into the new slightly broadened cultural norms. Noting that these happen to be the same bodies and desires that queer politics has fought for, Warner argues that strategies for legitimation and normalcy are “a mistake” that “represent a widespread loss of vision in the movement.”³³ This echoes his claim in his previous book, *Fear of a Queer Planet*, where he writes that queerness is “resistance to heteronormativity.”³⁴

Whereas Foucault emphasized the role of the social in enforcing conformity, Bersani and antisocial theorists who followed emphasized non-conformity, tending to how gay sex and desire, how homo-ness/ queerness, figures outside of that sociality. Antisocial theorists have elucidated how sociality and relationality operate with a normalizing logic of *inclusion* that seeks to conform, assimilate, or render illegible difference. One key way that the antisocial thesis has been taken up in queer theory that is particularly relevant for this project is in its turn towards time itself, which is, finally, the topic to which I now turn.

³² Ibid., 89.

³³ Ibid., 3, vii. Warner explains that the quest for legitimacy functions as a kind of “politics of shame” that leads to the “unthinkability of ... desire” (7).

³⁴ Michael Warner, *Fear Of A Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 1993), xxvi. Or, as David Halperin puts it a bit more broadly: “Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant.” *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 62.

§3. *From subject formation and (anti-) sociality to the underlying temporal logics*

Perhaps one of the most significant ways the turn towards time has been taken up in queer theory, certainly one of the most well-known, is through Lee Edelman's provocative book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. I begin here not to immediately delve into the details of Edelman's argument—that will come later in this section—but because this monograph is a clear and poignant example of how the antisocial thesis has made the turn towards time. Deeply influenced by Bersani's work, Edelman argues against what he calls reproductive futurism, a logic that undergirds our very conception of the political and social, as we “attempt to produce a more desirable social order.”³⁵ This logic, Edelman argues, is distilled through *time*, the desired social order transmitted “to the future in the form of its inner Child.”³⁶ Time, and particularly the future, become the venue through which straight, heterosexist sociality manifests, and as such, just as “useful thought... may be created by questioning the compatibility of homosexuality with civic service,” so too, Edelman suggests, might there be some useful thought in questioning the compatibility of queerness with the normative temporal logic of the future, as that logic is grounded in the value attached to reproduction and the figure of the child.³⁷ Put another way, just as homo-ness for Bersani is marked by “a revolutionary inaptitude for heteroized sociality,” for Edelman, queerness “names the side of those *not* fighting for the children,” and figures as “the place of the social order's death drive.”³⁸ Temporal logics serve as the frame—the grounding and the telos—through which heteronormative sociality functions.

In their description for the fourteenth transdisciplinary theological colloquium at Drew University, on “Sexual Disorientations: Queer Temporalities, Affects, Theologies,” Stephen

³⁵ Edelman, *No Future*, 3.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Bersani, *Homos*, 113.

³⁸ Edelman, *No Future*, 3.

Moore, Kent Brintnall, and Joseph Marchal situate the queer theoretical turn to temporality within the broader context of queer theory. “Just as the foundational work of queer theory reveals that conceptions of gender, sexuality and race are not natural or inevitable, but social and conventional—and hence, ethical and political,” they explain, “this body of work underscores that even seemingly commonsensical categories like past, present, and future are intimately bound up with desire and power.”³⁹ In illuminating how time is bound up with desire and power, queer turns towards time turn to different themes/loci to identify, diagnose, and challenge iterations and logics of straight time, to “replace reliance on logics of repetition, linearity, periodicity, and teleology with images of temporal drags and co-presences, anachronisms and proximities, contaminations and touches across time.”⁴⁰

In short, the queer theoretical turn to temporality explores and challenges “the logic of (hetero)sexual ideology as it shapes our pervasive understandings of politics, temporality, and social relations,” and has diagnosed and critiqued particular aspects, logics, and presuppositions commonly held about time as reflective of that heterosexual/heterosexist ideology.⁴¹ What, specifically are those aspects of (straight) time that are critiqued and challenged? The beginning of this section gestured to one aspect that Edelman suggests, the future and the way it is bound up with an investment in reproduction and the figure of the child. The next section will explore futurity, as well as other critiques lobbed at, and responses to straight temporal logics.

³⁹ See “About,” *Sexual Disorientations: Queer Temporalities, Affects, Theologies*, accessed November 30, 2016, <http://depts.drew.edu/tsfac/colloquium/14/index.html>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Edelman in Caserio et al., “The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory,” 821.

II. Temporality: normativity, narratives, teleology, and futurity (or, queer temporal critiques of and responses to straight time)

Perhaps one of the clearest and most salient examples of a queer critique of straight temporality (and gesture to an alternative) is offered by J. Jack Halberstam in a roundtable discussion on the topic. Halberstam offers a vignette that is worth reproducing in its entirety.

They explain:

I am in grammar school in England in the 1970's, and in assembly hall the headmistress wants to let the girls know that it is our responsibility to dress appropriately so as not to "incite" the male teachers to regrettable actions. This, she says, will be good training for us, since we are here to prepare ourselves for marriage and family. I hear a loud voice in my head saying fuck family, fuck marriage, fuck the male teachers, this is not my life, that will not be my timeline. Queer time for me is the dark nightclub, the perverse turn away from the narrative coherence of adolescence—early adulthood—marriage—reproduction—child rearing—retirement—death, the embrace of late childhood in place of early adulthood or immaturity in place of responsibility. It is a theory of queerness as a way of being in the world and a critique of the careful social scripts that usher even the most queer among us through major markers of individual development and into normativity.⁴²

In their text *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, Halberstam expounds and critically reflects on this story, arguing that straight time is manifested in and through a "life narrative [that] charts an obvious transition out of childish dependency through marriage and into adult responsibility through reproduction," a sense of time that creates and reinforces "'institutions of intimacy' through which heteronormative culture secures its 'metacultural intelligibility.'"⁴³ While Halberstam is assuredly making a value judgment about these heteronormative social scripts, that value judgement is based in a broader recognition of the ways in which time and temporal logics are indeed "bound up in power and desire," and that

⁴² Halberstam in Dinshaw et al., "Theorizing Queer Temporalities," 182.

⁴³ Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005), 153. Halberstam here is quoting and relying upon Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 553.

this particular dominant narrative is one that privileges and presumes heteronormativity, positing a singular acceptable way of being, and being formed, in and by the world.

The roundtable dialogue on “Theorizing Queer Temporalities” in which Halberstam offers their vignette presents a number of different ways in which temporal presumptions and discourses are bound up in power and desire and how such temporal presumptions and discourses can both become and challenge undergirding ways in which difference-foreclosing norms are upheld and perpetuated.⁴⁴ Of particular relevance to this project is Edelman’s challenge to the ways in which we turn time *into* history, which “offer[s] the promise of sequence as the royal road to *consequence*.”⁴⁵ The turn by queer theorists to temporality and its relevance to my project can perhaps be explained by the same trajectory I have used to explain queer theory more broadly. Queer temporality has critically interrogated and challenged how *the temporal logics embedded within* subject formation and sociality have aided and abetted processes and practices of regulation, assimilation, and normativization that exile queer desire from the social. In response, they call for a different, queer, temporality.

The first subsection speaks to my critique of how within methodological-ethical frames, norms are not so much reframed by social contexts but displaced on to the practices and formation of identity itself, and how this functions to undermine difference; the second then points to how this displacement also marshals teleology to this revised vision of Christian identity, uni-directionally seeking particular ends—more simply, perhaps, the first subsection addresses the methodological, the second the ethical.

⁴⁴ From Roderick Ferguson’s application of philosophical critiques of progress and historicism (i.e. Benjamin, Lowe) to sociological discourses about African-American sexuality and Carolyn Dinshaw’s queering of history and reworking linear temporality, to Annamarie Jagose’s shift from representation to temporality in her examination of lesbian (in-)visibility and cultural productions of lesbianism, to name just a few. See Dinshaw et al., “Theorizing Queer Temporalities.”

⁴⁵ Edelman in *Ibid.*, 181.

§1. *Formation, normativization, socialization, and the narrative logic of time*

Whereas theologians like Lindbeck have turned to practices as a way of moving beyond ahistoricized, non-contextualized accounts of Christian identity and formation anchored by propositional truth claims, some of the work in queer temporality, particularly the more historical and affect-based scholarship, challenges the presumption that a shift to practices and a focus on formation circumvents the ahistoricizing non-generosity (for lack of better words) that such methodological-ethical frames seek to avoid. Halberstam's reflection that began this section offer one such example, pointing to how particular social scripts posit, circulate, and thus reify particular presumed norms and ideals temporally via certain life narratives and notions of development.

In their critique, Halberstam challenges the ways time moves with a “narrative coherence” directed towards a particular normative end—for Halberstam, this temporal logic is straight in multiple senses of the word: it seeks straightness, and it is singular, linear, uni-directional.⁴⁶ These factors coalesce to produce a kind of “straight time,” which Dustin Bradley Goldz describes as that “which adopts a linear—and so literally ‘straight’—approach to time... a temporal trajectory through heteronormative progression that relies upon the assumed naturalness, correctness, and inevitability of heteronormative time orientation.”⁴⁷ Others, like Carolyn Dinshaw, Carla Freccero, and Heather Love echo Halberstam's critique in that they point to the ways time itself at times (pun intended?) functions in ways that are actually often rather queer and explore how queerness of and within time itself might be a useful resource in

⁴⁶ Halberstam in *Ibid.*, 182.

⁴⁷ Dustin Bradley Goltz, *Queer Temporalities in Gay Male Representation: Tragedy, Normativity, and Futurity* (Routledge, 2009), 117.

and for queer lives.⁴⁸ Through both critique and construction, these thinkers challenge the way time is utilized and or presumed to function in a linear, singular, narratively-coherent route towards a prescriptive, normative, homogenous end.⁴⁹

One of the most salient examples of queer temporality's critique of a singular normative, "straight" logic of development is found in Elizabeth Freeman's insights on the ways in which "time binds." In her monograph of that title, Freeman explores how, even preceding any prescriptive aims, the temporal ordering of time already reflects a logic of (hetero)normativity that forecloses difference—temporality itself has come to be a tool and marker of power, a "mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts."⁵⁰

This is what Freeman means by this claim that time binds. She explains, in a passage worth citing at length:

By 'binds, I mean to invoke the way that human energy is collated so that it can sustain itself. By 'time binds,' I mean something beyond the obvious point that people find themselves with less time than they need. Instead, I mean that naked flesh is bound into socially meaningful embodiment through temporal regulation: binding is what turns mere existence into a form of mastery in a process I'll refer to as *chrononormativity*, or the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity. And I mean that people are bound to one another, engrouped, made to feel coherently collective,

⁴⁸ I.e. how loss and setbacks accompany and are interwoven with progress, or how desires are bound up with and shaped by past experiences. See for instance, Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 1999); Carla Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2006); Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 2009).

⁴⁹ To offer one example from the roundtable discussion: Dinshaw explains that she is seeking to develop in her work what she calls "a postdisenchanted temporal perspective, one that opens up to an expansive now but—unlike, say, a medieval Christian view of time and history—is shaped by a critique of teleological linearity, that is, rejects the necessity of revealed truth at the end of time or as the meaning of all time" ("Theorizing Queer Temporalities," 186. I'll return to Dinshaw's notion in chapter 5.

⁵⁰ Freeman, *Time Binds*, 3. Power, within Freeman's analysis—as is the case with queer theory more broadly, is not necessarily negative or entirely "bad," but it often is turned to as a normativizing and regulative force. For more on this theme, see Foucault, "The Subject and Power."

through particular orchestrations of time: Dana Lucian has termed this *chronobiopolitics*, or ‘the sexual arrangement of the time of life’ of entire populations.⁵¹

Freeman points out that “time, then, is not only of the essence; it actually produces ‘essences’—well-rested bodies, controlled orgasms, and so on.”⁵² Temporal logics, for Freeman, are one of the most significant and salient tools of regulation and assimilation, whereby “people whose individual bodies are synchronized not only with one another but also with larger temporal schemes experience belonging itself as natural.”⁵³

Freeman’s critique of chronobiopolitics echoes Halberstam’s critique of straight time and the ways in which it manifests through normative life narratives. “In a chronobiological society,” Freeman explains, “the state and other institutions [i.e. the church/religious institutions?] link properly temporalized bodies to narratives of movement and change. These are *teleological* schemes of events or strategies for living such as marriage, accumulation of health and wealth for the future, reproduction, childrearing, and death and its attendant rituals.”⁵⁴ The queer temporal critiques of the linear, narrative logic of straight time and how it forms individuals into a normative homogenous sociality also holds within it a critique of the ways individual and communal narratives and the practices that accompany them operate with and towards an ideal end that further reflects and perpetuates homogeneity. The methodological shift to practices and patterns in Lindbeck’s theology may reflect a *desired* openness to difference, but a queer temporal lens reveals how the actual temporal logics of patterns and practices are more circuitous

⁵¹ Freeman, *Time Binds*, 3.

⁵² Elizabeth Freeman, “Introduction,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 2–3 (January 1, 2007): 160. In this introduction to the special issue on queer temporalities, Freeman explains that things like “Schedules, calendars, time zones, and even wristwatches are ways to inculcate what the sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel calls ‘hidden rhythms,’ forms of temporal experience that seem natural to those whom they privilege,” and offers a number of examples, such as the shift from an 18-hour to an 8-hour workday and the term ‘premature ejaculation’ (160).

⁵³ Freeman, *Time Binds*, 4.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* emphasis mine.

and less linear than Lindbeck presumes, as well as how the presumed and/or desired telos of that linear, narrative sense of time itself undermines difference, articulating the stakes for LGBTQI Christians in a theology that operates within such a frame. I turn now to the queer temporal discussion on teleology, further outlining discussion on the foreclosing effects of teleological linear narratives as well as turning to the constructive possibilities queer time offers.

§2. *Time, teleology, and futurity*

Given the recognition of the normativizing and foreclosing effects of “straight time,” queer theoretical scholarship on temporality has turned to ask: how then should one approach time and the ways in which individuals and communities exist in and through it. If, again, “(hetero)sexual ideology...shapes our pervasive understandings of power, *temporality*, and social relations,” is there a space outside of this?⁵⁵ In asking this question, queer scholars have (ironically, it may seem) turned to the theme of the future. If theorists of queer temporality have persuasively argued that a singular, teleological, narratively-cohering account of time (read: straight time) closes off difference, what does it mean or look like to think of and/or about the future? Queer temporal turns to the future have generally been divided into two camps: queer negativity, represented by Lee Edelman, on the one hand, and queer utopianism, upheld by José Esteban Muñoz, on the other.⁵⁶

The “Theorizing Queer Temporalities” roundtable discussion, which Edelman participates in, opens with a prompt from Freeman asking the scholars involved to reflect on

⁵⁵ Edelman in Caserio et al., “The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory,” 821 emphasis mine.

⁵⁶ While these are not the only figures associated with these respective approaches—Tim Dean is also often associated with queer utopianism, and Leo Bersani and, to some degree, J. Jack Halberstam, with queer negativity—they are the most prominent and representative. See Caserio et al., “The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory”; Dinshaw et al., “Theorizing Queer Temporalities.”

“how and why the rubric of temporality...became important to your thinking as a queer theorist [and what] concerns motivated the turn toward time for you?”⁵⁷ Several of the contributors respond by reflecting on the various ways their respective works address and challenge the presumptive straightness of time—its presumed linearity, the positivity of practices, etcetera. When it is Edelman’s turn to respond, he steps back (takes it a step further?), raising questions as to whether individuals and communities should, or even can, resist the normalizing effects of modern subject-formation enacted by and through time. “Opening this conversation with a series of questions presupposing a ‘turn toward time’ already establishes as our central concern not the movement *toward* time but *of* it” he explains, it, time, being “the motionless ‘movement’ of historical procession obedient to origins, intentions, and ends whose authority rules over all.”⁵⁸ Continuing, he poses the question: “What if that very framing [of a ‘turn *towards* time’] repeats the structuring of social reality that establishes heteronormativity as the guardian of temporal (re)production?”⁵⁹

In his book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Edelman expounds at length on this claim, calling for a (queer) rejection of the future. Grounding his analysis in a Lacanian psychoanalytic framework, Edelman argues that the queer inhabits the space of the death drive in the cultural/imaginative psyche of contemporary Western culture, a psyche governed by what he calls reproductive futurism. Edelman explains that reproductive futurism is the logic that undergirds our very conception of the political, as we “attempt to produce a more desirable social order,” through a turn to the future, all of which is filtered through and gains force through

⁵⁷ Freeman in Dinshaw et al., “Theorizing Queer Temporalities,” 177.

⁵⁸ Edelman in *Ibid.*, 180.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 181, emphasis mine.

the figure of the Child—the promised future, innocent and full of potential.⁶⁰ Within the politics of reproductive futurism the figure of the Child serves as the fantasy to “screen out the emptiness that the signifier embeds at the core of the Symbolic,” the figure of the future that promises to attain that desired wholeness.⁶¹ As Edelman puts it, the “Child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention.”⁶²

Within this frame, the queer is the anti-child, the pervert who is governed by the pleasure principle—queerness “names the side of those *not* ‘fighting for the children, the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirm the absolute value of reproductive futurism.’”⁶³ It is precisely within and through this rejection of the future that Edelman locates what he argues is the only viable possibility for a queer oppositional politics.⁶⁴ One reviewer of *No Future* offers a helpful pithy summary of this logic:

because the political is constituted as and through the future, it must necessarily disavow any threats to that future; the queer is positioned precisely as such a threat to the future. Therefore, for the queer to remain a threat to the political, he or she must embrace this very position of disavowal, of abjection, of perversion, of being the threat to the political per se... Not to be a dangerous, threatening pervert is, simply, to be normal. And to be normal is to be complicit in the discourse of domination that are perpetrated in and through this very narrow discourse of ‘the political.’⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Edelman, *No Future*, 3.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶³ *Ibid.* Edelman offers a Lacanian-inspired neologism, naming the queer as the “sinthomosexual” of/within US culture (see 33ff).

⁶⁴ “The consequences of such an identification both of and with the Child as the preeminent emblem of the motivating end, though one endlessly postponed, of every political vision *as a vision of futurity* must weigh on any delineation of a queer oppositional politics.” *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶⁵ Shannon Winnibst, “Review Essay: No Future,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28 (2010): 181. Another reviewer, J. Blake Huggins, also offers a useful and succinctly summary in a conference paper engaging *No Future*. He explains that Edelman’s project “aims to reclaim queerness against the Symbolic by embracing its negative position within the Symbolic,” and that “queer negativity here involves rejecting the future because the affirmation of the future within the Symbolic would amount to the regulation of possibility *a priori*, an instantiation of teleological determination, a suturing together of the split self, and the consolidation of identity.” J. Blake Huggins, “The Future of ‘No Future’:

Queers should thus not only eschew the narrative linear logics of straight time but reject the very order through which such logics unavoidably operate, an order that excludes queers. As Edelman provocatively and (but?) poignantly puts it, queers should embrace the logic that others project on to them regardless, and should proudly proclaim: “Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized...fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop.”⁶⁶ The future has no place for the truly queer, so our political and social task is to stop trying to conform (as to do so is to erase queerness, to erase difference) and embrace the present and our status as the Other in it.

Like Edelman, José Esteban Muñoz is concerned with, and rejects, the way futurity functions within heteronormative contemporary culture to normativize, regulate, and foreclose difference. But whereas Edelman locates that function within the very *notion of* futurity and its fantasmatic role within the Symbolic order that “secures normativity’s identity” and “affirms normativity’s singular truth,” Muñoz locates it in a *logic of* futurity, a “pragmatic” straight temporality that orients itself to and by heteronormativity.⁶⁷ “Straight time tells us that there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life,” Muñoz argues, explaining that the “only futurity promised is that of reproductive majoritarian heterosexuality.”⁶⁸ Muñoz laud’s

Plasticity, Temporality, and the Undecidable” (Religion Interruptus: The Affects of Sex, Politics, and Bodies, Syracuse University, 2015), 3.

⁶⁶ Edelman, *No Future*, 29. Edelman’s call is even more...powerful.. in its full context, and bears citing more fully here. He writes: “Queers must respond to the violent force of such constant provocations not only by insisting on our equal right to the social order’s prerogatives, not only by avowing our capacity to promote that order’s coherence and integrity, but also by saying explicitly what Law and the Pope and the whole of the Symbolic order for which they stand hear anyway in each and every expression or manifestation of queer sexuality: Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from Les Mis; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the New; fuck Laws both with capital ls and with small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop.”

⁶⁷ Ibid., 26; Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 21.

⁶⁸ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 22.

Edelman's disdain of the culture of the child, though disagrees with his analysis of the ultimate source of, as well as his proposed response to, that culture.⁶⁹ While he rejects a straight temporality and the future it offers, Muñoz also rejects Edelman's queer negativity, "refus[ing] to give up on concepts such as politics, hope, and futurity."⁷⁰ For Muñoz, Edelman's eschewal of the future *en toto* itself operates in a straight temporal logic, granting too much power to the heteronormative Symbolic order, consigning resistance to the province of the present (and thus abdicating all accounts—and possibilities—of the future to the province of the Symbolic).⁷¹

In light of this critique, Muñoz proposes an account of futurity that seeks to move beyond "what can only be seen as a binary logic of opposition."⁷² Turning to Ernst Bloch's work on utopianism and hope, Muñoz proposes instead a queer sense of time, "an ordering of life that is not dictated by the spatial/temporal coordinates of straight time," which relies upon and engenders an alternate account of futurity, not as prescriptive teleological end determined and arrived at by heteronormativity, but as horizon—a "forward-dawning queerness," queerness as the not-yet conscious.⁷³ Queerness as potentiality, as "not quite here," both reflects as well as enables engagement in "a collective temporal distortion" of the straight present.⁷⁴ Muñoz explains:

Queerness' time is a stepping out of the linearity of straight time. Straight time is a self-naturalizing temporality. Straight time's "presentness" needs to be phenomenologically questioned, and this is the fundamental value of a queer utopian hermeneutics.

⁶⁹ Ibid. cf. 11, 91-92.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 92.

⁷¹ As Muñoz puts it: "My argument is therefore interested in critiquing the ontological certitude that I understand to be partnered with the politics of presentist and pragmatic contemporary gay identity. This mode of ontological certitude is often represented through a narration of disappearance and negativity that boils down to another game of fort-da." Ibid., 11.

⁷² Ibid., 49.

⁷³ Ibid., 31, 21.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 185.

Queerness' ecstatic and horizontal temporality is a path and movement to a greater openness to the world.⁷⁵

As always-horizon, the utopian promise of/via queer time is always possible—it is potentiality, Muñoz explains, drawing on Agamben—but it is never graspable, not marked by a singular determined telos.⁷⁶ Rather, it is glimpsed and enacted in everydayness and excesses, and in *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz turns to different “utopian bonds, affiliations, designs, and gestures that exist within the present moment” as examples of sites that offer us “an anticipatory illumination of queerness.”⁷⁷

In short, for Edelman the very notion of futurity disciplines and closes off difference, whereas for Muñoz, it is not the future per se that is the problem but rather the ways in which straight time constricts the future by demanding conformity to a norm. Put another way, for Muñoz, (investments in/visions of) the future can be redeemed and recast; for Edelman, all visions of futurity perpetuate the very problem, and thus must be eschewed. In the chapters that follow, I turn to Edelman's and Muñoz's respective approaches in more depth, placing them in conversation with (feminist) theologies and exploring what they bring to the table for thinking about formation and belonging amidst difference, examining the potential textual, methodological, and ethical possibilities and risks of their respective accounts. Here, my aim is simple to point out that, despite their differences, Edelman's and Muñoz's turn to futurity—and the queer turn to temporality more broadly—hold in common a recognition and critique of how temporality functions and is operationalized teleologically, towards a future, in a way that suppresses and constrains difference.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 25.

⁷⁶ See Ibid., 21, en4.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 22–23. In particular, Muñoz turns to aesthetics as sites of this illumination, looking at various queer art performances.

* * *

This project is a diagnostic one—it seeks to discover and give name to what I identify as an ailment in theological methodology and ethics: how we attend to—or, rather, fail to rightly and/or adequately attend to—intrahuman difference (particularly gender and sexuality), in how we understand faithful Christian identity and the formation of it, and from there, in how we envision and enact Christian community. This is an ailment that theological method and ethics has sought to address many a time before, and chapter one charts that history, focusing in on one recent, potentially compelling diagnosis and subsequent curative offered in Lindbeck’s postliberal framework. This project is also a kind of epidemiological project, interested in exploring the patterns, causes, and effects of this ailment and its manifestations.⁷⁸

Epidemiological analysis rejects simplistic or shallow explanations of disease and health, seeking more robust and long-lasting public wellness outcomes by zooming out to explore the big picture and how various factors intersect and/or interact within it. In the spirit of this kind of analysis, a close examination of Lindbeck’s frame found it wanting, discovering that it’s not only failed to attend to difference *within* Christian communities—an ailment of which suicides like Brian's are particularly devastating manifestations—but also that its proposed interventions in many ways undermined or worked against the desired outcome. Chapter one turned to DeHart and Tanner to do a sort of first round of epidemiological investigation, theologically identifying and challenging some key problematic patterns and presumptions undergirding this Lindbeckian framework.

⁷⁸ I am of course using this as a loose metaphor, as epidemiology is a particular discipline/area of public health. Another, perhaps better, disciplinary metaphor could have been community psychology or social work, but both prove more stylistically pedantic as metaphors and thus proved less stylistically useful.

In recognizing that ailments have many causes and manifestations—in order to effectively zoom out—epidemiological analysis itself must also zoom out, drawing on different disciplines, theories, and frameworks in order to get a full picture of the situation. Similarly, in this chapter I have turned to queer temporality in order to get a better sense of the problem this project seeks to address. Queer temporal scholarship illuminates the ways in which time binds norms, subjectivity, and sociality, to each other and to time itself via conceptions and visions of futurity, charting how through those bindings, difference is foreclosed. Put another way, couching the theological analysis of chapter one inside the queer temporal scholarship outlined here in chapter two, this project argues that methodological-ethical frameworks operate in/according to a logic of straight time and in doing so, foreclose on difference. Given this project's particular concerns, I turn now to feminist theological accounts of formation that operate with this methodological-ethical framework, placing these accounts in conversation with queer temporality to identify the particular ways in which straight time manifests (hint[/already revealed] spoiler: through how gender and sexuality are understood in relation to Christian identity) in theological frameworks that are avowedly attentive and committed to embracing (particularly these forms of) difference.

PART II. FEMINIST METHODOLOGICAL-ETHICAL FRAMEWORKS IN STRAIGHT TIME

From Tertullian's claim that "Woman is a temple built over a sewer, the gateway to the devil," to Luther's assertion that the "words and works of God is quite clear, that women were made either to be wives or prostitutes;" from John Wesley's admonishments to his wife to be "content to be a private, insignificant person," to Paul Tillich's extramarital affairs and womanizing tendencies... in their theologies and in their own lives, Christian theologians have, historically, not exactly been known to be a champion of women or of gender equality amidst embodied difference.¹ Historically, in theology as well as in philosophy and culture more broadly, the judgment of what counts as human was drawn from male experiences. And this "judgment prevailed until women stepped forward and raised their voices in protest."² Feminist theology has been a key avenue for this voice raising, challenging theological claims of and bases for sexism through a variety of methods, often through close readings and fresh interpretations of the very theologians whose sexist remarks it denounces.

Yet, history has also made clear that feminist theology (like the feminist theory and praxis it in part draws from) has itself not always been a champion of equality for all who experience discrimination informed by gender. Throughout their own histories, feminisms and feminist theologies have often neglected differences between and among women. Though

¹ See Quintus Septimus Florens Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women* (Washington, D.C: Codex Spiritualis, 2012), chapter 1; Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. Vol. 12: Selected Psalms I (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 94; Wesley's letter to his wife, July 15, 1774, as found in John Henry Overton, *John Wesley* (London: Methuen, 1891), 184; Hannah Tillich, *From Time to Time*. (New York: Stein & Day, 1973); Richard Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr* (New York: Pantheon, 1985).

² Anne M. Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 9.

feminist political organizing stemmed from women's involvement in the abolitionist movement, it was not long before large (and powerful) swathes of the movement began ignoring difference, focusing on middle class, white women's experiences and needs to the detriment, and often at the expense of, women of color, poor and working class women, and LGBTQI people.³ In theology, womanist, mujerista, Asian feminist, and queer-feminist theologies have developed in part in response to this problem within "mainstream" feminist theologies.

This project responds to this history and tradition within feminist theology, turning to queer temporality as a resource in order to not so much as construct a new subcategory of feminist theology but to do what Tanner calls "internal critique."⁴ This project, as the first section outlined, focuses on examples of feminist theological discourse that, like Lindbeck, seek a generous orthodoxy that is open to difference—specifically, in these accounts, an openness to embodied difference that is marked as female.⁵ Toward that end, they, too deploy methodological-ethical accounts of formation, the gendered forms of difference they are addressing being uni-directionally shaped by Christian identity and formational practices, and linearly directed in that way towards prescriptive ends. Although they represent advances in different ways over Lindbeck, their work ends up ultimately undermining difference—and for similar reasons.

³ As Audre Lorde put it in 1979: "If white American feminist theory need not deal with the differences between us (black women and all women of color), and the resulting difference in our oppressions, then how do you deal with the fact that women who clean your houses and tend your children while you attend conferences on feminist theory are, for the most part, poor women and women of color? What is the theory of racist feminism?" Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007), 111. See also fn5 below.

⁴ See chapter 1.

⁵ As well as, though to a lesser extent in these particular accounts, difference that is manifested in and by minoritized and marginalized sexualities. While Coakley especially attends to some degree to sexuality in her discussion of desire, these accounts focus primarily on gender, though there are undoubtedly implications for sexuality, which I address as they arise in this section of the project.

Here, as way into the close readings and critical analysis in the chapters themselves, a bit of my own narrative might be helpful...

Raised in a conservative evangelical home and community, my interests—my desires, my goals, my... *self*—always felt fractured, split in two with the respective sides in competition with each other. On the one side was my desire to be faithful to what I saw as the difficult and sacrificial but ultimately liberating way of Jesus, way of the Cross; on the other, my *desires*: my interests in reading and debating the finer points of systematics with men that far-overshadowed my interests in shopping with my girlfriends as we talked about our interests in men, not to mention the libidinal, emotional, spiritual, erotic urges brimming within me towards and for *women*. These parts of me would spar nearly daily, the respective sides both taking their turns at knocking the other side down, but never out. I was constantly sore, broken, dizzy. Neither side would cede defeat.

As these two sides both grew stronger, fueled by the hearty nutrition and exercise regimen that is higher education, I discovered that knowledge and scholarship was a life raft that enabled me to jump from the ship that was my conservative religious upbringing (or, one might say, that was there waiting after I was forced to walk the plank). This life raft of scholarly learning and community was sponsored by two disciplines both coming to my aid—feminism and academic theology. Feminism had given me hope, helping me to imagine new possibilities for myself beyond what I had planned when I started college, which had been to find a husband—the Mrs. degree!—preferably one who would become a pastor. Feminism helped me see that I could be a pastor myself if I wanted to, that gender didn't limit me from what I had been taught growing up were men's jobs. And while feminism was what enabled me to accept this, theology was what enabled me to pursue it, as I discovered the joys of exploring and

pursuing the truths and meanings of the Christian faith—of examining the history of a doctrine, comparing readings of a theological claim in light of its history and in light of other doctrines and theological claims, of debating the meanings and implications of theological arguments, of putting all of those things and more together to construct my own theological claims. Feminism was what enabled me to accept and pursue my interests, theology was where those interests lay. At least at first.

I rather quickly realized that this dichotomy was far too neat, and that it resulted in just a different variation of the split that I had experienced growing up, taking on a new, more educated form—on one side, feminism, on the other side, theology. Studying theology as a woman often read, in multiple ways, as a charge to be less of a woman—to certainly be interested in less womanly things, and (like?) feminism. The less “womanly things” part was not much of a problem for me—I preferred what were often perceived as more male activities: sports over shopping, beer over wine, theology and philosophy over...whatever it was women were supposed to talk about. Feminism, though, was what had enabled me to embrace rather than fight my less womanly proclivities; it what led me to consider theology, and Divinity school, in the first place. But to attend to feminism was, it felt like, to shirk from the real work of theology, which was focused more on less embodied and social matters, on things like metaphysics and the doctrine of the Trinity.

Things didn't seem much better from the feminist side, which often scoffed at religion, certainly at the patriarchal history (and often present!) of Christianity, with theological study often serving as the handmaiden for such patriarchy, with, to give just one example, its Trinitarian justifications for male language for God. Not to mention that, while I liked the new possibilities it opened to me, feminism often wanted to put me into a box I didn't quite seem to

fit. “We’re the same as men and deserved to be treated as such,” some of my new feminist friends would exclaim. Others would argue the opposite, explaining that “the problem is that we’re not recognized for our differences, that femininity isn’t valued in this sexist society!” I found myself confused at who this “we” that everyone was talking about was—I didn’t feel like a man, but I didn’t exactly feel like a Woman either. The fact that I was a womanish woman that also happened to like other women certainly didn’t make things any easier—I mean, if I liked women, and didn’t really like men, then clearly I thought there was something to this whole being a woman thing...

With both feminism and theology, I had found a life raft but I found myself wondering if either would let me on to their rescue boats to take me to shore. And if so, how would I chose which one? I found myself unable to get on either boat—intact, not split apart into two halves, but drifting further out to sea.

And then, in my second year of Divinity School, I came across Sarah Coakley, and soon after that, Serene Jones. I had encountered feminist theology briefly before, but, at least as I had been taught and/or had perceived at the time, it had seemed to make me choose, either giving up parts of my interests in theology that were deemed patriarchal, or embracing a certain understanding of feminism, giving up parts of myself in that way. But Coakley was a feminist theologian my male only-interested-in-“pure”-systematics friends liked. “...this false disjunction between systematic theology and gender studies need not so much to be overcome, but rather to be approached from a different, and mind-changing direction,” Coakley informed me, chiding the dueling boxers inside of me and calling for a different approach.⁶ The Trinity, one of the

⁶ Sarah Coakley, “Is There a Future for Gender and Theology? On Gender, Contemplation, and the Systematic Task,” *Criterion: A Publication of the University of Chicago Divinity School* 47, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2009): 4.

most “orthodox” theological themes, was that which called for that direction change and served as its foundation. Jones, too, turned closely to doctrines and theological themes and thinkers, including the Trinity to give hope for women who suffered miscarriages, to Calvin and Luther’s writings on justification and sanctification to re-examine feminist theoretical work on gender. Reading Coakley and Jones were the first times these dueling sides of myself caught a glimpse of the possibility that maybe, just maybe, they didn’t actually have to be constantly fighting—that perhaps they could be a kind of boxing team, fighting *together* against the greater opponents of idolatry, sin, and sexism. “...the task of theology is always, if implicitly, a recommendation for life” Coakley writes.⁷ “God wants women to flourish as creatures equal in beauty, stature, and power to men,” Jones asserts, and “only a faith that actively encourages this flourishing is worthy of the God who gifts us with life, love, and hope.”⁸

In contesting and blurring the boundaries between feminism and theology, Jones and Coakley also inadvertently introduced me to poststructuralist feminist theory, to work that was challenging the accounts of *feminism* I found so polarizing and limiting. Through them, I was introduced to Judith Butler, whose theory that gender was constructed, that our identities were formed, reformed, and performed almost immediately made me feel like so much less of a freak than I had felt with my mixed, unmatching interests. The “insistence upon the coherence and unity of the category of women has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of ‘women’ are constructed.”⁹ Butler’s words gave voice to my feelings of estrangement, and offered a compelling explanation of how I got

⁷ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 18.

⁸ Serene Jones, “Glorious Creation, Beautiful Law,” in *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw and Serene Jones (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 22.

⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 19–20.

there, the various forces that not so much pushed me out to sea, but that gave the name “ocean” to the water I was floating in and that told me waiting for a rescue boat was my only option. *Gender Trouble* didn’t negate the fact that I was floating in this large body of water, but it did teach me that I could swim. Or tread water, if that’s what I wanted to do. Or get together with others floating in life vests and together craft a boat of our own. “In other words, the ‘unity’ of gender is the effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through a compulsory heterosexuality,” Butler explains, following up by asking, “What kind of subversive repetition might call into question the regulatory practice of identity itself?”¹⁰ And not only was a (presumptively) secular gender theorist saying all of these things, but Coakley and Jones pointed out that it was right there, in the Christian tradition all along, in Gregory of Nyssa and Calvin, in accounts of Trinitarian desire and the doctrine of sanctification!

Yet, as I kept reading Coakley and Jones over the next few years, as I dove into Butler’s work, as well as the scholarship Butler drew on, finding myself especially enamored with Michel Foucault, I began to sense that Coakley and Jones had some pretty different ideas on how to navigate “the ocean” than Butler did, at least in terms of how they understood gender. While I continued to find rich and profound insights and resources in their work, Jones and Coakley’s respective approaches began to feel more like new life rafts seeking to take me to a certain promised land, a land where gender was transformed into something new. While on some levels, this was quite appealing—gender binaries transformed by and through God! A land of milk and honey!—it felt...limiting, constraining. “Do not ask me who I am and do not ask me to remain the same,” Foucault writes in *Archaeology of Knowledge*. “Leave it to our bureaucrats and our

¹⁰ Ibid., 42.

police to see that our papers are in order.”¹¹ I was beginning to feel like Coakley and Jones were asking me who I was and where I was going—to get my papers in order.

Nevertheless, I still found myself deeply drawn to their work for the ways they both presented a kind of middle way— showing me I can have gender theory and the Christian tradition, feminism and my faith. I wasn’t sure where they was going—I mean, maybe I wasn’t quite reading Butler correctly, or reading Coakley and Jones correctly... or, hell, maybe Butler was wrong (gasp!)—but I was deeply drawn to the ways they had put these “sides” of feminism and the Christian faith in conversation, that these discourses—and thus, these competing “sides” of myself—weren’t fighting anymore, but were at the very least talking peacefully. I wasn’t beating myself up anymore or feeling split in two.

“...if one is resolutely not engaged in the practices of prayer, contemplation, and worship, then there are certain sorts of philosophical insight that are unlikely, if not impossible, to become available to one.”¹² Years later, reading volume 1 of Coakley’s systematics during my doctoral studies, I realized that, though these sides weren’t fighting anymore, the match was set up so that theology would always, always win—theology and feminism weren’t on the same plane, where they were at peace with each other, working in unison. Rather, it was a tense treaty, a kind of (inverse?) Faustian bargain, where feminism gets to stay in the game if it agrees that theology would always reign victorious. Returning to Jones, I saw this same logic there, an embrace of *some* aspects of gender theory, within the clearly marked bounds of Christian theology. I saw this logic present in patterns and practices of formation itself, ways in which Christian identity and theological claims about it marked the bounds of gender and sexual

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 17.

¹² Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 16.

identity.

This section, then, argues that in Coakley's and Jones' methodological-ethical accounts of formation, the game is indeed rigged—that, despite vast differences in their approaches, they both posit a directional relationship between Christian identity and gendered/sexual identities, that, as we've seen, undermines attention to differences and thereby undermines their own aims. To turn first to Coakley...

CHAPTER THREE

GOD, SEXUALITY, STRAIGHT TIME, AND THE SELF: ON SARAH COAKLEY

...divine desire purgatively reformulates human desire. It follows that all the other problems of power, sex, and gender with which contemporary theory struggles so notably cannot be solved, I dare to say—whether by human political power, violent fiat, or even subversive deviousness or ritualized revolt—without such prior surrender to the divine.
- Sarah Coakley

Gender (embodied difference) is here not to be eradicated, note, but to be transformed; it still “matters,” but only because God desires it to matter and can remake it in the image of his Son.
- Sarah Coakley

The result of contemplative prayer is “distinctive ways of knowing” achieved through willingness “to endure a form of naked dispossession before God; ...surrender control; ...accept the arid vacancy of a simple waiting on God in prayer.... All these are the ascetical tests of contemplation without which no epistemic or spiritual deepening can start to occur.” The dispossession of the self is simultaneously an achievement of the self: It is a decision freely made, an almost Promethean submissiveness.
- Linn Tonstad

There is perhaps no work more relevant to this project than that of Anglican theologian Sarah Coakley. While Coakley’s oeuvre is extensive in both its depth and breadth—she has written on a variety of topics ranging from the liberal christology of Ernst Troeltsch to disputes within patristic trinitarian formulations to evolution and the rationality of religious belief—a persistent and central theme in Coakley’s scholarship is the relationship between Christian practices (particularly prayer), theology, and feminism.¹ In her acclaimed collection of essays on

¹ In an interview with Rupert Shortt, Coakley explains that “time on my knees [...] provides one of the central themes for my entire project as a systematic theologian,” and that the “loss of mastery” that prayer engenders “is not inimical to feminist empowerment, but—paradoxically—is its very condition” (71). Sarah Coakley, “New Paths in Systematic Theology,” in *God’s Advocates: Christian Thinkers in Conversation*, ed. Rupert Shortt (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 67–85. And in an introduction to a symposium on Coakley’s work, Gösta Hallonsten notes that “the characteristic features of the theological work of Sarah Coakley” are “clearly feminism and gender

Powers and Submission, Coakley posits a rendering of Christian feminism that is grounded in a “fundamental and *practiced* dependency on God.”² Coakley further pursues these topics in the first volume of her systematic theology, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity,’* foregrounding the connections between prayer, systematics, and gender/sexuality/feminism as central to her theological system and, as the subtitle intimates, situating these themes under and alongside the doctrine of God.

In addition to marking the explicit shift to feminist theology and the topic of gender and sexuality as the direct site of analysis, the turn to Coakley highlights the individual in a way that the turn to Lindbeck’s postliberalism did not. Whereas I explored how Lindbeck’s frame had ramifications for individuals in terms of communal identity and belonging, this chapter on Coakley focuses, as Coakley herself does, specifically on individual formation. In this chapter I explore how Coakley understands the relationship between Christian identity and gendered and sexual identities in and through her accounts of the formation of the self. In doing so, I also seek to demonstrate how this impacts what constitutes community and its boundaries, and how that might influence belonging. Individual and communal formation are, of course, interrelated, and both are vulnerable to critique from a queer temporal lens.

While this chapter marks a shift, it nonetheless identifies and seeks to chart the same pattern that I identified and began to critique in Part I. Coakley’s methodological work—her

theology” as well as “the emphasis on prayer, especially contemplative prayer, and also on practice as a locus for doing theology” (49, 50). Gösta Hallonsten, “Sarah Coakley--A Symposium,” *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 85, no. 1 (2009): 49–51.

² Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), xx. As Mark Oppenheimer puts it in a review of the text for the *Christian Century*, “In the thicket of verbiage are two main clearings, general themes that reappear. The first is that feminist theory is a powerful tool not always well used. The second is that prayer needs to be a central category of theology” (27). Mark Oppenheimer, “Sarah Coakley Reconstructs Feminism,” *The Christian Century*, June 28, 2003.

introduction of a method she calls *théologie totale*, which I will describe shortly—is especially salient in that it reflects an attention to the very level of analysis I seek to explore. For Coakley, theology is not merely a collection of doctrines to be assented to, but rather, “theology is always, if implicitly, a recommendation for life.”³ As such, it must attend “to the different *levels* and *forms* at which doctrine may be purveyed,” which requires a methodological awareness of and attention to a variety of mediums and resources (such as feminist theory), as well as an attention to “bodily and spiritual practices (both individual and liturgical) [as] the precondition” for theology.⁴ Whereas DeHart’s and, to a lesser degree, Tanner’s, analysis highlighted how Lindbeck’s postliberal frame reflected and engendered particular ethical commitments, and in doing so blurred the methodological aims of his work—and thus produced what I am have been calling in this project a methodological-ethical framework—Coakley’s *théologie totale* functions more explicitly as such a (methodological-ethical) framework that “keeps ethics, doctrine, and spiritual practice tightly wound together.”⁵

This chapter examines *théologie totale* as a methodological-ethical frame by highlighting its distinguishing features (its nine distinctive methodological hallmarks), the effects it seeks/claims to accomplish, and the theo-onto-epistemological assumptions that undergird it.⁶ Whereas the doctrinal and metaphysical assertions of Coakley’s theology as well as her theo-ethical embrace of submission have been the subject of much praise, debate and discussion, particularly from feminist perspectives, less critical attention has been given to her

³ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 18. See also the section on “What is Systematic Theology,” 36-40.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁶ For the list of the methodological hallmarks of *théologie totale*, see *Ibid.*, 87–97. As I indicated and illustrated in part I, I seek to closely examine not only the claims themselves, but the frameworks those claims are a part of and the assumptions undergirding them, seeking to show how they operate in “straight time” and thus participate in and perpetuate a certain kind of heteronormative theological imagination.

methodology.⁷ *Théologie totale* has already been lauded by many, including myself, particularly for its commitment to and articulation of a middle way—an approach that integrates concerns that have often been polarized (with often negative effects). *Théologie totale* takes seriously both systematics and the social sciences, postmodern relativism and Enlightenment rationality, abstract theory and embodied practices. Contemplation is a pivotal resource for challenging idolatry and mastery, for rethinking gender and sexuality, and for encountering difference.⁸ As Coakley puts it:

the very act of contemplation—repeated, lived, embodied, suffered—is an act that, by grace and over time, inculcates mental patterns of ‘un-mastery,’ welcomes the dark realm of the unconscious, opens up a radical attention to the ‘other,’ and instigates an acute awareness of the messy entanglement of sexual desires and desire for God.⁹

In *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, the first volume of her four-part systematic theology, Coakley offers *théologie totale* as a method based on this act, as well as the theological grounding, and ethical impact of this claim. It “bind[s] questions of theological method, contemplative practice, and desire into a new tether,” via “a specifically trinitarian understanding of God,” and in doing

⁷ See, for instance, Anna Mercedes, *Power For: Feminism and Christ’s Self-Giving* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2011); Beth Felker Jones, “The Spirit Helps Us in Our Weakness: A Review of *God, Sexuality, and the Self*,” *The Other Journal*, accessed April 7, 2015, <http://theotherjournal.com/2014/06/09/the-spirit-helps-us-in-our-weakness-a-review-of-god-sexuality-and-the-self/>; Elizabeth Antus, “On Desire Lines: Sarah Coakley, Vulnerability, and What Turns Us On,” *WIT: Women in Theology*, September 4, 2013, <https://womenintheology.org/2013/09/04/on-desire-lines-sarah-coakley-vulnerability-and-what-turns-us-on/>. It is also important to note here how there has been less critical attention to Coakley’s methodology, 1. because it is still rather new, and 2. because there is a lot in it that is (potentially) liberative/transformative, as I speak to in the introduction to part two.

⁸ For instance, in a review of her work, Frances Young writes that Coakley offers “a new take on feminist theology” (Frances Young, “On Desiring God: A New Take on Feminist Theology,” *The Marginalia Review of Books*, December 9, 2014, 10, <http://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/desiring-god-new-take-feminist-theology/>). Similarly, Mark Oppenheimer, a religion journalist most known for his biweekly “Beliefs” column in *The New York Times*, writes that her scholarship “reconstructs feminism” (Oppenheimer, “Sarah Coakley Reconstructs Feminism.”). Also, it is important to note that, as the following quote above indicates, difference, for Coakley, is addressed in and through the language of the “other.”

⁹ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 43.

so, offers fresh insight for feminism that secular gender theory is unable to provide.¹⁰ This chapter explores this framework and these claims, through a turn to queer temporality and with an attention to how *théologie totale* understands gender and sexual subjectivities in relation to Christian identity.

Coakley's pursuit of "a theology founded in intentional practices of un-mastery," with contemplation, as a "disciplined form of unknowing" at its center, marks another significant shift—perhaps *the* most significant shift, in the context of this project/broader argument—from the Lindbeckian postliberalism examined in chapter one.¹¹ Whereas Lindbeck's framework is, ultimately, positive and productive, Coakley's account is decidedly more "negative"—cautious about the productive force and effects of actions and behaviors and seeking, through/via method, a kind of un-doing, an un-handing of mastery in and through "the apophatic act of contemplation." It is also decidedly less neat; aware of and attentive to "messy entanglements," of "sexual desires and desire for God," especially, but also of "human and divine powers and submissions," of "doctrinal truth and social reality," of "political, sexual, and doctrinal agendas in any such trinitarian thinking," all from which "there is no escape."¹²

However, as with Lindbeck, this shift from propositions to practices that Coakley proposes relocates normativity. Practices do not just embody norms, but they *become*

¹⁰ Ibid., 34. Coakley argues that "Whereas secular gender theory argues, and agonizes, about how it can shift and transform cultural presumptions about gender that are often unconsciously and unthinkingly replicated, a contemplative theology in *via* has at its disposal, first, theological concepts of creation, fall, and redemption which place the performances of gender in a spectrum of existential possibilities between despair and hope" (53-54).

¹¹ Ibid., 66, 43.

¹² Ibid., 43, 67, 90, 190, 59. Regarding the positivity and linearity of Lindbeck's postliberal framework, this is particularly evident in the way theological ethicists like Hauerwas have taken up Lindbeck's frame, turning to the church as a distinctive polis through which a people are formed, by way of particular practices and towards a particular vision.

normative—and, ultimately, singular.¹³ While Coakley’s apophatic vision is, in theory, inclusive of differences in gender and sexuality (at the outset, at least), those differences are erased or minimized as one is assimilated into and by particular prayer practices, practices that in turn undo and transform that difference. Coakley’s vision of formation (theological, liturgical, and individual) articulated through *théologie totale* treats gender and sexuality as aspects of our selves that are transformed rather than undone.

In *God and Difference: The Trinity, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Finitude*, Linn Tonstad attributes Coakley’s “struggles with difference” and with “attentiveness to the other” to problems in her Trinitarian theology.¹⁴ Coakley advocates that “Humans practice self-erasure so that God may move in, for true humanity means ceding to the divine.” “Yet,” Tonstad points out, within Coakley’s frame, “the human being’s free practice of contemplation also conditions the movement of God in significant ways.”¹⁵ I agree with Tonstad, but want to extend her diagnosis beyond Coakley’s Trinitarian theology to her methodology and ethics.

¹³ Tonstad’s *God and Difference* explores how this collapse manifests precisely in and through her trinitarian theological rationale, in the logic of dependence and submission she presumes.

¹⁴ Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 118. Tonstad points to a presumptive two-ness of gender (read: sexual difference in the French feminist sense) within Coakley’s framework that, while broadened and destabilized, remains operative—i.e. “the praying submissive discovers that her Christic transformation ‘feminizes’ her into the ‘masculine’ Christ”—as a key way in which Coakley a wider breadth of difference and attentiveness to the other is undermined in Coakley’s account (102). Tonstad traces how, because of this, Coakley’s vision of “[u]ndoing gender hierarchies means no more than permitting and working toward liberal goals of equality and justice... while valorizing the bodied and affective dimensions stereotypically associated with the feminine and derogated in same Christian and Enlightenment traditions” (106). In focusing undoing gender hierarchy in these ways, Tonstad points out that Coakley does not get at “the fundamental feminist conviction... that the very social order needs to change,” and she demonstrates how Coakley “remains trapped in what she sees to be feminist aporias of equality and difference” (106). Tonstad also outlines various ways in which she sees Coakley’s trinitarian framework undermine rather than bolster an attentiveness to difference, turning particular to Coakley’s elucidation of how prayer functions to transform desire as it is applied to a prison inmate population. For more on this see the section on “Attentiveness to the Other,” in *God and Difference*, 118-121.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 99.

Rather than affirming the “messy entanglements” of desire, *théologie totale* seeks to clean up and straighten out such messy entanglements by directing them toward God.¹⁶ In directing them toward a singular telos, differences of gender and sexuality are homogenized and flattened rather than destabilized. In other words, *théologie totale* manifests the logic of straight time. While Coakley’s goal of un-mastery is laudable, her *vision of* un-mastery—of what it *is* and how one pursues it—ultimately sacrifices differences of gender and sexuality to a singular teleology. That teleology thwarts, stymies, and ultimately undercuts *théologie totale*’s aspiration to be a middle way, a theology *in via*, an “unsystematic systematics” that is attentive and open to otherness, that fosters awareness of “messy entanglements,” and thereby pursues/aligns with the “rightful goals of a distinctively Christian feminism.”¹⁷

Queer temporality offers a lens and language through which to make this critique by calling into question the logic and potential consequences of a singular/presumptive/ prescriptive telos centered upon a desiring subject that relies upon a narrative coherence and demands particular practices. It reveals what I will call a teleology of success in Coakley’s account that undermines *théologie totale*’s pursuit of un-mastery, gender lability, and openness to otherness.

The first section of this chapter addresses Coakley’s account of subject formation, exploring how Coakley relies on particular ontological and epistemological assumptions about

¹⁶ Ibid., 118. While this is not Tonstad’s main focus, she does attend to this within her broader argument, explaining that “Trinitarian theology has lost its way [having become] a way to enjoying practices of sacrifice and submission under the banner of countering the rapaciousness of modern subjectivity,” and that the “accompanying articulations of trinitarian personhood reflect deeply gendered and... misguided assumptions about human and divine personhood” (1). It is also not surprising that Tonstad goes “deep” to the very foundation of (Coakley’s) theology, given her search—that I seek to build on here—of “where in the theological imaginary are heterosexism and heteronormativity grounded and maintained” (3)?

¹⁷ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 343. Interestingly, Coakley does not bring up feminism explicitly until towards the end of the text—the first explicit mention is on page 234. In her discussion of feminism, she refers frequently back to Chapters 1 & 2, where she does not address feminism directly, but does explore at length why “gender ‘matters’” (53) and what *théologie totale* offers to/over-and-against secular gender theory. As Linn Tonstad puts it, “It is on the grounds of attentiveness to gender that Coakley is a feminist theologian” (*God and Difference*, 101).

difference, time, and subject formation in and through time that impact and undergird her vision of what gender difference and un-mastery are, as well as how to “get there.” I begin by turning to her explicit reflections on gender, placing her in conversation with Judith Butler and Linn Tonstad. With their assistance, I explore and critically examine Coakley’s eschatological vision and its trinitarian frame and her subsequent claims on the “transformation” of gender and sexuality, outlining how her account of gender forecloses difference rather than opens up to it. From there I examine how this trinitarian, eschatological account of gender is indicative of and a part of her account of subjectivity, which operates with a narrative coherence towards a particular ideal, leaving little space for difference.

In summary, in section one, I argue that while Coakley claims/seeks to articulate a path/method that engenders “self-erasure” and from there, a “radical attention to the ‘other,’” her vision of un-mastery (as a re-orientation of desire/the self) and the path towards it (via *théologie totale*) contradict and countermand those aims.¹⁸ This manifests in her explicit turn to gender and sexuality, and in the broader shape of her methodological-ethical frame. I reveal a level of contradiction at work in Coakley’s frame, between her account of subjectivity and her aims. Placing this self-contradiction within the framework of queer temporality uncovers its deeper roots in straight time.

In the second section, I turn briefly to how straight time operates in and through Coakley’s account of particular practices not only of the self, but of academic theology, exploring her metaphor of Wigan Pier. Thus, Coakley’s understanding of theology, too, works against her aims. Finally, I conclude by turning briefly to Jack Halberstam’s reflections on the “queer art of failure,” along with Lynne Huffer, to begin to explore how queer temporality opens

¹⁸ Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 99; Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 43.

up possibilities for a different way of addressing Coakley’s concerns; one that resonates with Coakley’s project, but that avoids the problems I outline in the first two sections. I begin by turning to Coakley’s account of subject formation—its gendered claims and presumptions, its narrative logic, and the status of the self in it...

I. (Gendered) Difference, the (Desiring) Subject, and (the Telos of) Straight Time

To understand how Coakley operates with an account of subjectivity, desire, and gender that is rooted in a straight temporal logic, it is important to give an outline/brief summary of Coakley’s project in *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, the first volume of her (what will be) four-volume systematics. The key locus where prayer, systematics, and sexuality meet for Coakley is desire. In the prelude to *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, Coakley explains that “the questions of right contemplation of God, right speech about God, and right ordering of desire all hang together.” Within this entanglement, desire is primal, “more fundamental than sex.”¹⁹ As in *Powers and Submission* (a text I will return to shortly), Coakley persuasively argues here that (correct) theological discourse must be precluded and accompanied by vulnerability and surrender to the Divine—necessary affects and acts that eschew idolatry. Coakley locates idolatry in a sense of mastery that often manifests in and through masculinist and racist ideologies. The surrender she envisions is engendered by “particular graced bodily practices,” those of prayer and contemplation.²⁰

In articulating this entanglement between contemplation of God (practices/prayer), speech about God (theology), and right ordering of desire (sexuality) in this first volume of her systematics, Coakley is not only explicating the methodology that will guide her systematics but

¹⁹ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 1, 10.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

in doing so, is also presenting her explicitly Trinitarian doctrine of God—a historical retrieval of a patristic Trinitarian formulation recast through the lens of desire in such a way that addresses sexuality and gender, as well as concomitant metaphysical and theological analyses on the nature of the Trinity. Coakley’s account of the doctrine of the Trinity is the key theo-onto-epistemological structure undergirding *théologie totale*. It is also simultaneously influenced by said methodology, which thus highlights the epistemological foundation of/in her claims: that “the problem of the Trinity cannot be solved without addressing the very questions that seem least to do with it,” questions of “sexual justice...of the meaning and stability of gender... of the final theological significance of sexual desire.”²¹

The foundational structure that guides Coakley’s method, and thus her entire systematic theology, is that of a “contemporary trinitarian *ontology of desire*—a vision of God’s trinitarian nature as both the source and goal of human desires, as God intends them.”²² In this vision and account, “God the ‘Father’, in and through the Spirit, both stirs up and progressively chastens and purges, the frailer and often misdirected desires of humans, and so forges them, by stages of sometimes painful growth, into the likeness of his Son.” Thus, Coakley explains, “ethics and metaphysics may be found to converge” and “divine desire can be seen as the ultimate progenitor of human desire, and the very means of its transformation.”²³ This trinitarian doctrine of God marks both the ontological foundation of desire and its ideal telos.

Coakley grounds her argument in an archaeology of early patristic trinitarian formulations. She argues that “the right ordering of desire was not, of course, alien to some of

²¹ Ibid., 2. At the end of the same introductory chapter, Coakley writes that “theology involves not merely the metaphysical task of adumbrating a vision of God, the world, and humanity, but simultaneously the *epistemological* task of cleansing, reordering, and redirecting the apparatuses of one’s own thinking, desiring, and seeing” (20).

²² Ibid., 5.

²³ Ibid.

the greatest early Christian thinkers of the late antique era;” rather “the perception of ‘perfect relation in God’ (the Trinity) was fundamentally attuned, and correlated, to their concomitant views about men and women, gender roles, and the nature of ‘erotic’ desire.”²⁴ This is evidenced for Coakley in and through the “‘Spirit-leading’ approach to the Trinity that was prevalent in early patristic trinitarian thought.”²⁵ In Chapters 3 and 6 of *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, Coakley expounds on this patristic tradition of “praying the trinity,” an “incorporative” or “reflexive” rather than “ratiocinative” or “linear” model of the Trinity, where the Holy Spirit is the “primary means of incorporation into the trinitarian life of God, and [is] constantly and ‘reflexively’ at work in believers in the circle of response to the Father’s call.”²⁶

Yet, with the conciliar negotiation of trinitarian orthodoxy that took place in the fourth century, this Spirit-leading approach disappeared, and Coakley argues that this “overzealous achievement of orthodoxy” also opened up the potential for an “ironic *unorthodoxy*—in the form of the temptation to re-relegate the Spirit to an effective remaining subordination, even despite the rhetoric of full equality with the other two persons.”²⁷ Coakley charts how, in addition to an intrinsic ambiguity in Scriptural resources for trinitarian theology (specifically, the varied “ordering” of the language of Father, Son, and Spirit), the resubordination of the Spirit was also

²⁴ Ibid., 2. I read what Coakley is doing as a kind of archaeology rather than a genealogy, in that it seeks to uncover and restore a lost consistency and meaning. For more on the difference between the two, see the introduction of Lynne Huffer, *Are the Lips a Grave?: A Queer Feminist on the Ethics of Sex* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

²⁵ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 103.

²⁶ Ibid., 111, 104. Coakley explains how this incorporative/reflexive model is based on Romans 8, “with its description of the cooperative action of the praying Christian with the energizing promptings of the Holy Spirit. On this view, what the ‘Trinity’ is is the graced ways of God with creation, alluring and conforming that creation into the life of the ‘Son.’” She continues, pointing out that it is not that the prayer is having a conversation with some distant and undifferentiated deity, and then is being asked (rather arbitrarily) to ‘hypostatize’ that conversation (or ‘relationship’) into a ‘person’ (the Spirit); but rather, that there is something, admittedly obscure, about the sustained activity of prayer that makes one want to claim that it is personally and divinely activated from within, and yet that that activation (the ‘Spirit’) is not quite reducible to that from which it flows (the ‘Father’)” (112).

²⁷ Ibid., 100, 101.

due to “ecclesiastical opposition” to Spirit-leading approaches.²⁸ This opposition, she notes, was due to two key social concerns, one of which was that “a special commitment to deep prayer in the Spirit...came with the concomitant danger of the intensification of erotic power and a problematic entanglement of human spiritual and sexual desires.”²⁹ The force of this combination of theological and social factors, any of which alone would be difficult to combat, effectively eradicated this approach to trinitarian thinking from modern theology.³⁰

Coakley’s “critical retrieval of this spiritual nexus” of early patristic trinitarian thought, then, seeks to both challenge and address this history, offering an account of, again, “praying the trinity” wherein prayer is an “irreducibly dy-polar divine activity—a call and response of divine desire—into which the pray-er is drawn and incorporated.”³¹ Coakley calls for a middle approach that is *both* experiential and prayer-based, on the one hand, and creedal and rational on the other, thus avoiding the pitfalls of either—an account of “orthodoxy as transformative spiritual *process*,” and a methodology that is based off of *and* engenders such an account. She dubs this method *théologie totale*, a riff off of analogy to the French Annales School’s *l’histoire totale*, and “its goal of uncovering every level of an historical culture.”³²

²⁸ Ibid., 101.

²⁹ Ibid., 102. The other concern Coakley notes was that a Spirit-led approach “could lead to ‘sectarian’ or purist tendencies on the part of those seeking a life of special abandonment to the Spirit,” and that such tendencies would threaten the delicate church-state political balance that had been achieved (102).

³⁰ And as such, fostered modern challenges to trinitarian thinking, as they attacked the logic of linear models on critical rational grounds. Coakley explicates Maurice Wiles’ critique on this front, and challenges it with/from an incorporative framework.

³¹ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 5, 113. For more on how Coakley’s account of the hypostatic distinctiveness of the Spirit is based on the incorporative/reflexive model, in counter to Wiles’ logic, see Ibid., 105ff.

³² Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 35. She also highlights here how “the evocations of *totale* are decidedly not ‘totalizing’ in the political sense. Later, in a brief section on “*L’histoire totale* as background to ‘*théologie totale*,’” Coakley provides more detail of the Annales School and its analogies (and limits of such) to her own method. She explains that the “approach of the school aimed to uncover the thick textures in which historical events are couched, and in particular they brought social scientific methods to bear in order to provide fuller understandings of the contexts of history and its links with the

Contemplation and desire are hallmarks one and nine, respectively, of *théologie totale*, these themes serving as the bookends of her methodology, rooted in her trinitarian frame.³³ As Tonstad succinctly explains, “Silent contemplative prayer is the heart of her theological method, for it is in such prayer that the pray-er makes room for the Spirit to reform her, enlighten her, reshape her into the Son, and bring her to the Father. Such prayerful waiting on God is a form of power-in-vulnerability.”³⁴ Through the Spirit, desire is transformed, reoriented towards the Divine as one contemplates the Divine. Pivotal to this chapter, and to Coakley’s own argument, desire’s transformation enables the eschewal of and resistance to idolatry and to a false sense of human mastery, thereby opening up an attentiveness to otherness that transforms gender and sexuality, undoing the effects of stable, normative gender and sexuality on identity. As Coakley puts it, “the ‘fixed’ fallen differences of worldly gender are transfigured precisely by the interruptive activity of the Holy Spirit, drawing gender into trinitarian purgation and transformation.”³⁵

Contemplating God as “the source and sustainer of all being” means understanding “the dizzying mystery encountered in the act of contemplation as precisely the ‘blinking’ of the human ambition to knowledge, control, and mastery.” Through this ‘blinking,’ prayer enables us to better see and understand the connections between sexuality and God, as “divine desire [is] the ultimate progenitor of human desire, and the very means of its transformation.”³⁶ Grounding her Spirit-led, prayer-based account of the Trinity in Romans 8, Coakley notes that in having to

present,” and points out that she do not share all the methodological presumptions of *histoire totale* (which themselves have been controversial amongst historians), noting a divergence in her resistance of any straightforward reduction of theological categories or explanations to social science ones” (62).

³³ Ibid., 105.

³⁴ Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 100.

³⁵ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 58.

³⁶ Ibid., 44, 6.

“yield to the Spirit’s ‘sighs too deep for words’, it follows that prayer at its deepest is God’s, not ours, and takes the pray-er beyond any normal human language or rationality of control.”³⁷ It is through yielding to and by the work of the Spirit, via prayer, that our desire is transformed by God, a transformation that engenders un-mastery and an openness to otherness that “ultimately slays patriarchy at its root.”³⁸ Prayer is the path through which these transformations and un-doings occur.

Given this account of desire, how does Coakley speak of/about the formation of the subject, as a desiring, sexual subject? Moreover, how does gender come into play in this framework? Gender fits into Coakley’s trinitarian framework in two key, interrelated, ways, and through an examination of these ways, what Coakley offers in terms of the formation of the subject begins to become clear.

First, while sexuality and desire are at the heart of the feminist themes Coakley explores in *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, she highlights at various points in the text how the un-mastery that the Spirit-led *théologie totale* engenders transforms gendered subjectivity as well, undoing the “‘fixed’ fallen differences of worldly gender.”³⁹ Echoing, and in a way building on, the claims she makes in the final chapter of her previous text, *Powers and Submissions*, Coakley argues that “prayer in the Spirit both takes up and transforms the usual societal implications of gender, and renders them both labile and cosmic.”⁴⁰ The second way gender comes into play in Coakley’s framework, then, is in the way in which gender fluidity and sexual difference is read as possible, and understood in light of, her account of the trinity.

³⁷ Ibid., 114.

³⁸ Ibid., 327.

³⁹ Ibid., 58.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 115; see Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, “The Eschatological Body: Gender, Transformation, and God,” 153-67.

Through a close examination of how gender and desire function in Coakley's account, I argue that Coakley's frame presumes a fixed end, coherent narrative, and a distinctive path of and for subjectivity via *théologie totale* that undermines gender and sexual difference by subsuming it into and by Divine desire. Coakley's frame may be inclusive in that it *attends* to sexuality and gender, but a close examination through a queer temporal lens reveals that it is not ultimately inclusive of gender and sexual *difference*, as it presumes and calls for a particular, prescribed transformation of that difference by and in relation to one's spiritual self and formation. There is a particular linear narrative coherence and directionality, wherein spiritual desire serves as the *end* to which other desires are directed and formed, and this narrative is itself rooted in a (trinitarian) theological imaginary that undercuts difference and upholds heteronormativity. To now turn to this in more depth by first examining its undergirding trinitarian imaginary...

§1. *The trinity, eschatology, and the end(s) of gender?*

"It is on grounds of attentiveness to gender that Coakley is a feminist theologian," Linn Tonstad points out.⁴¹ As the introduction to this chapter highlighted, Coakley's attention to gender has garnered a great deal of attention; one key reason for that attention is Coakley's engagement—both positive and critical—with contemporary gender theory, particularly her

⁴¹ Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 101. At the beginning of her chapter on Coakley, Tonstad aptly points out that "While Coakley identifies as feminist, her primary antagonists are often other feminist theologians who, she claims, do not have the necessary 'perceptive,' 'profound,' and 'subtle' understandings of the nuances of Christian traditions and of the importance of shared rationality and analytic philosophy of religion. Rhetorically, she is established as the exception among feminist theologians, the one who need not be relegated to the margins of mainstream theological conversation due to the combination of force and subtlety in her thought. Just this aspect of her style, combined with the compatibility of her project with typical forms of resistance to the theological importance of feminist concerns, makes her the favorite feminist of those theologians and analytic philosophers of religion most hostile to or uninterested in gender concerns" (98).

account of gender as fluid. Another, related, key reason is that she roots that account in the Christian tradition, particularly in the doctrine of the trinity— “it is on grounds of a particular account of the trinity that Coakley sees gender becoming fluid inside divine desire,” Tonstad continues.⁴² Does Coakley’s attentiveness to gender align with the openness to otherness, un-mastery, and flourishing that she seeks? This section will explore these questions, turning first to its trinitarian frame and Linn Tonstad’s critical analysis of it, and then to Coakley’s eschatological account of gender fluidity, which I place in conversation with Judith Butler.

In *God and Difference*, Tonstad closely charts the trinitarian moves that serve as the basis for Coakley’s account of gender. She outlines in detail how the relations of the persons of the trinity and our incorporation into those relations through prayer engenders and reflects a kind of gender fluidity. “The praying submissive discovers that her Christic transformation ‘feminizes’ her into the ‘masculine’ Christ,” and this gender fluidity extends through liturgy to the God-world relation.⁴³ Tonstad demonstrates how, while there may be a “‘bafflement’ of literalistic gender imagery” in Coakley’s account, a gender binary is still operative and affirmed, as her trinitarian frame operates with a “theological symbolic order of sexual difference.”⁴⁴ She explains:

the affective life of binaries... may not be so easily displaced, for their power often depends on their associative, symbolic relations, which are not overcome. That differently sexed persons move through different positions in a theologico-symbolic order may rather demonstrate the expansive capability of that order to retain its fundamental hierarchies in the face of social transformations.⁴⁵

⁴² Ibid. For more on the critical acclaim of Coakley’s feminist theology, see fns. 2, 7, and 8.

⁴³ Ibid., 102. Unfortunately, a detailed re-telling of the trinitarian logics at play is beyond the scope of this chapter. See chapter three, “Speaking ‘Father’ Rightly: Kenotic Reformation into Sonship in Sarah Coakley,” in Tonstad, *God and Difference* (98-132), especially pps. 102-108.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 105.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 103.

Tonstad illuminates how Coakley's trinitarian-based call for gender fluidity affirms femininity, but in doing so, retains and entrenches a binary framework for gender/sexual difference. "Undoing gender hierarchies," for Coakley, "means no more than permitting and working towards liberal goals of equality and justice...while valorizing the bodied and affective dimensions stereotypically associated with the feminine and derogated in some Christian and Enlightenment traditions."⁴⁶

According to Tonstad,

Coakley remains trapped in what she believes to be feminist aporias of equality and difference, and of conflict between sexual desire and desire for God. Neither gets at the fundamental feminist conviction (as I see it) that the very social order itself needs to change, and that feminism serves as a diagnostic and partial prescription for what such change entails. Remaining within gender, as it were, or heightening gender (even in a fluid form), *distracts* from feminist goals, just as an obsessive focus on homosexuality—pro or con—distracts from the true challenges queer relationships and ways of thinking pose to the symbolic and material orders of church and society.⁴⁷

Moreover, Tonstad explains, "because idolatry purgation is explicitly and continually an individual act...albeit with cosmic consequences, what Coakley terms 'secular' gender presumptions (the symbolic order of sexual difference) are left untouched."⁴⁸

This (theological) symbolic order of sexual difference undergirding Coakley's frame actually (rather ironically) leaves binary gender ultimately untransformed, and moreover, perpetuates heteronormativity.⁴⁹ While gender "literalism is 'baffled'...binary heterosexism

⁴⁶ Ibid., 106. Tonstad cites Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 80-81.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 105. Tonstad references here Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 45, 325.

⁴⁹ As I discuss in the next section, Coakley's affirmation of gender as labile draws heavily on the work of feminist theorist Judith Butler. Whereas Coakley draws on and aligns with Butler, to a degree, in affirming the fluidity and non-fixity of gender, it is interesting to note here that Coakley fails to attend to how Butler's account is critical of and challenges the logic of sexual difference that Coakley's frame relies on. For Butler, there is a "presumptive heterosexuality" within sexual difference, and it "is guilty of reducing all modes of alterity to the model of the heterosexual couple. See Judith Butler et al., "The

certainly is not.”⁵⁰ Positing gender fluidity as the movement “between ‘male’ phallicism and ‘feminine’ receptive activity does nothing to undo either their human ordering in relation to each other or the primary heterosexism that such imagery encodes.”⁵¹ As such, Tonstad aptly and compellingly points out, “Lost is precisely what Coakley would seemingly desire: the theological significance of more expansive and varied relationships among human beings.”⁵² Thus, Coakley’s account is deficient on its own terms; it undermines its own aims. Ultimately, I will show how queer temporality illuminates salient dimensions of that deficiency and explains the underlying cause of that failure. Before turning to explanation, then—or, rather, as a way of turning to it—it is important to explore how this manifests in her account of gender as fluid and labile.

As I have already noted, Coakley’s reflections on gender fluidity in *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, echo and build on her final chapter of *Powers and Submissions*, on “The Eschatological Body: Gender, Transformation, and God.” Couched within the context of her call for submission to and dependence on God as liberative rather than limiting for feminist theology, Coakley reasons that if “our fundamental and practiced dependency is on God, there is the fulcrum from which our (often necessary) dependencies on others may be assessed with critical discernment, and the assumed binary gender-associations of such dependencies called into question.”⁵³

Future of Sexual Difference: An Interview with Judith Butler and Drucilla Cornell,” *Diacritics* 28, no. 1 (1998): 27; Pheng Cheah and E. A. Grosz, “Of Being-Two: Introduction,” *Diacritics* 28, no. 1 (1998): 4.

⁵⁰ Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 105.

⁵¹ Ibid. Tonstad explores how this manifests in Coakley’s trinitarian frame in depth, referencing Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 286, 277. See 105ff.

⁵² Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 105–6. Additionally, Tonstad argues that Coakley’s trinitarian frame “brings human and divine personhood into relation closer than they can support,” and in doing so fails to speak to the potentiality of human love across difference given that “divine persons are fundamentally unlike human persons in that they are the *same* in a very strong sense (the numerical non-multipliability of God)” (103).

⁵³ Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, xx.

Placing poststructuralist feminist theorist Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity in conversation with Gregory of Nyssa's eschatological reflections on the transformation of (gendered, embodied) identity, Coakley argues that Butler's "radical theory of gender 'performativity' leads us inexorably to the questions of eschatological longing... and thereby—albeit unintentionally—to the horizon of a *divine* 'grand narrative.'"54 Coakley uses Butler's notion of performativity against some of Butler's broader claims, arguing that the Christian tradition has resources that a Butlerian theory seeks—that "her theory has the remaining marks of a body longing for transformation into the divine."55

Coakley juxtaposes Gregory of Nyssa with Butler to show that both operate with a notion of gender fluidity via performative practices, that "possibilities for labile, fluid transformation towards a goal of liberation and personal authenticity is what Butler's vision has in common with this more ancient wisdom."56 Reflecting on Butler's "uncanny degree of influence," the source of which Coakley locates as/in "the allure of gender liberation...the prospect of an escape from stereotype, the hope of an elusive personal transformation beyond normal human expectations and restrictions," Coakley finds this same fluid, performative account of embodied, gendered identity in Gregory. Yet what Coakley does *not* find in Butler, "although her argument begs it" is an eschatological end towards which we are transformed.57 Coakley argues that while Butler gestures towards transformation and transcendence, envisioned as, "labile fluid transformation

⁵⁴ Sarah Coakley, "The Eschatological Body: Gender, Transformation, and God," *Modern Theology* 16, no. 1 (January 2000): 63–64. A slightly revised version of this essay appears as chapter nine in *Powers and Submissions*.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 64. Coakley is quite overt about her critiques of the "secular" program Butler pursues, writing that "Butler's ingenious attempts to escape the repressive net of sexual stereotypes are—I shall suggest—ironic, if ultimately depressing secularized counterparts of an *ascetical* programme of gender fluidity into the divine that Christian tradition holds out to us" (61). I explore Coakley's critiques of "secular gender theory" in depth in my later section on Coakley's methodology.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

towards a goal of liberation and personal authenticity,” she finds Butler ultimately unsatisfactory because she lacks a “vision of final ‘erotic’ fulfillment.” There is no “divine referent that forms the final point of meaning... ‘that fundamental *eros* for the endless God that binds the polyphony of our intentionality into some sort of unity.’”⁵⁸ *What*, precisely, does this Nyssan addition *do* to gender norms? How does this redeemed vision manifest in gender performance? This is left untheorized and unstated in Coakley’s account. As Tonstad puts it, “Eschatological gender fluidity promises redemption of gender, but Coakley’s insistence on the importance of gender and sexuality now is matched only by her reticence about what such gendered redemption means.”⁵⁹

Ultimately, Coakley finds Butler’s project useful but fundamentally wanting due to its lack of an eschatological end; yet Coakley does not contend with Butler’s argument of gender performativity in full and thus misses its thrust and force. While Coakley astutely “sees past the clumsy and/or deliberate misreading of Butler’s work,” as Ellen Armour points out in her review of *Powers and Submissions* for the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, and rightly “understands that Butler does not collapse the body into language, for example, nor does her work end in political quietism,” she fails to acknowledge or attend to a foundational aspect of Butler’s performative frame.⁶⁰ Given that, as Butler argues, gender is not “natural,” but produced and performed, this also means that there is not—or, rather, that there should not be—a

⁵⁸ Ibid., 65, 68. Coakley here is citing Rowan Williams, “Gregory of Nyssa on Mind and Passion,” in *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, ed. Lionel Wickham and Caroline P. Bammel (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993), 244.

⁵⁹ Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 104.

⁶⁰ Ellen T. Armour, “Review: Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73, no. 1 (2005): 238.

correct or ideal essence *or* end.⁶¹ The “goal of liberation and personal authenticity” is not a singular goal that is attained for Butler, if it is even a goal at all, but a process. Coakley herself points to how “Butler, as a lesbian theorist, is out to make ‘gender trouble’, ‘not through the strategies that figure a *utopian* beyond, but through the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place.”⁶² Thus, her work speaks not so much to “an *optimistic* call to fluid gendered transformation [but rather an] insistence that speech can effect occasional punctures in existing power relations.”⁶² Drawing on a review by Amy Hollywood, Coakley nevertheless reads within Butler a demonstration of the “possibilities of transcendence that emerge in and through complex bodily practices,” and utilizes that to affirm and call for an ultimate transcendence.⁶³

Coakley sees a fluid, transformative account of gender realized through contemplative practices, a liberating ideal one can come to embody through performance/practice—that prayer in and through the Spirit enables us to move beyond “the seemingly immovable stuckness of what secular gender theory gloomily calls ‘the gender binary.’”⁶⁴ Butler, conversely, argues that ideals are precisely that: constructs, that inevitably impede liberative possibility but, in their constructed nature, also hold within them the possibility for *continued, continual* subversion.

According to Butler, because gender “ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates,” there are always “possibilities of recirculation [that] repeat and displace...the very

⁶¹ Gender norms and/as ideals of course continue to operate in our current system. While from a Butlerian perspective, the ways in which norms/ideals function and gain legitimacy by attaching themselves to claims of “nature,” is problematic and false, it nevertheless still occurs. Moreover, even if there was such an ideal, performativity, as Butler understands it, would also prohibit our ability to embody that ideal essence or end.

⁶² Coakley, “The Eschatological Body: Gender, Transformation, and God,” 64–65 (en22, emphasis hers), 66. Coakley is citing Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 34.

⁶³ Coakley, “The Eschatological Body,” 66. Here, Coakley is citing Amy Hollywood, “Transcending Bodies,” *Religious Studies Review* 25 (1999): 14.

⁶⁴ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 61.

constructs by which they are mobilized.”⁶⁵ Coakley recognizes Butler’s “transcendence” as “an excess of possibility” yet still seeks to locate it, to ossify it, in a particular frame.⁶⁶ Placing Coakley’s turn to gender in conversation with Butler reveals not only a mis-use of Butler’s account of gender but further illuminates how Coakley’s account undermines its own aims. Butler’s account of performativity begins to also point to *how* this is the case, through Coakley’s underlying presumptions about subjectivity and the narrative logic through which formation occurs. Turning to this narrative logic, and the role of practices in sustaining it, further elucidates and broadens the scope of the foreclosing impact of Coakley’s frame and begins to situate my analysis here within my broader critique of straight time in methodological-ethical frameworks.

§2. *Narrative coherence, (gendered) subjectivity, and straight time*

Whereas Butler sees gendered identity as constantly (potentially re-) constructed, Coakley sees a clear, coherent, *cohering* path through which our subjectivities are (trans-) formed, “a rendering labile of gender to the workings of divine desire, a loosening of the restrictions of worldly presumptions about gender as selfhood expands into God, and is thereby released for the same great work of love.”⁶⁷ Put another way/to use a bad metaphor, whereas Coakley seeks an island of transformed, more fluid, gendered norms and relations (though, again, she is unclear about what those fluid gender norms and relations look like) and reads in Butler that same path because they, say, both reject the notion that men swim the freestyle and women the backstroke, Butler recognizes the transformative possibilities in and through the type of swim stroke and rejects an arrival at any particular location or configuration. As Butler puts it,

⁶⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xiv, 41-42.

⁶⁶ Coakley, “The Eschatological Body,” 66.

⁶⁷ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 87.

“*woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing *that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end.*”⁶⁸ Butler’s analysis ends up functioning not to support Coakley’s account of gender transformation through contemplative practice, but to challenge it.

Reading Coakley in conversation with Butler demonstrates how, while Coakley speaks of gender as labile, that lability is bounded and directed, and as such is, well, not so labile—difference is not so much affirmed as delimited and impeded. Gender fluidity for Coakley is bound by and directed to a transformation of the self, and the self’s desires, by and towards the Divine. This highlights two (interrelated) undergirding themes that, I will argue, are indicative of how Coakley’s framework operates in straight time: a linear, narratively coherent logic and an implicit investment in a stable subjectivity.

Similar dynamics show up in Coakley’s account of desire’s transformation. Like her account of gender (which it undergirds), though Coakley claims to seek a kind of lability (or in this instance, un-mastery), desire’s transformation ultimately follows a linear, narrative coherence directed towards a prescriptive teleological end. Coakley, as I have already outlined, grounds these connections between desire and “un-mastery” in a Trinitarian theology that takes seriously the work and role of the Spirit, who “is perceived as the primary means of incorporation into the trinitarian life of God, and as constantly and ‘reflexively’ at work in believers in the circle of response to the Father’s call.”⁶⁹ Yet a closer examination of *how* prayer achieves the effects she claims it engenders reveals a narrative logic that undermines un-mastery, a logic that a turn to (queer) temporality illuminates.

In turning to Patristic resources for a Spirit-led trinitarian theology based in prayer, Coakley looks to Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, and Pseudo-Dionysius, tracing the

⁶⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 43 emphasis mine.

⁶⁹ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 111.

emphasis on the Spirit that weaves through their texts and thus ties them together, despite their differences. In her prelude on “interpretive dangers,” she cautions us against assuming that those differences are as vast as they may initially appear.⁷⁰ In chapter six, “Batter My Heart,” Coakley juxtaposes Gregory of Nyssa with Augustine, looking at how their respective accounts “might mutually illuminate one another,” turning then in chapter seven to Pseudo-Dionysius as a frame for that mutual illumination.⁷¹ While Coakley acknowledges that Augustine’s account of desire, which argues for the “rightful *harmony* between the rational activities of the mind” is in stark contrast with “Gregory’s spiritual emphasis on the indispensability of loss of mental control,” she argues that Augustine’s account also eschews mastery in that it is “only *God* who can finally supply the (graced) control that human, ascetic effort constantly fails to achieve.”⁷² Pseudo-Dionysius serves to synthesize these two theological paradigms that in different ways—at least, utilizing different languages and with different emphases—“hint at a certain symbolic or analogical alignment of sexual desire and desire for God, rather than demanding a disjunctive choice between them.”⁷³

⁷⁰ Outlining Coakley’s accounts of these thinkers is beyond the scope of this chapter. It is important to point out that Coakley calls out “interpretive dangers” in readings of Augustine, critiquing the reading that bifurcates eastern and western conceptions of the trinity, where the Western is seen as proto-Cartesian, as having “already been seduced in Augustine well towards the modern solipsistic sense of selfhood which was later associated with Descartes’ philosophy, and had read it instead on to God in Godself, making God in the image of the modern, individual mind” (270). Coakley argues that this is flawed because “it sought to project certain anti-‘Enlightenment’ agendas directly into the life of God, thereby unconsciously creating a new idolatrous project of social utopianism while also seriously misreading the Enlightenment figures who had become the new ‘whipping boys’ of this ‘Eastern’ trinitarian project” (270). My argument here is that she is performing this very critique methodologically.

⁷¹ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 275.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 279.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 295.

What is crucial is how desire is transformed towards and by God. For Pseudo-Dionysius, desire, “divine ecstatic yearning,” begins with Godself, and we are brought into it.⁷⁴ This incorporative Trinitarian account, Coakley suggests, is a kind of ekstasis that engenders an ordered and hierarchical loss of mastery that reflects intra-trinitarian relations. Pseudo-Dionysius’s “crucial notion of ekstasis,” locates its origin within Godself from which it becomes the site of our participation in and with God despite our lesser place in the divine hierarchy, our occupation of a lower cosmological realm. Thus, it “allows an implicit acknowledgement of love across difference; for it reflects on the moment of divine love across an ontological divide.”⁷⁵ Through prayer, desires are radically *transformed*, but towards a particular end as well as in a particular way. Desire travels a particular, ordered narrative path that functions to undermine, rather than open up the potential of love across, difference.⁷⁶ Coakley’s account is rooted in Christian Platonism, which is itself rooted in Plato’s *Symposium*, where “‘erotic’ desire has a propulsion to the eternal form of ‘beauty,’ and that one must therefore spend one’s life in an attempt to climb back up the ladder of (progressively purified) desire to that divine realm where the full ‘revelation’ of beauty may occur.”⁷⁷ Outlining how Platonism gets taken up in Christianity, Coakley explains that it is “the central project of [her] systematic theology as a whole to give new coinage to this tradition of Christian Platonism.”⁷⁸

Coakley writes that:

to step intentionally into the realm of divine, trinitarian desire, and to seek some form of participation in it through a profound engagement with the Spirit, is both to risk having

⁷⁴ Coakley explores at length how Pseudo-Dionysius is significant as “we are presented with a vision of a divine incorporative flow which fits our original ‘prayer-based’ model of the Trinity with exactitude” (Ibid., 316. See Chapter 7, particularly 315ff.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 316–17.

⁷⁶ Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 103. See fn50 above.

⁷⁷ *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 8. Coakley here cites *Symposium* 210A-212C

⁷⁸ Ibid., 9.

one's human desires *intensified* in some qualitatively distinct manner, and also to confront a search and necessary *purgation* of those same human desires in order to be brought into conformity with the divine will.⁷⁹

She continues, explaining that one “might say then, of human engagement with God at its most profound, that the Spirit progressively ‘breaks’ sinful desires, in and through the passion of Christ.”⁸⁰ What form(s) does this “erotic purgation” wherein one’s desires are transformed by and to the Divine take, and what sinful desires are transformed?⁸¹ She goes on to briefly list some of those sinful desires that are broken and chastened—“the human lust to possess, abuse, and control,” but beyond that it is startlingly unclear what does and does not count as sinful and what desires are and are not in need of transformation.⁸² As Ellen Armour points out in a recent review essay surveying the state of feminist theology by considering together recent works by Coakley and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “precisely what desires must be *reformed* for us to be *conformed* to Christ is a critical issue both historically and today.”⁸³

Could not one make an argument that same-sex desire is sinful and thus in need of transformation? This is a question Ellen Armour raises to Coakley. Armour points out that the fact that “desire needs disciplining and purifying, and that this will be demanding and difficult work, at times, funds the ongoing demand in some circles that gay and lesbian Christians ‘pray the gay away.’”⁸⁴ It does not help that Coakley explicitly avoids the topic of same-sex desire. Coakley explains that her book “will not divert to a detailed discussion of the so-called ‘problem’ of ‘homosexuality’ . For it is concerned with a deeper, and more primary, question:

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 15.

⁸³ Ellen T. Armour, “Feminist Theology in Retrospect and in Anticipation,” *The Journal of Religion* 96, no. 1 (January 1, 2016): 96.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 97.

that of putting desire for God above all other desires, and with judging human desires only in that light.”⁸⁵ Left unclear is what other desires are judged negatively in that light and how such decisions are made.

To be fair, Coakley’s lack of clarity around what transformed desire looks like does leave space for openness and multiplicity. She notes that the transformation of desire “involves a lifetime’s undertaking of discernment and (graced) practice,” and one of her concluding theses is that the “‘apophatic turn’ has the capacity not only to undermine gender stereotypes, but to lead to a form of ever-changing modellings of desire for God.”⁸⁶ Additionally, her emphasis on ekstasis and unmastery do open up space for, and her aims of openness towards otherness assuredly point to, the possibilities of multiplicity and variation, yet she fails to attend to what that might look like or mean at any real length, instead often opening up space for a reading of the transformation of desire towards and by God as a singular, definable end.⁸⁷ Indeed, what Coakley is proposing is not so much an undoing of subjectivity but rather a particular kind of transformation of it that in many ways intensifies and elevates the self. As Tonstad’s analysis of Coakley in *God and Difference* so aptly points out, *théologie totale*’s goal of self-erasure is at the same time a kind of self-achievement. As she puts it, in a passage I have already cited as an epigraph at the beginning of this chapter:

The result of contemplative prayer is ‘distinctive ways of knowing’ achieved through willingness ‘to endure a form of naked dispossession before God;...surrender control;...accept the arid vacancy of a simple waiting on God in prayer;..at the same time to accept disconcerting bombardments from the realm of the ‘unconscious’: all these are

⁸⁵ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 11. Armour notes that the fact that “Coakley gives us not even the briefest hint at the import she finds in contemplative Trinitarianism for the conflict over homosexuality is surprising given not only the conflict’s prominence on the contemporary scene, but the role this very same ascetic logic plays in it” (“Feminist Theology in Retrospect and in Anticipation,” 97).

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 320, 341.

⁸⁷ Nor, again, does her Trinitarian account bolster an embrace of such multiplicity/variation, given the “non-multipliability of God” (Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 103).

the ascetical tests of contemplation without which no epistemic or spiritual deepening can start to occur' (GSS, 19). *The dispossession of the self is simultaneously an achievement of the self: It is a decision freely made, an almost Promethean submissiveness.*⁸⁸

Tonstad points out how this dispossession-cum-achievement also manifests in Coakley's discussion of altruism in her account of sacrifice. "Sacrifice is both the precondition and the mode of one's own divinization, the transformation of one's cognitive, affective, bodily, and sensory capacities beyond ordinary human limitations already in this life," Tonstad summarizes. As such, the "expanded self thus remains at the very center of this altruistic project. Coakley continually insists that our kenotic, purgative, prayer-driven suffering is a sacrifice of our distorted desires for the sake of flourishing—including our own."⁸⁹ Coakley's call for self-erasure, within her particular vision of un-mastery, is one that actually elevates the self. For Coakley, subjectivity is not so much undone but rather reconstituted in and by the Divine.⁹⁰

As the last chapter explored, the queer turn to temporality has challenged the ability of a linear narrative with a singular prescriptive telos to open up and affirm difference. Both Edelman and Muñoz (as well as Halberstam, Freeman, etc.) describe and critique the ways that a directed, cohering narrative is indicative of and produces a vision of the normative and the ideal that undermines difference and is counter to queerness. As Edelman put it, "queerness marks the excess of something always unassimilable that troubles the relentlessly totalizing impulse informing normativity."⁹¹ While Halberstam cautions against the narrative coherence of the "timeline" of development and attendant social scripts as that which "usher[s] even the most queer among us ... normativity" is directed at the stages of individual development, is it not the

⁸⁸ Ibid., 109 emphasis mine.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 117.

⁹⁰ See Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 23, 26.

⁹¹ Edelman, in Dinshaw et al., "Theorizing Queer Temporalities."

case that different “developmental” narratives peddle in and produce the same foreclosing normative telos and path?⁹²

In the concluding section of this chapter and in the conclusion to this dissertation, I will return to Huffer and other queer theorists, exploring how they might open up different possibilities for navigating the relationship between formation, selfhood, and openness to difference. Here, my aim is simply to show that Coakley betrays her goal of acknowledging and affirming “the messy entanglement of sexual desires and desire for God.”⁹³ In positing one’s desire as following a clear path—one transformed by the Divine towards the Divine, reoriented by the good towards the good—*théologie totale* untangles the knot of desire, thus cleaning up rather than affirming the mess. Before exploring what queer temporality might offer constructively, it is important to first turn to how a straight temporal logic manifests not only in her methodology of *théologie totale* and its claims, but also *through* her own methodological processes/operations.

II. Escaping Wigan Pier? Theological Method, Contemplation, and (Untangling?) Messy Entanglements (or, Seeking Dry Land?)

For Coakley, contemplative *practice* re-orientes our desires away from ourselves and challenges and un-does our impulses towards mastery and certainty—as a practice, it constitutes an “appropriately apophatic sensibility,” a “vertiginous free-fall [which] is ... the means by which a disciplined form of unknowing makes way for a deeper knowledge-beyond knowledge.”⁹⁴ Coakley also claims that this turn is what makes her approach unique, in a way

⁹² Halberstam in *Ibid.*, 182.

⁹³ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 43.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 46, 44.

that interestingly both overlaps with and directly responds to postliberal approaches. “What distinguishes this position, then, from an array of other ‘post-foundationalist’ options that currently present themselves in theology,” Coakley explains, “is the commitment to the discipline of particular graced bodily practices which, over the long haul, afford certain distinctive ways of knowing.”⁹⁵ For Coakley, the attention to embodiment sets this turn to practices apart from earlier attempts. Yet, as we have seen, this turn towards practices and trinitarian framework of desire does not necessarily shield Coakley from the *effects* of mastery that she is concerned with. This section turns, then, from the subject and their formation/transformation, to the operations of theological method itself.

For Coakley, contemplation is not only central to the transformation of one’s own, personal desires, but to the task of theological reflection itself—as “the questions of right contemplation of God, *right speech about God*, and right ordering of desire all hang together.”⁹⁶ Because “a particular set of bodily and spiritual practices...are the *precondition* for trinitarian thinking,” it becomes the case that “if one is resolutely *not* engaged in the practices of prayer, contemplation, and worship, then there are certain sorts of philosophical insight that are unlikely, if not impossible, to become available to one.”⁹⁷ As she puts it more bluntly: “systematic theology without prayer, contemplation, and ascetic practice is void.”⁹⁸

While Coakley grounds her methodology in this practice of contemplation, she argues that the inclusion of the social sciences and feminism is also vital for robust theological reflection, especially in light of the increasingly “spiritual-but-not-religious” landscape of the contemporary West. However, these “secular knowledges,” as the quote above attests to, must be

⁹⁵ Ibid., 19.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 1.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 16.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 47.

grounded in and subordinate *to* contemplation, since the practice engenders rightly ordered desire and thus does what these secular reflections on power, sex, and gender cannot—produces (and demands) a surrender of the self to the Divine, and therefore resists the reification of power and mastery.

Because the social sciences and feminism are vital—albeit secondarily so—to the method, given that *théologie totale* “spirals out to acknowledge the messy complexity of the entanglement of the secular and spiritual realms for those who dare to practice it,”” Coakley must make “a case for a continuing, albeit critical, interaction with traditions of political liberalism and feminism” as supplementary but subordinate to theological discourse itself.⁹⁹ This is the task she takes up in the second chapter, “Doing Theology on Wigan Pier? Or Why Feminism and the Social Sciences Matter to Theology,” In order to articulate how contemplation/her methodology offers this re-figured, rightly-ordered relationship between secular knowledge and theological knowledge, Coakley uses this metaphor of “Wigan Pier.”

Wigan Pier is meant to be an evocative, rich metaphor, drawn from poetic imagery used by the 19th century English poet and cultural critic Matthew Arnold as well as acclaimed 20th century author and cultural critic George Orwell. The metaphor is predicated on a similar theologically-minded image that Arnold pens in his poem “Dover Beach.”¹⁰⁰ In the poem, Arnold uses Dover beach, the shore of the English ferry port of Dover, Kent, as a metaphor to reflect on love, faith, and the human condition.¹⁰¹ A number of theologians have drawn on the poem’s lament on the increasing decline of Christianity during the then-contemporary Victorian

⁹⁹ Ibid., 69.

¹⁰⁰ Matthew Arnold, *Dover Beach and Other Poems* (New York: Dover Publications, 2012). “Dover Beach” was originally published in 1867.

¹⁰¹ Dover beach was where Arnold and his wife honeymooned in 1851, and some scholars have suggested that he originally wrote the poem during that trip.

era, which Arnold describes as the waning “Sea of Faith,” when “Christian faith was in decline, overtaken by the modernizing trends of science industrial revolution, and critical ‘rationality.’”¹⁰² Despite its rich connection to the historical, sociocultural context Arnold observed, Coakley suggests that the metaphor of Dover Beach is no longer applicable since, perhaps much to our surprise, the tides of faith did not quite wash away in the way that Arnold predicted. Rather, they undoubtedly “turned” but ultimately in an unexpected direction, with the subsequent advent of post-modernity and “New Age spirituality.”¹⁰³ While “institutional Christianity’s attraction seems to have washed away... various other forms of ‘lived religion’ have washed back in” in its stead.¹⁰⁴ This tide change, Coakley suggests, has been largely positive, in that religion and spirituality have not drifted off to sea, entirely disappearing and thus causing a metaphorical, spiritual coastal erosion. While positive, the change has also been dangerous, as theologians, presumably in an effort to locate, claim, and/or follow the tide, have been lead to and seduced by “Wigan Pier.”

Coakley offers only a brief explanation for the metaphor she employs, most of it tucked away in footnote, before she offers *théologie totale* as the method that can “steer beyond” the Pier.¹⁰⁵ To grasp what is at stake for Coakley, it is important to understand her metaphor.

¹⁰² Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 71. See also Nicholas Lash, *Theology on Dover Beach*: (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005).

¹⁰³ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 71.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. For her explanation of Wigan Pier, see Ibid., 71, n2. While Coakley’s explanation was a helpful start—and she accurately recognized that the “ruse... may need some initial explanation, especially for readers who are not British”—the brevity of her account made it rather difficult, for me at least, to grasp the metaphor and the meaning behind it, with her discussion of tipplers, the history of the “joke” behind the account, and Orwell’s text on the subject leaving me with greater confusion instead of clarity. Her direction to the website of the Wigan Archaeological Society for more thorough explanation did not (initially) remedy this confusion, likely due to the historical and cultural differences. The explanation of the Wigan Pier metaphor that follows in this section is my own effort to put together a more complete image based on Coakley’s explanation as well as through research into the texts and history that comprise the original “Wigan Pier” and the abundance of cultural and literary references that employ it.

Explaining it briefly as “that modest canal jetty at least fifteen miles from any ocean tide,” Wigan Pier exists geographically in Wigan, an industrial area in Greater Manchester in northwest England, and is situated near the center of the town, on the Leeds-Liverpool canal. The original “pier” was not a pier at all—as piers have the connotation of being boat docking stations constructed for passengers rather than cargo, with some element of entertainment and tourism involved—but rather a staithe (read: wharf), likely merely a constructed wooden jetty, where coal from nearby mines were loaded into waiting barges on the canal. The name Wigan Pier, then, is ironic, mocking even. The origin story of the joke is that, in 1891, an “excursion train” travelling to Southport got delayed on the outskirts of Wigan as a large wooden crane (a “gantry”) that carried minerals from one coal mine to another had to move across the canal and the rail line. As the passengers were waiting for the crane to pass, one of the travelers remarked “where the bloody hell are we?” and someone mockingly replied “Wigan Pier,” conjuring the images most of us associate with piers, a seaside walkway that serves as a source of pleasure and recreation for beach visitors. The joke made its way to George Formby (it is unclear as to whether he was *on* the train, or if he heard about it secondhand), a popular English comedian and singer, who perpetuated the humorous tale around the music halls in Wigan, adding to the tale by noting that, when he passed the Pier, he saw that the tide was in—a mocking, humorous reference to the constant flooding in the low-lying areas of the town.¹⁰⁶

The town and its “pier” were further popularized, then, by George Orwell, in his second non-fiction text *The Road to Wigan Pier* that serves as an argument for socialism. The first half of the book is a sociological investigation of the dismal living and working conditions of the working poor that largely comprised Wigan Pier and its surrounding areas, the latter half a long

¹⁰⁶ Bill Alridge, “Original Wigan Pier,” *The Wigan Archaeological Society*, accessed April 6, 2015, <http://www.wiganarchsoc.co.uk/content/History/LinkPier.html>.

essay on the middle class and the broad benefits of socialism.¹⁰⁷ The historical, cultural, and literary context give weight to Coakley's use of the metaphor as a descriptor of "certain theological choices" that she seeks to avoid.¹⁰⁸ In short, for Coakley, Wigan Pier functions metaphorically as a false but alluring escape, as a retreat that *sounds* pleasurable if one has no knowledge of the locale and thus no recognition of the irony, but is, in actuality, dismal. To further contextualize the metaphor, one might consider Wigan Pier the British Industrial-Revolution era equivalent to New York's Coney Island in the mid-1980's.

Theologians are seduced by Wigan Pier when they try, and fail, to negotiate the relationship between the sacred and the secular. *Théologie totale*, then, is the methodology that offers a way out, a "methodological pincer movement" that lifts "the decks on the grimy ills of 'Wigan Pier' *without getting stuck there*."¹⁰⁹ As the decks of our misplaced desires are lifted, we are then lead closer to the Divine. The options of Wigan Pierism reflect misplaced desire because they seek to attain ends in and through their own acts. As Coakley puts it in a footnote, she calls for *un-mastery* deliberately, distinguishing it from Milbank's notion of non-mastery. "The desire *not* to 'master' cannot be summoned by mere good intention or *fiat*," she asserts, but rather, is a matter "of waiting on divine aid and transformation."¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Orwell paints a vivid picture of the locale. He writes: "I remember a winter afternoon in the dreadful environs of Wigan. All round was the lunar landscape of slag-heaps, and to the north, through the passes, as it were, between the mountains of slag, you could see the factory chimneys sending out their plumes of smoke. The canal path was a mixture of cinders and frozen mud, criss-crossed by the imprints of innumerable clogs, and all round, as far as the slag-heaps in the distance, stretched the 'flashes' — pools of stagnant water that had seeped into the hollows caused by the subsidence of ancient pits. It was horribly cold. The 'flashes' were covered with ice the colour of raw umber, the bargemen were muffled to the eyes in sacks, the lock gates wore beards of ice. It seemed a world from which vegetation had been banished; nothing existed except smoke, shale, ice, mud, ashes, and foul water." George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (Mariner Books, 1972), 53.

¹⁰⁸ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 70.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 36, 85.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 43, n6.

Discussions and diatribes on the relationship between theology and ‘the secular,’ broadly construed, are legion, and these conversations and claims have assumed many different forms: from proposals of various typologies regarding the role of the “church” in or to the “world,”¹¹¹ to examinations of the role and/or use-value of the Christian tradition in democracy¹¹² or in the history of empire,¹¹³ to explorations of the relationship between various particular ‘secular’ disciplines and Christian theology—which, of course, is the “sea-scape” Coakley seeks to chart, exploring how to navigate between systematic theology and the social sciences (as they both relate to feminism). Unlike some other attempts at this navigation, Coakley seeks a sort of middle way—beyond, on the one hand, those positions that eschew the resources and insights of the social sciences as part of their “resistance to ‘secular modernity’” and, on the other hand, those that see “classic Christianity [as] *inherently* ‘patriarchal,’” and thus reject it as a non-useful tradition or framework.¹¹⁴

Coakley offers three examples of the “Wigan Pierism” that she seeks to move beyond, three approaches to the relationship between the sacred and the secular that she eschews and seeks to overcome with her *théologie totale*. The first theological approach Coakley eschews is the “reactive return to a high, authoritarian ecclesiastical Christian ‘orthodoxy,’” which she identifies as being most like the “‘Wigan Pier’ of the original ironic vaudeville song...[having]

¹¹¹ Stanley Hauerwas’s work is especially relevant here. See, for instance, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991); *After Christendom?: How the Church Is to Behave If Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation Are Bad Ideas* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991); *Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics*, 2nd edition (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

¹¹² See, most notably, Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

¹¹³ For instance, Kwok Pui-lan, *Empire and the Christian Tradition: New Readings of Classical Theologians*, ed. Don H. Compier and Joerg Rieger (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007); Bruce Ellis Benson and Peter Goodwin Heltzel, eds., *Evangelicals and Empire: Christian Alternatives to the Political Status Quo* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008).

¹¹⁴ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 75.

cut itself off from the messy detritus of the actual ‘sea of faith.’”¹¹⁵ She associates this approach with the Roman Catholicism of JP II and Benedict, as well as with various Reformed and Lutheran forms of neo-conservatism. Coakley then quickly moves to critique the second Wigan Pier methodology she identifies, an approach that is similar to the first, but different in that its temptations lie in “its own distinctive claims to authority—less institutional, more purely intellectual, in tone.”¹¹⁶ This approach appeals to a certain theological metanarrative, and argues that the “secular” scientific and sociological insights of modernity are “themselves variations on weak theological alternatives” and thus “can be declared intellectually bankrupt.”¹¹⁷ In her analysis of and seeking to move beyond these two approaches, Coakley’s *théologie totale* again has much in common with postliberalism. Her narration of the two different “sides” she is seeking to move beyond is distinctly similar to how Frei, Lindbeck, and others of their time sought to move beyond a theology “polarized between conservative repristinators on the right and, on the left, radicalized progressives who seemed prepared to ‘emancipate’ Christianity from the entire doctrinal tradition which had given it its shape.”¹¹⁸

While Lindbeck and other “postliberal” thinkers sought to move beyond these two polarized options, Coakley’s efforts to move beyond Wigan Pier also seeks to move beyond a third approach—an approach embodied by (some strands of) feminism. Whereas these first two Wigan Pier options, while differing in tone and emphasis, share a common resistance to “secular modernity,” the third fails in precisely the opposite way. Instead of rejecting secular knowledges *tout court*, it rejects Christianity, holding that “classic Christianity is *inherently* ‘patriarchal,’ and that—without necessary ideological correction—it will inevitably tend towards the suppression

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 73.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ DeHart, *Trial of the Witnesses*, 14, fn21.

of the rights and dignity of women and other marginalized people, including ethnic minorities and homosexuals and lesbians.”¹¹⁹ For Coakley, these approaches all fail in that they are unable to articulate some sort of middle way that both embraces the insights of the social sciences and the rich history and tradition of the Christian faith.

Whereas an earlier section of this chapter examined the inconsistency and limits of Coakley’s account of gender (trans-) formation in relation to her use of Butler, it is important here to briefly examine how Coakley articulates how her approach as superior to and integral for “the secular riddle of gender.”¹²⁰ Coakley’s explanation that this riddle can only be solved when “its connection to the doctrine of a Trinitarian God” is understood and embraced” not only demonstrates Coakley’s privileging of theological discourse, but, again, assumes that gender constructions are a “problem” that can and should be *solved*, a point addressed in the previous section.¹²¹ Coakley suggests that turning our attention to desire and to the trinity enables us to move beyond “the seemingly immovable stuckness of what secular gender theory gloomily calls ‘the gender binary.’”¹²² Not only does Coakley read a nihilism *into* “secular gender theory”

¹¹⁹ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 75–76.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 54. Moreover, while Coakley is particularly critical of “secular” feminist theorists, she is also, if not more, critical of feminist *theologians*. As Tonstad puts it, “While Coakley identifies as feminist, her primary antagonists are often other feminist theologians who, she claims, do not have the necessary ‘perceptive,’ ‘profound,’ and ‘subtle’ understandings of the nuances of the Christian traditions and of the importance of the shared rationality and analytic philosophy of religion” (*God and Difference*, 98, see also en6 and en7).

¹²¹ *Ibid.* It is also important to note here that this claim, and the argument that follows from it, makes a number of epistemological assumptions that might be seen by many (myself included) as concerning, the most obvious one being that there *is* a sort of ontological twoness of gender, even if it is fallen and subject to a “transfiguring interruption” (58). Mapping the threeness of the Trinity onto the twoness of gender assumes and reproduces—ontologizes—gender. While there is a rich feminist theoretical tradition on twoness grounded in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, those accounts at the very least reflect critically and constructively on these nuances and concerns. For more on the feminist theoretical debate on “twoness” see Cheah and Grosz, “Of Being-Two”; as well as Butler et al., “The Future of Sexual Difference.” Both essays appear in a volume of *Diacritics*, guest-edited by Cheah and Grosz, on “Irigaray and the Political Future of Sexual Difference.”

¹²² Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 61.

and, as was pointed out earlier, fail to take the nuance of queer temporal insights on subjectivization seriously, but she also sees the move beyond this as achievable and desirable, dictated by her theological frame.¹²³

Coakley seeks to avoid the false lure of Wigan Pier, but in doing so, does she embrace, as she claims, “the ‘sea of faith’ [which] may be murky, polluted, or marshy,” or, in her effort to “not get stuck” does she quickly begin searching for dry land, with *théologie totale* as her compass, and contemplation as her oars? In such an effort, might also the sea of faith itself get left behind? Aspects of Tanner’s critiques of postliberalism also find resonance here—Tanner challenges the predetermination of “proper future practice,” how this lifts practices “out of the social processes that formed and continue to form them.”¹²⁴ As such, academic theology, even if it is focused on practices, loses its relevance, failing to “make sense to people from their own theological outlooks.”¹²⁵

In her theological analysis of *what* occurs, Coakley’s account forecloses difference, as the narratively cohering, prescriptive path towards the Divine through and by which our desire is transformed erases and minimizes gender and sexual difference as it directs, transforms, and reconstitutes it. This is echoed in Coakley’s methodological reflections on *how* such transformation occurs, via *théologie totale*. In both these ways, queer temporality helps illuminate the ways in which Coakley’s vision and the methodological-ethical frame on which it is built fails to engender the aims it seeks. I conclude this chapter now by turning briefly to how queer temporality opens up different possibilities for addressing the aims Coakley seeks.

¹²³ To be fair, Coakley is not the first to critique the gender theories she is referencing as nihilistic—this is a critique made even by some queer and feminist theorists. Nevertheless she makes the charge *tout court* without specifying the basis or specific object of her critique.

¹²⁴ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 79, 78.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

III. The Self, Straight Time, and Success: Concluding Remarks on Coakley, Crawley, Huffer, and Halberstam

While in their text *In a Queer Time and Place*, Halberstam directly addresses the logics of straight temporality, their *Queer Art of Failure* offers a paradigm that aligns with Coakley's methodological aims without falling prey to the same foreclosing of difference, and thus further highlights the limits of Coakley's frame, as well as pointing to the possibilities both within and beyond it. Like Coakley, Halberstam seeks a third way, an alternative to the current order of things. "We are all used to having our dreams crushed, our hopes smashed, our illusions shattered," Halberstam acknowledges, "but what comes after hope?...What is the alternative, in other words," they continue, "to cynical resignation on the one hand and naïve optimism on the other?"¹²⁶ However, whereas Coakley's methodological "pincer movement" advocates embracing and utilizing both the resources of the social sciences and the doctrinal tradition of the Christian faith to re-orient desire towards its rightful object, the Divine, Halberstam counterintuitively advocates embracing the "utility of getting lost over finding our way."¹²⁷

Earlier in this chapter, I argued that both in her account of gender, and in the prescriptive linear logic of what contemplation does in and through *théologie totale*, while seeking to avoid the grimy decks of Wigan Pier, Coakley instead wants to reach some kind of dry promised land where oneself is taken up into the Divine, and that this opens one up to the world and to others within it in a transformative way. Turning to queer time and to theological engagements of Coakley's work—mainly that of Linn Tonstad's—I have sought to show that this openness is by no means a given within Coakley's method, but that rather, Coakley's account of what un-mastery is can actually function to foreclose openness and attentiveness to difference.

¹²⁶ Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 1.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

Halberstam, conversely, does not seek a kind of dry land in her project, but instead asks us to consider “the possibility that alternatives dwell in the murky waters of a counterintuitive, often impossibly dark and negative realm of critique and refusal.”¹²⁸

Similarly, Coakley’s account also has comparable resonances, and divergences, with Lynne Huffer, in ways that nearly mirror Halberstam’s. Like Coakley, Huffer, a feminist philosopher at Emory University, has written extensively on the relationship between eros/desire, (un-)mastery, and feminism; while Huffer is not writing from a theological or theistic perspective, at first glance one may even assume an alliance between Huffer and Coakley in their respective visions. In addition to the shared thematic interests, (as well as shared feminist theoretical interests in Irigaray for that matter), Coakley and Huffer have similar methodological predilections—like Coakley’s non-totalizing *totale* that explores trinitarian theology and the formation of the self from multiple, intersecting levels and directions, Huffer’s archival turn functions similarly in her examination of madness; and like Coakley’s pursuit of a “middle way” for theology, an “unsystematic systematics,” Huffer too seeks a kind of middle way, between queer and feminist theories.¹²⁹ Finally, along those same lines, both Coakley and Huffer, in their own ways, practice kinds of “reparative” reading practices, Coakley for instance turning back to the patristics as a resource for feminist theology and resisting the either-or logic of systematics or practices/experientialism, and Huffer embracing and enacting multiplicitous, non-dialectical analyses throughout her oeuvre.¹³⁰ Here, however, is precisely where congruence between

¹²⁸ Ibid., 2.

¹²⁹ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 49; Huffer, *Are the Lips a Grave?*

¹³⁰ In a presentation at the 2015 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, in a paper presented for a panel on Huffer’s texts, I turned to Huffer’s work as a resource for a kind of post-reparative reading in the vein of Eve Sedgwick. For more on this, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You’re so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is about You,” in *Touching, Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003),

Coakley and Huffer breaks down, as it does with Halberstam. Whereas Coakley reads erotic transformation of desire as a narrative, linear, formative process, Huffer, recounting her argument in *Mad for Foucault*, reads eros:

...as a disappearance: a profile dissolving at the edge of the horizon, a shadow cast as it falls. Eros becomes the name for that which is lost in the moral rationalization of modern sexuality as the site of our intelligibility. In a moment that leaves eros behind as the unintelligible form of a fading unreason, it can only reemerge, in the historical present, as an atemporal rupture—as the lightning-quick flash of a ‘mad’ mode of knowing—within the scientific specification of the sexual *dispositif*'s ever-proliferating list of perversions.¹³¹

Eros does not merely transform and reorient the subject, it (ethically) dissolves the subject, shattering the subject through and by the encounter of alterity, what Huffer explains as “a heterotopian *ethopoiesis*, an ethical remaking of the erotic relation” (a topic I will return to in the conclusion of this dissertation).¹³²

Whereas Halberstam diverges via a turn to failure, Huffer diverges via a turn to madness; what both divergences share is a critique of, and alternative to, the narrative linearity of subject formation. Both Huffer and Halberstam are attuned to the difference-foreclosing normativity undergirding such narrative processes and logics—to put it in my own words, to how straight time stifles. Moreover, both also point to how relationality is undermined within this straight temporal logic, and how queer time engenders and fosters an openness to otherness, new forms of sociality and connection.

In *Are the Lips a Grave?*, Huffer explores the different ways “an antifoundationalist heritage of thinking that is not only queer but explicitly feminist” enables her to “reframe

123–52. Huffer herself also writes on reading Foucault and Sedgwick “together through the lens of a reparative ethics in which the felt experience of knowing the world is also an experiment in new ways of living.” See Lynne Huffer, “Foucault and Sedgwick: The Repressive Hypothesis Revisited,” *Foucault Studies* 14 (September 2012): 20–40.

¹³¹ Huffer, *Are the Lips a Grave?*, 12.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 43.

difference,” and in that retraversal, “the old difference problem reappears as new.”¹³³ Huffer’s text examines and challenges the different ways in which difference is undermined in *both* narrative feminist and performative queer frameworks, and proposes a “rethinking of narrative performance as socially embedded,” illuminating how alterity itself must guide, rather than be guided by, an ethical frame. I return to Huffer’s constructive proposal as a resource later in the conclusion of this project—here, what I want to highlight is how she does not eschew narrative *en toto*, but challenges the foundationalist logic embedded within narrative linearity.

Explaining that “while both narratives and performatives produce subjects, narrative depends on a retroactive legitimation of the subject position through the temporality of a narrative grammar,” and fails to fully tend to how alterity and encounter with otherness shape us.¹³⁴ Drawing on Iris Marion Young, Huffer challenges how in traditional ethical theory, moral respect assumes “taking the place of the other,” but fails to attend to the alterity of the other based on their own narrative—“the difference, interval, that others drag behind them shadows and histories, scars and traces, that do not become present in our communication.”¹³⁵ Continuing, Huffer explains that these shadows and scars “mark the place both of damage and the possibility of transformation that we can never fully grasp, articulate, or understand.”¹³⁶ A linear narrative with a singular telos not only does damage by presuming and positing particular norms that

¹³³ Ibid., 20, 21.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 59.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 71. Huffer here, in the latter quote, is citing Iris Marion Young, *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 53. Huffer continues explicating Young, writing, “Young asserts that this ideal of identification as a necessary ingredient for ethical relation in fact upholds ‘a conceptual projection of sameness among people and perspectives, at the expense of their differences’” (*Are the Lips a Grave?*, 71, citing *Intersecting Voices*, 44).

¹³⁶ Huffer, *Are the Lips a Grave?*, 71.

foreclose difference, but it also fails in that it forecloses possibilities that come from that attention to alterity, to what Young and Huffer call an “asymmetrical reciprocity.”¹³⁷

The ways in which a linear narrative towards a singular telos undermines difference by foreclosing possibilities is also a theme Halberstam addresses. In his engagement with *The Queer Art of Failure* for the *Syndicate Theology* symposium on the text, Ashon Crawley reflects at length, and with profound poeticism, about how it is failure, not the linear, teleological movement to a particular aim, that enables openness to otherness and new forms of relationality, to “consider otherwise modes of existence, otherwise means of being in the world together with others.”¹³⁸ *Théologie totale* seeks to counter the ways in which theological knowledge functions as a form of mastery and control by turning to contemplative practice, but Crawley points out that it is through failure and being with others through which such destabilization occurs:

What does it mean for intellectual pursuit to come from those that cannot read? From chickens? From children? Can flesh that fails to order knowledge based on a particular epistemology know anything about freedom, about liberation? This is to ask from where does a knowledge of freedom, to use a phrase from Fred Moten, emerge? It is to ask from where does the idea, to borrow from Jose Muñoz, of disidentification exist such that it is prompted in ones that have never had such experience? To inflect this question through Christian religiosity: Why sit in upper rooms waiting for that which you do not know exists, that which you do not know is even possible? From where does the modality of gathering with others seeking the experience of divine encounter come?¹³⁹

For Coakley, such a knowledge of freedom comes through a particular process of individual practices of un-mastery; but for Halberstam, and for Crawley, that comes through failure and togetherness. “Halberstam’s text [*The Queer Art of Failure*] is fundamentally about the encounter of gathering with others, about the privileging of the multiple, of the multitude,” Crawley explains. “Such gatherings, such multiplicity,” he continues, “are failures to establish

¹³⁷ Ibid.; Young, *Intersecting Voices*, 44.

¹³⁸ Ashon Crawley, “Otherwise, Failure,” *Syndicate Theology* 2, no. 3 (June 2015): 180.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 180–81.

the bourgeois subject of liberal thought, *the shored up enclosed individual*.¹⁴⁰ Whereas *théologie totale* privileges the individual and their transformed desire at the cost of the communal, as Tonstad points out, the turn to failure is bound up with and by belonging and community. As Halberstam puts it, “We will wander, improvise, fall short, and move in circles. We will lose our way, our cars, our agenda, and possibly our minds, but in losing we will find another way of making meaning in which...no one gets left behind.”¹⁴¹ Halberstam, Huffer, and Crawley all gesture not only to the ways in which Coakley’s frame might undermine an openness to difference, but to different possibilities for a kind of (de-?) formation that engenders such openness.

Finally, whereas Coakley’s *théologie totale* seeks to achieve a particular end (the reorientation of desire and the resultant effects) via a specific set of practices (silent individual contemplation), Halberstam’s failure, Crawley points out, is not achievable in the same kind of way; as such, it is situated eschatologically—“we find that the otherwise is, to fail to use the phrase theologically,” he notes, “*already but not yet*.”¹⁴² Implicitly invoking, or at the very least echoing, Muñoz’s call in *Cruising Utopia* for a queer horizon, for the non-attainable future-in-the-present, Crawley points out that failure “simply illustrates the ongoing plentitude of *horizon*, that the path to success exists previous to situation.”¹⁴³ While *théologie totale* is teleological and linear, failure “is *horizontal*, it is the unceasing thrust, movement, and force of and to the horizon, which gathers while it also disperses.”¹⁴⁴ As “horizontal,” failure presents and offers an otherwise that is unattainable. In its “refusal of being captured,” failure “leaves open for us the ongoing

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 181 emphasis mine.

¹⁴¹ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 25.

¹⁴² Crawley, “Otherwise, Failure,” 182.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

possibility of discovery,” a “mysterious beyond [that] allows us to think”—and, I would argue, act and be—“without having to force such thinking [and acting, and being] into predetermined ideologies and concepts.”¹⁴⁵ In contrast, predetermined ideologies and concepts (and practices), even if rooted in a vision of un-mastery towards and by the Divine, constrict the possibilities of the otherwise and thus foreclose rather than enable an attentiveness to the other and to difference.

If Butler’s insights about gender challenge Coakley’s “expansive” but teleological account of gender, Halberstam’s insights about failure (as presented by Crawley) challenge Coakley’s prescriptive vision of how such expansiveness is attained. Whereas Coakley invokes eschatology as a linear telos, Crawley’s reading of Halberstam invokes it as horizontal and *open-ended*; a sense of possibility that remains always beyond while it is at the same time being envisioned and enacted in and through (the failures of and in) the present—an already not yet.

I turn now, in my final case study, to Serene Jones, another feminist theological thinker who seeks a vision of gendered and sexual flourishing presented through a methodological-ethical framework that, I am arguing, operates in straight time. Like Coakley, Jones invokes the eschatological in her turn to gender (and, similarly, turns explicitly to Judith Butler). Yet, whereas Coakley invokes a linear eschatological end, Jones, more like Crawley, turns to eschatology as a resource for understanding the in-between, the liminal, the already but not yet. But whereas Crawley sees that eschatological as horizontal, enabling an otherwise, Jones, I will argue, relies on the eschatological not yet to foreclose the otherwise, to stabilize the present. To turn now, then, to Jones...

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

CHAPTER FOUR

ESCHATOLOGY, ESSENTIALISM...AND EXCESS? ON SERENE JONES

Feminist theological discussions of women's nature are rooted decisively in a theological vision of an already/not-yet future—a vision of God's will for a redeemed humanity where all persons live in right relation to God and to one another. This normative perspective looks ahead to a model of identity yet to be realized and not back to models of personhood that remain rooted in an essentialized nostalgia for the natural and the given. Such theologizing shapes the present by touching our daily lives with its vision of redeemed humanity as the goal of faithful living in this moment.
- Serene Jones

Yes, on one level Taiwan just wants a good fuck, but when we look at this longing projected out on a screen or enacted on a stage, we see it as more; we see it collectively as a desire for the good life that we have been denied in straight time's chokehold. We are left waiting but vigilant in our desire for another time that is not yet here.
- José Esteban Muñoz

And in imagining one finds that otherwise has been realizable already.... the otherwise is, to fail to use the phrase theologically, already but not yet. If otherwise possibilities announce and enunciate plurality, multiplicity, irreducibility, then even when already realized as otherwise modes of social political organization, of otherwise ways of life like the horizon, such would of necessity maintain the not yet nature, a force that keeps open and at remove any declaration of doneness.
- Ashon Crawley

At the beginning of the previous chapter, I noted that there was perhaps no work more relevant to this project than that of Sarah Coakley. This, in many ways, was true (otherwise, I would not have made such a claim!). Coakley's *théologie totale* serves as a paradigmatic example of a methodological-ethical framework of and for formation, focused on the self but with implications for communal belonging and/amidst gender and sexual difference, rooted in particular practices, and emphasizing gender and sexual identity as central to and for the work of theology and life of faith. The last chapter argued that not only is Coakley's program paradigmatic of this methodological-ethical binding, but it is also paradigmatic of straight time—that while she seeks unmastery and a particular kind of feminist flourishing, it is a version of

unmastery and flourishing that has Christian formation—in Coakley’s particular frame, the reorientation of desire—as its telos in such a way that undercuts gender and sexual difference and openness to otherness.

While Coakley’s methodological-ethical framework is particularly relevant for the way it elucidates my argument by illustrating and illuminating its operations, Jones’ framework—embodied in what she calls “eschatological essentialism”—is particularly relevant for this dissertation in a slightly different way. It, too, is beholden to straight time (hence its inclusion in this project), but less so, and with more contradictions. Put another way, Jones’ frame comes the closest to the queer temporal logic I am seeking. At points, it even utilizes/inhabits and performs such a logic. In many ways, Jones’ framework functions as a kind of Hegelian synthesis or subversion of Coakley’s methodological-ethical framework and the Lindbeckian framework I outline in the first chapter of this project.¹ In this way, her account illuminates my critique of the straight temporality of methodological-ethical frameworks, demonstrating how adjustments and improvements in the content of the framework fail to open up difference in the way these theologians hope. To unpack this first in slightly more detail before delving into the particulars of Jones’ framework...

Like both Coakley and Lindbeck (and his followers), Jones is not merely a systematician or scholar of religion (or ethical theorist), but turns to theology as a rich resource in and for people’s lives.² In her essay “Glorious Creation, Beautiful Law,” she turns to John Calvin’s work

¹ Or rather, to be more accurate/less colloquial, a Hegelian *Aufhebung* (or, a Fichtean synthesis—though, while I am not using either in any kind of scholarly/definitional sense, what I am saying aligns more with the former rather than the latter...).

² Similarly, in *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), Jones muses that “It is hard to think of a task more central to Christian theology as a whole than this one: finding the language to speak grace in a form that allows it to come toward humanity in ways as gentle as they are profound and hopeful” and in performing (/attempting?) this task, the work of

on law and grace as a resource for Reformed feminist theology. She explores Calvin's writings through what she names as an aesthetic lens that attends "more carefully to Calvin's own account of the dispositions or character traits he wants this doctrine to cultivate, the kind of person he hopes will be shaped and compelled by the aesthetic power of his account."³ This is not unique to this particular essay but aligns with Jones' broader vision of the work of theology. Jones explains that she finds aesthetic theological analysis fruitful because it enables her to "explore at a more complex level how Christian beliefs are formed: what they look like; how they feel; what they lead us to do; how they shape our bodies, our relationships, our sense of self, and our most fundamental grasp of God and the world." As "a feminist with a pragmatic interest in social change," such an approach is "helpful because it require[s] taking seriously the concrete practices, cultural patterns, and communal actions—and not just the reasoned ideas—that make us who we are..."⁴

These claims alone already begin to brightly illuminate how Jones' approach to theology aligns with both the Lindbeckian postliberal tradition and with Coakley. While the particular methodological tools they turn to differ, and while the content of their doctrinal claims and ethical visions differ in many respects, all these thinkers see theology as formational, seeking some kind of flourishing. That comes to bear in their methods and their ethics, and particularly, in the different ways they bind method and ethics to one another.

Jones's work also has commonalities with Lindbeck's and Coakley's respective projects, serving as a kind of link between them as well as a movement beyond them. Jones has been shaped by and bears marks of the postliberal tradition—Jones was formed as a minister and

theology should (/does?) inspire people "to think in practical ways about how grace might be enacted or performed in people's lives..." (x).

³ Jones, "Glorious Creation, Beautiful Law," 30.

⁴ Ibid., 23, 24.

trained as a theologian at Yale during the era of the “Yale School,” when and where postliberalism was at its height.⁵ Like Lindbeck and his followers, Jones is invested in “concrete practices, cultural patterns, and communal actions” that form us as people of God, practices that, as she puts it, “that make us who we are.”⁶ But beyond Lindbeck, and like Coakley, she sees gender, and feminist analysis, as a vital part of that investment, rather than as secondary to it. Central to Jones’ postliberal-inflected theology is that “God wants women to flourish as creatures equal in beauty, stature, and power to men” and that “only a faith that actively encourages this flourishing is worthy of the God who gifts us with life, love, and hope.”⁷

Moreover, Jones’ theology is not characterized by the same spatial rigidity and boundaries as Lindbeck’s. I return to this theme later, but here it is important to just briefly mark this difference. Not only does Jones’ Reformed account of the relationship between nature and grace preclude a clear church-world or sacred-secular divide in her theology, her emphasis on the sovereignty and grace of God reflects a reticence towards dualisms and definite dichotomies. God’s gift of continual creation of and presence in the world “includes not only what we typically think of as the glorious performances of human life at its best”—rather, “God is present everywhere, even in places we prefer not to see,” even in “[s]cenes of our suffering and

⁵ See DeHart, *Trial of the Witnesses*, 50–52, fn114. In his exposition of the factors that displaced the original methodological impetuses guiding the Yale “postliberal” tradition, in his exploration of Radical Orthodoxy, Dehart points out that one factor in that shift was the theological dispute that the turn to Radical Orthodoxy engendered. Amongst the “works which might have disturbed the all-too-easy association of the Yale legacy with a form of theological reaction,” DeHart mentions “Serene Jones’s treatment of feminist themes [as one of the works] bearing a Yale stamp which contributed...to that shift” (51).

⁶ Jones, “Glorious Creation, Beautiful Law,” 24.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

sinning.”⁸ In this way, Jones has more in common with Tanner, and her critique of Lindbeckian postliberalism, than she does with that framework itself.

Jones also holds much in common with Coakley: an explicit attention to gender; a linking of (or, rather, a recognition of the links between) gender/sexuality, practices, doctrine, and (the messiness of) desire; a turn to eschatology as a resource for theological reflection on gender. But just as is the case with Lindbeckian postliberalism, Jones also moves beyond Coakley in many respects. Whereas Coakley seeks to untangle the messiness of desire as it is transformed towards and by the Divine, Jones emphasizes not the transformation of the messiness of desire, but on the grace of God as rendered present in the midst of such messiness. Examining the “strong tendency in the [Reformed] tradition towards a kind of moral and aesthetic repulsion at the specter of unregulated or misdirected desires and the messy lives they create,” Jones challenges this “Reformed tendency to ‘exile’ the undesirable [where the] good unfolds in space of God’s action, and the bad exists beyond it,” identifying this as “a position that dramatically calls into question the sovereign reach of the Divine presence and love.”⁹ For Jones both gender and desire are couched within rather than, as in Coakley, directed by broader doctrinal claims about who god is and how God works in the world. This doctrinal grounding in turn (also) holistically impacts one’s ethics (and method) as, following Calvin, for Jones the “proper function of doctrine is to build piety.”¹⁰

⁸Ibid., 29. For Jones, this even manifests in her account of transcendence, as she builds on Calvin’s maternal metaphor, of God implanted in our innards/wombs, of how “God envelops us and we, in turn, envelop God” (27). This marks a different, more intimate kind of relationality that is still marked by distinction/upholds God’s transcendence. As she explains, “In the maternal metaphor, this relation looks very different. Like the contract metaphor, difference is maintained—but between the two, there is a constant exchange of fluid and blood across the boundaries dividing them. In this regard, there is *indwelling in the midst of distinction...*” (28, emphasis mine).

⁹ Ibid., 31.

¹⁰ Ibid., 36.

Finally (and relatedly), Jones' methodological-ethical framework melds and moves beyond both Lindbeckian postliberalism and Coakley in two key ways. First, whereas Coakley focuses on the individual and Lindbeck on the community, Jones account reflects and builds on a robust theological anthropology of a socially-embedded self. The self is not fully autonomous and entirely agential, but shaped by and through communities and cultural contexts; on the other hand, the self is a *self*, a unique constellation of communities and experiences that reflect a particularity that cannot/should not be subsumed by a singular communal or cultural context.¹¹

This affects how Jones treats the particular *categories* of identity—religion, gender, sexuality—at issue here. Recall that, for Coakley, sexual desire is a reflection of and to be transformed by desire for God, and gender identity and differentiation is reflective of God's Trinitarian nature. Rather, for Jones, gender and sexuality are significant aspects of our identities, culturally/socially and individually, and thus significant topics deserving of theological attention in their own right and on their own terms. More to the point, Christian formation works with and through them rather than over and against them.

These similarities and differences point to a key thematic shift regarding the notion of formation that marks Jones' account. In both Lindbeckian postliberalism and Coakley's *théologie totale*, the turn to formation is a turn to particular practices, of how those practices form us into and as part of a particular community, towards a particular end. Jones, as we will come to see, does not focus on formation in this way, and is far more apophatic about and open to multiplicity and variance. In offering more space for differences between and within communities than either Lindbeck or Coakley, Jones comes closest to the vision this project seeks. In many ways, her work embodies it, as a juxtaposition with Muñoz will come to show.

¹¹ I return to this theme of selfhood in Jones' work throughout this chapter.

Yet, I argue, a close examination of her frame through the lens of queer temporality and futurity shows an operative account of the (female) *self* that ultimately undermines her aim: Jones' methodological-ethical framework operates with a singular universal notion of woman as a regulative ideal, and in doing so, she presumes and posits an account of the formation of womanhood that forecloses and obstructs difference.

I make this case via examining three themes in Jones' account: first, her account of gender itself, and her theological analysis of the essentialist vs. constructivist debate in feminist theory; secondly, her constructive response to that debate via her turn to "eschatological essentialism;" and finally, her reflections on trauma and its effects. These themes will be explored in the three respective sections of this chapter, and each section will place Jones' work in conversation with queer theory—the first section engaging Butler; the second, Munoz; and the third, Edelman. Through these respective analyses, I demonstrate how Jones, while gesturing towards a more open vision of gender identity via a turn to the future, nevertheless stabilizes gender vis-à-vis Christian identity, and in doing so stabilizes the present in a way that forecloses difference.

I. Between a Rock and a Hard Place? Jones' Theology of Gender Identity

How does one's sexed and gendered (and sexual) identity further complicate the already complicated theological anthropological inquiry of what it means to be human in light of who God is? And how does this question impact what it means to flourish, and what it means to be formed as a Christian? Again, distinctive from Coakley, for Jones, gender in and of itself is worthy of theological analysis, and exists as a site of its own formation and possible/hopeful flourishing. Whereas the methodological-ethical frames up to this point have addressed

(explicitly or implicitly/in their silence) how gender and sexuality should be transformed *by* and through Christian identity and formation, Jones begins to move beyond a kind of prescriptive narrative linearity *methodologically*, in that she turns theologically to how gender and sexual identity formation themselves are vital to and for a Christian theological vision of/for flourishing.

Nevertheless, while she examines the significance of gendered flourishing in and for Christian identity and formation, Jones stabilizes gender, tethering an understanding of what gender is and what forms it takes (read: gender norms) by and to the present, to prevailing (and perhaps even dominant?) conceptions and classifications of gender identity. In doing so, she risks impeding difference by foreclosing other forms and manifestations gender might take. Moreover, Jones draws on theological anthropology in this stabilizing of gender norms, and in doing so, fails to attend to how Christian identity itself might also be shaped by gender (and sexual) identity. While her eschatological essentialism gestures towards an account of gender more open to difference, it remains guided, to at least some degree, by straight time. I return to this latter concern at the end of this chapter; this section explores Jones' account of gender, placing it in conversation with Butler.

§1. Framing the Debates on Women's Nature Theologically

In her text *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace*, Serene Jones explores the relevance of feminist theory to contemporary theology, examining how feminist theory's aims of supporting the liberation and flourishing of women align with "the critical task of helping the church reflect on its present-day witness and practice" to "serve and

strengthen the community from inside.”¹² At the forefront of her inquiry—an inquiry which is bound up with and has significant implications for Christian identity formation—Jones turns to the question of women’s “nature,” beginning by noting how this theme is central to theological considerations of flourishing. “From the time of the early Christian apologists,” Jones point out, “theologians have asked about ‘woman’: Is she fundamentally or essentially different from man? Is she created by God to be more nurturing, loving, motherly, and intuitively spiritual than man?.. Or, negatively, is she weaker than man? Was she created to help him and follow him?”¹³ These questions all point to the broader debate in feminist theory that Jones addresses in this chapter, that of essentialism vs. constructivism: “Is being a ‘woman’ the product of nature or nurture... does ‘womanhood’ express an inborn, natural, female disposition or follow from socially learned behaviors?”¹⁴

Jones outlines the feminist theoretical debate and examines it with a theological lens, with an eye towards promoting communal faithfulness and (women’s) flourishing.¹⁵ Turning first to the essentialist side of the debate, which understands women’s nature as something that is indeed natural—that there is a universal essence of “woman,” a set of features or qualities that mark their nature and define the category—Jones outlines how it is problematic. Essentialism,

¹² Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 11. Also maybe, here or earlier, before the §, include this quote—“feminist theory helps us better understand how cultural constructions of gender have affected the development of Christian thought and practice over the centuries into the present” (15).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ A chart of Jones’ account of the theological value of the respective sides of the debate:

| | Essentialism | Constructivism |
|-----|---|--|
| +’s | Feminist theologians are “trying to speak the truth of the matter about women’s nature and God.” | Theological affirmations of “creation’s diversity, human finitude, the power of sin, and the remaking potential of grace.” |
| -’s | Limited in our ability to grasp these truths are and how they manifest; used to subordinate and subdue. | Doctrinally, we want to make normative, clear truth claims; politically, important to advocate for women/the oppressed. |

she points out, makes claims about who and what women are that “fail to describe the complex reality of women’s (and men’s) lives;” moreover, such claims have been used to justify the historical oppression of women, and “in a world full of gender ‘givens,’ it is hard to imagine radical social change in support of women’s full equality with men.”¹⁶ On the other hand, Jones also highlights its merits, explaining how “universal claims about women’s nature are [also] attractive to feminists” for many reasons. There is value in celebrating, perhaps even privileging, feminine distinctiveness, particularly in and for emancipatory political aims. Additionally, theologically some level of essentializing is necessary, Jones argues, as feminist theologians “are also trying to speak the truth of the matter about women’s nature and God.”¹⁷

This point about the seeking of “essential truth” in the work of (feminist) theology is one of the key reasons why and where Jones finds fault in the constructivist side of the debate, the view where “‘selves’ are no longer assessed and measured by universals but are viewed as dynamic products of vast cultural forces,” and that “conceives of persons as fluidly constituted; as webs of discourses, agendas, attitudes, relationships, and hence as more messy, unstable, and open-ended than essentialists’ discussions of human nature allow.”¹⁸ Jones expresses her concern about the constructivist critique of universality on theological grounds:

The doctrines that feminists construct for use in the varied contexts of women’s lives are by no means considered tentative or culturally relative. To the contrary, these claims are bold, normative, and powerful enough for persons to stake their lives on. For feminist theology to be as life-transforming and life-enhancing as it claims to be, it must be committed to such truths and to their enactment in the lives of women and men.¹⁹

¹⁶ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 29. For Jones’ detailed narration of the constructivist v. essentialist debate and the strengths and weaknesses of the respective sides, see her chapter on “Women’s Nature,” particularly her sections on “The Essentialist Side of the Debate” (24-31) and on “The Constructivist Side of the Debate” (31-42).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 30, 53.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 54. See also her outlining of feminist critique of leanings towards moral relativity on bottom of 41ff.

For Jones, to affirm a constructivist account of personhood and of gender means to deny any universal or normative claim and thus to eschew truth, which is counter to the message of the Gospel.

Jones is also suspicious of the social, theological, and ministerial implications of the constructivist emphasis on cultural relativity/construction and fragmentation. She notes that feminists have worried “about the political effect of celebrating the fluid, fragmented character of women’s identity at the very moment women are arguing that their identity has been overly fragmented by dominant culture.”²⁰ The theological concerns worry her as much or more than the political. As I’ll explore later, conceiving of justification and sanctification as shattering and un-doing, as Luther does, has “negative effects,” as the woman is “already unraveled by the world, undone by falsely inscribed relations of power. She comes not with a robust self that needs to be dismantled by the wrath of the Law but as a de-centered subject whose lack of self is her prison.”²¹

Jones also highlights the pastoral ramifications of a constructivist account of women’s nature in her text *Trauma and Grace*. Theologically reflecting on the trauma of miscarriage, Jones challenges the “poststructuralist rendering of *the destabilized ‘subject.’*”²² Having reflected earlier in the text on particular women’s stories and experiences of miscarriage, Jones argues that this account of women’s nature (or lack thereof):

risks inappropriately valorizing tropes of rupturing, fragmenting, “coming undone.” For a woman like Wendy, who was bleeding for days, a theory that hemorrhages the self, can hardly be consoling. For one whose very body is being strewn into history, buried in earth, images of the poststructuralist boundless self hardly come as a comfort.²³

²⁰ Ibid., 41.

²¹ Ibid., 62, 63.

²² Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 142 emphasis hers.

²³ Ibid., 143.

The constructivist account of women's nature, for Jones, is inadequate theologically, politically, and pastorally.

That being said, Jones does find theological merit in the constructivist position insofar as it affirms gendered difference and reminds us of the limits of human existence. Jones acknowledges and affirms how constructivist accounts implicitly speak to the recognition of sin through reminding us that “these ‘imaginative cultural constructs’ of gender are shaped by concrete relations of power and material interests that oppress women.”²⁴ The constructivist position also speaks to grace and redemption in the midst of sin, she notes, given that cultural constructs can also be subverted and challenged towards the aim of women's freedom and flourishing. Interestingly (but not surprisingly given the way the chapters of this project unfold), Jones' acknowledgement of the values of constructivism aligns closely with two of my three key critiques of methodological-ethical frameworks. The connections she sees between sin and constructivism acknowledges the negative subjectivizing effects of even positive identity formation, which aligns with my first thesis. Similarly, the connections she sees between theological claims on human finitude and constructivism's “epistemic skepticism” align with my second thesis.²⁵ And of course, more broadly, Jones' recognition that constructivism highlights the theological truth, embodied in the doctrine of creation, “that difference is good, that diversity finds its origins in a divine delight in difference,” is one side of the dual-sided assumptions and values (belonging being the other), guiding and framing this project.²⁶

²⁴ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 59.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁶ *Ibid.* Interestingly, where Jones' work diverges from my argument in this project is in my third and final critique of methodological-ethical frameworks of formation—that they fail to consider the theological and ethical possibilities of, and in, de-formation. This divergence, and my critique of it, will become clearer throughout the chapter.

Jones' reading of constructivism and its strengths resonate deeply with my argument in this dissertation. Yet whereas my claims about formation rely on constructivist assumptions, Jones' ultimately finds a constructivist account untenable, at least on its own, and comes back to the point that:

as feminists are busy celebrating diversity, acknowledging finitude, confessing sin, proclaiming the power of grace to transform lives, analyzing contexts and power relations, thinking about social change, and seeking conversions, we are also trying to speak the truth of the matter about women's nature and God. We converse with Scripture, traditions, and ecclesial experiences that constrain what we say about humanity. There are theological truths that feminists believe are so fundamental to the life of faith that, while we may recast, reconstruct, and even revolutionize them, we may not finally relativize or dismiss them.²⁷

For Jones, theology requires that we make universal claims, which makes constructivism, despite what it offers, ultimately untenable.

Given the merits and problems with both the constructivist and essentialist sides of the debate, for Jones we are essentially (pun intended!) stuck between a rock and a hard place, to utilize a metaphor she draws on in an earlier essay.²⁸ In light of this stuckness, Jones turns to eschatology and to Reformed accounts of justification and sanctification to offer a constructive proposal. Before turning to that constructive proposal, first, it is important to ask: are her claims about constructivism's untenability justified? I assess them by turning once again to Judith

²⁷ Ibid., 54–55.

²⁸ In the earlier essay, aptly titled "Women's Experience: Between a Rock and a Hard Place," Jones seeks to better understand and "map out the different conceptual frameworks within which...North American feminist, womanist, and *mujerista* theologians are situating their constructive projects," by examining the methodological assumptions they make around women's "experience." See "Women's Experience between a Rock and a Hard Place: Feminist, Womanist, and *Mujerista* Theologies in North America," in *Horizons in Feminist Theology*, ed. Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 33.

Butler, the theorist who, by Jones's own account, most aptly embodies a "strong constructivist" position.²⁹

§2. *A Butlerian Critique of Jones' Critique of Constructivism*³⁰

One of the key concerns that lies at the heart of Jones' critique of constructivism is that it denies universals or normative claims, and thus eschews truth, which is counter to the message of the Gospel. A close reading of Butler's constructivist account, however, does not support this claim—Jones' argument incorrectly assumes a polarity between normativity and truth/reality. Truth as a concept is not necessarily counter to a constructivist frame; rather, constructivists like Butler seek to a) recognize the way that truths are often socially constructed (which does not necessarily make them any less true), b) carefully delineate between what constitutes as (socially-constructed) truth and what is marked as normative and/or universal, and c) critically examine and challenge how gender serves/functions as a universal or normative category. Further, placing Butler and Jones in conversation reveals some fault lines in Jones's position. Her lack of clarity about what norms are to be affirmed and how, opens up space for potentially oppressive culturally-determined norms to remain unchallenged, highlighting an investment in a stabilized gendered subjectivity that I will come to critique later in this chapter.

Jones cites Judith Butler as a paradigmatic proponent of a strong constructivism, yet an examination of Butler's claims undoes Jones' assumed dichotomy between normativity and

²⁹ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 31ff.

³⁰ Portions of this subsection have been previously published. See Brandy Daniels, "Grace Beyond Nature? Beyond Embodiment as Essentialism: A Christological Critique," *Feminist Theology* 24, no. 3 (2016): 245–259.

truth.³¹ In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, a text that is, admittedly, published five years after *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, Butler examines the question of morality and ethics in light of an understanding of the subject as socially constructed.³² Butler argues with the claim that a constructed self delimits ethics, that it constrains agency (another claim Jones relies upon in her critique of constructivism). Rather, Butler seeks to show “how a theory of subject formation that acknowledges the limits of knowledge can serve a conception of ethics, and, indeed, responsibility.”³³ In her examination of the ethical imperative to “give an account of oneself,” Butler turns to a discussion of normativity. These questions, Butler explains, pose two kinds of inquiries for moral philosophy: what are the norms, and “where and who is this other?”³⁴

To give such an account, Butler explains, does not mean to eschew norms or universal truths—it is, in fact, impossible to do so, as we exist as relational beings, but also as beings in particular cultural contexts. The “problem is not with universality,” she explains, “but with an operation of universality that fails to be responsive to cultural particularity and fails to undergo a reformulation of itself in response to the social and cultural conditions it includes within its scope of applicability.”³⁵ The task, rather, is to acknowledge and interrogate norms, to recognize the ways norms function to constitute oneself in relation with the other. Butler explains:

³¹ See her section on ‘Weak vs. Strong Feminist Constructivist Views of Women’s Nature.’ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 34–36. To be fair, Jones was hardly alone on this charge. This was a common critique/reading of Butler’s work, one that Butler notes, and responds to, in later works, particularly in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005) which I turn to shortly.

³² While *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology* preceded *Giving an Account of Oneself*, it is telling that in *Trauma and Grace*, Jones continues to raise similar concerns in her critique of “the poststructuralist rendering of the destabilized subject” (142).

³³ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 19.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

The norms by which I recognize another or, indeed, myself are not mine alone... Their sociality, however, can be understood neither as a structuralist totality nor as a transcendental or quasi-transcendental invariability.... Certain breakdowns in the practice of recognition mark a site of rupture within the horizon of normativity and implicitly call for the institution of new norms, putting into question the givenness of the prevailing normative horizon.³⁶

Norms, for Butler, are relational and consistently shifting within and by the contexts of the relationships in which they're established or assumed. Butler then turns to Foucault to demonstrate the ways in which norms function as regimes of truth that offer "the terms that make self-recognition possible."³⁷ Yet it is also the case, as Foucault has shown, that, at times, "the very unrecognizability of the other brings about a crisis in the norms that govern recognition,"³⁸ which can result in the reformulation of norms.

Butler is concerned with *how norms function*—with, as one might say, the fact *that* norms function—within relation, about "the social dimension of normativity that governs a scene of recognition."³⁹ Butler, we see, does not here—as Jones intimates she does earlier—posit normative claims or universality as counter to that which is socially constructed. Rather, Butler is concerned with the various ways in which norms shape and construct truths that we take to be universal. The question that Foucault first raises and Butler then takes up, is not whether norms are or are not real, but what to do in light of the reality of norms, in light of the ways norms not only construct, but sometimes constrict, us. Butler invokes Foucault's question as central here: "Who can I be, given the regime of truth that determines ontology for me?"⁴⁰ Butler is concerned with the way norms and truth claims actually function to hinder the truth of a person. It is not

³⁶ Ibid., 24.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 23.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 25.

whether norms do or do not exist, or should or should not exist, but it is about the unyielding prescriptive nature of norms that function to undermine truth and exclude.

In her critique of constructivism, Jones highlights and seeks to affirm life-giving *theological* norms, not the exclusionary cultural norms that Butler is concerned about. This distinction raises two, related, points. First, Jones' position fails to delineate between different types of norms and their effects. In asserting the need for universality and norms within and as part of her critique of constructivism, Jones implicitly conflates theological norms, which she associates with/as truth, and cultural norms. Moreover, questions around the significance and place of (gendered) selfhood *as* a theological norm gets lost. This is a key theme I explore throughout the next two sections of this chapter, but I raise it first here as a way to transition to that analysis, and because a turn to Butler begins to evince the limits of, or rather, the foreclosing of difference within, Jones' logic.

In the preface to the second edition of *Gender Trouble*, Butler makes clear from the start that her intention is not to call into question the very possibility of universality, of reality, but to demonstrate the ways in which gender constructions function to constrain reality. As she explains about her work:

The point of this text is... to show that the naturalized knowledge of gender operates as a preemptive and violent circumscription of reality. To the extent the gender norms... establish what will and will not be intelligently human, what will and will not be considered to be 'real,' they establish the ontological field in which bodies may be given? legitimate expression.⁴¹

Butler speaks autobiographically about this violence, reflecting on "an uncle incarcerated for his anatomically anomalous body," her "own tempestuous coming out at the age of 16; and a

⁴¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xxiii.

subsequent adult landscape of lost jobs, lovers, and homes,” amongst other things.⁴² We see that Butler is not, as Jones suggests, calling for an eradication of universals per se, but rather, is suggesting that gender should not be one of them—that the ontologization of (categories of) identity/subjectivity functions to circumscribe peoples realities. Appeals to universal claims about gender incite and at the same time mask violence. “It was difficult to bring this violence into view,” Butler muses, “precisely because gender was so taken for granted at the same time that it was violently policed.”⁴³

The concern is not with universal claims, but with how *representation* shapes and creates universals—and ultimately undermines them. “My suggestion,” she explains, “is that the presumed universality and unity of the subject of feminism is effectively undermined by the constraints of representation discourse in which it functions.”⁴⁴ A turn to Butler reveals that Jones unfairly reads a strong constructivist position as contrary to universality as such, and conflates a rejection of the naturalization and normalization of gender categories with a rejection of universal claims writ large.⁴⁵

Converse to her critiques of constructivism, Jones finds significant theological and social value in essentialism. While she finds it to be limited in many respects, she highlights how it is particularly useful pragmatically, politically, and pastorally—that there is some value in retaining some claim of woman as a unifying signifier, something along the lines of what

⁴² Ibid., xix.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁵ Whereas Jones is critical of Butler’s constructivist frame in that it critiques universals, other feminist and queer theorists have challenged Butler as being too identitarian, raising questions about the Hegelian logic of her notion of performativity and subversion from the point of view of a Foucauldian desubjectivizing ethic. For more on this see Huffer, *Are the Lips a Grave?*, 15ff.

feminist and postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak dubbed “strategic essentialism.”⁴⁶ Butler’s insights about the social nature of norms and limits of representation also begin to challenge Jones’ turn to strategic essentialism.

Butler takes direct aim at a strategic essentialism, precisely because of her understanding of the way power operates. She exclaims:

This problem is not ameliorated through an appeal to the category of women for merely ‘strategic’ purposes, for strategies always have meanings that exceed the purpose for which they are intended. In this case, exclusion itself might qualify as such an unintended yet consequential meaning.⁴⁷

This “insistence upon the coherence and unity of the category of women,” she explains, “has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of ‘women’ are constructed.”⁴⁸ Ellen Armour makes a similar argument in her essay “Questioning ‘Woman’ in Feminist/Womanist Theology.” Armour examines how discussions of the nature of “woman” almost always operate with and through assumptions of the experiences of particular women—of white women. Armour’s essay points to how “discursive structures—particularly the structure of an essential humanity (or, in these cases, femininity)—

⁴⁶ Spivak first expresses the idea of strategic essentialism in an interview with Elizabeth Grosz in *Thesis Eleven*, 10/11, 1984. The interview was soon thereafter reprinted in a collection of her work. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Criticism, Feminism, and the Institution,” in *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, and Dialogues* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 11. While that marked the first articulation of the idea, Spivak offered a more cogent and developed explanation of the notion in her essay “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography,” in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 270–304. Reflecting on how the Subaltern Studies group’s efforts to read history from below resulted in a quest for a peasant/subaltern consciousness, Spivak reads their efforts as “a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest” (275).

⁴⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 8.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 19–20.

continue to function in feminist thinking to the detriment of its dealings with issues of race and class.”⁴⁹

What Butler points out, and what Armour echoes, is that presumptive unity, as opposed to being necessary for effective political action, actually works against it—that it is “precisely the cause of an ever more bitter fragmentation among the ranks,” setting up “an exclusionary norm of solidarity at the level of identity that rules out the possibility of a set of actions which disrupt the very borders of identity concepts, or which seek to accomplish precisely that disruption as an explicit political aim.”⁵⁰ In her earlier essay, “Between a Rock and a Hard Place,” Jones asks: “is a rhetoric which celebrates the fragmentation of the subject strategically well suited for persons who are struggling to claim a sense of wholeness and stability, having been oppressively fractured by their time on the margin?”⁵¹ A reading of Butler would suggest that perhaps it is—that a fragmentation of *gendered subjectivity* is a fragmentation of oppressive boundaries and regulations that constrict gendered flourishing in all its diversity, and that a failure to see or acknowledge that results in a different kind of fragmentation, a “more bitter fragmentation.”

Instead of a strategic essentialism, Butler suggests a “coalitional politics” that holds open imaginative possibilities that a strategic essentialism unwittingly forecloses. She explains:

This antifoundationalist approach to coalitional politics assumes neither that ‘identity’ is a premise nor that the shape or meaning of a coalitional assemblage can be known prior to its achievement. *Because the articulation of an identity within available cultural terms instantiates a definition that forecloses in advance the emergence of new identity*

⁴⁹ Ellen T. Armour, “Questioning ‘Woman’ in Feminist/Womanist Theology: Irigaray, Ruether, and Daly,” in *Transfigurations: Theology and the French Feminists*, ed. C.W. Maggie Kim, Susan M. St. Ville, and Susan M. Simonaitis (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 145.

⁵⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 21.

⁵¹ Jones, “Women’s Experience between a Rock and a Hard Place: Feminist, Womanist, and Mujerista Theologies in North America,” 52.

concepts in and through political engaged actions, the foundationalist tactic cannot take the transformation or expansion of existing identity concepts as a normative goal.⁵²

Normative identities, she explains, are *constituted* by regulatory practices, and functions as a universal ideal rather than a description of universal experience. By proposing an essentialized sense of self, however strategic it may be, Jones may actually, at least to some degree, undermine her own aims. While Jones calls for a more open essentialism, her argument for it is grounded in the importance of “the articulation of an identity within available cultural terms,” and thus “forecloses in advance the emergence of new identity concepts,” which is, in fact, precisely what she seeks.⁵³ A turn to Jones’ constructive proposal—a theological take on Spivak’s strategic essentialism, which Jones dubs “eschatological essentialism”—further demonstrates how Jones’ account forecloses difference, and a turn to queer theoretical insights on temporality, particularly on futurity, elucidates and builds upon this Butlerian alternative.

II. The Not Yet as Already? On Eschatological Essentialism

Given her evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of both sides of the essentialist vs. constructivist debates on women’s nature, Jones (like Coakley) looks for a third way and finds a resource for that too in feminist theory, in Gayatri Spivak’s notion of strategic essentialism. This term refers to “the ways in which subordinate or marginalized social groups may temporarily put aside local differences in order to forge a sense of collective identity through which they band together in political movements.”⁵⁴ This section explores Jones’ turn to strategic

⁵² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 21 emphasis mine.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Paul Dourish, “Points of Persuasion: Strategic Essentialism and Environmental Sustainability” (Sixth Annual Conference on Pervasive Computing, Sydney, Australia, 2008). Interestingly, though the term was coined by Spivak, Jones does not cite her in the chapter. Instead, using Irigaray as a foundational/paradigmatic theorist in this regard, she cites a number of other theorists who offer similar

essentialism, focusing particularly on how she reframes it theologically via a turn to eschatology. This turn toward futurity, on the one hand, begins to gesture towards an account of identity and its formation that is open to difference, at least initially. However, by placing Jones in conversation with Muñoz, I show that Jones' account fails to make good on this promise, at least in full, foreclosing the possibilities for difference by calling for an account of gender, via her theological anthropology, that is stabilized by and through the present.

§1. From strategic essentialism to eschatological essentialism: the essential in the becoming

Reflecting upon the feminist theoretical debates on women's nature in light of feminist theology, Jones surmises that feminist theologians are perhaps "feminism's oldest and most experienced strategic essentialists," given the ways in which they have sought a middle ground between feminist theory and the Christian tradition.⁵⁵ As the previous section on Jones and Butler outlined, Jones seeks, and ultimately finds, an "in-between position [that] applauds constructivist critiques of gender but feels nervous about giving up universals (or essences) altogether."⁵⁶ Strategic essentialism recognizes the political and practical usefulness of essentialism. Claims about women's nature have been useful in advancing the struggle for women's equality and empowerment. Similarly, there is a theological value to claiming some essential truths about who women are and who God is.

However, Jones is not sufficiently attentive to critiques of strategic essentialism. Other feminist theorists have critiqued it for emphasizing the essential at the cost of the constructive,

accounts and utilize other names for it, such as normative constructivism, pragmatic utopianism, pragmatic universalism, etc. See Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 44, en45.

⁵⁵ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 54. The tensions strategic essentialism seeks to navigate, Jones explains, is also "a path theology has followed many times in the past" (54).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

and in doing so undermining the very notion of difference they seek to affirm. The earlier discussion of Butler and Armour on this point speak to how “strategic” affirmation of particular gendered norms has functioned as a kind of alibi for white and straight feminists to exclude women of color and queer women as they work towards their own political aims. Interestingly Spivak herself, despite being the one who developed the notion and coined the term, later rejected strategic essentialism as a viable position.⁵⁷ In an interview with Ellen Rooney in 1989, only five years after beginning to develop the idea, Spivak explained:

Within mainstream U.S. feminism the good insistence that “the personal is political” often transformed itself into something like “*only* the personal is political.” The strategic use of essentialism can turn into an alibi for proselytizing academic essentialisms. The emphasis then inevitably falls on being able to speak from one’s own ground, rather than matching the trick to the situation, that the word strategy implies.⁵⁸

Continuing, Spivak asserts, “I have, then, reconsidered my cry for a strategic use of essentialism....So long as the critique of essentialism is understood not as an exposure of error, our own or others’,” she explains, “but as an acknowledgement of the dangerousness of something one cannot not use, I would stand by it as one stand among many.”⁵⁹ For Spivak, like Butler and others, strategic essentialism has failed to emphasize the strategic and focused too much on the essentialism⁶⁰ To her credit, Jones’ turn to a strategic essentialism focuses significantly on the strategic; yet, in addition to failing to fully attend to how strategic

⁵⁷ For more on Spivak’s development of the notion of strategic essentialism, see fn46 above.

⁵⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “In a Word: Interview,” in *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 4. The interview was first published in 1989 in *differences* 1.2, 124-156.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶⁰ In her interview with Rooney, Spivak speaks a lot about the nature of strategy, and the failure of U.S. feminisms to focus on the strategic in its turn to strategic essentialism. She echoes this in another interview where she continues to be critical of the notion in a succinct summary that bears noting. She explains: “my notion just simply became the union ticket for essentialism. As to what is meant by strategy, no one wondered about that. So, as a phrase, I have given up on it.” Sara Danius and Stefan Jonsson, “An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak,” *Boundary 2* 20, no. 2 (1993): 35.

essentialism has been operationalized and utilized in exclusionary ways, Jones' deployment of strategic essentialism may in fact put her own project and its aims at risk.

That said, Jones avoids some key dangers of essentialism by (strategically!) locating the essential in the future. Building on the "tradition" of strategic essentialism in feminist theology, Jones, relying especially on the work of Letty Russell, proposes an *eschatological* essentialism. She explains:

Feminist theological discussions of women's nature are rooted decisively in a theological vision of an already/not-yet future—a vision of God's will for a redeemed humanity where all persons live in right relation to God and to one another. This normative perspective looks ahead to a model of identity yet to be realized and not back to models of personhood that remain rooted in an essentialized nostalgia for the natural and the given. Such theologizing shapes the present by touching our daily lives with its vision of redeemed humanity as the goal of faithful living in this moment.⁶¹

Jones calls for and affirms the making of essentialized claims of women's nature, but locates that essential in becoming, in the future, in how we are being formed and what we are being formed to be. The essential is located in the eschatological, the woman in this frame "is the embodied agent struggling to become the ever shifting essential woman of the *future*," looking not behind to the past to guide her but forward "to an emancipatory future where her identity is defined as 'graced.'"⁶² Women's nature is now re-framed as women's becoming.⁶³ This frame for Jones avoids the limits of the respective sides of the debate, as it is not originary in its essentializing nor does it exhibit an "arrogant triumphalism that cries: We have finally gotten beyond culture, beyond gender, beyond all oppression."⁶⁴ It instead "adopts a realist posture, yearning for a new

⁶¹ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 54.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 64 emphasis hers.

⁶³ See *Ibid.*, 65.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 68.

future and working for a new day while struggling with the limits of the present and the inevitable brokenness of the future vision itself.”⁶⁵

Again, Jones emphasizes the strategic value of this eschatological essentialism. The strategic is subtended for Jones by theology. For Jones, the “feminist theologian affirms, in concert with the strategic feminist theorist, that for women the normative moment is politically and pragmatically crucial.”⁶⁶ In locating the essential eschatologically in the future, normative essentials are upheld, but they are upheld in a way that shows that “as the author of those defining essentials, God desires to empower and liberate women rather than to break what little self-confidence they have.”⁶⁷ Locating the essential in the future avoids the risks associated with essentialism, as it is something we are moving towards rather than something that exists within us. In many ways, Jones’ eschatological essentialism bears strong resonances with José Esteban Muñoz’s account of the queer horizon. There are also some concordant notes struck when placing their respective accounts in conversation. To turn now, then, to that comparison...

§2. *Eschatological essentialism and the queer horizon*

In chapter two, I introduced the debate on the question of futurity in queer temporality and outlined Edelman and Muñoz’s respective accounts. To briefly recap: contra Edelman, Muñoz calls for an (particular kind of) embrace of the future, because he sees in it the potential for a *different kind* of future, what he calls a “future in the present.”⁶⁸ For Muñoz, the future is not the source of our problem—rather, our problem is straight time, that sense of time that demands conformity to the norm. In his analysis of straight time and his call for the enactment of

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 63.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 49.

queer time in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Muñoz offers an account of the future that, he believes, avoids two (binary) extremes: eschewing, on the one hand, the “antisocial” queer theorists (read: Edelman) who reject any emphasis on the future (and thus, it seems [to some?!] on hope at all) and who propose that the only way one can move towards queer emancipation is through a rejection of “reproductive futurism” and an embrace of negativity; and, on the other hand, also resisting an account of the future that adheres to a “straight temporality” that is also oppressive for those who do not fit within the norm, for those who are subaltern, those who are queer.⁶⁹ Seeing both sides as participating “in what can only be seen as a binary logic of opposition,” Muñoz instead seeks a third alternative, “the future in the present.” His is an ethical turn toward a queer horizon, an open futurity that envisions the good life as something to be performed and enacted in the present, rather than either rescued from the past not deferred to the future. Moreover, “the future present” is enacted in and through excesses (affective and otherwise) rather than through submission to prescriptive linear process of formation.⁷⁰

The similarities/points of potential overlap between Muñoz’s and Jones’ accounts are multiple. Most significantly, and straightforwardly, both Muñoz and Jones turn to the future as a potential site of liberative possibility. Over and against the ways in which politics (including theological and religious-institutional politics) have dictated the present—in the current “world full of gender ‘givens’ [where] it is hard to imagine radical social change in support of women’s full equality with men”—a turn to the future offers possibilities of imagining, and seeking to enact, something otherwise.⁷¹ Additionally, both speak to a re-imagined relationality, whether it

⁶⁹ Ibid., 22.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 13.

⁷¹ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 29.

is enacted on the queer dance floor, as is the case for Muñoz, or engendered via sanctification, as it is for Jones.⁷² This juxtaposition begins to speak to a third way in which the overlap between Jones and Muñoz is present but slightly more tenuous, where Muñoz might offer some kind of insight to Jones.

Whereas Muñoz speaks of “freedom as unboundedness,” Jones’ eschatological essentialism retains some parameters that reflect both her affirmation of theological norms and her understanding of women’s gendered formation.⁷³ Jones is right (in my take, at least) that the work of theology demands making normative and/or universal claims, and that this “is as true for contemporary feminist theologians as it was for sixteenth-century Reformers or first-century Apologists.”⁷⁴ Throughout her text, Jones asserts (and/or affirms) a number of such normative/universal claims about God, humanity, and flourishing: about God’s nature as just and loving, about the inherent worth and also sinfulness of humanity, etcetera.⁷⁵ Yet for Jones those normative theological claims about God and humanity seem to gesture beyond abstract universals towards a kind of revised essentialism, a normative ideal of a (gendered) self that risks foreclosing difference, in the same way that critics have charged strategic essentialism of doing.

Similar to how in Coakley’s frame it is unclear what gender lability and transformation looks like, for Jones, what is essential is unclear. This is, on the one hand, positive, and aligns with Muñoz’s reflections on the future as a queer horizon, as something never grasped but

⁷² These two themes encapsulate the key ways I discern an overlap between Jones and Muñoz. Two other potential, though less minor, resonances: Jones’ imagery of woman “poised on the edge of a promised land,” and Muñoz’s image of queerness as horizon; and Muñoz’s turn to astonishment and Jones’ Irigararian turn to wonder (Ibid., 68).

⁷³ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 32 emphasis mine.

⁷⁴ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 51.

⁷⁵ See Ibid. “Although exploring our identity as creatures of God involves an ongoing interpretive engagement with Scripture, tradition, and present-day experience,” Jones explains, “it also seeks to identify the truth of the matter about God and humanity.” Amongst those truths for her “are essentialist claims about the nature of the human person” (51).

always pursued. Jones herself speaks to how our understandings of the universals must be revised in light of epistemic constraints and the ways in which power shapes and limits us. Yet whereas Muñoz turns off the beaten path in pursuit of his utopic vision of the queer horizon—challenging “straight time’s chokehold” and speaking of “[q]ueerness’ ecstatic and horizontal temporality” by turning to excesses, glimpses, and margins—Jones’ account reverts too often to a straight temporal logics of an ideal end attained by a right path.⁷⁶ For instance, she writes:

if a movement lifts up an alternative, unifying image of ‘women’ that is believable and compelling—even if this image is admittedly only a universal *ideal*—then it is likely to make a good start. This normative imagining, in its universal or essential form, provides a regulative ideal. Such ideals involve a ‘utopic essentialism’—they are utopian visions that, by breaking open the present, imagine humanity anew.⁷⁷

The resonances and dissonances with Muñoz here are interesting. On the one hand, Jones too makes a utopic turn, and she, like Muñoz, speaks of the future breaking open the present. But for Muñoz the liberative promise of the future is not a regulative ideal, but is found in excesses that manifest in performative practices that are ephemeral, but nonetheless real. For Jones, however, the future *is* the ideal – and it is, for the moment anyway, singular. It may break open the present, but only to allow in another regulative ideal that we would then work (linearly, it would seem) to realize. Particularly given how she is concerned with political and pragmatic effects, the lack of sustained attention to how ideals, particularly in regards to gender, function to foreclose difference is telling.

Relatedly, while one assuredly would *not* call Muñoz pessimistic—he is critiqued for being quite the opposite—Jones’ turn to the future is cast even more positively. The very turn to the future itself, with “its vision of redeemed humanity” *is* what is liberative, what can engender

⁷⁶ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 25.

⁷⁷ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 46 emphasis hers.

and enable a liberative feminist (theo-) politics.⁷⁸ While Jones does acknowledge that our fallenness as humans means an “inevitable brokenness of the future vision itself,” it is nevertheless in working towards that future that we find solace and hope. Indeed acknowledging brokenness means we avoid an “arrogant triumphalism” that presumes we have gotten it right, that we have arrived.⁷⁹ Turning to the future, if anything, further displaces and mediates that arrogance. Muñoz, conversely, acknowledges that the turn to the future can be problematic and oppressive—that “Futurity *can be* a problem.”⁸⁰ Appeals to the future can be indicators of arrogance. When we presume we know what the vision of the future should look like, that vision necessarily excludes and forecloses difference. As an example, while Muñoz differs significantly from Edelman, he does acknowledge the ways turns to the future are bound up with normative heterosexual culture, how the future often serves as “a fantasy of heterosexual reproduction.”⁸¹

Jones cites political and pragmatic concerns as motivating her utopic essentialism—“Putting all of one’s energies into elaborating the particularized differences between women with no reference to commonalities makes effective action difficult,” she explains. While that claim is undoubtedly true, it fails to explain how and why such aims demand an essentialism, let alone a utopic one. Jones repeatedly highlights how constructivist accounts of women’s nature note and at times draw on the shared experiences of the lived realities and material effects of gendered constructs, and that within strong constructivist accounts, “women are not *incapable* of actively and intentionally participating in processes of cultural formation.”⁸² It is unclear as to why those

⁷⁸ Ibid., 54.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 68.

⁸⁰ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 49 emphasis mine. I retained the capitalization both to avoid the awkwardness of bracketing one letter, and also as a signifier (building off Edelman’s capitalizing of the Future when speaking of reproductive Futurism).

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 38.

shared experiences within the constructs cannot be the site and source of political mobilization—why must a singular, let alone regulative, ideal serve as the unifying point?

Moreover, the turn to some revised essentialism, however open, for Jones is not only political and pragmatic, but, as this chapter has already explored, theological. Significantly, for Jones, retaining this essentialism is important in terms of one's formation. "Universalizing gestures are warranted," Jones argues,

because the dramatic function of sanctification (in both its traditional and feminist forms) is to provide the person of faith with the structure and direction needed to follow the path of the Christian life. This structuring occurs through normative gestures that instantiate the subject—not just as an abstraction but in the concrete materiality of everyday life. From the perspective of the strategic essentialist, these bold gestures are necessary if women are to combat social scripts that define them as silent, passive, or invisible, or as pure relationality.⁸³

While Jones here indicates an openness in the form those universals take, the above passage begins to point to how, for Jones, included in the normative theological claims are normative theological claims about subjectivity and selfhood—while, again (finally), how gendered those norms are is unclear, Jones' focus on selfhood and the affirmation of identity marks a difference from Muñoz. Whereas Jones sees the future as a site of a kind of revised, open essentialism—and reads sin as a kind of "coming undone," where "the borders of the self are plundered," when "the self is 'unsheathed,'" and/or women's "bounded identities dissolve"—Muñoz is *critical* of the "universalizing rhetoric of selfhood" and sees the potentiality of the future as the site where "*disidentity* as the practice of freedom" is explored and enacted.⁸⁴

⁸³ Ibid., 65.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 121; José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers Of Color And The Performance Of Politics* (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 1999), 20. For more on Jones on sin and self, see *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, Chapter 5, "Sin: Grace Denied," especially 120ff. She does, importantly, note that "this sinful process of coming undone is not just the result of internal confusion on the part of women but is tied to concrete relations of power and institutional formations that attach and occupy women (and others), thereby violating the boundaries of their personhood" (121). For more on Muñoz

In his earlier monograph, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Muñoz makes an argument that is similar in many ways to Spivak's critique of strategic essentialism.⁸⁵ Looking specifically at queers of color in theatre performances, Muñoz interrogates how marginalized bodies are often utilized as tokens of difference in a way that perpetuates the status quo and ultimately undermines difference. Such turns to difference, Muñoz persuasively argues, often presume and uphold hegemonic and normativizing discourses and narratives about identity that are stereotyping and singular, that fail to attend to intersectionality. Examining different performance artists in conversation with a host of critical theories, Muñoz identifies and uplifts "disidentifying" as a strategy that reflects and empowers political agency.⁸⁶

Because Jones shifts the "essential" to the eschatological, she perhaps *is* destabilizing gender, at least to some degree, in shifting its definition from a site of origins to one of a more hopeful, open telos. Yet queer theory, and particularly queer temporality, is cautious about this affirmation of identity and selfhood, however displaced. Muñoz, who like Jones turns to the future as a resource, explains that his interest is "in critiquing the ontological certitude that [he] understand[s] to be partnered with the politics of presentist and pragmatic contemporary gay identity," which is intrinsically connected with his notion of queer futures, of queerness itself, as

here, see *Disidentifications*, chapter 7. At the end of *Disidentifications*, Muñoz gestures towards what will become *Cruising Utopia*, and makes explicit the link I presume above, arguing that "disidentificatory performance offers a utopian blueprint for a possible future, while, at the same time, staging a new political formation in the present" (200).

⁸⁵ Like Spivak, Muñoz too is directly critical of white feminism, turning to Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherie Moraga's 1981 anthology, *The Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, as support for his notion of disidentification. He explains that "although the advancements of white feminists in integrating multiple sites of difference in their analytic approaches have not, in many cases, been significant, the anthology has proved invaluable to many feminists, lesbians, and gay male writers of color," and "serves as a valuable example of disidentification as a political strategy" (*Disidentifications*, 22, 21).

⁸⁶ These disidentificatory "strategies of iteration and reiteration," Muñoz explains, serve as "performative acts of conjuring that deform and reform the world" (*Ibid.*, 196).

“always on the horizon.”⁸⁷ In turning to the eschatological “not yet” as a resource for the political already, Jones opens up space for difference, but also opens up space for exclusion, for the continued foreclosing of difference, masked by the turn to the strategic and the ontological presumptions in the ossification of selfhood. Whereas Jones wants to dislocate the essential by placing it in the becoming, but retaining it in a not yet vision of selfhood, Muñoz, conversely, pursues a “disidentificatory venture,” and/via the “always horizon” of queer time.⁸⁸ For Jones, the present becomes the lens through which the vision of the hoped for future is sought and enacted. It is open to continual change, but nevertheless, like Spivak, Muñoz’s turn to disidentification demonstrates the ways in which difference can be co-opted in this turn.

Jones’ acknowledgement of the merits of constructivism and her turn to eschatology undeniably make her more open to difference, especially in the sense of the term that the chapters thus far have explored—an identity formation that stems from and relates to membership in a normative community. But they point to an undergirding question that guides this project—the question of selfhood and the place of that self in/as an aim of formation. For Jones, while the future is open, a “whole,” coherent and to some degree gendered, self is important.⁸⁹ While a turn to Muñoz begins to raise questions about the potentially difference-foreclosing effects of affirmations of selfhood and identity, a turn to Lee Edelman presses even more deeply into the questions of selfhood and the relationship between how we understand the self, how we think of the future, and the degrees to which we embrace and/or exclude difference.

⁸⁷ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 11.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁸⁹ Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 97.

III. The Future, (Faith) Identity, Trauma, and the Self

As this chapter has already explored, for Jones, the retention of some kind of revised, eschatologized, essentialism is bound to the importance of the self—politically/pragmatically, and theologically. Why is the affirmation of self important to Jones in these ways? In her affirmation of both essentialism and constructivism and her call for a middle way, what kind of self—or, to put it another way, how much self—do we have in Jones’ account? How much self should we have, should we want to have? And who is the we in question—what role does the gendered aspect or part of the self come to play in this account. To explore these questions and place Jones in conversation with Edelman, this section turns first to how Jones reframes one’s “faith identity” and its relevance for gender identity.⁹⁰

§1. Eschatological Essentialism and the Re-mapping of Justification and Sanctification

To further illustrate her dissatisfaction with both sides of the essentialist v. constructivist debate and begin to theologically flesh out her call for an eschatological essentialism, Jones turns to the doctrines of justification and sanctification—“two doctrines used in classical Protestant thought to depict what a person’s nature looks like when it is transformed in faith by the grace of God.”⁹¹ Why the turn to these doctrines? At the beginning of her chapter on “Sanctification and Justification: Lived Grace,” Jones explains, reflecting on how she and her students, in a divinity school course she was teaching on feminist theory, had begun moving “deeper into the dramas of feminist debates over women’s nature, on the one hand, and theological treatments of ‘the doctrine of the Christian life’ (lived grace) on the other,” and upon doing so, “discovered surprising similarities between these two dramas—between what feminist theorists say about

⁹⁰ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 55.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

women's nature in the essentialist/constructivist debate and what Christians say about faith identity in the images of justification and sanctification."⁹² Together they had discovered and discerned that, despite the different analytic frameworks, there were significant similarities and overlaps, "likenesses [that] are most apparent when one situates 'woman' in the middle of these two discursive fields and traces how the dramatic forces of each define 'her' identity."⁹³ Jones turns to these likenesses to better articulate and theologically situate her eschatological essentialism.

Jones turns to Reformed theologians Martin Luther and John Calvin, explaining that it was with the Reformation that justification and sanctification "were brought together as *the* primary metaphors for describing how a person comes to faith or, better stated, how God comes alive to persons as the creator and redeemer of their lives," which focused on "God's merciful reestablishing of the divine-human relationship destroyed by human sin."⁹⁴ She begins by outlining their accounts in some detail, turning to Luther's account of justification and Calvin's insights on sanctification. While re-rehearsing Jones' outline in detail would be superfluous, a brief summary is important for understanding what Jones ultimately does with these accounts.

Justification for Luther, Jones explains, "describes what God does to redeem humanity in Jesus Christ: God 'justifies' the sinner."⁹⁵ Luther uses a courtroom scene as a metaphor for this process, placing himself in the position of the defendant who, despite his devotion to the Law and efforts to follow it, nevertheless stands guilty before the judgment of God—"the harder the sinner asserts his will in an attempt to accomplish the law and win God's favor," for Luther, "the more he exhibits the root of humanity's sin—a misguided desire to save himself, to make himself

⁹² Ibid., 55.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 55–56 emphasis hers.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 56.

God. In trying to merit God’s approval, humanity fails to see that divine grace must be given, not earned.”⁹⁶ As Luther puts it and Jones recounts, we are “crucified by the Law.”⁹⁷ Justification, then, occurs when Jesus enters the courtroom scene, and the Judge, God, seeing Jesus’ righteousness, reverses the guilty verdict for humanity; through Jesus, there is an *imputation* of righteousness—“through this verdict, the sinner puts on an alien righteousness in faith—a righteousness not belonging to the sinner by nature or by right but belonging to Christ, who has transferred God’s mercy to the guilty party.”⁹⁸ This frees the will from its bondage, to use Luther’s language, not because it is no longer guilty and no longer asserts itself, but because God has decided against punishment, setting the will—setting us—free, no longer beset by fears of (deserved) divine retribution, now empowered by grace to follow and serve God. We are still guilty of sin, we remain sinners, but are justified through Christ despite that—we are “simultaneously justified and sinner.”⁹⁹

Sanctification, then, is “a lifelong process in which the justified sinner is empowered by the Holy Spirit for service to neighbor and faithful obedience to God,” and for insight on this doctrine, Jones turns to Calvin.¹⁰⁰ Sanctification for Calvin is a “struggle ever upward towards Christian perfection,” a process that is always incomplete because of human sin but is nevertheless a process of transformation. Jones explains that “in contrast to justification, where the sinner is made righteous by an external judgment and an imputed, alien righteousness, in divine sanctification, God initiates real, internal transformation. The believer’s life is materially

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ The Latin here is *simul iustus et peccator*. See Ibid., 57.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. Jones explains that the doctrine of sanctification was “developed more fully by Calvin than by Luther.”

(not just juridically) remade.”¹⁰¹ Calvin emphasizes not only how the Law judges and condemns but how it also, as Jones puts it, “gives positive direction”—it both crucifies and builds up, or as Calvin puts it, both mortifies and vivifies.¹⁰² Sanctification is the “remaking process.”¹⁰³

Having outlined these Reformed doctrinal accounts, Jones asks: “How might the story of Christian conversion to new life in God look through the eyes of feminist theory?” and invites us to re-examine Luther’s courtroom scene metaphor through those eyes, imagining a woman in the defendants chair.¹⁰⁴ Looking at “this initial undoing gesture” from a feminist theoretical perspective would mean asking “What happens to the woman who enters this tale having spent her life not in the space of narcissistic self-definition but in a space of fragmentation and dissolution?” as woman “comes not with a robust self that needs to be dismantled by the wrath of the Law but as a de-centered subject whose lack of self is her prison.”¹⁰⁵ Echoing her critique of constructivism that this chapter outlined earlier, Jones draws on that critique and suggests that the shattering and fragmenting that comes at the forefront of justification is a story a woman “knows all too well,” and it is a story that reads “more like sin than the freeing act of divine mercy.”¹⁰⁶ For the reasons that constructivism is limited, so too is Luther’s telling of the story of redemption and faith identity. But as with constructivism, it speaks vital truths and should not be eschewed.

Jones offers an alternative, a third way, that becomes the basis of her eschatological essentialism. “What might be done to narrate conversion in women’s lives more meaningfully?”

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid., 58.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 61.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 62, 63.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 63.

she wonders, and then offers a possible way forward, in a passage worth citing at length. She explains:

The story of God’s judgment and mercy should, I think, be told in reverse—starting with sanctification and its rhetoric of building up instead of with justification and its initial language of undoing. With sanctification at the beginning, the first word to meet the woman who enters the doctrine of the Christian life is one that constructs her, giving her the center and the substance she needs to become the substance she needs to become the subject then judged and graciously forgiven. This inversion does not replace or destroy the logic of justification; narrating the story of a sturdy and resilient new creation before turning to the moment of dismantling and forgiveness simply allows the most problematic aspects of justification (its first de-centering moment) to be tempered.¹⁰⁷

We need to construct, claim, and seek to live into liberative visions of “woman,” Jones argues, before we deconstruct and challenge and seek to un-do harmful visions, or we end up doing more harm in the midst of our efforts to judge these cultural sins.

Sanctification gives us the framework for constructing liberative visions of women’s nature, locating that nature eschatologically, as something we are seeking and living into. “Here,” Jones explains, “the stretch from feminist strategic essentialism to feminist theology is not far.”¹⁰⁸ Over-and-against what Jones sees as the oppressive effects of a constructivist account of women’s nature, she explains that “the woman who inhabits this doctrinal terrain is neither passive nor fragmented but is set in motion and directed toward a goal. In this manner, sanctification provides doctrinal grounds for a logic of identity that counters views of women’s nature that undermine her agency.”¹⁰⁹ The insights of constructivism still come into play, as they continue to do the work of “exposing the illusions of *falsely inscribed* gender ‘truths’ that have patterned women’s lives for centuries” and it gives us an account of “persons as relational and

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 64.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

fluid subjects.”¹¹⁰ These constructivist notions find grounds in the doctrine of justification—the sinful aspects of self (and/in society) are undone, and with those, sinful false notions of gender that oppress and foreclose. The relational and fluid self then is the new identity one is given through Christ, which can be read through Luther’s notion of imputed righteousness. But this deconstructing and decentering only come *after* and/or exist *apart from* the formational work of sanctification, as for Jones it is “[n]ot by being undone, but by enjoying the pleasure of flourishing in the containment of divine life, [that women] begin a lifelong journey of faith, moving towards a perfection that resists falsely gendered versions of the self.”¹¹¹ For Jones, locating the essential in the becoming enables this both/and between constructivism and essentialism—the strategic essentialist both/and finds theological footing in the eschatological already/not yet, and vice versa. The turn to the not yet future enables a way of claiming the essential—universal normative truths of, about, and for women—while attending to the insights of constructivism.

Jones’ reordering of sanctification and justification as a way to understand and envision gender identity illuminates the centrality and value of selfhood in Jones’ framework. While her displacement of essentialism to the eschatological may leave space for openness, her pastoral and theological concerns for affirming gendered selfhood risks foreclosing on the flourishing of/amidst difference that she seeks. As the last section explored, whereas Jones’ eschatological future retains a relationship to essentialism, Muñoz’s queer horizon is linked to a politics of disidentification. Jones’ emphasis on sanctification and the necessity of self-formation further elucidates her emphasis on selfhood and subjectivity.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 67.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 65.

A turn to Jones' more recent work on trauma, however, shows a more destabilized notion of selfhood and a more open vision of the future that is even more in alignment with Muñoz. Yet, a closer examination of queer temporal critiques of (coherent, stable) selfhood/subjectivity presses even against Muñoz's disidentificatory venture towards a queer horizon. Upon exploring Jones' turn to trauma, I briefly outline how Edelman's critique of futurity raises questions about Jones' framework.

§2. *Trauma and the Shattered, but Sutured, Self*

Whereas Jones' eschatological essentialism risks foreclosing possibilities of and for difference by tethering the future to present investments in and epistemological frameworks of self, however revised, her reflections on trauma and its effects in *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* gesture towards a more open, inchoate sense of selfhood and futurity. In tending to the ways in which the violence of trauma wounds, disorients, and fragments, Jones seeks to ask not solely, or even primarily, how those impacted by trauma can be made whole or be put back together, but instead how "people, whose hearts and minds have been wounded by violence, come to feel and know the redeeming power of God's grace."¹¹²

And as she makes clear at various points throughout the text, that often means an eschewal of any identifiable discernable ends and a more inchoate experience and embrace of fragmentation and glimpses of the "good." For instance, in her chapter on "The Unending Cross," she suggests that the original "non-ending" of the Gospel of Mark might be a resource for trauma survivors, as the non-ending can remind us that Jesus comes to us in the midst of our trauma—"in the midst of our faltering speech, our shattered memories, and our frayed sense of

¹¹² Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, viii.

agency.”¹¹³ She continues, arguing that this “is truly what grace is, in its most radical form: not the reassuring ending of an orderly story, but the incredible insistence on love amid fragmented, unraveled human lives.”¹¹⁴ Jones’ reflections on grace here bear resonances to the ecstatic, horizontal nature of the queer future (present) that Muñoz speaks of—the sense of time that is not only always out of grasp, not marked by a always horizon, but also experienced ecstatically, glimpsed and enacted in quotidian examples of “utopian bonds, designs, and gestures that exist within the present moment.”¹¹⁵ As he puts it in his reflection on the problems of futurity:

On oil dance floors, sites of public sex, various theatrical stages, music festivals, and arenas both subterranean and aboveground, queers live, labor, and enact queer worlds in the present... Certain performances of queer citizenship contain what I call an *anticipatory illumination* of a queer world, a sign of an actually existing queer reality, a kernel of political possibility within a stultifying heterosexual present. I gesture to sites of embodied and performed queer politics and describe them as outposts of actually existing queer worlds. The sites I consider are sites of mass gatherings, performances that can be understood as defiantly public and *glimpses* into an ensemble of social actors performing a queer world.¹¹⁶

The queer future present, for Muñoz—that is, the approach to futurity not subject to the static and confining linearity of straight time—as horizon is something that is not grasped or achieved but glimpsed and anticipated, even as it is embodied and illuminated in that anticipation.

Like Muñoz’s unending horizon, Jones speaks of how “God’s gospel cannot ever be finished,” and notes that it’s “edge is unsettling and unnerving,” but in “the voids and silences we find we are not alone.”¹¹⁷

In a subsequent chapter on “Mourning and Wonder,” where Jones turns in more depth to the topic of grace, we see further resonances with Muñoz’s turn to excesses and glimpses, her

¹¹³ Ibid., xiii.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 22–23. As Muñoz puts it, “queerness’ ecstatic and horizontal temporality [is] a path and a movement to a greater openness to the world” (25).

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 49 emphasis mine.

¹¹⁷ Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 97.

turn to wonder bearing a family resemblance to what Muñoz, following Bloch, calls “astonished contemplation,” a sense of astonishment and wonder that “helps one surpass the limitations of an alienating presentness and allows one to see a different time and place.”¹¹⁸ Here, Jones not only acknowledges that grace, and healing from trauma “seldom happens in a direct, linear manner,” but she calls for an embrace of that truth, challenging “a grand narrative of redemption crafted to follow the driving-forward movement of the gospel story,” suggesting that the “lilt of grace is far more interesting in its varied turns and slants of light”—in, perhaps one could say, glimpses—“than any answers we imagine.”¹¹⁹ Grace here is glimpsed, and it illuminates precisely in and through the glimpses, the lilt and turns. Moreover, that illumination has a disruptive function, which Jones explores through reflecting on the experience of grace in physical practices—what she calls “liturgies of the flesh”—like acupuncture or yoga.¹²⁰ Like the openness of Muñoz’s queer horizon that is steeped in an un-doing or disidentifying of the self, that seeks a “freedom as unboundedness,” in these experiences of grace, at “the same instant that you are undone and held, you are *thrown wide open*. With each breath and needle prick, the world around you and within you becomes more spacious and boundlessly present to you.”¹²¹

This chapter on mourning and wonder, along with two other chapters that together comprise the third and final section of *Trauma and Grace* is, interestingly, called “Ruptured Reedemings,” which itself intimates something different or beyond an eschatological essentialism, as redemption is not located in the essentialized future but in the ruptures, the cracks, the glimpses. In the first chapter of this section, on “Sin, Creativity, and the Christian Life,” Jones stages an imaginary conversation between two women who encounter one another

¹¹⁸ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 5.

¹¹⁹ Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 156, xiv, xv.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 158.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 160 emphasis hers.

after Jesus' crucifixion—the two women characters being Mary, Jesus's mother, and Rachel, a fictional character whose son was executed by the Romans 30 years earlier in the slaughter of the innocents. In this imaginative rendering, Jones acknowledges and affirms the complexity and non-linearity of healing—indeed, for Jones, a key “mark of Mary's renewal as an agent is her changing sense of *time*,” her recognition that things “are not as they seem, for God is at work in history, subverting and reversing that which is right before our eyes.”¹²² Trauma, for both these characters, “undoes their capacity to imagine a future and see themselves as effective agents in the world. In other words, it undoes their sense of self.”¹²³ In this imaginative drama, Mary heals from the trauma, which in part comes from and in part contributes to a different relationship with time.

Jones' turn to trauma theory throughout the text speaks to the complexities of this question, in many ways acknowledging that while *agency* can be restored, and flourishing can absolutely occur, healing is not a return to a pre-traumatic whole self, but that the redemptive grace we might experience “will and should be a grace haunted by the ghost of the violence it addresses.”¹²⁴ Nonetheless, her vision of the healing power of grace remains haunted by the vision of wholeness. Indeed, grace heals by, “in so holding us, [it gives] us back ourselves made whole.”¹²⁵ But does healing mean one is “put back together,” so to speak, as Jones indicates?

Both Jones and Muñoz speak to a disidentifying or fragmenting rupture of selfhood yet at the

¹²² Ibid., 117 emphasis hers.

¹²³ Ibid., xiii–xiv.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 41. See especially Jones' point that “after trauma we never return to a state of previous innocence,” citing Lawrence Langer that the “survivor does not travel a road from the normal to the bizarre [and] back to the normal again, . . . but from the normal to the bizarre [and] back to a normalcy so permeated by the bizarre encounter with atrocity that it can never be purified again” (41, en6). This theme of the fractured self appears throughout the text, especially in chapter 2 on “9/11's Emmaus: Gracing the Disordered Theological Imagination” and chapter 6 on “The Unending Cross.”

¹²⁵ Ibid., 97.

same time both also find it important to retain some degree of lingering presence of self amongst the fragmentation. Like Jones, Muñoz, though to a lesser degree, speaks of the strategic and social importance and usefulness of selfhood for marginalized, minority identities.¹²⁶ Here, a turn to Edelman is instructive.

§3. *Sutured Self=Stable and Coherent Self= Straight Time? An Edelmanian Critique*

Whereas, as chapter two explored, Muñoz' turn to queer futurity aligns him with antisocial queer theorists to some degree, it is also the case that key antisocial thinkers are critical of Muñoz' embrace of futurity—however tenuous and queer it is/understands itself as being—in that they read the positive turn to futurity as regulative and oppressive, as antithetical to queerness. This is, of course, the critique leveled most notably by Lee Edelman. Vital to Edelman's eschewal of futurity is his critique of the ways in which the turn to the future is fueled by, and fuels, a fantasy “that assures the stability of our identities as subjects and the coherence of the Imaginary totalizations through which those identities appear to us in recognizable form.”¹²⁷ Grounding his argument in a Lacanian framework, Edelman outlines, and ultimately rejects, the way in which politics “names the struggle to effect a fantasmatic order of reality in which the subject's alienation would vanish into the seamlessness of identity at the endpoint of

¹²⁶ For more on this in Muñoz, see Caserio et al., “The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory.”

¹²⁷ Edelman, *No Future*, 7. Edelman continues, explaining that “Though the material conditions of human experience may indeed be at stake in the various conflicts by means of which differing political perspectives vie for the power to name, and by naming to shape, our collective reality, the ceaseless conflict of their social visions conceals their common will to install, and to install as reality itself, one libidinally subtended fantasy or another intended to screen out the emptiness that the signifier embeds as the core of the Symbolic. Politics, to put this another way, names the space in which Imaginary relations, relations that hark back to a misrecognition of the self as enjoying some originary access to presence...compete for Symbolic fulfillment, for actualization in the realm of the language to which subjectification subjects us all” (7-8).

the endless chain of signifiers lived as history.”¹²⁸ The notion of a stable, coherent identity is bound to an affirmation of futurity, and both are fantasies that ultimately violently exclude and regulate.

These fantasies are both fueled by, and fuel, what Edelman refers to as reproductive futurism, wherein the figure of the Child serves “as the prop of the secular theology on which our social identity rests.”¹²⁹ The figure of the Child operates with and upholds an “insistence on sameness that intends to restore an Imaginary past. The Child,” Edelman explains, “marks the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity: an erotically charged investment in the rigid sameness of identity that is central to the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism.”¹³⁰ Edelman calls for queer opposition “to the governing fantasy of achieving Symbolic closure through the marriage of identity to futurity in order to realize the social subject,” and explains that queerness is precisely that which figures outside and beyond reproductive futurisms political symptoms, occupying “the place of the social order’s death drive.”¹³¹ Given especially that this place of the social order’s death drive is what others project on to queer people regardless, Edelman calls for an embrace of this “nonteleological negativity,” an eschewal of the “very framing [that] repeats the structuring of social reality that establishes heteronormativity as the guardian of temporal (re)production.”¹³²

Again, within a Lacanian frame, Edelman reads figural queerness as negativity, particularly as “the force that shatters the fantasy of Imaginary unity, the force that insists on the

¹²⁸ Ibid., 8.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 12.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 21. Or, as Edelman puts it earlier, in “its coercive universalization...the image of the Child...serves to regulate political discourse—to prescribe what will *count* as political discourse—by compelling such discourse to accede in advance to the reality of a collective future whose figurative status we are never permitted to acknowledge or address” (11).

¹³¹ Ibid., 14, 3.

¹³² Edelman in Dinshaw et al., “Theorizing Queer Temporalities,” 181, 195.

void (replete, paradoxically, with jouissance) always already lodged within, though barred from, symbolization.”¹³³ He explains:

What futurism always anticipates, in the image of an Imaginary past, a realization of meaning that will suture identity by closing that gap, queerness undoes the identities through which we experience ourselves as subjects, insisting on the Real of a jouissance that social reality and the futurism on which it relies have already foreclosed.¹³⁴

Eschewing the oppressive and difference-foreclosing fantasy of the social order entrenched in the figure of the Child, of reproductive futurism, opens up “an access to the jouissance that at once defines and negates us;” as such, “queerness proposes in the place of the good, something [Edelman] want[s] to call better,” though “it promises, in more than one sense of the phrase, absolutely nothing.”¹³⁵ In an earlier essay, “Queer Theory: Unstating Desire,” speaking about this access to jouissance that queerness reflects and engenders, Edelman argues that that queer theory is “*utopic in its negativity... curv[ing] endlessly towards a realization that its realization remains impossible.*”¹³⁶

Whether or not one buys into the Lacanian framework that undergirds Edelman’s critique, Edelman’s analysis illuminates the ways in which identity, futurity, and sociality—or, to put it another way, the self, teleology, community, and formation—are often bound together in ways that affirm and reproduce the order of things, an order that is grounded in a normativity that oppresses difference. And while Edelman operates with a different (psychoanalytic) frame than the Foucauldian, poststructuralist one that guides much of this project, both share a critique of

¹³³ Edelman, *No Future*, 22.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 24–25.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹³⁶ Lee Edelman, “Queer Theory: Unstating Desire,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 2, no. 4 (1995): 346.

and call for resistance to the ossification of selfhood.¹³⁷ In framing his call for an (anti-?) politics of negativity, he explains that it “suggests a refusal—the appropriately perverse refusal that characterizes queer theory—of every substantialization of identity, which is always oppositionally defined and, by extension, of history as linear narrative (the poor man’s teleology) in which meaning succeeds in revealing itself—*as itself*—through time.”¹³⁸

Whereas Jones, and to some degree Muñoz sees self-shattering as the problem (and wholeness as the solution), Edelman locates the problem in the fantasy of a coherent stable selfhood. To refuse shattering, then, perpetuates the fundamental problem rather than solving it. Edelman’s critique points to how Muñoz and Jones both fail to offer an account of how one supports the selfhood of some subjects (those who are oppressed) without fueling the difference-foreclosing, exclusionary logic that such a notion of selfhood is built on.¹³⁹

But what is one to make of Edelman’s critiques *theologically*? What of the importance of theological norms to affirm, of theological anthropology, of the importance a theological affirmation of selfhood might hold politically and socially? This is the subject I turn to now, in the third and final section of this project, beginning to outline a theological framework for an account of formation in queer time. I do admittedly diverge from Edelman in some respects, turning to theology—particularly to epistemology and eschatology—as a potential resource for an account of futurity and formation. Drawing on and seeking to move beyond the ways in which Jones’ (and similarly, Muñoz’s) turn to the effects of trauma, what might it mean to imagine the “capacity to imagine a future” and embrace agency for individuals and communities outside of

¹³⁷ In some ways, from a different approach Edelman extends a Foucauldian critique of subjectivation and illuminates how biopower and disciplinary power operate in and through narratives of time itself.

¹³⁸ Edelman, *No Future*, 4 emphasis his.

¹³⁹ I am grateful to Kent Brintnall for his comments on a previous draft of this chapter, particularly his insights on Edelman’s work that I draw heavily on here.

the perhaps impossible (in the case of trauma) or the potentially dangerous and delimiting (in the case of gender, according to Butler) affirming of an essential, whole, sense of self? Or, to ask a different, but very closely related question—perhaps the inverse of the previous question, even—is there a way to affirm an “undone” sense of “self” in a way that not only avoids furthering, or even inflicting further, trauma, but that engenders and supports flourishing? I suggest that there is, and gesture to this potentiality, now.

PART III.
WHO'S THE "WE?" QUEER, CHRISTIAN
(UN-) FORMATIONS & APOPHATIC FUTURES

As participators in this possibility, we are a riddle to ourselves.
- Karl Barth

...the otherwise is, to fail to use the phrase theologically, already but not yet. If otherwise possibilities announce and enunciate plurality, multiplicity, irreducibility, then even when already realized as otherwise modes of social political organization, of otherwise ways of life like the horizon, such would of necessity maintain the not yet nature, a force that keeps open and at remove any declaration of doneness.
- Ashon Crawley

When we refuse to sever or chose between different aspects of our identity, we create a new situation.
- Judith Plaskow¹

Who is the “we” in theology? Theology has been called to ask this question many times, scholars and practitioners from and of different social locations pointing out how the “we” reflects a particular “we-ness”—one that often fails to take gendered (as well as other forms of) difference seriously. The claims made in the names of “us,” often leaves out a huge portion of the we—women, people of color, the disabled, the global South, LGBTQI people, etc.... let alone those who occupy more than one of those under-/unacknowledged social locations. In this way, feminist theology has called theology to ask who, and where, we are—calling for a broadening of this we. But is there *a* we?

A turn to theological reflections on formation, I have sought to argue, reveals that broadening the ‘we’ is not enough. Even those who have sought a generous orthodoxy and have developed complex methodological-ethical frameworks intended to make room for difference

¹ *Standing Again at Sinai*, x. She continues, writing “If we are Jews not despite being feminists, but *as feminists*, than Judaism will have to change.”

have operated with a presumptive “we” in mind. They presume to know in advance the “we” to come and the path towards flourishing and faithfulness that will bring it into existence.

The first section of this project sought to lay the groundwork for an inquiry into how such projects wrestle with the relationship between Christian identity and the different “we’s” of which we are a part. In that section, I explained what I mean by methodological-ethical frameworks and identified their primary goals: to understand and regulate how communities and selves are constituted in and through practices of formation. In the service of that goal, these frameworks marshal together time, teleology, norms, and identity in the pursuit of faithfulness and flourishing. I identified a tension in these projects between the pursuit of faithfulness and openness to difference. Introducing theories of queer temporality allowed me to diagnose the source of that tension in the particular convergence of temporality, teleology, and subjectivity that these projects end up adopting. Singular, prescriptive accounts of time presume a narrative, coherent self and seek or presume movement towards a stable, knowable telos, which curtails difference and delimits freedom and flourishing.

In section two, then, I turned to feminist frameworks of formation that explicitly seek a flourishing that is open to and for women and sexual minorities. I demonstrated how in these accounts formation is directed toward ends intended to accommodate such difference—unmastery and openness to the other (Coakley), or a formation of the self that affirms women’s worth and equality (Jones)—they nevertheless operate with an account of the future and the self’s movement towards it, in a way that undermines difference. For Coakley, Christian identity serves as the stable site toward which gender and sexuality are transformed, and practices of Christian identity (read: contemplative prayer) are the means through which that transformation occurs. For Jones, womanhood is not so much undone by Christian identity, but affirmed and

stabilized by it. In both accounts, the methodological-ethical framework presumes and posits a solid future towards which a (female) self is constructed and directed as part of a “we.”

Theories of queer temporality have illuminated the critical analysis I have offered so far. In doing so, convergences between these theories and theology have also come to light. Both Coakley and Jones—in different ways and to differing degrees—acknowledge and affirm the ethical turn to “un-doing” that queer temporality upholds, for example. They even draw on some queer theoretical sources for their claims, though not theories of queer temporality. Taking queer temporal critiques of a future and of a stable, prescriptive “we,” seriously, this final section asks, what might it mean to have an account of formation in which the future is not already set? What might a formational framework that does not presume a singular gendered or sexual, or religious, “we” look like? I argue here that there are rich theological resources that can inform this question’s asking, as well as for imagining possibilities for an otherwise framework. Chapter five turns to those resources, as well as begins to gesture to that otherwise.

CHAPTER FIVE:

VIRTUE WITH NO AFTER? TOWARDS A NON-NORMATIVIZING ASKESIS:

AN ETHICAL-METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK IN A QUEER TIME & PLACE

Perhaps the key methodological question is not what method have you adopted for this research? But what paths have been disavowed, left behind, covered over and remain unseen?
- Avery Gordon

Utopia is not prescriptive; it renders potential blueprints of a world not quite here, a horizon of possibility, not a fixed schema. It is productive to think about utopia as flux, a temporal disorganization, as a moment when the here and the now is transcended by a then and a there that could be and indeed should be.”
- José Esteban Muñoz

We will wander, fall short, and move in circles. We will lose our way, our cars, our agenda, and possibly our minds, but in losing we will find another way of making meaning in which, to return to the battered VW van of Little Miss Sunshine, no one gets left behind.
- J. Jack Halberstam

Who is the “we?” Is there a “we?” How do theologians determine what claims and/or practices mark or define this “we?” These are questions I raised in the first chapter of this project, outlining how Lindbeck’s postliberal account functions as a paradigmatic methodological-ethical frame that seeks openness to difference but actually forecloses upon that goal. Its methodological-ethical framework not only posits an ideal singular telos of what flourishing looks like, but also presumes clarity of access to and universal agreement about those ends. That sets in place an account of the path Christian formation traverse(s) that forecloses on differences. I found a similar (though not identical) problem in two more recent feminist methodological-ethical frameworks. Does this mean that theologies of formation—feminist or otherwise—should or even can eschew any kind of formational telos? I do not think so. Like Lindbeck, Coakley, and Jones, I too seek a kind of generous orthodoxy with a vision of

faithfulness that enables flourishing. That very project, I believe, requires an alternative to the uni-directional, teleological logic present in their work. That alternative needs to be theological. Here, in this final chapter, I begin to propose just that.

First, I return briefly to DeHart and Tanner, coming full circle from the first chapter, turning now to their own constructive claims (rather than focusing primarily on their critiques) in conversation with the arguments of this project to suggest an *ethical-methodological* framework of formation as one that affirms difference in its visions of flourishing. Following that, I turn in the second section to Lynne Huffer's proposal of an ethics of narrative performativity as a potential framework for a "virtue with no after," a way of envisioning formation in a way that takes the normativizing risks of subjectivation seriously and seeks to throw out that bathwater without throwing out the baby of formation altogether. Huffer's account, particularly its turn to asymmetrical reciprocity, has much to offer to an account of religious formation that seeks to take difference seriously. Finally, I conclude this final chapter by briefly revisiting Jones' creative re-reading of justification and sanctification, offering an *alternate* alternate reading as one potential creative rethinking of formation in a queer time and space.

I. An Ethical-Methodological Framework of Formation? Revisiting Tanner and Dehart

Beginning this project, I turned to Lindbeck as paradigmatic of the contemporary turn to Christian formation. Although such accounts operate with a framework that seeks to be generously orthodox, exhibiting continuity with Christian norms and traditions but open to different forms of expression those norms take, I explored how this manifested in a uni-directional, prescriptive frame. Within this frame, methodology, while presumed to be merely descriptive or at the very least open, operates in service to a particular ethical vision, a vision that

claim to allow for difference but in effect, given the way the framework functions, forecloses on and obstructs difference. Introducing queer temporality, I examined how these frames marshalled time, teleology and norms in and to a particular singular *vision of identity* that constrained difference. I traced that constraining effect to the logic of futurity underlying postliberalism's temporal framework. In part two I explored how similar methodological-ethical frames also embedded in logics of (straight) futurity operated in feminist theological accounts. In Coakley's case, a singular teleologic of Christian identity functions to transform and subsume gender and sexuality through particular practices of formation, I argued. Jones' doctrinal examination of the self operated with a teleology of identity formation that functioned to stabilize womanhood.

Challenging this "straight temporality" of these methodological-ethical frameworks of formation then, calls for a disaggregating of—or, perhaps, a subverting or destabilizing of the relationship of—time, telos, and norms in such formational frames. To elucidate what this might mean, it is perhaps helpful to juxtapose those points with what it does *not* mean. The un-marshalling of time, telos, and norms in frameworks of formation does not mean (1) a disavowal of norms, (2) a total eschewal of telos, or (3) an eschewal of formation itself. It is in this evaluation of what such an un-marshalling does *not* mean that Tanner and DeHart's work begins to be helpful, and in doing so, also begins to open up possible alternatives.

First, a framework of formation in queer time does not mean a total disavowal of norms. Recalling the engagement with Butler in chapter four, I explored how Jones misconstrued Butler's constructivism as a totalizing rejection of norms. Butler illuminates the importance of attending carefully to how norms function and how they *relate* to universality—how "the givenness of the prevailing normative horizon" might presume false and delimiting universals (and thus posit problematic norms) that do not take cultural and personal contexts into

consideration—that fail to recognize, and thus foreclose on, difference.¹ In *Theories of Culture*, Tanner is similarly circumspect about this prescriptive normative function as it operates in postliberalism, calling into question the way norms *presume a universality* apart from the cultural social contexts in which they function—how this “prejudge[s] the nature of the Christian social practices within which theology is lodged.”² Tanner challenges the way in which postliberalism propose accounts of Christian identity that, while acknowledging the “mixed character” of Christian ways of life, nevertheless “hold on to the idea of a self-contained and self-originating identity for *Christianity*.”³ It is not that norms are thrown out the window—or, to perhaps use a better, similarly colloquial metaphor, it is not that the baby is thrown out, but the bathwater is, the bathwater being the ways in which practices and the methodologies that draw on practices (and, I would add, the methodological-ethical accounts of formation that stem from them) presume a stability and normativity to those norms apart from social context. Drawing on Tanner’s attention to the cultural, spatial, shaping of norms, I suggest a de-teleologizing of norms within methodological-ethical frameworks, which leads me to the second, interrelated, item on the what-this-does-not-mean list.

A framework of formation in a queer time does not mean a total eschewal of telos. First and foremost, with both norms and telos, it is naïve at best, as well as academically and ethically disingenuous, to presume or propose the eradication of norms or ends as possible—argumentation itself is a normative, teleological endeavor; not to mention, theological studies is

¹ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 24. As Butler puts it, the “problem is not with universality, but with an operation of universality that fails to be responsive to cultural particularity and fails to undergo a reformulation of itself in response to the social and cultural conditions it includes within its scope of applicability” (6).

² Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 66, 107.

³ *Ibid.*, 105 emphasis mine.

unabashedly normative (indeed, this is what generally distinguishes it from religious studies).⁴ What a queer temporal framework does do, I argue, is challenge a prescriptive linearity and/or singularity of that telos, particularly as it relates to identity. In challenging the discrete spatial boundaries of identity, part-and-parcel with calling into question the presumed link between norms and universals, Tanner de-singularizes, one might say, an account of Christian identity as it is understood in relation to other identities.

Christian identity does not become the telos to which intrahuman differences (such as gender and sexuality) must be subordinated to, transformed by, or even understood under the rubric of, but Christian identities and intrahuman differences shape and are shaped by one another—this does not foreclose or obstruct difference, but draws on it and values it. As Tanner puts it, in the context of discussing how academic theologians engage with cultural practices, it is not by a linear singular process of application, but nor is it a meaningless, accidental process. Rather, it is “by way of an innumerable series of discrete disruptions and concrete balancing acts... that eventually add up to something surprising.”⁵ Interestingly, Tanner refers to this as a “highly constructivist account of the academic theological project.” The theologian, she explains, “is always ultimately making meaning rather than finding it.”⁶ There is not a single telos one reaches, but multiple ways of becoming that draw from the “materials” at hand.

⁴ It is important to note that the relationship between religious studies and theological studies—the distinctions as well as similarities of the respective disciplines—is complex and contested. For more on this, see Donald Wiebe, *The Politics of Religious Studies: The Continuing Conflict with Theology in the Academy*, 1999 edition (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000); Ann Taves, “Negotiating the Boundaries in Theological and Religious Studies” (Graduate Theological Union Convocation Address, Berkeley, CA, September 21, 2005), <http://gtu.edu/news-events/events/lecture-address/convocation/negotiating-the-boundaries-in-theological-and-religious-studies>; Darlene L. Bird and Simon G. Smith, eds., *Theology and Religious Studies in Higher Education: Global Perspectives* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2009).

⁵ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 92.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 93.

Dehart's analysis in *The Trial of the Witnesses* also lends resources to the argument I am making here, and what it does and does *not* mean. The alternate interpretive framework he proposes for engaging Lindbeck and Frei's work, "center[ed] on witness, the people who are charged with it, and that to which they must bear testimony," destabilizes a prescriptive, unidirectional normative telos of Christian identity all the while upholding Christian identity and the norms, or rather the norm, singular, that marks it—"the presence of God in the human story of Jesus Christ."⁷ Christianity is normed by Jesus alone, DeHart asserts, but is *tried* at its sites. This already destabilizes formational frames wherein Christian identity is normativized by particular practices, offering a different rubric, one of witness that lends to greater nuance and room for movement—for difference—in manifestations of that witness. DeHart goes on to outline three dimensions or connotations to this (re-)interpretive frame: trial as a situation demanding endurance, as experimentation, and as submission to judgment.⁸ Each dimension lends something to a temporally queer *formational* framework.

First, in the meaning of trial as a situation/site of endurance, DeHart explains that this is evidenced in the attention to methodology within Christian theology, and the shape that has on practices, as "the church must expose itself to the trauma of its own remaking and that of its utterances."⁹ A close examination of Jones', and especially Coakley's, frames revealed varying levels of hesitation in the face of such exposure, their respective bolstering of Christian practices or stable selfhood functioning as shields buffering the effects of exposure. Explaining the second meaning of trial, as experiment, DeHart draws and builds on Rowan Williams' insight that

⁷ DeHart, *Trial of the Witnesses*, 243, 244.

⁸ See *Ibid.*, 244–76.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 244.

“theology is about ‘experimenting with the rhetoric of its uncommitted environment.’”¹⁰ Here, in their theologies, Coakley and Jones both excel. Yet in their visions of formation, they again shield, limiting possibilities of experimentation by marking Christian identity as the ends that gender and sexuality move towards or fall in line with. DeHart here discusses the significance of theological engagement with external influences, those discourses serving a kind of breathing function for and in theology. What then might it mean to experiment in practices of formation and performances of selfhood?

Finally, in the third meaning of trial, submission to the judgment of publics, DeHart suggests that “determining the ways of witness in word and deed in a specific cultural situation is not only and unavoidably a collective negotiation, it is one in which the church does not decide its course by retiring ‘in camera.’”¹¹ What might it mean to apply this to formation, and to the frameworks of formation themselves, particularly as Christian identity is understood in relation to intrahuman differences? “Through speaking and thinking carefully and tentatively through the words of outsiders,” DeHart writes, “the witnesses do not just convert that language into something new; they are themselves converted.”¹² How might intrahuman differences serve not just to be transformed by Christian practices, or affirmed by theological claims on the self, but be transformative *to* and shaping of Christian identity and the formation of it?

DeHart’s reflections on Christian identity and/as a trial of witnesses, along with Tanner’s reflections on culture, offer resources that gesture towards a queerer framework of formation—a framework wherein formation does not mean a singular movement in a singular direction of and towards identity, but where different identities, experiences, and knowledges shape one another;

¹⁰ Ibid., 245. DeHart here cites Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000), xiv.

¹¹ DeHart, *Trial of the Witnesses*, 245.

¹² Ibid., 262.

a framework where methodology does not presume, posit, and present a path to a singular ethical vision, but where an ethical commitment to difference and recognition of the limits of knowledge and access, of the mysteries and abundances of how God works in the world and in peoples' own lives, shapes methodologies and subsequent accounts and practices of formation.

In this section, I proposed that a *framework* of formation that embraces difference, that does not have an already set future, is one that inverts ethics and method in its normative quest, which both affirms the normative nature of Christian identity and theological claims while also taking seriously the limits and dangers of how norms have been bound with and to time and telos, and how they are inhabited in and through personal identity formation. I conclude now, then, with some final, brief, thoughts on what this might mean not just for a framework for formation, but within an account of formation itself...

II. Who's the "We" and/in Formation? Huffer's Narrative Performativity as a Resource (or, Formation as Heterotopian Catachresis)

What are the possibilities for envisioning and engendering a "we" in a way that honors, rather than sublimates or forecloses, difference? In her re-traversal of feminism and queer theory and/in relation to one another in *Are the Lips a Grave?*, Lynne Huffer proposes an ethics—or, rather, an "ethopoiesis: a dismantling of the self for an ethical remaking of the erotic relation"—that is a rich resource for envisioning a formation in a queer time and place.¹³ Like (and, for that matter, as one of) the queer (temporal) theorists I rely on, and as I have already outlined at various points throughout this project, Huffer diagnoses and critiques the philosophical and

¹³ Huffer, *Are the Lips a Grave?*, 43.

historical emergence of the subject and its subjugating effects.¹⁴ From this critical perspective, Huffer draws on Foucault as well as feminist theorist Luce Irigaray to critically interrogate and rethink the “ethical tension [that] is often expressed as an opposition between a feminist investment in narrative coherence and a queer embrace of performative disruption.”¹⁵

In re-traversing the grounds of the split between feminist and queer theories, however, Huffer not only diagnoses and critiques modern subjectivity, but also “exploits [its] unstable epistemic foundation,” and “restore[s] to [modernity’s] grounds the ungrounding cracks and instabilities that open up possibilities for transformed relations between subject and others.”¹⁶ In this way, Huffer’s own methodology of re-traversal eschews the kind of straight temporality that this project challenges. Contra a teleological arrival or a Hegelian sublation, Huffer’s re-traversal “hope[s] to restore to our soil, as Foucault puts it ‘its rifts, its instability, its flaws’” and, by doing so, “to make queer feminism stir once more under our feet.”¹⁷ Huffer charts how “throughout their work both Foucault and Irigaray are driven by an antipathy to the Hegelian dialectic and its neat resolution of ethical and political opposition through sublation.” They both identify a dialectical, teleologizing logic as integral to the subjectivizing, and thus subjugating, production of the modern sexual subject.¹⁸

¹⁴ For previous discussions of these themes, see especially the first subsection in chapter two, on “Subjectivity: power and the formation of the self,” 85-89, and the final section of chapter three, on “The Self, Straight Time, and Success,” 177-185.

¹⁵ Huffer, *Are the Lips a Grave?*, 13.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5, 13. Huffer continues, explaining that this “ungrounding restoration is not cause for alarm but rather a reminder: there’s nothing solid beneath our feet, and to persist in the illusion of solid ground is to perpetuate the epistemic and ethical violence that both Foucault and Irigaray repeatedly describe” (13).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2. Huffer here cites Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1994), xxiv.

¹⁸ Huffer, *Are the Lips a Grave?*, 47. Huffer challenges this dialecticalizing logic throughout *Are the Lips a Grave?* as well as throughout her earlier monograph *Mad for Foucault*, in and through a variety of tropes: i.e. the Deleuzian doublings and co-extensivities she reads in Foucault’s *History of Madness* that mirror and reflect “the tension of madness itself,” and radically intervene in “the logic of inside and outside” that typically frames our accounts of the subject; the atemporally rupturing function of eros as a

In her re-traversal, Huffer offers a constructive ethic that “produces a transvaluation of sexual values rather than simply their rejection.”¹⁹ Huffer’s focus is on “rework[ing] the moral terms through which the ethics of sex have been debated” in queer and feminist theories. This reworking, I want to suggest, offers much of use to theological accounts of formation, particularly in combatting and addressing the problems this project identifies *while at the same time retaining that which is of value in (these theological accounts of) formation*.²⁰ Huffer’s account of narrative performativity provides a way of understanding and re-framing formation in *deconstructive* terms, as a process of un-doing the subject in, through, and for one’s encounter with difference, in a way that eschews a prescriptive linear teleology while retaining—unabashedly affirming, even—a framework of and for formation as such.

§1. Restoring ~~queer feminism~~ formation(’s rifts). Narrative performance: what’s the difference?

Like this project, Huffer is interested in the place of difference, and explores the ways in which the question of difference is re-framed through a “rift-restoring retraversal” of the “split” between queer and feminist theories.²¹ In approaching this question from her desubjectivizing, antifoundationalist frame, Huffer interrogates the way attention to difference has been sequestered into the rise and institutionalization of intersectionality as *the* form of feminist analysis. Tracing the ways in which an antifoundationalist account of difference was gradually displaced, Huffer explains how difference “became, increasingly, an empirically grounded theoretical claim about legible positions on a social grid that made identities more complex than

‘mad’ mode of knowing; the Irigirayan lips as “catachrestic heterotopias, [as] both real and unreal, both what is and what is not,” the erotic pleasure being found precisely “in their movement between”... (*Mad for Foucault*, 67; *Are the Lips a Grave?*, 12, 41).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

²¹ Lynne Huffer, “Lipwork,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 27, no. 3 (2016): 99.

previously conceived.”²² The intersectional turn Huffer critically examines resonates with the methodological-ethical frameworks of formation that this project finds wanting.

On the surface, it might seem as though these frameworks I critique come up short simply because they fail to attend to intersectionality, elevating and teleologizing Christian identity at the expense of intrahuman differences like gender and sexuality. On this surface reading, my proposal, then, affirms intersectionality, by attending precisely to religion, gender, and sexuality as facets of our identities and lived experiences as they relate to one another. A closer look however, particularly at Huffer’s critique, demonstrates otherwise.

Intersectionality, Huffer explains, “articulates a political promise to eradicate the possibility of future exclusions,” and in doing so operates with a logic of inclusion that sublimates and normativizes difference.²³ In this way, “intersectionality contributes to a critical environment where the moral imperative to exclude exclusion produces the repeated failure to live up to that ideal.”²⁴ Huffer’s critique here illuminates the failures and limits of my own project as an intersectional one. If this dissertation was read as doing simply or solely this, calling for intersectional analysis, I would fail on this account as well; in my focus on women and non-normative sexualities, I do not attend (certainly not closely/adequately) to race or disability (or class, or age, or...the list goes on). Rather, this dissertation has sought to identify and critically examine the larger difference-foreclosing logics at play in accounts of formation and the frameworks that undergird them. This is not counter to the aims of intersectionality, but rather identifies and attends to underlying epistemological presuppositions that intersectional

²² Huffer, *Are the Lips a Grave?*, 14. In “Lipwork,” her contribution to a roundtable on *Are the Lips a Grave?* in *differences*, Huffer interestingly points out that she “discuss[es] intersectionality for less than two of the book’s two hundred pages,” but despite that “the intersectionality question has been the most consistent point of commentary in public sessions on the book” (97).

²³ Huffer, *Are the Lips a Grave?*, 19.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

analysis alone does not address, and that can even be obscured through appeals to intersectionality.²⁵ In doing so, this project demonstrates how these feminist methodological-ethical frameworks fail in precisely this way, undermining their own aims of inclusion and/of difference. Similarly, in their pursuit of a singular telos, Coakley's and Jones' feminist methodological-ethical frameworks ultimately normativize (gender and sexual) difference.

Yet Huffer is also critical of the queer performativity and antisociality that is often proffered as the alternative to this approach.²⁶ Huffer argues that

Queer theory's claim of radical inclusivity—what Bersani calls “bringing out, celebrating, ‘the homo’ in all of us” (10)—makes sameness a precondition of recognition, thereby revealing radical queer inclusivity as a falsely universalizing claim. ... Put another way, behind queer theory's seemingly infinite possibilities of unconstrained local performances lurks the age-old trap of universalism: its subsumption of difference into the sameness of a seamless “we.”²⁷

Not only does Huffer's point here speak to the ways in which antinormativity becomes its own kind of delimiting norm, but she suggests that this queer “we” universalizes the subject in a way that also implicates it in “processes of othering and erasure,” those processes “masked by the seeming instability of the performative subject.”²⁸ Queer negativity can in its own way be a kind of normative, prescriptive telos that paradoxically also forecloses difference.

²⁵ For more on this theme, see especially Jasbir K. Puar, “‘I Would Rather Be a Cyborg than a Goddess’: Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory,” *philoSOPHIA* 2, no. 1 (2012): 49–66. While critical of some undergirding presuppositions of intersectionality in her turn to assemblages, Puar argues that these two theories “need not be oppositional but rather... frictional,” and goes on to chart “the limits and possibilities of intersectionality and assemblage and what might be gained by thinking them through and with each other” (50).

²⁶ Huffer charts how a “metanarrative has developed in which the fluid destabilizing queer performance stakes out its difference from that which came before by setting up a stable, fixed, feminist narrative as its nonqueer, identitarian other” and that “in some veins of the story, the struggle solidifies into a battle between warring camps...” (57, 58).

²⁷ Huffer, *Are the Lips a Grave?*, 63.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 68, 67.

Placing these critiques in conversation, retraversing this terrain, Huffer offers her own kind of queer temporal framework, one that does not operate from or in search of a presumed, ideal (anti-)telos, but that is rooted in the question of ethics—that foregrounds ethics rather than method, the encounter with difference rather than the approach. Drawing on Charles Scott, Huffer emphasizes the “insistence on the question” in “the question of ethics,” explaining that such an insistence “pries ethics open, ever so slightly, to produce what Scott calls ‘an interruption in the ethos.’”²⁹ This interruptive re-framing not only offers a challenge to the linear teleologies that orient frameworks of formation, the very re-framing itself contests the linearity and spatiality of a straight temporal logic. Huffer claims her approach as “heterotopian: the articulation of a space that, as Foucault famously put it, is both ‘utterly real...and utterly unreal,’” and, like Irigaray’s reflections on the vaginal lips, as “bringing together, as a catechrestic relation, *what is* and *what is not*.”³⁰

The very title of Huffer’s text, *Are the Lips a Grave?* evokes two texts that highlight the respective sides of the split Huffer is retraversing— Irigaray’s 1977 essay “When Our Lips Speak Together,” speaking to feminist investment in narrative, and Leo Bersani’s “Is the Rectum a Grave?” to the queer investment in performativity and self-shattering. And it is in reading the two together that Huffer suggests enables us to “open up the ethical, narrative, and performative space of alterity that is repetition with a *difference*,” that enables us to read narrative and performative together—to see narrative not “as performativity’s oppositional other, but rather as a speech act with a particular kind of performative force,” avoiding the respective erasures of alterity that each are respectively susceptible to.³¹ An ethics of narrative performance,

²⁹ Ibid., 44, see n49.

³⁰ Ibid., 31, see n21; 40, emphasis hers.

³¹ Ibid., 69.

for Huffer, means thinking performativity's recognition of the instability and fluidity of the subject in the context of sociality, where "the structure of narrative breaks open the self-referential, asocial structure of the universalizing performative utterance."³²

Like the theologians this project engages critically with, Huffer recognizes the value of narrative in and for ethics. She explains that, while queer theory, and the poststructuralism that subtends it, tells us "that we only have access to the world through a grid of language... that's not the only point, because we're interested in more than epistemological questions." We're also, she asserts, "interested in the ethical questions."³³ Huffer's highlighting of the ethical highlights a similarity between her queer feminism and the theologies this project explores. But while the frameworks this project explores focus on the narrative at the expense of the performative, Huffer seeks to read the two together. What does this look like? What does this do in and for theological accounts of formation?

Narrative performance, Huffer explains, "would replace the question 'is it queer?' with a more interesting question: 'what's the difference?'" It asks the question of "[w]hat allows the 'differences' of history and the continually shifting contexts of our present to emerge without becoming a reflection of ourselves or the symmetrical other of sameness."³⁴ Whereas the accounts that this project critiques have allowed difference to be subsumed into sameness in their teleologizing of formation, foregrounding the question of difference challenges the normativizing effects of subjectivation while at the same time taking the narratives through which difference emerges seriously. Narrative, in this frame, has a performative dynamic,

³² Ibid., 69–70.

³³ Ibid., 69.

³⁴ Ibid., 70.

wherein encounters with others in and through history both reflect and point to the ethical imperative to attend *to* the particularities of others in their differences.

Huffer turns to Iris Marion Young's notion of asymmetrical reciprocity here to illuminate what an ethics of narrative performance means/looks like, and how it differs from other approaches. Genuine reciprocity must be asymmetrical, in that it must "acknowledge the difference, interval, that others drag behind them, shadows and histories, scars and traces, that do not become present in our communication."³⁵ What might it mean to attend to these asymmetries that are borne from difference, in thinking of formation? And what of belonging, the matter that sparked this project's critical inquiry into the question of difference in the first place?

§2. *Boundedness, belonging, and heterotopian futures: on reading(,) difference and formation*

While Huffer's performative turn to narrative hones in on the question of difference, what of the "we" that this dissertation raises questions about? If an attention to narrative in conversation with performativity means attending to unique particularities of the others we encounter, does this mean there is indeed no possibility of a we? While Huffer is wary of the universalizing, normativizing, difference-foreclosing effects of pursuing "we"-ness, she does not conversely suggest a kind of rampant individualism. Rather, Huffer speaks of a "bounded alterity," where we are bound by the narratives that have shaped and that continue to shape us. However, she reminds us that encounters with difference are part and parcel of our past (via the others that populate the narratives that bind us) and our present. Thus, despite—or, better said, *through*—that boundedness, "both our pasts and our presents are open to transformation."³⁶

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 71. Huffer here is citing Young, *Intersecting Voices*, 53.

³⁶ Huffer, *Are the Lips a Grave?*, 72.

Through our encounters with difference, our own narratives are (re-)shaped, opening up new performative possibilities.

Explaining that her proposal “takes seriously the desire for belonging,” Huffer outlines how the attentiveness to difference via narrative performance and the possibilities of a bounded alterity can be explored, perhaps even engendered, through a “socially embedded model of reading.”³⁷ Huffer explains that

This model can provide an understanding of close reading as a process of alternating identification and disidentification between subject and other, narrator and naratee, text and world. Such a process puts the knowing subject into question and, in doing so, allows the alterity of the other in its difference to emerge.³⁸

Such a practice is one that does not seek a clear, prescriptive end, but seeks to envision and enact “alternate forms of belonging.”³⁹

This model of close reading is one that would support the alternative methodological-ethical framework that we need. In place of a uni-directional prescriptive logic wherein (particular presumptions about) Christian identity serves as the telos to which other identities must bend, Huffer’s close reading is a process of formation that requires both identification and disidentification, enabling us to do belonging amidst difference better. This does not mean eschewing formation or the Christian narrative and history upon which accounts of formation are grounded. Rather, it argues that taking formation seriously—certainly if one also wants to honor difference—means, as the last chapter explored, acknowledging our own locatedness and limits,

³⁷ Ibid., 70.

³⁸ Ibid. And, again, in this way Huffer’s proposal points to a kind of inversion of a methodological-ethical framework.

³⁹ Ibid.

and participating in practices that help us to do that, that “allow the alterity of the other in its difference to emerge.”⁴⁰

In arguing for this model, Huffer draws on both Muñoz and Edelman (as well as Eve Sedgwick) as support. In a passage worth citing at length, Huffer explains:

If, as Muñoz puts it, “the promises made by disidentification’s performances are deep,” we need to articulate more fully the intersubjective relations through which those promises can be realized. Further, if “our charge... is to continue disidentifying with this world until we can achieve new ones” we might be helped in our task by asking more insistently about how to inhabit—right now—these present moments of disidentification. Such an insistence on the present not only takes seriously Lee Edelman’s antisocial critique of reproductive futurism but also heeds Sedgwick’s complaints about a tendency in critical theory to invoke a “beyond” that we never quite reach but proclaim incessantly.⁴¹

Huffer’s argument here echoes many of the claims—theoretical as well as theological—made in this dissertation about sociality and the self, and about the relationship between difference, the ethics of formation, and the future. For Huffer, this narrative retraversal, this socially embedded model of reading, aids us in the (un-?) formative task of disidentifying in a way that continually engenders ethical and social possibilities.

This ongoing (un-)formative process of identifying and disidentifying bespeaks, I would argue, a kind of subversion of—or, perhaps better, a kind of counter to—the methodological-ethical frameworks I have discussed in this project, whose versions of futurity and formation subsume difference to sameness. Contra, for instance, Lindbeck’s *intratextuality* that functions to “mark the correct ‘direction of interpretation,’” the *intertextuality* of Huffer’s model of reading honors the integrity of the text while at the same time recognizing the presence of difference and

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 70–71. Huffer here cites Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 200; Edelman, *No Future*; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

outside forces on and even within the text itself.⁴² This socially embedded model does not reduce or subsume difference within the text to fit into a singular cohesive system; rather, in asking “what’s the difference?,” it both ethically attends to the damage wrought by (the lack of attention to) difference and uses that as heterotopic sites of growth and possibility “for transformed relations between subjects and others.”⁴³

In the chapters that comprise the body of *Are the Lips a Grave?* Huffer pursues answers to her question of “what’s the difference?,” pursuing, and performing, an ethics of narrative performance through socially embedded reading, and outlining its disidentificatory and heterotopian effects. For instance, one chapter uncovers the racial and sexual violence lying beneath a story of queer freedom, interrogating the way storytelling functions in the law through examining the 2003 US Supreme Court case *Lawrence v. Texas* that led to the decriminalization of sodomy.⁴⁴ A whole set of chapters explores various lesbian feminist literary and cinematic rewritings of stories of sexual violence and pleasure in order to reconstruct a queer lesbian archive that challenges “the linear temporality of a story about queerness we have come to receive as a given.”⁴⁵

The afterword reframes the “familiar contours” of the notion of “work-life balance,” as a question about biopower in order to “challenge the status of the self as an ethical ideal,” and in doing so “help us practice, in the here and now, new modes of living and political belonging.”⁴⁶ In the spirit of the intertextual, socially-embedded, ethical retraversal Huffer both performs and calls for, I want to conclude this chapter, and this project, by offering a brief (re-?) retraversal of

⁴² DeHart, *Trial of the Witnesses*, 95. See chapter one of this dissertation, especially pps. 63-71.

⁴³ Huffer, *Are the Lips a Grave?*, 13.

⁴⁴ See Huffer, *Are the Lips a Grave?*, chapter 4 “Queer Victory, Feminist Defeat? Sodomy and Rape in *Lawrence v. Texas*,” 91-117.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 25. See chapters 5-8, 118-177.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 177, 179, 184. See “Afterword: Queer Lives in the Balance,” 177-184.

my own, returning to Serene Jones' creative re-framing of the doctrines of justification and sanctification, as a way of imagining formation heterotopically, as and through practices of disidentifications, as a shift from the development of the self as and to an ethical ideal to a difference-embracing boundedness that “begins with the subject-to-be-undone.”⁴⁷

III. Desubjectivation as Sanctification? (Re-framing Jones' Re-framing)

To recall: in chapter four of this project I turned to Serene Jones' account of eschatological essentialism, arguing that an examination of her frame through the lens of queer temporality and futurity reveals that she operates with an account of the female *self* that ultimately forecloses difference. In many ways, Jones' account is itself a kind of socially embedded reading, a retraversal of the essentialist-constructivist debate through a theological frame, as well as a kind of transvaluation of the doctrines of justification and sanctification. In reframing the essential as an eschatological becoming, Jones opens up spaces for difference and re-imagined, not-yet-known relationalities. Jones demands and engenders attention to women, listening to the voice of the female as other, through re-reading the courtroom scene of Luther's account of justification through “imagining a woman in the defendant's chair.”⁴⁸

Yet, as chapter four argues, Jones' account is occluded by what Huffer would describe as an “investment in a subject-making form of power-knowledge that runs the risk of perpetuating precisely the problems [it] had hoped to alleviate.”⁴⁹ Jones' insistence on a singular, universal

⁴⁷ Huffer, “Lipwork,” 99.

⁴⁸ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 61.

⁴⁹ Huffer, *Are the Lips a Grave?*, 5.

notion of “woman” as a regulative ideal enacts “the violence of subjectivity as an ethical ideal.”⁵⁰

Jones, to recall, argues that:

if a movement lifts up an alternative, unifying image of “women” that is believable and compelling—even if this image is admittedly only a universal *ideal*—then it is likely to make a good start. This normative imagining, in its universal or essential form, provides a regulative ideal. Such ideals involve a “utopic essentialism”—they are utopian visions that, by breaking open the present, imagine humanity anew.⁵¹

In contrast to Jones’ affirmation of a singular regulative ideal, Huffer’s heterotopic turn “refuses the consolations of utopianism,” eschewing the ways in which such ideals, precisely in their regulative gestures, subsume difference into sameness.⁵²

Huffer aptly asks, in “fail[ing] to challenge the status of the self as an ethical ideal, what happens to the abjected residue of that utopian ideal: the queer, the oblique, the incoherent, and indeed, the erotic?”⁵³ No matter how liberative Jones’ vision is, as long as the regulative ideal remains singular and universal, it will necessarily foreclose on difference. Might it be possible, à la Huffer’s call for a narrative performativity, to take seriously the ways in which difference shapes experience without stabilizing that experience by subjecting it to a regulative ideal? Recall that Jones’ eschatological essentialism relies on a reversal of the Christian narrative of justification and sanctification thereby stabilizing womanhood, tethering it to a singular regulative ideal. What if, rather than *reversing* that narrative, one imagined *inverting it*?

What if we re-frame justification as a positive, “putting on” of “alien righteousness,” and sanctification as a process of *un*-doing, in and through encounters with the difference between human and divine? Jones highlights how, for Luther, we are “crucified by the Law,” but

⁵⁰ Ibid., 43.

⁵¹ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 46 emphasis hers.

⁵² Huffer, *Are the Lips a Grave?*, 32. In chapter four, I also compare and contrast Jones’ turn to utopia with Muñoz’s. See especially pps. 215-220.

⁵³ Ibid., 179.

justification is the imputation of the righteousness of Christ in response *to* that—it is a transferral of God’s mercy onto our guilt.⁵⁴ It is a putting on of the righteousness that we do not ourselves possess, which opens up new ways—or what Ashon Crawley calls “otherwise” ways—of being in the world.

Yet, continuing to follow this narrative, while we have been imputed with an alien righteousness, it is still external to us—we do not yet fully inhabit it. We are “simultaneously justified and sinner.”⁵⁵ Could then sanctification, this “lifelong process in which the justified sinner is empowered by the Holy Spirit for service to neighbor and faithful obedience to God,” be precisely a process of desubjectivation and/as resubjectivation; a “wrenching of the subject from itself,” that frees the self, both for the sake of and (paradoxically) by binding us to, others.⁵⁶ Sanctification as de/(re)subjectivation, I want to suggest, honors the significance of formation in a way that takes difference seriously, avoiding its subsumption in a prescriptive telos known in advance, and instead allowing alterity to challenge and (un-)shape one’s own subjectivity. This alterity comes from encounters with others – first, from God and Christ, but also from those we encounter in the world – but also from within; the “infinity of forms [we] possess...”⁵⁷ This reframing of sanctification takes seriously the way different facets of our identities relate, and in recognizing and attending to the ways that difference emerges and co-exists, often “uncomfortably, even agonistically...new (unknowable) possibilities emerge.”⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 56.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*; Huffer, “Lipwork,” 96. Huffer here is directly quoting Michel Foucault, “Interview with Michel Foucault,” in *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, ed. James D. Faubion, vol. 3. Power (New York: New Press, 2000), 241.

⁵⁷ Huffer, *Are the Lips a Grave?*, 128.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 158.

Narrated through the doctrines of justification and sanctification, the drama of faith identity becomes its own kind of catachrestic heterotopia, albeit one admittedly less provocative or sexy than Irigaray's lips. Entering into this drama of this faith identity means taking up a mode of living that is "both expressed and unexpressed," or, to put it in theological terms, that inhabits the already and the not yet. The future is not an identifiable, knowable telos—a kind of ideal—that we strive towards, rather it is a heterotopia, something that both present and not, a way of being and belonging that, in being open to difference, is (un-) formed by it, all of through which new possibilities emerge.

AFTERWORD: HEARING GOMORRAH?

One must therefore plunge oneself into the life of a godless world, without attempting to gloss over its ungodliness with a veneer of religion or trying to transform it... To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way, to cultivate some particular form of asceticism... but to be a human being. It is not some religious act which makes a Christian what he is, but participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world.

During the last year, I have come to appreciate the “worldliness” of Christianity as never before ... One must abandon every attempt to make something of oneself, whether it be a saint, a converted sinner, a churchman...

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer

To frame her proposal of an ethics of narrative performance, Huffer begins by turning to the 20th century French writer Colette’s reading of Sodom and Gomorrah, a story that “since the Middle Ages, has buttressed the edifice of moral purity against the purportedly impure dangers of sexual otherness.”¹ Huffer hones in on one part of Colette’s reading that, despite repeated returns to it in conversation with colleagues and students, has “haunted [her] for over twenty-five years”—Colette’s claim that “There is no Gomorrah... Intact, enormous, eternal, Sodom looks down from its heights upon its puny counterfeit.”² Huffer charts how Colette’s interpretation not only highlights the problem of alterity within the story itself but also allegorizes the ways in which alterity is not only obliterated but subsumed within sameness—the deviance of sexual difference of Sodom and Gomorrah is destroyed, yes, but also, beyond that, Gomorrah is destroyed in another way, as it is subsumed into Sodom.

To riff off Colette’s allegory and Huffer’s analysis of it: the methodological-ethical frameworks of formation that this project has explored are laudable in that they attend to the

¹ Ibid., 50.

² Colette, *The Pure and the Impure*, trans. Herma Briffault (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1966), 131–32. As cited in Huffer, *Are the Lips a Grave?*, 50.

difference of Sodom—seeking a generous orthodoxy, a recognition of the messy entanglements of sexuality and desire, an attentiveness to the social and political realities facing women. These accounts all seek to open space for difference, not to obliterate it. But what they fail to attend to is, to stick with the allegory, Gomorrah, the difference within the difference. Lindbeck's intratextual method posits a singular and fixed set of meaning and practices derived from a presumptively isolatable, normative Christian community, foreclosing on difference within the believing community itself. Coakley's *théologie totale* proffers a theo-praxis of self-erasure that renders gender labile through contemplative prayer, but tethers that lability to particular forms of practices, and that operates with a theo-symbolic logic of sexual difference that in turn retains and entrenches a gender binary that forecloses difference outside of that frame. And finally, Jones' eschatological essentialism gestures to a more open vision of womanhood, but at the same time imprisons that vision, stultifying difference through an affirmation of a stable feminine subject.

This failure, I have argued, is a result of a straight-temporal logic undergirding their accounts, where difference is subsumed into or stabilized by religious identity, bounded by a unidirectional prescriptive linearity of what formation/the good is, and how one moves closer towards it. Queer theoretical reflections on temporality, and particularly on futurity, through the works of José Esteban Muñoz, Lee Edelman, and others, have illuminated how temporality, teleology, and normativity are marshalled together in these frameworks in ways that undermine these frameworks' aims, foreclosing difference not through outright exclusion but through subtle formative processes and practices that obscure or subsume difference into and by a particular sameness.

Drawing on Paul DeHart and Kathryn Tanner’s critical engagements with postliberalism, I propose that a formational framework in a queer time and space, one that takes difference seriously, is one that de-teleologizes formation. Recognizing the “mixed character” of communities as well as within the individuals that comprise those communities, and recognizing Christ, rather than a particular iteration of the church, as the norm, means a shift from finding meaning to making it, from Christian community being the site where norms are presumed and performed to where they are tried.³ This framework of formation in a queer time is one that approaches the future by shifting the question from “how do we secure or obtain it?,” to “who is the ‘we’ that make up and enact it?,” recognizing that the *question* of the “we” is also one that demands asking “what’s the difference?”

I introduced this project by recounting a *New York Times* story, where historian Molly Worthen outlines how college students are grappling with negotiating different aspects of their identities in relation to one another in culture. While Worthen hones in on this cultural tension by focusing in on evangelical students at non-religious institutions, another key arena where this theme has arisen in culture as of late is in the legal and political sphere, as evidenced recently with tensions between, for instance, more conservative religious groups and members of the LGBTQ community—i.e. HB2, the infamous “bathroom bill,” that requires individuals to use the gendered bathroom that corresponds with the biological sex they were assigned at birth.

In a recent issue of *The Atlantic*, staff writer Emma Green attended to this tension in an article on how “Even the Government’s Smartest Lawyers Can’t Figure Out Religious Liberty.” The subtitle blurb for the piece gets right to the point, Green pointing out immediately for her

³ See Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 92; DeHart, *Trial of the Witnesses*, 244–76.

readers that “conflicts between secular ideals and tenets of faith are ultimately problems of culture, not law.”⁴

What Green, as well as Worthen, fail to highlight in their journalistic reflections on these tensions is something a colleague and friend of mine, Bridget O’Brien, a doctoral candidate in Theology at the University of Notre Dame, quickly identified in a private correspondence about Green’s article. She wrote:

I really wish that there was any shred of evidence that the people pushing this argument ever paused to ask, ‘What are the pastoral and theological implications of making the legal argument that we cannot preserve our identity without excluding some of our own members?’ Just once I would like to see someone really wrestle with, “What are we telling LGBTQ Catholics* [and to a lesser extent, sexually-active unmarried straight female Catholics] when we argue that we are incapable of being Catholic if we let them in?,” rather than jumping to ‘Pluralism etc we serve nonCatholics etc the argument is between Catholics and nonCatholics etc.’ */Mormons/evangelical Protestants/whathaveyou/mutatis mutandis.⁵

I conclude with O’Brien’s insight here not only because it offers a nice bookend to the story that introduced this project, but because the questions it raises both are and are reflected in the questions this project has sought to explore. What are the stories we are telling about identity? About the relationship between identities? About difference and/in community? And *how* are we telling those stories?

The longing O’Brien expresses in this brief reflection is one that asks the question of “who’s the ‘we?’” in a way that also asks “what’s the difference?,” that seeks a kind of formation that attends to both. In asking these questions of we-ness and difference, the future is certainly rendered unstable, and a kind of un-doing of identity, of self, and of norms, is almost assured. But perhaps in considering these questions, we are sanctified in our un-doing, and can be more

⁴ Emma Green, “Even the Government’s Smartest Lawyers Can’t Figure Out Religious Liberty.,” *The Atlantic*, September 14, 2016.

⁵ Private correspondence, September 28, 2016. Shared with the permission of the author.

closely bound to one other not in spite of but because of and through our differences; that, as Halberstam puts it, we will wander, fall short [and] lose our way” but in that “losing we will find another way of making meaning in which... no one gets left behind.”⁶ Or, as Huffer puts it, “in the spaces of uncomfortable coexistence—where competing stories and contradictory identities resist each other...new (unknowable) possibilities emerge.”⁷ This dissertation wagers on, and hopes for, precisely this.

⁶ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 25.

⁷ Huffer, *Are the Lips a Grave?*, 158.

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