

“In The Name Of The Fear, The Shame & The Hegemonic Guilt:”

A SIRmon From Trans Christian Men To The Church

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Abstract

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With a resurgence of anti-LGBTQIA+ propaganda in Canada, this thesis addresses the source of a long history of hatred of trans people in conservative Christian communities, and the belief that trans and Christian identities are mutually exclusive. The current dominant narrative addressing anti-trans rhetoric focuses on the implications of normative masculinity and combating its evolution into "toxic masculinity" within the sex/gender system. Vatican documents are prime sources of reinforcement of "toxic masculinity" in both Christian and secular Western society. A language shift from toxicity to hegemony guides my exploration of hegemonic Catholic theology and its roots in hegemonic gender ideology. The goal of this research is to combat the weaponization of Christianity against LGBTQIA+ communities, particularly trans communities, by dismantling its weaponry of fear, shame, and guilt. A narrative analysis of two trans Christian men's memoirs—*My Name is Brett: Truths From a Trans Christian* (2015) by Brett Ray, and *Trans Boomer: My Journey From Female to Male* (2015) by Lee Jay—uses a mixed theoretical framework of queer theology, intersectionality, transfeminism, body theology, and Black theology to deconstruct personal experiences of integration and tension living in the liminal space of trans-Christian identity. Ray and Jay's memoirs show that, not only are trans men and Christianity not mutually exclusive, but the (Catholic) Church can learn and strengthen their collective relationship with God by coming to know and love God's trans children. There is no theological justification for anti-trans rhetoric.

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“And if I have prophetic powers,
and understand all mysteries
and all knowledge,
and if I have all faith,
so as to remove mountains,
but do not have love,
I am nothing”
(1 Cor. 13:2).

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Finally, I give thanks to my God who—despite certain people weaponizing my faith against me—has never left my side. I should not be here today with all the close calls thus far, but I am. The only explanation I have? I was found before I was lost, I was yours before I was not. Amen.

CHAPTER 1—INTRODUCTION

There has been a recent resurgence in anti-trans/queer hate in Canada, displayed via nation-wide hate rallies that are fueled by gross misinformation. This anti-trans movement is attempting to reverse the rights and freedoms my elder LGBTQIA+ community members have fought for since the late 1960s. These rallies are predominantly led by groups like *Action4Canada* and *Hands Off Our Kids* who organized the *One Million March For Children* which claim to be religious or represent religious communities, particularly Muslim, Sikh, and Christian families with young children. Canadian anti-LGBTQIA+ organizers from Neo-Nazi groups like *White Lives Matter* (white supremacist, anti-immigration movement), the *Canadian Nationalist Party* (white nationalist political organization), *Save Canada* (teen-led anti-LGBTQIA+ in children's spaces organization), and *Active Club Canada* ('whites-only' fitness/"activist" network)—each with *growing* chapters across the country (anti-hate.ca, 2023)—have succeeded at convincing parents, and adults without children, that LGBTQIA+-inclusive information does not belong in schools—or in a "safe, normal society" in general—but *religion does* because a distorted interpretation of "children's innocence" has been weaponized against any possibility for LGBTQIA+-faith integration/co-existence.

This attempt to place LGBTQIA+ people as outsiders to religious communities hits hard for me. I carry years of experience as a closeted, queer trans man in the Catholic Church, and converted to the United Church shortly before coming to accept my true self. Unfortunately, being one's true self as a trans person in Canada's social climate today can mean anything from discriminatory hiring practices—including Ontario Baptist pastor, Junia Joplin being fired for coming out during a Pride month sermon (Neustaeter, 2020)—to violent hate crimes.

Anti-trans hate rhetoric is becoming so pervasive and dangerous that the Integrated Terrorism Assessment Centre (ITAC) and Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) continue to monitor and conduct reviews of anti-trans organizations—including *Action4Canada*

—and are warning Canadians of the potential threats this could pose to national security. CSIS spokesperson, Eric Balsam provided the following statement to CBC:

‘CSIS assesses that exposure to groups and individuals espousing anti-gender extremist rhetoric could...encourage serious violence against the 2SLGBTQI+ community, or against those...viewed as supporters of pro-gender ideology policies and events...the ecosystem of violent rhetoric within the anti-gender movement, compounded with other extreme worldviews, can lead to serious violence.’ (Balsam qtd. in Tunney, 2024)

CSIS’ wording is problematic¹; however, the threat they are trying to warn Canadians of is real. The ‘compounding with other extreme worldviews’ Balsam is referring to includes the strong link between anti-trans ideology and white supremacy, hence why most organizations leading the resurgence of the anti-trans movement are neo-Nazi/white supremacist groups.

In addition to Balsam’s reference to white supremacy colliding with anti-trans hate, ITAC representatives refer to the ‘compounding extreme worldview’ of religious extremists, saying “those who embrace religiously motivated violent extremism in Canada continue ‘to view members of the 2SLGBTQ community as desirable targets.’” Action4Canada and the One Million March for Children continue to recruit support from both white supremacists and various religious communities. Despite the wave of contradictions played out at their "anti-gender ideology" protests, i.e., Islamo/Sikh/xenophobic, white supremacist neo-Nazis rallying on the same side as Muslim and Sikh racialized immigrants, these organizations continue to garner more recruits to spread disinformation. While hateful people do not always resort to physical violence, it is only a matter of time before some decide to take "inspiration" from the Pulse nightclub tragedy in 2016 to "get their message across." With my positionality as a trans man with white privilege and a psychological disability, I experience the compounding

¹ I would argue that CSIS should replace the term ‘anti-gender’ with ‘anti-trans,’ and ‘pro-gender ideology’ with ‘gender-affirming’ to more accurately describe this culture war. Use of inaccurate terminology, regardless of intention, misreports these very serious threats to LGBTQIA+ communities, and reinforces anti-LGBTQIA+ groups’ misuse of terminology to further their hateful propaganda/recruitment.

factor of ableism to the dangers faced by trans people and their supporters, both at the pro-trans counter-protests and in their daily lives.

In this context, the goal of this thesis is to combat the weaponization of Christian faith in conjunction with racial and ableist hate against LGBTQIA+ communities across Canada, particularly the trans community, by deconstructing the religious claims at the foundation of their campaigns through which they attempt to spread *fear* of the unknown via disinformation, *shame* those who do not align with their worldview, impose *guilt* onto those who challenge that fear and deny to feel any shame for living a life that is authentic to them. To begin this deconstruction, I will delve into hegemonic gender ideology and its roots in hegemonic Christian theology. Much of Christian theology is historically, and currently, steeped in male supremacy over female subservience; this has proven to be true of my experiences when presenting as female within Christian institutions. I analyze the memoirs of two trans men—Brett Ray’s *My Name is Brett: Truths from a Trans Christian* (2015) and Lee Jay’s *Trans Boomer: A Memoir of My Journey from Female to Male* (2015)—who grew up in different Christian sects and generations. Through my reading of these texts and examination of traditional Christian theology, I challenge the normalization of hegemonic gender ideology by inviting readers, especially anti-queer/trans or unsure Christians, to critically consider the following questions:

- 1.) Where, specifically, do you draw your beliefs from—holy texts, fellow church parishioners, family members, a priest, minister, deacon, Brother, nun, bishop, archbishop, the Pope/Vatican, and/or elsewhere?
- 2.) Are your beliefs guided by individuals in your personal Christian community, or by the overarching doctrine of *the Church*, and if it is the latter, what gives those working at the State level, e.g., the Vatican, more credibility to shape beliefs in your eyes than someone not ordained/appointed in *the Church*? Who taught/influenced those religious leaders’ beliefs?

- 3.) What are these sources' specific reasons for holding an anti-queer/trans ideological position?
- 4.) Have you ever questioned how others within your own congregation, or other congregations, may interpret the same sources differently?
- 5.) Have you actively listened to other Christians with a variety of lived experiences and interpretations of scripture?
- 6.) Have you ever approached your faith from other theological perspectives not taught by your sources? For example, were you aware of the existence of different theologies such as queer, body, and Black theologies?

Using Brett and Lee's narratives, I show that not only is queer/trans faith integration possible, but also that embracing trans identities can expand and strengthen one's personal relationship with God and within the collective Christian community if the community opens their hearts to this transformation. I believe that any church that welcomes and actively engages with the perspectives given in this research will be surprised by how many queer/trans Christians will walk through their doors, or already have.

In an article on trans people's reflections on identity and Christian faith, Benson et al. discuss an interview a Christian trans woman, Amy, who sums up a renewed interpretation of scripture that is trans-affirming, and describes how some Christians resist it: "Unfortunately, many people are stuck with that [trans-exclusionary] view of scripture...It limits their view of the world. It limits their view of God" (Benson et al., 2018). Like Amy, I no longer adhere to Catholic doctrine that preaches of faith and queer/trans identity as mutually exclusive based on *some* Catholic's inability to recognize queer/trans people as evidence of God's boundless creative capacity. It has been life-changing to learn of these trans/queer-inclusive interpretations of the Bible, such as all the meaningful, celebrated re-naming, particularly the story of *Simon* being renamed *Peter* because Jesus saw the good in him when no one else did until after Jesus'

crucifixion, when *Peter* continued Jesus' ministry for the rest of his life (John 1:42). I see this now as a trans-affirming Bible passage because his birth name, *Simon*, means "one who hears," which could refer to him truly hearing and listening to Jesus' ministry of love for all humankind. Jesus knew He could trust him with His message and gave him the new name of *Peter*, meaning "like rock/stone," to acknowledge this level of trust before even Peter was able to see this in himself. And when Jesus' died, Peter transformed his life to become closer to his most authentic self and helped those around him to do the same. This is not just a story to get people to believe in God; it is a story meant to celebrate life's transitions and to live a life of purposeful happiness instead of remaining limited to "the way things have always been."

The Bible verse that is most often weaponized to exclude and demean trans people's very existence is: "So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female, He created them" (Gen. 1:27). This is often quoted as a stand-alone verse, without the context that is given thereafter: "Then God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth'" (Gen. 1:28). God may have *begun* with male and female, but They also said to '[b]e fruitful and multiply; fill the earth,' and this direction is not elaborated on. So, it is possible God meant to multiply in types of people and ways of living, not solely procreation. Unfortunately, there are those who use this follow-up verse to say trans men and trans women are not legitimately men and women because they cannot reproduce in the "natural" way God intended for their birth sex and are therefore acting against God's Word.

This interpretation is the one that is most loudly heard from anti-trans protesters, including those from the One Million March for Children and endorsed by the Campaign Life Coalition (Canadian partner to Coalition Life, US). In an endorsement statement, CLC's national president, Jeff Gunnarson explained that the goal of the parental rights protests was to:

safeguard all children from the propaganda of LGBT activists, and their gender-bending ideologies, in the education system. To make sure no child is ever exposed to explicit

sexual content...nor the corrosive suggestion that they might be 'trapped in the wrong body' and should consider whether he or she is 'transgendered'...I'm so grateful to God that...National Pride Flag Walk-Out Day was...a huge success, but it seems like that day of action helped to set in motion something even bigger. (Gunnarson, 2023)

The Walk-Out Day Gunnarson is referring to is the CLC's first annual National Pride Flag Walk-Out (2023) where parents were encouraged by Hands Off Our Kids to keep their kids home from school on June 1—the day most Canadian schools raise the Pride flag—in protest of "LGBT indoctrination and exploitation" in the classroom. Labeling gender affirmation as a 'corrosive suggestion,' followed by thanking God for success in keeping thousands of kids home from school on a day intended to support LGBTQIA+ youth, comes from a mentality that is largely the result of non-gender-affirming Christian indoctrination—what the CLC is built on—that uses Bible verses like Genesis 1:27-8 to justify scaring trans youth back into the closet.

Genesis 1:27-8 is also the Bible verse that anti-trans Christian parents in Alberta, use to argue that the "parental rights" policy put in place by Alberta premier, Danielle Smith, are for their "child's safety." The new policy makes it compulsory for a teacher to notify and obtain consent from parents/guardians when their child under 16 wants to go by a different name or pronoun in the classroom, and to provide notification, with or without their consent, regarding 16 and 17-year-old children. Unsurprisingly, CLC president Jeff Gunnarson commended Premier Smith for this policy that "will go a long way in protecting children and safeguarding the unreplaceable parent-child relationship" (Gunnarson qtd. in Amundson, 2024). 'Safe-guarding' the 'unreplaceable parent-child relationship' echoes anti-trans "denaturalization" sentiments from the Catholic Congregation for Education under Vatican "guidance" (discussed on page 28).

Hands Off Our Kids are being deliberately mis-informed by people like Mr. Gunnarson, as well as anonymous, neo-Nazi anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric steeped in an ideology that is inherently anti-femininity. Parents, especially fathers of Abrahamic faith-based households, are

being encouraged to avoid exhibiting any expression of femininity, and to immediately shut down any perceived threat to their ability to do so. This fear is then extended to how they raise their children. When these fathers hear that LGBTQIA+-related information is being shared in their children's classroom, their instant reaction will be that of hostility to the alleged "cultural feminization" of all aspects of Canadian life, but particularly, the education system of their own children's school(s). The fear that they are losing control of their children if the relevant sect of the "Mommy State"—i.e., the school board—is permitted to teach their children supposedly "feminine values" associated with second wave feminism, including weakness and softness, which alt-right groups have them believing to be synonymous with being part of, or supporting, the LGBTQIA+ community. Any topic with ambiguity or nuance is seen as indecisive and confusing* (to the parents, not their children*) and therefore, effeminate. LGBTQIA+-inclusive curriculum, is deemed to be too nuanced and unpredictable, and therefore, does not belong in a traditional learning environment of "definitive, objective, black-and-white subjects" like math and science. And yet, many of these fathers of Abrahamic faith have no problem with their religion being taught in schools, a subject with an abundance of nuance and subjectivity.

I can no longer ignore the human ignorance and damaging social constructs imposed onto the Christian faith by my former Catholic parish, and alt-right groups now weaponizing my faith for anti-LGBTQIA+ hate rally recruitment that does hurt me, but more importantly, hurts younger, more vulnerable LGBTQIA+ youth still trapped under non-affirming roofs. These realizations have revealed stark differences between how I understand my personal relationship to God, the institutionalization of Christianity, and the expected but often false correlation between the two, something Christians affiliating with Action4Canada and Hands Off Our Kids would benefit from critically considering. Travis, a trans man, shares this experience of false correlation: "The more I realized that I don't worship my church and...the members of my church...I worship God, the better I consolidate those ideas about gender and religion" (Benson et al., 2018). This statement resonates with me on a piercing level; I worship God, not my

church. As a Christian trans man, I do not need any religion or person's approval on how I practice my faith, or my existence as both trans and Christian, nor does anyone else.

Coming to this realization took *years* of painful isolation from any supportive faith community. It took years of bouncing from no religion to Buddhism, back to no religion, then to Wicca, back to no religion, and in those periods of no faith whatsoever, contemplating and attempting suicide because my life had no direction, no support network, and was chalked full of traumas I had mistaken for my own sins from years of hateful Catholic indoctrination. It was not until I met my best friend, turned love of my life, six years ago that I finally saw my first glimpse of faith without fear, belief without shame, and love without the guilt my childhood taught me to feel whenever I "asked too much of someone," followed by giving too much of myself.

I have rekindled not only my faith in God, but myself. I have learned the disheartening truth through loving a partner who is a racialized, queer, gender fluid, neurodivergent, disabled immigrant, that none of these things *should* dictate a person's right to a dignified life, but still *do* because of compounding waves of hatred. This thesis is personal, the impacts of what I write will be personal, and lives are on the line with every line, every second you read this. If that makes you uncomfortable, good. It *should* be uncomfortable. I will never change the mind of every anti-trans person, but I *can* help change the social landscape to one where intersectional trans-affirmation is no longer a radical action, but a cultural norm.

Locating the Researcher

Before diving into my mission of intersectional, Christian trans-affirmation, let me fully introduce myself. Knowing where the researcher is positioned in all social categorizations is vital to providing full transparency and integrity as an academic who wants to bring research into the communities in which I am fighting for. I entered this program with the initial intent to focus on experiences of closeted lesbians growing up in the Catholic Church, and the sexual violence experienced by this demographic. However, since becoming more informed on issues of gender

and sexuality, I have come to the realization that I am not, and was not, a lesbian. I was assigned female at birth, but that assignment does not align with my gender identity; I am a queer trans man. Trans and queer are just two ways I articulate my identity. At the time of publishing, I am 29, white, able-bodied, psychologically disabled, and a multiple sexual assault survivor, born and raised in a middle class, Roman Catholic household in rural Nova Scotia, Canada.

CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

In chapter two, I delve into my literature review in which I discuss gender norms, hegemonic and normative masculinity, and trans-cisgender hierarchies. This is followed by breaking down the origins and mainstream popularization of *toxic masculinity* as a strategic, political buzzword conceptualized and incorrectly used synonymously with hegemonic masculinity by conservative psychology and policy makers, mainstream and trans-exclusionary radical feminists—often self-identified as gender critical feminists—and by trans feminists. Next, I illustrate the mainstreamed term *toxic theology* and, incorporating the proper distinction between hegemony and toxicity, define and discuss what hegemonic theology is and who uses it, through two anti-LGBTQIA+ publicly available Vatican documents. This is followed by a brief rundown of the Vatican/Catholic leaders' fabrication of the "crisis of masculinity" as opposed to a transformation of masculinity, and how that fear mongering materializes in Christian communities through strict adherence to traditional Catholic hegemonic masculinity in the family unit. Finally, I provide a succinct history of the *waves* of trans life writing.

In chapter three, I discuss feminist theories/theologies used in my analysis. First, I review the origins of queer theology from Patrick Cheng's *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (2011), sources of queer theology—scripture, tradition, reason, and experience—followed by strands of queer theology from the mid-1950s to present—apologetic, liberation, relational, and queer. Second, I provide a characterization of intersectional feminist theory as coined by Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1990), and its principles and *domains of power*

expanded upon by Dill & Zambrana (2009), and Collins & Bilge (2016), respectively. Third, I review transfeminist theory using Sara Ahmed's (2016) conceptualization of transfeminism as a response to the systemic ways marginalized peoples are attacked, and as diversity work, thinking of gender, itself, as an institution of policing, passing, and power. I review transfeminism from Cristan Williams' (2020) exploration of the *ontological woman*, wherein a sex-essentialist discourse is rigged to ensure authenticity is withheld from trans experiences. Fourth, I explore body theology with Nancy Eiesland's (1994) connection between Jesus' post-resurrection wounds and disabled Christians' relationship with the Divine, as well as Christian Fetherolf's revelations of Christian teachings from disability communities. Lastly, I engage with Black theology as illustrated by Black theologian, James Cone's connection between the inferiority of Black bodies and Jesus' crucifixion, complemented by Black Womanist theologian, Kelly Douglas's stance on Black slaves developing a compassionate, comprehensive Christianity when barred from Eurocentric, formal theological education.

Next, I discuss why I have chosen a narrative analysis of two memoirs written by Christian trans men—*My Name is Brett: Truths from a Trans Christian* (2015) by Brett Ray, and *Trans Boomer: A Memoir of My Journey from Female to Male* (2015) by Lee Jay. I examine how one can challenge and deconstruct gender and theological hegemony through the genre of trans life-writing, via an exploration of *authorship of self-identity* (Enke, 2012), *epistemological validity* (Namaste, 2000), *cultural intelligibility* (Butler, 1990), and constructively acknowledging and critiquing the evolution of the Western *hegemonic trans life narrative* (Vipond, 2019; Prosser, 1998). Lastly, I provide six questions I will be using in my narrative analysis of Brett Ray and Lee Jay's memoirs, corresponding with the six tenets of both hegemonic gender ideology and hegemonic theology (see Figure 1, p. 25).

In chapter four, I begin with Christian trans life writing as a counter-hegemonic trans narrative to the hegemonic trans narrative typically presented to the public—stories of secular trans experiences—setting up my proposition of Brett and Lee's memoirs as counter-hegemonic

trans narratives. I dive into Brett and Lee's perceptions of their respective Christian denominations growing up and developing understanding of their masculinity. I then apply my theories/theologies to a narrative analysis by systematically pulling passages from their life stories relevant to each tenet of hegemonic theology, followed by its corresponding tenet of hegemonic gender ideology—tenets 1-4 and 6 are applicable to Brett's story, and tenets 1-6 are applicable to Lee's (tenet application to Brett and Lee's stories starts on pg. 98).

In chapter five, I relate my analysis of Brett and Lee's memoirs to my own personal experiences within my journey from Roman Catholicism to United Christianity, and from "straight, cis female" presenting to an openly queer and trans man. I conclude my firsthand experiences with an original poem encompassing my most recent feelings navigating the public sphere as a queer trans man, *Happiness Over Safety* (Langille, 2024).

In conclusion, I summarize the insights drawn from my analysis by illustrating how Brett and Lee's experiences can be used to offer the Church/Christians guidance on developing a deeper connection to God and Their creation by opening their hearts and congregation to *all* of God's beloved children through queer theology, intersectional feminist theory, transfeminist theory, body theology and Black theology. I explain some limitations of my research surrounding racialization, culture, and Christian denominations within trans life writing as a white, Canadian, United, queer trans man. Finally, I divulge some current implications for my research in my own city and country, such as the recent nationwide anti-LGBTQIA+ rallies weaponizing "children's innocence" using hegemonic theology/gender ideology. I confront their arguments to show their inherent hypocrisy, how they work against the word of God, and to invite groups who are skeptical of trans-affirmation to reframe their notions of who God knows to be His beloved children, followed by a message to my trans community and trans Christians.

CHAPTER 2—LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review will explore the three pillars of my research: hegemonic/*toxic* masculinity, hegemonic/*toxic* theology, and the "crisis" vs transformation of masculinity debate. I will begin with a brief history of normative masculinity and hegemonic masculinity as theoretical concepts. Next, I will give a brief breakdown of *toxic* masculinity, how it is used interchangeably with hegemonic masculinity, and conservative psychological and policy makers,' mainstream and gender critical feminists,' and transfeminists' use of the term. I will then provide my critique of the term *toxic masculinity*, arguing for a shift in language to hegemonic gender ideologies. Next, I will give a summary of what hegemonic (*toxic*) theology is, followed by who uses it and how. Subsequently, I will briefly explore the 'crisis' of masculinity vs transformation of masculinities' debate between LGBTQIA+-affirming and non-affirming Christian leaders and followers, and the motivations driving the "crisis" position relating to past and current embodiments of *masculinities*. Finally, I will introduce the literary genre of life writing, its sub-genre of the trans memoir, the concept of transnormativity within this sub-genre, and Christian trans memoirs as examples of counter-trans/Christian narratives.

GENDER NORMS & HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

Normative definitions of masculinity are purposefully used to set a general standard by which all expressions and identifications of masculinity are to be evaluated against, with some forms deemed correct, permissible, and normal in society but others deemed as incorrect, prohibited, abnormal, or deviant. Normative masculinity is taken as a universal truth that does not necessitate further questioning; as such, normative masculinity does not allow for nuance or complexities of gender. Dictionaries offer the simplest, normative definition of all concepts, with masculinity typically defined as, "qualities or attributes regarded as characteristic of men," "the quality or nature of the male sex: the quality, state, or degree of being masculine or manly," or

“characteristics that are traditionally thought to be typical of or suitable for men”

(Dictionary.com; Merriam-Webster.com; Cambridgedictionary.com). Across most dictionary sources, masculinity is vaguely defined as assumed characteristics associated with men. But how do we know what characteristics, qualities or attributes are associated with men? And how do these characteristics differ by culture, location, time, and religion?

Gender theorists, Tristan Bridges and Michael Kimmel (2011) illustrate the ways masculinity deviates from the assumed norm: historically (changes over time), cross-culturally (culturally specific), intra-psychically (changes over the course of one’s life), and contextually (within a given society and period of time). We cannot speak of masculinity as one static or universal concept. Masculinity scholars tend to speak of *masculinities*, in the plural, to encompass all the above factors and more. Kimmel & Bridges continue to explain how men & masculinity studies takes its lead from feminist studies on socially constructed facets of identity, aiming to “highlight both the collective privileges from which men as a group benefit as well as the disadvantages that certain groups of men face” (Kimmel & Bridges, 2011). This is where masculinity studies and trans studies meet in their connections to hegemonic masculinity.

Hegemonic ("Toxic") Masculinity & Trans/Cisgender Hierarchies

Reese Simkins, a professor of trans studies, urges us to consider socially constructed identities, including gender, within discourses of power and oppression:

Identities must both be recognized for what they challenge and for what they reinscribe...[We must] continually interrogate how our own politics and identities impact on a multiplicity of individual subject positions that are not our own...We must begin by examining how, and why, the hegemonic sex/gender system ascribes *masculinity* to what it determines to be biological male bodies and *femininity* to what it determines to be biological female bodies. (Simpkins qtd. in Scott-Dixon, 2006)

The power of the sex/gender system lies in maintaining two distinct categories of *recognizably* female-bodied persons who will become feminine women and male-bodied persons who will become masculine men. This system is rooted in men/males/masculinities oppressing women/females/femininities and oppression of anyone who does not embody men/males/masculinities, including cis women, but also, gay, racialized, poor, and disabled men, trans (wo)men, and non-binary persons (Simpkins qtd. in Scott-Dixon, 2006). This dyadic relationship of the sex/gender system is at the epistemic core of hegemonic masculinity.

One of trans-inclusive feminists' biggest goals is to break down oppositional understandings of masculinity and femininity. To do this, we need to address the structure of the hierarchy of masculinities and ask where its power resides: "Power invests itself in bodies...discourses of power determine the possibilities of identity" (Simpkins qtd. in Scott-Dixon, 2006). How we think is structured by power relations, and this governs the margins in which power can be challenged. This not only creates the binaries of man/woman, male/female, and masculine/feminine, it pre-determines who fits into each category, oftentimes before they are even born. A linear discourse of sex/gender requires an essentialist classification system that codes those assigned-male-at-birth (AMAB) to become men and those assigned-female-at-birth (AFAB) to become women (Simpkins qtd. in Scott-Dixon, 2006).

Masculinity and "becoming a man" mean different things depending on the cultural, historical, and geographical context. What does not change is the ever-present expectations to live up to an "ideal/acceptable" form of masculinity. But who decides what is the ideal form of masculinity? In a Western context, this is dictated by those at the top of the masculinities hierarchy: upper-class, white, straight, cisgender, able-bodied, formally educated men—those with the most socio-political power. This masculine hierarchy relies on "the existence of multiple competing masculinities that interact within a hierarchical framework [that] exposes masculinity both as relational and as fragile—something which must be proven...In order to gain

legitimacy and higher standing in the masculine hierarchy, masculine beings compete against one another in an ongoing way” (Simpkins qtd. in Scott-Dixon, 2006).

There is also a phenomenon that trans woman Alaina Hardie calls, *trans hierarchies of legitimacy*. From her experiences inside trans communities within the San Francisco Bay Area, Hardie shares her thoughts on this self-imposed ranking system that positions some trans identities as more valid than others. At the top of this hierarchy is post-operative, "passing," conventionally "attractive" trans women, particularly male-to-females who are petite and thin with feminine features and carriage, i.e., figure, posture, walk, mannerisms (Hardie qtd. in Scott-Dixon, 2006). The main criteria to maintain the highest legitimacy in trans and cis communities is the ability to never disclose one's transness, to have all gender-affirming surgeries, and to practice a strictly heteronormative sexuality, while avoiding anything that could suggest queerness. These were the trans folks who were believed to have the “greatest natural right to call themselves women” (Hardie qtd. in Scott-Dixon, 2006). At the bottom are pre/non-operative, "non-passing," conventionally "unattractive" trans women, and lower than them, trans men who are seen as "lesbians in denial" or transitioning to "attain male privilege."

The fear of being outed, regardless of one's place within this hierarchy, is amplified even more in today's increasingly violent and transphobic social climate. The connection between disclosure and one's value and validity—in both trans and cisgender spaces—is a direct result of internalized trans and queer-phobia. It creates a social climate of *us vs them*, even within a group that shares a common marginalization, and this only widens the divide between trans and cisgender men in the rat-race to "normal" or mainstream masculinity: “Be quiet. [Don't] make a fuss. Pass unnoticed” (Hardie qtd. in Scott-Dixon, 2006). This kind of in-fighting relates back to Gayle Rubin's charmed circle (1984). Rubin's charmed circle diagram identifies:

A hierarchy of types of sex, whereby some sex is treated as good, normal, natural, blessed and other sex is treated as bad, abnormal, unnatural, damned...The types of sex...within

the charmed circle are: heterosexual, married, monogamous, procreative, non-commercial, in pairs, in a relationship, same generation, in private, no porn, bodies only, vanilla...types of sex in the outer limits are homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, commercial, alone, in groups, casual, cross-generational, in public, porn, with manufactured objects, sadomasochistic. (Rubin, 1984 in Jones, 2020)

The 'charmed circle' in 1984 illustrated a sole focus on the hierarchy of sexuality among cisgender people, and was inherently transphobic, racist, xenophobic and ableist. The 'charmed circle' segregated trans people out of the hierarchy altogether because trans people were—and still are—considered less likely to transfer across societal margins, i.e., "pass" for cisgender, to even have their sexualities be socially permitted within sight of 'the charmed circle.'

Additionally, Rubin never mentioned how race, nationality, and (dis)ability factor into the 'charmed circle.' It was not until Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term and popularized the concept of 'intersectionality' (1990) that the academy saw an uptake of critiques and expansion upon the 'charmed circle' to intersectionally analyze hierarchies of sexuality within and between different communities. In 2024, not only are trans people and their rights under increasing attack from those occupying the center of the intersectional 'charmed circle'—white, cisgender, able-bodied, natal citizen, Christian, married, monogamous, procreative, non-commercial, in pairs, in a relationship, same generation, in private, no pornography, bodies only and "vanilla"—but also from those *within* the LGBTQIA+ community who are cisgender or cis-passing. The intra-group fighting is only getting worse for trans people, particularly those considered "non-cis passing," with the increase in anti-trans hate and resulting decrease in trans persons' safety, as well as ally's safety if they publicly support trans people. These internal tensions also include cis-het-passing trans people being queer phobic toward both cis and trans non-heterosexual people to maintain their "stealth" position in the charmed circle.

As Audre Lorde said: “The master’s tools can never dismantle the master’s house.” We need to create and utilize new tools of social change that allow us to not only dismantle the master’s house but dismantle the *master/slave binary* mindset itself. If hegemonic masculinity is the *master* of the sex/gender system, then internalized transphobia is the *Stockholm’s syndrome* of hegemonic masculinity. It is this relationship that hosts a breeding ground for gendered *toxicity* to pervade from the lowest to the highest positions of the masculinity/legitimacy hierarchy. This legitimacy hierarchy is perpetuated by internalization of a phenomenon Kyle Scanlon calls *biocentrism*: “the assumption that people who match [their assigned-sex-at-birth] ...are more 'real' and/or more 'normal' than those whose assigned-sex-at-birth is incongruent with their gender identity” (Scanlon qtd. in Scott-Dixon, 2006). Biocentrism can be internalized by both trans and cis people but, unfortunately, many trans folks see this as the only path to climbing the podium of power in the sex/gender system that cis people benefit from. This use of the term *biocentrism* is new, but its implications were omnipresent in Western society long before the term came into use by transfeminists. This gatekeeping of embodiment of (wo)manhood, in any regard, leads us to a discussion of what has been popularly labeled—inaccurately, I will argue—toxic masculinity, through conservative psychological and policy, and mainstream feminist and transfeminist lenses.

"Toxic" Masculinity Through a Conservative Psychological & Policy Lens

The term *toxic masculinity* as an analytical concept originated in the 20th century mythopoetic men’s movement of the 1980s, coined by Dr. Shepherd Bliss. Dr. Bliss, an army veteran, psychology professor, and author of *A Quiet Strength: Meditations on the Masculine Soul*, first used the term *toxic masculinity* to attribute meaning to his late father’s “militarized, authoritarian masculinity” (Harrington, 2021). Bliss uses *toxic masculinity* as a medical term because, as he said in a 1990 interview with Daniel Gross, “like every sickness, toxic masculinity has an antidote” (Gross, 1990). Moving into the 1990s and early 2000s, toxic masculinity

expanded from the men's movement of the 1980s to self-help, academic, and policy literature. Family therapists like Dr. Frank Pittman argued that “men who lack adequate fathering pursue unrealistic cultural images of masculinity and feel a constant need to prove their manhood,” and Dr. Steve Biddulph argued “boys need a strong bond with a father figure/male mentor to avoid becoming toxically masculine men” (Pittman, 1994; Biddulph, 1997).

The dominant discourse was clear and unchallenged: boys need the right kind of masculinity and only fathers can and should instill this masculinity in their sons. Consensus among psychologists posited toxic masculinity as “culturally normative but curable through engaging men with fatherhood...[for] masculine emotional development” (Harrington, 2021). In “Renewing the Sacred Vocation of Fathering,” Don Eberly, founder of the U.S. National Fatherhood Initiative, attributed the cause for the Columbine shooting—and most mass shootings—to single mothers and physically or emotionally absent fathers: “Young men badly need to see mature masculinity modeled out. Well-seasoned masculinity fundamentally transforms the aggression of young males by capturing their masculine energy and directing it toward socially constructive pursuits” (Eberly, 1999).

By 2007, a psychosocial prescription for engaged fatherhood meshed perfectly with 21st century recommendations for heteronormative family life in a post-industrial, neoliberal society. Toxic masculinity was to blame for the gendered fallout of deindustrialization: *masculine* occupational sectors disappearing and *feminine* service sectors expanding. An Irish family policy article argued for engaged fatherhood to “[tame] their wildness...to the extent that [fathers] can adjust to the discipline of domestic routines and remain with their children and partners and in their families, as opposed to prison” (Ferguson & Hogan, 2004). Additionally, the U.S. 2006 Thriving Families program for low-income, particularly minority parents strongly promoted heterosexual marriage and used fatherhood as a “civilizing influence on men” (Randles, 2013). Programs like these not only promoted heterosexual marriage and fatherhood, but also forced a white supremacist family ideal onto racialized, low-income families, particularly Black and

Latino fathers. Toxic masculinity was, and often still is, equated with behaviors and attributes of racially, economically marginalized men (Bhana, 2005).

Toxic masculinity became a theoretical framework grounded in white supremacy used to justify racist, classist views that portrayed non-white, low-income men as aggressive criminals, making them intrinsically bad fathers. Though this racist and classist use of a toxic masculinity framework was packaged as concern for "men's well-being," it was a social power tool used by conservatives to keep racialized, low-income men in a subordinate position to the hegemonic masculine ideal of whiteness and financial security (Harrington, 2021). It did not and does not reject the gender hierarchy or binary. Rather, it strengthens traditional male gender roles through a "deficit perspective" of men (Dollahite et. al., 2002). Toxic masculinity, in this context, was intended to *reform* (read: control) subordinated men, maintaining the hegemonic vision of the cis-heteronormative (i.e., nuclear) family.

"Toxic" Masculinity Through a Mainstream & Gender Critical Feminist Lens

In contrast to a conservative policy lens, since around 2016, predominately white feminism uses *toxic masculinity* as a catch-all phrase for any behavior of men deemed misogynistic, homophobic, or violent. Notable examples of this include many feminists' critiques of Donald Trump's deplorable behavior in the 2016 presidential election (i.e., *Trumpism*) and other high-profile men accused of sexual assault in the #Metoo movement. Instead of using toxic masculinity to control racialized, low-income men, white feminism paved a new path for toxic masculinity to name and hold to account (mostly) white elite men for their abhorrent behavior, a "frame for responding to resurgent masculinist right-wing politics" (Harrington, 2021). Most feminist scholars fail to clearly define and operationalize toxic masculinity, providing examples of domination, aggression, and misogyny, but with no deeper analysis of the root causes of these behaviors. Terry Kuper's 2005 article on toxic masculinity is often cited as the "most prominent scholarly usage of the concept," (Sculos, 2017), establishing popular use of

toxic masculinity as a subset of hegemonic masculinity materializing in certain contexts, such as prisons or “bad neighborhoods” (Parent et al., 2019). The toxic/healthy masculinity binary discourse endures through feminist scholarship by virtue of repetitive citation, with a severe lack of feminist analysis beyond clichés—Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs) being a primary transgressor—excluding via subordination, complicity, and marginalization, all tools of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This is where mainstream feminism branches into the sub-genre of gender critical feminism.

Gender critical feminism “opposes the self-definition of trans people, arguing that anyone born with a vagina is in its own oppressed sex class, while anyone born with a penis is automatically an oppressor...gender is a system that exists solely to oppress women, which it does through the imposition of femininity on those AFAB” (Burns, 2019). Janice Raymond, professor emerita of women’s studies and medical ethics at the University of Massachusetts and author of *The Transsexual Empire: Making of the She-Male* (1979), asserts that “trans culture” is violence against women, and that “self-declared men” will always regret having a sex change and detransition. Raymond’s beliefs derive from a gender critical lens that says eradicating male privilege is feminism’s main priority and that trans men are simply women, typically queer, who are trying to escape from misogyny, gain male privilege, and transition out of gender oppression.

Germaine Greer, one of the loudest voices of second wave feminism, provides an example of gender critical feminists maintaining *us vs. them* oppositionality within the sex/gender system. In a BBC Newsnight segment, Greer gives the following response to Kirsty Wark asking what she thinks of Caitlyn Jenner winning *Glamour* Woman of the Year: “I think misogyny plays a really big part in all of this, that a man who goes to these lengths will be a better woman than someone who was just born a woman” (BBC Newsnight, 4:22-4:38). Rachel Parreñas’ contextualization of agency counters this use of *misogyny*: “A subject can never be completely removed from the process of its constitution...[but] subjects intervene to shape the process and condition of their constitution” (Parreñas, 2001). Trans people cannot remove

themselves from a misogynistic society, but they *can* utilize agency via HRT, surgeries, and/or changing their gender expression to affirm their gender to themselves and their affirming peers.

"Toxic" Masculinity Through a Transfeminist Lens

Transfeminists argue that creating new language simply expands the possibilities for AFAB people and frees them from the constraints imposed on them justified by essentialist understandings of womanhood that reduce women to anatomy and ability to conceive. Transfeminists move beyond the use of biology to justify gender-based oppression and hold women—cis and trans—to the same level of accountability as men for dismantling a patriarchal society. Mainstream and gender critical feminists often fail to recognize that anyone—regardless of gender—can exhibit and perpetuate *toxic* gender performances. Simpkins explains that:

since under hegemonic discourses of sex/gender, masculinity consolidates its privilege by oppressing femininity, one of the quickest ways for trans masculine individuals to validate their masculinity is to engage in the oppression of femininity and participate in the misogyny that the sex/gender system demands. (Simpkins qtd. in Scott-Dixon, 2006)

Hence, anyone—trans masculine folks and cis women, included—can consolidate whatever amount of privilege they can by tearing down anything or anyone perceived as "too feminine," and become an active participant in the same misogyny imposed on them. This grand patriarchal narrative is upheld by forcing gender-non-confirming individuals to compete with one another for status and some semblance of power at the expense of others, even if that means being crushed against the glass ceiling rather than breaking through it.

What is means to "be a man" expands far beyond essentialist theorizations of masculinity to include those not expected to perform masculinity under a normative rubric: those *not* assigned male at birth, i.e., trans men, transmasculine people, and various other gender identities embodied by those assigned-female-at-birth. In *Trans/Forming Feminisms*:

Trans/Feminist Voices Speak Out, Krista Scott-Dixon maintains that “heteronormative masculinity...depends on the repeated rejection of characteristics associated with femininity, such as subservience. Men whose other social locations place them in subservient roles, such as racial and/or economic marginalization, must then produce ways to reassert or reinvent masculine dominance” (Scott-Dixon, 2006). This internalized fear of feminization is prime breeding ground for *weaponization of masculinity*. Homolar & Löffmann provide an explication of hypermasculine posturing and appealing to male anxieties: “Populist rhetoric from—and to—the right of the political spectrum relies on highly gendered scripts to build and mobilize political support by making abstract notions of insecurity feelable as a crisis and betrayal of manhood” (Homolar & Löffmann, 2022). This indicates a strong link between masculinity, radicalization, and populist movements. Historically—and currently—we see this mobilization vis-à-vis white supremacy, involuntary celibacy (aka *incels*), and same-sex marriage opposition. These movements prey on men’s fear of losing power by bolstering a sense of entitlement that, when not fulfilled, creates a visceral anger at those perceived to *owe* them something as opposed to shame of themselves for embodying that level of entitlement.

Dr. El Jones—journalist, professor, and social justice activist—gives an example of potential consequences of mobilizing masculinity in university culture. Regarding the murder trial of king-pin William Sandeson who killed opposing kingpin, Taylor Samson—both former Dalhousie students—Jones illustrates an image of toxic masculinity in its most dangerous form:

criminal university cultures are dominated by a code of silence known as the no snitching code...These young men grow up in a culture where there is high debt and few jobs...They see the older men in the university community driving nice cars...showing off titles like Dr. and they want an easy path to that wealth and power. (Jones, 2017)

The circumstances surrounding this murder are indicative of wide-spread proliferation across Canadian campuses of glorifying in-fighting among men for financial and social gain, and

whatever silence and violence is required to get it. This silence and violence often translates over to the way men view and treat not only their male peers, but also women and anyone they view as effeminate. Mosher & Serkin establish three central elements of hypermasculinity that men exhibit in attempts to assert dominance in social interactions: “calloused sexual attitudes toward women...fetishization of violence as manly...[and] the understanding and promotion of danger as exciting, in which the attitude that survival in dangerous situations...is a manly display of masculine power over the dangerous environment” (Mosher & Serkin, 1984 qtd. in Homolar & Löffmann, 2022). Men who display hypermasculinity, including Sandeson, are examples of a performance of manhood that transfeminists have long understood damaging to all genders.

Language Shift

Upon reviewing use of the concepts of normative masculinity and violence, hegemonic and toxic masculinity, hybrid masculinity theory, and hegemonic bargaining, it becomes clearer that the term *toxic masculinity* fails to encompass the more nuanced forms of gendered power dynamics within a patriarchal society. It fails for five reasons; it:

- 1.) Assumes toxicity is based in masculinity and men are the central perpetrators.
- 2.) Fails to define masculinity outside the normative definition of masculinity those using the term are fighting against.
- 3.) Relies on labeling *bad* behaviors/attitudes as masculine—aggression, emotional unavailability—when any gender identity can and does exhibit such attributes.
- 4.) Blames said behaviors on cis men, the onus on cis women to call it out and excuses women/femme-identified people for their part in exhibiting the same toxicity, and;
- 5.) Many who call such behaviors toxic, benefit from hegemonic social power relations and label others’ behaviors as toxic to deflect from their own problematic actions, placing themselves as more progressive to maintain peers’ approval.

Thus, I will only refer to "toxic" attributes related to masculinity as *hegemonic gender ideology*.

Hegemony is defined as one group or culture holding dominance (read: power) over another (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony is that "hegemonic control is not maintained merely by force or the threat of force, but by consent as well. That is, a successful hegemony not only expresses the interest of a dominant class (see Ideology), but also is able to get a subordinate class to see these interests as "natural" or a matter of "common sense" (Childers & Hentzi, 1995). Hegemony is *not* synonymous with toxicity. Toxic masculinity is a surface-level label for attributes harmful to the person exhibiting them and/or other people, while hegemonic masculinity refers to social power relations behind *all* attributes expected of those perceived as boys/men across all social institutions. Hegemonic masculinity is at the *root* of harmful attributes, but *also* those viewed as positive within the culturally expected dominant narrative of masculinity. Successful hegemonic masculinity satisfies the interests of those currently embodying the dominant masculine narrative *and* makes those who are subordinated by it consent because they, too, see the dominant masculinity as natural. Counter-hegemonic masculinities exist in resistance to hegemonic masculine narratives. However, the goal of counter-hegemonic masculinity should not be developing into the new hegemonic masculinity, as this sustains the masculine hierarchy. The only change is who is at the top and the bottom. Swapping places in the masculine hierarchy is not progression; the masculine hierarchy within hegemonic gender ideology needs to be dismantled altogether.

My use of hegemonic gender ideology in critiquing hegemonic theology derives from hegemonic masculinity as explicated by Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005 and Scott-Dixon, 2006, compared to recurring themes observed and categorized from my review of similar, if not verbatim attributes inaccurately labeled as toxic masculinity by: Greer, 2015; Bhana, 2005; Biddulph, 1997; Dollahite et. al., 2002; Eberly, 1999; Ferguson & Hogan, 2004; Gross, 1990; Harrington, 2022; Homolar & Löffmann, 2022; Jones, 2017; Parent et. al., 2019; Pittman, 1994; Randles, 2013; Raymond, 1979 qtd. in Murphy, 2020; Scott-Dixon, 2006; Sculos, 2017.

Fig. 1: Summarizing principles & tenets from lit. review of hegemonic theology/gender ideology

LINKS BETWEEN:	HEGEMONIC THEOLOGY	HEGEMONIC GENDER IDEOLOGY
PRINCIPLE 1: <u>GUILT</u>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Guilt</u> ↓ Pray for forgiveness ↓ <u>No accountability</u> from Church</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Guilt</u> ↓ Project blame ↓ <u>No accountability</u> from individual</p>
PRINCIPLE 2: <u>SHAME</u>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Shame</u> ↓ Confess sins ↓ Religious <u>Victimization</u></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Shame</u> ↓ Entitlement ↓ Self-<u>Victimization</u></p>
PRINCIPLE 3: <u>FEAR</u>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Fear</u> ↓ Punishment in Hell ↓ <u>Violence</u> inflicted on individual</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Fear</u> ↓ Emasculation ↓ Inflict <u>violence</u> on others</p>
TENET 1	Followers held to rigid, unyielding system of beliefs	Unwavering desire for power & control, esp. via weaponization of masculinity to instill fear
TENET 2	Producing cognitive dissonance, contradicting & conflicting dogmas	Subordinating, degrading & devaluing anything / anyone who challenges one's understanding of & ability to perform conditioned cis-hetero masculinity
TENET 3	All questioning discouraged / silenced	Constant need to prove one's manhood, particularly through callous sex attitudes toward women & feminine-identified persons, fetishization of violence as "manly" & promotion of danger as exciting, something to be conquered
TENET 4	Outside / "Outside Ideologies" viewed as suspicious & a threat	Avoidance of femininity / feminization & discouragement of emotional development / expression beyond anger, confidence & lust
TENET 5	Pluralism of belief discouraged & other religions or no religion, unacceptable	Adoption of "Us vs. Them" competition-threat narrative, particularly through distorted sense of entitlement to power, wealth & sexual satiation
TENET 6	Strict enforcement of solely literal interpretations of holy texts	Ontological, essentialist, binary understanding of manhood & womanhood

Hegemonic Theology

Though I will be referring to such theology as hegemonic, the definition of "toxic" theology given by the *Encyclopedia of World Problems & Human Potential* is still applicable:

belief systems that contain falsehoods...not referring to the underlying religion, but...its expression in a particular community of faith...containing a measure of violence—emotional, physical, or spiritual—and power abuse that compromises mental health and physical wellbeing. (EWPHP, 2020)

Examples of hegemonic theology listed in the EWPHP (2020) include: followers being held to a rigid, unyielding system of beliefs and beratement for independent thought, producing cognitive dissonance or confusion from internal contradictions and conflicting dogmas, questioning being discouraged and silenced, outsiders being seen as suspicious and a threat; pluralism of belief being discouraged and other religions deemed unacceptable, and rigid enforcement of solely literal interpretation of holy texts. Any religious belief supported by hegemonic theology is based in control and power through guilt, shame, and fear. My research will be focusing on one religious institution's hegemonic theology in particular: the Catholic Church.

Who Uses Hegemonic Theology and How?

Although it is my position, as an intersectional transfeminist, that nothing is inherently masculine or feminine, the expectations of gender, gender roles, expression, and identity are, however, still policed within hegemonic theologies that function under the opposite position. From theologians and my own lived experience, the Catholic Church expects Catholics to abide by a strictly binary, essentialist, ontological understanding of gender that is inherently sexist, racist, ableist, classist, and queer/transphobic. Anti-trans people take it upon themselves to interpret and use this essentialist rhetoric to shame and guilt anyone who does not fall neatly

into the traditional gender binary for going against "God's Will," requiring repentance and changing their ways to be accepted into the Kingdom of Heaven. Such hegemonic policing of gender is not only harmful to visibly marginalized Catholics and other Christians. This form of "theological guidance" is detrimental to *every* follower because of the limitations and control it has over their lives, whether they realize it or not.

Most Catholic theologies and institutions operate under a top-down approach to faith that holds fast to the notion that Scripture and official Church documents are inerrant and should be followed without question, purely because it is God's Word, and therefore, infallible. When we bring gender into this top-down approach to faith, those who hold fast to this approach will use passages from scripture to support the *heterosexual matrix*, that "designates the grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized" (Butler, 1999 qtd. in Varela & Dhawan, 2011). The same naturalization is applied to gender identity and expression, to enforce what Chambers & Carver (2008) refer to as *gender intelligibility*. Through scripture, conservative theological writing, and church leadership, the discourse of hegemonic gender ideology is woven into the very fabric of the Catholic institution and its constituents. Every value, belief, and moral judgment rests upon which gender, and in turn which gender role, has been assigned to you by the State, your family and parish. Anti-trans Catholics believe this gender has been assigned by God, and that gender can be assumed as obvious and fixed to whatever external anatomy they see.

Preaching and practicing of hegemonic Christian theology is not limited to church leaders or theologians. It can also be observed throughout alt-right Christian and/or educational institutions, organizations, and Christian advocates. However, for the purposes of my work, I will be homing in on two official Vatican documents that hold substantial power over Catholic believers—one that addresses homosexuality in 1986, the other addressing transgender persons, particularly youth, in 2019—both of which inform non-church leaders' and theologians' thinking, writing, and public engagements (Sprinkle, 2021; Pearcey, 2018):

(1) *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (1986), Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, aka. Pope Benedict XVI

(2) *Male & Female, He Created Them: Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education* (2019), Catholic Congregation for Education, Vatican Press

Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons

With the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the Catholic Church's lack of support for gay people dying in droves, the Vatican could no longer ignore the underlying parallel epidemic of homophobia. In 1986, the Vatican answered the public's call to give the Church's official stance on homosexuality. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, popularly known as former Pope Benedict XVI, wrote the *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*. He provides over a dozen arguments against the Church's acceptance of individuals acting on their *homosexual condition* and provides guidance to priests on providing the best pastoral care to *same-sex-attracted* individuals. This letter is over-saturated with hegemonic gender ideology in relation to masculinity discourses within hegemonic Catholic theology. But, for the purpose of context—and because this document is primarily addressing homosexuality, not trans people—I will briefly discuss three examples that directly impact queer *and* trans people and illustrate hegemonic Catholic theology operationalizing and policing masculinity.

Complementarity & The Life-Giving Union

Pope Benedict XVI begins by speaking on complementarity of cis-men and cis-women and their ability to procreate, but only in married unions. He refers to this "loving and life-giving union" as the sacrament of marriage and only sex in the context of this heterosexual marital union can be viewed as "morally good." In response to why a loving union between two people of the same sex is *not* a manifestation of God's love, he asserts that, "to choose someone of the same sex for one's sexual activity is to annul the rich symbolism and meaning, not to mention

the goals, of the Creator's sexual design" (s7). There are plenty of heterosexual Christian marriages that are lacking in the "rich symbolism and meaning" department. Countless heterosexual marriages are based completely on money, are abusive—emotionally, physically, sexually, spiritually, or financially—and/or only happened because of familial expectations.

Homosexual activity is not a *complementary union*—able to "naturally" transmit life—and so, it “thwarts the call to a life of that form of self-giving which the Gospel says is the essence of Christian living” (s7). Yet, there are many heterosexual, cisgender, Christian married couples who cannot conceive due to infertility issues, high health risks, or simply not wanting children. Reasons for not wanting kids include inadequate finances, being in a domestically abusive marriage, mental health issues with detrimental consequences for the mother/child, a demanding or high-risk job, or that having kids is just not right for them. With all these possibilities within heterosexual cisgender unions, why is a same-sex and/or trans couple in a healthy, stable relationship, who want to start a family via IVF, donor, surrogate, or adoption not also performing an act of giving and nurturing life? And why is the bar set so low for cis-heterosexual unions to be "complementary?" According to this document, all that is required is a Catholic church wedding and a marriage license between two fertile adults. There is no mention of how to be a good partner to one's spouse or a good parent to one's children. Though the definition of "good partner/parent" is subjective, without any benchmarks whatsoever, this document would still grant legitimate "complementarity" to a cis-heterosexual married couple who beats their children (and potentially one partner also beating their spouse), so long as they naturally conceived their kids and maintain custody. In short, the Catholic Church believes anything other than natural, heterosexual procreation is *playing God*.

Distorted Practices, Sacrifice & Deliverance From Evil

Pope Benedict XVI addresses homosexuality as "self-indulgent," "intrinsically disordered" and a "moral evil" that “prevents one's own fulfillment and happiness” (s7). In

response to gay hate crimes, he sounds empathetic at first, saying everyone deserves respect, and those who commit hate crimes deserve condemnation. But he finishes with victim blaming: “When homosexual activity is...condoned, or when civil legislation is introduced to protect behavior to which no one has any conceivable right, neither the Church nor society...should be surprised when...irrational and violent reactions increase (s10).

This is another example of the Catholic Church producing cognitive dissonance and conflicting dogmas. First, he says it should not be a legally protected right to not be attacked based on sexual orientation, but no one should be surprised when such attacks do occur because it is "understandable" that people are going to be distraught witnessing something "unnatural." This is the equivalent of telling a rape victim that, while a rapist's actions are deplorable, it would not have happened if they had just covered up. The former Pope makes it clear that hegemonic masculinity/Catholic culture is, indeed, rape culture: victim blaming, no accountability, and gaslighting. Hegemonic masculinity and, in turn, the Catholic Church, frames rape as "natural" because the entire mainstream discourse about rape is how to avoid becoming a victim to it, not how to stop oneself from committing rape. The Church's silent indifference to rape culture, despite centuries of perpetuating it, is normative violence.

One does not have to look hard to find cases of clergy members getting caught for sexually abusing children, only to force victims/families to sign NDAs while the offending clergy member is moved to another parish to abuse a new community of children or pass away before justice can be served. The Jesuits, a religious order of the Roman Catholic Church, released the names of 27 Canadian Catholic priests who were guilty of child sexual abuse dating back to 1950:

Of the men named, all but three are dead. The order says...the release of the names is part of the Jesuits' effort to promote transparency, accountability, justice, and healing for survivors of abuse. In most cases, the abuse came to light after the alleged abuser had

died...some cases never reaching criminal or civil litigation...Rev. Erik Oland says despite the exhaustive review, other names may be added to the list in the future. (CTV, 2023)

These are just 27 names the Jesuits were willing to release because most are dead and most cases against the Church on behalf of the accused never reached criminal sentencing or victim compensation. Despite their claim of promoting transparency, accountability, and healing in their "exhaustive review," none of this is achieved by releasing a remarkably incomplete list.

Christian Authenticity & Dissent

The *love the sinner, hate the sin* discourse is more damaging to queer folks than telling us upfront that we are not accepted. Classifying queerness as just as much a sin as adultery, rape, and murder is extremely degrading. The "sins" listed in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 ("...shall not inherit the Kingdom of God") and Exodus 20 (the 10 Commandments), homosexuality is the sole focus of this discourse. The Catholic Church still views divorce as a sin, but no one says, "love the divorcee, hate the divorce." The Catholic Church views murder as sin—and a criminal offence—but no one says, "love the murderer, hate the murder." When more time and energy is put into "reforming" homosexuals than murderers—or the ever increasing list of pedophilic priests—one must question whether the Catholic Church is in *any* position to police morality.

Whenever people 'dissent' from this harmful discourse, the former Pope warns bishops to watch out for any programs that stray from it to be more inclusive and compassionate, as he believes, there is nothing compassionate about "lying" to parishioners about "the Truth." He asserts no program that includes homosexual persons can be authentically pastoral unless it is to convert them away from this "moral ill" (s15). He asks bishops to use all resources at their disposal to develop proper pastoral care programs "includ[ing] the assistance of the psychological, sociological and medical sciences, in full accord with the teaching of the Church" (s17). Ultimately, the former Pope aligns with all support being withdrawn from pro-gay (and

trans) religious programming and is strictly against letting such programming take place in Catholic spaces, for he postulates, it is “contradictory to the purpose for which these institutions were founded...[to] keep as [the] uppermost concern the responsibility to defend and promote family life” (s17). If the "family life" in question is headed by a Christian, cisgender, and heterosexual mother and father, the Church overlooks any other shortcoming so long as the parent(s) go to confession for ignoring their children’s emotional needs, for example.

Male & Female, He Created Them: Toward a Path of Dialogue on Gender Theory in Education

In 2019, the Vatican finally responded to the call for the Catholic Church’s stance on trans/gender-non-conforming persons in and outside the Church. The Vatican Press released the Catholic Congregation for Education’s document, *Male and Female, He Created Them: Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory*. This document is meant to provide the Church’s guidance for youth educators in Christian and secular schools on dealing with "the rise of gender theory" in schools and media and give religious arguments against the acceptance of this theory, i.e., against accepting trans people and any non-cis-heteronormative relationship or union. This document, too, is oversaturated with hegemonic gender ideology in relation to masculinity discourse(s) within hegemonic Catholic theology. As this document pertains specifically to addressing trans people in the Church, I will give a more detailed account of passages that illustrate Catholic theological operationalizing and policing of masculinity.

Gender Theory & Denaturalization

The Catholic Congregation for Education shares their views on gender *theory* and its pitfalls in relation to Church teachings on gender and sex. The CCE refers to gender theory—as if there is only one—as a “gradual process of denaturalization” of the family, and “the view of both sexuality identity and the family become...founded on nothing more than a confused concept of freedom in the realm of feelings and wants, or momentary desires provoked by emotional

impulses and the will of the individual, as opposed to anything based on the truths of existence” (11). The CCE labels those they do not understand as "radicalized gender theory advocates" who incorrectly view gender as more important than male and female sex. They argue that gender theorists deny biological difference and are in denial of the “natural reciprocity that exists between men and women” thus, emptying the family of its “anthropological basis” (11-2).

Those who study and respect all genders are not: (a) denying the existence of biological differences, (b) in denial of the *natural reciprocity* between men and women, or (c) destroying the *anthropological basis of the family*. We acknowledge that there are, indeed, biological differences between humans, but these are not differences between genders; these are physiological differences between sexes. There is a particularly important distinction to be made between gender and sex, and we simply believe that one’s biology should not dictate gender identity, nor the social roles assigned to them, in society or in the private sphere of the family. The *reciprocity* between men and women in cis-heteronormative families is not natural due to their biology, but rather, to the rigid gender roles they have been socially conditioned into. What may be seen as "reciprocity" in the eyes of the Church and one spouse, may feel more like coercion to the other spouse who has less agency or right to selfhood in order to fulfill their "natural" role in the marriage, i.e., a cisgender, heterosexual woman who does not actually want kids but is forced into motherhood because she needs to fulfill this "womanly duty" outlined in her Catholic wedding vows and in consultation/"pastoral guidance" with her priest.

It is these rigid gender roles that the CCE’s concept of the anthropological basis of the family derives: one cis-het woman and one cis-het man joining in holy matrimony to then procreate to fulfill their Christian duty to ‘be fruitful and multiply,’ and to ‘fill the earth’ with more followers who will spread the Word of Jesus Christ. Yet, the "anthropological basis" of Christianity is community and *loving thy neighbor as thyself*, i.e., loving them like family. When He walked the earth, Jesus consistently brought people with stark differences together under one overarching community of faith and hope in something bigger than themselves. Jesus

himself did not come from what the Catholic Church deems a traditional family unit; his mother, Mary, received immaculate IVF from God, and Joseph, Jesus' stepfather, co-parented with God. As Jesus grew up, one could argue that all his disciples—not just the acknowledged twelve male apostles—became his extended chosen family. And when Jesus was crucified and buried, those disciples wept with Mary and Joseph, supporting them like family.

A modern example of a loving family outside the "traditional family unit" would be two trans men adopting a child, loving and raising them as their own. This may not be a "traditional" family by institutionalized Catholic standards, but I would argue that the love observed by two trans men choosing to go through the whole, painstakingly long adoption process to raise a child should be held in even higher regard than that of a cis-het couple bearing biological children by "accident" or through "reciprocity." Committing to the adoption process should indicate that the child is genuinely loved and wanted, not an "accident" or marital obligation. Additionally, those trans men may be saving a child who has been stuck in a cycle of never-ending abusive foster homes, which requires even more commitment to that child's healing and teaching them that abuse is *not* love—a lesson that the Catholic Church's does not have the most pristine record for proselytizing. So yes, gender theorists *are* denaturalizing relations between men and women: arbitrarily fabricated realities of gender, sex, and cis-het "reciprocity."

The Family & Children's Well-Being

The CCE cannot fathom a family unit that is not a cis-father, a cis-mother and two+ cis-children. However, there are a myriad of families who belong to the Catholic Church who do *not* see their union's purpose as solely a "baby mill," but as family units based in love, safety, and building a small community within a larger community of families. The social identities within these families do *not* make or break the anthropological basis of the family if these identities do not impede the parents/guardians' ability to provide their kids with a safe, healthy, and loving home where they can thrive. After all, the Bible clearly states we are all God's children, brothers

and sisters, most of whom we will never meet, but still must care for their well-being and value their contribution to the human species, overall. The CCE believes that children have the right to not only grow up in a home where the family is *recognized* as the primary instructive environment for their social development, but also, “to grow up in a family with a father and a mother capable of creating a suitable environment for the child’s development and emotional maturity and continuing to grow up and mature in a correct relationship represented by the masculinity and femininity of a father and a mother” (21). If they really believed this statement, the Church would treat divorce, infidelity, and pre-marital sex with the same, if not more, dutiful vigor. This is a classic example of Catholic ideological influence on non-Catholic and secular environments and its lasting impacts on what is considered gender normative, even in environments that claim to be opposed to deviating family dynamics for "secular reasons."

Catholicism, and its subsequent Christian denominations’ manipulative interpretation of scripture is a big reason, even in secular society, women who have been sexually assaulted, or even just a divorcee who had sex with her ex-husband while they were married, are seen as "defiled" or a "used goods." The specific Bible verse I am referring to is: “They shall not take a wife who is a harlot or a defiled woman, nor shall they take a woman divorced from her husband; for the priest is holy to his God” (Leviticus 21:7, NKJV). Victim blaming, policing of women’s sexuality, and rape culture in general has become so naturalized in society that no one calls out Christianity’s influence on such callous sexual attitudes from people of all genders who still hold steadfast to this ideological facet of hegemonic masculinity.

Anti-LGBTQIA+ propaganda from Catholic institutions and organizations have many folks still grossly misinformed through the hegemonic theological belief that children are happiest, healthiest, and safest with a cis-mother and a cis-father because same-sex, single-parent, or households headed by anyone other than two biological parents, are unstable or perverse. Results from numerous meta-analyses comparing ‘developmental outcomes’ and ‘quality of parent–child relationships’ among children raised by gay versus heterosexual, and

trans versus cisgender parents suggest that children raised by same-sex parents and/or trans parents report similar levels of self-esteem, social development, and life satisfaction as children raised by heterosexual [or trans] parents (Imrie et. al, 2021; Crowl et. al., 2008), and that a ‘nurturing family predicts better social competence than the family structure’ (Muñoz-Martínez, 2016; Foster, 2005). Children are not born innately bigoted towards different familial make-ups until other people teach them this bigotry. They are not "confused" by having same-sex parents. It is adults who have learned homophobic rhetoric that have a harder time understanding the concept of same-sex parent households [Sasnett, 2015; Fairtlough, 2008].

Additionally, the decline in the ‘culture of marriage’ in Canada and the US can be attributed to many things, but it does not *lead* to higher poverty rates or other *social ills*, i.e., addiction, mental illness, and crime rates. If anything, most people living in poverty *are* married and their poverty is usually due to economic crises and systemic barriers; in fact, economic crisis is one of the top reasons people—particularly millennials—are not having children, too, because they simply cannot afford to raise children [Choi & Ramaj, 2024; Lundberg et. al., 2016]. More millennials and Gen-Zs realize they do not want to, nor do they need, to get married, be monogamous, and/or have children to live happy, meaningful lives. This goes for people of all gender identities, sexual orientations and mono/poly dating practices (Hoy, 2024; Pain, 2020).

The Catholic Church projects all the blame for this shift onto others, particularly masses of youth leaving the Church, and they would be partially correct. Many, young and older, *are* leaving the Church to break free from restrictive teachings on marriage—specifically discouragement of/mandating repentance for divorce and requiring annulment of previous marriage(s) to remarry in the Church—though this is only one of many reasons. The Pew Research Center cites youth under 24 leaving the Catholic Church because they were unhappy with Church teachings/actions on issues like homosexuality, abortion, birth control, treatment/gender expectations of women, literal Bible interpretation, clergy abuses, and overall hypocrisy, rigidity, and intolerance from clergy and parishioners (Pew Research Center, 2011).

Schooling & The Social Order

The CCE's report concludes with hopes for the education system's role in supporting and, thereby, perpetuating hegemonic gender ideologies throughout youths' lives as they enter expectedly cis-heteronormative families of their own. The CCE believes the West is "faced with a culture that largely reduces human sexuality to the level of something commonplace, since it interprets and lives it in a reductive and impoverished way by linking it solely with the body and with selfish pleasure," and "the educational service of parents must aim firmly at a training in the area of sex that is truly and fully personal" (21). This conflicting dogma tells Christians to not interpret sexuality in "reductive" or "impoverished ways," *and* to view sexuality as purely for procreation and women satisfying their husbands' needs. As previously mentioned, this means the person with less power/say-so within the traditional Catholic marriage—typically a cis-woman—is effectively forced to have sex with her husband on his libido's schedule and is prohibited from using condoms or birth control to strive for successful conception of as many babies as the Lord has "planned" for her, regardless of whether or not she wants to do so.

I remember a woman in my hometown who already had five kids and was scared to have more with her health conditions, but her husband wanted to; so, she went to her priest for guidance on using contraception, to which he said would go against nature and God's Will, and she ended up having two more kids, with the final pregnancy's labor almost killing her. This interpretation of sexuality strips those with less power in the relationship of their agency and bodily autonomy, and can have profoundly serious, even lethal consequences. Sexual experiences for consensual pleasure should be commonplace, as everyone experiences and has a sexuality/romantic orientation, whether that be straight, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual with lesbian romantic attraction et cetera. However, the CCE does not want Christians to view being queer and/or trans as an authentic form/mode of human sexuality.

For the CCE, sexuality is not an identity or an experience to simply enjoy; it only serves one purpose and no matter the cost: procreation. Growing up, I was taught in the Catholic Church that babies are *always* a blessing and abortion is *always* infanticide, and in the case of an ectopic pregnancy, to "pray and let God's Will be done." As an AFAB, closeted teen who got pregnant at 16 through coercion, it was church "morals" like this that I was terrified, but thankful, to miscarry in the bathroom, alone at home, without telling anyone for years. This allowed me to avoid making the lose-lose decision between a.) accepting being forced into carrying to term, delivering, and putting her up for adoption, or b.) attempting to have a "secret" abortion only to receive hateful public scrutiny upon myself and family that I witnessed other teens as young as 13 experience with their abortions. It was not until years later, away from the Catholic Church, that I came to see my miscarriage as a harrowing blessing in disguise, despite what could have gone horribly wrong. The Catholic Church would say viewing miscarriage as a blessing is blasphemous and requires repentance. I believe the only blasphemy here is valuing a barely formed fetus conceived through coercive sex, barren of any love, as more worthy of life than the already living, breathing girl who just wanted a chance to live out the life God gave her. I am here today because I believe that miscarriage was an amendment to God's plan for me; God knew I had yet to step into who I really was and my life's purpose beyond procreation, so They granted me the grace of another chance, and I thank God every day for that.

The CCE say they are not homo/transphobic, as they *respect* all fundamental rights of the person, including freedom of thought, conscience, and religion (22). The contradiction here is glaring: people have freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, just not the freedom to think anything other than the views provided in this document. Parishioners are free to be themselves if they do not act on queerness or transness, put up boundaries around consent, or deny cis men of their God-given (read: arbitrary, coercive) right to power. They round out this *resource* with a call-to-action for grade-school teachers and administrations in public and private schools to build "a new alliance...that can offer a positive and prudent sexual education..."

an atmosphere of transparency where all parties constantly keep others informed of what each is doing, facilitating maximum involvement” (24). One cannot help but be reminded of the *new alliance* known as the "Holy" Crusades between 1095-1270 where the same *evangelization* efforts were promoted under *God's Will*. Today we understand these efforts to be “a series of military campaigns organized by popes and Christian western powers to take Jerusalem and the Holy Land back from Muslim control and then defend those gains,” or in other words, White supremacist colonization that forced hundreds of thousands of innocent people to either assimilate to an insolent weaponization of Christian faith or be one of the estimated one million murdered Muslims and Jews in the name of the Christian God (Cartwright, 2018).

Furthermore, the Catholic Church asks for a *positive* and *prudent* sex education in an atmosphere of *transparency*, when the Church: (a) pushes heterosexual abstinence-only sex education, (b) tries to cover up priests sexually abusing children by transferring those priests to new parishes, (c) pays people off to stay silent on SA allegations, (d) uses Church donations to line corrupt Church leaders' pockets and to pay their legal fees for such allegations, and (e) tries to lie their way out of the genocide of Indigenous children across Canada and the US by explaining that these schools were just trying to "educate and civilize the savages" and the deaths were all due to "uncontrollable illness" (Johnson, 2019).

Male and Female, He Created Them is a document riddled with examples of hegemonic theology: (1) followers are held to a rigid and unyielding system of beliefs, (2) cognitive dissonance produced through conflicting dogma, (3) all questioning is discouraged and silenced, (4) outside ideologies and theologies are viewed as a threat, (5) pluralism of belief is discouraged, and (6) solely literal interpretation of the Bible is rigidly enforced. All six tenets of hegemonic theology (Figure 1, p. 25) are, consequently, used by non-affirming Church leaders to push the "crisis of masculinity" stance in the crisis vs transformation of masculinity debate. One of the strongest tools for pushing this crisis rhetoric is incorporating hegemonic gender ideology

into Church teachings—with a particular focus on masculinity, as the Church typically values masculinity over femininity—the core of hegemonic gender ideology.

Traditional Catholic Hegemonic Masculinity

The following are examples of hegemonic Catholic expectations from two prominent Catholic readerships which exemplify the Vatican's teachings in the daily life of Catholic followers: *The Catholic Herald* based in London, England, since 1888, and *The Catholic Register* based in Toronto, Canada, since 1893.

In 'Defense of Masculinity,' written for *The Catholic Herald*, Joanna Bogle, a London-based author and historian, argues that men, especially men of Catholic faith, are "underappreciated" and "wrongfully chastised" for behavior which, she believes, is God-given (ex., being the breadwinner of the family/sacrificing more family time for work promotions, strictly disciplining the kids, expecting the wife to handle most of the emotional needs of the children, expecting the wife to maintain her femininity/figure/attractiveness for him etc.). Bogle refers to the Church as a mother who "loves her sons...wants them to show Christian leadership and Christian initiative...[and] wants their stories told: as missionaries and martyrs, heroes and scholars, and teachers and visionaries" (*Catholic Herald*, 2019). She continues saying the priesthood is one leadership role exclusive to men because Christ was born, died, and rose from the dead as a man. Bogle also draws reference to Joseph, foster-father to Jesus, husband to the Holy Virgin, and "provider of food for the table, protectors of the mother and child," as a prime example of how men should take initiative in their lives outside the priesthood.

Bogle's column sums up the "ideal" masculinity and manhood as a life of Christian leadership and initiative, martyrdom and heroism, mentorship and vision, and protecting and providing for women and children, with no room for sentimentalism or softness. She even goes as far as to insinuate that a man "displaying pink cheeks, soft robes, and holding a lily, does not look reliable." This is indicative of traditional Catholic teachings that presumes *masculine* men

must always be leaders who are strong, sacrificing, brave, intelligent, and resourceful, and anything other than these traits is effeminate, and therefore, weak, intellectually inferior, and unreliable. Transfeminists would question what exactly Bogle means by *Christian* leadership and initiative, martyrdom and heroism, mentorship and vision, and providing and protecting. On the other side of this social power relation, cis-women and children have the right to ask where they are being lead *to*, who or what are they being rescued *from*, what and whose doctrine/dogma are they being informed *by*, and why is it solely the job of *the man* to provide and protect the family. Unfortunately, Bogle—and many other women—have internalized this sexist, patronizing view of themselves in relation to men.

This is hegemonic gender ideology steeped in traditional Catholic hegemonic theology as mirrored in the *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual*, which can all be related back to the three primary principles of hegemonic gender ideology and hegemonic theology: guilt, shame, and fear. It is this guilt, shame, and fear that fuels the benevolent sexism men are conditioned to internalize. Men must lead because women need guidance. "Good men" must rescue women from the "bad men" because they are helpless without them. Men must teach women to know their place in the home "for their own good." Men must protect women from temptation to pursue something outside "their place" for their own safety. Men must control women because traditional Catholic hegemonic theology says this is *God's Will*. Power lives in hegemonic masculinity and manhood, and every power relation needs to maintain the facade of mutual benefits to keep that power.

In 'Fathers are Guardians of the Family & Church,' written for *The Catholic Register*, Sheila Nonato, former journalist for CBC Ottawa, Toronto Star, Jordan Times, and IRIN Middle East, interviews Lukasz Petrykowski, Catholic apologist, father, and former Toronto chapter president of the Catholic Civil Rights League. Petrykowski believes that Canada, along with other "progressive/leftist countries," is experiencing a "crisis of masculinity" due to another alleged underlying phenomenon within and outside the Church: a "crisis of fatherhood." He

explains how being a father now feels like “fighting a cultural battle against the gradual feminization of men in society...that fatherhood is at a crossroads that threatens families as we know them today,” and in modern society, “husbands and fathers are optional and qualities such as fortitude, stoicism, courage and fidelity are obsolete” (*Catholic Register*, 2011).

What is legibly masculine is gradually shifting as men are realizing that high emotional intelligence benefits perceived stress levels and increases overall health (Thomas et. al., 2018; Martins et. al., 2010) so yes, our culture is gradually becoming more "feminized." Traditional fatherhood is on the decline for many reasons, namely that more men (and women) are now rejecting gendered parenting norms and accepting other family structures that work better for them and their children (Preisner et. al., 2020) or are deciding to delay or forego parenthood due to socio-economic crisis (Nau et. al., 2015), so yes, fatherhood is at a "crossroads." And qualities of fortitude, stoicism, courage and fidelity appear to be declining but are just adapting as more men are admitting that they are struggling and accepting professional help (Gilgoff et. al., 2023) so, yes "masculine" qualities are starting to become culturally unintelligible to men who still feel too ashamed or emasculated to reach out for help. Petrykowski is correct on all aspects of his statements; he is misinformed on the nuances behind why these things are true, and that none of those nuances are necessarily negative.

Petrykowski argues this is happening because of the "incorrect gender ideology" that says gender is merely a social construction. He advocates for the "God-given biological reality" where men are made in the image and likeness of God, and should assume their God-given role as a Catholic father who “shepherds the people and the souls entrusted to him,” and not the “so-called metrosexual man who is concerned with fashion and appearance...incorporating a feminine nature to his masculinity...including wearing makeup, nail polish and other beauty adornments previously only seen on women” (*Catholic Register*, 2011). Once again, masculinity varies by culture and being a man is not an either/or matter of masculinity or femininity. Why is the optionality of cis-heteronormative fatherhood necessarily something to be concerned about?

What is something to be concerned about is the current economic crisis and its impacts on and beyond accessible parenthood. No one is encouraging husbands and fathers in cis-heteronormative households to leave or neglect their families, nor discouraging cis-het people in healthy relationships from starting a family. What they *are* saying is that is not the only acceptable family makeup or life path, and simply being a cisgender straight man in a cis-heteronormative family does not equate to being a "good Christian."

This is hegemonic gender ideology steeped in traditional Catholic hegemonic theology as mirrored in "Male and Female, He Created Them: Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory." Nonato's article and the Vatican document would like Christians to believe that bodily autonomy and non-cis-het desires are blasphemous, that children are confused from exposure to points of view outside the Church and cis-het family unit, and that a child's development, ability to grow up, and enter mature relationships is under threat by pluralism of belief and atheism. In one box, they place Christian faith and conservatism—in the other, queer identity and progressiveness. But *Christian* does not always equate to *conservative* beliefs, and queer does not always equate to *progressive* beliefs on gender and sexuality. A growing number of Christian communities are teaching and practicing gender and sexuality, particularly masculinity and queerness, in ways counter to those previously foretold.

Though understanding of masculinity varies by context, time, and individually, there are five principles that remain constant in traditional Catholic hegemonic masculine expectations:

- (1) Masculinity is to be embodied by men *only* and honored and obeyed by women.
- (2) A good Christian man is a cis-heteronormative family man.
- (3) Men must show Christian leadership in the home, Church, and community.
- (4) Men can only show vulnerability in private, away from the public.
- (5) Children are susceptible to a life of sin without a masculine father in the home.

LGBTQIA+-Affirming Catholic Theology

In contrast to Catholic hegemonic expectations of gender, there is one Catholic organization that *does* practice gender and sexuality affirmation that aims to help Christians of all denominations integrate their faith with acceptance of queer/trans identities. Founded in 1977, New Ways Ministry is an US-based Catholic organization that educates and advocates for equity, inclusion, and justice for LGBTQIA+ people worldwide by working to build dialogue between the Church and secular society. NWM has four core commitments:

- 1.) Promot[e] dialogue & reconciliation grounded in...unity & diversity of the Body of Christ
- 2.) Becoming anti-racist in our programming, publications, and internal operations
- 3.) Support research & resources that empower pastoral ministers and educators to advance an intersectional understanding of gender identity and sexuality
- 4.) Fostering holiness & wholeness within the Catholic LGBTQ+ community and allies through spiritual programs and resources.

(NWM, *Core Commitments*, 2022)

These commitments can be used to deconstruct hegemonic masculinity woven into the tapestry of traditional Catholic theology for a more inclusive theology motivated by radical love, not fear.

Unsurprisingly, most Catholic Church leaders have distanced themselves from NWM for its progressive views, even denying NWM as *authentically Catholic*. But despite a tight budget and profound public scrutiny, New Ways Ministry has since stood their ground in their LGBTQIA+ affirming position. One example of this holy defiance comes from NWM's executive director, Francis DeBernardo, in his response to the Vatican document summarized in my exploration of hegemonic theology, *Male & Female, He Created Them*. DeBernardo (2019) argues that this document is not an *educational tool*, but rather, a tool of discrimination to be

used against trans youth, and the LGBTQIA+ community overall, by perpetuating and encouraging bigotry and violence. DeBernardo encapsulates the Vatican's adherence to Catholic hegemonic theology and its implications in jeopardous hegemonic gender ideologies:

The only truth the document reveals is that the Vatican remains ill-equipped to discuss gender and sexuality in the modern world...Because they have not consulted science or people's experiences, the Vatican's theology on gender is deficient and flawed. It relies on categories of male and female that were shaped centuries ago in oppressive and repressive cultures. (DeBernardo, 2019)

Indeed, the Vatican has not updated their knowledge of gender and sexuality in a rapidly changing world. It is possible to believe in both God and science, but the Vatican has yet to show signs of this besides finally admitting global warming is real under Pope Francis' appointment.

Crisis vs Transformation of Masculinity in Catholicism

With a general understanding of the theorization and uses of both hegemonic gender ideology and hegemonic Catholic theology, a strong link is evident: acceptance and promotion of non-hegemonic masculinities continues to pose a threat to the Catholic Church, its clergy, and conservative members because trans men/masculinity confronts and challenges the Church's:

- Unwavering desire for power and control over female, juvenile, racialized, disabled, poor, and congregation members of other marginalized groups
- Fear of losing male-entitled respect in the Church, home, and society at large, and constant need to prove this authoritative manhood
- Avoidance of femininity and justification for subjecting women to subservient roles in the Church, in the home, and in society at large
- "Christian Savior Complex" and "Good Christian" image

- Essentialist understandings of gender as justification for pushing the narrative of the "natural" family, i.e., mother, father, sons, and daughters

Trans men (and trans women) challenge Catholic conservatives' ego, pride, and entitlement to their positions of power, in the Church and secular society. A social phenomenon emerges from this conflict, referred to as the crisis of masculinity vs. transformation of masculinities.

Auto-Biographical Life Writing: Trans Memoirs

Life writing outlines the events of one's life, written by or about someone deemed old enough to have the lived experiences to write or be written about, typically in the format of an (auto)biography or memoir. For this research, I will focus on the medium of memoir. Rachel Meltzer notes an important differentiation between memoirs and autobiographies: "A memoir is a nonfiction narrative in which the author shares their memories from a specific time or reflects upon a string of themed occurrences throughout their life. An autobiography is a factual and historical account of one's entire life from beginning to end" (Meltzer, 2022).

The word *memoir* comes from the French word *mémoire*, meaning *memory*. So, in the simplest sense, Patricia Thang asserts that memoirs are:

about the author remembering, reminiscing, and reflecting on experiences from their lives...While lived experiences can't be fact-checked, every single one is true to the person going through it. Though they don't necessarily give a full, multi-perspective picture, memoirs are special in that they allow readers to see how *others* see and understand the *same* world. (Thang, 2018)

In other words, the primary distinction between memoirs and autobiographies is *themed* subjective vs general objective truths. Thang suggests memoirs cannot be fact-checked, which is partially true. The facts in their story *can* be fact-checked—such as specific dates, persons

present, and even the weather—however, how the experiences impacted the author, while true to them, are still subjective. Memoir is a flexible genre with no singular structure but, typically, a memoir will follow a specific theme—including obstacles the author has or continues to overcome related to that theme—detailed through flashbacks and, often, dialogue to provide the backstory pertinent to understanding the author’s overall message (Meltzer, 2002).

One theme that has developed into an exponentially growing memoir sub-genre over the last couple of decades is the trans memoir. Trans memoir has typically revolved around the obstacles the author has had to overcome being trans, and how these experiences have developed their understanding of themselves and the world around them from a trans positionality. The first known trans memoir, in a Western context, was *Man Into Woman: An Authentic Record of a Change of Sex*, published in 1923, written by Lili Elbe, a trans woman from England, famously known as the first trans woman to undergo a sex reassignment surgery (now commonly referred to as gender-affirming surgeries). Unfortunately, what started out as a revolutionary sub-genre for sharing trans voices has left out and dismissed many of those voices for not adhering to what has become the Western hegemonic trans narrative.

The Western Hegemonic Trans Narrative

Bradford & Syed (2019), Vipond (2019), Darwin (2020), and Konnelly (2021) share similar positions on the Western hegemonic trans narrative dominating the trans memoir genre, building on a new concept coined by Austin Johnson in his (2013) master’s thesis: *transnormativity*. Johnson defines transnormativity as “the specific ideological accountability structure to which transgender people’s presentations and experiences of gender are held accountable.” In “Transnormativity: A New Concept and its Validation Through Documentary Film About Transgender Men” (2016), Johnson expands on this definition:

Transnormativity is a hegemonic ideology that structures transgender experience, identification, and narratives into a hierarchy of legitimacy..dependent upon a binary medical model and its accompanying standards, regardless of individual trans people's interest in or intention to undertake medical pathways to transition. (Johnson, 2016)

He argues that publishers and publicists prioritizing the transmedicalist model over de-pathologizing / fluidity models (Jacobsen et. al., 2022) further marginalizes gender non-conforming people who cannot or have no desire to transition medically. It is also vital to note that transnormativity is not the institutions themselves—cis/trans communities, educational, healthcare, and legal institutions—but rather, these institutions are conduits that can channel social power to either challenge or perpetuate a transnormative culture.

As a normative ideology that regulates social relations, transnormativity can be understood in relation to the sociological concepts that preceded and developed it: *heteronormativity* (Berlant and Warner, 1998; Ingraham, 1994; Warner, 1991), *homonormativity* (Duggan, 2003; Seidman, 2002), and the *trans medical model* (Jackson, 2006; Rich, 1980). Transnormativity is both an empowering and restricting ideology, privileging some trans identities as legitimate, and subordinating other trans identities as illegitimate. While cis and trans people are both held to sociocultural standards of masculinity and femininity relating to gender-specific language, mannerisms, dress, behavior, et cetera (Connell 2010), within trans communities, additional complexities of gender accountability are policed by social actors that extend beyond partners, friends, and family. In a transnormative culture, trans identities are granted authenticity through a variety of social actors that cis people have privilege of ignoring without threats to their cis-heteronormative identity, including healthcare practitioners, government ID distributing agencies, and police stations for background checks.

A transnormative culture cultivates hegemonic gender expectations entrenched in two primary discourses of trans identity: *born in the wrong body* and *I always knew* (Hines, 2009;

McBee, 2012; Mock, 2012). The two discourses leave little to no room for alternative discourses of gender non-confirming identities outside the man/woman, trans man/woman gender binaries and creates daily barriers for those who do not or choose not to *pass* as a man or woman. While *passing privilege* (i.e. the privilege to consistently be gendered as the gender one identifies with), is based on arbitrary social constructions of what a man or woman “should” look, sound, act, and think like, and should never dictate trans authenticity, it largely remains the crux of daily safety, ease in daily routines, and acceptance in a cis-heteronormative society. Johnson argues that placing the highest trans legitimacy within the medical model and its standardized criteria (i.e. DSM-5; WPATH) “creates a normative process of becoming transgender that requires trans people to produce a biography wherein they have exhibited signs or symptoms of gender non-conformity throughout life that in turn have caused them emotional distress” (Bolin, 1988; Cromwell, 1999; Denny, 2006; Spade, 2003 qtd. in Johnson 2016).

From Bradford & Syed’s (2019) application of Lyotard’s *master narrative* and gender non-conforming persons’ agency in strategically resisting/conceding with narrative constraints, to Darwin’s (2020) restructuring of gender diversity *within* a trans* umbrella with infinite possibilities, rather than pinpointing trans identity on a finite spectrum, to Konnelly’s (2021) connection between transmedicalism, resistance and strategic assimilation to transmedicalist expectations—there is insurmountable evidence that this normative process of becoming culturally legible as trans holds the most power in a transnormative culture. This is but one of an *infinite* number of lived trans narratives—most of which are still (dis)missed in cis *and* trans spaces—with consequences for non-legibility *or* hyper-visibility ranging from microaggressive comments to assault or even murder (Clark, 2019).

CHAPTER 3—METHODOLOGY & METHODS

THEORY

To meaningfully reflect on the chosen texts—as well as my lived experience—in relation to hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic Christian theology, I must first delineate a framework that fine tunes the lens in which I view this content. I will be applying a theoretical framework that mixes queer theology, intersectional feminist theory, transfeminist theory, body theology, and Black theology to deconstruct the personal lived experiences of being a Christian trans man in relation to the diverse experiences explored in similar research using these theories.

Queer Theology

The primary theoretical tool that I will use for my analysis of such texts is queer theology, which will be informed by the work of Patrick Cheng (2011), and some of the theorists that informed his work. In his book, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology*, Dr. Rev. Patrick S. Cheng, an Episcopal priest and queer man, explicates queer theology as the following: “If theology is defined as ‘talk about God’ (that is, theos [God] + logos [word]), then queer theology can be understood as queer talk about God...This...leads to the question of what exactly is meant by the term ‘queer’...[There are] at least three meanings of the word...as an umbrella term...transgressive action and...erasing boundaries” (Cheng, 2011). *Queer* as an umbrella term refers to those who identify with non-heteronormative sexualities and/or gender identities, or more simply put, anyone who is not straight/cisgender. *Queer* as transgressive action refers to intentional reclaiming of the word which used to only have negative connotations. Cheng describes transgressive action, i.e., to “queer” something, as “engag[ing] with a methodology that challenges and disrupts the status quo” (Cheng, 2011). *Queer* as erasing boundaries refers to the erasure and/or deconstruction of binary thinking around sexuality and gender. “Queer theology is a shorthand term for theology that is done by and for LGBT people” (Cheng, 2011).

Queer people can use queer theology as a spiritual, tangible tool to free themselves from the cis-heteronormative chains that keep them from knowing God's love. This is a theology that serves its people, rather than the power relations dividing them, and possesses the power to bring *all* Christians closer to God through coming to know more of Their creation.

Sources of Queer Theology

There are four key sources of—places queer theologians drawn from to develop, teach, and practice—queer theology: scripture (reading holy texts), tradition (what church authorities teach), reason (drawing on philosophy), and experience (human experience of the Divine).

Queer Scripture

Scripture has traditionally been used to shame queer sexuality, heavily relying on seven "clobber passages"—a term used by LGBTQIA+-affirming theologians, theorists, activists, and Christians to refer to the Bible passages that get used ad nauseum by those who are non-affirming to "clobber"/condemn all queer relations—Genesis 1-2, 19:1-38; Leviticus 18:22, 20:13; Romans 1:25-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 1 Timothy 1:9-10 and Jude 6-7 (NKJV, 1982). In Genesis 19—the story of Sodom and Gomorrah—two “angelic visitors” stay the night in the town of Sodom, but the “lawless men” of Sodom demand that Lot, the visitor’s host, kick them out to be “judged.” The visitors escape with Lot, and shortly after, God sets fire to the town of Sodom and its sister town, Gomorrah (Gen. 19:1-38). Under hegemonic theology, this passage is interpreted as God punishing queer men, on the assumption that the visitors were having sex in Lot’s home. However, God burned down the towns *after* Lot got the visitors to safety.

One common interpretation from queer theology is that God was condemning the "lawless men's" inhospitality toward strangers, turning them out to the fatal desert environment. This interpretation is not part of a new theological standpoint; in 1995, queer theologian, Nancy Wilson, developed a queer theology of sexuality in *Our Tribe*, that focuses on

the “gift of promiscuity” and “bodily hospitality” that many folks in the LGBTQIA+ community are shamed for embodying (Wilson, 1995). Giving someone the gift of consensual bodily pleasure outside of marriage is not shameful; it is something women have been doing for other women for centuries. The only reason this is seen as shameful outside of a queer theology of sexuality is because men are not required for every pleasurable experience in a woman’s life and that hurts entitled men’s egos. In 1997, Kathy Rudy, a lesbian ethicist, suggested that non-monogamous sex acts—including group and anonymous sex—can be seen as a “progressive ethic of hospitality” (Rudy, 1997). In the context of lesbian anonymous group sex, everyone involved is there because they want to be. It is an act of bodily autonomy with no ulterior motives, unrealistic expectations, or obligations.

In the context of my methodology, a “progressive ethic of hospitality” can be applied to stepping outside our own biases to give the gift of genuinely listening to another human being’s scriptural interpretations or religious experiences without always trying to play devil’s advocate on an issue that may not directly affect us but deeply affects them, just for the “reciprocal theological exercise” that actually causes them further minority stress/trauma. Providing a progressive ethic of hospitality is churches putting the substantial effort in to make historically unwelcoming Christian spaces a place of refuge and solace for God’s racialized, disabled, queer and trans children, as well as those still grieving for the ones who did not make it this far to experience such hospitality. The goal of any theological conversation should not be “winning the argument,” but rather, all parties involved learning something new about each other, themselves, and God. In 2006, 30 LGBTQIA+ theologians, ministers, and writers collaborated in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, a compilation of commentary on all Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Commentary came from a variety of theoretical frameworks, including queer theory and various other feminist, deconstructionist, post-colonial, utopian, sociological and historical-critical theories (Guest et. al., 2006). This was the first theological commentary of its kind, bringing together voices that have been deliberately silenced in the Church and theological

study since the Church's inception. It sparked new conversations, theories, and expansion on older theories that paved the way for more people to finally resonate with scripture.

Queer Tradition

Queer theology also draws on traditions from both Church history and church leaders' teachings over the last 2000 years. One of the most influential texts is Anglican priest Derrick Sherwin Bailey's (1955) study, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*. For the first time in the Church's history, Bailey challenged the traditionally anti-queer views of Church teachings up to that point. Though it was not widely accepted by other clergy or theologians in 1955, it became a catalyst for further challenges to traditional Church teachings including Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance & Homosexuality* (1980) and *Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe* (1994), Brooten's *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (1996), Brown's *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (1986) and Jordan's *Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (1997).

Reclaiming the Christian tradition allows queer theology not to *create* LGBTQIA+ stories in traditional Church teachings, but to bring to light the stories that were always there. Queer theology works under the premise that queer love/people were not always viewed in a negative, sinful light in the Church tradition. Traditions that continue to be challenged by queer theology include churches from various denominations still not blessing same-sex unions—even after Pope Francis declared priests can now bless such unions as of July 11, 2023 (CBC, 2023)—denying the importance of sex for pleasure, diminishing women's roles in the home and society, and requiring confession with a priest for natural human desires (Cheng, 2011).

Queer Reason

Queer theology also draws upon reason—humans' ability to observe the world and use philosophy to know God. This part of queer theology works on the premise that God can be

known by observing nature and all God's Creation. Typically, Catholic theologians have used "reason" to justify the Church's stance that non-procreative sex acts—same-sex intercourse included—are intrinsically evil and against the laws of nature. But progressive Roman Catholic theologian, Gareth Moore challenged this teaching by asking a series of reason-derived questions in his book, *A Question of Truth: Christianity & Homosexuality*: "Is it true that all same-sex acts and relationships are intrinsically evil? Is it true that all LGBT people are unhappy and poorly adjusted? Is it true that same-sex acts and relationships do not occur naturally in the created order?" (Moore, 2003). Moore, along with queer theologians agree that the answer to all these questions is *no*. Through observation of the world around us and basic philosophical questioning, love, or even just consensual pleasure, between two or more consenting adults is not evil, not all LGBTQIA+ people are unhappy or maladjusted, and there is an abundance of evidence illustrating *hundreds* of other species practicing same-sex relations including fish, reptiles, birds, and primates (Roughgarden, 2013). These are species that the Bible says God made before humans; if hundreds of these species are free of condemnation for their pleasures and unique reproductive capacities, then there is no theological justification for condemning humans for acting on the unquities of our genders and sexualities.

We can also use reason to observe the countless priests, pastors, ministers, and bishops who have come out as gay—some forced to leave their ordained position—while others' prohibited sexuality "comes out" sideways through espousing anti-homosexual rhetoric at the altar while sexually abusing powerless, young boys behind rectory doors, shielded from taking accountability by the Vatican. To Moore and other queer theologians, simply observing what is right in front of us is not dissent; the Roman Catholic Church simply lacks sound arguments against homosexuality or gender variance besides flimsy interpretation of a few Bible verses that have been re-translated over 450 times in the English language alone. Moore is correct: "The church teaches badly" (Moore, 2003). The Church is going to need stronger, less tautological evidence than, "that is how we have always interpreted it, so it must be so."

Queer theologians also draw upon reason using post-structuralist philosophy—in particular, queer theory—to construct their theology. As stated before, queer theory rejects all traditional, mutually exclusive, fixed categorizations of identity. This is not to say that queer theologians deny the existence of physiological differences between people, but that such physiological differences do not dictate any inherent gender identity, sexuality, interests, career prospects, or role in the family. Reason tells queer theologians that forcing correlation between physiological body parts with gender/social roles is not "natural law;" it is a matter of social convention that is constantly changing (Cheng, 2011). Queer theologians of color draw on post-colonial theory to observe the existence of hybridity and intersectionality among humans. With queer reason, it is impossible to ignore the socially constructed categories—with room for overlap—that have real, tangible impacts in our daily lives: race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, gender identity, ability, religion, body type, et cetera (Cheng, 2011).

Queer Experience:

Finally, queer theologians draw on lived experience as a source for creating theology. Queer theology operates under a belief that God acts in specific ways in each of our unique lived experiences. LGBTQIA+ people's lived experiences are included in this belief and their queered perspective is critical to understand and practice a theology that is inclusive of all God's people (Cheng, 2011). There are thousands of anthologies, memoirs, autobiographies, and poetry books authored by LGBTQIA+ Christians on queer lived theologies including:

- *Sanctified: An Anthology of Poetry by LGBT Christians* (Cannon, ed., 2008)
- *This is my Body: Hearing the Theology of Transgender Christians* (Beardsley & O'Brien, eds., 2016) and;
- *I Rise: The Transformation of Toni Newman* (Newman, 2011).

LGBTQIA+ Christians' lived experiences share a common theological thread. Their journey to knowing God and embracing their queerness are not mutually exclusive. These two journeys are lived simultaneously. Both are deeply spiritual processes, and both lead to living an authentic, joyful, faithful life (Cheng, 2011), with each individual LGBTQIA+ Christian continuously growing and building their personal relationship with God, with no need for Church approval. This personal relationship with God is central to developing and practicing a queer theology, with no two queer theologies looking exactly alike, but all authentic and sacred.

Strands of Queer Theology

There are four strands/steps that queer theologians have taken since the 1950s to evolve into today's more expansive field of queer theology, the first three drawing from pre-existing theologies first developed by other marginalized groups within Abrahamic faiths: apologetic, liberation, relational and queer theology.

Apologetic Theology

The *apologetic* strand of queer theology started in the mid-1950s, with theologians focusing on how LGBTQIA+ people can live faithful lives without sacrificing their sexuality or gender identity and should be accepted as full church members (Cheng, 2011). Robert Wood, an openly gay Congregationalist minister, wrote *Christ & The Homosexual: Some Observations* (1960), in which he argued for the church to stay true to the message, "God loves all His children," and to "act with love," encouraging gays to "participate in church activities (Wood, 1960 qtd. in Cheng, 2011). This follows the "love the sinner, hate the sin" rhetoric still pervasive in churches of various denominations. But, in 1960, this was a significant step away from the visceral God Hates F*gs rhetoric still seen at religious based anti-LGBTQIA+ protests today (see: the notorious Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas).

Letha Scanzoni and Virginia Mollenkott published *Is The Homosexual My Neighbor?: A Positive Christian Response* (1978), in which, they discuss historical, biblical, scientific, and ethical arguments in favor of accepting gays and lesbians in the church, with an additional challenge to Christians to accept gays and lesbians as Christian neighbors, just as Jesus accepted the outcasts of His day (Scanzoni & Mollenkott, 1978 qtd. in Cheng, 2011). Teetering on tolerance but not acceptance, apologetics theology was the first step toward true acceptance of LGBTQIA+ people. Although, from personal experience, while a myriad of individual churches have achieved true acceptance, I still do not see a significant shift toward acceptance at the overarching "State level" of the Church. In other words, acceptance of LGBTQIA+ people have not been mainstreamed into Christian doctrine; it has not become the default of Christian teaching to love and accept all God's children regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. Apologetics is not the main strand applied to my analysis, but I will offer different types of pro-trans arguments—historical, biblical, scientific, and ethical.

Liberation Theology

The liberation strand of queer theology started in the late 1960s, modeled after other liberation theologies of the decade—Latin American and Black liberation theology—both of which were based on the Exodus story of the Israelites' liberation (Cheng, 2011). The primary focus of liberation theology, under a queer lens, is not just getting the church to accept LGBTQIA+ people, but also, demonstrating how liberation from heterosexism and homophobia—and the freedom to be one's true self—is "at the heart of the gospel message and Christian theology" (Cheng, 2011). This strand argues that God is never neutral on social justice issues and always stands on the side of the poor and oppressed (Gutiérrez, 1973; Cone, 1969; 1970; 1975). Sally Gearheart and William Johnson edited an anthology called *Loving Women/Loving Men: Gay Liberation & The Church* (1974), in which Johnson argues "passive acceptance of injustice is no longer possible for lesbian and gay people," proposing liberation

goals for the Church: “affirmation of same-sex relationships, electing gay people into church leadership, encouraging gay people to enroll in seminaries and developing a totally new theology of sexuality which would reflect the validity of same-sex relationships as well as other relationships” (Gearheart & Johnson, 1974 qtd. in Cheng, 2011).

J. Michael Clark, a gay theologian, wrote *A Place to Start: Toward an Unapologetic Gay Liberation Theology* (1989), in which he advocated for creating a theology that recognizes the importance of “experience as a source for theology” (Clark, 1989 qtd. in Cheng, 2011). In a similar vein three years later, Robert Williams wrote, *Just as I am: A Practical Guide to Being Out, Proud & Christian* (1992), in which he argued that following suit with "Liberation Theology 101," only LGBTQIA+ people can ascertain what they deem to be sin and morality for themselves, and “any straight cleric’s attempt to define sin for gays and lesbians is patriarchal and condescending, and ultimately, blasphemy” (Williams, 1992 qtd. in Cheng 2011). Liberation theology will hold significant importance in my analysis, particularly liberation from not just heterosexism and homophobia, but also from hegemonic masculinity/Christian theology.

Relational Theology

The relational strand of queer theology was first developed in the late 60’s/early 70’s by lesbian theologians in response to the omission of women’s issues in theological reflection, with the primary goal of finding God in mutual relationships with another person or in nature (Cheng, 2011). Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, founders of Daughters of Bilitis, published *A Lesbian Approach to Theology*, in which they argued that the “despairing homosexual must understand that [they] too are a child of God” (Martin & Lyon, 1971 qtd. in Cheng, 2011). In 1974, Sally Gearheart wrote *The Miracle of Lesbianism*, with a focus on the importance of relationships for lesbian women. Come 1989, Carter Heyward expanded on these relationships between women by drawing from Audre Lorde’s idea of the erotic as sacred: God is not extrinsic

to sex or gender identity as God is intertwined with all our gendered and sexualized idiosyncrasies (Heyward, 1989 qtd. in Cheng, 2011).

Mary Hunt, co-founder of the Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics & Ritual, said in *Fierce Tenderness: A Feminist Theology of Friendship* (1991), that human friendship—whether sexual intimacy is a factor or not—is a “useful paradigm of right relation for the whole of creation” (Hunt, 1991 qtd. in Cheng, 2011). Elizabeth Stuart, a lesbian theologian, expanded on Hunt's paradigm of friendship in *Just Good Friends: Towards a Lesbian & Gay Theology of Relationships* (1995), arguing that Christians need to practice an “ethic of friendship” and to “sacramentalize friendship,” as it is in friendship where God is always found (Stuart, 1995 qtd. in Cheng, 2011). Gary Comstock, former Protestant chaplain, concurs in *Gay Theology Without Apology* (1993) that Jesus should be seen more as a Divine friend than a Divine master (Comstock, 1993 qtd. in Cheng, 2011). It is in friendship that gay Christians dying in the height of the AIDS epidemic found peace in the spiritual journey between life in the flesh and eternal life of the soul. John Fortunato (1987) believed the only way for these men to deal with their anger and pain was through “acts of loving”—from those who tended to, comforted, and loved them in those final days, to researchers driven to finding better treatments and a cure.

Queer Theology

The queer theological strand, itself, is based on the theoretical work of queer theorists including Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in the 90s/early 2000's. Queer theologies include bisexual and transgender theologies since it is these discourses that inherently deconstruct binary categorizations of sexuality and gender identity, and view gender on a spectrum or continuum (Cheng, 2011). This strand came of age in 2000, when Marcella Althaus-Reid released their groundbreaking, controversial theological text, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender & Politics*. In this book, Althaus-Reid confronts

social/religious taboos by challenging the “heterosexual and patriarchal assumptions of traditional theologies” (Althaus-Reid, 2000 qtd. in Cheng, 2011).

Virginia Ramey Mollenkott's *Omnigender: A Trans Religious Approach*, was an important milestone for trans theologies within queer theology. Mollenkott (2001) breaks down the issues with the binary gender system—even within some queer theologies—in relation to Christianity and Judaism, primarily traditional understandings of trans people remaining within the male-female binary. It was this essay that launched several more theorists to offer their insights into experience outside the MTF/FTM trans binary from a traditional Christian standpoint, including Tanis (2003), Tigert & Tirabassi (2004), and Althaus-Reid & Isherwood (2009). I will be following suit with the current trend in queer theology of drawing on other theories like intersectionality, transfeminist theory, body theology and Black theology to expand the field of queer theology toward complete inclusivity, with the broader goal of deconstructing binary categorizations of socially constructed identities beyond gender and sexuality, using another overarching theme and analytical tool: radical love.

Radical Love: Central to a Queer Theology

Vital to the application of queer theory and queer theology is the concept of radical love: “a love so extreme that it dissolves our existing boundaries, whether they are boundaries that separate us from other people, that separate us from preconceived notions of sexuality and gender identity, or that separate us from God” (Cheng, 2011). Christians believe in a higher power who dissolved the boundaries between death and life, time and eternity, and between humans and the divine. In queer theory, radical love challenges social boundaries around sexuality and gender identity. Fixed categorizations—life *vs* death, time *vs* eternity, human *vs* Divine, straight *vs* gay, male *vs* female—reduce these concepts to essentialist rather than social constructions, with no room for nuance, diversity, extraordinary rarities, miracles or sacralities.

Radical love is *not* about abolishing labels or arguing in favor of a lawless, immoral existence. As St. Paul teaches us: “love is patient and kind, and not envious, boastful, arrogant, or rude” (Saint Paul, NKJV, 1982). It is a love premised upon safe, sane, consensual behavior, therefore, Cheng asserts, “nonconsensual behavior—such as rape or sexual exploitation—is by definition excluded from radical love” (Cheng, 2011). Radical love breaks down barriers and boundaries between oppositional, black-and-white identities and groups, and makes space for everything in-between and beyond two ends of a traditionally finite spectrum. It dispels selfishness and promotes interconnectedness and mutual respect between *all* living beings. Thus, radical love is pertinent to utilizing my next framework: intersectional feminist theory.

Intersectional Feminist Theory

My use of queer theology will be guided by a second theoretical tool, intersectional feminist theory, which will be informed by the works of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1990), Dill & Zambrana (2009), and Collins & Bilge (2016). This is a framework for analyzing and deconstructing the multitude of socially imposed binaries and oppressions within all people in relation to others. Intersectionality as a concept was popularized by Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw, a leading scholar of critical race theory and professor at UCLA School of Law and Columbia Law. Crenshaw states that intersectionality is meant:

to describe how race, class, gender, and other individual characteristics ‘intersect’ with one another and overlap...individuals have individual identities that intersect in ways that impact how they are viewed, understood, and treated...Intersectionality operates as both the observance and analysis of power imbalances, and the tool by which those power imbalances could be eliminated altogether. (Intersectionality Wars, 2019)

Regarding ‘observance and analysis of power imbalances,’ Dill & Zambrana offer their insights on the concept. In their article, “Critical Thinking About Inequality: An Emerging

Lens,” Dill & Zambrana (2009) outline three pragmatic facets of Crenshaw’s framing of intersectionality that can be applied to any social justice issue. They state that intersectionality:

1. Grounds theory in the lived experiences of the marginalized to identify counter-hegemonic narratives,
2. Pushes theory beyond essentialized identity categories by allowing for nuanced accounts of complexity and variation within and across difference,
3. Attends to multiple dimensions of power (structural, disciplinary, hegemonic & interpersonal) that operate with and through people’s lives.

(Dill & Zambrana, 2009)

To recognize and explicate intersectionality in lived experiences of trans Christian men, we must address how multiple dimensions of power—structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal—shape their gender, sexuality, and religious identity in relation to other people and institutions, and how these dimensions vary across other interstices of their identity.

Throughout my analysis, I will be extracting examples of each of the dimensions of power under an intersectional rubric provided by Sirma Bilge and Patricia Hill Collins. The *structural* domain of power refers to the fundamental structures of social institutions such as job markets, housing, education, and health. The *cultural* domain of power emphasizes the increasing significance of ideas and culture in the organization of power relations and helps manufacture and disseminate this narrative of fair play that claims that we all have equal access to opportunities across social institutions, that competition among individuals or groups (teams) are fair, and that resulting patterns of winners and losers have been fairly accomplished. The *disciplinary* domain of power refers to how rules and regulations are fairly or unfairly applied to people based on race, sexuality, class, gender, age, ability, and nation, and related categories. And the *interpersonal* domain of power refers to how individuals experience the convergence of structural, cultural, and disciplinary power (Collins & Bilge, 2016).

Transfeminist Theory

The third theoretical tool for my analysis is *transfeminism*, which will be informed by the works of Sara Ahmed (2016) and Cristan Williams (2020). Sara Ahmed shares how she, as a cisgender lesbian, came to understand transfeminism from an ally's perspective: "When we are asked where we are from or who we are, or even what we are, we experience...a hammering away at our being. To experience that hammering is to be given a hammer, a tool through which we, too, can chip away at the surfaces of what is, or who is, including the very categories through which personhood is made meaningful...that have chipped away at us...This reciprocal hammering can be thought of as an affinity. I want to explore my relationship to transfeminism as an affinity of hammers" (Ahmed, 2016). In this passage, Ahmed conveys transfeminism as a relationship between how we are attacked for whatever social categories are imposed upon us, those we naturally embody, and how we can respond to such attacks.

She proceeds to illustrate transfeminism as a form of diversity work in her book *On Being Included: Racism & Diversity in Institutional Life*. Ahmed discerns diversity work in two ways: "the work we do when we aim to transform an institution (often by opening it up to those who have been historically excluded), and the work we do when we do not quite inhabit the norms of an institution" (Ahmed, 2016). In the context of a trans person's lived experience, Ahmed says, "we can think of gender, too, as an institution. We can think of gender norms as places in which we dwell [i.e., cis heteronormativity]: some are more at home than others [i.e., cisgender]; some are unhoused by how others are at home [i.e., cis privilege]. When we are talking about the policing of gender, we are talking about walls, those ways in which some are blocked from entry, from passing through [i.e., passing privilege]" (Ahmed, 2016). Solidarity can take form when we recognize others who are 'unhoused' or 'blocked' because of one or multiple social marginalizations. Ahmed calls this form of coalition building an "affinity of hammers." Through this affinity of hammers, shared experience of pieces of ourselves being chipped away

by systemic oppressions, “we witness the work each other is doing, and we recognize each other through that work...we take up arms when we combine our forces” (Ahmed, 2016).

Applying transfeminist theory to an analysis of data regarding hegemonic theology and hegemonic Christian theology allows a deeper observation of the binary social power relations between those who embody hegemonic masculinity within hegemonic Christian institutions and those who embody counter-hegemonic masculinities within those same institutions. Such institutions are not limited to Christian places of worship, as there is a major artery carrying hegemonic Christian theology/ideology to the heart of *every* social/government institution in Canada—familial, political, economic, and educational included. The affinity of hammers Ahmed describes amongst all people who experience some form of “hammering” at their identity can be applied to the experiences of Christian trans men and the allyship they discover in their relationships within and outside their church communities. Transfeminist theory is also easily applied to the ongoing diversity work within Christian institutions to work toward opening them up to those who have been historically excluded (i.e., queer/trans people) and the emotional labor that is necessary for survival in the meantime—as people who do not inhabit the norms of a Christian institution—until those norms have been successfully transformed. I will be using transfeminist theory to reflect on lived experiences as examples of:

- Gender as institution & the gender norms Christian trans men speaking through these texts must “live in,”
- Some feel “at home,” others “unhoused” by peers’ comfortability in these norms
- Walls that block trans men’s entry into privileges their peers receive by embodying hegemonic masculinity in their community.

Integral to using integrity-based transfeminist theory is the inclusion of transfeminist theory according to theorists with lived experience as trans persons. Cristan Williams, a trans historian and pioneer in addressing the practical needs of transgender people in Houston,

Texas, writes extensively on the pitfalls of a strictly ontological understanding of womanhood, which carries over to an understanding of manhood. In *The Ontological Woman: A History of Deauthentication, Dehumanization & Violence* (2020), Williams cites Simone de Beauvoir in suggesting how “the move to root feminism in an inherent biological, psychological, or reified ontology was to endorse the very essentialism upon which patriarchy was built” (de Beauvoir, 2009 qtd. in Williams, 2020). Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs) rely on this reasoning to justify the belief that a woman is defined by her "womanly nature" or "God-given" experience of female embodiment. This is an ontological claim, that is, a belief about the nature of being, of non-cultural essential biological attributes like chromosomes, bone morphology, and the capacity for conceiving, pregnancy, and giving birth (Williams, 2020).

Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminism exacts gains from a woman’s or man’s forced loss of humanity and gender authenticity. Williams asserts that a sex-essentialist discourse will always be rigged to ensure authenticity is withheld from trans experiences. However, it is not just sex-essentialist discourse that acts to withhold gender authenticity from trans women and men, in both Christian and secular spaces. Disability and race are also weaponized to police trans (wo)manhood, and body theology and Black theology are the next frontier to combating these additional attacks on trans authenticity in the church.

Theological Intersection Between Disability & Race

Body Theology

Nancy Eisland, author of *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (1994), writes on the connection between recognizing Jesus’ post-resurrection wounds and tackling inaccessibility for disabled people in Christian spaces and theology. Liberatory theology of disability, or body theology, states that the foundation of *any* Christian theology is a belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, “recognized as a deity whose hands, feet,

and side bear the marks of profound physical impairment” (Eisland, 1994). When Jesus was resurrected, His disciples saw the scars on His back and sides from the lashing and the holes in His hands and feet from crucifixion and did not think less of Him or pity Him for his disfigurement; they recognized His sacrifice as a gift from God, the gift of a savior with compassion and empathy. In body theology, disabled bodies are not a result of sin or in need of virtuous Christian charity. People with disabilities have gifts that the Christian community can learn from if they commit to the transformation out of ableist theology.

Biblical scholar, Christian Fetherolf, quotes a Bible verse in *Body for a Temple, Temple for a Body: An Examination of Bodily Metaphors in 1 Corinthians* (2010), that illustrates God valuing people of all abilities:

The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need for you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable...if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. (1 Cor. 12:14 qtd. in Fetherolf, 2010)

If Jesus had a human body, and through the life and death of that body, the world found a savior, then why do we believe the flesh is tainted by sin and of no value to Christian identity? Why is altering the body not seen as a spiritual journey toward authenticity in God’s image?

Black Theology

In *Strange Fruit: The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Black theologian and professor of systematic theology, James H. Cone furthers the conversation around embodying theology by making connections between inferiority and disposability of Black bodies and the crucifixion of Jesus. Cone states that there are *some* Black theologians who connect with Jesus’ body *after* the resurrection. However, most feel a deeper connection with Jesus in the crucifixion, itself:

When we encounter the crucified Christ today, He is a humiliated Black Christ, a lynched Black body...Christ is made Black through God's loving solidarity with lynched Black bodies and divine judgement against the demonic forces of white supremacy. Like a Black naked body swinging on a lynching tree, the cross of Christ was an utterly offensive affair...subjecting the victim to the utmost indignity. (Cone, 2014)

While European theologians were valuing the importance of the soul over the flesh, Black Christians were holding onto the physicality of Jesus in their theology and saw the importance of remembering Jesus' humanity, as He walked, talked, ate, slept, cried, and suffered like them.

Black womanist theologian, Kelly Douglas, reminds white Christians that because Black slaves were barred from formal theological education, they had to produce their own language derived from experience to understand God's work in their lives (Douglas, 1999). Christian Black slaves understood Jesus as a friend who walked and talked with them, who listened to their pain, understood their grief, and dried their tears. Faith from their lived experiences created a sustaining, more comprehensible and compassionate Christianity—another gift to the church—like lived experiences from Christians with disabilities. Ignoring the contributions to Christianity from body and Black theology is to say that some bodies are "not as holy" as others and do not represent the Image of God, as they are effectively dehumanized. The same will be argued in my analysis for queer theology's contributions to Christianity.

This mixture of queer theology, intersectionality, transfeminism, body and Black theology constitutes a scholarly approach that is community-centered, gender affirming, and gives highest authority to self-representation of race, class, and disability, intersecting with gender, sexuality, and faith experiences, creating a lived—rather than Bible-based—theology.

METHODS

Narrative Analysis

I will be conducting a narrative analysis of two memoirs written by trans Christian men: *My Name is Brett: Truths from a Trans Christian* (2015) by Brett Ray, and *Trans Boomer: A Memoir of My Journey from Female to Male* (2015) by Lee Jay. I am analyzing memoirs because the personal nature of such texts allows for a study that is community-centered, gender and sexuality affirming, and prioritizes self-determination—all vital components of a discourse rooted in queer theology, intersectionality, transfeminist theory, body theology and Black theology. I am prioritizing first-hand, lived theologies over sole reliance on academic theory. I will be utilizing the following definition of narrative analysis:

a genre of analytic frames whereby researchers interpret stories...told within the context of research and/or are shared in everyday life. Scholars who conduct this type of analysis make diverse—yet equally substantial and meaningful—interpretations and conclusions by focusing on different elements...how the story is structured, what functions the story serves...the substance of the story, and how the story is performed. (Allen, 2017)

Challenging & Deconstructing Gender & Theological Hegemony Through Memoir

In, *Becoming Culturally (Un)intelligible: Exploring the Terrain of Trans Life Writings*, Evan Vipond (2019) utilizes Enke's (2012) work to illustrate how trans writers are using life writing to claim not only literary authorship, but *authorship* of their own identity and experiences in the story they live every day. Trans life writing is a revolutionary act, Viviane Namaste (2000) argues, because trans people continue to be denied the right to self-determination and epistemological validity for their lived experiences. Trans erasure—the systematic silencing and/or eradication of trans voices, identities, and authenticity via

cis-heteronormative institutions—is a clear human rights violation. But this human rights violation continues to occur because of what Judith Butler (1990) refers to as *cultural intelligibility*: the social process of predetermined criteria being created and used within cis-het social institutions to judge *who* is legible as *authentically* human, and *who* or *what* is not. Black and other racialized feminists have theorized on this concept of cultural intelligibility long before Butler formally coined the term. We do not have to look far back to see a long history of Black/non-white people being excluded from *human* status in a culture that places the white, heteropatriarchal, masculinist, Eurocentric, ableist, bourgeois male at the top of the social hierarchy (Stryker & Currah, 2017). Transfeminists and Black feminists—along with disability feminists—have the potential to be strong allies to each other, especially with the amount of overlapping systemic subordination of intersectionally marginalized identities.

Vipond examines mainstream trans life writing texts published between 1967 and 2017 to unpack hegemonic trans narratives that remain underrepresented because of this hegemonic hold on trans experience: Jorgensen’s *Christine Jorgensen*, Jan Morris’s *Conundrum*, Mario Martino’s *Emergence*, Chaz Bono’s *Transition*, and Janet Mock’s *Redefining Realness* and *Surpassing Certainty*. Vipond categorizes these memoirs as mainstream trans memoirs for five reasons. (1) All of these authors were published with well-established publishing houses and marketed to the public (i.e., cisgender readership). (2) All of these authors were able to articulate their stories—in English—in a culturally legible way. (3) All these authors have achieved financial success. (4) All of these authors were openly trans before publishing. And (5) Most of these authors’ gender expression is culturally legible as gender-conforming, largely because they were able to access some level of medical gender-affirming care and identify within the trans binary of trans women and trans men. Each of these reasons are not coincidental and all play a part in the formation and sustaining of transnormativity in trans life writing, which dictate the financial and social success of that memoir, and in turn, the trans author.

Publishing with a well-established publishing house—that has also published cisgender life writing and marketed to the cisgender majority—is a privilege granted to trans memoirs that adhere to hegemonic gender expectations (read: white, able-bodied, gender norm-confirming, binary-identifying trans people). Vipond (2019) draws attention to the societal reality that some trans folks naturally fall into these trans narrative tropes, while others must reconstruct their life story to fit as closely as possible to these tropes to be legible to the cis-heteronormative reader. While fitting into this overarching trope may achieve literary success, Butler (1990) points to a major pitfall of prioritizing cultural legibility over authenticity: erasure/obscure of parts of one’s identity and experiences. Examples of such erasure include:

- (a) Deliberate distancing of queerness from transness (Ahmed, 2006),
- (b) Adopting the ‘trapped in the wrong body’ narrative (Spade, 2006),
- (c) Reliance on language of ideological baggage of two genders (Scott-Dixon, 2006),
- (d) Reducing transition to three stages of medical transition (Ames, 2005) and/or,
- (e) Situating transness nearest to white (wo)manhood (Skidmore, 2011).

These examples of trans erasure and obscurity make up what Jay Prosser refers to as a *narrative map*, “available for trans persons to replicate and, in doing so, become culturally intelligible” (Prosser, 1998). Previous trans memoirs—those by Jorgenson, Morris, Martino, Bono and Mock, for example—have tried to establish a coherent, continuous timeline to their respective gender histories (Butler, 1990), within each of their respective *waves* of trans memoir.

Trans memoir is categorized into *waves* or generational cohorts (Meyerowitz, 2002; Rondot, 2016), similar to the re-telling of feminist histories (Califia, 1997; Stryker, 2008). While the wave metaphor provides convenient differentiation between periods, generational cohorts, and ideological trends, feminist scholar Astrid Henry (2012) says, it “presumes people of a particular...generation share a singular ideological position and denies the possibility of cross-generational identification across political lines.” Jorgensen, Morris and Martino belong

to the same *wave* of trans life writing; but each has a different understanding of gender and sex, some seeing gender rooted in biology, others seeing gender spiritually (Califia, 1997).

It is important to note the limitations of a mono-marginalization framework of gender. Christine Jorgenson is the first American trans person to undergo gender affirmation surgery in Denmark (1950), and the first trans person to become internationally recognized. Delisa Newton, a Black trans woman, was one of the first to undergo GCS in the US and was dubbed “the first negro sex-change” in 1963 (Meyerowitz, 2002). The fact that a racial signifier was applied to Newton’s medical transition, but not Jorgenson’s, reveals how whiteness stands in as a universal conceptualization of trans embodiment; a white trans person’s race is never included in their public narrative (i.e., “Jorgenson is the first known *white* American trans person to undergo GAS”). The *white as universal* ideology placed Jorgenson’s autobiography in the literary canon of what trans scholars Califia and Stryker name as the first wave of trans life writing that was markedly influential in establishing the “rulebook” for mainstream marketability of trans life writing. Vipond (2019) asserts, if this is the case, then the first wave of trans life writing was predominantly white, leaving little space for trans persons of color to take up literary and literal space (i.e., authority, authenticity, agency) in a transnormative culture.

Data Selection

For the purpose of this research, I have chosen two memoirs written by trans men who *do* self-identify within a trans binary, but have all published under smaller, lesser-known publishing houses or independently, were all marketed to trans people *and* cisgender people who want to learn and become better allies, and none of them have achieved substantial financial success or notoriety from the general, i.e. cis, public. It is through these two memoirs that I plan to challenge hegemony in cis and trans masculinity, as well as in the hegemonic Christian institutions in which masculinity is performed and policed.

I have also chosen these memoirs written not just by trans men, but Christian trans men who kept their Christian faith in some capacity and integrated their gender and religious identity. The fact that it was as difficult as it was to find two memoirs by trans men who *remained Christian* throughout and post-medical/legal transition, *and* included their religious journey with their trans journey, concurrently, is significant to this research. Most trans memoirs are written by authors who either grew up religious but left their faith upon self-discovery and acceptance of their trans identity, or by those who never/very loosely adhered to a religion (Christianity or another faith). As a Christian trans man, if I were to write a memoir on my concurrent journey between my faith and gender identity, it would be criticized both by non-gender-affirming Christians *and* non-faith-affirming trans people.

Because of the long history of judgment and persecution of the LGBTQIA+ community from Christian institutions, it is understandable but unfortunate that those who want to integrate their faith with their gender identity continue to face gatekeeping from either side, simply for embodying a unique truth in their lived experience. So, for those who choose to share their truth, despite this strife—to push back against the limiting constraints of the both the hegemonic trans narrative *and* the hegemonic Christian narrative—I am arguing that memoirs written by Christian trans men embody a counter-hegemonic trans narrative to the memoirs written within the transnormative *and* cis-heteronormative literary canon.

Memoir Analysis Questions

I have discovered, in review of the literature, that hegemonic gender ideology and hegemonic Christian theology operate under the exact same foundational principles and guiding tenets. Thus, passages will be pulled from both memoirs that answer/challenge the following six questions of my narrative analysis in relation to lived experience of hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic Christian theology, as outlined in Figure 1, p. 25, I ask, in relation to hegemonic gender ideology, does the action, attitude, or institutional mandate in question derive from:

1. An unwavering desire for power and control over others, especially via the weaponization of "masculinity," instilling fear to gain that control,
2. Subordinating, degrading, and devaluing anything or anyone who challenges one's understanding of and ability to perform cis-heteronormative masculinity,
3. Need to prove one's manhood through callous sex attitudes toward women, fetishization of violence as manly, and promotion of danger as exciting and something to be conquered,
4. Avoidance of the feminine/fear of feminization & discouragement of emotional development beyond anger, assertiveness, and lust,
5. Adoption of *us vs them* competition-threat narrative, particularly through a misconstrued sense of entitlement to power, resources, and sexual satiation, or
6. Holding onto ontological, essentialist, binary understandings of (wo)manhood?

In relation to hegemonic Christian theology:

1. Are followers held to a rigid, unyielding system of beliefs?
2. Is cognitive dissonance produced in followers using conflicting dogma?
3. Is all questioning discouraged and/or silenced?
4. Are "outside ideologies" viewed as suspicious or a threat?
5. Is pluralism of belief discouraged and/or other/no religion unacceptable?
6. Is it strictly enforced that holy texts must be interpreted literally?

If the answer is *yes* to any of these questions, the behavior or attitude exhibited by the author themselves, from another person in their life, or Christian institution, derives from a hegemonic gender ideology and/or hegemonic Christian theology. The examples will be explored further through queer theology, intersectionality, transfeminist theory, body theology, and Black theology to deconstruct and dissolve the pragmatics of guilt, shame and fear imposed on trans *and* cis Christians for not adhering to these tenets.

CHAPTER 4—MEMOIR DISCUSSION & ANALYSIS

I would like to preface this analysis of Brett Ray and Lee Jay's memoirs through a brief discussion of a counter-hegemonic narrative within the genre of trans life writing that these two authors' stories embody: Living as both Christian and trans.

Christian & Trans: A Counter-Hegemonic Trans Narrative

While many—but not all—white trans people believe they need to distance any semblance of, or relation to, queerness from their transness to maintain some cultural legibility (i.e. power) in their life writing, trans women of color—such as Janet Mock, Laverne Cox, and Marsha P. Johnson—have their existence questioned on additional grounds that their racialization and transness are also incompatible, and therefore, unintelligible to the public imaginary. Also deemed unintelligible and, oftentimes, inauthentic, are the stories of trans individuals who also identify within some realm of spirituality or religiosity. Of all the trans memoirs written in a Western context in the last fifty years, less than twenty percent have been published by trans authors who grew up religious *and* presently maintain some religious affiliation. Christian trans people are one group of religious trans folks who face attacks on their cultural intelligibility from both LGBTQIA+ and Christian communities; embodiment of such cultural intelligibility is to live out a counter-trans narrative.

One trans Christian man who discusses at length the tension between LGBTQIA+ communities and Christian communities is Austen Hartke, in his 2018 theological guide, *Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians*. His application of personal and other trans folks' experiences in queer and Christian circles illustrates the hardships of cultural intelligibility often faced by Christian trans individuals for embodying both a counter-Christian narrative and counter-trans narrative, simultaneously. A 2013 survey from the Pew Research Centre found that 29% of LGBT-identified people in the USA have been

unwelcomed in religious spaces. Their 2014 study found that 70% of millennials and 58% of Americans overall are too judgmental and alienate the LGBT community. And approximately 25% of the people interviewed who were raised in religious families, but have since left their faith communities, admit that negative treatment or anti-LGBT teachings were factors in deciding to leave (Hartke, 2018). The Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution in 2014 declaring "gender identity confusion" to be a direct consequence of fallen human nature and emphasized required repentance from transgender people who wish to be welcomed into the Kingdom of Heaven. Hartke says this presupposes all trans identities are somehow incompatible with a life of following Christ (Hartke, 2018).

Hartke illustrates this widespread presumption of trans/Christ incompatibility through the biblical story of Jacob's renaming after his struggle with God (NKJV, 1982). After this fearful encounter, Jacob was renamed *Israel* meaning "one who has struggled with God and persevered": "This imagery—this wrestling with God and humans—is incredibly familiar to trans Christians who have spent a portion of their life grappling with their faith and their gender. Sometimes we must fight for our gender to be recognized and sometimes we must fight to be seen as Christians" (Hartke, 2018). While Austin found himself asking if it was possible to fully embrace both parts of his identity and still be welcomed in his Christian community, I concur, but also argue from lived experience, that we—as trans Christians—have the additional fight to be recognized as authentically trans—not traitors—within our trans communities when we attempt to be openly Christian in traditionally LGBTQIA+ spaces. To be labeled a traitor by both my Christian community and LGBTQIA+ community imposes a sense of imposter syndrome in many of the spaces I should feel safe and welcomed in. Christians who tell me I am not living an "authentic" Christian life strip me of the gender affirmation God knows I am worthy of, and queer/trans people who tell me I am not living an "authentic" queer/trans life are strip me of the faith affirmation I worked for years to finally find and hold onto. Both sides do not understand

the harm they are doing to someone who has had to live a double life for too long. I have religious traumas too, but I will not belittle a person's faith because of *my* past.

Hartke shares two other trans stories that reiterate this battle for what I will refer to as *dual intelligibility* between LGBTQIA+ and Christian communities. Lawrence Richardson, a Black trans man and pastor raised in the Southern Baptist Church, shares how, when he came out as trans, not only did he lose his faith community but also his Black community: "It's difficult to be who you are if there's a part of you that isn't completely accepted in a certain space" (Richardson qtd. in Hartke, 2018). Though this transition period of his life was arduous and faith-testing, he continued his calling to ministry: "Even if we didn't want to follow, we have no choice. The call in our souls is just that loud. I'm listening to the call of God in my life, and I'm going to follow that call wherever it leads me, even if that leads me to death, and that's not a message that mainstream society can take" (Richardson qtd. in Hartke, 2018). Indeed, this is a message mainstream media (read: cis-het media) cannot understand but is also a message often not taken kindly by those in the LGBTQIA+ community who have been hurt in the name of God.

Hartke shares excerpts from his interview with Lynn Young, a Native American two-spirit Christian, who addresses this hurt that is to blame for the continued pains of cultural incompatibility between gender diversity and Christ. In response to his Native American friends' questioning on this matter, Young says: "Some of my Native Traditionalist friends who are dear, beloved people to me don't get how in the world I could ever identify as Christian, because that is the religion of our oppressors, the religion of the people who tried to kill us, and did kill our ancestors, and that's all true. But that's not Christ's fault" (Young qtd. in Hartke, 2018). Though we have different racial and cultural backgrounds, Young is mirroring a similar sentiment in my positionality within my introduction: God did not hurt me, people did; people abused the name of God to abuse those deemed what I now understand to be *culturally unintelligible*. If what has been discussed thus far is any indication, and if cultural un-intelligibility is grounded in the

current socio-cultural norms of the time, then a shift in culture—norms, beliefs, values, and biases—may be on the horizon where gender meets faith and cultural intelligibility.

With these statistics and anecdotes, it may still be confusing as to how an LGBTQIA+ individual would want anything to do with religion of any kind. However, in a survey of LGBT Americans, half of queer-identifying adults claimed a religious affiliation and seventeen percent of those adults said their faith was a particularly important part of their life (Hartke, 2018). This may be largely due to more LGBTQIA+ folks loosening the cultural constraints of gender and faith to fit their whole person, rather than shattering and reconstructing themselves to fit the current Western hegemonic trans and Christian narratives; Brett Ray and Lee Jay are two prime examples of what loosening those cultural constraints can look like, and the life-long process of becoming culturally intelligible to one's self in relationship to the Creator.

DISCUSSION

***My Name is Brett: Truths from a Trans Christian* by Brett Ray**

Interstices of Identity & Influential Family Background:

Brett wrote his memoir because he is among the more privileged trans folks who *can* share their story (i.e., white and Western/geographic privilege), in hopes that it will create more space for people embodying concurrent marginalizations to trans identity to start telling theirs. Upon publishing in 2018, Brett was in his early 30s, and identifies as a white, American, United Methodist trans man. His native tongue is English. He is openly queer and attracted to women, men, and genderqueer people; Brett was dating a cis woman by the end of the memoir. He is physically healthy, but dealing with depression and anxiety, and experienced suicidal ideation as a teen, due to gender dysphoria and lack of acceptance in his religious community and university. He started heavily drinking and smoking in high school and self-identifies as a recovering alcoholic who openly shares his experiences with Alcoholics Anonymous.

Brett grew up middle class, and his parents—from the Baby Boomer Generation—also grew up middle class. For most of his life, he lived as an "only child" with his mom and stepdad in Kansas, US, while his sister lived with their biological dad. His parents encouraged him to go to university right after high school; he had the financial means and spiritual/academic rigor to complete a master's in divinity from Duke Divinity School, a school that only accepts five percent of applicants, most of whom, are white, heterosexual, and upper-class. Brett had mixed experiences of acceptance and intolerance from Duke students and faculty, managed to find a friend group that accepted him into their sorority as *Bri*, and continued supporting him leaving the sorority but remained friends as *Brett*. Brett was hoping to use his M.Div. to become a United Methodist pastor but—since trans men are still prohibited from ordination—he uses this degree in his work with the Reconciling Ministries Network and Believe Out Loud (173).

Religious Background & Perceptions of United Methodist Church

Brett was raised United Methodist and remains United Methodist today, actively pushing for change in the Methodist tradition to become more affirming. He is heartbroken that he is still prohibited from being a pastor in his church—even with a Master's of Divinity—but refuses to serve as a church leader in any other denomination because the United Methodist Church is his home. Brett came out on social media in his early 20s and some of his peers told him he was confused, and this was not what God wanted for his life (147).

Kansas was not where Brett wanted to attempt to pastor. It was not safe. The United Methodist Church says being gay is incompatible with Christian teaching and being a "practicing" gay disqualifies you from ordination (147-8). United Methodist pastors are regularly put on church trial and stripped of their ordination credentials simply for officiating queer weddings. Cisgender, heterosexual officials at annual conferences continue to have harmful conversations about Brett's "chosen" life and the lives of his queer loved ones, and pretend it is "holy conferencing," when there is nothing holy or compassionate about their "love the sinner,

hate the sin" rhetoric (149). He reflects on how strange it is that the UMC asks those in need to come to the church for help instead of bringing help to them. He also finds it very disconcerting how LGBTQIA+ people continue to be chased out of the church rather than welcomed in like Jesus would have welcomed them. Overall, Brett struggles with the major disconnect between the United Methodist Church and the people they claim to want to serve (143).

At a "diversity panel" held during orientation at Duke Divinity School, one of Brett's friends asked if students from the LGBTQIA+ community are safe to express themselves in the classroom. A couple faculty members addressed it well, saying while they may not personally agree with the "lifestyle," they would never grade or treat a student differently because of it, and sat down to hear the next question. But then the Dean came up to the podium to reiterate that Duke is a United Methodist institution, stating: "At Duke, we think all people are of sacred worth, but we also uphold the Church's stance on homosexuality, which states that homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching." No further questions were allowed, and Brett was outraged. He was almost outraged enough to leave Duke and find another school but chose to stay because he did not want to abandon seminary in his home faith because of one official's personal viewpoint on gender and sexuality (150-1).

He could no longer willingly, repeatedly put himself in situations where he was told his being is incompatible with the God he loves, and Whom he knows loves him. He could no longer sit in such willfully ignorant conversations and pretend they were Holy in nature (152). Though he continues to hear the divine call to be pastor in the UMC, he also hears and chooses to listen to the divine call to self-care. He dreams of being a church leader who preaches good theology, does hospital visits for the sick and dying, goes to annual conferences, blesses the sacramental elements, actively welcomes queer folks, baptizes lesbian women and gay men who have come back to church, and has naming ceremonies for trans people (154).

People suggested to Brett that he leave the UMC to become a pastor in a more accepting sect of Christianity. However, he remains adamant and hopeful: "I'm not a Presbyterian or

member of the United Church of Christ. The United Methodist Church is my home. I will stay in the Methodist pews. I will not be a pastor, but I will be a presence because I have hope for my church” (155). Despite ongoing difficulties with this path, he will keep defending it when people claim it is unredeemable. He refuses to sit silently, and will not stop asking the tough questions, namely: “When will we acknowledge there are trans people in our congregations?” (156).

Viewpoints on Masculinity & Manhood:

As a kid and throughout adolescence, Brett felt very dysphoric and hateful toward his assigned gender at birth and tried to block these feelings out. He describes his gender as never something that just was, but always something that should not be; he always felt like a boy but did not have the language yet to articulate this as a child. When he would play make-believe with his cousins and friends, it was always either playing *house* or *cops and robbers*; Some of his play roles included the "badass older brother," the "weightlifter who juggled multiple girlfriends," and the "really smart college student who wanted to be a professor" (27-30). No matter what role it was, his pretend name was always *Brett*. At the time, he did not want his parents to know his imagination would even be capable of thinking of himself as a boy, so he made his cousins and friends promise not to talk about their make-believe play with his or their parents.

Throughout the remainder of Brett’s childhood, he tried to suppress and block out any feelings of being male. Upon entering adolescence, and eventually high school, he started to develop depression and an anxiety disorder and began abusing alcohol, along with having many hookups with feminine-presenting girls to be perceived as a lesbian, not trans. He did not know how to talk about his feelings of depression and anxiety, let alone ask for any kind of help. It did not seem to matter how much he drank or smoked, how many parties he went to, how many lies he told people, or girls he hooked up with—he never felt happy (33-4). He struggled with extreme social anxiety which made it debilitating to make new friends without vodka as "social lubrication." When he was inebriated, he convinced himself he was fine and became oblivious to

the further deterioration of his mental health (124-5). He distinctly remembers times in high school when he would hear of other trans people dying by suicide and became even more scared to share his struggles with mental health out of fear that people would know he was not so different from those victims and that connection would make his friends and family view him as mentally unstable and, therefore, stop talking to him (137). Through all this pain and confusion, Brett remained active in his church, particularly with the youth council, helping the minister—his grandfather—lead worship, read the liturgy to the congregation, and read theology books to take part in theological conversations with pastors and friends in the church. One of the few things he was sure of from a young age was how much he wanted to be a minister, but he knew, even before coming out, he would not be eligible for ordination (144). His life plan, if he made it through high school, was to be closer to God and share that joy with others.

After graduating from high school, he decided to follow his spiritual life plan and was accepted into Duke Divinity School as *Bri*. First year was a time of self-exploration and revelation; some painful and damaging, and some painful but liberating (7). One of those liberating experiences was meeting a professor who gave him the safe space to come out a queer woman and to name all the fears he had about coming out to family and friends: “Would my family love me? Would my church accept me? Was God okay with this? Would I ever find a job? Would my friends stick with me? Would I ever be able to find someone to love me again?” (10) and “if they took me seriously, would it affirm my identity to myself? Or would it make my true self so real to me that I wouldn’t know how to handle it?” (16). Shortly after this meeting with his professor, Brett decided to start attending local Alcoholics Anonymous meetings in the evenings after classes. At one of those meetings, he took the plunge and came out as a trans man for the first time. The following passage encapsulates this profound turning point for Brett:

‘My name is *Bri* and I’m an alcoholic...I think...part of why I used to drink was because I was afraid of who I was...if I was my true self, people wouldn’t love me...what I’ve learned

here is that there are people who will love me as myself...I've been living as *Bri* for my entire life, but it's never felt right. I've never been good at being a girl and I've never been good at being *Bri*...from here on out, I'm not going to do that anymore...I'm going to go by the name Brett and live as Brett. Today I'm grateful to be sober because I'm not quite as afraid to confront myself anymore'... 'Thanks, Brett. We're glad you're here.' (17-8)

In this moment, he opened up about more than simply wanting to stay sober and transition to male; he was unpacking a whole slew of issues and assumptions with hegemonic masculinity that both cis and trans men alike deal with on a daily basis: normalization of binge drinking to "be fun" to others, to hide pain, fear of vulnerability and opening up to real intimacy, and needing to be extroverted to be confident and liked by their peers.

But the biggest assumption this memory exemplifies is living up to everyone's expectations of your manhood except your own. Brett says he was playing the part of *Bri* for years, despite it not feeling right and "not being good at being a girl," because that was what was expected of him as a "good daughter," a "good sister," a "good girlfriend," and a "good woman of God." After coming out as trans at that AA meeting, Brett became more aware of himself and his place in the world and started noticing gendered expectations everywhere he looked, including within his own family. The more aware of all of this he became, the more willing he was to transgress those expectations and be more outspoken with the need for those transgressions. At this point, he was beyond frustrated about the fact that "[he] no longer knew how to be the child and grandchild [his] family thought [he] was" (51-2). He decided to come out to this mother and sister in a letter first because he felt closer to them. His sister was accepting right away, and when his mom read the letter, she did not understand and said she was not ready to call him Brett or use he/him pronouns *yet*, but that she still loved him no matter what. The men of the family were much slower to accept it. His father refused to talk about or acknowledge it until a couple of years later but did eventually come around. Other male relatives, mostly devout

Methodists, however, have yet to acknowledge the hurtful things they said and did to Brett and no apologies have been exchanged for all the fights (66).

Moving past the lack of accountability and respect from his male relatives, Brett began hormone replacement therapy once he saved up enough money to start it, as HRT is not covered under most insurance plans in the United States. His parents also declined any financial help with a medical process they said he would regret and did not see the harm in just dressing how he wanted and waiting until he "knew for sure" to start anything "drastic." Considering Brett was already an adult and had been thinking this over for years with horrible gender dysphoria, this was just a projection of them not being ready to accept their child being transgender. I also must agree with Brett when he says, regarding the concrete changes he needed to see, that "testosterone is the only thing that could make those changes a reality...[and] that necessity is something...only trans people really understand" (75). He began wearing a binder which, he says, was "the most uncomfortable thing I've ever put on my body, but...it was the first thing that made me feel any semblance of comfort existing in my own body" (75). Also important to note is Brett was able to save up enough money for HRT, and eventually top surgery, because of his sorority friends pre-coming out, fundraising for him at their parties. He admits he was incredibly uncomfortable, at first, asking for help because he felt ashamed of failing to provide for himself and thought people would judge him as a man (77).

Once he was on testosterone for several months, he started to become interested in his body in a non-hateful way for the first time. He liked seeing hair sprouted on his face and legs, his hairline changing, his arms getting thicker, because he was finally starting to feel like he *knew* and recognized his own body. He never ascribed to the *trapped in the wrong body* trans discourse—as his body always felt like it belonged to him—he believes he was simply born into "a body that needed to make a transition to be fully itself" (75). After two months being on testosterone, Brett had his top surgery—a double mastectomy—and woke up just in time to see the fireworks go off outside his hospital room for the Fourth of July; prior to surgery, he thought

he would feel well enough to actually go to the fireworks, but he was far too sore to go anywhere for a while. Through the initial discomfort of surgical recovery, he felt an immense wave of personal liberation; he refers to July 4, 2013, as “his own Independence Day” (84-5). The first few weeks after surgery were extremely hard for him, as he was not used to relying on others for everything. He could not lift his arms up, lift any weight, push or pull doors, sleep laying down, empty his drains or change his bandages, and he acknowledges how privileged he was to have his mother take care of him through the whole recovery process (85-6).

For a while, Brett would look at his scars and think “real men didn’t have those scars on their chests” (87). It took a lot of support from his friends, and eventual partner, to realize those scars did not make him less of a man. They are survival scars that show the path from where he has been and how he got where he is today, and when his partner rests her hands on them and says she loves him, he finally believes her (88). The process of getting to this level of acceptance was a long one. There were conditions of being a man that he did not expect, such as the social expectations to change the way he walked and talked, to hold doors open for women, to always pay the whole bill on dates, and to not enjoy “girl shows” like *Pretty Little Liars* (98). He even found videos online of trans men giving advice on how to *pass* as a man, such as flat-lined voice inflections, walk “manly,” take up more space in public such as sitting with legs open and shoulder back, and to only date feminine cisgender women (99-100). He knew he should not have to do all these things to be read as a “real man,” but he was also understandably terrified of the very real, potentially lethal consequences of not doing them and getting clocked as transgender. But Brett is a queer trans man, and the whole point of becoming *Brett* was so he could be himself; the man that he was expected to be pushed further away from his authentic self. For a while, Brett was proud to be a trans man but found it difficult to admit he was not a manly, heterosexual trans man who only chases after women (102).

Brett admits he used to make a lot of gay jokes and thought it was okay because he was transgender, until a friend confronted him and said that self-deprecating humor was just hiding

another part of himself and that an attraction to men did not make him any less of a man (103). It was only then that he realized that throughout his years of proudly transitioning, he had been re-socialized in ways, he says, he is not proud of (105). The biggest take-away from this learning experience for Brett was this: "If we don't naturally fit into the "ideal" man or woman, then it's not really ideal for us" (107). This flips hegemonic masculinity on its head and reclaims *manhood* as whatever trans men—and cis-men—want it to be. This is where the United Methodist Church could learn a thing or two about what it really means to be a "man of God," and it starts with Christian men opening their hearts to the kind of *manhood* God has in store for them. Just because the Bible says we are all sheep and Jesus is the Shepherd, does not mean every sheep has to look and act the same way, or that the Shepherd punishes any sheep for wandering off down a different path. That wandering sheep—or Christian—is following where they feel naturally inclined to go. Jesus will check on them and make sure they know their way back to the flock when danger arises, but He will never strike the one who lets themselves explore more of His beautiful world than just the same pasture they were born into.

In our unfortunate reality, this self-exploration is beautiful, yet also a great privilege. Brett is lucky to have supportive friends and female family members standing in solidarity with him who give him the space to experience this kind of exploration. He knows he has loving people to fall back on when this exploration leads him toward painful experiences, some necessary, others heart wrenching (108-9). He has the social, financial, and geographical/legal privileges to use HRT, have surgeries, and make changes in legal documentation. And these privileges, whether we like to admit it or not, thicken our wool and sharpen our horns to stave off predators, like ignorant wolves. There are many trans men who either do not want HRT/surgeries or do not have access to them for a multitude of systemic reasons. But those trans men should not be seen as less of a man than those who do; and more of both secular and Christian society needs to recognize that (109). Like Brett says, we need to stop assuming men need to have a penis and present in restricted ways to have their manhood and their humanity

respected. We need to advocate for all trans *and* cis men's right to bodily autonomy and freedom to present however feels natural for them. Hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic theology hurts cis men, too (110). When even a cis man faces potential threats of violence/harassment for crying or simply telling their male friends they love them platonically, our society has a problem. When a cis man feels the need to lie about how many women they have slept with to maintain respect with their peers, our society has a problem. When cis men feel like they cannot reach out for professional mental health help without losing respect in their church or in their workplace, our entire society has a massive problem with hegemonic gender ideology that *everyone* has a responsibility to work towards eradicating. This includes people of *all* sexes and gender identities. This is not just a trans-man issue, or a cis-man issue; it is a cis-women's issue, a trans-women's issue, a non-binary person's issue, and so on.

It is also a Christian issue because if Christians want to claim we are meant to love and protect each other from evil, we need to put our prayers where our mouths are and speak God's love into action. God's love is not anti-queer/trans; it is anti-queer/transphobia. We see this illustrated in the dozens of Bible verses regarding love, including:

- Let all that you do be done with love. (1 Corinthians 16:14)
- And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him. (1 John 4:16)
- This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. (John 15:12)
- Neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-9)
- If someone says, 'I love God' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for if he does not love his brother, whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? (1 John 4:20)

We need to let *all* men feel God’s love in their lives, whatever that looks and feels like for them. We need to give *all* men the right to feel, period. When men are not allowed to feel anything besides anger, the number of men resorting to acts of violence, whether it be against family, partners, or complete strangers, is horrifying but not surprising (Huguet & Lewis-Laietmark, 2015). It is horrifying the number of cis-het men suffering at the hands of the opioid crisis (Judd et. al., 2023). And it is terribly sad, but not surprising the steadily increasing number of cis-het men taking their own lives, and usually by the most gruesome methods (Leung et. al., 2019). It took a long time before Brett felt ready “to be in a relationship with people who truly wanted to know [him]...It was a love [he] had never before let [him]self feel” (134). The reason Brett was able to get to that place in his life was because he finally realized he did not need to know what it meant to "be a man" in society or his church; he just needed to be himself (112), how only he knows in his personal relationship with God. In learning to laugh and breathe through all past mistakes, failures, and heartbreaks (119), he finally experienced the queer liberation God had in store for him, as He does for all queer Christians. His transitions to get to this point—both medical and spiritual—were not immediate. It took time and repetitive gender affirmations from family, friends, and supportive members of his Methodist congregation; it took his male friends talking to him “like all of the guys” (160). Without affirmation, he would never have known it was okay to be *Brett*, the queer, trans man God intended him to be.

Trans Boomer: A Memoir of My Journey from Female to Male by Lee Jay

Interstices of Identity & Influential Family Background

Lee Jay wrote his memoir because growing up, there was a void of trans stories with few publishing houses even considering the odd trans person who wanted to publicly share their story; he does not want that for the next generations. Upon publishing in 2015, Lee was 58 years old, and identifies as a white, American, multi-disabled, middle class, ex-Jehovah’s Witness, transgender man who, like Brett, struggles with depression and anxiety, from medical

exhaustion and losing friends in the AIDS epidemic. His native tongue is English. Lee never explicitly labels his sexuality but discusses intimate connections with straight cis women and gay cis men. Lee is single by the end of the memoir but remains open to whatever love comes into his life. Lee admits he used alcohol for similar reasons to Brett, but never labels it as addiction, explaining that drinking at a young age was the norm for his generation.

Lee grew up middle class, but his parents (from the Silent Generation, 1925-1945) grew up in poverty before having him and his sister, and his father was an alcoholic before they were born. Lee did not go to college right after high school because he barely passed grade 12, did not know what he was good at, and was still dealing with undiagnosed illnesses. He grew up with and still manages concurrent physical and cognitive disabilities, spending much of his life in the hospital. Congenital defects include no eustachian tubes, poor eyesight, and an autoimmune disorder resulting in frequent and severe opportunistic ear infections, strep throat, and sinus infections. Once he thought his ailments were under control, he enrolled in college in January of 1979. But after one semester, he was back in the hospital after collapsing at work, requiring surgery to remove a severely inflamed double ureter on his right kidney. This was the cause of his chronic bladder infections, blood in his urine, and a seizure disorder. The surgery improved his overall health, but it meant taking a year off from work and school to regain feeling and full use of his torso through rest and physical therapy, and, subsequently, normal concentration levels after being pumped full of medications for years pre- and post-surgery.

Upon recovery, he returned to college and declared a major in business to support himself to not return to physically demanding jobs. In 1983, he left his hometown to complete his final two years of college in a bigger city, hoping to find an accepting community on campus and anonymity off campus. He graduated with a business degree in 1985, in the first surge of the AIDS epidemic. With limited formal education, Lee found himself working a variety of hands-on jobs in the 70s to support himself without his birth family. He began full-time non-profit work in the mid-80s with his chosen family, the Centurions, a gay biker gang formed in 1978 by gay

military veterans who wanted to keep that military camaraderie without the homophobia, who also helped HIV+ and other marginalized men via financial support with the proceeds from drag shows, and emotional support in a system/country that relentlessly dehumanized them.

Religious Background & Perceptions of Jehovah's Witnesses:

Lee was raised as a Jehovah's Witness, but eventually left the faith to become a non-denominational Christian. He views JWs as an isolationist doomsday cult, and wants nothing to do with it, as it promotes dangerous, harmful theology that robbed him of so much knowledge and years of personal development that he had to make up for via therapy. Jehovah's Witnesses was founded in 1874 by Charles Taze Russell. Lee is the third generation of JW in both parents' lineage. JW, a minority sect of Christianity, has its members living vastly different lives from their neighbors. Scriptural doctrine is passed down from the governing authority—Watchtower Bible & Tract Society—and is to be followed without question (19).

Answers to any questions about how to live a life approved by Jehovah are in the scriptures. Lee believes this method of learning produces black and white thinking, with zero room for other sources of information. The Watchtower Bible & Tract Society dictates that every member's social world must revolve around strictly family and the congregation. Parents are responsible for rearing children into disciplined followers of Jehovah. A parent's status in the congregation depends on how well their children mature and whether they remain active in the religion. If parents' children leave the JW, the parents experience perpetual shame and embarrassment (20). This is because JWs are taught to see this as a failure, with their kids' actual blood on their hands come Armageddon. To lose a child to the secular or alternative faith world—out of Jehovah's flock—is to permanently scar the parents' moral record with Jehovah.

Hence, JW parents take great care to isolate their kids from the world. The number one method of choice is homeschooling. Parents who use public schools (like Lee's parents) denigrate them, emphasizing every morning that only 'The Society' teaches the Truth. Lee's

parents also told him he would not graduate before Armageddon arrived anyway and tried channeling him into vocational education and jobs with minimal responsibility. This allows for mandated, paid full-time service to proselytizing—converting as many people as possible to Jehovah’s flock before Armageddon hits (21-2).

Families in the JW community take turns hosting the weekly Bible study meetings in their homes. Each meeting begins with a prayer, typically recited by the man of whichever house is hosting the meeting, followed by reading of a complimentary textbook to the Bible. Discussion follows around the book of Revelation. Finally, there is a round-robin reading, one paragraph per attendee of the text, followed by questions on the material read (23-4). Jehovah’s Witnesses support the patriarchy, as husbands are to be obeyed by their wives, just as they obey Jehovah. Any civic involvement is forbidden, as it violates scriptural doctrine where Jesus says in the Bible that His followers are not part of this world, therefore Jehovah’s people are not meant to be part of the secular world (32). Lee notes that times were different when he was growing up. Homosexuality was still illegal and deemed a mental illness, with no mother wanting that sinful life for her child (41-2). The congregation Lee grew up in was, however, racially/geographically diverse, including Hispanics, African Americans, and Canadians. His mother regularly studied the Bible with a Hispanic family of migrant workers who lived in extreme poverty (55).

One childhood memory that reinforces Lee’s views on JWs was when he was leaving a JW convention in Yankee Stadium and saw a group of ex-Jehovah’s Witnesses forming a picket line to pass out pamphlets describing the religion as a dangerous cult. Lee was ordered to not even look at them (68-9). As a teen, he was going through normal teenage physical development, but emotional/psychological development—making mistakes, learning life lessons, and gradually maturing over time—is denied by the Society. JW youths are expected to mature instantly into young adults ready to serve Jehovah without any natural exploratory teen development (80). Life as Lee knew it was going to end in five years anyway with the alleged Armageddon, so thinking ahead was not possible. He learned from an early age to keep his true

thoughts to himself to avoid punishment. Everything he knew about himself was wrong, perverted and forbidden at home, so why bother exploring when it would all soon be over? (86).

Lee's life went on autopilot, just putting one foot in front of the other. He was going through life full of fear because of JW fear mongering (97). It was not until he graduated high school and left Kansas—since the scheduled Armageddon never happened—that he was able to take refuge from the world in gay bars to escape the hatred of coworkers, family, and society at large, including extreme hostile backlash from religious groups (139). Lee began teaching in a junior high where hatred excelled in a learning environment. In the early 80s at the onset of the AIDS epidemic, politicians were condoning gay bashing on live television. Whenever a gay man died of AIDS, the funeral service was conducted as families wanted, their Christian agenda enforced. Men whose lovers had just died had their home taken by the family of the deceased because they had no rights under marriage laws dictated by Catholicism or civil laws (175-6).

Lee vividly remembers seeing dehumanizing slogans put on T-shirts such as, "Gay = Got AIDS Yet?" and "Kill a Queer for Christ" (183). Killing in the name of the Christian God has been happening for centuries, but it has always been the will of ignorant or deliberately malevolent people, not God. Millions of people were killed worldwide largely because of a sense of moral failing attached to the disease. In North America, thousands died of AIDS because of the alt-Christian right's influence on public opinion and access to information, particularly the Catholic Church. When governments failed to protect their citizens, LGBTQIA+ organizations like ACT-UP, Queer Nation, and the Lesbian Avengers tirelessly researched, advocated, fundraised, and protested on behalf of those dying from a disease that both politicians and religious leaders were blaming their "lifestyle" for contracting. Lee lost numerous friends to AIDS followed by an endless line of funerals with families that mercilessly ripped away all belongings, money, and homes the surviving partner shared with the deceased because same-sex couples had no marital or common-law rights (184). Religion was violently weaponized to degrade and dehumanize innocent people who just wanted to love who they loved, live a normal,

happy life, and die with dignity. The people who blasphemed the name of God for such monstrous acts are the ones who should be begging for God's mercy. Claiming 100% certainty of God's Will in any matter is *boastful arrogance*, which is prohibited in scripture.

Viewpoints on Masculinity & Manhood:

As young as five, Lee noticed how his sister and female friends seemed to feel at home in their bodies, which heightened his feelings of discomfort in his, especially when it came to clothing. He grew up in the 60s with parents who wanted him to be a proper, feminine daughter: soft, dainty, barely present, take small steps, and grow up to be in the home raising children while supporting their future husband's career. Lee remembers how appalled he was at this being the only option provided to him and his sister (11). His father was an alcoholic and had a mistress, which he felt he deserved in return for financially supporting the family. His father's entire friend group was men who also drank heavily and cheated on their wives because male privilege within Jehovah's Witnesses—and 60s hegemonic Christian masculine society—allowed it; it was simply the norm (16). His father would go on to lead this double life for over a decade.

At the Jehovah's Witnesses Kingdom Hall, only men are allowed to speak during the service, and scriptural doctrine—hegemonic masculinity/hegemonic theology—justified this rule. Men are the head of their families, with women and children in subservient positions (22). The customary dress code—in Kingdom services and home Bible studies—was strictly gendered: suits and ties for the men and boys, dresses or skirts for the women and girls. All service and meeting prayers are read aloud by men, and group readings and discussions are also dictated by the Watchtower Bible & Tract Society, all of whom are men (23-4). When Lee's father was leading a Bible study in his home, he would often need to discuss private topics with the male elders present, which meant sending all the women and girls out of the room (24). As Lee was raised as a girl, he always went with the women into the kitchen at this time. Though children—female or male—were not permitted to speak with company over unless spoken to, Lee

says he felt honored to get to listen to the women talk as he learned a lot of information which he still carries with him today. As noted earlier, Jehovah's Witnesses are against abortion, gay and trans people, smoking, blood transfusion, and organ donation, as JW's believe all of these equally contaminate Creation (26-7). But none of these things—except literal contamination of the lungs from smoking—contaminate Creation. This rule only holds power over JW's because the religion itself is contaminated by hegemonic norms influenced by centuries of Catholicism's hegemonic masculine conditioning disguised as sacred theology.

Jehovah's Witnesses follow very traditional Western hegemonic gender expectations of men: make a salary that is enough to support a wife and kids (presuming the wife does not work outside the home as is preferred under JW "unwritten rules"), never show weakness in front of family, and to "man up" to handle the pressures such expectations put on a man. Women have no rights, are to be submissive, stay home with the kids, assume their position in the domain of motherhood, and respect the unspoken code of silence for wives of the 60s (43-4). Of course, Lee was a gender non-conforming kid who regularly got corporally punished for failing to adhere to the rules of hegemonic femininity. Part of this punishment would include capitalizing on features of the "feminine domain." Lee would be forced into extra cooking, sewing, raising his naturally deep voice, wearing dainty dresses, taking up less space, and even practicing balancing a book on his head for better posture and poise (47-8). In 1967, Lee distinctly remembers getting his first period and how shocked and dysphoric he was to be "entering womanhood" that quickly. He hated the horrible cramps, the nuisance of sanitary belts (before pads or tampons existed), and how much more self-conscious he felt about his body. But what he hated the most was the physiological signal of female fertility: he did not and still does not want kids (50).

As an adult, Lee has no doubt that JW conventions attract male predators, as younger JW's of all gender identities are known for their naïveté from being isolated from the general, non-JW population. In 1970, at Lee's first JW convention in NYC, he was riding the subway with his mother when he felt a full erection against his butt from the stranger behind him. When he

tried to move away and stomp on the man's foot to make it stop, his mother told him that his behavior was not ladylike and to stay put until they arrived at their stop. That man got off the train before them but was quickly replaced by another man running his hand over Lee's bare thigh, moving under his skirt (67-8). He felt so ashamed and embarrassed by this sexual assault because his mother's dismissive reaction reinforced a shame narrative around being a sexual assault victim, rather than shaming the person who chose to victimize someone.

Come fifth grade, Lee became more curious about his sexuality and kissed the girl next door, followed by asking her: "What if I told you, I'm not a girl but really a boy" (59). Unsurprisingly, the ten-year-old girl ran out of the house screaming and told her mother, who then told Lee's mother. He went home that night to a beating and more forced feminization for the next two weeks. Because Lee grew up in an isolationist cult, he had not learned about consent or personal boundaries yet; something that happens far too often with kids who grow up in ultra-conservative Christian households that stifle any proper sex education. Such households intentionally withhold such education because teaching consent and boundaries arms young people with the tools to critically question their environment. It was not until Lee reached high school that he began researching this information on his own, which he got caught doing and was punished yet again for seeking information outside the cult. It was also not until high school that he was walking through a San Francisco art exhibit after a JW convention day that he was exposed to photos and paintings depicting gay love and sex. He was punished for not immediately averting his eyes, but he fondly remembers this as the moment he finally knew he was not alone or insane for his developing sexuality (77).

Unfortunately, this moment was clouded over for the next couple of years when he was trapped in his parents' home. He knew to avoid further punishments, he had to assimilate and hide his true gender and sexuality, and at one point, this led him to the edge of a bridge one block from his school. He thought suicide would put him out of his misery—physical punishments, low self-esteem, poor health, anxiously waiting for Armageddon—but as he stared

down at the water below, he paused. What if he survived? He would be in even worse health than he already was and would rely on his abusive family as his caretakers. He decided against suicide and started drinking and smoking with his school friends; it was easy to obtain alcohol when most parents, including his alcoholic father, always had a fully stocked liquor cabinet that he was too drunk to keep track of missing bottles (87). But no amount of drinking was going to fix the underlying problems. Lee was struggling with controlling his anger, depression, and declining physical health. He was constantly exhausted—both physically and mentally—with a complete void of information on LGBTQIA+ people like himself, just negative news stories about another gay or trans person being killed or arrested (111-2). He knew if he was ever going to get out of his hometown and finally meet people who would embrace him, he would need to be able to support himself with zero help. He wanted nothing to do with heterosexual marriage, nothing to do with fights over money, power, and sex like his parents had (65). Independence was especially crucial with no gay rights in the 70s; he could not have the marital/civil rights only heterosexual marriage offered at the time. Still, he tried “flirting” with being female for a bit longer, even trying to date men, but that only ended in an attempted date rape, which ended any attempts to bond with straight men for years (114).

He began college in the 80s in a bigger city and met other gay people at gay clubs. He finally had hope that he could survive as his true self because he finally had support (112-3). But then the AIDS epidemic started killing off many of his friends. He stayed strong with the remaining friends he had from the New Jersey Centurions—a gay biker club that was started in 78’ by gay veterans who wanted to rekindle the best parts of military camaraderie in a safe, embracing environment. The Centurions abided by a code of honor: respect, honesty, integrity, responsibility, and looking out for their fellow gay brothers (161-2). Prior to legal name change, and despite not being able to access legal gender change because of his disabilities and financial barrier to surgery, Lee was the first trans man to be invited into this club. They worked tirelessly to raise money for their brothers dying of AIDS, whom the State did not care about. This club

fostered a healthier brotherhood than any cis-heteronormative biker club, gang, or fraternity. The Centurions exemplified a type of queered masculinity that fostered respect and an openness to love other men as friends and partners without their masculinity being called into question.

Lee attended his first trans convention in the mid-80s, where he was finally able to meet other trans men and access LGBTQIA+ information that he had been deprived of. He noticed trans women far outnumbered trans men once he started mingling; when he introduced himself as a trans man, even other trans people did not believe he could have a female body under his suit (157). Moving past this disbelief from his own community, he made deep connections with other trans men he never thought possible. He notes learning about diversity in the trans male community: how each of them “took a different journey to discover we were in the wrong body...a different journey to correct the wrong body...and a different journey yet again to decide when and how to educate the world about our lives” (147), only sharing a collective bond of identifying as trans men. My only critique is the lack of diversity in assuming all trans men naturally ascribe to the *born in the wrong body that needs fixing* trans discourse. Some trans men do, but others do not, or do but only in medical settings because it is the only trans narrative that meets medical gatekeepers’ criteria for access to gender affirming care. But he was working with the knowledge he had at the time, coming from a very restricted background.

By the beginning of the 90s, Lee was in his early 30s and decided to join the National Leather Association (NLA) which was founded in 87’ after the March on Washington for gay rights. The NLA offered him the opportunity to explore inner kinks and fetishes and expand his sexuality in a safe environment with like-minded pro-LGBTQIA+ people. He was yet again on the fringe of society with queer/transphobic cis-heteronormative people labeling everyone in the NLA as dangerous and deviant. But those attitudes were exactly why the NLA does what it does to this day: educate to slay the fear of the unknown (155). The NLA educates people on the difference between kinky and abusive sex, how to negotiate what you want during sex, and creating a safe word with your partner(s) to respect each other’s boundaries, and much more. It

was the NLA that coined the healthy BDSM creed *Safe, Sane, & Consensual* (156). Rather than being dangerous, Lee asserts that the NLA promotes healthier sex than most of the public school system does for teens. The NLA helped Lee develop a more expansive understanding of healthy male sex and sexuality than most men are ever exposed to—both cis and trans, straight and gay.

Lee discusses his gender and sexuality through strangers' assumptions. If he is with an openly gay male friend, people assume he is a gay cis man. If he is with a lesbian who "appears straight," people assume he is a straight man. How the world sees Lee varies depending on perceptions of who he is with and how much experience the person observed has with people outside the cis male/female binary. It is common for Lee to be addressed as Sir and Miss on the same day (198). This is something I find in my transition and how I am perceived when I am with my partner who faces the same varied gender assumptions from strangers regularly.

Finally, Lee acknowledges that, while he has no desire to return to womanhood, he feels honored to have lived as *both* genders and believes everyone embodies some mixture of masculinity *and* femininity. While it is becoming more widely accepted in the Western LGBTQIA+ community that there are more than two genders, Lee is coming from experiences with gender from a different generation and notes the rise in younger generations choosing to "abandon constricting gender markers" (215). His journey of exploring masculinity began in a world of gay men performing in drag before today's notion of political correctness. He lived through a time when the term *cross-dresser* was the PC term replacing words like *tranny* and *hermaphrodite*. When celebrities transitioned, society saw their struggles through medical transition, finding happiness when the medical process was "complete" (218-9). It is becoming more accepted—though not entirely—to identify as trans without surgery or hormones. We are starting to understand the biocentrism and ableism in expecting trans people to utilize medical intervention to be "authentically" trans. Lee has no interest in assimilating into heteronormative society, urging trans folks to find a place in the world, comfort themselves, change what they can and survive as best they can (219). *That* is embracing the validity of trans masculinity.

ANALYSIS

The following is the narrative analysis of Brett and Lee's memoirs, broken down into the six tenets of hegemonic theology (HT) and hegemonic gender ideology (HGI), and the resulting guilt, shame and/or violence they experienced because of it.

Brett Ray

Tenet 1-HT: Followers held to rigid, unyielding system of beliefs

In Brett's narrative, two examples of being held to a rigid, unyielding system of beliefs within the United Methodist Church include when he first came out as trans online and when he was coming to terms with his ineligibility to be a United Methodist pastor. Brett first decided to come out as a trans man on social media before telling his family, who he did not give access to his online profile. While he received several messages of support and affirmation, he also read a lot of private messages to his inbox steeped in non-affirming hegemonic theology: "It didn't take long for the private messages to flood in. Some of them asked if they had missed something, some asked detailed questions, others offered words of support, and still others told me I was confused and that this wasn't what God wanted for my life" (47). As Brett said earlier in his story, as a little kid, he did not have language yet to understand he was trans, but he knew with 100% certainty that he was not a girl. He always believed in God and was told that God loved him, long before he came out as trans. Brett wondered how these people in his private messages could know what God does or does not want for his life when his gender identity never interfered with his faith in God before coming out to others.

The unyielding belief some Christians have of claiming to know what God wants for all people without considering the diversity in God's human creation, suggests Christian churches would benefit from incorporating intersectionality and queer theology into their sermons. If Christianity preaches God to be an Almighty higher power who created everything on Earth, this

means God created millions of species, landscapes, and complex ecosystems, many of which, we have yet to discover. Additionally, Christianity preaches of the *endless mysteries of God*, especially when discussing more complex phenomena or unexplainable human experiences. If holding both beliefs, it is not feasible that an individual Christian could be capable of foreseeing what God wants for every other person on this Earth, including trans Christians.

The same conclusion can be argued against Brett's home United Methodist Church. The UMC's official stance on LGBTQIA+ people is that being gay, lesbian, or trans is incompatible with Christian teaching, and "being a practicing gay or lesbian disqualifies you from being an ordained pastor" (148). Cheng's (2011) lesson on the second source of queer theology—queer tradition—informs us that the beliefs an individual church's leader teaches their congregation are that church leader's personal, biased beliefs, and do not automatically correlate with God's rule over all of humanity. The fourth source of queer theology—queer experience—evinces humans' capacity to observe things through the five senses God gave us, which include the observation—in whatever physical capacity any given Christian holds—of multiple church leaders, within the same UMC denomination, preaches LGBTQIA+-affirming theology to their congregations. Therefore, there is no merit to anti-LGBTQIA+ theology based on "tradition."

Tenet 1-HGI: Resolute desire for power & control by weaponizing/using masculinity for gain

In Brett's narrative, one example of a resolute desire for power and control or using masculinity for gain includes his make-believe play as a child. As a kid, long before Brett came out or knew he was trans, he would use make-believe play with his friends to temporarily escape the gender expectations of being socialized to be a girl. No matter what version of *house* or *cops and robbers* he and his friends were playing, Brett always played the "badass oldest brother." (27). What remained consistent, Brett says, was that his make-believe name was always *Brett*. While this is not an example of a constant desire for power and control over others or using

masculinity to gain something over others, it is an example of Brett using masculinity—even if just during make-believe—to feel some sense of temporary control of his own identity.

bell hooks' concept of feminist masculinity warns us of being quick to discard manhood and masculinity simply because of the damage caused by hegemonic masculinity that Brett experienced early on in his transition. In *The Will to Change* (2004b), hooks advocates for feminist masculinity as a “constructive alternative to patriarchal masculinity,” and any attempt to eradicate the concept of masculinity just “furthers the notion that there is something inherently evil, bad, or unworthy about maleness” (hooks, 2004b). Hooks provides the following framework for actualizing a feminist masculinity in everyday life:

To offer men a different way of being, we must first replace the dominator model with a partnership model that sees interbeing and interdependency as the organic relationship of all living beings...selfhood, whether one is female or male, is always at the core of one's identity. Patriarchal masculinity teaches males to be pathologically narcissistic, infantile, and psychologically dependent for self-definition on the privileges (however relative) that they receive from having been born male...male identity like its female counterpart would be centered around the notion of an essential goodness that is inherently relationally oriented. (hooks, 2004b, qtd. in Almassi, 2015).

Replacing the dominator model with a partnership model of masculinity would allow Brett, and other trans men, to prioritize who they know themselves to be over others' perception of what a man "should be." This model would help him break free from the biocentric, internalized transphobia that says trans men can never be real men because they were not born into unearned male privilege. This model would show him the essential goodness of his gender identity, no matter what identity it is, that is relationally oriented, whereby all man-to-man friendships are based in interconnectedness over constant competition to prove one's manhood to people who should care about you for you, not how you measure up to them.

While wanting control over one's self-expression is not an example of hegemonic gender ideology, the male characters Brett chose to embody derive from internalized hegemonic gender ideology, particularly hegemonic masculinity. Pretending to be a weightlifter juggling multiple girlfriends shows internalization of a HGI that expects men to be physically strong, avoid emotional attachments, and to view women as trophies to be won as opposed to human beings. Believing that to play make-believe as a smart student who becomes a college professor or a writer, one must be male, shows internalization of a HGI that says women are intellectually inferior to men and do not have what it takes to become professors in higher education or successful authors. Pretending to be a broke, male drug addict is a sad internalization of a HGI that bears an unfortunate reality of the addict community, that on average, consists of more men than women; interestingly enough, this character was foreshadowing for Brett's eventual real-life alcoholism. The make-believe characters also play into the structural and cultural domains of power, in that, coming to embody any of these identities is largely determined by one's position in the structural hierarchy of social institutions such as the job market, housing, education, and health, and the cultural ideology that competition in these social institutions is fair and results in a natural pattern of winners and losers.

Tenet 2-HT: Producing cognitive dissonance, contradicting & conflicting dogmas

In Brett's narrative, two examples of producing cognitive dissonance in a faith's followers include the United Methodist Church's hypocrisy regarding helping the less fortunate and giving out mixed signals in relation to the rules on God's condemnation. From as far back as he can remember, Brett always wanted to be a pastor in the United Methodist Church because he had been active in the church in multiple capacities his entire life and felt called to ministry. However, the ministry he wanted to provide was in stark contrast to the UMC's current mandates: "We asked those in need to come to the church for assistance rather than taking assistance to them...It was disconcerting to me how...queer people were being chased out of the

church rather than welcomed in...there is a major disconnect between the church and the people we claim to want to serve” (143). Transfeminist theory evinces the discrepancy between feeling *at home* in God’s house in a queer Christian’s heart and feeling *unhoused* by other Christians’ effortless, cis-het, often white, able-bodied, middle- to upper-class conditional acceptance into one of God’s many public houses, i.e., churches.

Brett is also revealing the UMC—and countless others’—lack of integrity to the poor that they claim to want to serve in Jesus’ name. Most churches do *some* community work where a few members of the congregation and/or the minister will go out to a nursing home or a hospital to bring communion or some other sort of spiritual assistance to those they deem the "less fortunate." However, this is done sparsely considering the resources they have available. Rather than follow in Jesus’ footsteps to help *anyone* in need, no matter how "uncomfortable" the circumstances might make the helper feel, Brett is saddened to see the UMC helping with the least amount of effort, discomfort, and financial resources necessary, and then proceeding to thank God for blessing them with the opportunity to do His good work.

Brett believes in conducting a ministry that embodies both body and Black theology. Practical, as well as spiritual help, should be brought directly to those in the community who need it but never receive it because society at large puts all the blame on them for their homelessness, addiction, sex work, all the above, and more. Just as Jesus’ disciples did not turn away in horror upon seeing Jesus’ wounds after the resurrection, Christians cannot turn away in horror upon seeing the reality of our world today. Trans people are most often the ones helping other trans people when most cisgender people turn a blind eye. And it is also most often that same trans person who steps in to help the cis person who would ignore them if they knew the person helping them was trans. Black people are most often the ones helping other Black people when most white people would turn a blind eye. And it is most often that same Black person who steps in to help the white person who would normally ignore a Black person’s needs but is now in need themselves. Piepzna-Samarasinha asserts—as she does for BIPOC and LGBTQIA+

peoples— “the disabled and sick are discovering new ways to build power within themselves and each other [and] at the same time, those powers remain at risk in this fragile political climate in which we find ourselves” (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). If every church helped carry the weight of ignorance and hatred, instead of perpetuating it, and stood in solidarity with *all* these marginalized groups, the Church would finally exude a level of compassion that truly embodies Jesus’ dying wish for humanity: “Love one another; as I have loved you. By this all will know that you are My disciples if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35). For a "Christian" to view a marginalized person’s life as incompatible with Christian teaching denies this commandment and forfeits one’s identity as a disciple of Jesus.

Tenet 2-HGI: Subordinate, degrade & devalue any challenge to cis-het masculine discourse

In Brett’s narrative, one example of subordinating, degrading, or devaluing anything that challenges the cis-heteronormative discourse is his difficulty accepting his own queer masculinity, even after coming to terms with being a trans man. In 2014, he began to become aware that he is a trans man with an attraction to not only cis women, but also cis men and genderqueer people. He says: “It was surprising to me how hard of a pill that was to swallow...I was incredibly proud to be a trans man, but it was still unfortunately difficult for me to admit I wasn't a heterosexual trans man. There's a strange expectation that to be a good man is to be a heterosexual, manly man who chases after women all of his life” (102). Though Brett never belittled other queer men for their sexuality, it took him a bit longer to come to terms with the fact that both his own gender *and* his own sexuality were not the HGI norm. This is at least partly because, if he were heterosexual, he could still maintain the heterosexual privilege and cultural legibility that comes with "successfully" embodying hegemonic masculinity.

Brett admits he used to make a lot of gay jokes behind closed doors as well and thought it was okay because he was part of the LGBTQIA+ community. But then, through a conversation with his best friend about *why* he was making those jokes, he realized it was simply a self and

community-deprecating way of identifying another truth about himself: “I had someone to remind me that an attraction to men doesn't make me any less of a man” (103). Intersectionally speaking, Brett finally realized that he was abiding to a very essentialized, limiting category of manhood that excluded not only queer men like himself, but queer racialized men, queer disabled men, queer immigrant men, queer older men, queer impoverished men, and queer men from any combination of these interstices of identity. Brett was openly challenging the cis-het masculine discourse that denied queer men entry to the church, while simultaneously denying the right to challenge this discourse for himself.

Tenet 3-HT: All questioning discouraged/silenced

In Brett's narrative, one example of all questioning being discouraged and silenced was part of a diversity panel during orientation at Duke Divinity School. When a friend of Brett's asked if LGBTQIA+ students were safe at Duke to openly express themselves, faculty members gave affirming answers, but the Dean clarified that it was not a LGBTQIA+-affirming institution, and no further questions were allowed (150). While this upset Brett, he decided he was not going to let one person dictate his ability to earn a degree in divinity. The dean's decision to reiterate anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric and deny further dialogue on behalf of the whole academic institution was based on abuse of "tradition" and scripture and was completely unacceptable. Tying this incident to the disciplinary domain of power (Dill & Zambrana, 2009), the dean effectively told the entire incoming class that if something were to happen to an LGBTQIA+ student on campus that risked their safety, the people responsible would not be held accountable.

This form of silencing can be tied directly to rape culture on university campuses—and religious academic institutions are not immune, no matter how much they preach to the contrary. This is a social issue pervasive across Christian institutions around the world—grade schools, post-secondary schools, and churches, alike—that rarely see justice carried out for its victims. Silencing survivors is a social issue that fails to be addressed by Christian leaders across

structural, cultural, disciplinary, and interpersonal domains of power, within and between their institutions. And queer and trans Christians are not spared from the destruction disguised as what Brett so eloquently named, "holy conferencing," wherein the people negatively and disproportionately affected are completely barred from public conversations that ensue after such horrors, and strategies for damage control are created for the sole protection of the perpetrators of the hate-driven violence and the religious institutions that house their horrors (i.e., on-going sexual abuse of minors by clergy, denying the possibility of marital rape, publicly denouncing the death penalty—even after thousands of unmarked graves of Indigenous children on former Residential school properties—condoning conversion therapy despite the 100% failure rate and resulting suicides, et cetera, et cetera).

Tenet 3-HGI: Must prove manhood, esp. through callous sex attitudes, fetishizing danger

In Brett's narrative, two instances of feeling the need to prove one's manhood are the unexpected conditions suddenly imposed on him by friends after coming out and coming to terms with the internalized anatomical conditions trans men impose on themselves. When he realized he was a man, he also learned that he had no idea what it meant to be a man. Upon beginning his transition, people in his life started expecting big changes in the way he lived that would make him a "real man," but none of these likes, dislikes, interests, or behaviors are inherently masculine or feminine, and by extension, neither male nor female attributes. For a while, he tried to make the suggested changes, but soon came to understand that the whole reason for transitioning was to be more authentically himself, and trying to fit into more gender ideals that were not ideal for him was to go against that authenticity.

Brett started giving himself permission to identify with a counter-hegemonic narrative around masculinity that did not rely on mutually exclusive male and female attributes or interests. This included anatomy as well: "Only when we stop assuming that all men should have penises and present themselves in particular ways will we even begin to care for the lives of trans

men...Not all cisgender men align well with the male gender expectations, either” (110). If a straight, cis man were to suddenly lose his penis in an accident, becoming unable to have traditional penetrative sex, would he no longer be allowed to live as a man? No. It is no different for a trans man; whether he decides to get phalloplasty or not, he is still a man. Like Dill and Zambrana argue, there is nuance and complexity to all social categorizations, and the larger community of various kinds of men is no exception (2009). At one point in time, Black men were not legally considered men with human rights like white men and were categorized as property. Look how far we have come (at least those of us not stuck in pre-abolition racism). Pope Francis publicly condemned racism as sin after the murder of George Floyd in 2020: “We cannot tolerate or turn a blind eye to racism and exclusion in any form and yet claim to defend the sacredness of every human life” (Vatican News, 2020). Racism is deemed sin in the Catholic Church because it is an example of unjustifiable hatred for human life. And yet, that same zeal for valuing and respecting all human life is denied to LGBTQIA+ people.

Tenet 4-HGI: Avoid femininity; discourage emotional expression except anger, lust

In Brett’s narrative, two distinct cases of avoiding femininity and discouraging emotional development and expression beyond anger, confidence, and lust were the night he came out as trans to his AA group and the night he looked up YouTube videos of trans men teaching other trans men how to *pass*. Early on in his degree, he came to accept his worsening alcoholism and began attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. Before he had even come out on social media, he decided at one of the meetings to come out as a trans man in his testimony. That AA meeting was more affirming and healing than any church confession. Brett finally admitted to himself and others that his drinking was a long-winded attempt to suppress emotional development and avoid showing vulnerability. He never felt safe as *Bri* to show this side of himself, and this was only going to carry over into his life as *Brett* if he did not take a good hard look in the mirror and just let himself feel—no alcohol numbing the pain—just complete surrender to all his emotions.

Culturally speaking, men are chastised for either not showing enough emotion or showing too much at culturally wrong times—any time they are not alone. This example of hegemonic gender ideology is heavily embedded into Western culture, and though things are shifting toward a hybrid masculinity of just enough vulnerability to balance out the *bro-culture*, men continue to be corrected socially for not living up to somebody's gender expectations. So much so that not only are there "alpha male" videos on YouTube teaching cis men how to be "real men," but also videos of trans men teaching other trans men how to *pass* as cisgender. Brett shares how various videos, "told [him] to make sure [his] voice inflection was more flat-lined...taught [him] how to walk manly...how to take up more space in a room or a crowd—because men generally take up more space than women do...to sit with [his] legs opened instead of crossed, and to keep [his] shoulders back to make them appear broader" (99-100).

For a while, Brett worked at checking all the boxes and began passing as a heterosexual cis man. The only problem was that he is a queer trans man, and all these adopted attributes were taking him further away from his authentic self, which was worsening his mental health despite the trans euphoria he felt from passing. At this point, Brett would have benefited from learning about Cheng's (2011) concept of God's radical love: a love so strong it dissolves all the socially constructed binaries people have imposed on themselves. While suppressing all socially constructed signs of femininity to pass as a cis man are unfortunately necessary for trans safety in a transphobic society, God's radical love looks past social fabrications of gender and just loves you for you. God does not care what your voice sounds like, how you walk, talk, sit, or posture; He only cares about the kind of person you are and how you treat other people—the Golden Rule, understood by 99.9% of kindergarteners, is somehow lost on millions of Christian adults.

Tenet 6-HGI: Ontological, essentialist, binary understanding of (wo)manhood

In Brett's narrative, one prime example of ontological, essentialist, binary understandings of (wo)manhood is his changing relationship with his chest. After getting top

surgery to remove his breasts, Brett had an ambivalent relationship with his newly acquired flat chest. There were several moments when he would think, “I love this, I love the way this feels, but I can never let anyone see it” (86). He was happy to finally have the flat chest he had been waiting for but felt shame around the scars underneath from the surgical incisions: “There was still a part of me that thought real men didn’t have those scars on their chests” (87). Brett had, understandably, internalized an essentialist understanding of manhood—reduced to body parts and reproductive functioning. He finally felt *at home* in his own body but *unhoused* by the hegemonic gender ideology that equates sex to gender, gender to sex. Transfeminists like Sara Ahmed want to break down the door to that tiny 4x4 room that sex and gender have been forced to *live in*, with zero breathing room for far too long.

In time, Brett came to embrace the scars on his chest, realizing they did not make him less of a man of God. A trans Christian’s surgery scars—if they choose to/can have the surgery—show the voluntary sacrifices made to reach their full potential. The sacrificial pain from this surgery connects trans Christians closer to Jesus, as Jesus’ body was heavily scarred for who he said he was and his message. If Jesus’ scarred body is still sacred and loved, then why can so many Christians still not see the sacredness and worthiness of love within their trans siblings in Christ? Those scars are lifelines of accessibility to a life full of genuine joy and self-love that everyone deserves but are too often denied because of others’ hateful decision to intercept and cut that connection. Anti-trans Christian organizations in the USA trying to cut off that connection, including the Christian legal powerhouse, Alliance Defending Freedom, and the Family Research Council, are behind multi-million-dollar campaigns to push for more anti-trans legislation, guised as “parental rights.” This has dire consequences for trans youth and adults trying to access life-saving trans medical care, i.e., increased suicide rates for trans people and increase in anti-trans hate crimes against those who no longer “pass” since being forced to stop hormone therapy in the 19 States that have implemented medical transition bans (Pauly, 2023).

Lee Jay

Tenet 1-HT: Followers held to rigid, unyielding system of beliefs

In Lee's narrative, one example of Jehovah's Witnesses being held to a rigid, unyielding system of beliefs are 'The Society's' strict control over families' social life. Upon reflecting on the rigidity of child rearing in a JW family unit, Lee remembers being told that all answers to life's questions could be found in scripture, no critical thinking required. The governing authority pushing this black-and-white line of thinking within any JW congregation is known as the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, whom, according to Lee, demands:

a very controlled social world that revolved around [the] family and congregation. Parents were responsible for rearing their children in the discipline of Jehovah, their God. The status that the parents enjoyed in the world of the congregation depended on how well their children matured and whether they remained active within the religion. If children left the religion, the parents experienced shame and embarrassment. (20)

While JW theology uses scripture to limit critical thinking in its followers, Christianity that queers its theology uses scripture as a starting point for different interpretations and insights to flourish through open theological discussions. Queer scripture is a source of queer theology that is driven by follower's unique lived experiences, letting personal experience lead the interpretation rather than starting with a set interpretation and trying to mold one's experiences to fit that interpretation. In other words, JW's use of scripture stems from a top-down approach to theology, while queer theology works from a bottom-up approach. JWs might be convinced to open up to a more expansive theology if they had the chance to talk to more Christians outside the JWs and watchful eye of the Society. Because of the fear imposed onto them by the Society, many JWs may not even be aware of other interpretations of Christian scripture or theologies. That day walking out of his first JW conference with his family as a child, being met by

ex-Jehovah's Witnesses passing out pamphlets to help more people leave the JW's, had a significant impact on Lee and is at least partially to thank for his decision to leave as an adult.

Regarding the second part of this passage, parents are put under tremendous pressure to keep their children's faith in Jehovah strong and unwavering. Any doubts in the JW faith are viewed as dissent and must be met with strict discipline—corporal punishment and shaming being the go-to methods of correction. In queer theology, questions are welcomed, not punished, as questions indicate curiosity and a desire to learn from others' perspectives. And in relational theology, this dialogue between two or more differing points of view is how theology is created. Because God is intertwined with all our gendered and sexualized idiosyncrasies, followers of God can come from any background and any way of life, as God created all our differences with purpose: to learn from and teach one another our own unique experience of creation. Every time we learn from another person, we get to know another piece of God's creation and, in turn, strengthen our faith through that knowledge transfer. Therefore, if a child grows up and leaves the Jehovah's Witnesses, it does not necessarily mean they have lost their relationship with God. They may have simply discovered the limitations JW's put on God and converted to a sect of Christianity—or another religion entirely—that gives them the freedom to develop their faith, and there should be no shame or embarrassment in that. For those who fear being shunned by their family if they leave the Jehovah's Witnesses, that very well might happen, but the immeasurable joy and love that is possible from meeting new people and developing a chosen family who is supportive, might be just what their relatives need to *witness* to also leave the Witnesses, or at the very least, keep in contact with their child.

Tenet 1-HGI: Resolute desire for power & control by weaponizing/using masculinity for gain

In Lee's narrative, one example of a resolute desire for power and control by using masculinity for gain is in his breakdown of family gender roles. Heavily influenced by Jehovah's

Witnesses doctrine, mixed with the generalized gender expectations of the "all-American family" of the 1960s, Lee was taught the following family dynamic:

Men were expected to make a decent salary, enough to support their wife who stayed at home with their children...to handle the pressure, not showing weakness, staying stoic, and carrying on. My father would often remind my mother in a rage of how much...sacrifice he had to endure to provide the basic needs to our family. Women...had no rights and were expected to be submissive...I lived under a code of silence...what happened at home stayed at home. (43-4)

Though Western, secular culture is slowly shifting, this dynamic is still common across cis-heteronormative, North American households—religious and not—and is riddled with more social issues than sexism. These standards perpetuate issues around classism, ableism, and racism, as well. Studies from the Pew Research Center suggest a steady decline in US survey respondents' affiliation with Catholicism, with only 20% of adults self-identifying as Catholic, compared to 24% in 2009 (Pew Research Centre, 2019).

Depending on where a male-identifying person falls in the masculinities hierarchy in relation to income, physical and mental capabilities, and race as perceived by others, the benchmark of adequately providing for his family can be within arms' reach or dragged further away. Depending on the social circumstances one finds themselves in from day to day, this benchmark has the potential to move either way—sometimes moving multiple times within the same day—with some groups of men falling consistently behind and some consistently getting ahead due to socially constructed divisions between men that are out of their control. This is, most often, the reason marginalized groups of men are disproportionately accused of displaying "toxic masculinity," which I refer to as hegemonic gender ideology. There is a visceral inflexibility and limited understanding of gender among men (and women) that leads to something called *normative violence*: "the result of norms that determine not only who counts

as human, but also regulates what is legible and intelligible within a specific [gender] framework. Those vulnerable to not being recognized as legitimate [gendered] subjects risk *social death*” (Mills, 2007 qtd. in Varela & Dhawan, 2011).

Within the framework of *manhood*, men who embody a marginalized masculinity are often forced into a *hegemonic bargain* to avoid this *social death*: “leveraging one aspect of... identity (race, class, sexuality, etc.) to elevate another aspect which is under threat” (Chen, 1999 qtd. in Varela & Dhawan, 2011). An example of this within the LGBTQIA+ community is when a white, rich, gay cis man leverages his white, class, and cis privilege to draw negative attention away from not being straight to maintain some level of status in the masculine hierarchy. He may do this by putting down other gay men who do not embody whiteness, a wealthy lifestyle, or were not assigned-male-at-birth: ‘I might be gay, but I’m not like *those* gays; I’m a real man who likes real men.’ This policing of differing expressions of “gayness” is a reiteration of cisgender lesbian and gay men’s response to Christian movements opposing homosexuality, a form of assimilation called homonormativity. Mathers et. al (2018) summarizes from Bernstein (2002), Bryant (2008), Sumerau et. al (2015), and Ward (2008) how, starting in the 1960s:

Rather than maintaining a politics of opposition to Christian standards of morality, family, and relationships, homonormativity involves...politics of similarity wherein (primarily cisgender) lesbian and gay people—regardless of religion or feelings about religion—adopt and conform to...standards of white, middle-class, monogamous, patriarchal, and domestic respectability...Homonormativity establishes some respectable lesbian and gay people at the expense of...ongoing marginalization of others.

I would argue that homonormativity is strongly connected to internalized homophobia, and to maintain some level of personal authenticity while trying to feel safer as a gay person, especially in devout anti-gay Christian communities, many cis-gay men (and cis-lesbians) resort to marginalizing people from their own LGBTQIA+ community—including the ostracizing of trans

gay men—rather than trying to find solidarity. Thus, gay men are not immune to the cis-heteronormative and biocentric gender ideology pervasive in Western cultures, and simply being gay does not automatically make someone progressive or accepting of others' lived realities of being gay, or of different sexualities, gender identities or expressions.

In the case of Lee's father, he was struggling to bring in enough money to care for not just a family, but a family with a child living with compounding chronic health conditions with minimal health insurance. Instead of addressing issues of class and health inequalities, Lee's father lashed out at his wife and children, pushing the financial blame on them, out of fear of being emasculated and losing his authority in the home. Lee's mother was financially dependent on his father, so she was forced to be the submissive housewife who did what her husband said to keep a roof over her children's heads. Lee saw this unhealthy dependence growing up but could not say anything until he grew up, moved out of the house, and went to countless therapy sessions to learn what healthy relationships and families could look like. But before then, this facet of hegemonic gender ideology caused complex traumas.

Tenet 2-HT: Producing cognitive dissonance, contradicting & conflicting dogmas

In Lee's narrative, two examples of producing cognitive dissonance in followers are Jehovah's Witnesses' stance on social/health issues and politicians' contradictory statements in the 80s AIDS epidemic. In an introduction to the Jehovah's Witnesses' general beliefs, Lee shares that the JW are anti-abortion, anti-homosexuality, anti-smoking, anti-blood transfusions and anti-organ donation (26). Jehovah's Witnesses claim to be pro-life, but then in the same breath, are against lifesaving medical interventions like blood transfusion and organ donation, which alludes more to being pro-birth. This is a significant example of conflicting dogmas that result in an abundance of cognitive dissonance when a Jehovah's Witness' own life is on the line; though many JWs will deny lifesaving procedures—even on their deathbed—there have also been many JWs who make an exception to the dogma when it is their own life or the life of a

loved one. This is not to shame any JW for making this exception, but rather, a critique of the JW faith for putting its followers in these inhumane circumstances. A queer theology would argue that no loving God would force their followers to choose between faith and life itself.

Moreover, integral to a queer theology is the concept of radical love, “a love so extreme that it dissolves our existing boundaries, whether they are boundaries that separate us from other people, that separate us from preconceived notions of sexuality and gender identity, or that separate us from God” (Cheng, 2011). Such a love, I would argue, also dissolves the boundary between subjective, socially constructed conceptions of right and wrong that have absolutely zero backing from Christian scripture, as none of the aforementioned medical interventions existed back when these scriptures were initially written. Radical love asks for integrity from its constituents, which means dissolving the black-and-white boundaries that people have imposed on scriptural interpretation, therefore, dissolving the boundary that separates theological and secular study to allow for consideration of historical context.

Lee also shares his memories of the AIDS epidemic and the contradictory statements thrown around by Christian politicians that Jehovah’s Witnesses were expected to agree with. These included the following statements from Jerry Falwell Sr. and William F. Buckley:

- Falwell: ‘AIDS is God’s judgment on a society that is not living by His rules’ (163).
- Buckley: ‘There should be tattoos on all who have AIDS, to protect the victimization of other homosexuals’ (163).

These statements produce a similar cognitive dissonance to the JWs conflicting stance on medical intervention. Falwell said AIDS was God’s punishment on a society not living by His rules, but that society is made up of more than just the gay men who were dying in droves from the disease, and it fails to understand that AIDS is not a "gay disease;" the minute the government saw more and more cases of straight people contracting HIV, many of those same politicians—but not Falwell—stopped calling it God’s judgment. Calling HIV a gay disease was

also just for their own comfort, believing that they were safe from the disease because of their heterosexuality. Buckley said publicly that anyone with AIDS should have a tattoo to protect the victimization of other homosexuals, but his real motive was giving gay men a tattoo indicating their status to increase their chances of becoming the victim of a hate crime because people only associated AIDS with homosexuality. All these statements from politicians and hate propaganda shirts came from people who dared to call themselves Christian. One of the most quoted Bible verses is “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (Matthew 22:37–39), and yet, there is zero evidence of any kind of love in these statements. People who identify as Christian but only love their "neighbors" who fall neatly into their zone of prejudiced comfortability, are not abiding by their most basic duty as a Christian. Not every homophobic Christian will commit a hate crime, but fear breeds hate, which perpetuates the normalization of an anti-gay/queer culture that dehumanizes gay/queer people, making it a lot easier for those whose fear of what they do not understand has turned to hatred, to resort to violence.

Tenet 2-HGI: Subordinate, degrade & devalue any challenge to cis-het masculine discourse

In Lee’s narrative, one example of subordinating, degrading and devaluing any challenge to the cisheteronormative masculine discourse is his uncomfortable experience with his teaching colleagues. One day, in the teacher’s lounge at the junior high Lee taught at, he felt forced to listen silently as multiple teachers made abhorrent statements about gay men dying of AIDS:

- Football coach: ‘This AIDS thing is great because it’s really going to reduce the number of incidents of homosexuality!’
- Art teacher: ‘Our son is a doctor, and he has to treat those AIDS victims; why should he be put in danger, it’s right in the Bible...what they’re doing is wrong!’
- Staff: ‘Why, it’s full of fruits and nuts and even the weather is queer!’
- Secretary: ‘He doesn’t respect women; his father is a fruit!’ (140).

Aside from how terrifying it must have been for Lee, a queer trans man to work with these people, the *audacity* of his colleagues to vocalize these attitudes in a learning environment for children—some of whom will come to the realization that they are gay—is infuriating and heart wrenching. These teachers were fear mongered into subordinating, degrading, and devaluing many of their current students' lives because of the non-stop AIDS moral panic propaganda.

Some might argue that Lee should have said something to stand up for himself and others, but for things to really change, and to protect those directly affected, allies need to speak up in these kinds of situations. Trans people are not obligated to out themselves in potentially dangerous situations to educate ignorance. If a trans person feels brave enough to stand up, more power to them, but the onus should not be put solely on them. I heard this said repeatedly at the counter-protest to the Hands Off Our Kids march in September 2023 in response to a lack of cis-het people present on our side but claim to be allies behind closed doors: "If you aren't getting hit by the same stones, you aren't standing close enough."

Tenet 3-HT: All questioning discouraged/silenced

In Lee's narrative, two examples illustrating discouragement or silencing of all questioning are the formal governance of the Watchtower Bible & Tract Society and the expectation of all Jehovah's Witnesses teens to immediately become unquestioning adult followers. The Jehovah's Witnesses are foremost a separatist and isolationist sect of Christianity. Lee shares how his family life was vastly different from their neighbors': "There are scriptural doctrines passed down from the governing authority that must be followed without question. Any violation of these doctrines, based on scriptural content, results in the shunning of the violator" (19). One of the primary distinguishing factors between a religion and a cult is whether the institution in question inflicts physical and/or psychological harm on its members; it is Lee's position that Jehovah's Witnesses controlling followers in this manner meets the criteria of an

inherently dangerous cult, rather than just another sect of Christianity. This form of religious governance over leadership eliminates the possibility for developing a relational theology between members, as members are expected to police each other's public and private behavior, rather than build a genuine friendship. The constant fear of being shunned for making a mistake under the subjective JW doctrine is not conducive to wholeheartedly embracing the gospel message of God's radical love. This fear is only conducive to producing guilt for completely natural feelings and human curiosity, and the internalization of shame for getting *caught*.

Lee also shares being policed by the Watchtower Bible & Tract Society on basic adolescent emotional development. While Lee and his fellow teen peers were simply experiencing the average physical and social child development into their teen years, the Society made it clear that "this average development was never allowed in Jehovah's Witnesses' youths. During this time, you were to mature into young adults ready to serve Jehovah without going through any sort of teenage development" (80). Like Lee says, it is no wonder the Jehovah's Witnesses attract and encourage sexual predation with its younger members' naïveté and isolation from the general population. The youngest and most vulnerable members are not taught about consent, boundaries, the difference between healthy vs abusive relationships, or even basic human psychological/sexual development. If a JW teen even tries to ask any questions about any of these topics, they are immediately shut down and often punished for daring to even think about such "blasphemy." To this, I must ask: If God is responsible for the creation of all humans, why would They create something They deem an "abomination?" And if God is All-powerful and Almighty, why are They creating so many "mistakes?" These JW teens—or any Christian teens for that matter—would benefit from a theological and sexual education inclusive of queer experience. They would learn that God, Thysself, is a compassionate God, who loves all of creation just the way they are because every(body)'s differences—including gender and sexuality—were created with Divine intention.

Tenet 3-HGI: Must prove manhood, esp. through callous sexual attitudes, fetishizing danger

In Lee's narrative, two anecdotes that exemplify a constant need to prove one's manhood—especially through callous sex attitudes and fetishization of danger—are being trans in an American airport shortly after 9/11 and the strenuous legal process of transitioning without medical intervention. Lee was lied to from infancy to early adulthood about the inevitable Armageddon that would annihilate humanity for its sins and only save those who proved their worthiness of salvation. Of course, multiple dates were predicted by the Society for God's impending wrath, all of which came and went, only to be replaced by a new date. The only Armageddon Lee witnessed before leaving the Witnesses came on September 11th, 2001, one year and nine months after the last Armageddon date given by The Society.

After the World Trade Centre twin towers fell on that fateful day, a new level of fear and paranoia swept across the nation that brought everything into question, including personal identification at airport security. Shortly after 9/11, Lee was going through security at an international airport, where he showed his driver's license as per routine. The security officer announced to everyone in the general vicinity: 'You're going to have a hard time convincing me you are the female that is listed on this driver's license!' (203). Lee did his best to remain calm and politely explained he was transgender, in mid-transition. Luckily, the officer let him through, but had it been a less lenient officer, Lee would have no one to vouch for his non-threatening identity. Though this is not an example of proving manhood through callous sex attitudes or fetishizing danger, it *is*, however, an example of a life-or-death situation in which trans men must prove their manhood to *avoid* callous sexual attitudes toward them from other men and the potential physical danger to their lives, if proven unsuccessful. Trans men are often and effectively forced to internalize the very biocentrism behind other men's challenge to the authenticity of their manhood. *Passing* can mean the difference between safety and the physically dangerous consequences of failing to meet the criteria of hegemonic masculinity.

After this near-miss at the airport, in 2003, Lee decided to start the court process to secure his legal name change. Unfortunately, because of the health legislation in early 2000s America, he was not allowed to change his gender marker. He was only doing hormone replacement therapy (HRT) with no surgeries, and a certified letter from a surgeon was required, by law, to complete a legal gender change. Lee outlines the main reasons gender-affirming surgeries were not an option for him: “Throughout [his] entire life, [he] had been poked, prodded, and cut repeatedly due to [his] poor health...[and] insurance companies were refusing to pay for any surgery involved in sexual reassignment” (208). Expecting all trans folks to have gender-affirming surgeries to be legitimately trans in the eyes of the law is both ableist and classist, one, because oftentimes, trans folks’ bodies like Lee’s with serious disabilities make surgery too risky to their health, and two, because in places where such procedures are not covered under public health insurance, gender-affirming surgeries are far too expensive and require too much time off of whatever work they are able to do to support themselves. Being disabled and/or being poor do not make someone any less authentically trans, and quite frankly, no one—not even other trans people—are in any position to police authenticity regarding how other people identify. A self-proclaimed transfeminism that does not include intersectional feminist theory into its praxis is not trans feminism; the very definition of transfeminism is the application of feminist theory to deconstruct *all* socially constructed binaries perpetuated by cis-heteronormative discourse, including the tenet of hegemonic masculinity that all men need to prove their manhood whenever their masculinity is questioned.

Tenet 4-HT: Secular/outside ideologies viewed as suspicious & a threat

In Lee’s narrative, two examples highlighting the suspicion of ideologies outside the Jehovah’s Witnesses are JW parents isolating their children from the outside world and witnessing an ex-Jehovah’s Witnesses protest outside a JW convention. Lee does an excellent job in meticulously exposing the isolationist, separatist tactics used by the Society to prevent the

"infiltration" of external information that would expose the dangers of the religion to its current followers. One such tactic is mandating specific parenting strategies for all JW parents and shaming parents who fail to follow it: "Children's actual blood was on the parents' hands if they failed. To lose a child to *the world* out of Jehovah's flock was to scar their record as parents and Christian Witnesses took great care...to isolate children from the outside world...many chose to homeschool their children. Parents who used public schools denigrated them by emphasizing that only...*The Society* taught the *truth*" (21).

This form of theological indoctrination does not achieve liberation from the "sins of the Earth," as The Society would have JW families believing. It achieves the various enslaved outcomes liberation theologies strive to break free from. Labeling any route of potential escape from JW doctrine of enslavement as a threat to Jehovah's Will does not build a stronger congregation. It intentionally singles out those most vulnerable in the congregation and uses them as the theological scapegoat for public crucifixion to keep the rest of the flock in line. If anything, this JW tactic makes a mockery out of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Jesus knew that upon his death, he would be resurrected out of God's *radical love* for Their human son and all humankind. There is *no love* in the crucifixion of JW's most vulnerable members. Forcing the most marginalized to bear the cross of the most privileged meets the textbook definition of blasphemy: an insult showing contempt, disrespect, and lack of reverence for God or an object considered sacred or inviolable, in this case, God's radical love for all Their creation.

The Society takes labeling outside ideologies as a threat to another level when they ignore the experiences of their *own* former members having the courage to leave the Jehovah's Witnesses *and* to attempt to help others do the same. At one of the JW conventions Lee attended as a child, he and his family walked by a line of protesters as they were leaving the stadium. These protesters were ex-Jehovah's Witnesses passing out pamphlets to anyone leaving the convention who would take one, that outlined all the dangers of the JW outlined in this analysis. Naturally, this picket line caught Lee's curiosity, but his parents immediately

ordered him to not make eye contact (69). Even as a child, Lee knew the faith he was being raised in was doing more harm to him than good, and it is unfortunate that he was not able to heed the former members' warnings until he moved out at the age of eighteen. This is a sad reality for many queer and trans people raised in conservative Christian households—they must wait until they can legally escape their *own families* before they can escape the chains of anti-LGBTQIA+ indoctrination. Once they are out, though, they can begin to see that all anti-LGBTQIA+ claims hammered into their head for years can all be debunked by a mixture of queer scripture, tradition, reason, and most poignantly, queer experience.

Tenet 4-HGI: Avoid femininity; discourage emotional expression except anger, lust

In Lee's narrative, two examples of avoiding femininity and discouraging emotional expression/development beyond anger, confidence, and lust are observations of his father's psychological decline and his own struggles with anger and deteriorating health. Over the years, Lee's father was always psychologically and physically abusive to him, his sister, and mother; and it only got worse with time. By the time Lee and his sister were in their late teens:

[Their father] would become more and more absent from home until eventually moving out altogether. He would eventually go back to work, although when he cashed in his retirement, he lost a huge amount of money because it was around the time that Nixon had resigned, and the stock market was down. He was never the same after 1975 and became bitter, more enraged and would eventually leave the religion when his alcoholism consumed more of his life and money. (105)

Growing up with a father who lived a life this saturated in hegemonic gender ideology would be hard on any child. But for a young trans man already struggling with gender identity and expression, this model of masculinity would only serve to cause more cognitive dissonance between the female gender role he was trying so desperately to break free from, and the male

gender role he feared he could become: a man consumed by money, mistresses, the malaise of addiction, and ultimately, an early trip to the morgue. This is the very statistical outcome trans feminists are trying to save cis and trans men from fulfilling.

Sadly, Lee did start down the path to becoming that very statistic. He admits to having trouble controlling his anger and depression, often drinking to cope with his unresolved family and religious traumas. His physical health was failing him; he was frequently in and out of the hospital with various debilitating conditions that took far too many visits to the ER to finally diagnose and effectively treat. He was understandably exhausted in every sense of the word to the point that, when it came to considering his gender and sexuality, he laments on living “in a void of any information with no internet, no social media, and very little news coverage of anything that involved gay or transgender people except to report the negative” (111). And Lee did not need any more negativity. It took years of therapy and making new connections after leaving his family and the JW’s that he discovered the positivity that was possible from exploring various LGBTQIA+ communities. Lee was finally able to witness and experience—through both the tragedies and the triumphs of the gay rights movement—all the possibilities for living out a counter-hegemonic queer, trans narrative.

Tenet 5-HT: Pluralism of belief discouraged; other or no religion unacceptable

In Lee’s narrative, one anecdote revealing the discouragement of pluralism of belief and refusal to accept other/no religions are his experiences of proselytizing with his parents by age nine. A Jehovah’s Witness’ religious duties start at the tender age of five, when they are expected to start accompanying their parents in their *field service work*. This means going door to door in a designated neighborhood to share the Word of Jehovah in hopes of converting more people to the faith. Lee began public speaking at age nine, which he very quickly excelled at. His parents took advantage of his ability to sell and overcome rejection, and the Society “provided a scripture or a scripted response to every objection a householder could give” (26). Aside from

Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses are the only other sect of Christianity that still practices faith conversion, door-to-door salesperson style. This practice is driven by their belief that the literal blood of non-believers is on their hands come Armageddon if they do not try to convert people weekly. Even if the person who comes to the door says they are already a Christian, that is typically not good enough. To be saved in the end times, they must be, specifically, a Jehovah's Witness Christian, as all other denominations interpret scripture incorrectly, according to this sect. And if the person who comes to the door practices an entirely different faith or practices no faith, they are doomed automatically to eternal Hellfire if they do not convert to JWs.

Uncoincidentally, Western hegemonic gender ideology also discourages pluralism of belief. HGI says there is only one right way to be a man or a woman, and nothing in between. Specific to hegemonic masculinity, those highest on the hierarchy of legitimate masculinities are white, straight, cisgender, able-bodied, wealthy, Christian men. Any man who does not embody all those characteristics must overcompensate in another area to at least avoid the *lowest* level of the Western hierarchy: non-white, queer, trans, disabled, poor, non-Christian/atheist men. This brings up another point of classism within the Jehovah's Witnesses. If JWs only go door-to-door to convert people to save them, what about homeless people? Are they not worthy of Jehovah's Kingdom? Will the homeless be the first to die from Jehovah's wrath as they had neither shelter from the elements nor eternal damnation?

This also brings up a point of ableism within the Jehovah's Witnesses. If it is a JWs' duty to proselytize, or else have the blood of non-believers on one's hands, they fail to explain what this means for those with disabilities that would be a barrier to this duty, for example those who cannot speak to or hear the person they are trying to convert, those who paralyzed from the neck down and could not enter homes with no accessible entrance, those who have suffered severe head trauma or were born with a severe cognitive impairment that hinders their level of comprehension and communication. Are these people not worthy of Jehovah's mercy because they cannot efficiently convert people because of disabilities that are out of their control? It

seems to me that not only are Jehovah's Witnesses unaccepting of pluralism of religious belief or gender ideologies, but also pluralism of socio-economic status or physical and cognitive ability.

Tenet 5-HGI: Us vs. them narrative; sense of entitlement to power, wealth & sex

In Lee's narrative, two examples of pushing an *us vs them* narrative and a sense of entitlement to power, wealth, and/or sex were his father's selfish life philosophy and conservatism in America during Reaganomics. Lee's father was a man who felt a strong sense of entitlement to multiple mistresses outside his marriage, no responsibility for the "feminine duties" of parenting such as helping the kids with their homework, talking to them when they were upset, or comforting them when they were sick—and Lee was often seriously ill—or having to discreetly spend his hard-earned money on Lee's medical expenses because it was not his fault his kid could not stay healthy. He was, quote, "supporting a wife and children," and felt these transgressions should be his "perks of the job" (16). Again, this did not give Lee a particularly good example of a male figure he could aspire to through his transition. While his father felt *at home* in this damaging discourse of masculinity, Lee felt *unhoused* within this discourse of masculinity and did not feel comfortable embodying those "norms of being a man." His father's abhorrent behavior within his marriage to Lee's mother was one of the main reasons he chose to never get married. If their dynamic was what marriage looked like—and this was the only kind of marriage he was exposed to in an isolationist cult—Lee wanted no part of it.

On top of this already unhealthy example of marriage and family, Lee came of age in the late 80s, in what he calls the *throes of Reaganomics*. There was no such thing as family bathrooms, and conservatism was the "only mood the country tolerated, with anyone on the outside considered un-American" (149). All these hegemonic gender roles Lee was exposed to were also steeped in ultra-conservative politics in favor of xenophobia, white supremacy, ethnocentrism, Islamo/Hinduphobic, and a whole slew of other alt-right standpoints masquerading as American family values. I think Lee would agree with me in saying: Hate is *not*

a family value or an "American value;" it is a closed-minded value, and closed-mindedness is an ideology that *anyone* of any background can adopt—minorities and majorities, alike.

Tenet 6-HT: Strict enforcement of literal interpretations of holy texts

In Lee's narrative, the main source of strict enforcement of solely literal interpretations of all holy texts is the rules of all Jehovah's Witnesses study meetings. As stated before, Jehovah's Witnesses are expected to take turns hosting group Bible studies in their home. Not only must these meetings always start with prayer by a man, but everything that is read and discussed is also completely dictated by the Watchtower Bible & Tract Society, including the only acceptable interpretation of the scriptures. There is then a "round-robin reading by males and females of one paragraph in the textbook, followed by questions on the material just read" (23). This kind of meeting resembles more of a standardized test than an actual Bible study, which—if my grade schooling taught me anything—these kinds of tests are not testing comprehension or critical thinking skills, but one's ability to memorize and regurgitate. That is the level of understanding of scripture for a Jehovah's Witness: memorize and regurgitate. That is not theology, that is propaganda, much like the alt-right's response to LGBTQIA+-inclusive education: no informed arguments, just propaganda.

Naturally then, Jehovah's Witnesses are not keen on intersectional feminist theory, so it makes sense that nuance, complexity, variation are not part of their theological vocabulary. This is not to say they are stupid, rather, they were indoctrinated from an incredibly early age to *not* have this vocabulary. Concepts of nuance, complexity, and variation are threatening words to isolationist, separatist cult leaders who need to maintain control over their members to keep up whatever lies they tell them. These are also threatening words to trans-exclusionary radical feminists and anyone who holds on tightly to ontology and essentialism in their gender performance; and clearly, one of those people is Lee's former college professor.

Tenet 6-HGI: Ontological, essentialist, binary understanding of (wo)manhood

In Lee's narrative, one audacious anecdote that reveals the ontological essentialism of (wo)manhood was his experience with being outed to a transphobic former college professor. This professor had somehow found out after Lee graduated that he is a trans man and was quite upset that this was "kept from him," as if it were an act of deception and any of his business. Lee shares the moment this former educator showed where he lacked some education himself:

He very uncomfortably confronted me, prefacing the conversation with his discovery and asking if I wanted to elaborate...I was not surprised so I simply stated the truth. He had no idea...and then proceeded to ask me if I had 'a tool'...Obviously this was something he feared or he would not have asked the question. (216-7)

This makes me wonder if this professor has ever learned about ontology or essentialism in his own degrees, as it is not evident from this conversation. This professor's discomfort with his "discovery" suggests this is a cis man who felt his masculinity was somehow threatened by another kind of masculinity he was not familiar with. Rather than reflect and do some research before initiating this conversation, he opened with anger and projected his insecurity of his own manhood onto Lee, who responded with security in his trans manhood. In my personal experience, a lot of cis men are taken aback when a trans man is more secure in his masculinity than they are in theirs. This attitude is indicative of biocentrism and, quite frankly, a lack of maturity and emotional development, which is understandable considering hegemonic gender ideology does not value the "feminine" character development of emotional intelligence.

CHAPTER 5: SELF-EXPLORATION OF FAITH & (TRANS)MASCULINITY

While Lee chose to leave the Jehovah's Witnesses, who have still made zero strides to become queer/trans-affirming, Brett chose to stay in the United Methodist Church to keep advocating for affirming changes. Though I chose to leave the Catholic Church at age seventeen, Brett's decision to stay in the UMC sparked an interest in me to find out if there are any Catholic churches/organizations that are currently queer/trans-affirming. While I am not comfortable ever re-aligning myself with any Catholic church, Brett and Lee's stories gave me a small glimmer of hope for those folks who *do* want to keep their Catholic or otherwise conservative faith without compromising their queer/trans identity.

Trial & Tribulation, In *My* Transition

I have found myself, just 1 year and 7 months into medical transition, already discovering several new things about masculinity and manhood, some positive and some more negative and nuanced than I anticipated. In order to explain some of these personal experiences, I need to discuss some concepts within men and masculinity studies—normative violence, the hegemonic bargain, social death, hybrid masculinity, cisgender privilege, masculine hierarchy, and biocentrism—as well as one original concept I have begun developing that I believe will resonate with many trans men and transmasculine folks: Bro-Culture Shock (Langille, 2024).

I must admit, I find myself struggling with my own internalized biocentrism as a trans man. This internalization is most viscerally felt every time I enter a men's washroom, try to be taken seriously as a male site manager by entitled clientele at work, or simply conversing with cisgender men who do not know that I am a trans man. When I use the men's washroom, there is a self-imposed protocol that is driven by both my own internalized biocentrism and other men's: (1) Walk straight to the nearest available stall, careful to not make eye contact with any other men, (2) wait to start using the washroom until it is either loud enough to drown out the

distinct "female urination sound" or all other men have left the washroom, (3) keep legs together and shirt covering most of my lap in case someone can see through the slit between the stall door and partition, (4) walk straight to sinks to wash hands, careful to keep looking in the mirror to a minimum if others are around the sinks, and (5) leave promptly, being sure to keep a more "masculine gait." This may all sound ridiculous to cisgender folks, but it comes from all the horror stories of trans men being harassed or assaulted in men's washrooms because of a small detail that tipped off a transphobe to a trans man's "invalid" presence in a men's space.

I started doing these things automatically out of years of being conditioned as a *woman*, to be *extra* cautious around men when no other "women" are around. And then it hit me: since starting to "pass" in my transition, have I made women take such precautions, simply because I now pass—most of the time—as male? Because they, too, have been conditioned to be weary of men? It is a chilling realization that—at least with my outward appearance—I have become the very thing I was conditioned to fear. This also gives me a new sense of compassion for how men are so disconnected from genuine emotional connection with others because of the restrictions hegemonic masculinity places on them and their peers. I know myself that the only time I would ever lay a hand on anybody would be either in self-defense or defending someone else who is being assaulted, regardless of gender. But women to whom I am a stranger do not know that, and I do not blame them; they have every right to take such precautions with the rate of senseless violence committed against women every minute around the world. It breaks my heart, though, to know this and realize the only thing I *can* do to ease their discomfort is to simply keep being myself, a person who will *not* hurt them as I, too, have been hurt.

The violence I experienced as a *woman* is linked to the violence I have just begun to experience as a trans man. As Mills (2007) says, normative violence is the result of norms that determine not only who counts as human, but also regulates what is legible and intelligible within a specific gender framework. When I was presenting as a cis-het woman, I had many experiences of emotional and bodily degradation of my femininity to boost/maintain a man's

cis-het masculinity in the hierarchy of legitimate masculinities. Now that I am living as an openly queer trans man, I am also having experiences of degradation, but for my lack of legitimate masculinity as perceived by not only cis-het men, but also cis-het women, and even more surprisingly, by cis-queer women. When I was living as a cis-het woman, I had cis-het men try to invalidate my humanity by dehumanizing my "feminine" body and emotions. Now, cis-het men are trying to invalidate my humanity by dehumanizing my "attempt to hide" my feminine body and emotions with an "appropriation" of masculinity/manhood.

I used to teeter on the fence in discussions of male privilege because, when I only had lived experience being perceived as a woman, I knew cis-het men would never take me seriously because 'what would a woman know about being a man?' But *now* that I have tangible experience actively living as both a woman and a man, there is no doubt in my mind—now accounting for the power imbalance between cis and trans men—that not only is *cis-male* privilege real, but *cis-passing* privilege is also an unfortunate reality within the hierarchy of masculinities. When I pass as a cis man in public, I am treated with more respect from other men, interrupted less often in conversations with men, and asked for my input more often from male strangers than when I was living as a woman. Most of the time, for my own safety, I go along with it and accept the hegemonic bargain required for cis passing. If I show any evidence of "transness," it could mean social *death* of losing my legibility as a man with transphobic comments/shunning, to actual death for threatening their fragile masculinity.

The kind of cis man who kills a trans man, simply for being trans, could have a range of motivations for doing so, but all of those motivations—religious or secular—are rooted in a hegemonic gender ideology that demands: unwavering control, degradation of femininity, proving manhood by subordinating others, avoidance of emotional development, abiding by an *us vs them* narrative, and an essentialist, black-and-white understanding of manhood. Though this lethal outcome will not happen in most interactions of being outed, the fact that it is a possibility and *does* happen, should make all men (and people of all gender identities) seriously

question their role in preventing this kind of violence. It is not enough to simply say: 'Well, I would never do such a thing, so I am not part of the problem.' You *are* part of the problem if you remain silent and complacent when witnessing an act of transphobia, no matter how insignificant it may look or sound to you. Because, as many of my trans community members will attest, it is often the smallest, most seemingly insignificant detail that escalates into a visible physical attack. Transphobia needs to be shut down *before* it gets to that point.

Bystanders stepping in is a crucial step toward denormalizing transphobia, whereas being transphobic is publicly condemned, and trans identities are normalized. We will have achieved normalization of trans identities when *coming out* as trans is no longer required because the concept of *coming out of the closet* for trans people in the West implies we were hiding or lying about our gender identity. Trans identities will have been normalized when it is no longer labeled "brave" to tell someone you are trans as there is no more rational fear in doing so. It will also be normalized when trans people do not have to research a church before attending a service to see if trans people are genuinely accepted, tolerated, or if they will be rejected. It will be normalized when trans folks hold more positions of leadership in the church without their appointment being questioned or protested. It will be normalized when church leaders address their congregation as simply God's children, and not God's sons and daughters, as the gender binary does not account for the diversity of human creation.

Let me share a recent jarring experience connected to what I call *bro-culture shock* that could have turned for the worst and could have been stopped had one of the people present called out the vulgar nonsense of their "bros." I was using the washroom at work before my shift started—the men's washroom because that is what I am, a man. A group of teen boys entered the washroom and were being rowdy with each other, which normally I would just ignore because it is not surprising anymore. Suddenly, my stall door was being shaken and pounded on by a couple of those boys and I noticed them trying to look over the stall door and through the space between the door and the lock. I immediately froze up because I was a trans man in a washroom

of mostly cis guys and my pants were down, exposing my birth-assigned sex. At first, I did not know if they knew there was a trans man in the stall and this was about to be a transphobic assault, or they were just being assholes for "fun." Then I heard them asking, 'Is that you in there, X?' The name they said was not even close to mine, so I realized they initially thought they were just rough housing with one of their friends. However, when one of them looked through the space, they immediately turned around and whispered something and laughed with one of their friends. Soon after—though it felt like an hour—they left the bathroom still loudly shouting random things, and I stayed in the stall until I could not hear their voices anymore. I put a mask on from my bag and quickly left the stall and washroom and headed to the office to start getting ready for my shift. This office is a safe space, as only I have the keys to get in, and there is a landline available if I ever forget my phone and need a lifeline.

I have heard vile things said about cis/queer women and queer men while using men's washrooms—worse than I ever imagined prior to medically transitioning—which is disgusting enough. But this was my first experience with fearing for my safety in a men's washroom, and unfortunately, it will not be my last. Aside from the whirlwind of emotions, including the anger I had toward these boys, it has also fueled my protective instincts for other trans folks, especially trans youth. This experience shows just how much our school systems and family units are failing our children, particularly the boys. It became clear that these boys have not been effectively taught anything about consent, boundaries, respect, or healthy interpersonal relations in their male friend groups—hook's feminist masculinity, if you will—and this will only get worse as they enter adulthood, with potential legal and/or lethal consequences.

As disconcerting and violating it felt to experience this, it also points to a 'rhetorical collision of sorts,' where this level of "horsing around" and harassment might have felt different to X as a friend and peer of these boys. In *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999) Delany argues that, despite City Hall rhetoric, the "Disneyfication" i.e., gentrification of Times Square was never about public morality, safety or health, but rather, serving corporate/private

economic interests. Delaney describes this discourse as a *rhetorical collision*, whereby “the sign that a discursive collision has occurred is that the former meaning has been forgotten and the careless reader, not alert to the details of the changed social context, reads the older rhetorical figure as if it were the newer” (119). Had I been socialized with this kind of taunting in male friend groups, this situation may have landed differently for me. But this also begs the question: why is this kind of horsing around acceptable and to whom? To those assigned-male-at-birth (AMAB) and socialized as boys, this behavior is understood as "horse play," typically justified with the same gendered adage: ‘Boys will be boys.’ But to those assigned-female-at-birth (AFAB) and socialized as girls, this behavior is understood as harassment.

For AFAB trans men, this behavior is also a manifestation of bro-culture shock (Langille, 2024). Trans experiences like this can be avoided with implementation of LGBTQIA+-inclusive school curriculum, the very curriculum many parents are being misguided to believe is an attack on "parental rights." If a parent actually *reads* through this curriculum, and still chooses to protest it, they are not fighting for "parental rights;" they are *anti-LGBTQIA+* and *that* is part of the problem that holds their children back from learning empathy for those different from themselves, whether that be differences of gender or sexuality, race or ethnicity, able-bodied or disabled, poor or wealthy, Christian or Muslim, and so on. Learning empathy for those different from us is critical for youth, particularly cis boys, to foster friendships based in interconnectedness and interdependence with people of all social identities, not the constant contention and antagonizing for cheap laughs prevalent in so many young male friend groups.

LGBTQIA+-inclusive education fosters this kind of empathy and healthy interpersonal skills that increase a child’s emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence should be part of all grade schools’ health curriculum. EI belongs in the classroom just as much as IQ; hate and ignorance do not. Queer-phobic children *will* become queer-phobic adults if changes are not made. If parents are okay with *that*, but not this inclusive curriculum, their adult children, and every other person those adult children cross paths with, will pay the price. Children need

protection from regression, not progression, and for these anti-LGBTQIA+ religious parents, God's radical love—no matter which God(s) they believe in—has/have the capability of dissolving the wall of fear, shame, and hegemonic guilt they have been tricked into believing is "protecting their children's innocence." Childhood innocence is under threat from far more evil entities hidden in plain sight under the facade that cis-het equals safety.

Bro-culture is rooted in hegemonic gender ideology that forces boys to constantly choose between the addictive but temporary dopamine hit they get from the approval of their friend groups, and calling out the gendered behaviors and attitudes they know are hurting others they care about, but cannot express this concern without experiencing a 'social death' that often includes physical ramifications from those who claim to be their friends. Potentially the biggest bro-culture shock moment of my transition, thus far, is the sheer magnitude of pressure put on young, (assumedly) cis-het boys to fear feminization so deeply and viscerally, they would rather jeopardize others' safety than accept a feminist masculinity into their lives that might allow to them to be genuinely happy. This is a tough choice that trans boys/men can help teach cis boys/men how to make: empathy over ego, happiness over safety.

Happiness Over Safety

E. Levi Langille (2024)

Wake up,
saunter to the washroom,
your own *private* washroom,
brush your teeth,
take your meds,
take your weekly shot of *manhood*,

dread,

missing my **shot** at freedom.

Put your binder on tighter than tight,
a bullet proof vest
ready for a fight,
keep your *womanhood* out of sight,
Funny how a binder *squeezes* like an anaconda,
and yet,

I can finally...

...*breathe*,

with *this* constriction,

I am *free*,

from the flesh and blood prison *puberty* bestowed upon me.

After breakfast,
grab your bag,
grab your wallet and keys,
grab your stealth expertise,
It's time to walk into another hopeful unknown,
never fully at ease.

Step onto the elevator,
holding my breath,
praying for safety,

three guys enter,

less than arm's length,

from possible death.

I know my mind is jumping to the worst conclusion but,
with the current statistics,
enclosed spaces can quickly become chambers...

...of execution.

The possibility is always there,
But the world waits for no one,
So, push it to the *back* of your mind,

Press on.

Though we refuse to live *IN* fear,
we do live *WITH* fear;
it's a fine line between living unapologetically trans,
while remaining cautious of the *real* dangers
to our...

bodies

minds

souls

minds

and *BODIES*...

We are so much more than our *body*...

...no matter how many they bury,

More than just our *genitals*...

...no matter how many they rape,

More than just our reproductivity...

...no matter how many doctors deny us care.

The threat of violence,
in the face of non-compliance
is a constant reminder;
to defy norms,

...is to court death.

CONCLUSION

Summary of Narrative Analysis: Insights

With this narrative analysis of Brett Ray and Lee Jay's memoirs, I hope it has become clear that, not only are trans men and Christianity not mutually exclusive, but the church can learn and strengthen their collective relationship with God by coming to know and love God's trans children. Through queer theology, trans men such as Brett can teach the church the power of God's radical love, a love so strong, it deconstructs all limitations of our social fabrications. By taking off the mask of a socially constructed Imago Dei, Christians can see the true image of God—not in physical form—but rather, the holy virtues of compassion, love, faith, hope, charity, prudence, and justice. Trans men like Lee can teach the church the value of critical thinking about one's faith and to see scripture as a starting point for multiple lived realities of God's children. We must not lose sight of each other and the cultural context in which we practice our faith. A tradition does not suit the collective if it harms any part of the flock.

Through intersectional feminist theory, trans men like Brett can teach the church that, although fear, shame, and guilt are natural parts of life, they are not judges of who God does and does not love, and they are not the fence posts with which men are to judge themselves to other men. Viewing God through intersectional eyes allows for a dissolving of arbitrary boundaries we have created to categorize and divide God's creation; for learning of different lived experiences than your own, lessens one's ego and bias to become closer to the Divine. Trans men like Lee can teach the church of the ableism and classism inherent in imposing the Vatican's unyielding rule of complementarity and the life-giving union as requirements for Christian authenticity, and labeling the actions of those who cannot abide as dissent.

Through transfeminist theory, Brett and other trans men can teach the church of the true compassion shown from one marginalized person to another. Just as Jesus continued to care for others even as he was suffering, marginalized peoples, including trans people, continue to care

for other trans people when no cis people will come forward to help. There is an unspoken understanding and duty of trans adults to do what one can to lessen the suffering of the next generation of trans youth. In the church, we understand that to do this, we must break down the walls of hegemonic gender ideology that block entry into God's kingdom based on arbitrary human impositions of gender. Lee and other trans men can teach the church that disability does not taint the value one brings to a community or their purpose on this Earth; after all, our bodies in this life bear no weight in the afterlife. Where the church sees impurity, God sees verity.

Through body theology, men like Brett can remind the church that Jesus' disciples did not pity him for his physical disfigurement, but rather, understood the sacrifice as a gift of compassion and empathy for all humankind. The compassion and empathy trans men are capable of embodying, even after profound physical and psychological scarring to the body and soul, is a gift that should be celebrated in the church, not exiled. These scars are not to be hidden away, but rather, blessed in baptism to encompass our whole being—recognizing and acknowledging the full embodiment to our existence, both the beauty and the pain. Men like Lee can teach the church that exiling the most vulnerable does not strengthen a community. A strong community embraces and uplifts those most vulnerable among them. And uplifting should not be done as a charitable after-thought to lessen the guilt of those most privileged in the community; No one should have been left behind in need of charity in the first place.

Through Black theology, Brett can teach the church of Jesus' solidarity with those the majority tries to silence and His divine judgment against any form of supremacy over another living being. How much one values others' humanity and honors their lived experience is a better indicator of faith than how much one reads the Bible or attends Sunday services. Only "showing up" on Sunday mornings evinces faith in a colonial institution, not God. And Lee can teach the church the difference between building faith and indoctrination. If a church leader prioritizes maintaining control over actively engaging with the nuance, complexity, and natural human variation of their members, they are not a leader of faith, but a dictator of doctrine. All

Christian *doctrine* is a human construct created *without* Jesus' input, as everything was written down years *after* the resurrection. There is far more power in our personal relationship with the Divine over a myriad of verses lost in translation.

Limitations

With my positionality as a white, Canadian, able-bodied, trans Christian, I cannot generalize experiences of other white, able-bodied trans Christians with those of other races, nationalities, abilities, and other differing interstices of identity. Both Brett and Lee's memoirs are from the perspective of a white, American/North American trans Christian man—interstices closest to my own. I did explicitly search for memoirs written by trans Christian men of other racial backgrounds but only found two memoirs: one written by Lei Ming, an Asian Christian trans man living in stealth as the rules around transition to obtain legal documentation in China are extremely arduous, and one written by Rizi Timane, a Black Christian trans man from Northern Africa. Unfortunately, though I did read it in its entirety, I had to exclude Lei Ming's memoir because it did not meet the memoir selection criteria of being from a Western perspective and expanding outside this would be beyond both the scope of a master's thesis and the realm of trans narratives I feel I have a right to talk about from a culturally informed position. I had to exclude Rizi Timane's memoir for the same reason, but also because online searches showed distribution had been discontinued outside of Africa until after I completed my thesis. Both memoirs are now available, and I highly recommend reading them: *Life Beyond My Body: A Transgender Journey to Manhood in China* (2016) by Lei Ming, and *Love Wins Out: My Journey as an African Trans Man* (2021) by Dr. Rizi Timane.

Though I do address race and nationality in analysis of both memoirs through my research of Black theology, there are nuances of being a racialized trans man, with which I do empathize through allyship, but will never completely understand, as it is not my personal lived experience. I also cannot account for all the variations of scripture interpretation, tradition,

intra-congregational relations, and overall life experiences of trans men in the thousands of other Christian denominations around the world, with ~200 in the US and ~100 in Canada. I can only speak from experience as a Canadian ex-Catholic/current United Christian, along with information on the United Methodist Church from Brett and Jehovah's Witnesses from Lee.

This leads to the following logical question: why is it so much harder to find and access memoirs written by racialized trans men? Some might attribute this to trans people being a minority, and Christian trans people being a minority, and therefore, racialized Christian trans men are a minority within a minority, within a minority, limiting the number of relevant memoirs. However, I would suggest, among other reasons, that there are additional barriers to publishing for racialized trans stories because the dominant narrative of trans life writing is white, as well as the fact that not all racialized trans people *want* to publish their story either at all or in a book. There are far more stories of racialized trans people in online sources such as blogs, YouTube videos (including spoken word), and podcasts—which cut out the gatekeepers—of which I suggest should be delved into for further research on trans life narratives, particularly around other religions besides Christianity.

Current Implications

The "Parental Rights" rallies mentioned in the beginning of this work were, and continue to protest, the inclusion of LGBTQIA+-inclusive material being taught in Canadian schools—or any mention of anything LGBTQIA+-affirming in the classroom, i.e., 'Don't Say Gay' legislation—and demanding that parents be notified if a student requests to go by a different name and/or pronouns in the classroom. After I attended and witnessed the visceral hate spewed because of blatant misinformation shared from an American neo-Nazi government-recognized cult, I see that this thesis has become so much bigger than my individual struggles with discrimination and hate, simply for being who I am. These hate groups

claim they want to "protect the children," but only certain children that conform to their bubble of cis-heteronormative-only propaganda.

Directly from their website, Hands Off Our Kids states that they are a “grassroots movement dedicated to safeguarding parental rights and advocating for the removal of intrusive elements of sexual orientation and gender ideology from the educational system” (handsoffourkids.ca, 2023). They have been insidiously disinformed by American Neo-Nazi ideology to believe we—the LGBTQIA+ community—want to do the following list of blatant lies:

- Teach their kids how to have gay sex via sexually explicit material i.e., porn
- Turn all their children gay and/or trans
- Have gay and trans teachers groom their children for queer sexual exploitation
- Promote anti-faith violence toward Christian, Muslim, and Sikh children/families

Hands Off Our Kids claims to embrace principles of “human dignity, freedom of thought, and religious freedoms,” through “nurturing [kids’] growth in a safe environment and promoting critical thinking through quality education.” They say they are bringing together "diverse voices" to show solidarity and raise awareness for the “well-being of children and reinforcing a just, inclusive, and rights-respecting society.” They strive to hold current governments accountable—particularly the Canadian federal and provincial governments—for their responsibilities towards the “most vulnerable members of our society.” They want their kids to learn in a “healthy school system that is free from biases and indoctrination” and “refuse to stand by while the government and school system allow sexually explicit content and gender ideology” to be made available in their children’s classrooms. Finally, they hold steadfast to the *biased* opinion that parents, and parents alone, are responsible for their kid’s “moral upbringing,” not politicians, which is why they feel the necessity in marching to “speak up and have their voices heard” through a process of “dialogue, positive change, and the preservation of core human values” (handsoffourkids.ca, 2023). As soon as pro-LGBTQIA+ Canadian groups

and communities got wind of this group, their misinformed beliefs, and their plan, counter-protests were orchestrated in every city that was having a hate rally, including mine.

Those who are advocating for stronger "parental rights" believe these are "natural rights," inherent and universal, with zero room for State involvement. American psychiatrist, Robert Jay Lifton describes this line of thinking as a *thought-terminating cliché*: "how most far-reaching and complex of human problems are compressed into brief, highly reductive, definitive-sounding sentences, easily memorized, and easily expressed...becom[ing] the start and finish of any ideological analysis" (anti-hate.ca, 2023). Essentially, Dr. Lifton says the phrase '*protect parental rights*' has become a thought-terminating cliché that shuts down any follow up questions such as 'rights to do what?' and denies any subjectivity or bodily autonomy of children and naturalizes the parent as an omnipotent figure who views their children as unconscious dolls rather than human beings capable of thought and action outside this figure's control. The thought-terminating cliché '*protect parental rights*' is being used as a more palatable stand-in for '*anti-trans rights*' or '*anti-trans children's rights*.'

While this mindset is driving anti-LGBTQIA+ activists who were already openly proclaiming to be anti-LGBTQIA+, unfortunately, it is also being used to drive concerned, misinformed parents who may not actually be anti-LGBTQIA+ had they not been fed complete falsehoods about the LGBTQIA+-inclusive education. A substantial portion of those concerned, yet misinformed parents were specifically recruited because of their *religious affiliation* and their faith has been weaponized to push them further into anti-LGBTQIA+ beliefs. The underlying concern from both the anti-LGBTQIA+ activists who recruited them and the misinformed parents of faith is this fear of "losing masculinity" or "real men."

The culture of fear of "losing masculinity" and "real men" permeates through all aspects of Canadian life, and attempting to reviving hegemonic masculine traits is a direct response to the alleged humiliation, confusion and emasculation of men caused by second wave feminists who advocated for gay liberation, women's bodily autonomy from men, and female

empowerment in the workforce. Stephen Ducat (2004) argues that ring-wing movements use a twisted interpretation of the second-wave feminist movement to instill fear in men that they are being controlled by the "Mommy State" that pushes "feminist values" of weakness and softness. In Parental Rights Movement (PPR) groups like Hands Off Our Kids, these "moments of softness" are parents fighting for complete control of their property—their child—disguised as "protecting the children," either not realizing or not caring that their demands for "parental rights" may be suppressing their own child's right to safety at school and/or at home. This movement is not about the children; if it were, I would not have seen several children holding signs saying, 'I Belong to My Parents,' and 'My Parents Know Best.'

Catholic Counter-Hegemonic Masculinity & What I Want (Christian) Parents To Know

Gender and sexuality are not as a choice, but rather, a process of discovery through lived experiences, a process not affirmed by traditional Catholic theology. And part of this process of discovery is experienced in school. Many LGBTQIA+ people were denied this part of our discovery process, including myself, which is why most of us did not come to even understand we were always queer until well into adulthood. Had we been given some more information and safe spaces to talk in grade school, we could have bypassed years of internalized hatred and unhealthy suppression which often leads LGBTQIA+ youth to alcohol, other drugs, cis-het hook-up culture, and suicidal ideation/attempts. These destructive behaviors—so long as they were done discreetly—were framed as better than the alternative because they hide the truth. It makes ones think what the Catholic Church would rather have: suicidal, alcoholic, sexually exploited cis-het children scared of going to church or home, *or* happy, healthy, safe, queer children who do not fear their faith community or family?

Those who participate in the One Million March Children say they fear their children are being sexually exploited by "LGBTQIA+ propaganda," but I was sexually exploited far more as a "cis straight girl" than as a queer trans man. I was more easily coerced into straight sex because

it meant further hiding of my queerness and transness. Cis-het promiscuity is an unfortunately common tool of LGBTQIA+ suppression. Fighting against LGBTQIA+-inclusive education will force many queer children into using this tool of suppression to get through their grade school years in one piece, even if that one piece has been taped together so many times, one begins to think they are made of 90% tape. It is extremely difficult to 'just be a kid' when every spare moment is consumed by finding a better hiding spot than the last, sometimes from one's own flesh and blood. Kids do *not* choose to be LGBTQIA+, any more than they choose their parents. For kids to "just be kids," they need to stop being forced to choose between happiness and safety in their own home, school, or community. And it should not take potentially losing one's own child to a Pulse Nightclub-level tragedy to fully grasp how much weight is behind this plea.

A Message to My Trans Community

To my trans community: If we are ever to eliminate the negative effects of hegemonic gender ideology that we call out our cisgender peers for, we, as trans people, must stop taking on hegemonic gender expectations to attain some level of power, status and, ultimately safety, often at the expense of our own trans brothers and sisters who do not embody those traits. If trans folks are ever going to feel safe and validated, we need to find the courage to actively embody gender expressions outside hegemonic cis-heteronormative ideals. We need cisgender allies to support us, and each other, in the fight to deconstruct the hierarchy of legitimate masculinities and femininities. We also need to remember our shared humanity underneath all the political and social divides that are imposed on us, and those we have internalized as marginalized people that we are too often co-conspirators in perpetuating.

I also want my trans community to be aware of counter-hegemonic Christian theologies that attempt to break down traditional, binary Church teachings to support the idea of gender-as-process, not gender as choice or sin. Upon reviewing New Ways Ministry's core

commitments to the trans community, I believe counter-hegemonic Church teachings on gender, particularly masculinity, could promote:

- 1.) Dialogue between cis and trans men that respects and affirms unity in diversity of gender identity and expression, with no gendered expectations for legitimacy;
- 2.) Anti-racist discourse spanning across all men and masculine-identifying people, where no one's masculinity is questioned or demeaned because of perceived or self-identified race;
- 3.) Intersectional understanding of *manhood* that recognizes men of varying interstices of identity intersecting with gender need different resources, and mutually empowering man-to-man relationships that lift each other up and hold each other accountable;
- 4.) Mutual respect between religious and non-religious men, cis and trans men, and other masculine-identified people with any combination of interstices of identity, that sees all men as valid, and worthy of respect, dignity, and love from friends, (chosen) family, partners, and God.

I would like to finish with one final message to my trans, Christian, trans Christian communities, and anyone else reading this, using a metaphor from Austen Hartke that sums up what I would like *all* readers to take with them:

What if we imagined this story in another way? What if the lost sheep didn't wander away from the safety and goodness of the shepherd? What if it was just trying to escape the cruelty of the flock? Sheep will occasionally pick out a flock member who doesn't fit in—maybe because of an injury or a strange marking—and they'll chase that individual away...Jesus...leaves the 99 sheep behind to go in search of the one who needs

help...what's at stake for Jesus in this situation isn't just that one single lost sheep, and it's not just the 99 back home. It's *the integrity of the [whole] flock*. (Hartke, 2018)

We need to stop scapegoating marginalized individuals to protect the comfort and status quo of the "community" i.e., the hegemonic majority. Singling out individuals will not eradicate the larger systemic powers at play that impact every(body). We need to work within our communities from a genuinely all-inclusive, intersectional lens of interdependence and interrelatedness that not only protects trans, queer and other marginalized peoples, but also saves humanity from its own self-created catastrophes, fighting over human differences. We need to stop weaponizing these differences and start seeing how they are created with Divine intention, regardless of whether we believe that to be from God(s), Mother Nature, or the greater cosmos beyond any of our full comprehension.

The most humbling lessons we can all learn, that can give us the potential to find common ground with anyone, are: to listen more than we talk, to think critically before we criticize, to be careful with our assumptions of others, and no matter which "side" of a debate we are currently on, to always, always be teachable. I know that I do not, and never will know everything, and that is okay. It is part of what makes us all human. Sheep do not wander in groups because they all think the same or cannot think for themselves; they wander together for the emotional connection of community and for protection from wolves and other predators. We do not have to think the same way to show respect and kindness, and we should not *have* to be among the chosen targets of a wolf pack to want to help those the wolves have chosen.

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