

HOW PROPHECY GOT HER QUEER BACK:
(RE)DISCOVERING THE PROPHETIC AT THE RAINBOW LOUNGE,
40 YEARS AND EIGHT MINUTES LATER

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How Prophecy Got Her Queer Back: (Re)Discovering The Prophetic at the Rainbow Lounge, 40 Years and Eight Minutes Later

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Abstract

On June 28, 2009, mere minutes after the 40th anniversary of the Stonewall Rebellion, police in Fort Worth raided a local gay bar known as the Rainbow Lounge. When one of the patrons was critically injured that night, the anger that erupted among the LGBT communities raced through the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex, eventually reaching around the nation. In the climate that followed the police raid, a new voice emerged among the protestors: that of the prophetic. The purpose of this paper is twofold: (1) to provide an historical account of events at the Rainbow Lounge on the night of June 28, 2009 and the following months, and (2) to examine the inherently queer nature of the prophetic tradition by considering the words and actions of individuals and institutions, both queer and straight, in the aftermath of the raid of the Rainbow Lounge. Composed of four primary sections, this paper begins with an introductory account of events at the Rainbow Lounge immediately prior to and during the police action. The second part engages in a consideration of what it means to be “prophetic,” with the idea that the prophetic is inherently queer being explored in the third segment. In the final section, supporting examples of the words and deeds of ministers and theologians following the raid are considered.

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INTRODUCTION

On June 28, 1969, in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of New York City, police staged a raid on the Stonewall Inn, a well-known gay bar run by the local mafia, in what they most likely thought would be simply another in a long string of law “enforcement” actions intended to cow and frighten the local gay and lesbian population. Imagine their shock when, instead of acquiescing to requests to show identity and/or be escorted to the back to “prove” their sex, the customers refused, showing a unified front against police oppression. While police detained some patrons and allowed others to leave the bar, a crowd numbering in the hundreds began to gather outside the inn. When some of those who had been officially arrested were literally thrown into paddy wagons, the atmosphere of fear and intimidation intended by the police quickly became one of anger and outrage on the part of the assembled crowd. When one of the women who had been held began to struggle with her captors, her calls for help, combined with the excessively rough treatment she received at the hands of her captors, caused something in the crowd to snap and a riot ensued.

In the hours that followed, the situation evolved from the scene so common in LGBT communities around the nation, of gays, lesbians and transgendered individual being harassed by authorities, to one of open revolt against the repressive policies of a heterosexist society. Even as police backup appeared on the scene, efforts to disperse the crowd were met with violent resistance, forcing the police to barricade themselves within the inn. Though further reinforcements eventually succeeded in clearing the streets, the spirit of revolution that had been set loose was not so easily overcome. Over the next several days and nights, riots took place throughout the area as protesters clashed with police on numerous occasions. Though “peace” was ultimately restored, neither police nor the heteronormative forces of society as a whole were

ever able to put the so-called genie back in the bottle. Within two years of what became known variously as the Stonewall Riots, Stonewall Rebellion, or simply “Stonewall,” gay rights organizations had sprung up across the country, as each year the date of June 28, 1969 was honored in cities and states throughout America by those who saw the oppression inherent in a system that condemned others simply for whom they chose to love. The LGBT Rights Movement had begun.

Fast forward four decades, and the weekend of June 27-29, 2009 was poised to acknowledge a particularly important milestone for LGBT communities around the nation, as it marked 40 years since the events at Stonewall. The weekend promised to be a time when men and women from all walks of lives would acknowledge four decades of labor against oppression by looking back on both the highs and lows of a decidedly long and difficult struggle and reaffirm their commitments to continue the struggle against injustice. Though celebrations of Stonewall’s 40th anniversary were certain to be bittersweet—indeed, the actions of the Obama administration in the previous weeks had been perfect examples of the tumultuous history of the LGBTQ Rights Movement, as the Justice Department defended the Defense of Marriage Act in court one week, only to extend employment benefits to the same-sex partners of federal employees the next—no one could imagine how events would transpire in Texas. In the morning hours of June 28, 2009, instead of celebrating 40 years of LGBT rights movements, patrons at Fort Worth’s newest gay bar, the Rainbow Lounge, were reliving events frighteningly similar to those that precipitated the Stonewall Rebellion. An extremely aggressive police raid of the bar was underway which would end with the arrests of several patrons, one of whom would be critically injured.

This paper is a reaction to an age-old presence that was reawakened in the wake of the raid¹ at the Rainbow Lounge. In contrast to Stonewall,² the public presence of a modern-day generation of prophets cast events at the Rainbow Lounge in theologically unique terms. A small but vocal group of ministers and theologians made it a point to add their voices to the growing sea of cries for justice and accountability that followed the event, and in doing so, renewed efforts to counter millennia of religious bigotry. This paper will attempt to capture that sense of the prophetic spirit that followed events at the Rainbow Lounge, even as it attempts to reinterpret the meaning behind the term “prophetic.”³

The essay is divided into four sections. In the first, a reasonably detailed (though by no means exhaustive) account of the “police action” at the Rainbow Lounge, including an overview of the events that led to the head injury of one of the patrons, is provided. The purpose of this section is to provide both a synopsis of events for future readers and to lay out the historical framework for the fourth section. The second section deals with questions of theory and definition regarding the prophetic legacy, and temporarily leaves behind the discussion of the

1. The use of the word “raid” will prove to be an admittedly controversial choice for some, who may prefer words such as “incident” or “police action.” Nevertheless, those readers would do well to consult the Oxford English Dictionary, which provides the following definition of *raid*: “A sudden or vigorous attack or descent upon something for the purpose of appropriation, suppression, or destruction; *spec.* a surprise visit by police to arrest suspects or seize illicit goods.” After reading the section of this paper entitled “The Rainbow Lounge Raid,” it is hoped that the choice to use this word will be clear.

2. In preparation for this paper, an extensive period of time was spent researching the presence of theological voices in the immediate aftermath of the Stonewall Riots, including attempts to contact LGBT leaders such as Reverends Magora Kennedy and Troy Perry. Though there were without doubt ministers and theologians who condemned the actions of New York City police, their voices do not appear to have been public in the same way that ministers and theologians were vocal following the raid of the Rainbow Lounge. This is not to be unexpected, however, as the Stonewall Riots were the beginning of a paradigm shift in the approach taken by LGBT communities across the nation, and a transition from silent protesting and meetings behind closed doors to vocal advocacy for equal rights.

3. This work is also intended to serve the tertiary purpose of providing one entry in what will hopefully be a larger corpus of work exploring the events surrounding and leading up to the police raid of the Rainbow Lounge. Already, the media frenzy surrounding that night has died down as the temporal distance between the present and June 28, 2009 increases. It is hoped that scholars will not forget the events surrounding the Rainbow Lounge Raid, lest an important chapter in the struggle for civil rights fall into obscurity.

Rainbow Lounge. It is in this section that the groundwork for the simple thesis of the third section—that prophecy is, by its very nature, queer—is prepared. The fourth section returns to the Rainbow Lounge, with the dual purpose of providing an historical account of the prophetic voices which were so important in the days, weeks and months following June 28, 2009, and of explaining how those voices exemplified the queer force that is prophecy.

THE RAINBOW LOUNGE RAID

In the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex, the weekend of June 27-29, 2009 promised to be a time of significant, meaningful activity by LGBTQ communities throughout the area. Of particular note were a gay pride “mixer” scheduled for Friday evening in Denton, TX and a movie screening and panel discussion the following Saturday afternoon at a local Presbyterian church. Sunday morning, at Dallas-based Cathedral of Hope, a message in a series of sermons celebrating “A Generation of Pride” was slated. These events, and many others, were intended to build up to the Million Gay March in Dallas on Sunday, the flagship event of National Gay and Lesbian Pride Day. Events shortly after midnight on June 28, however, cast a pallor over Sunday’s celebrations.

Only a week before, a new bar named the Rainbow Lounge had opened in Fort Worth to much applause. With its grand opening scheduled for June 27, the club was an affirmation of the increasingly open presence of gays and lesbians in the Fort Worth area. In contrast to Dallas, with its well-known “gayborhood,” Fort Worth was decidedly lacking in “safe” areas where gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer individuals could openly express their sexuality. The presence of the Rainbow Lounge, though certainly not a solution to the often close-minded atmosphere that pervaded the city, was nevertheless a welcome breath of fresh air for many. It was hoped that the bar would serve as a place where any person, regardless of his or her

sexuality, could come to enjoy an evening of loud music, fantastic shows, spirits, and the company of others in a reasonably safe atmosphere. It was to be an important place where one could leave behind the daily tension of bucking the pervasive heteronormativity of the nation's seventeenth largest city.⁴

The atmosphere at the Rainbow Lounge on June 27th was electric. The faint haze hanging in the bar was fodder for the laser beams that struck out from the ceiling, pulsing in rhythm to the throbbing beat. Patrons embraced one another as they danced, stood at the bar, sat in couches, or mingled outside in celebration of the beginning of another year of LGBT rights movement. Unfortunately, any sense of security the establishment might have had was destroyed a mere eight minutes after the 40th anniversary of Stonewall.

Stonewall Turns 40

According to an investigation released by the Fort Worth Police Department (FWPD), officers with the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission (TABC) had singled out the Rainbow Lounge for inspection three nights before. On patrol with two members of the FWPD, a TABC agent arrived at the Rainbow Lounge the night of June 25 with the intent to conduct a bar check for appropriate distribution of alcohol. While waiting for a supervisor to arrive to ensure the check was conducted correctly, the agent heard voices coming from behind the club and motioned the FWPD officers over. In what would have struck a passerby as a surprisingly voyeuristic, sexually-charged scene, he peeked through the fence, then motioned to one of the FWPD officers to do the same. They “peered through the crack in the fence and observed two (2)

4. "Table 1: Annual Estimates of the Population for Incorporated Places Over 100,000, Ranked by July 1, 2008 Population: April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2008" (CSV). *2008 Population Estimates*. United States Census Bureau, Population Division. <http://www.census.gov/popest/cities/tables/SUB-EST2008-01.csv> (accessed 24 April 2009).

males in tight fitting underwear sitting on a picnic table.”⁵ The officers and agent then returned to their car and, finding that a supervisor was unavailable for the check, left the area. Two days later, on Saturday, June 27, Fort Worth police and TABC agents, in what can only be hoped was simply a colossal lack of sensitivity to the historical importance of the weekend, prepared for an evening of bar checks that would end with the Rainbow Lounge. Among those who would be conducting the checks were the TABC agent and two FWPD officers who had been peeking through the Rainbow Lounge fence two nights before.

The exact story of how events transpired when Fort Worth Police and the TABC entered the Rainbow Lounge is anything but clear. On the one hand, there is the deceptively benign, matter-of-fact account of events present in the legally-worded report released by the Internal Affairs Division of the FWPD. On the other hand, there are the accounts by bar patrons of an extremely aggressive police force invading the bar and creating an overly intimidating atmosphere. A prime example of this disconnect between the two parties can be found in the differing accounts of the arrest of George Armstrong that night.

The police investigation provides a lengthy, fairly dry (though not to say downplayed) description of a struggle between Armstrong, who arrived at the Rainbow Lounge shortly before the police, and his arresting officer, J.M. Back:

Officer Back approached Mr. Armstrong and asked him how much he had had to drink. Mr. Armstrong responded ... that he had only been at the Rainbow Lounge a short time and had a couple drinks. Officer Back could smell alcohol on Mr. Armstrong's breath [and] told Mr. Armstrong that he was under arrest for Public Intoxication. Mr. Armstrong refused to comply with Officer Back's directions to place his hands behind his back. Mr. Armstrong stepped down from the VIP level

5. Michael Baldwin, “Inter-Office Correspondence, Subject: Internal Affairs Case #Ia2009-0142,” Fort Worth Police Executive Services Bureau Internal Affairs Division, (2 Oct 2009), 9.

to the main floor and began to struggle with Officer Back. They started to ricochet off of the walls leading to the men's bathroom. Officer Back was not able to control Mr. Armstrong and they both entered into the men's restroom while struggling. ... Officer Back started to become tired and winded and pulled Mr. Armstrong out of the bathroom and back into the hallway between the men's bathroom and the VIP section. ... Officer Back decided to take Mr. Armstrong to the floor.⁶

In stark contrast to the movie-like replay provided by the report, there is the account by a patron at the bar who described the event in a more succinct, decidedly more frightening, way: “there was that guy getting the crap beat out of him there in the back.”⁷ Given the lack of documentary evidence of events on June 28 (only a few grainy cell phone pictures exist), it is difficult to know which of the accounts, if not both (or neither), is accurate. Whatever the case, the reality is that the presence of the police and TABC agents quickly created an atmosphere that would strike any student of the Stonewall Rebellion as eerily reminiscent of events 40 years prior.

Though it is hoped that they were unaware of it at the time, the FYPD officers and TABC agents had arrived at the Rainbow Lounge 40 years and *eight minutes* after New York Police walked into the Stonewall Inn and announced “Police! We’re taking the place!”⁸ Though the stated purpose of the Rainbow Lounge “inspection” was to ensure that patrons were not being “over served” alcohol, the presence of police arresting patrons in a gay bar on the 40th anniversary of the event most often credited with sparking the modern LGBT rights movement was a metaphorical powder keg, just waiting for a spark to ignite it. That spark would be found with a young man named Chad Gibson.

6. “Inter-Office Correspondence, Subject: Internal Affairs Case #Ia2009-0142,” 13.

7. Tammye Nash, “What They Saw At the Rainbow Lounge,” *The Dallas Voice (TX)*, 29 Jun 2009.

8. New York City Police entered the Stonewall Inn at 1:20 am, June 28, 1969 [David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution*, 1st ed. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2004), 137]. Fort Worth Police walked into the Rainbow Lounge at 1:28 am, June 28, 2009.

Chad Gibson: A Catalyst for Action

When Chad Gibson walked into the Rainbow Lounge Saturday night, there was no way he could have known that before the night was out he would be on the front lines of the struggle for LGBT equality in Fort Worth. For a day or two, he wasn't even fully aware of how the night had ended, because he was lying in a hospital bed with potentially fatal bleeding in his brain, the result of an injury sustained while in the custody of the TABC.

As with the arrest of George Armstrong, the details surrounding Chad Gibson's arrest are obscured by differing accounts. The TABC agent, with whom the altercation leading to the arrest began, claimed Gibson first used "the back of his right hand," making contact with "the genital area,"⁹ and then resisted arrest. This in turn led to Gibson's forcible detainment at the hands of several TABC agents and Fort Worth Police. The report submitted to the TABC Chief of Enforcement stated that the agents "reported no visible signs of injury on the subject and there was no sign of injury, like blood, on the floor where the arrest took place."¹⁰ Instead, Gibson's head injury is explained as the result of a fall he sustained after vomiting outside the club while in custody:

[TABC Agent Jason] Chapman, who was standing only a few feet from Gibson, then noticed Gibson bent over facing him and began to vomit. Chapman said he reacted by stepping back to keep the vomit from landing on him. Chapman looked down for a second and when he looked back up toward Gibson, he saw Gibson rise up and turn to his right, as if trying to collect himself. This is when Chapman said Gibson, who was still handcuffed from behind, suddenly began to fall. Chapman said he reached out to grab Gibson, but he couldn't reach him in time. Chapman saw Gibson fall forward to the ground, striking the front right portion of his forehead on the concrete pavement. Chapman described the "popping" sound

9. Andy Pena, "Inter-Office Communication, Subject: C09-012 (Aller/Chapman)," Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission, 30 Oct 2009, 12.

10. *Ibid.*, 13.

of Gibson's head striking the ground equal to two pieces of wood violently coming together.¹¹

Gibson, however, denied this account: "They have, you know, blamed it on me, that I was drunk, I fell and hit my head. I groped the officer. I did this. I did that. You know what, no."¹² In the end, regardless of which account is accurate, the exact cause of Gibson's injury—whether he fell and hit his head on the ground or TABC agents and Fort Worth Police caused the injury while trying to arrest him—was not the central issue. The fact that a gay male in Fort Worth was in the hospital after a police raid of a local gay club, however, was.

To say that Chad Gibson served as a rallying cry for LGBT individuals who already felt under siege would be a gross understatement. Even as New York celebrated the 40th anniversary of Stonewall with a gay pride parade, the palpable outrage in Fort Worth was a sign that the struggle for equality was not over. In communities where the names of victims of anti-LGBT violence are burned into the minds of many—Paul Broussard,¹³ Charles Howard,¹⁴ Matthew Shepard,¹⁵ Satendar Singh,¹⁶ Emonie Spaulding,¹⁷ Brandon Teena,¹⁸ Juana Vega,¹⁹ Arthur

11. *Ibid.*, 14-15.

12. "Man Injured in Raid of Gay Bar Speaks Out," *WFAA-TV News 8 Update (TX)*, narrated by Darla Miles, (4 July 2009).

13. On July 4, 1991, in Houston, TX, Paul Broussard, a gay male, was killed when he and two friends were attacked by a group of young men out to "beat up some queers." Among the weapons used against Broussard was a 2-by-4 through which a nail had been driven. (John Makeig, "3 Youths Plead Guilty to Murder of Banker," *Houston Chronicle [TX]*, 12 Jan 1993, A9.)

14. On July 7, 1984, in Bangor, ME, Charles O. Howard, a gay male, was chased down by a group of three teenagers yelling homophobic slurs. Upon catching him, his assailants threw him off of a bridge into the stream below, in spite of his cries that he could not swim. Howard drowned within minutes. (Judy Harrison, "Where are Charlie Howard's Killers?" *Bangor Daily News Online*, [13 July 2009], <http://www.bangordailynews.com/detail/110585.html> [accessed 03 April 2010].)

15. In one of the best-known cases of anti-LGBT violence, Matthew Wayne Shepard was robbed, beaten, tortured and then tied to a fence and left to die on October 7, 1998 in Laramie, WY after telling two young men (who had offered him a ride home from a bar) that he was gay. His comatose body was found the next evening and he died three days later. ("Our Story," *Matthew Shepard Foundation* [website], http://www.matthewshepard.org/site/PageServer?pagename=Our_Story_Main_Page [accessed 03 April 2010].)

16. On July 1, 2007, in Sacramento, CA, Satendar Singh, a gay male, was accosted by a group of men who had been taunting him with homophobic slurs throughout the day. When a fight ensued, Singh was knocked to the

Warren Jr.,²⁰ Nicolas West,²¹ and, just months before before, Michael Scott Goucher²²—the news of a young, gay male being injured while in police custody awakened a fury that could scarcely have been anticipated by the officers at the Rainbow Lounge that night. Within hours, the LGBT communities in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex were aware of the raid, with local and state news outlets following close behind.²³ The story very quickly spread around the nation as LGBT news outlets and blogs such as Queerty,²⁴ Equality Across America,²⁵ the National

ground where he suffered extensive brain injuries, dying four days later. (Crystal Carreon, “Beating Death Symbolic of Local Tensions,” *The Sacramento Bee [CA]*, 27 July 2007, A1.)

17. On August 21, 2003, in Washington, DC, Emonie Kiera Spaulding, a sex worker, was shot to death after a man with whom she may have been sexually intimate discovered she was transgender female. (Eric H. Holder, Jr., “Statement of Eric H. Holder, Jr. Attorney General Before the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, At a Hearing Entitled ‘The Matthew Shepard Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009,’” *Department of Justice*, 25 June 2009.)

18. On December 31, 1993, in Humboldt, NE, Brandon Teena (born Teena Brandon), a transsexual male, was shot to death in the horrific culmination to a week of violence that started with his kidnapping and rape on Christmas Eve by a group of acquaintances. (Chris Summers, “The Victims of Prejudice,” *BBC News Online*, 26 December 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/3219591.stm> [accessed 3 April 2010].)

19. On November 11, 2001, in Milwaukee, WI, Juana Vega, a lesbian, was shot to death after a confrontation with her girlfriend’s brother who accused her of “turning” his sister gay. (Franny White, “Hate Crimes Charge Demanded in Death,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel [WI]*, 20 November 2001, B5.)

20. On July 4, 2000, in Grant Town, WV, Arthur Carl Warren, Jr., a gay male, was beaten to death by three men who then dumped his body on a nearby road, running him over multiple times in an attempt to make his death appear to be a hit-and-run. (Thomas Glave, *Words to Our Now: Imagination and Dissent*, [University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 2005], 261.)

21. On November 30, 1993, in Tyler, TX, Nicolas West was kidnapped in a shopping center parking lot and driven to a nearby clay pit, where he was shot approximately fifteen times and left for dead. (Texas Attorney General, “Media Advisory: Henry Earl Dunn, Jr. Scheduled to be Executed,” 13 May, 2002, <http://www.oag.state.tx.us/oagNews/release.php?id=134> [accessed 3 April 2010].)

22. On February 3, 2009, in Stroudsburg, PA, Michael Scott Goucher, a gay male, was attacked by a man with whom he had had prior sexual relations. Stabbed multiple times, his body was dumped on the side of a road and covered with snow, where it remained undiscovered for more than a week. (Adam McNaughton, “Teen Confesses to Stabbing Stroudsburg Man About 20 Times,” *Pocono Record [PA]*, 13 February 2009.)

23. cf. “Man hospitalized after inspection of gay bar,” narrated by Darla Miles, *WFAA-TV (TX)*, 28 June 2009, <http://www.wfaa.com/news/local/64772877.html> (accessed 19 March 2009); “DFW Gay Community Upset After Bar Raid,” *CBS 11 TV Online*, 29 June 2009, <http://cbs11tv.com/local/Rainbow.Lounge.TABC.2.1063513.html>, (accessed March 19, 2008); “Fort Worth rally protests police raid on gay bar,” *The Houston Chronicle Online*, 29 June 2009, <http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/metropolitan/6502162.html> (accessed March 19, 2008); Jeff Prince, “Rainbow Lounge: Fort Worth’s Stonewall?,” *Fort Worth Weekly Online*, 30 June 2009, http://www.fwweekly.com/index.php?option=com_wordpress&p=682&Itemid=482, (accessed March 19, 2008).

24. “SHOCK: Fort Worth Stages Its Own Stonewall-Style Gay Bar Raid,” *Queerty*, 29 June 2009, <http://www.queerty.com/shock-fort-worth-stages-its-own-stonewall-style-gay-bar-raid-20090629/> (accessed 19 March 2008).

Lesbian and Gay Task Force,²⁶ and Gay Agenda,²⁷ as well as national news outlets such The New York Times,²⁸ The Los Angeles Times,²⁹ CNN,³⁰ MSNBC's "The Rachel Maddow Show,"³¹ and The Huffington Post³² carried the story. News of events in Fort Worth even reached across the Atlantic Ocean when it was picked up by "Europe's largest gay news service," Pink News³³.

The wave of outrage swept through the various LGBT collectives in Fort Worth and Dallas like a storm. Events that had been planned to celebrate 40 years of activism quickly became occasions for vigorous protest. The first such protest took place Sunday evening at 7pm on the steps of the Tarrant County Courthouse in Fort Worth. A crowd of approximately 100 gathered to express their outrage at events the night before and begin pressuring local authorities for an explanation of what appeared to many to be a deliberate attempt to "send a message" to the LGBT communities in the area. It was into this environment of protest, fueled by the hurt and pain of the police raid, that a small group of prophets stepped, prepared to stand up and speak out

25. Tammye Nash, "Eyewitness accounts contradict statements from police on what happened at Rainbow Lounge Sunday morning," *Equality Across America*, 29 June 2009, <http://equalityacrossamerica.org/blog/?m=200906> (accessed 19 March 2008).

26. Sue Hyde, "From Stonewall to the Rainbow Lounge: Stop police abuse!," *National Lesbian and Gay Task Force*, July 1, 2009, <http://www.thetaskforce.org/blog/20090701-shyde-abuse> (accessed 19 March 2009).

27. James Hipp, "Post Pride Raid Ends in Arrest of 7," *Gay Agenda*, 29 June 2009, <http://www.gayagenda.com/tag/rainbow-room/> (accessed 19 March 2009).

28. James C. McKinley, Jr., "A Raid at a Club in Texas Leaves a Man in the Hospital and Gay Advocates Angry," *The New York Times Online*, 4 July 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/05/us/05texas.html?_r=1&ref=us (accessed 19 March 2009).

29. P.J. Huffstutter, "Police raid at gay club in Texas stirs ugly memories," *Los Angeles Times Online*, 6 July 2009, <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/jul/06/nation/na-gay-bar-raid6> (accessed 19 March 2009).

30. "Dallas' Gay Community Outraged," CNN, <http://www.cnn.com/video/data/2.0/video/us/2009/06/29/dnt.tx.gay.bar.controversy.kdaf.html> (accessed 19 March 2009).

31. "'The Rachel Maddow Show' for Monday, June 29," narr. by Allison Stewart, *The Rachel Maddow Show*, MSNBC [transcript], 29 June 2009, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/31663765> (accessed 19 March 2009).

32. "Gay Bar Raid In Texas Protested: Excessive Force Alleged," *The Huffington Post* [online newspaper], 29 June 2009, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/06/29/gay-bar-raid-in-texas-pro_n_222416.html (accessed 19 March 2009).

33. "Police raid Texas gay bar on the anniversary of the Stonewall riots," *Pink News* [online newspaper], 30 June 2009, <http://www.pinknews.co.uk/news/articles/2005-13011.html/> (accessed 19 March 2009).

for the oppressed and marginalized. Though outnumbered by the much larger heterosexist communities that saw events at the Rainbow Lounge as a just “reward,”³⁴ these prophetic voices spoke a renewed message of God/dess’³⁵ love and acceptance to the LGBT communities and condemnation of actions meant to create an environment of fear and intimidation.

THE PROPHETIC LEGACY

Before continuing with the Rainbow Lounge narrative, a detour is required to lay out what exactly is meant by the use of the term *prophet*. For many, when the word “prophet” or “prophecy” is mentioned, the mind quickly conjures up certain images grounded in millennia-old stories. For some, the image is perhaps that of a deranged ascetic, shouting at the top of his lungs for all who might listen, much the parody in Monty Python’s *Life of Brian*, where long-bearded man in a tattered tunic holds the attention of a rapt crowd with esoteric warnings that “the young shall not know where lieth the things possessed by their fathers, that their fathers put there only just the night before around eight o’clock.”³⁶ For others, the image might be that of a Nostradamus-type figure, predicting future events with such vague utterings that even the most far-fetched events can somehow be interpreted as fulfillment of the prophecy. Perhaps the image of the court prophet comes to mind: one who crushes tea leaves and rolls animal bones in an effort to determine whether the king’s next military foray will end in success or disaster. Though

34. Though it is customary to cite proof for claims of this nature, in this case I will decline. The vitriolic sentiments that were often found in responses to posts on blogs and articles in online news outlets were reprehensible and do not deserve to be repeated here. Suffice it to say that a reader sufficiently interested in anti-LGBT statements in the wake of the Rainbow Lounge Raid can peruse the comments sections of the stories provided in the footnotes above.

35. Throughout the paper, the phrase “God/dess” has been chosen as a substitute for “God.” This choice is an attempt to destabilize the often male, heterosexist imagery associated with the traditional term. Though it is acknowledged that any use of “God” may still be compromised by Western Christian Imperialism, given the intended audience the risk appears acceptable.

36. *Monty Python’s Life of Brian*, DVD, directed by Terry Jones, (Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures, 1979).

these images all find some basis in historical reality, they nevertheless miss the essence of what it means to be a prophet or to speak with a prophetic voice. What, then, makes a person a prophet? Is it the ability to predict the future or speak using eloquent, yet esoteric, platitudes? Or is it something deeper; something that at first may be tremendously subtle only to later prove to be deeply earth-shaking?

The answer is that it is the moral accountability to which the unjust and oppressors are held by a vocal few speaking with divine authority³⁷ that constitutes the primary force behind the prophetic. Given this meaning, the sense of prediction of future events is more or less limited to “woe unto you” statements; comments that remind all who hear them of the consequences that come when a person or group chooses to ignore the divine mandates of justice toward, equality of, and love for each other and creation. Throughout the prophetic tradition³⁸ several noticeable characteristics emerge that aid in the effort to determine what exactly can be considered “prophetic.” Though each prophet obviously has his or her own characteristics, three primary themes emerge, the first of which is the most critical: speaking the truth to those in positions of privilege.

Prophets Speak Truth to Power

Woe to those who lie upon beds of ivory, and stretch themselves upon their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the midst of the stall ... but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph! Therefore they shall now be the first of those to go into exile, and the revelry of those who stretch themselves shall pass away.

Amos 6:4-7 (RSV)

37. Though any act of speaking out against oppression and injustice can be prophetic, in this paper, the use of the word *prophet* is deliberately limited to those who claim some form of divine authority.

38. It is important to note that the prophetic tradition is not merely limited to passages from the Hebrew Bible and Christian Testament. As such, this paper will also borrow from the Islamic tradition in an effort to expand the definition.

In the 1955, in response to the ever-increasing tensions of the Cold War, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) published a pamphlet entitled *Speak Truth to Power*. Using a charge given to their eighteen-century predecessors, the members of the AFSC envisioned a reality where the truth that “love endures and overcomes; that hatred destroys; that what is obtained by love is retained, but what is obtained by hatred proves a burden,” was spoken to all. Those to whom this truth was to be communicated were:

Those who hold high places in our national life and bear the terrible responsibility of making decisions for war or peace ... to the American people who are the final reservoir of power in this country and whose values and expectations set the limits for those who exercise authority ... to the idea of Power itself, and its impact on Twentieth Century life.³⁹

Though the definition of “Power” in the third sense was not explicitly laid out,⁴⁰ the overall charge was clear: the AFSC intended to speak boldly to those who wielded their positions of influence in the hopes of preventing them from doing so in greedy and self-serving ways, placing the needs and desires of relatively small, privileged groups ahead of those of the larger community. In effect, the AFSC was making the case for a resurgence of the prophetic.

Abraham Joshua Heschel writes that, “the prophet is an iconoclast, challenging the apparently holy, revered, and awesome. Beliefs cherished as certainties, institutions endowed with supreme sanctity, [are exposed] as scandalous pretensions.”⁴¹ This drive to illuminate the “scandalous pretensions” of those in power is one of the primary characteristics of the person

39. Stephen G. Cary, James E. Bristol, et al., *Speak Truth to Power: A Quaker Search for an Alternative to Violence: A Study of International Conflict Prepared for the American Friends Service Committee* (Philadelphia: 1955)

40. This paper is similarly unconcerned with providing a “textbook” definition of *power*, primarily due to the multiple forms expressions of control may take. As such, “power” will be used in its broadest sense: to refer to any system of control whereby one group exerts undue influence over another. A comprehensive definition is left to the purview of other authors.

41. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 10.

who speaks with a prophetic voice. The realization that individuals and institutions that claim, on the outside, to be about the business of the people may actually be engaged in perpetuating a system of control designed to maintain their influence at the expense of the marginalized and oppressed drives the prophet to speak with a voice that condemns such unjust use of influence.

The prophet is not fooled by the platitudes of those who engage in what appears on the surface to be altruistic work, instead looking deeper to see the motivations behind such actions and to draw attention to other areas of inaction (or counteraction) that highlight the hypocrisy of those whose primary concern is for themselves. The prophet speaks truth with the voice of Jeremiah:

Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other God/dess that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, “We are safe!”— only to go on doing all these abominations? (Jer 7:8-10 NRSV⁴²)

The pretensions of the elite are laid bare as the words of the prophet strip away the veneer of acceptability and expose the troubling realities underneath. Just like Martin Luther King, Jr., who wrote from a Birmingham jail that, “it is true that [police] have been ... rather publicly ‘nonviolent.’ But for what purpose? To preserve the evil system of segregation,”⁴³ the prophet understands that the elite are willing to temporarily set aside appearances of uncontested power if it will ensure that the larger system of control remains in place.

Reza Aslan’s view of the prophetic role in the Islamic context provides additional insight into the prophet’s decision to speak with bold honesty. Referring to Muhammad’s decision to

42. Unless otherwise stated, all scripture passages taken from the *New Revised Standard Version* (edited by Wayne A. Meeks et al., New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

43. Jr. King, Martin Luther, “Letter From a Birmingham Jail,” in *Liberating Faith: Religious Voices for Justice, Peace, & Ecological Wisdom*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb, (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 186.

announce himself as “the Messenger of God,” Aslan points out that he was “blatantly transgressing the traditional Arab process through which power was granted.”⁴⁴ The feature that pushes prophets to ignore hierarchies that are in place for the express purpose of keeping radicals like them in check, and to instead find divine authority in the only “person” who is qualified to grant it—God/dess—is a key element of speaking truth to power. What makes a prophet so effective in this endeavor is the fact that he or she stands outside of the power structure, resisting attempts to co-opt the message. This decision to defy the lure of power is noticeably different from “temple prophets” who often find their words—either accidentally or deliberately—shaped by the elite with whom they seek favor. The true prophets resist temptations to sell out, instead insisting on the purity of their message, much like the Prophet Muhammad, who said, “if they put the sun in my right hand and the moon in my left on condition that I abandoned this course, until God/dess has made me victorious, or I perish therein, I would not abandon it.”⁴⁵

In the end, however, the prophet understands that he or she “faces a coalition of callousness and established authority;” that they are trying to “stop a mighty stream with mere words.”⁴⁶ Even as the message is preached—“It is you who have devoured the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?” (Is 3:14-15)—there is a keen awareness of the almost insurmountable task ahead. How, then, is the prophet to accomplish the divine mission with which he or she has been

44. Reza. Aslan, *No God But God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2006), 44.

45. Abd al-Malik Ibn Hishām, Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishāq’s Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 119.

46. Heschel, *The Prophets*, 16.

charged? The answer to this question lies in a second characteristic of the prophet: that he or she stands with the oppressed.

Prophets Stand with the Oppressed

I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them.

Exodus 3:7

In the struggle between the oppressed and the oppressors, prophets face the latter, reminding the elite of God/dess' condemnation of their repressive stance. Even as this is done, prophets locate themselves alongside those who have suffered from the harsh realities of unjust power structures. Indeed, the prophet often comes from the ranks of the marginalized, having experienced the plight of the oppressed firsthand. John the Baptizer was one such prophet, who, having endured the indignities inflicted upon the Jewish people by the Roman Empire, left to the wilderness to preach a message of condemnation of the elite and salvation for the oppressed. The prophet understands that the change he or she has been tasked with by God/dess is impossible to achieve without enlisting the help of those who are to be freed. After all, though the prophet's words may prove to be a nuisance to the elite, it is a relatively simple matter to silence a single voice. When the prophet combines his or her voice with that of a *movement*, however, an entirely different story may unfold. Gandhi by himself could do little more than point out injustice and fast in protest of the repressive British Empire, something that had most certainly been done before, to little effect. On the other hand, when his voice was backed by that of millions of his countrymen and women, what could have been little more than an itch for the collective British Empire to scratch became a grievous wound that succeeded in crippling the most powerful empire the human race had known to that point.

The prophet seeks to give hope to the oppressed by reminding them of God/dess' solidarity in their plight. Like Ezekiel, when the oppressed cry out that, "our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely," the prophet responds with God/dess' words: "I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ... I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live..." (Ez 37:10-14). Indeed, it was this very message—this *dream*—to which Martin Luther King, Jr. referred in his famous speech on August 28, 1963:

Go back ... knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed. Let us not wallow in the valley of despair. ... So I say to you, my friends, that even though we must face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed—we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all ... are created equal.⁴⁷

Furthermore, as King's speech communicated, the hope and dream brought by the prophet is not one for tomorrow; it is one for *today*. As the prophet stands with the oppressed, speaking a message of hope that condemns the elite and promises salvation for the oppressed, the words are not meant solely for future generations (though it is certainly acknowledged that the struggle will be long), but also for those present *now*. Isaiah does not say, "The people who walked in darkness *will see* a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light *will shine*." Instead he spoke for the *now*; "the people *have seen*" and "a light *has shined*." (Is 9:2)

47. Martin Luther King Jr. and James Melvin Washington, *I Have a Dream : Writings and Speeches That Changed the World*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 104.

J. Michael Clark writes of being, “acutely aware that any prophetic voice must also be a compassionate voice and one *grounded in community*.”⁴⁸ It is this spirit of compassion and community that is behind the words of a prophet when he or she speaks of God/dess’ promise that those who have been beaten down will be lifted up. Indeed, the prophet could not hope to convey such a message if he or she stood in a place that was removed from the suffering of the marginalized. The promise of God/dess’ Justice is not something that can be preached from the ranks of oppressors. Only when it emanates from a place of solidarity with the downtrodden can it truly be considered prophetic.

Prophets Transgress Boundaries

Of what use to me is frankincense that comes from Sheba, or sweet cane from a distant land? Your burnt offerings are not acceptable, nor are your sacrifices pleasing to me.

Jeremiah 6:20 (NRSV)

Not only does the prophet speak to those in power and stand with those who are oppressed, the prophet *acts* against boundaries, both artificial and real. But this action is of the subversive type where the prophet, by his or her very presence, turns traditionally held notions of what is “appropriate” and “acceptable” on their heads. Societal “norms” are shown for what they are: rules and boundaries fabricated by the elite in order to maintain control via a particular power structure. The prophet accomplishes this when he or she crosses a boundary in a deliberate act of defiance. By its very nature, this act becomes an unwelcome affront to those in positions of privilege because it is a sin—a *transgression*—against what is “expected.” It goes beyond simply “reaching across the aisle,” and instead becomes an act that *breaks through* what was

48. J. Michael Clark, “Peace Theology and Apocalyptic Metaphor: A ‘Queer’ Perspective,” *Journal of Men’s Studies*, 11(2), 2003, 237.

previously believed to be an impregnable wall. This breakage startles observers, and, after catching their attention, helps prepare them to hear a message of radical justice.

In Jeremiah, God/dess tells the prophet not to “enter the house of mourning, or go to lament, or bemoan them” (Jer. 16:5) as a way of capturing the attention of those who have become so enthralled with the *appearance* of faithfulness that they have missed the *spirit* of faithfulness. By transgressing traditional expectations, Jeremiah stands up and stands out as a voice of God/dess’ condemnation of empty acts. A similar transgression occurs when God/dess commands Ezekiel not to mourn the passing of his wife, an obvious sign of something amiss. The reaction of the people is immediate: “Will you not tell us what these things mean for us, that you are acting this way?” (Ez 24:19). Once again, the prophet denies traditional expectations by crossing a previously inviolable boundary with the express purpose of shocking the observer out of his or her complacency and preparing the mind to receive God/dess’ words. In the Islamic tradition, we see this transgression as well. As mentioned above, Reza Aslan reminds the reader that Muhammad’s decision to take the title of “Prophet” without seeking the permission of any other was a transgressive act *par excellence*. Muhammad did not speak out against a boundary; he shattered it by doing on his own that which the elite had convinced the people was beyond their ken.

Though this transgression may be obvious in nature—indeed, simply standing up in the midst of a crowd and speaking out is a powerful act in and of itself—it can also appear in the subtle hint behind the prophet’s words as he or she uses bodily appearance, mannerisms, and even location as sub-texts to the spoken message. John the Baptist announced the coming messiah not in the regalia of a temple prophet, surrounded by the wealthy and powerful, but dressed in camel hair and living on a diet of locusts and honey in the surrounding countryside. In

our modern time, the prophet often transgresses boundaries simply by appearing in a venue previously reserved for the elite. Martin Luther King, Jr. addressed the throngs of people not from the relative isolation of a backcountry church, but by standing in front of the Lincoln Memorial as pictures of this prophet standing at the heart of the very government that sought to deny justice to his people—a black man in a white world—sped around the globe. Though King’s words rang with the voice of God/dess, his *presence* was also a testament to a prophetic willingness to transgress the artificial boundaries set in place by the elite.

(RE)DISCOVERING THE QUEER IN PROPHECY

Each of the characteristics listed above—as acts that, by their very nature, push against the inertia of the status quo—can be seen as embodiments of a queer identity. In this way, the attributes of a prophet betray the underlying queerness of the prophetic endeavor.

(Re)Defining “Queer”

Before making the case for prophecy as queer action, it is important to acknowledge that the word “queer” can have a multitude of meanings, each as unique as the individual who chooses to use the term. Nevertheless, when considering the traditional uses of the expression, two primary meanings emerge, both with fairly broad usage. In the modern vernacular, the most common usage of *queer* is in reference to same-sex-loving individuals, male or female and is often used in a derogatory sense. Though an accurate use of the word, it is without doubt the most simplistic, as it reduces the individual to a function of his or her sexuality, and runs the definite risk of dehumanizing the individual. In its second usage, *queer* communicates a non-sexual sense of being different; of standing apart from the crowd. Though an admittedly older usage, more commonly used in the first half of the twentieth century before there was a “formal”

gay and lesbian rights movement, it is nevertheless a meaning that carries great value for modern discourses. At the same time, it still lacks a sense of dynamism, as the person is *labeled* queer, becoming a victim of his or her own oddity; passively assigned a place “over there,” away from the dominant voices. There is, however, a third definition that is slowly gaining recognition on the academic stage; one that attempts to merge these two traditional definitions in a way that allows them to transcend one another.

The word *queer* is rapidly transforming into a term that combines the best of its “same-sex” and “different” definitions in order to make room for a larger group of people, while avoiding the gross oversimplifications and categorizations traditionally associated with the two. This new definition considers queer as a counter to the prevailing heteronormativity of modern society, as it takes on a meaning that communicates a sense of action against systems of domination grounded in “traditional” notions of sexuality and/or power. It is what Judith Halberstam refers to as “nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment and activity in space and time.”⁴⁹ *Queer* becomes that which resists the normative influence of the status quo. For example, it is with this definition in mind that Carter Heyward refers to her mother as queer:

What makes my mother queer is her irrepressible interest in making connections among justice struggles and making these connections public! Not hiding her convictions under a barrel. Not remaining silent when everyone around her would be more comfortable if she were sometimes a little less in their face...⁵⁰

49. Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 6.

50. Carter Heyward, “Queer Christ: Transforming Anger Into Hope,” *Episcopal Divinity School*, <http://www.eds.edu/CURRENT/PDF/Sermons/QueerChrist.pdf> (accessed 8 April 2010).

In this new definition, the individual is neither precluded from loving the same sex, nor is he or she required to do so (both of which would suggest a norm-based view of sexuality). Instead, what determines one's queerness is whether or not one stands in solidarity with the opposition to systems that seek to homogenize, and therefore marginalize, one's being. Furthermore, though the individual is still likely to be referred to as "odd," this "standing apart" becomes a deliberate action taken against an oppressive system. With this new definition, the label of "Queer" becomes a badge of honor worn by all who fight injustice and oppression.

(Re)Discovering Jesus, the Queer Prophet

The case for a *prophetic* Jesus is one that almost makes itself. Jesus' message most certainly spoke truth to power—both the religious leaders of the day who collaborated with their Roman oppressors to gain moderate measures of power, and the Roman Empire, whose presence was felt in even the most mundane daily actions—and the Nazarene also stood with the oppressed, eating in the homes of the "least of the least" and healing those who had long ago been abandoned as "unclean." Jesus' very presence was transgressive, especially with respect to the Sabbath. Whether it was a walking through fields of wheat and picking and eating the kernels (Lk. 6:1-5), or healing the blind (Jn. 9:1-41), the decision to transgress the system of restrictions put in place by the priestly caste was a testament to Jesus' willingness to act subversively. However, there is another case for Jesus that requires a bit more effort to tease out: the *queer* Jesus.

Returning to the quote above by Carter Heyward, we can see that she does not end the description of her mother as queer with the idea of speaking the truth to those who may not wish to hear it. Instead, Heyward focuses on that which she finds to be the essence of her mother's queerness:

At the same time, you will never meet a gentler, kinder, more compassionate soul than my mother... The queerest thing of all ... is that she is such a bundle of apparent contradictions. She is confrontational and compassionate, angry and gentle, representing for me One through whom we meet God face to face.⁵¹

Given this description, how can one *not* see Jesus as queer? The angry Jesus who storms the temple, overturning the tables of the money-changers is the very same compassionate Jesus who, seeing the diminutive Zacchaeus sitting in a tree, reviled by those from whom he collected taxes for the Roman Empire, asked him to come down in order to stay at his house. (Lk. 19:1-10) The confrontational Jesus who condemns the religious authorities as a “brood of vipers” (Mt. 3:7) is the very same gentle Jesus who admonished the disciples when they tried to drive off a group of playing children. (Mt. 19:13) Indeed, to suggest that Jesus was not strange, odd or peculiar for the time would be a sign of a complete lack of awareness of what it was for which Jesus stood. The case for Jesus’ solidarity with the sexually oppressed only serves to further compliment this sense of queerness.

Robert Goss makes a strong case for a queer Jesus, both in the sexual sense and, more importantly, in the prophetic sense. Goss argues that Jesus died “in solidarity with gay men and lesbians”⁵² by embodying “nonheterosexist and nonhomophobic sexual patterns.”⁵³ It is through this resistance of heterosexist modes of thinking, expressed in a desire to move beyond the *hetero* and the *homo* in his daily interactions, that Jesus transcended the false binarisms of heteronormative ways of thinking. This resistance becomes a queer tension, similar to the association Reverend Cody Sanders makes when comparing the prophetic call to the coming out

51. Ibid.

52. Robert Goss, *Jesus Acted Up: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 83.

53. Ibid., 82.

experience: “the call and the coming out are ... filled with tension; tension between knowing one’s internal, deeply held identity as called of God, or created by God and knowing the risk of identifying this inner voice to others.”⁵⁴ Using this approach, one can immediately draw a connection between the queer Jesus who transgressed the normative boundaries of the time and the prophetic tradition.

In *Queering Christ*, Goss reminds the reader that “to queer” something means to “to spoil or to interfere.”⁵⁵ This leads to the suggestion that queering various discourses “[transgresses] the boundaries of normativity that are embedded in particular discourses and practices.”⁵⁶ If Goss is correct (and indeed, there seems no reason to assume otherwise), his suggestion that the transgression of normative boundaries is a queer act makes perfect sense in light of his conclusion that “in traditional theological language, queering has a prophetic edge in its critiques.”⁵⁷ Once again, the prophetic is shown to be queer, with the ultimate example (in Christian theology) of that prophetic queerness being embodied in Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus’ prophetic action, combined with this queerness as Christ, is a powerful testament to the fact that the prophetic tradition does not need to be “queered” because it is, by its very nature, innately queer. In fact, one might go so far as to suggest that the word “prophet,” when used apart from the queer modifier, refers to “false” prophets like those in the temples whose predictions were subject to the whims of the king or queen. Deborah, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Amos, Micah, John the Baptizer, Jesus the Nazarene, Muhammad the Prophet, Susan B. Anthony,

54. Cody Sanders, “Prophet: A Queer Calling,” sermon preached at Oakhurst Baptist Church, Decatur GA, 5 July 2009.

55. Robert Goss, *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2002), 229.

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid.

Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and multitudes of others are then seen for what they truly were/are: queer prophets who find a way to stand against the normative powers of the day, speaking truth to power, standing with the oppressed, and transgressing the status quo. With this understanding of the prophetic in mind, the lens of the prophetic queer can now be turned back to those individuals who stood up in the days and weeks following the Rainbow Lounge Raid and spoke with a prophetic voice.

QUEER PROPHETS AND THE RAINBOW LOUNGE

Within a week of the June 28th raid on the Rainbow Lounge, the various LGBT collectives in and around Dallas-Fort Worth had assembled into a relatively united group that sought to protest the heavy-handed treatment by police. The anger and hurt was real and palpable as LGBT citizens of Fort Worth, who before might have considered the city to be tolerant though lacking in affirmation, were suddenly faced with the possibility of an openly hostile local government. Whether the Fort Worth police and TABC agents were acting out of malice or were simply guilty of a phenomenally poor choice of dates, the connection to events at Stonewall 40 years before unleashed a tidal wave of protest. From small rallies at street corners, to marching protests down the streets of Fort Worth, to deliberate disruptions of City Council meetings, those in the LGBT communities and their allies were determined not to be silent. It was in this environment that groups of modern-day prophets, with a queer Jesus as their inspiration, embodied the characteristics discussed above. The message of truth to power often took the form of the “‘No more!’ speech,” prophets could be seen standing with the oppressed as LGBT “‘allies” spoke out at various events, and the transgressive spirit of the prophetic voice could be seen in the garb and mannerisms of several of the more vocal protestors. Though there were

undoubtedly others who embodied the prophetic spirit in the days, weeks and months following the raid, a few specific examples are offered here.

“No more!”

Four days after the arrests at the Rainbow Lounge, a candlelight vigil was organized at the bar. Serving multiple purposes, the gathering was both a time to remember Chad Gibson’s plight and a chance to bring the events on June 28th to the attention of a wider audience. Reverend Carol West, pastor of Celebration Community Church, was one of the speakers at the event. Standing before the front door of the bar, she faced a crowd of over a hundred and spoke truth to power.

In the days following the raid, there were efforts by some to portray the rainbow Lounge as an isolated incident that was in no way indicative of a larger atmosphere of intolerance. Some of West’s first comments were intended to expose that falsehood:

Some people say that in the past, oppression has never happened in Fort Worth, but it has. ... I remember when you went to a bar ... when the police would enter and you could not sit a table with people of the same sex. I remember at church services in the metroplex when license plate numbers would be written down if you attended a church that had an outreach to the GLBT community and those license plates would be published in the paper. I do not want to go back to those days.⁵⁸

Uninterested in buying into a less-than-accurate notion of Fort Worth designed to portray the city as an open and inclusive atmosphere, she instead spoke of a hidden reality for those in attendance—a reality that was then communicated across the nation when West appeared in a

58. “Rainbow Lounge Candlelight Vigil,” author’s personal recording, 1 July 2009.

photo headlining the New York Times article on the Rainbow Lounge Raid.⁵⁹ West’s prophetic message continued as she reminded those in attendance, “the name Stonewall is so much more than a Southern general,” and affirmed, “we believe as a community in justice. This situation was injustice.”⁶⁰ Her message was not one intended to provide succor to those who sought to silence the LGBT voice. Rather, she was there to speak plainly and powerfully about a commitment to seek justice and not back down: “If you truly believe we were indeed created equal and you truly believe in justice, then you need to ask questions and you need to say ‘No more!’”⁶¹

West was not alone in speaking her prophetic message. No sooner had her time ended than a fellow gay theologian, Stephen Sprinkle, picked up the charge. An ordained Baptist minister, professor at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, and director of the Unfinished Lives Project,⁶² Dr. Sprinkle’s presence would become a staple of the various protests organized around the Rainbow Lounge events in the coming months. His comments at the vigil only served to reinforce the defiant message West had spoken to those who sought to subjugate LGBT voices. Picking up West’s rallying cry of “No more,” Sprinkle spoke of an “obligation to resist oppression,” delivering a mighty rebuke to those who “came ... with the intent of sending a message to the LGBT community.”⁶³ Sprinkle’s message was clear:

59. McKinley, “A Raid at a Club in Texas Leaves a Man in the Hospital and Gay Advocates Angry.”

60. “Rainbow Lounge Candlelight Vigil,” personal recording.

61. Ibid.

62. The Unfinished Lives Project (<http://unfinishedlivesblog.com>) has as its mission, “revealing the reality of unseen violence perpetrated against people whose only “offense” is their sexual orientation; making anti-LGBT hate crime statistics available to our communities; educating about the nature of hate crimes and how it affects LGBT and other communities; and eliminating hate crime through social justice and awareness activities.”

63. “Rainbow Lounge Candlelight Vigil,” personal recording.

I want all of those people to know that we received that message loud and clear. We won't back down. We won't back off. We won't stop the pressure. Because we're going to be free. The obligation to resist is with each one of us. By your presence tonight, you're staking your claim—you're placing your ticket on the table—to say that when the time was necessary to stand up and be counted, you came, you were counted and you found a way to cry out along with Carol West and along with everyone organizing this resistance, "No more!"⁶⁴

In a mere eight minutes, the same amount of time that elapsed between the 40th anniversary of Stonewall and the entrance of police into the Rainbow Lounge, the presence of two openly gay ministers speaking with a prophetic voice gave those assembled a new sense of hope and purpose as chants of "No more! No more!" echoed off nearby buildings.

Lest the impression be given that it was only individuals who spoke with a prophetic voice following the raid, the Dallas-based church, Cathedral of Hope, also lent its voice to the growing cries for Justice. In a statement released to news outlets less than twelve hours after the raid, Mike Piazza spoke in his official capacity as dean of the church: "The Cathedral of Hope ... [calls] on Chief of Police Jeffrey Halstead to issue a full report and apology immediately. This kind of targeted humiliation and harassment was unacceptable 40 years ago, and it is unacceptable today."⁶⁵ Considered to be the "world's largest liberal church"⁶⁶ (indeed, the label "megachurch" would be appropriate), the prophetic force of this statement was not lost on its intended audience. It was rare enough to have individual ministers and theologians to stand with LGBT communities in the decades following Stonewall. That a church with a membership numbering in several thousand strong, the vast majority of whom would not self-identify with

64. Ibid.

65. "Lesbian/gay church condemns Fort Worth Police raid on newly opened Rainbow Lounge early Sunday," *Pegasus News*, (29 June 2009), <http://www.pegasusnews.com/news/2009/jun/29/lesbian-and-gay-church-cathedral-hope-issues-state/> (accessed 24 April 2010).

66. Ibid.

heteronormative models of sexuality, would do so was a tremendous sign of the movement of God/dess' spirit in the decades following the Stonewall Rebellion.

The experience of outspoken, supportive religious voices was most certainly a new experience for many of those gathered, as they had become used to a steady stream of ridicule and condemnation from those who claimed to speak with divine authority. In the days, weeks and months following the raid of the Rainbow Lounge, the LGBT communities saw that there were prophets in their midst who were willing to stand up to the elite and preach a message that, rather than acquiescing to demands to remain silent and not “cause waves,” held those in power directly responsible for their actions and demanded Justice. The queerness of the prophetic tradition has rarely been so evident.

“I am an ally.”

The queerness of the prophetic tradition was also evident in other areas, specifically in the outspokenness of so-called “allies” that followed the events on June 28, 2009. Though the loudest and strongest voices were those who spoke from a position within the various LGBT communities (and rightly so), there was a definite and determined contingent on the “outside” that stood with the oppressed in resisting marginalization. This prophetic solidarity was present as early as the morning after the raid and was sustained through several City Council meetings, even after events at the Rainbow Lounge had somewhat faded into the background.

Not 24 hours had passed before local ministers Russell K. Elleven and Anthony “Tony” Lorenzen issued a joint statement to local newspapers decrying the raid, calling for “respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person,” and stating their belief that sexual orientation

was never cause for a person to “be dehumanized through acts of violence, exclusion, or oppression.”⁶⁷ This stand with those who had experienced newfound oppression mere hours before was made all the more powerful by the fact that it was done without equivocation or political calculation. Indeed, Elleven and Lorenzen both acknowledged that they were writing in spite of being unclear about what exactly had transpired, but that they were compelled to “stand on the side of love.”⁶⁸

Reverend Estrus Tucker was a similarly important “prophetic ally” in the aftermath of the Rainbow Lounge Raid. The chair of Fort Worth’s Human Relations Commission, Tucker had previously been engaged in drafting an amendment to the city’s anti-discrimination ordinance that would extend protections to include transgender, gender expression and gender identity. At the July 14 City Council meeting, Tucker spoke eloquently and passionately, affirming the “vision and responsiveness” of LGBT organizations in their activism following the raid. Speaking from the realization that “this could have been my sister, my brother or my nephew,” he decried “matters that should not matter, such as sexual orientation.”⁶⁹ His presence as a reverend and his outspoken advocacy for LGBT communities at this, and future council meetings, served as prophetic reminders that God/dess stands on the side of the oppressed.

Yet another example of this prophetic solidarity was evident at a November City Council meeting where the topic was not the Rainbow Lounge, but a transgender anti-discrimination ordinance that was before the council. At the meeting, those who had been steady presences

67. Russel K. Elleven, Anthony Lorenzen, “Tarrant County Unitarian Universalist Congregations Stand on the Side of Love” *Sunflower Chalice* [online blog], 29 June 2009, <http://sunflowerchalice.com/2009/06/29/responses-to-the-rainbow-lounge-raid/> (accessed 1 April 2010).

68. *Ibid.*

69. Fort Worth City Council, “City of Fort Worth City Council Meeting: Tuesday, July 14, 2009,” 14 July 2009, http://fortworthgov.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view_id=2&clip_id=522 (accessed 2 April 2010).

during the aftermath of the Rainbow Lounge Raid maintained a resolve to stand with the LGBT communities that began at the Rainbow Lounge, if not before. Barb Heptig, a seminarian at Brite Divinity School, addressed the council with a desire to “reclaim the Christian ground of love to say do not cave into fear.” She warned all assembled that “to impose our fears on other people is not what the God I worship wants.”⁷⁰ Shortly thereafter, she was followed by Tolli Thomas, who spoke both of her father, a Baptist minister, and of her Christian upbringing. Her prophetic voice rang clear as she recounted a life where her family was “taught the Christian philosophies of love and acceptance. We [were taught] the truth of the scriptures and not just interpretations.” She reminded the city council, those in the room, and all else who might hear her voice that, “we are all bound to one another by our Maker ... Accepting and loving one another is accepting and loving ourselves and it honors Christ’s teachings.”⁷¹

Finally, if the reader will allow a brief moment of self-indulgence, the author could similarly be included in this group of prophetic allies. At a city council meeting following the raid, I stood before the city council and, describing myself as “a scholar engaged in serious study of the Christian heritage of justice,”⁷² spoke to the injustice of the moment. I cautioned “all those who believe God blesses the denial of full equality for gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered persons, your lines of communication to the Creator are faulty,”⁷³ and, using my own translation of Mt. 25:40, cautioned that the “least of these” could easily be understood as “the minorities among you.” As I imagine was the case for other allies, my purpose for doing so

70. Fort Worth City Council, “City of Fort Worth, Texas Regular City Council Meeting: November 10, 2009,” 10 November 2009, http://fortworthgov.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view_id=2&clip_id=705 (accessed 12 April 2010).

71. Ibid.

72. Fort Worth City Council, “City of Fort Worth City Council Meeting: Tuesday, July 14, 2009”

73. Ibid.

was to cast my lot as a theologian *with* the LGBT communities, not against them. In fact, as a later City Council meeting, I abandoned the term “straight ally” in favor of simply stating, “I am queer,” something which felt perfectly in place, given the prophetic voice I was attempting to claim.

Dismantling the Master’s Tools with the Master’s House

Audre Lorde is well known for her essay entitled “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” wherein she speaks of the need for tools and approaches that have not been developed and sustained by the oppressor. Indeed, she stresses that “[the master’s tools] may allow us *temporarily* to beat him at his own game.”⁷⁴ Lorde makes a compelling case for leaving behind traditional approaches in favor of newly minted ones that do not bear the stamp of the oppressors. At the same time, several of those speaking with a prophetic voice following the Rainbow Lounge raid hinted at another, transgressionary twist of Lorde’s statement: dismantling the master’s tools with the master’s house.⁷⁵

As mentioned above, Stephen Sprinkle was an outspoken voice at many of the protests following the Rainbow Lounge Raid, including the candlelight vigil at the Rainbow Lounge. Though he spoke at each event with the prophetic fervor that is a trademark of the millennia-old tradition, as powerful as his message was, it was in the first minute of each speech that the dismantling began. At each event, Sprinkle stepped to whatever platform had been set up

74. Audre. Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 112. [*italics mine*]

75. Before continuing, a brief explanation of what *I* mean by the “master’s house” and the “master’s tools” is in order. When I refer to the “house,” I am speaking specifically of the modern-day, mainstream church and the thousands of icons, vestments or catch-phrases used daily to communicate the various interpretations of the Christian faith. With respect to the “tools,” I am referring specifically to the myriad of heteronormative theologies that undergird “traditional” views of sexuality.

wearing garb meant to immediately call into question the traditional assumptions of what it meant to be a minister. Perhaps the most striking piece of vestment was the clerical collar he wore around his neck. Given his Baptist ordination, Sprinkle had no ecclesiastical reason to wear a collar,⁷⁶ but the visual impact it carried was unmistakable: a minister was about to speak... at a pro-LGBT event.

To add to this visual statement, Sprinkle would also wear a large cross, suspended around his neck by a long, rainbow ribbon. The connection between the sign of Jesus' suffering and one of the symbols of the fight for gay and lesbian rights served to destabilize the clerical collar, since the former could simply have meant a "straight" minister was standing in solidarity with the LGBT communities.⁷⁷ The rainbow lanyard, however, began to communicate the possibility of a minister who did not fit the traditional image. This subversive element was further enhanced by the presence of a large rainbow armband on Sprinkle's right wrist. Approximately 3 inches in width, the armband was yet another visual cue to the observer that the person about to speak was coming from an unexpected direction. The visual conundrum presented to the audience by Sprinkle's clerical collar, rainbow lanyard, and rainbow armband subconsciously set the stage for the words that would introduce every speech, and which offered rock-solid confirmation that Dr. Stephen Sprinkle was not a typical prophet.

"My name is Stephen Sprinkle and I'm associate professor at Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University. I'm the first out and open scholar ever to teach in the history of Brite

76. The clerical collar is a piece of clothing generally eschewed by Baptist ministers, who consider it to be a symbol of dependence on a larger ecclesial body.

77. Though this show of solidarity would, of course, be nothing to be taken lightly, a collar alone was insufficient to destabilize the traditional expectations an observer might have had of a straight (and perhaps celibate) minister.

Divinity School. I'm the first out and openly gay person to ever be tenured at Brite Divinity School."⁷⁸ Sprinkle began each of his speeches with this mantra, often adding that he was an ordained minister. For the observer who had just moments before seen the (unfortunately) conflicting messages of traditional church regalia combined with the symbol for gay and lesbian pride, the message was clear: Sprinkle was someone who had found a way to combine church teachings with his own sexuality in such a way that, not only was he not ashamed, he was proud. By situating himself in the master's house through the use of both visual images and vocal affirmations, he was able to destabilize the master's theological tools that had so often been used to devalue and condemn LGBT sexuality.

Sprinkle was not the only one to employ this transgressionary strategy. Carol West similarly wore a clerical collar and was even pictured in the New York Times in her collar as she attended the candlelight vigil the week following the raid. When, as mentioned above, others and I spoke before the Fort Worth City Council, we were very deliberate to reference our theological training as a way of using the master's house to dismantle the master's tools. When each person combined his or her own transgressionary approach with a message of peace and justice, the presentation was an excellent example of the queerness inherent in the prophetic tradition.

78. "Rainbow Lounge Candlelight Vigil," personal recording.

CONCLUSION

The life of a prophet is not futile. People may remain deaf to a prophet's admonitions; they cannot remain callous to a prophet's existence.

-Abraham Joshua Heschel⁷⁹

The raid on the Rainbow Lounge by Fort Worth Police and TABC agents was a frightening reminder for LGBT communities that the rights for which they had fought so fiercely over the past 40 years were only as solid as the individuals tasked with enforcing them. The daily reminder that Chad Gibson was in the hospital with a potentially fatal injury only heightened the sense of betrayal felt by many. When Jeff Halstead, chief of Fort Worth Police, offered the “gay panic” defense as an explanation for the actions of his officers on June 28, 2009,⁸⁰ it was clear that, in spite of the decades of activism following Stonewall, the struggle was far from over.

With not even a year having passed since the Rainbow Lounge Raid, it is still impossible to state with any certainty whether Fort Worth Police and the TABC were trying to send a message to LGBT communities by picking the 40th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots to act or they were simply acting from a unbelievably uninformed position. Whatever the case, one thing is clear: though the message, be it deliberate or inadvertent, was heard, it was most certainly not accepted. The quick and sustained reaction by individuals and groups from all parts of the Fort Worth spectrum was a sign that a shift had taken place in the intervening decades since 1969. The realization that the police’s homophobic response during and after the raid was due in large

79. Heschel, *The Prophets*, 18.

80. In an interview with reporters from several Dallas-Fort Worth news outlets, held shortly after the raid, Halstead responded to criticisms of the way in which his officers handled the raid two nights before, replying, “You're touched and advanced in certain ways by people inside the bar; that's offensive. I'm happy with the restraint used when they were contacted like that.” Thomas Korosec, “The police Raid on the Rainbow Lounge has Rocked the World of Fort Worth gays,” *The Dallas Observer Online*, 20 August 2009), <http://www.dallasobserver.com/content/printVersion/1491291> (accessed 24 April 2010).

part to the centuries-old message of condemnation preached by the Christian church was not lost on the crowd. However, the fact that anyone would dare to stand up and challenge the heterosexist “wisdom” that had implicitly sanctioned the raid was a sign that the spirit of Stonewall was alive and well. That some of these challenges would come from the very religious communities so often associated with anti-LGBT bigotry and hatred assuredly appeared to some as nothing short of a miracle.

Speaking with a prophetic voice is not an easy mantle to wear, as it requires standing against those who, by virtue of their place in positions of power, can bring great pressure to bear on the prophet. Nevertheless, it is a responsibility that is not easily shirked by those who seek Justice for the oppressed and marginalized. In the days and weeks following events at the Rainbow Lounge, that responsibility was taken up by a small group of outspoken individuals who felt the movement of the Divine in their hearts. In their words and deeds, they gave testament to the abiding spirit of the prophetic in our modern age.

This paper has been a testament to the struggle of these prophets in speaking out against the powers that sought to do the Fort Worth LGBT communities harm. The act of “being prophetic” taps into a tradition that is millennia old. The importance of speaking truth to power was not lost on the prophets at the Rainbow Lounge, as they spoke with a spirit that was moved by God/dess to fight for divine *Justice*, even when it meant standing against human justice. Of course, this meant crossing boundaries that some would have had them believe were inviolable. After all, does not the dominant voice in mainstream Christianity state that to be gay/lesbian and ordained is contradiction of God/dess’ “Law?” Still, the prophets did not look to human notions of what was acceptable for their inspiration. Instead, they looked to the Christian exemplar of the prophetic: Jesus.

The peculiarity of Jesus stands as the ultimate example (for the Christian) of the queerness inherent in speaking and acting prophetically. Even as Jesus bucked the Empire-centric notions of the day, so also did the prophets at the Rainbow Lounge buck 21st century heterocentrism. Even as Jesus stood before the authorities and declared a message of truth that was inconsistent with their elite, jaded existence, so also did modern-day prophets in Fort Worth speak a message that was inconsistent with the backdoor political calculations of the “Fort Worth Way.” These words and actions served as a new witness of the queerness that is such an integral part of the prophetic tradition; a queerness that has been obscured for some time.

The intersection between the Rainbow Lounge and those who spoke out with a divinely motivated voice was a definitive sign of the queerness inherent in the prophetic tradition. Rather than being simply an act of *speaking* out against oppression, the full range of prophetic practice was evident in the aftermath of the police raid. From the chants of “No more!” that thundered from the mouths of those who sought to resist oppression, to the positions of solidarity maintained by those who fought alongside the victims of police brutality, to the transgressive words and appearances of those who hoped to shock observers out of complacent notions of what is “proper,” the peculiar—the *queer*—nature of fighting against the subjugation of the weak by the powerful that has come to exemplify the prophetic voice over the millennia was an almost daily occurrence in Fort Worth, 40 years and eight minutes after Stonewall.

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