

AMBIGUOUS EMBODIMENT:  
CONSTRUCTING POSTSTRUCTURALIST PASTORAL THEOLOGIES  
OF GENDER AND SEXUAL FLUIDITY

by

Jason D. Hays

*Bachelor of Arts, 1995*  
*Political Science*  
*American University*

*Master of Theological Studies, 1999*  
*Sociology of Religion, Culture and Ethics*  
*Wesley Theological Seminary*

*Master of Divinity, 2003*  
*Wesley Theological Seminary*

**DISSERTATION**

Presented to the Faculty of the

Brite Divinity School

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Pastoral Theology and Pastoral Counseling

Fort Worth, TX

May 2013

AMBIGUOUS EMBODIMENT:  
CONSTRUCTING POSTSTRUCTURALIST PASTORAL THEOLOGIES  
OF GENDER AND SEXUAL FLUIDITY

APPROVED BY

DISSERTATION COMMITTEE:

JORETTA L. MARSHALL

Dissertation Director and Dean

NANCY J. RAMSAY

Reader

STEPHEN V. SPRINKLE

Reader

JEFFREY T. WILLIAMS

Associate Dean for Academic Affairs

© COPYRIGHT BY JASON D HAYS 2013

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### Chapter One

<b>Embodiment and Ambiguity in Pastoral Theology</b> .....	1
Modernist Theological Discourses on Embodiment.....	3
Pastoral Theological Approaches to Embodiment.....	7
Identity Construction and the Experience of Ambiguity .....	11
Construction of the Self and Identity .....	12
Who am I?.....	15
There is no I without You .....	18
Am I a Me or a Norm? .....	20
Fleshing Out Ambiguous Embodiment .....	22
Justice Implications of Defining Embodied Ambiguity .....	28
Towards a Poststructuralist Pastoral Theology.....	30
Fluid Imago Dei .....	31
Project Curiosity and Research Questions .....	35
Where do we go from here?.....	37

### Chapter Two

<b>A Constructive Pastoral Theological Method to Account for Gender and Sexual Ambiguity</b> .....	40
What is a Pastoral Theological Method? .....	40
Praxis-oriented Emancipatory Method .....	44
Critical Correlation: Placing Commitments in Conversation .....	49
Pastoral Theological Spiral: Round and Round We Go .....	53
Human Experience in Context – Constructivist Grounded Theory .....	53
Deconstruction – Related Fields .....	55

Theological Discourses .....	59
Assessment – Reconstruction .....	60
Generating Practices .....	62
Qualitative Research Design and Interview Protocols.....	63
Individual Interviews .....	68
Group Interview .....	70
Towards a Constructive Pastoral Theology of Ambiguous Embodiment .....	71

### **Chapter Three**

<b>Selected Theological Discourses on Ambiguity and Embodiment .....</b>	<b>73</b>
Embodiment Theology.....	73
Imago Dei.....	78
Incarnation .....	84
Eros .....	99
Towards a Constructive Pastoral Theology of Ambiguous Embodiment .....	103

### **Chapter Four**

<b>Fluid Subjectivity and Imaging God .....</b>	<b>105</b>
Queering Pastoral and Practical Theology.....	105
Fluid and Dynamic Subjectivity .....	107
Performative Self .....	110
God’s Beloved .....	114
Calling.....	117
God’s Unconditional Love.....	121
Kamitsuka and Performative Imago Dei.....	123
Bisexual Experience.....	125
Towards a Constructive Pastoral Theology of Ambiguous Embodiment .....	134

## **Chapter Five**

<b>Transgressive Texts and Ambiguous Christology</b> .....	137
Hermeneutics .....	137
Historical Jesus Transgressing Binaries and Boundaries.....	138
Transgressive Jesus, Ambiguous Christ, Queer Communities .....	144
Queering Biblical Characters .....	146
Legitimizing Texts .....	151
Texts that present change and movement as normative.....	152
Texts that deconstruct categories of ritually clean/unclean .....	155
Othering and alterity .....	159
Towards a Constructive Pastoral Theology of Ambiguous Embodiment .....	161

## **Chapter Six**

<b>Embodied Congregational Practices</b> .....	163
Official Statements of Inclusion .....	164
Embodied Worship .....	170
Embodied Leadership and Practices of Justice.....	182
Resistance .....	185
Towards a Constructive Pastoral Theology of Ambiguous Embodiment .....	187

## **Chapter Seven**

<b>A Constructive Pastoral Theology of Ambiguous Embodiment</b> .....	191
Theological Contributions .....	193
God Imaging and the Construction of Identity .....	193
Transgressive Ethics .....	195
Beyond Inclusion .....	197
Worship and Liturgical Practices.....	198
Project Limits and Areas of Additional Research.....	199
Final Word .....	201

Bibliography .....	203
Appendix A.....	212
Appendix B.....	214
Appendix C.....	216

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have navigated liminal and fluid spaces of identity for most of my life. I'm immensely grateful for my parents, Bonnie and George, who have travelled alongside me always expressing their encouragement and support – even during the times they found it difficult to understand my many ambiguities – and for always challenging me to bring authenticity and integrity in all that I do.

I'm grateful for the critical inquiry that has been modeled and nurtured by my faculty, and for their engagement of my work. I'm deeply indebted to Joretta Marshall, my dissertation director and mentor. She has been a strong supporter and encourager of me as an emerging theologian, always inviting me to think more critically and in more theologically grounded ways. More importantly, I'm grateful for her trail-blazing scholarship and prophetic ministry of inclusion in the church and academy for so many years. My work as a queer theologian is only possible because she has gone before me, and for that I am profoundly grateful.

Thanks to Nancy Ramsay for her encouragement and thoughtful reading of my work, and for her scholarship around gender, race and class. Her seminar gave birth to and formed the early manifestations of this project. Thanks to Christie Neuger who has been an important conversation partner around poststructuralist commitments, who has modeled for me the importance of justice and care in teaching, and who continues to encourage and inspire me as a Narrative practitioner and pastoral theologian. Thanks also to Steve Sprinkle for his unwavering



encouragement of my work and his many years in teaching and ministry for LGBTQ justice.

This dissertation is also the result of the collaborative learning among my colleagues at Brite Divinity School. Thanks to Deanna Langle, John Thexton, Genny Rowley, Bill Roozeboom and Cody Sanders for sharing with me their wisdom and lived experiences in ways that invites me to grow and learn, and who, despite tiring of my constant references to Butler and Foucault, always challenge me to hone my constructive work with great care and compassion.

I remain immensely grateful for the willingness of the project participants to share their stories with me and to welcome me into their deeply, provocatively, dangerously, beautifully ambiguous lives. I have been moved by the depth of their theological reflection, and the sincerity with which they seek to remain connected to a faith tradition that has (in most cases) denied their in-between-ness and as a result, has been a source of great pain. Yet, the resiliency they show in remaining part of the body of Christ has demonstrated something nearly ineffable in my attempts to construct this pastoral theology of ambiguous embodiment: namely, the power of centering one's identity foremost on the confidence of being one of God's beloved creatures. To them I offer my deep gratitude.

I offer my appreciation to colleagues and members of First Congregational UCC Church Boulder for their encouragement and support over the past four years, especially Rev. Martie McMane. Rather than viewing my doctoral program as a

distraction from our shared ministry, they have welcomed my research and have encouragement me to share my learnings with them as partners in ministry.

Finally, I am forever indebted to my partner, Erica, for encouraging me when I found myself seduced by hopelessness, for reminding me that I am more than what I write, and for believing in me when I didn't believe in myself. Without such love and support, this dissertation would never have been possible. And for that, I am deeply grateful.

## ABSTRACT

AMBIGUOUS EMBODIMENT:  
CONSTRUCTING POSTSTRUCTURALIST PASTORAL THEOLOGIES  
OF GENDER AND SEXUAL FLUIDITY

Jason D. Hays

Brite Divinity School

Dissertation Advisor: Joretta L. Marshall

This dissertation explores key theological questions raised by gender and sexual ambiguity. Using a pastoral theological methodology in conjunction with constructivist grounded theory the project considers the lived experiences of persons who don't identify within the binary categories of male/female (persons who identify as gender-queer, gender fluid, queer or intersex) or gay/straight (persons who identify as queer, sexually fluid or bisexual). First person narratives are placed into critical conversation with poststructuralist theory, critical gender theory and queer theology, along with theological discourses on *imago Dei*, incarnation and *eros*.

Two key questions are explored: 1) how persons who don't identify within binary constructs of identity "make sense" of their ambiguity in light of their images of God and operative understanding of Christian theology; and 2) how such persons

experience pastoral and congregational practices as helpful (or unhelpful) to participating fully in congregational life.

Three significant themes emerge from the study. First, a correlation between the process of deconstructing God-images and the participants' own deconstructive process of constructing fluid gender and/or sexual identities. This suggests that the process of reconstructing non-anthropomorphic and fluidly performative images of God is helpful in the reconstructive process of fluid and liminal identities. Second, a transgressive hermeneutic is used by participants to "read" their lived experience of fluid and liminal embodiment into scriptural texts. This suggests a "transgressive ethic" of resistance against binary disciplinary regimes. Third, participants indicated that while official congregational statements of LGBTQ inclusion were important, embodied liturgical and congregational practices that create space for gender fluid bodies to participate fully in congregational life were vitally important to feeling a sense of belonging. This suggests several implications for pastoral and congregational practices of care and counseling.

The dissertation concludes by offering a tentative constructive pastoral theology of ambiguous embodiment that suggests a more nuanced and multi-layered theological anthropology of human embodiment – one that seeks to take into account the embodied experience of liminal, fluid and ambiguous gender and sexual identities.

**CHAPTER ONE**  
**EMBODIMENT AND AMBIGUITY IN PASTORAL THEOLOGY**

*What could be clearer than that our lives are ambiguous--  
deeply, provocatively, dangerously, beautifully ambiguous?*

-- John D. Caputo (2005, p. 15)

Seth is an active member of an emergent post-denominational congregation in Colorado. Seth does not identify as male or female – but identifies as “gender-queer.” This means that Seth’s gender identity and expression does not fit within the binary categories of male and female and that Seth identifies and expresses gender differently in different contexts and within different relationships. While at times Seth identifies as *more* female or *more* male, in most contexts Seth identifies as *neither* male *nor* female, but as gender-queer – as *in-between* male and female. Seth was raised in a conserving, evangelical Christian community, and Christian theology and tradition has been – and continues to be – a foundational resource in Seth’s life. As Seth began to deconstruct the gender identity into which Seth was socialized as a child, and to construct a more fluid gender identity, Seth found inspiration and resources in biblical texts and theological categories that presented God in diverse gender expressions. Seth reflects on this process:

God interacts with all of us through different gender expressions and different relational interactions. And that perhaps there is a purpose also in us having that kind of fluidity in our lives...So I think to me the

piece around exploding God's gender from a rigid binary also exploded the options around relationship and partnership and how those things aren't actually just options but are critical parts of our growth and understanding of ourselves in the world by our relationships with others. (Seth)

Just as Seth “exploded” the rigid binary of gender as it relates to God, Seth also exploded the rigid binary of Seth’s own gender identity. This process resulted in not only a reconstruction of God in more relational, rather than anthropomorphic terms, but also a reconstruction of the norms related to Seth’s intimate relationships with others. Moreover, because of Seth’s fluid gender identity, modern essentialist and binary constructions of sexual orientation (e.g., gay/lesbian/homosexual and straight/heterosexual) fail to take into account Seth’s fluid sexual identity. Thus, Seth’s preferred sexual identity is queer. Seth’s experience – and the experience of others who identify as gender-queer, ambiguous, queer, intersex, sexually fluid or bisexual – are challenging Christian theological discourses regarding embodiment, gender and sexuality to take into account the idea that gender and sexual identities are dynamic – not static – and that dynamic, fluid identity is God’s creation and intention for humanity.

There are several key theological questions raised by gender and sexual fluidity. The first question is *how persons who don’t identify within binary constructs of identity “make sense” of their ambiguity and how they understand their experiences of ambiguity in light of their understanding of God.* In other words, *what are the theological themes, resources or metaphors engaged by persons – persons who experience their embodiment as ambiguous – in the construction of their*

*identities?* This raises important considerations related to how theological discourses around embodiment, *imago Dei*, incarnation and *eros* take into account (or not) the embodied experiences of ambiguity. The second question is *how such persons experience pastoral and congregational practices, and to what extent such practices are helpful (or not) to participating in congregational life. This raises important considerations related to power and hegemony within communal practices regarding the body.*

In an effort to begin answering these questions, this dissertation seeks to construct pastoral theologies of *ambiguous* embodiment. More specifically, the project seeks to construct a pastoral theology from the lived experience of persons in/as/with their bodies and how such persons “make sense” of their experienced ambiguity, particularly as it relates to gender and sexuality.<sup>1</sup>

### **Modernist Theological Discourses on Embodiment**

John Caputo asks rhetorically, “What could be clearer than that our lives are ambiguous -- deeply, provocatively, dangerously, beautifully ambiguous?” (2005, p. 15). Indeed, I begin this exploration of embodiment with the assumption that human life is deeply, provocatively, dangerously and beautifully ambiguous; that despite our

---

<sup>1</sup> Though “ambiguity” will be explored in more detail below, for our purposes here ambiguity is being used as an existential theological category of how one locates one’s body in relationship to discourses that present norms of the body as binary essential categories –abled/disabled, gay/straight, male/female – norms against which persons must identify, locate and categorize their own bodies. See Butler (1993, 2004, 2005).

modernist attempts at scientifically categorizing and diagnosing nearly every aspect of the human condition, it is my experience as a pastor and pastoral counselor that the certainty of descriptive constructs such as binary gender and sexuality nearly always give way to the more evocative and mysterious ambiguity of lived embodied experience. In this study I carefully investigate how the lived experiences of persons who don't identify between the binary categories of male/female and gay/straight construct their ambiguous and fluid identities; and, of equal importance, what theological resources they are using to construct such identities. If I affirm that life is deeply, provocatively, dangerously and beautifully ambiguous; and, if I affirm pastoral theology's prevailing epistemological claim that theology is constructed from the lived experience of persons in community, then I am led to consider how the *lived experience of ambiguity* has the potential to contribute something significant. More specifically, I believe that the *lived experience of ambiguity* has something to offer the conversation about who God is, in what manner humanity is created, and how we are called to live together in human community: in other words, theological anthropology.

Of course, Christian communities and theological discourses have for centuries pondered the meaning of what it is to be embodied creatures. In this study I am particularly interested in engaging theological discourses on embodiment – and on gender and sexual identity in particular – which come from the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup>



Century since the sexual revolution of the 60's and 70's, the post-Stonewall gay and lesbian liberation movement, and the emergence of third-wave feminism<sup>2</sup>. The late 60's and 70's brought a dramatic expansion in the consideration of theological discourse on embodiment, particularly as modernist and scientific enterprises began to quantify, categorize and diagnose the human condition in ways that correlated with the concept of a "protected class" within the civil rights and liberation movements of that time. In response, several different academic disciplines began to create a landscape upon which persons might consider, in a new way, not only the political questions of the body but also the existential and theological questions of what it means to be or to have a body. These modernist discourses originate in varying locations upon this landscape and, in some cases, bring into conversation multiple theories and commitments around the question of embodiment. I will briefly consider a few of those disciplines here, in general terms, as a way of charting the landscape before considering the specific contribution made by the field of pastoral theology.

Historians of Christianity have considered the relationship between the body and soul, and more recently have begun to read historical sources on the body with a

---

<sup>2</sup> While it is clear that theological, sociological, ethical, philosophical and anthropological discourses have engaged questions of embodiment – and even ambiguous embodiment – long before the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, such is not the focus of this dissertation. Rather, this dissertation engages the literature that emerged from three key movements (sexual revolution, gay and lesbian liberation movement, and third-wave feminism), with particular attention to how theologians have reflected on shifting understandings of body, gender and sexuality since the early 1990's. Moreover, throughout this project I will seek to highlight both the contributions and limits of those works, particularly as queer theology and poststructuralist theory pushed the conversation beyond essentialist constructs of identity formation.

more deconstructive lens – particularly towards questions of human sexuality and the role of women’s bodies in historical theology (Boswell, 1980; Brown, 1989; Rogers, 1999; Schaus, 2006). Feminist and queer biblical scholars have argued that embodied lives must be taken seriously in any hermeneutical methodology, especially when considering the treatment of women and non-heteronormative persons in scripture (Schüssler Fiorenza, 1983; Reuther, 1983; Isherwood & McEwan, 2001; Stone, 2001; McKinlay, 2004; Jennings, 2005; Eskenazi, 2008, Davies, 2003). Christian ethicists have challenged the church to critically examine and deconstruct prevailing operative theologies of the body in a wide variety of contexts ranging from human sexuality, bioethics and personhood (Nelson, 1978; 1983; 1992; Hauerwas, 1990; Nelson & Longfellow, 1994; Cahill & Farley, 1995; Farley, 2005; De La Torre, 2007). Feminist and womanist ethicists, in particular, have been interested in the relationship between women’s bodies and patriarchal systems of power constituted and legitimated by practices within the church (Chopp, 1986; Cannon, 1988; Heyward, 1989, 1995; Gudorf, 1994; Gilson, 1995; Townes, 1998, 2006). Similarly womanist and postcolonial scholars, while not specifically limiting their work to theologies of the body, also forefront the particular lived, embodied experiences of marginalized and colonized persons within contexts of power, patriarchy and racism (Williams, 1993; Weems, 1995; Douglas, 1999; Kwok, 2005; Joh, 2006; West, 2006; Copeland, 2010; Sang Hyun Lee, 2010). In somewhat different ways, ecological theology has considered the implications of embodiment, especially in terms of God imaging (McFague, 1993, Farley, 2005).

These diverse methodologies to embodiment assume varying epistemologies and theological norms. And, they begin at different starting points. For example, many biblical scholars begin with texts, and then engage historical context and adjunct disciplines of anthropology and archeology to construct a theology of the body. Some ethicists, though not all, bring moral values and norms to the particular lived experiences of persons in their bodies in order to construct ethical practices of care within community. Often feminist and womanist theologians, likewise, begin with the particular, lived experiences of women in their bodies – paying careful attention to the discourses of power and racism inscribed upon them – but not necessarily with the specific aim of constructing a theology of the body.

### **Pastoral Theological Approaches to Embodiment**

The question of epistemological methodology – or starting point – is an important consideration because it illustrates the unique contribution the field of pastoral theology offers to questions of embodiment. Generally, pastoral theologians hold the epistemological commitment to constructing theology that is grounded in lived experience. As it relates to embodiment theology, some pastoral theologians engage the questions and challenges of being embodied creatures within the context of communities of care that are seeking healing and transformation (Chopp, 1986; Patton, 1993; Couture & Hunter, 1995; Couture, 1991). Other pastoral theologians in the field of pastoral care and theology have drawn on the theological and ethical norm of justice to critically evaluate the challenges of embodied life in community,

especially communities experiencing abuses of power and systemic violence (Poling, 1991, 2003; Poling & Neuger, 1997; L. Graham, 1992, 1997). Other pastoral theologians have constructed their theologies of the body by engaging the adjunct discipline of neuroscience (Ashbrook, 1984, 1997; Hogue, 2003; Whitehead, 2010). Others explore embodiment within the context of human finitude and illness (Lapsley, 1972; Bringle, 1990; Way, 2005). Many feminist pastoral theologians endeavor to construct theologies of the body in the embodied act of providing care and counseling with women (Heyward, 1989, 1995; Graham, E. 1996; Neuger, 1996, 2001; Marshall, 1997; Miller-McLemore & Gill-Austern, 1999; Gorsuch, 2001).<sup>3</sup>

My work as a pastoral theologian in constructing theology from the lived experiences of persons in their bodies is grounded in a praxis-oriented methodology, which posits that the experience of one's body within communal practices is theologically constitutive. In other words, rather than extrapolating preconceived theological concepts regarding the body (e.g., gender, sexuality, ability, racial identity) and then imposing those concepts onto the lived experience of persons in their bodies, it is my proposition that persons' experiences of their bodies actually *construct* theological categories of embodiment. For example, preconceived theological concepts regarding deafness, particularly as such concepts have been extrapolated from centuries of reading scripture through an "abilist" hermeneutic,

---

<sup>3</sup> See Ch. 3 for a more comprehensive engagement with pastoral theologians writing in the area of gender and sexuality.

would impose a category of “disabled” on a person who doesn’t hear. Yet, persons who identify as culturally Deaf and use American Sign Language to communicate would reject a “disabled” identity, claiming the fact that their ears (an embodied experience) function differently than others’ ears is merely a matter of embodied diversity; and that their use of their eyes to communicate, rather than their ears, merely constitutes a socio-linguistic minority identity – not an externally constructed and imposed “disabled” identity. In this scenario, pastoral theological inquiry would suspend the imposed theological construct of “disabled” – and indeed would raise ethical and justice questions about such an imposition – in order to enter into the lived experience of a person whose ears function differently; and, thereby construct a more nuanced and evocative theological anthropology of human embodiment.

This example regarding deafness is not unlike Seth’s experience. Seth rejects the externally constructed gender identity arbitrarily imposed by binary male/female discourses of gender and, instead, identifies through a more ambiguous experience and presentation of a fluidly-gendered body. The resulting question raised from this experience is, *what does such ambiguous and fluid gender identity suggest for theological anthropology of embodiment? How might one go about exploring such lived experience in order to correct and/or construct a more nuanced theological anthropology? And how might such theological claims remain grounded in the particularity of Seth’s life – while still contributing something to the wider conversation of embodiment theology – but without making universal claims about all gender identities?*

In response to these questions, this dissertation seeks to employ a pastoral theological method which is primarily dialogical and deconstructive (Graham, E., 2002). Through individual and group interviews I explore the ways persons who experience their bodies as ambiguous may understand themselves as created in God's image, and what conclusions the lived experiences of embodied ambiguity might suggest about the nature of God. I consider the ways these first person narratives critique, affirm, challenge, confuse, problematize and reify ideas related the theological concepts of being "created by God" and being "a beloved child of God." I also survey the congregational practices experienced by participants in their local settings in order to suggest practices that encourage and support persons who identify as ambiguous within a community of faith.

Utilizing Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006, 2009) as the primary qualitative research method for documenting the first person narratives of participants, I place these narratives in critical conversation with preexisting discourses about the body, especially theological and philosophical discourses that have an impact on how persons "make sense" of their ambiguous embodiment vis-à-vis binary normalizing systems of power. I reflect upon these first person narratives in light of pastoral theologians who have engaged questions of gender and sexuality, particularly feminist and gay/lesbian liberationist pastoral theologians. However, because much of the literature in pastoral theology regarding gender and sexuality draws on theological anthropologies that assume essentialist constructs of personhood, I will expand the conversation partners in this project to include three

adjunct disciplines that will shift away from essentialist constructions of the self. The first adjunct discipline is postcolonial sources on liminality, especially Bhabha's work on the interstitial or in-between space in which personal or communal identity is constructed (1994). I will utilize Bhabha's work to define ambiguity as a theoretical category of identity. Second, I turn to poststructuralist sources on the philosophical and ethical implications of relating to the "self" as being socially constructed (Butler, 1990, 1993, 2005; Derrida, 1976; Foucault, 1965, 1975, 1977). I do so because it is my assessment that essentialist theories of the "self" are unable to account for liminal, fluid and ambiguous experiences of embodiment (the case for which I will make shortly below). And thus, it is my objective to bring to the field of pastoral theology a more robust engagement with poststructuralist theorists working in the area of gender and sexuality, especially Michael Foucault and Judith Butler. Finally, because I engage questions of *imago Dei*, incarnation and *eros* throughout this study, and because I have staked a claim that essentialist theories of gender and sexuality are ineffectual, I will consider the contribution of several poststructuralist and queer theologians who are writing on *imago Dei*, incarnation and *eros* from a more postmodern perspective. These include Margaret Kamitsuka (2007), Anita Monro (2006) and Marcella Althaus-Reid (2000).

### **Identity Construction and the Experience of Ambiguity**

I began this chapter with Seth's description of gender-queer identity and considered the theological implications of constructing a pastoral theology of

embodiment grounded in ambiguity. I then briefly considered how pastoral theology has approached questions of embodiment as a way of describing, in general terms, my own pastoral theological method (see more detail of my methodology in Chapter Two). Now, before moving to describe the specific research design of this project, there are two key theoretical assumptions that require consideration: first, my theoretical assumptions regarding the construction of identity and the self; and second, my operative definition of ambiguous. Let me begin with construction of the self and identity.

### *Construction of the Self and Identity*

Whenever a pastoral theologian considers questions of identity formation, there is always an embedded or assumptive theological anthropology that is operative in the constructive theological enterprise (though it is often not explicitly identified). Pastoral theologians considering identity formation, particularly as it relates to gender and sexuality, necessarily bring to their constructive work theo-anthropological assumptions regarding existential questions of personhood, lived experience, humanity's relationship to the Divine, and what constitutes the "self." Many utilize adjunct disciplines of psychology (i.e. personality theories and psychotherapeutic approaches) to inform their operative theological anthropologies of the person. I hold the position that it is one's theological anthropological commitments which inform one's selection of a psychological theory, rather than the other way around. Consequently, it is important for me to disclose my own assumptions regarding my



theological anthropology of human personhood, particularly as it relates to my commitments around gender and sexuality.

It is my view that prevailing theologies of gender and sexual identity, most which have utilized post-enlightenment Modernist theories of the “self,” assume that gender and sexual identities are fixed and static; people are “born” with a gender and a sexual orientation<sup>4</sup>. While persons do change over time, that which *does not change* becomes considered as the “self” – that which is constant over time. This is how we recognize people we haven’t seen for a long time; they are still “themselves,” even though they are different from the last time we saw them. As such, prevailing theological anthropologies have come to assume essentialist conclusions regarding gender and sexual identity; namely, that gender is fixed and is directly correlated with biology, and that sexuality, either heterosexual or homosexual, is similarly fixed *in utero* or early childhood<sup>5</sup>. In other words, descriptive categories such as “man” and “woman” or “gay” and “straight” are no longer descriptions; they have become fixed, essential markers of identity. The problem is that such essentialist approaches to identity fail to take into account that descriptive categories such as “man” and “woman” or “gay” and “straight” are not actually fixed – they are socially constructed

---

<sup>4</sup> See Chapter Four for a more detailed deconstruction of essentialist theories of gender and sexuality.

<sup>5</sup> It’s worth noting recent efforts to utilize genetic and brain chemistry theories of sexual orientation as an illustration of the shift from sexual orientation being a “choice” towards being an essentialist category of identity.

concepts which are used discursively within cultural discourses of power and privilege.

Simone de Beauvoir's famous quote from *The Second Sex* captures well the underlying ideas behind how gender is a socially constructed category of identity.

One is not born, but rather becomes, woman. No biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine. Only the mediation of another can constitute an individual as an *Other*. Inasmuch as he exists for himself, the child would not grasp himself as sexually differentiated. For girls and boys, the body is first the radiation of a subjectivity, the instrument that brings about the comprehensive of the world; they would apprehend the universe through their eyes and hands, and not through their sexual parts. (1949/2010, p. 283)

Gender differentiation is thus mediated, or imposed, through social relationships, the reification of gendered behavioral norms and the use of binary gender language.

Indeed, “Is it a boy or a girl?” is usually the first question asked of a parent following the birth of a child. As such, gender identity is inscribed upon the person from birth, and that gender identity continues to be constructed and performed through gendered clothing and colors, behavioral norms, reinforced toys and tools, and prescribed social relationships. In response, social constructionist theory maintains that identity is not an essential category of the self, but is, rather, constructed discursively through power and normative discourse (Berger & Luckman, 1963; Gergen, 1985, 1991, 1994, 1995, 2001). In other words, there is no single, static, essential self which lives somewhere “deep” inside us; rather, we enact and perform multiple selves within relational experiences of power and language in multiple contexts throughout life.

*Who am I?*

To begin understanding how ambiguity and socially constructed identity interact, I turn now to gender theory as an adjunct discipline to pastoral theology, especially the work of poststructuralist philosophers Judith Butler and Michael Foucault. Poststructuralism is a philosophical movement begun in the late 1960's by philosophers questioning the operative assumptions of structuralism (Derrida, 1976; Foucault, 1965, 1975, 1977). The movement critiqued structuralism's claim that there were inherent structures in language and social discourse that regulated the symbolization of signifiers (words) for objects. Poststructuralism posited that underlying structures within language and social discourse are not merely inherent, but are also products of history, culture and power. Thus, poststructuralist theorists begin with the epistemological assumption that discursive relationships construct the human experience or reality – not imbedded, inherent or essential categories (structures) of meaning. In other words, language doesn't merely symbolically represent the essential and embedded structures of objects or identities; the symbolization of language (signifiers) actually constructs the objects (signified) in the first place. The same could be said for the construction of the person, the subject. For example, the signifier "man" is not merely descriptive of a disembodied, essentialist or archetypal concept of "man" but is, rather, a symbolic signifier for a socially constructed concept of "man" which is constituted through discursive norms of what "man" means.

Within this philosophical school Judith Butler, a philosopher and queer theorist, writes in the areas of political and religious philosophy, gender identity and heteropatriarchy. I utilize the work of Judith Butler in this study primarily as a philosophical conversation partner in gender theory. Recall my earlier claim that all pastoral theologies are necessarily grounded in embedded theological anthropologies. Though Butler is not a theologian, her philosophical theory of gender identity and gender performance, along with her work in sexuality and queer theory, presents a rich conversation partner to consider the lived experiences of persons *for whom identity is not fixed*, but rather, is *ambiguous, fluid and/or liminal*.

Butler's early work in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993) engaged questions of gender construction and body discourses. In these two works she posited that relational power takes place discursively upon the body. As such, bodies are not materially static, they are discursively constituted and are cultural landscapes upon which discourses inscribe meaning and identity. In other words, bodies are inscribed with gendered identities (e.g., clothing, makeup, jewelry, hair, weight, behavior modification, body-image). This is what Butler describes as gender "performance." The point here is that one "performs" one's gender identity in discursive relationship with binary (male/female) normative discourses – and one performs one's ambiguous identity in discursive relationship with binary norms that don't allow for fluidity between the norm of male/female.

In addition to gender identity, Butler also posits a philosophical theory for constituting the self, which takes into account the socially discursive nature of identity construction. In *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005) Butler explored the ways in which the “other” is recognized, and how one gives an account of oneself to the “other” through a set of norms – norms that govern “recognizability” (2006). Butler posits that when one gives an account of oneself, one does so in relationship to norms that categorize, other, regulate, discipline and recognize human subjectivity. Her primary epistemological commitment regarding the subject is this: *when one gives an account of oneself one always does so to another within discourses that inscribe norms upon one’s subjectivity.*

This claim is immensely relational. Here Butler is building upon the work of the French poststructuralist philosopher Michael Foucault who made the claim that when the “other” recognizes the “subject,” one does so within relationships of power; and those relationships of power are mitigated discursively through language. In other words, we give recognition to each other’s identities within normative discourses of relational power, or what Foucault described as the “normalizing gaze.”<sup>6</sup> We do so with categories of identity within language (e.g., “male” and “female” or “gay” and “straight”). The point that Foucault made with the “normalizing gaze,” however, is that these norms – words used in language – which are used to construct identity and

---

<sup>6</sup> See Ch. 2 for a more detailed engagement with Foucault and more comprehensive treatment of poststructuralism’s contribution to the field of pastoral theology.

self, do not entirely belong to the subject nor the other. They belong to the normalizing regime.

For example, if a teacher recognizes a student, the teacher is conferring recognition on the student as a student within the discourses of institutional power that construct the social identities of “teacher” and “student.” The teacher doesn’t own the social identity “teacher,” though s/he does inhabit it. And the student doesn’t own the social identity “student,” though s/he does inhabit it. In a sense, the teacher submits to the terms of the normalizing disciplinary regime (the school) when the teacher offers recognition to the student. In this way, I am not in relationship to you; and you are not in relationship to me. Rather, we each are in relationship to the norms that constitute “teacher” and “student.” In other words, the “I” is subjected to the norm at the very moment it makes such an offering, so that the “I” becomes an instrument of that norm. Thus the “I” seems *used* by the norm to the degree that the “I” tries to use the norm in order to give recognition to “you.” Thus, though I thought I was in relationship with *you*, I find that I am caught up in a relationship with *norms* (Butler, 2006, p. 26).

*There is no I without You*

There are several important theological implications of engaging Butler’s epistemological approach to gender identity and sexuality in this project. First, Butler’s claim that in order for “I” to be constituted, the “I” must be recognized by the other – that there is no “I” without “you” – is a deeply relational epistemological

proposition. *There is no “I” without “you.”* This interconnectedness is well described by Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s explanation of the South African concept of *ubuntu* – the essence of being human: “Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can’t exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can’t be human all by yourself...” (Tutu, 2008, p. xx). And, of course, human interconnectedness is an important theological commitment for many theologians. But the critique that Butler is offering pastoral theology, especially as it relates to interconnectedness, is that human interconnectedness is not merely relational; it is *constitutive*. In other words, I cannot constitute my “self” without being in relationship with “other.”

These relationally constitutive epistemological claims seem critically important to my own theological commitment that God creates and calls us into relational communities of justice. It is this commitment that leads me to consider not only the language with which a person constructs an ambiguous identity (e.g., gender-queer, ambiguous, queer, intersex, sexually fluid, bisexual) but also the role that communal practices have on the lives of persons with ambiguous identities. In short, we have been created by God and live within creation to be in relationship: in relationship with God, in relationship with one another, and indeed, with all of creation.

We incarnate and embody this in the construction of our own subjectivity through discursive relationships of “I” and “you.” But for persons who embody an ambiguous identity, this is particularly challenging because many congregations and

communities of faith often exclude and reject persons who embody ambiguous identities. They are denied communal recognition as subjects, as persons. Without community, there is no “you” to recognize the “I.” Again, because communal recognition is so critically important to the construction of self-identity, I am particularly interested in exploring congregational practices that communicate acceptance and recognition of persons with ambiguous identities. This is why I cannot easily separate the process by which an individual theologically constructs an ambiguous identity from the congregational practices that influence the person’s own understanding and expression of gender and sexuality. This tension between individual identity and communal practices is explored in more detail in Chapter Six.

*Am I a Me or a Norm?*

Butler’s second epistemological contribution is a troubling proposition for pastoral theology. If the “I” becomes an instrument of the norm, then am “I” in relationship with “you” or with the norm? In other words, if I were to constitute “I” by engaging in categories unknown to the discursive norms being placed upon me by the other, there is no “I” for the other to be in relationship with. The other can only be in relationship with me (“I”) when I engage in symbolic acts that fit normative categories. For example, I may not give an account of myself as a Golden Retriever because doing so would not meet the criteria established by normative discourses for categories used to constitute humans.



For persons who embody an ambiguous identity, this is critically important. For example, when a person (“I”) engages with dominant hetero-normative communities (“you”) as gender-queer, androgynous or gender fluid, dominant hetero-normative communities can only relate to the person via the binary norms of male/female. In other words, the hetero-normative communities demand from the gender fluid person: “Are you a man *or* are you a woman?” because hetero-normative discourse maintains only two categories of gender. Hetero-normative communities, therefore, are not in a relationship with a *person*; instead the hetero-normative community is in relationship to the *norm* of binary gender (Wilchins, 2004). Thus, hetero-normative communities are at a loss because they don’t know what to do with an ambiguous identity that doesn’t conform to normative discourses on gender and sexuality.

Discourse is a set of rules for producing knowledge that determines what kind of intelligible statements can be circulated within a given economy of thought. For example, in the discourse on gender, you can only say meaningful things about two kinds of bodies that will make sense. References to third genders will always sound fanciful, nonsensical, or just ridiculous. (Wilchins, 2004, pp. 59–60)

The point here is that it is impossible to be in relationship with a person (i.e., subject) outside of the normative discourses of language. So the implication for theological anthropology is this: *from where do the normative categories come and who has the power to engage in the recognizing practice of naming? Who gets to decide who is man and who is woman? Or more accurately, who constructs the normative criteria for what constitutes identity?*

As I discuss in more detail in Chapter Three, theological discourses have engaged in subjugating normative categories – especially binary and dualistic norms – throughout history: Male/Female, Israel/The Nations, Jew/Greek; Slave/Free; Lost/Found; Good/Evil; Young/Old; Rich/Poor. The poststructuralist critique offered by Butler and Foucault suggests that there is no “I” which is not in relation to these (and similar) norms, but at the same time rejects the binary nature of the norms in the first place. This rejection of “normal” and “binary” is theologically significant in my view because it fundamentally affirms the sacred worth of each person. Each person has been uniquely created with the spark of the Divine to embody a particular and distinct way of being in the world, which is nearly always more ambiguous than the binary categories offered by modern epistemological and theological discourses.

### **Fleshing Out Ambiguous Embodiment**

Now that I have disclosed my utilization of Butler’s gender identity theory and my theological commitments regarding the discursive construction of the self and of identity, I now describe in more detail my working definition of ambiguity. As I stated above, for our purposes here, ambiguity is being used as an existential theological category of how one locates one’s body in relationship to discourses that present norms of the body as essential categories – abled/disabled, gay/straight, male/female – norms against which persons must identify, locate and categorize their own bodies. In this way, I’m defining ambiguous embodiment as the *interstitial space between normative categories, the landscape in-between binary bodily norms*.

Indeed, it could be argued that all embodiment is ambiguous. So one may be wondering, “Who are you really talking about?” This project is particularly interested in persons who embody the interstitial space specifically between several key binary norms. The original research design for this project included several categories of self-identified ambiguous persons:<sup>7</sup>

- a) persons who identify their bodies between binary categories of abled/disabled (e.g., culturally Deaf persons who reject a disabled identity, episodic disability, “invisible” disabilities);
- b) persons who identify their bodies as in between binary categories of female/male (e.g., omnigender, genderqueer, intersex);
- c) persons who identify their sexuality between binary categories of gay/straight (e.g., bisexual, pomosexual, asexual, queer);
- d) persons who identify their race as bi-racial.

It is important to acknowledge at the outset the effects and liability of defining ambiguity in these terms, particularly because defining ambiguous embodiment as the space *in-between binary norms* unavoidably reifies the very normative discourses I seek to deconstruct. Queer theorist, Daniel Noam Warner, identifies this common liability in many queer qualitative research methodologies:

in searching for the [normative] category, the researcher reperforms it...Any ‘stuff’ that is found becomes retroactively posited as that

---

<sup>7</sup> Through the course of this study these groups of self-identified ambiguous persons was narrowed, which is addressed as part of the qualitative research methodology section in Ch. 2.

which inspired the search, and further ensconces the legitimacy of the political category. This may benefit those few who are able to look 'normal', but those whose deviance persists remain marginalized. Regardless of whether the researcher intends to produce prejudiced or nonprejudiced data, research that gives undue substance to identity categories always does so at the expense of a more fluid sexuality, and a more free life. (Warner, 2004, p. 326)

In other words, in constructing my definition of ambiguity as the interstitial space between normative categories, I am continuing to participate in the normalizing discourses that marginalize the very persons whose emancipation I'm most interested in ensuring. Acknowledging this critique, I have nevertheless concluded that utilizing the same normative categories I seek to deconstruct – as a strategy to plot the ambiguity of the project participants – may also serve as a subversive strategy in as much as it seeks to reappropriate (rather than reify) the effects of the binary categories. My discussion of methodology in Chapter Two describes in more detail how these categories became problematic for the project.

*What is Ambiguity? Fluid, Liminal and Interstitial Embodiment*

Ambiguity has been a topic of academic study in a wide variety of fields: logical and semantic philosophy (Atherton, 2008), feminist ethics (de Beauvoir, 1948), hermeneutics (Tracy, 1994), religious studies (McKim, 2001), literary criticism (Empson, 1947), biblical interpretation (Ingram, 2006; Thatcher, 2006), moral theology (Niebuhr, 1943/1996), church history (Kuefler, 2001) and gender studies (Wilkerson, 2007; Mollenkott, 2007).

Several adjunct disciplines to pastoral theology have offered important considerations of ambiguity that are helpful for this study. The first is the field of linguistics, which treats ambiguity both as a lexical category (when a word has more than one meaning) and as a semantic category (when a phrase can be understood in more than one way). Jacques Derrida, postmodern linguistic philosopher writing on ontology, epistemology, aesthetics and hermeneutics, builds upon this idea and constructs ambiguity in terms of “undecidability,” the “either/or” and “both/and” dynamic of discourse (1976). While the both/and nature of Derrida’s ambiguity is instructive, the liability of this description of ambiguity is the assumption that ambiguity reifies the binary construction of male/female and gay/straight, rather than as a constructed identity of *somewhere in-between*.

Similarly, John Caputo, postmodern theologian writing on hermeneutics, phenomenology and deconstruction, continues this line, noting the Latin roots of *ambi*, meaning “both,” and *agere*, to act or to do, by emphasizing the performativity and ethics of the ambiguity. “Ambiguity describes a situation in which there is something that must be done but we are of two minds about what to do” (Caputo, 2005, p. 17). Here the either/or and both/and component of Caputo’s definition is helpful. The liability with this description of ambiguity, however, is the assumption that ambiguity necessitates being of “two minds,” which suggests confusion or lack of clarity about one’s ambiguous embodiment. Indeed, most project participants understood the word ambiguous as suggesting confusion or lack of clarity and thus, did not prefer it as a descriptor for their embodied identities.

How might ambiguity be described when the person is not of “two minds,” nor is confused about the ambiguity, but is *at home with the ambiguous identity*? Ritual anthropologist Victor Turner describes ambiguity in terms of *liminality*, “neither here nor there...betwixt and between the position assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremony” (Turner, 1969/1995, p. 95). Here Turner is constructing liminality as a transitional place – a place of being “betwixt and between” as one transitions from one identity or social location to another. Ritual, especially religious life cycle events, facilitates the transition during these liminal stages. Systematic theologian Sang Hyun Lee continues Turner’s work on liminality as a hybrid racial, ethnic and/or cultural location. “Liminality is the situation of being in between two or more worlds, and includes the meaning of being located at the periphery or edge of a society...a creative space of resistance and solidarity” (2010, p. 5). Liminality in this regard is a helpful theoretical category because it suggests the in-between nature of ambiguous embodiment. In fact, one participant, Luke, particularly liked the word *liminal* and uses it regularly to describe his identity. Interestingly, that participant is a transgender man who is in the process of transition from female to male. This seems congruent with Turner’s work, namely, its assumption of transition from one social identity to another, not in-between.

Other participants, however, experience their ambiguous embodiment not as a transition or movement to one binary or another, but as a stable location. This concept of in-between or fluidity is identified in Homi Bhabha’s work on liminality. Bhabha is a postcolonial theorist who has been influenced by Derrida and Foucault. Quoting

the art historian Renée Green's characterization of a stairwell as a "liminal space, a pathway between upper and lower areas, each of which was annotated with plaques referring to blackness and whiteness," Bhabha presents liminality as an interstitial or in-between space in which personal or communal identity is constructed (1994, p. 4). For Bhabha, liminality and hybridity are connected: this "interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (1994, p. 4). Here Bhabha's treatment of liminality offers a helpful framework for mapping the cartographies of ambiguous embodiment because it allows for the diversity of ambiguous embodiment experiences – whether fluid, or static or intermittent. Bhabha's work is also helpful for this project in terms of his treatment of identity construction as a *constant process of engagement, contestation and appropriation, within discourses of power* (1994).

There are two pastoral theologians who have recently raised the question of ambiguity. The first is James Poling, who during his recent retirement address to the Society of Pastoral Theology employed ambiguity as an ethical or moral theological category that emerged from his work with persons who commit sexual violence. He defines ambiguity as "the ability to live with the knowledge of good and evil in myself, others and God" (2012, p. 7-6). Here Poling is using the concept to describe an ambivalence in navigating "good" and "evil," or what ethicists might describe as a "moral ambiguity" (2011). Clearly this understanding of ambiguity as an ethical category is quite different than the one I'm offering here, and it appears to echo Caputo's treatment as being of two minds about what to do (2005).

The second is Pamela Cooper-White, who engages theories of multiplicity and hybridity of the self (2008; 2011). Cooper-White is not specifically addressing multiplicity of sexual and gender identities, but is arguing for a psychotherapeutic approach that resists psychodynamic's overemphasis on integration and honors the multiplicity and hybridity of both the pastoral care giver and receiver. Her use of multiplicity and hybridity as categories of inquiry suggest that there are multiple "parts" of oneself which are "braided" together (2011). In this regard Cooper-White's recent work is quite promising for the field because it is challenging embedded essentialist theories of personality, especially theories that pathologize multiplicity and remain cautious of so-called "splitting" and "dissociative identity disorder." My critique of Cooper-White's formulation is that each strand of her braid metaphor still seems to finish with one singular braided self, rather than multiple selves. This appears to be an important distinction between poststructuralist approaches which provide for multiplicity of *selves*, rather than multiple parts of the one *self*.

In this way, my use of "ambiguity" as an existential identity is grounded in the theoretical discourse of liminality; not merely a reification of the *in-between*, but also suggestive of *fluidity* – a moving back and forth while in-between. In fact, as I will explore in more detail in Chapter Four, *fluidity* (rather than ambiguity) emerged as a descriptor of identity that was preferred by my most of my research participants.

#### *Justice Implications of Defining Embodied Ambiguity*

As I continue to think about ambiguity, I turn now to the poststructuralist critique of discursive power and the theoretical category of ambiguity. My



engagement with these two fields of study lead me to take seriously the subjugation and de-humanization of persons who don't experience their bodies within the normalizing categories inscribed by hegemonic discourses. Recall here Butler's work regarding the claim that the person who experiences ambiguous embodiment necessarily constructs an identity dialogically with binary norms – norms which negate the very existence of such ambiguity in the first place. As discussed above, when a gender-queer person presents as gender fluid or androgynous, hetero-normative communities demand one gender or another. But ironically, the rejection of the binary also reifies the binary gender construct in as much as the person is required to identify somewhere "in-between" male or female, rather than constructing an identity as a third, fourth or fifth gender category (Fausto-Sterling, 1993)<sup>8</sup>. As a result, a fluid or ambiguous identity suggests a transgressive act, one which *crosses over* or *violates* the binary boundaries of gender which have been reified in Western cultural discourse. This suggests a dynamic of transgressive embodiment. In other words, when gender-queer persons insist upon performing a fluid or ambiguous gender identity, they are engaging in subversive power over and against dominant binary norms. Consideration of the subversive implications of this transgressive stance is explored in more detail below.

---

<sup>8</sup> The field of anthropology has considered the existence of third gender categories in cultures throughout the world. Common examples include the *hijras* in India and *Two-Spirit* persons within Native American communities. It's noteworthy that Nepal's supreme court ordered a third-gender option for government identification and census documents in 2007. Moreover, the intersex movement has raised significant awareness in the US about the ethical practice of infant gender assignment surgery and the need for social and legal institutions to account for third-gender identities.

### **Towards a Poststructuralist Pastoral Theology**

I have considered the contribution that Judith Butler's work on gender identity and performance has to offer this study, and have identified the theological implications of utilizing Butler's epistemological commitments. I have also identified key theorists, especially Derrida, Caputo and Bhabha who have shaped my operative definition of ambiguity. I pause now to acknowledge a common critique of poststructuralist theory before making the case for a why poststructuralist pastoral theology will help craft a contribution to theological anthropology offered by fluid, liminal and ambiguous gender and sexuality.

A prevailing critique of poststructuralist theory is that it is a solipsistic and nihilistic worldview which fails to take into account "reality" beyond that which is socially constructed through language and discourse. It is important to acknowledge that this critique merits thoughtful consideration. Indeed, some conclusions offered by poststructuralist theory do, if taken to their extreme conclusion, suggest that there is no reality beyond that which is constructed through language and discourse. This raises significant questions of relational justice and situational ethics, particularly as it relates to violence against "real" bodies – bodies which are more than mere "cultural landscapes" (Butler).

At the same time, I do think that poststructuralism offers a helpful adjunct philosophical discipline to my operative theological norms regarding the body and ambiguous embodiment. Recall again the questions raised by Seth's experience: what does ambiguous or fluid gender and sexual identity suggest for theological

anthropology? How might one go about exploring such lived experience in order to correct and/or construct a more nuanced theological anthropology? And how might such theological claims remain grounded in the particularity of Seth's life – while still contributing something to the wider conversation of embodiment theology – but without making universal claims about *all* gender identities? These questions require an operative theological anthropology that can account for the construction of identity without relying upon essentialist categories of the self. Moreover, these questions require a method of theological reflection that can facilitate the construction of embodiment theology in light of social constructionist and discursive theories of power. It is my proposition that poststructuralism offers the most helpful epistemological approach in this regard, which has led me to bring poststructuralist theory and pastoral theology into critical conversation around the topic of ambiguity. I do so for two specific reasons.

### *Fluid Imago Dei*

First, it seems that poststructuralism offers a nuanced hermeneutic for understanding the ways *imago Dei* is reflected in ambiguous bodies, and serves as a helpful approach to grasping performative identity within Christian communities. One of the most prevalent theological resources participants used in the construction of their fluid and ambiguous identities were those grounded in *imago Dei*, being created in the image of God. How might one reflect theologically on the idea that one is created in the image of God, while at the same time maintaining that the very creation

is liminal and fluid, rather than fixed or static? Peggy Way, along with other pastoral theologians, affirm that the creature (e.g., human) is in constant change and that the creature's existence is shaped largely by chronicity and movement through time (2005). The problem is that while many theological constructs of *imago Dei* allow for liminal and fluid experiences over time, nearly all assume that the self is stable over time – that core categories of identity such as gender, sexuality and race are fixed, not fluid. A more nuanced theology of the *imago Dei* – one that takes into account embodied ambiguity – is needed.

If, as poststructuralist theory suggests, the self is constituted by means of multiple performative acts in relation to normative discourses, and if one maintains the theological claim that all humans are created in the image of God, then the image of God would be embodied through the performativity of our bodies within discourses of power. Here I'm suggesting that the *imago Dei* is reflected in our bodily performativity. In other words, how we live in and construct meaning around our bodies – and our bodies in community – cannot be separated from normalizing discourses of power which categorize, normalize and/or problematize our bodies. The theological claim that humanity is created in God's image cannot be separated from the discourses that inscribe meaning upon our bodies in the first place. This is, I would argue, an important contribution of poststructuralism to pastoral theologies of embodiment.

Feminist poststructuralist theologian, Margaret Kamitsuka, in her work *Feminist Theology and the Challenge of Difference*, argues that if all aspects of

human performativity are a reflection of who God is, then any discursive relationship that excludes some bodies as “other” and not reflective of God’s image would render an incomplete *imago* (2007). In this sense, poststructuralist theology not only deconstructs *imago Dei* to reflect a more fluid and dynamic divine, but at the same time, prophetically challenges Christian discourses to attend to the ways Christian communities become disciplinary regimes of truth that discursively constitute religious selfhood. The point here is that by understanding the life experiences of persons who live an ambiguous embodiment, pastoral theologians have an opportunity to construct a deeper glimpse of the human and, thus, a more complete theological anthropology of the *imago*.<sup>9</sup>

Second, I would suggest that poststructuralist theory also offers a theoretical framework which opens space for reflecting theologically on ambiguous life experience. Anita Monro proposes a poststructuralist theological methodology in her work *Resurrecting Erotic Transgression: Subjecting Ambiguity in Theology*, which frames subjecting ambiguity as the “bringing into discourse or human communication, and therefore into theology and Christian community, an adequate recognition of the multiplicity of human language and identity” (2006, p. 26). This recognition comes from a sustained attention to the “otherness” or alterity of language and subjectivity, which opens up multiple and ambiguous discourses of identity.

---

<sup>9</sup> A more detailed treatment of *imago Dei* in theological discourse is addressed in greater detail in Ch. 3, and in the lives of research participants in Ch. 4-6

Ambiguity, therefore, seems to suggest a theoretical category by which embodied persons who are gazed upon as “other,” “disabled” or “queer” may perform their identities critically or subversively (*lit.* changing from underneath) within these normalizing discourses.

This project, therefore, is *deconstructive* in as much as it seeks to examine and challenge dualistic constructs of prevailing theological categories, and *reconstructive* in as much as it seeks to construct a pastoral theology – rooted in first person narratives – that is more ambiguous, multilayered and nuanced. Why? Because I think such a project affirms my previous anthropological claim that all embodiment is ambiguous, despite prevailing discourses that maintain claims to the contrary. It is my hope that the constructive theologies that come from this project might move the field of pastoral theology away from our reliance on binary, ontological categories towards a more deeply, provocatively, dangerously and beautifully ambiguous understanding of embodiment (Caputo, 2005). If Elaine Graham is correct in her assertion that bodily practice – the concrete and dynamic narratives of humanity’s embodied experience – is the “agent and vehicle of divine disclosure,” then the embracing of ambiguity may offer a more mysterious, more evocative approach to pastoral theology – one that leads into the liminal space where *differance* is not dismissed but may, in fact, disclose something about the ambiguity of God (Graham, 1996, p. 109).

## Project Curiosity and Research Questions

I have traversed some of the landscape of theology on embodiment and described in general terms my pastoral theological method. I've disclosed my epistemological and theological commitments regarding discursively constituted identities and theories of ambiguity, and offered a brief summary as to why I think poststructuralist theology has something to contribute to the field of pastoral theology. I now turn to my research curiosity and the specific research questions explored in this project.

The broader, more general interest of my scholarship to this point is how pastoral theology and theological anthropology might expand its understanding of the body to take into account more ambiguous and fluid experiences. In some previous work I sought to construct a christology of ambiguity that engaged themes of liminality and fluidity, primarily by proposing a theological anthropology of incarnation for persons who don't conform to binary normalizing categories<sup>10</sup>. I'm now interested in learning from others about their own experience of ambiguity, the theological themes, resources or metaphors they are using in constructing their identities, and the practices that shape their participation in Christian communities.

---

<sup>10</sup> Hays, J. (2009). *Poststructuralist Theory and Bodily Difference: Constructing pastoral theologies of ambiguous embodiment*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Rocky Mountain-Great Plains Regional Meeting, Omaha, NE. Hays, J. (2010). *Bisexual Theology: Fluid Sexuality and Ambiguous Christologies*. Paper presented at Beyond Apologetics: Sexual Identity, Pastoral Theology, and Pastoral Practice symposium, Phillips Theological Seminary, Tulsa, OK.

Unsurprisingly, my curiosity for this dissertation is birthed from my own lived experience of ambiguity. I have always felt “at home” in the interstitial places of my life, the times when I was in-between homes or jobs or relationships or identities. More apropos to this project, as a queer identified man I have wrestled with identifying myself between binary sexual orientation categories of homosexual and heterosexual, which are presented in our dominant Western psychological discourses as essential and unchanging. This has resulted in countless experiences of being identified by straight communities as unfaithful or “in denial,” and by gay/lesbian communities as a traitor or “sitting the fence.” As a result, I have come to find the journey of ambiguity as home (Morton, 1985).

The second formative experience that motivates this project is my experience working as a bilingual hearing pastor serving a culturally Deaf congregation. These experiences invited me to become acutely aware of the normalizing discourse of disability as a socially constructed category of *difference*, and to consider the theological implications of culturally Deaf persons constructing their identity over and against discourses that label them “disabled.”

From these experiences – and from my own work constructing an identity from ambiguity in light of my preferred Christian theological metaphors and resources – I became curious to learn from others who also find the journey of ambiguity home: those who do not locate themselves within the binary categories presented to us by normalizing discourses and who don’t fit between the binary categories of, for example, abled/disabled, or gay/straight, or male/female.



I became curious to learn from others about how they “make sense” of their ambiguity and how they understand their experiences of ambiguity in light of their understanding of God. This led to a growing interest in how persons are shaped by, or give an account of, their experience of ambiguity vis-à-vis ideas of *imago Dei*, incarnation and *eros*. Subsequently, I also began to consider their experiences of pastoral and congregational practices. To move forward in this exploration, I have crafted two specific research questions for this project:

- 1) What theological themes, resources or metaphors are engaged by persons – persons who experience their embodiment as ambiguous – in the construction of their identities? In other words, how do they “make sense” of their embodiment within theological discourses?
- 2) Are these constructive theologies used by persons to resist binary normalizing discourses that problematize such identities within Christian congregations? If so, how are they being utilized?

### **Where do we go from here?**

In this introductory chapter I began with Seth’s experience of gender fluidity, and considered the implications Seth’s experience presented for theological anthropology and pastoral theology. After clarifying my operative definition of ambiguous as the interstitial space between normative categories, the landscape in-between binary bodily norms, I considered the contribution that Judith Butler’s work on gender identity and performance has to offer this study. I then briefly considered

how pastoral theology has approached questions of embodiment as a way of describing, in general terms, my own pastoral theological method which is predicated upon two key theoretical assumptions: first, my theoretical assumptions regarding the construction of identity and the self; and second, my operative definition of ambiguous. These epistemological and theological commitments regarding discursively constituted identities and theories of ambiguity led me to argue that poststructuralist theology has something to contribute to the field of pastoral theology. I then concluded the chapter with a formal articulation of my research curiosity and the specific research questions explored in this project.

In order to begin exploring the answers to these two broad research questions, I move next in Chapter Two to a more detailed presentation of my research methodology, both my use of Constructive Grounded Theory as a qualitative research methodology, along with my operative pastoral theological methodology. Following the presentation of my methodology, I place this project in conversation with several key threads in theological and philosophical literature regarding gender, sexuality and the body. This is presented in Chapter Three.

The succeeding three chapters will present an analysis of the first-person narratives and the three preliminary themes which emerge from interviews. The first theme, which I present in Chapter Four, discusses the relationship between deconstructing and reconstructing images for God and how that process is suggestive of participants' own exploration of fluidity. The second theme, in Chapter Five, is the influence and legitimating effects of biblical narratives that seem to have developed a

transgressive ethic in the lives of participants. Finally, the third theme, in Chapter Six, explores the embodied communal practices identified by participants that seem to facilitate affirmation and full participation in congregational life. Ultimately, it is my hope that these theological themes might contribute in some way to a wider discussion about embodiment in the field a pastoral theology, and may offer a more nuanced understanding of ambiguous embodiment.

**CHAPTER TWO**

**A CONSTRUCTIVE PASTORAL THEOLOGICAL METHOD TO  
ACCOUNT FOR GENDER AND SEXUAL AMBIGUITY**

**What is a Pastoral Theological Method?**

As pastoral theologian Nancy Ramsay explains, pastoral theology “begins with the concrete particularity of experience, intends a useful response for that situation and aims to articulate normative dimensions of the context of care” (2004, p. 157). Thus, pastoral theology is a contextual theology, a “critical engagement in acts of care or response to the needs posed for such care” (2004, p. 5). Indeed, the unique contribution pastoral theology offers the conversation on embodiment is a praxis-oriented, contextual methodology – a methodology that begins with lived experience. In this project particularly, the methodological starting point is the experience of one’s body. These experiences of the body, however, do not occur in vacuous isolation; they are shaped by theological discourses and communal practices that inscribe meaning and categories upon the body. At the same time, those experiences may also critically deconstruct the very theological discourses and communal practices that construct one’s experience of one’s body in the first place. Furthermore, pastoral theology is keenly interested in the particularity of one’s lived experience and the communal practices that impact those experiences. It seeks to engage that experience in dialogical relationship with discourses of theology that shape the experience of one’s body, while at the same time engaging in a critical conversation

with wider disciplines of inquiry such as psychology, anthropology, philosophy, sociology (to name but a few) which may contribute to the (re)construction of theology and pastoral practices.

It is worth noting here the similarities and distinctions between the field of practical theology and pastoral theology, particularly because I rely heavily upon Elaine Graham's work in my pastoral theological method. Graham, a practical theologian located within the European context, presents a methodology in which practical and pastoral are less differentiated. In fact, her methodology clearly and quite intentionally begins with the lived embodied experience of the person. But she argues that the lived experience of individuals – the primary focus of pastoral theology for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in the US – cannot be separated from practices of care and communal ritual. The individual's experience of suffering, loss, joy, relationship, etc. cannot be separated from practices and rituals that construct and contextualize those experiences in the first place. Thus, Graham bridges what I would describe as an unhelpful divide between the practical and pastoral fields.

I identify as a pastoral theologian, not a practical theologian. But it is also my contention that the distinction between "pastoral" and "practical" is becoming decreasingly significant in our respective fields. There are two reasons why I make this claim. First, the field of pastoral theology since the 1990's has made an important shift from person-centered methodologies, which relied heavily upon adjunct disciplines of psychological and psychotherapeutic theories in order to respond to individual human experience and suffering, towards taking into account the person-

in-community. This can be seen in the shift from Anton Boisen's *living human document* to Bonnie Miller-McLemore's *living human web*, as well as methodologies emerging in the 1990's that incorporated questions of systems and structures of power (Smith, 1982; Graham, L., 1992; Patton, 1993; Watkins Ali, 1999; McClure, 2009). Thus, if we take into account the person-in-community, then by extension, our work necessarily includes consideration of how communal praxis (the primary focus of practical theology) contributes to the constitutive identity of persons.

Second, the postmodern shift in the field challenges pastoral theologians to not only take into account the particularities of lived experience, eschewing universal claims; the postmodern shift also challenges pastoral theologians to take into account the discursive and relational discourses of power that impact the lived experience under consideration. For example, feminist pastoral theologians expanded the critical correlational method in order to not only consider the lived experience of women, but the lived experience of women within hetero-patriarchal discourses of power (Neuger, 1996; Miller-McLemore & Gill-Austern, 1999). Discursive and relational power is embodied in communal practices (praxis) and thus, while I continue to identify as a pastoral theologian, I do so with the recognition that practical theologians' attention to praxis-centered methodology, especially Graham's, has much to offer my work.

Indeed, it is the lived human experience within the context of communal practices which serves as the starting point for this pastoral theological project. And yet, it is equally important to recognize that pastoral theology is a constructive

theological endeavor; it is not only interested in how lived experiences deconstruct and critique communal practices and theologies, it is also interested in generating communal practices and theologies. In effect, the process of moving from lived experience towards a deconstructive and reconstructive analysis results in the construction of new theology. Christie Neuger refers to this as the pastoral methodological spiral.

Pastoral Theology can be defined as a process where, using the tool of empathic engagement, we engage in the methodological spiral that begins in the human story (in which the divine story is also partially embedded), moves to engage (deconstructively and as a source of knowledge) theological and other traditions, engages in reconstruction, and, out of practical wisdom and judgment, generates practices and performance of practices that are then brought to the particular story. The creative engagement of that encounter raises new questions and the spiral begins again. This becomes a practice of theology. (Neuger, 2007, p. xx)

Pastoral theological methods have experienced a significant evolution since Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher's work regarding the "rules of art" for ministry, despite his original vision for pastoral theology as the "crown" of theological study, eventually resulted in the reduction of pastoral theology to deductive or "applied" theology. Over much of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, pastoral theologians have sought to articulate a constructive theological method (rather than "applied") and have worked to reestablish the place of the field in theological discourse. Most notably the field has developed a method of constructive theology vis-à-vis adjunct disciplines outside of theology. Tillich (1951) offered a correlational method for bringing questions that arise from

existential experiences to religious and theological sources. Hiltner (1958) expanded on Tillich's model by bringing psychological and theological sources into dialogue within practices of pastoral care. Tracy (1975/1996) proposed a revised correlational method by which the questions and answers of existential experience were brought into conversation with the questions and answers offered by theological sources.

In the past several decades, the field has experienced an increased attention to systems and structures of power (Smith, 1982; Graham, L., 1992). Patton (1993) broadened pastoral theological method to include public theology and communal-contextual consideration. Watkins Ali (1999) offered a communal-contextual method which holds that the correlational relationship must remain accountable to justice concerns, especially for poor African American women. Contemporary feminist pastoral theologians expanded the critical correlational method in order to correlate lived experience with feminist/gender studies, social scientific studies and theological studies (Neuger, 1996; Miller-McLemore & Gill-Austern, 1999). More recently, Lartey (2003; 2006) proposed an intercultural method that takes into account the multiplicity of cultural identity and location in constructing practices of care within communities.

#### *Praxis-oriented emancipatory method*

My own methodology is located within this general trajectory of praxis-oriented emancipatory methods, though it is keenly interested in practices of and to



the body. In this way, I'm most interested, methodologically, in exploring the experience of one's *body* and one's *sense* of one's body in relationship to wider social, communal, theological and political discourses on the body, in order to construct a theology of the body and pastoral practices of care. At the same time, I bring to this exploration an ethical commitment regarding relational and emancipatory justice. These commitments are shaped largely by my own theological norms of liberation, norms which both challenge – and are challenged by – the adjunct disciplines of poststructuralist philosophy, critical gender and queer theories.

My methodology is shaped largely by the work of practical theologian Elaine Graham. Graham's methodological inquiry is interested in the relationship between pastoral practices and the construction of identity. Engaging a feminist hermeneutic of embodiment, particularly from a practical pastoral theological methodology, Graham brings into conversation pastoral, ethical and liberation theological discourses in order to construct her work on embodiment (2002). Her methodology quite intentionally begins with the lived embodied experience in practices of care. Graham defines *praxis* as "purposeful action" toward liberation: "purposeful activity performed by embodied persons in space and time as the subjects of agency and objects of history" (2002, p. 110). Purposeful activity, therefore, is something which is performed by persons and communities of persons within a dialectic tension – the tension between persons having their own agency while at the same time being the objects of discourses and communal practices. Through these practices, specific values and norms are reproduced and reified; in response to these practices persons

construct their identities. With a nod to Boff and Boff (and other liberation theologians), Graham also links praxis with social transformation and emancipation (2002, p. 133). “Criteria for authentic Christian pastoral practice as determined by a model of liberatory *praxis* locate human identity with history, and identify theological knowledge as arising from a specific context and harnessed to transformatory and political ends” (2002, p. 139).

Here I am positing that experience of one’s body is theologically constitutive of identity and practice. In other words, I am seeking to dialogically situate one’s lived experience of the body within preexisting theological discourses about the body in order to both deconstruct those theological discourses *and* to facilitate the possible construction of new theological knowledge about the body. Consequently, this study is not only interested in the ways preconceived theology informs understandings and experiences as persons in/with/as bodies, but is also committed to utilizing that lived experience of the body to critique, correct, inform or form wider pastoral and anthropological theological constructions and practices about bodies.

In this sense, my own pastoral theological method is primarily dialogical and deconstructive, with an accompanying ethical commitment towards emancipation and/or resistance. My method begins with the lived experience of persons in/as/with their bodies and how persons “make sense” of their *ambiguous* embodiment. I then place these first person narratives into critical conversation with preexisting theological and philosophical discourses about the body, especially gender and sexuality. In this way I’m not exploring first person narratives in a vacuum – I’m

placing these narratives in conversation with my own hermeneutical commitments. These two hermeneutical commitments are: 1) theological discourses on the themes of *imago Dei*, incarnation and *eros*; and 2) philosophical discourses on poststructuralist theory and queer theory.

As noted in the previous chapter, the primarily theological hermeneutic I use in the analysis of my interviews leads me to be keenly interested in the ways theological concepts such as *imago Dei*, incarnation and *eros* emerge from the first person narratives of project participants. These hermeneutical commitments steer me in the direction of asking questions and holding curiosities about the ways persons who experience their bodies as ambiguous may understand themselves as being “created by God” and “a beloved child of God,” two key phrases that emerged in the interviews. Another related question is what such experiences of ambiguity, in light of *imago Dei*, might suggest about the nature of God. *How might these first person narratives critique, affirm, challenge, confuse, problematize or reify ideas present in theological discourse? And what might these first person narratives offer that is new or different?*

The primarily philosophical hermeneutic I use in the analysis of my interviews leads me to be keenly interested in the ways normalizing discourses of language and power influence and shape the construction of fluid identities. Poststructuralist theories and queer theories serve as primary adjunct disciplines in this regard. In this way, I am placing first person narratives in critical conversation with my specific philosophical and theological commitments relating to the “self”

being socially constructed within relational discourses of language and power. This, of course, means I listened to interviews and read transcripts with a bias towards the ways discourses of power have inscribed meaning upon persons' ambiguous bodies, and to inquire as to how the construction of ambiguous identity may or may not be an act of resistance against those discourses. This presented an important challenge for me. Though I was "reading" these first person narratives with a poststructuralist bias towards discursive identity and acts of resistance, I also needed to remain open to "reading" these narratives in ways that might have critiqued or contradicted my own poststructuralist epistemology. The memo writing process in Constructive Grounded Theory assisted with making these biases more transparent (see below).

Similar to Elaine Graham, I am also bringing a praxis-oriented hermeneutic to these first person narratives, especially the discourses and research on pastoral and congregational practices with/for/about the body that have been experienced by persons in community. I do this with a corresponding ethical commitment to take into account the wider social, communal, theological and political discourses that construct such practices in the first place. Specifically for this project, I explore pastoral and congregational practices, as well as operative theologies of the body, experienced by persons with ambiguous bodies that have been helpful or that have affirmed the ambiguity of the human body (see Chapter Six for analysis of congregational practices).

### **Critical Correlation: Placing Commitments in Conversation**

Joretta Marshall (2004) maintains that pastoral theological methods must attend to and account for five criteria related to the commitments a theologian brings to the constructive enterprise: 1) the implicit role of theology; 2) the relationship between fields and disciplines outside of religion or theology; 3) the role of communities and contexts; 4) the integration of theory and praxis; and 5) the role of experience of individuals and communities. The methodology proposed in this dissertation seeks to address these in the following ways:

- 1) *Implicit role of theology*: This project is focused on how persons utilize theological discourses about the body to construct an identity or identities of ambiguous embodiment. In this sense, the work is primarily deconstructive in as much as it seeks to identify the embedded and/or operative theologies of the body that persons utilize in the construction of identity. This is the starting point for this constructive project. I place the theological reflections of participants in conversation with several fields of theological discourse: pastoral theology, queer theology and poststructuralist theological anthropology. I explore how participants' theological reflections may affirm, support, critique, contradict or reject the ideas purported by these fields. I then consider how the theological reflections by participants might construct a more nuanced, accurate pastoral theology of ambiguous embodiment. This is the primary focus of the first research question.

- 2) *The relationship between fields and disciplines outside of religion or theology*: I utilize poststructuralist theory primarily as a theoretical tool to deconstruct dominant discursive practices upon the body and as a method for taking into account the “normalizing gaze” upon the body. As such, poststructuralist theory is used as a hermeneutical lens (one of several lenses) through which I “read” the first person narratives of participants in the study. Similarly, I utilize queer theory as a deconstructive and hermeneutical tool for conducting analysis of the interview transcripts. As such, the correlation is more deconstructive rather than mutually revising. Finally, I use Constructivist Grounded Theory as a qualitative research methodology to record the first person narratives of lived experiences of ambiguity and congregational practices. Themes and theological sources named by participants are identified in order to consider emerging ideas for a pastoral theology of ambiguous embodiment.
- 3) *The role of communities and context*: The second research question is primarily directed towards the impact of practices upon bodies in communities and contexts. I carry into this study my own theological commitments of justice which are shaped by liberative and emancipatory sources in liberation theology. As such, I hold as a primary ethical commitment the theological norm of *shalom*: wholeness, right relationship and justice with peace. I therefore bring to the analysis of my transcripts a particular hermeneutic towards drawing out the narratives in participants’

lives that illustrate and/or embody acts of justice, wholeness and right relationship. In other words, these commitments shape the way I conduct and interpret interviews, causing me to be keenly aware of communal practices that subjugate ambiguous identities and of enactments of identity that may constitute resistance to binary norms. This becomes more clear in Chapter Six when I discuss the role that liturgy and congregational practices facilitate (or do not facilitate) participants' own sense of emancipation and inclusion in their faith community. In short, these commitments to justice and shalom, like Graham and Watkins-Ali, are critically important biases and norms I bring to the study.

- 4) *The integration of theory and praxis*: In this study I begin with the narratives of persons who experience their embodiment as ambiguous – experiences that occur within discursive relationships and communal practices of power. In this sense, the theological themes, resources and metaphors project participants engage to construct ambiguous identity are *a priori* in as much as they are already discursively inscribing meaning upon the body. (This dynamic was described earlier in regards to gender identity). Here theory and praxis cannot be easily separated because both are *already* mutually engaging. That said, the methodological commitment of this study is that the first person narratives are sought in order to *construct new theology*. Through deconstruction and reconstruction, this

study seeks to begin to offer a theology of ambiguous embodiment that is more critical and nuanced.

- 5) *The role of experience of individuals and communities*: This study assumes the poststructuralist epistemological claim that language is constitutive of identity and practice, and that narratives of identity present an opportunity for constructing new theology about the body. Asking questions about and inviting reflection upon how participants experience their community, and identifying the congregational practices that are more helpful (or not) in response to such ambiguity, is examined in order to recognize whether there are any recurring patterns that might emerge. These patterns then may offer suggestions and recommendations for other congregations seeking to welcome persons with ambiguity more fully.

Marshall's five criteria necessitate the academic and ethical practice of making my theological and theoretical commitments transparent, while at the same time making clear my methodological choices within an interdisciplinary project. In other words, here I am seeking to be transparent about *why* I'm placing certain adjunct disciplines into critical correlation with each other, and what assumptions I must make in order to do so. Next I will move to the mechanics of the critical correlation; or in other words, to explain *how* I intend to do what I will do. For this I return to Neuger's model of the pastoral theological spiral.



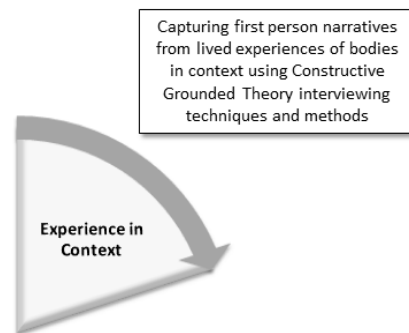
### **Pastoral Theological Spiral: Round and Round We Go**

Neuger’s spiral metaphor provides for the mechanics, or the *how*, of what the methodology of this project seeks to do. I offer the following modified methodological spiral, which will be used in this study, in order to consider the theological anthropological questions raised in the first chapter: *What does such ambiguous and fluid gender identity suggest for the theological anthropology of embodiment? How might one go about exploring such lived experience in order to correct and/or construct a more nuanced theological anthropology? And how might such theological claims remain grounded in the particularity of one’s life – while still contributing something to the wider conversation of embodiment theology – but without making universal claims about all gender identities?*

#### *Human Experience in Context – Constructivist Grounded Theory*

I begin with the human experience in context – the “human story.” In order to document the first person narratives of the project participants in such a way as to place them in conversation with each other and with theological and adjunct disciplines, I turn to the qualitative research method known as Constructivist Grounded Theory. Constructivist Grounded Theory has its roots in Glaserian and Straussian Grounded Theory, but has integrated constructivist and social constructionist theories, and the postmodern critique of grounded theory presented by critical ethnography. Kathy Charmaz (2006, 2009), the primary theorist for Constructivist Grounded Theory, describes the methodological orientation as:

A social scientific perspective that addresses how realities are made. This perspective assumes that people, including researchers, construct the realities in which they participate. Constructivist inquiry starts with the experience and asks how members construct it. To the best of their ability, constructivists enter the phenomenon, gain multiple views of it, and locate it in its web of connections and constraints. Constructivists acknowledge that their interpretation of the studied phenomenon is itself a construction. (2006, p. 187)



For this study, Constructivist Grounded Theory presents a qualitative methodology that: 1) is rooted in first person narratives, recording and categorizing theological themes, resources and metaphors, which facilitates a constructive pastoral theology of identity that resists the impulse to apply or impose existing theological discourses of embodiment; 2) recognizes the ways in which such first person narratives of theological reflection both constitute and are constituted by the very theological themes, resources and metaphors being referenced; and 3) holds me accountable for my power as a researcher, my subjectivity as an interviewer, and the ways my decisions in “reading” narratives imposes meaning.

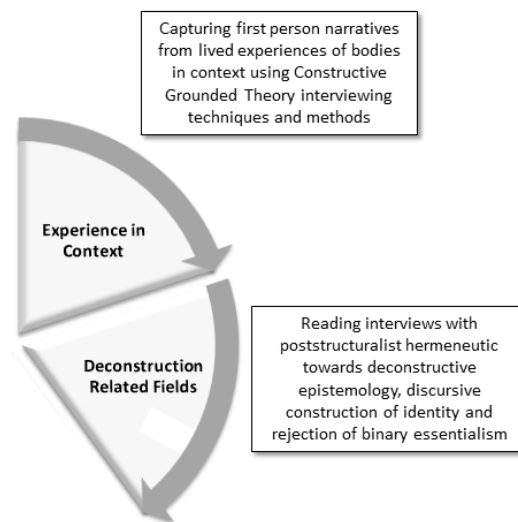
*Deconstruction – Related Fields*

Theological narratives of embodiment and identity are expressed discursively with dominant metanarratives of the body. These metanarratives diagnose, idolize, problematize and otherwise categorize some bodies as “normal” and some bodies as not. As such, the narratives of persons interviewed in this study are constructed and shared discursively with these normative metanarratives on the body. In order to take into account and deconstruct these metanarratives, I turn to poststructuralist theories on the body.

Judith Butler (2005) argues that bodies are not materially static, they are discursively constituted and are cultural landscapes upon which discourses inscribe meaning and identity. Bodies are categorized as “other” through a set of norms – norms that govern “recognizability.” Poststructuralist theorists, especially Derrida (1976) and Foucault (1965, 1977), have turned to *differance* as a primary metaphor for recognizing and constructing the “self” and “other,” and posit that language is the medium by which subjectivity is constructed and performed in social discourse. In this sense poststructuralism invites pastoral theologians considering embodiment to take into account the discourses that *normalize* some bodies and *other* “other” bodies that don’t fit into subjective categories of normalcy in their constructive theology.

I find poststructuralism compelling, in this regard, because I think it offers a helpful critique and challenge to pastoral theology to reconsider our operative theological anthropologies of self, identity and embodiment, and to do so while taking seriously discourses and relationships of power and the “normalizing gaze” (Foucault,

1965). This claim, of course, says something about the norms and values I bring to this study: namely, I think the field of pastoral theology would benefit from a thoughtful consideration of ambiguous embodiment and such a consideration must take into account discourses of power related to the body.



Postmodernism (as opposed to poststructuralism) is a broad philosophical movement that has critiqued the primary epistemological assumptions of the modern Enlightenment era. The postmodern critique challenged several modern ideas: the essential self known through reason, the ascendancy of rationality as the highest form of human functioning, and the prevailing assumption that the scientific method is objective and capable of delivering universal truths about the world.

One of the modernist movements critiqued by some postmodernists was structuralism. Structuralism was the modern European philosophical movement of the 1950's shaped largely by de Saussure's work which maintained there is an inherent

structure to reality, which is signified by language (de Saussure, 1916/1959; Lévi-Strauss, 1963; Piaget, 1970). In other words, language represents the inherent and underlying structures of the “real” or perceivable world in ways that link the objects of perception (signified) with the words used to name them (signifier). By the late 1960’s, a new movement was questioning the operative assumptions of structuralism (Derrida, 1976; Foucault, 1965, 1975, 1977). This movement is loosely called poststructuralism. Poststructuralism generally argued that underlying structures are not merely inherent, but are products of history and culture – products produced through social discourse.

Some argue that poststructuralism is a theoretical subset of the postmodern movement; I consider them distinct theoretical movements. These two movements are differentiated primarily by the question of discursive constructivism. While a number of postmodernists agree with the discursive constructivist critique to structuralism, not all would affirm the idea that objects and subjects are constituted by discourse. Poststructuralist theorists, conversely, stake their epistemological claim on this commitment; they necessarily begin with their starting point the epistemological assumption that discursive relationships construct the human experience or reality. Thus, for poststructuralists (in contrast to many postmodernists), language doesn’t merely symbolically represent the essential and embedded structures of objects; the symbolization of language (signifier) constructs the objects (signified) in the first place. The same could be said for the construction of person, the subject.

The poststructuralist movement therefore maintains that the “self” has no essential or inherent structures. There are no *a priori* characteristics that define what it is to be person outside of what “self” is constituted by discourses – discourses with, for, about and over-against the subject. In this sense, the subject is socially constructed within relational discourses of language and power. Thus, poststructuralism rejects the idea of a singular and unitary subjectivity by refocusing its attention to the alterity and otherness of language and identity. In order for the subject to be constituted, the subject uses the “other” as an interlocutor in discourse. This results in the construction of *differance* (Derrida, 1976).

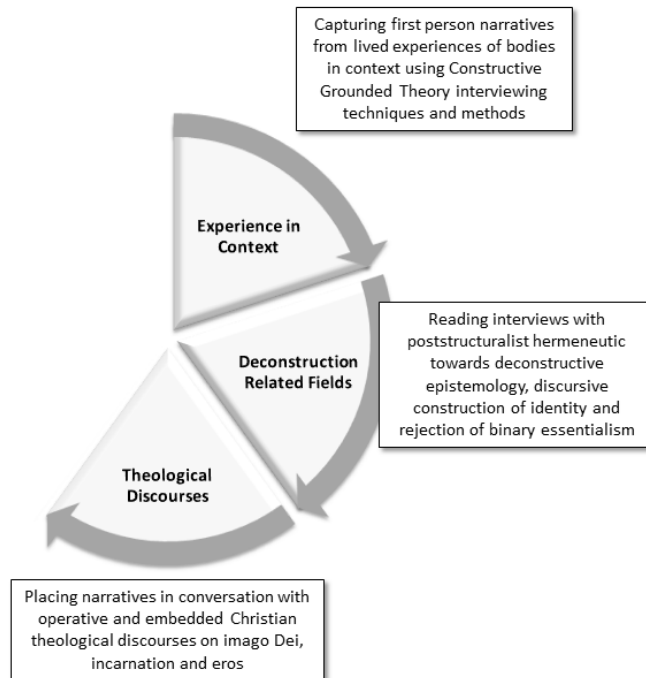
Foucault argued that power is constituted in a network of relationships, not as a commodity or a force which is omni-directional. Power is a relational dynamic of subjectivity and dominance. Foucault’s discussion of the power of gaze offers an insightful metaphor for the subjugating power of language, particularly in light of poststructuralist approaches which posit that language is constitutive of identity. Foucault’s early work explored the dehumanizing practice by which medical professionals diagnosed, labeled and treated “docile” bodies separate and apart from persons by means of the “clinical gaze” (1965). Foucault’s later work explored social discipline in the modern era, inspired by Bentham's Panopticon prison design in which a single guard watches over many prisoners without being seen (1977). As we will observe in my analysis of the first person narratives in subsequent chapters, this disciplinary watching is a metaphor for how modern discourses of language exercise control over systems of power-knowledge; the surveillance by those in power –

especially in the church – merely by their gaze upon another results in persons being subjected to the normalizing disciplines of acceptable behavior. In effect, persons become subjugated by being identified primarily with their non-conforming bodies.

These philosophical and epistemological claims are quite bold, indeed, and have been critiqued robustly from a wide variety of intellectual quarters. I nevertheless do think that poststructuralism offers an important invitation for pastoral theologians to consider the effects of language and discourse on the construction of identity, particularly in light of dominant theological norms and congregational practices (rooted in discursive and institutional power) that often “other” bodies that don’t fit into the normalizing categories of our dominant culture.

### *Theological Discourses*

In addition to reading the interviews of project participants’ life narratives with a poststructuralist hermeneutic I also bring a theological hermeneutic grounded especially in the themes of *imago Dei*, incarnation and *eros*. (These three theological themes are addressed in greater detail throughout Chapter Three.)

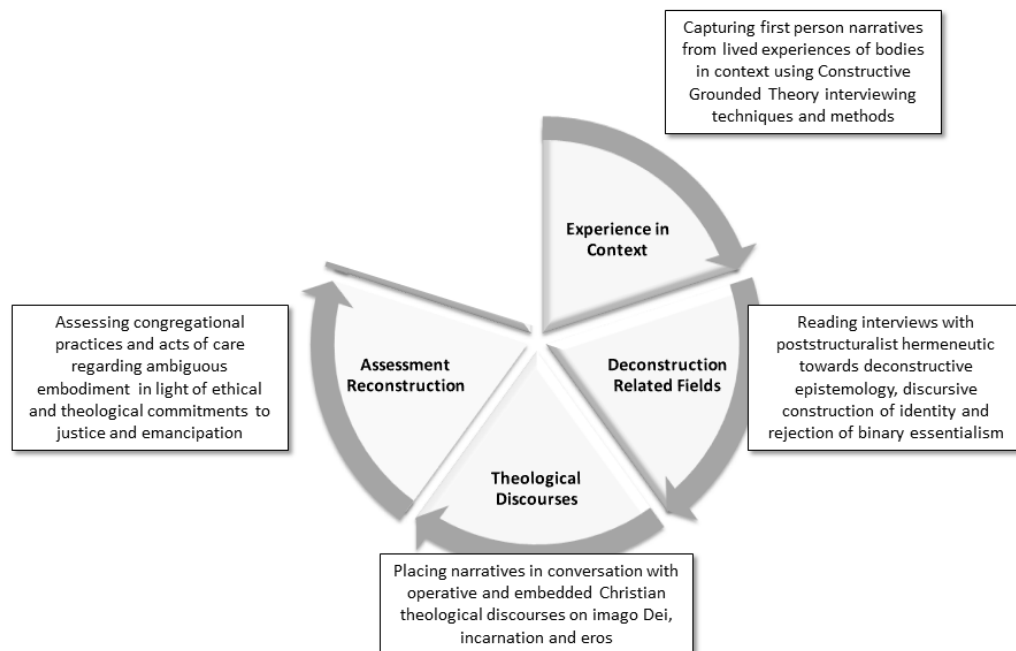


### *Assessment – Reconstruction*

In terms of methodology, I raise again the ethical norm of shalom which I bring to my analysis of participants' narratives. It is my contention that the most pressing human need in our communities and congregations is the need for shalom. We live in a world of immense pain and suffering in which many persons are hurt, broken, abused, subjugated, othered and dehumanized by systems of power and consumption. It is also my belief that the congregations in the Christian tradition have something to offer the world: practices of shalom. These practices of shalom have the potential to nurture and protect wholeness, right relationship and justice with peace.



In other words, my methodology necessarily invites me to take a stand on issues of justice – not merely in the assessment of metanarratives on the body that reject and dehumanize those who embody a liminal, fluid or ambiguous social location, but also in my constructive proposals regarding congregational and pastoral practices which I offer as a result of this study.



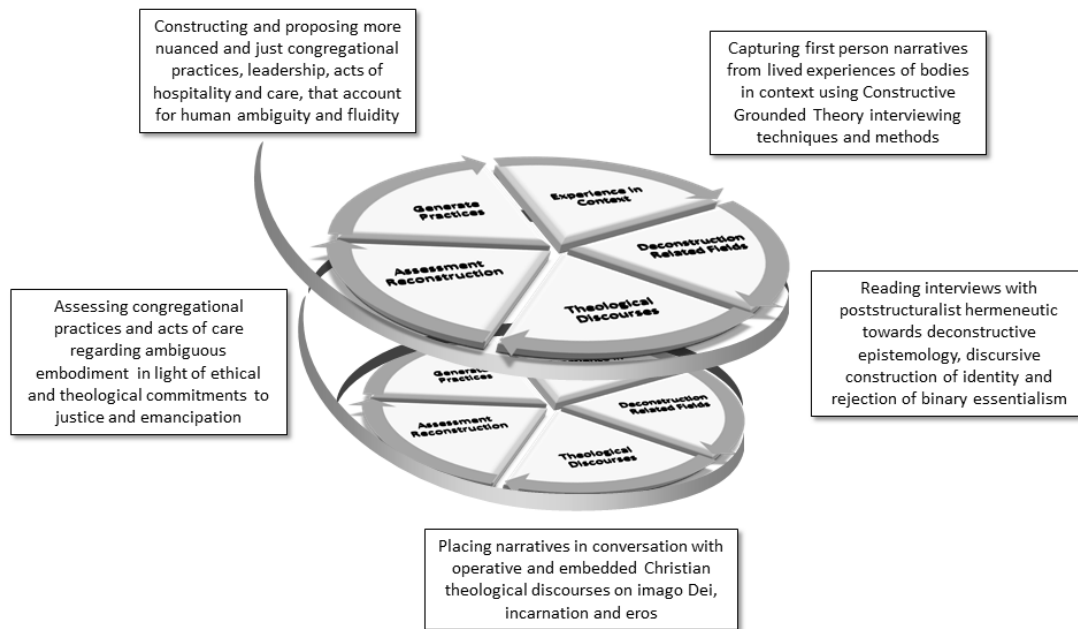
All of the methods—gaining awareness of injustice, reclaiming a diversity of perspectives, deconstructing dominant culture norms and practices, reconstructing new theory, theology, and care, and maintaining persistent accountability for all who have access to privilege and power—will be necessary as we continue to respond to *God's call for mutuality, love and justice for all of creation*. (Neuger, 2004, p. 85, emphasis added)

As such, the primary criterion I use to evaluate and assess praxis in response to ambiguous embodiment is God's call for mutuality, love, and justice for all creation. Or, in a word, shalom.

### *Generating Practices*

My methodology begins with capturing narratives using constructivist grounded theory interview. It engages a deconstructing analysis using poststructuralist and queer theories and theological discourses on *imago Dei*, incarnation and *eros*. It then offers an assessment of the congregational and pastoral practices experienced by persons who identify as liminal, fluid and/or ambiguous in light of shalom in order to critique and construct those practices. It concludes with proposing new (or more nuanced) theologically-grounded practices. These proposals for praxis, though grounded in the lived experiences of persons whose own assessment indicates that such practices are indeed emancipatory and liberative, are nevertheless offered tentatively as possibilities for movement in the field of pastoral theology.

I have come full circle. The tentative proposals for praxis offered in this study are “purposeful activity performed by embodied persons in space and time as the subjects of agency and objects of history” (Graham, E., 2002, p. 110). In this way, the newly proposed practices are then performed and engaged by persons and communities of persons within a dialectic tension – the tension between persons having their own agency while at the same time being the objects of discourses and communal practices. The spiral goes around again.



### *Pastoral Theological Spiral*

## Qualitative Research Design and Interview Protocols

Recall that this study is emerging from my curiosity to learn from others about how they “make sense” of their ambiguity and how they understand their experiences of ambiguity in light of their understanding of God. I am interested to learn about how persons are shaped by, or give an account of, their experience of ambiguity vis-à-vis ideas of *imago Dei*, incarnation and *eros*. I’m equally interested in their experiences of pastoral and congregational practices. This led me to formulate the two key research questions for this project:

- 1) What theological themes, resources or metaphors are engaged by persons – persons who experience their embodiment as ambiguous – in the construction

of their identities? In other words, how do they “make sense” of their embodiment within theological discourses?

- 2) Are these constructive theologies used by persons to resist binary normalizing discourses that problematize such identities within Christian congregations?

If so, how are they being utilized?

After identifying these primary research questions, I then began to clarify who would meet the criteria of ambiguity based on the definition I delineated in Chapter 1: *the interstitial space between normative categories, the landscape in-between binary bodily norms*. I also identified other criteria related to age, vulnerability, location and participation in congregational in consultation with the dissertation director. Through published works, conferences, personal relationships, public appearances and professional networking, I invited prospective participants to consider participating in the project<sup>11</sup>. The original criteria were quite broad and included:

1. Persons who self-identify as “ambiguous” according to the following definition: experiencing one’s body as located in the interstitial space between normative binary categories or in the landscape between binary bodily norms.

The four general areas of ambiguity of greatest interest included:

---

<sup>11</sup> Qualitative research protocols were reviewed and approved by the Internal Review Board of Texas Christian University, which works with the faculty at Brite Divinity School to insure ethical research practices, integrity and care in working with the participants in this project.

- a. persons who identify their bodies between binary categories of abled/disabled (e.g., culturally Deaf persons who reject a disabled identity, episodic disability, “invisible” disabilities);
  - b. persons who identify their bodies as in between binary categories of female/male (e.g., omnigender, gender fluid, intersex);
  - c. persons who identify their sexuality between binary categories of gay/straight (e.g., bisexual, pomosexual, asexual, queer, ambisexual);
  - d. persons who identify their race as bi-racial.
2. Persons who self-identify as “Christian,” and:
- a. Have been active in some Christian congregation for at least half of their adult life;
  - b. Have a working knowledge of the bible and major theological themes in the Christian tradition, but have not attended seminary;
  - c. Have attended worship services at least 50% of Sundays during the past 12 months.
3. Persons who live within 100 miles of Denver, CO.

I excluded the following persons from participating:

- a. Persons under 18 years of age.
- b. Persons who are unable to articulate an integrated construction of their ambiguous identity (e.g., “I’m just starting to figure myself out,” or “I’m not quite sure how to make sense of my identity”) (see Appendix C “Screening Question”).

- c. Persons who demonstrate possible cognitive impairment or developmental disability in the screening process.
- d. Persons who meet the criteria “vulnerable adult” according to Colorado and Texas state statutes.
- e. Persons for whom disclosure of their particular ambiguity would present a risk which, in the judgment of the researchers, does not warrant the benefits of participation.
- f. Persons unable to demonstrate, in the judgment of the researchers, adequate literacy in Christian theology to participate meaningfully in the project.

As participants were recruited and interviews unfolded, it became clear that the scope of the project would be too wide to include all of these self-identified categories. In consultation with the dissertation director, I concluded that engaging lived experiences and literature on disability studies, along with queer theory and theology, and with critical race theory, was too broad of an exercise. It would require a simplistic and superficial reading of those literature worlds, and raised serious doubts in my mind about the methodological integrity of placing such drastically varying theoretical worlds into conversation. Thus, I narrowed the participant pool to include those who experience ambiguity in gender and sexuality (1.b. and 1.c. above).

All of the participants in this study were referred by professional contacts. Though recruitment flyers were circulated to several organizations germane to the four general areas of ambiguity listed above, the most effective recruitment method

came through conversations with clergy and congregational leaders in the Denver metro area. After a prospective participant was referred to me, I scheduled a telephone screening to determine whether the prospective participant met the selection criteria (see Appendix C) and to answer general questions about the study. If the prospective participant met the selection criteria, the participant was sent consent documents.

Before beginning interviews I conducted one “mock” interview with a personal friend who met the participant criteria. This mock interview provided an opportunity for me to refine the language and nomenclature I was using, and to seek feedback regarding the interview process from the participant’s perspective. Two key insights emerged from this experience. First, I became aware that the word “ambiguous” was a descriptor towards which the mock interview participant had a negative reaction. Ambiguity, to the mock participant, evoked something entirely different than in the literature; it suggested to the mock participant confusion or lack of clarity, which was not the lived experience of this participant. As such, I suspended my use of “ambiguous” during the subsequent interviews and, instead, asked participants to identify for themselves their preferred descriptor – which included “fluid,” “liminal,” “queer” and, once in a while, “ambiguous” – and I continued using the participant’s preferred descriptor throughout the interview.

The second insight that emerged from the mock interview was the way I was asking participants to reflect theologically on their experience of ambiguity. In short, I was asking participants to make too large of a theological leap from their lived

experience to their understanding of Christian discourses on the body. As a result, I began asking questions with more specificity to scaffold participant reflections. For example, rather than asking “What theological resources do you find most helpful in constructing your ambiguous identity?” which was too broad of a question, I asked, “As you think about your own experience of fluidity, is there a story from scripture or a biblical character that you resonate with?” This seemed to facilitate a more helpful process for exploring theological themes without overwhelming the participants in responding to my questions.

### *Individual Interviews*

Individual interviews were conducted with six (6) participants. Following are their names participants selected for publication, along with preferred gender and/or sexual identity signifiers, and a description of the congregation in which they are actively involved:

*Luke* identifies as transman and queer, and is active in an emergent Protestant congregation.

*Mary* identifies as woman and bisexual, and is active in a post-denominational congregation.

*Paul* identifies as man and bisexual, and is active in a progressive Protestant congregation.

*Rae* identifies as gender-queer, and is active in a post-denominational congregation.



*Phyllis* identifies as woman and bisexual, and is active in a progressive Protestant congregation.

*Seth* identifies as gender-queer and is active in an emergent Protestant congregation.

Interviews ranged in length from 50 to 70 minutes in length. Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) is a highly reflexive research methodology and, as such, interviews were considered semi-structured (at most) and didn't necessarily follow a specific set of prescribed questions. However, I did use a list of questions as a guide to ensure I, as the interviewer, covered all the topical areas I wished to include in the study (Appendix A). Interviews took place in person in Denver, CO at mutually convenient locations between February 8, 2012 and May 27, 2012. Upon completion of the interview, participants were invited to complete an exit survey instrument using both Likert scale and open-ended questions to: a) identify the relative importance of the theological themes, resources and metaphors identified; b) explore to what extent the participant may consider the very construction of ambiguous identity as an act of resistance to binary norms; and c) invite the participant to reflect upon any changes or insights as a result of the interview (see Appendix B). Consistent with CGT interviewing norms, I wrote memos to reflect on my own experience of the interviews and to begin to connect and notate emerging ideas or patterns observed in the interviews. These memos are incorporated into my findings in subsequent chapters.

### *Group Interview*

Upon completion of the individual interviews and exit surveys, a group discussion with all six (6) participants was scheduled. The group experience was designed to invite participants to reflect upon the theological sources they find most important with each another. Similar questions were asked in group interview as in the individual interviews (see Appendix A for examples). Through the synergy of the group interaction, I was interested in whether a theological source or idea named by one participant might be received by other participants as helpful or insightful (or not) in understanding ambiguous identity. All six (6) participants were scheduled to attend the group interview on June 9, 2012. That morning, I received a call from one participant cancelling. When it came time for the group interview to begin, only three participants were in attendance. Later that day I received a telephone call that the second missing participant “got lost.” When I contacted the third missing participant, I was informed the participant “forgot.” The result was that the group interview included only three participants. Upon consultation with the dissertation director, I did not schedule another group interview for the remaining three participants, though all three indicated their willingness to give written feedback to drafts.

All individual and group interviews were audio recorded. Audio recordings were transcribed by me. Consistent with norms used in Constructivist Grounded Theory, the transcripts were coded to identify possible recurring themes or patterns, points of contrast and difference between each participant, and potential correlations between particular theological sources and the specific ambiguous embodiment of the

participants (these findings are presented in subsequent chapters). In consultation with the dissertation director, drafts of preliminary findings were circulated to project participants interested in providing feedback and critique in order to ensure the accurate representation of their narratives.

### **Towards a Constructive Pastoral Theology of Ambiguous Embodiment**

Anita Monro attempts to recognize the multiplicity of human language and identity in her methodological approach – one that facilitates evocative theological motifs that don't fit neatly into binary/dualistic categories. This approach, she writes,

presents the possibility of addressing the concerns of diversity, ambiguity and integrity...and conforms to the specifically Christian motif of the ambiguous subjectivity of the person of Christ. The goal [here] is to construct a methodological framework that will take into account ambiguous subjectivity, thereby transgressing the dualistic tendencies of Christian faith, theology and practice, and upholding the central motifs of Christianity which defy such dualisms. (2006, p. 26)

I have aimed to develop a very similar methodology: a method that can take into account ambiguous subjectivity and can transgress the binary, normalizing discourse.

I began by clarifying my definition of ambiguity and identifying my general theoretical, epistemological and theological assumptions regarding construction of identity and the self. I then also articulated two key research questions that emerged from my interest in learning from the lived experiences of persons who embody ambiguous identities.

In this chapter I sought to delineate my praxis-centered pastoral theological methodology through the use of the spiral metaphor. The method includes two key

hermeneutical commitments: 1) theological discourses on the themes of *imago Dei*, incarnation and *eros*; and 2) philosophical discourses on poststructuralist theory and queer theory. It then offers an assessment of the practices experienced by persons who identify as liminal, fluid and/or ambiguous. The method concludes by offering new or revised practices, taking into account the wider social, communal, theological and political discourses that construct such practices in the first place. I also delineated the interview protocols and qualitative methods based on Constructive Grounded Theory.

In the next chapter I will offer a more detailed analysis of the three theological themes that were identified in this chapter: 1) *imago Dei*; 2) incarnation; and 3) *eros*. The analysis will consider treatment of these three themes in recent philosophical and theological literature, and will introduce the key conversation partners I have selected for this project. Following this analysis, in subsequent chapters, the first-person narratives will be placed into critical correlative conversation with these theorists in order to begin constructing a pastoral theology of ambiguous embodiment.

**CHAPTER THREE**  
**SELECTED THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSES ON**  
**AMBIGUITY AND EMBODIMENT**

Though the primary starting point in the constructive pastoral theological method (the spiral) I presented in the previous chapter begins with the lived experience in context, such lived experiences do not occur in a vacuum. They occur within communal practices which are constituted by relational and normalizing discourses. Within the context of the church, these discourses are certainly theological, though they also include discourses outside the field of theology. These are represented in the spiral by *Deconstruction Related Fields* and *Theological Discourses*. I indicated my use of two such related fields, namely poststructuralist theory and queer theory, in the previous chapter though I will return to those disciplines as I move into the analysis of the interviews. As it relates to theological discourses, it is my intention to engage three specific genres of embodiment theology in this project: *imago Dei*, incarnation and *eros*. These sources will also serve as primary conversation partners in my analysis with participant interviews (Chs. 4-6), and will shape the final step in the spiral: the generation of revised practices for congregational life.

**Embodiment Theology**

I turn now to some of the literature regarding the lived experience of bodies in order to chart the cartography of the interdisciplinary theological landscape of

embodiment, attending to the distinctive methodologies and epistemologies of each scholar and noting differences in the projects that each theologian is constructing. I've selected three themes – *imago Dei*, incarnation and *eros* – because I believe they offer a rich opportunity to explore how gender and sexuality, as embodied identities, are constructed within theological discourse. In this chapter I introduce several key theologians within these three themes which I have selected for this project in order to set the groundwork for placing first-person narratives into critical correlative conversation. In other words, I don't craft my interview questions nor read the interview transcripts *ex nihilo*; I bring to this enterprise a worldview which is shaped by my own experience of, and pre-engagement with, theological discourses about the body. At the same time, it is not my intention to merely project onto participants' life stories my externally constructed theological conclusions. Quite the contrary. It is my intention to allow the theological discourses on *imago Dei*, incarnation and *eros* to serve as a hermeneutic to my listening and reading of the interviews, while at the same time allowing the interviews to serve as a hermeneutic to my engagement with those same theological discourses. In other words, a mutually critical conversation.

*Imago Dei* is used as a primary theological theme for Larry Kent Graham. As a pastoral theologian, Graham serves as an important conversation partner in exploring embodiment, particularly his emphasis on the relationality of being created in God's image, which relates well to my ethical norms of relational justice. I utilize Mary Timothy Prokes's work, a Franciscan Roman Catholic theologian, because I hold a commitment to intentionally broadening the conversation within the field of

pastoral theology beyond the prevailing, dominant Protestant worldview to include Roman Catholic and Orthodox theologians. Moreover, her use of vocation as a hermeneutical lens for understanding the body was echoed in one of the participant interviews. Feminist poststructuralist theologian Margaret Kamitsuka serves as a primary conversation partner throughout this study, especially because of her work in correlating poststructuralist theory with constructive theology. All three of these theologians aim to connect lived embodied experience as an expression of being created in God's image and as a reflection of the Trinity.

*Incarnation* is the second theme, one used significantly by ethicist James Nelson. Nelson's seminal work, *Embodiment*, was a formational text for me in my undergraduate studies and has become a primary influence in how I construct my own theological and ethical commitments regarding the body. Nancy Eiesland's work, especially her text *The Disabled God*, has been an influential text in my work in Deaf ministry and has served as a primary conversation partner around constructed christologies. Lisa Isherwood, a British liberation theologian, often articulates ideas in queer theology, feminist theology and liberation theology which align closely with my own. As such she is a primary conversation partner as a queer theologian. And while I've already identified the role that Elaine Graham's work plays in my constructive pastoral methodology, her published work on the body also serves as an important conversation partner, particularly her ideas regarding the body as a site of divine revelation. All of these scholars are considering the relational dimension of divine and human in their theologies of embodiment.

*Eros* was resurrected and reappropriated for modern use by Carter Heyward, a lesbian feminist theologian. Heyward's work serves as an important foundation for my use of *eros* as a theological category, though I part ways with her on several of her ethical conclusions. Marcella Althaus-Reid's work as a contextual theologian has had a significant impact on my work, particularly in queer theology, feminist theology and liberation theology. It is my reading that her work has pushed the edges of propriety and decency in theological discourses on the body (two normalizing categories she explicitly sought to deconstruct in her writing), which has often resulted in her being dismissed as a scholar. Though not a pastoral theologian, it is my view that Althaus-Reid's ethnographic-based work with women, trans and gender fluid persons in Brazil has much to offer the field of pastoral theology. Finally, John Blevins, a queer pastoral theologian, uses Foucault and Butler extensively in his work, and as such, is an important conversation partner for this project both in terms of pastoral theological methodology, as well as in critically engaging Foucault and Butler as adjunct theorists from philosophy. All these theologians are constructing embodiment theology in light of divine desire and human sexuality.

These selected theologians and ethicists are from varying disciplines and theological locations, which makes their comparison challenging. The purpose for bringing them together in critical conversation is twofold. First, it is to illustrate that the questions which are asked about embodiment are quite diverse, are engaged differently by scholars even within the same disciplines, and are explored with a wide



variety of theoretical assumptions. Again, the purpose is to chart broad themes on the landscape of embodiment as I read it.

Second, while I acknowledge that the distinctions between various fields in theology (e.g., constructive, pastoral, practical, moral/ethics) are important, I wish to return briefly to my previous comments that I believe the distinction between these fields is becoming decreasingly significant in our respective fields. The shift towards communal-contextual theology as a methodology in multiple disciplines in theology, including biblical hermeneutics, means that the divided fields of the academy are increasingly attending to similar questions of context, discourses and practices grounded in lived experience. Moreover, as the shift towards postmodern epistemologies continues, the academic disciplines are necessarily shifting towards the particularities of lived experience and the eschewal of universal claims. Again, this is not to say that the distinctions in the fields aren't important. What I am proposing is that distinctions in methodology, epistemology and operative theological norms present a more helpful taxonomy for exploring embodiment than the disciplinary boundaries of constructive, practical, pastoral and moral/ethical.<sup>12</sup>

While the three themes of *imago Dei*, incarnation and *eros* illustrate much of the theological landscape on embodiment, only a limited few are engaging questions of *ambiguity*, *fluidity* and *liminal identities*. Hence, this project. It is my hope that by

---

<sup>12</sup> See Bonnie Miller-McLemore's recent reassessment of Schleiermacher's so-called "crown" metaphor and an argument for a more egalitarian approach to the "trunk" and "roots" of the theological academy (2012).

constructing a pastoral theology of ambiguous embodiment I might reflect theologically on the lived experiences of persons who identify as ambiguous, fluid and/or liminal in order to: a) deconstruct dominant theo-anthropological paradigms of “normal;” b) to reconstruct an image of God that takes into account ambiguous embodiment; and c) to propose pastoral practices that might affirm and honor the ambiguous diversity of creation.

### *Imago Dei*<sup>13</sup>

Humanity is not alone. We have been created by God and live within creation to be in relationship with our Creator, and in relationship with one another.

Trinitarian theologians have long emphasized the relationality of the *perichoresis*, which suggests that humanity, created in God’s image, is also created to be relational

---

<sup>13</sup> It is beyond the scope of this project to engage and evaluate the volumes of theological discourse that have been published on the *imago Dei*. For our purposes here, it is worth noting the common three-part taxonomy of substantive, functional and relational approaches to explicating the claim that humanity is created in the image of God. The substantive trajectory, which includes Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther and John Calvin, is the claim that the image of God is inherent in the substantive qualities of humanity’s nature, especially reasoning and thinking. In one sense this view of the imago is somewhat disembodied, though some argue that bodies are, indeed, part of the substantive nature of the human experience. There are echoes of this in Prokes’ work. The functional trajectory emphasizes the role of humanity in exercising “dominion” and stewardship over the earth. None of the theologians engaged here locate within this trajectory. The relational trajectory, including Karl Barth, Emil Brunner and Douglas John Hall, maintains that the image of God is not specifically found in who humans are, but in how our ability to establish relationships is what makes us like God. Larry Graham’s work is within this general theme. Kamitsuka is utilizing a different approach altogether, based upon performativity, though one could argue that it may be a poststructuralist variation of the relational approach.

beings (Rahner, 1970; LaCugna, 1991; Volf & Welker, 2001). Accordingly, theologians exploring *imago Dei* have also considered the nature of our createdness and the implications of being created in God's image, particularly within a context in which humanity embodies a diverse multiplicity of bodily experience (Hall, 1986; Graham, L., 1992, 1997; Prokes, 1996). For purposes here, I will consider the work of Graham, Prokes and Kamitsuka in order to illustrate three quite different approaches to using *imago Dei* as a hermeneutical device to reflect on embodiment. Note how these theologians share in their use of the same theological claim – being created in the image of God – from different socio-theological locations and epistemological assumptions.

In *Discovering Images of God: Narratives of Care among Lesbians and Gays*, Larry Graham builds on the work of Douglas John Hall, who argued that being created in God's image is constituted by a quality of *relationship* rather than an essential human trait or characteristic (1986). Graham posits that living in the *imago Dei* means being in mutual relationship with each other – not only with God – and that those relationships mirror our relational existence with God (1997). In this sense being created in God's image necessarily implies a relational existence. Graham offers several “marks” of *imago Dei*, namely that in our relationships all are of sacred worth, we have opportunities to experience erotic embodiment, we seek relational justice and we live into dynamic wholeness (1997). These marks are shaped by Graham's reliance on process theology and frame his understanding of how relationality is lived out through the human body. In this sense, the body is in

relationship with other bodies, and through bodies in relationship the *imago Dei* is made known.

Prokes, a Roman Catholic theologian using as her primary source John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*, engages *imago Dei* principally in terms of vocation and "self-gift." Her work *Toward a Theology of the Body* largely on natural law theory in order to construct a theological anthropology of the body, and argues that humans experience their bodies – bodies in action and bodies in relationships – within the context of one's vocation. Bodies participate in the image of God, a God constituted by a "perichoretic union through total Self-Gift to the other Person" (Prokes, 1996, p. 96). Here she offers the pregnant body as a metaphor for this self-gift kind of embodiment: "No time in later life will there be the same capacity to reside – to live within physically or to share flesh and blood with such an enduring immediacy" (Prokes, 1996, p. 97). This indwelling of the child within the body becomes an operative theological image for the indwelling of the Christ within all of us. Prokes is using the embodied experience of pregnancy to reflect upon the theological concept of a perichoretic *imago Dei*, while using a hermeneutical lens of vocation.

A quite different approach to *imago Dei* can be found in Margaret Kamitsuka's poststructuralist work *Feminist Theology and the Challenge of Difference*. She approaches questions of "selfhood" and embodiment within the context of being created in the image of God, but her work is primarily

deconstructive, aiming to bring into conversation *imago Dei* and gender performativity (Butler 1990, 1993)<sup>14</sup>. The result is an embodiment that problematizes the male-female sexual binary – a key theme in this project. She argues that all aspects of human performativity are reflections of who God is, and are located within the context of communal discursive relationships.

Each community's construal of the *imago dei* becomes a discursive regime that functions as a convention for religious conformity to God's will. As the believer cooperates with or resists aspects of these community-specific discursive conventions, they become constitutive of her religious selfhood, so that she is performatively constituted in part by relations of power (and grace, the theologian will want to add) with the discourse of creation in the image of God. (2007, p. 80)

Here Kamitsuka uses *imago Dei* as a deconstructing heuristic to reflect a more fluid and dynamic divine, and to name the discursive power of *imago Dei* to constitute a person's selfhood. Bodily performativity – practices of the body that construct gender and identity – occurs within community discourses that impose conformity upon the body. These discourses are predicated upon an operative theological regime of *imago Dei* constructed as a white, male anthropocentric image of God against which non-white and non-male bodies are considered “other.” In this sense, bodies are not merely in relationship to other bodies, but are in relationship to other bodies within disciplinary regimes of power.

---

<sup>14</sup> See also Mary McClintock Fulkerson's feminist poststructuralist engagement of *imago dei*, particularly as it relates to patriarchal dominance (1997).

Three very different engagements with embodiment through the theological lens of *imago Dei*: a liberative, process theologian arguing for ethical practices of care and community in Graham; a natural law Roman Catholic theologian using vocation and pregnancy as an embodied metaphor in Prokes; a poststructuralist feminist theologian deconstructing *imago Dei* in light of disciplinary regimes in Kamitsuka. However, there seems to be an important thread in all three, namely, appropriating *imago Dei* in terms of humanity's experience of *relational* existence. Graham offers this in terms of bodies in relationship to other bodies through touch and sexual intimacy. Prokes offers this in terms of one's relationship to one's body (pregnancy) as a means of participating in the Trinity. Kamitsuka offers this in terms of discursive practices of the body to construct selfhood. This thread raises important ethical considerations for bodies in relationship, questions of justice, right relationship and health, particularly those interested in question of bodily violence.

The theme of *imago Dei* offers pastoral theologians an important construct for framing the embodied experiences of persons in relational community. And yet it makes a significant difference whether the *imago Dei* is understood as humanity being made in God's image, or humanity imaging God. For theologians committed to praxis-based theology, the later seems to be more critical. For example, *imago Dei* approaches to body theology might claim that when communities value each person's uniqueness and celebrate bodily diversity, they are reflecting the uniqueness and diversity of God. Or for example, when community and congregational practices attend to and honor different kinds of bodies, particularly bodies that don't meet the

criteria of “normal” – bodies that use wheelchairs, or bodies that are both male and female, or bodies that are too large to fit in pews – I would argue that a more inclusive and accurate image of God is being constructed. I will explore the relationship between human ambiguity and God-imaging in greater detail in Chapter Four.

The problem with relational embodiment is that, throughout human history, it has rarely reflected mutuality. As a result, using relationality as a primary means of constructing *imago Dei* is not without its ethical implications. For persons whose bodies are labeled “different” by hegemonic discourses which construct boundaries of bodily norms, the relational ideal of *imago Dei* quite often becomes a regime of conformity. This is Kamitsuka’s critique. Bodies that don’t fit within the shape, size, conformation and ability of that which is considered “norm” become problematized and are considered *not* to be a reflection of the image of God. In other words, the regime of conformity claims the closer one’s body is to “normal,” the closer one embodies the image of God. In this way, I am seeking to use the concept of *ambiguity* to both account for bodies that don’t fit the categories of “normal,” and to deconstruct the heresy of bodily perfection.

### *Incarnation*<sup>15</sup>

I now shift to theologians who are primarily interested in expressing human embodiment in terms of incarnation. While the distinction between these theorists and those presented above is somewhat arbitrary, the difference here is primarily one of emphasis. *Imago Dei* embodiment theologies posit as their starting point the doctrine of being created in the likeness and image of God; whereas incarnation embodiment theologies begin with a rejection of dualism and a preferencing of “fleshly” experience of the divine (Nelson, 1992). In other words, incarnation-oriented embodiment theologies begin with the assumption that the divine can be experienced in and through the body. In this sense, bodies present the medium by which God is made known in human community.

I begin with James Nelson’s seminal work *Embodiment*. This work brought a key critique to prevailing theologies of the body and human sexuality, and ushered a “turn to the body” as the starting point for constructive theology. While an ethicist

---

<sup>15</sup> There’s an important distinction to note here in the use of “incarnation.” The use of incarnation as it relates to human embodiment is different, though not wholly unrelated to, the use of incarnation to describe the divinity of Jesus. The historic controversies presented by Arius, Marcion, Valentinus (to name a few) and the subsequent christological definitions from the ecumenical councils (Nicaea in 325; Ephesus in 431; Chalcedon in 451) present a definition of “incarnation” as it relates to explicating the relationship between the historical Jesus and God and the “nature” of both. The use of “incarnation” here, as it relates to embodiment theology, is descriptive of the indwelling of the divine in human beings more generally. This expansion of the incarnation beyond Jesus towards all humanity (albeit in a lesser form than the fully human/fully divine formulation) often appears in theological discourse around the “spark of the divine” within each person, or the “sacred worth” of humans. We see this especially in the work Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and his christological claim that God becomes increasingly incarnate in all physical matter, including all humans (1961). Nelson seems to echo this in his “christic presence” formulation.



rather than a pastoral theologian, Nelson's contributions to the field of moral theology nevertheless have much to offer pastoral theologians primarily because the methodology he engages is largely *praxis* in its orientation. Nelson argues that most scholarship about the body, and sexuality in particular, has been uni-directional: beginning with religion and moving to the body. It has also tended towards male-centered and deductive theology, rather than inductive. He offers an approach which begins with the concrete. Rather than beginning with doctrinal formulation or creeds, he begins with the flesh.

[B]ody theology starts with the fleshly experience of life—with our hungers and our passions, our bodily aliveness and deadness, with the smell of coffee, with the homeless and hungry we see on our streets, with the warm touch of a friend, with bodies violated and torn apart in war, with the scent of a honeysuckle or the soft sting of autumn air on the cheek, with bodies tortured and raped, with the bodyself making love with the beloved and lovemaking with the earth. The task of body theology is critical reflection on our bodily experience as a fundamental realm of the experience of God. (Nelson, 1992, p. 42-43)

While *Embodiment* is primarily a text interested in reshaping Christian sexual ethics, in it Nelson proposes an incarnational theology which claims that God's action to become incarnate in the human flesh of the person Jesus necessarily means that the human body is holy. This point of departure constitutes his critique of Western Christianity's body-mind dualism, a dominant tradition that has for centuries presented the flesh – the human body generally and sexuality specifically – as sinful. Later, in *Body Theology*, Nelson makes a distinction between dualism (a dichotomy of utterly different elements) of body and soul, and duality (body and soul being

distinguishable, but belonging together). Recall here Nelson's use of the term "bodyself." In this way Nelson argues we do not *have* bodies; rather we *are* bodies. While the body and the self (a term Nelson doesn't define with great detail) are distinguishable, they belong together even grammatically.

In this work he also defines his incarnational theology: "It is nothing more, nothing less than our attempts to reflect on body experience as revelatory of God" (1992, p. 50). Here Nelson makes the ontological claim that the "givenness" of our bodily realities and the "meanings" we ascribe to them, ultimately facilitate the revelation of God. Hence all "fleshly experience" becomes vitally important to our experience of God – our fully physical bodies become "central vehicles for God's embodiment in our experience" (1992, p. 31).

Similar to Larry Graham and Prokes, this incarnation is not merely God's revelation within us but is a *relational* revelation. "Through the lens of this paradigmatic embodiment of God, however, Christians can see other incarnations: the *christic* reality expressed in other human being in their God-bearing relatedness" (1992, p. 51). Indeed, the central purpose of Nelson's christology is not necessarily about affirming Jesus as the Christ but is, rather, an affirmation of God's *christic* presence and revelatory activity in the world now.

Nelson's work is not without its limitations. He was writing in the late 70's, relying heavily upon an existentialist epistemology which, though helpful in preferencing lived concrete human experience and ethical praxis over doctrine, is problematic when faced with emerging social constructionist and poststructuralist

critiques (explored in more detail below). His methodology correlates anthropology, sociology and psychology with Christian moral theology and ethics, yet his operative assumption seems to be that adjunct disciplines of social science are free of doctrinal formulations – the very critique he lodged against normative Christian sexual ethics. At the same time, Nelson’s work *Embodiment* invited a major shift in the field – a “turn to the body” – by inviting a new wave of ethicists and theologians to reconsider orthodox and modern treatments of the body, particularly in light of interdisciplinary conversations in postmodern and social constructionist theories of gender.

I turn now to Nancy Eieseland’s work *The Disabled God*. While Eieseland’s work is often compartmentalized into the field of disability studies, her engagement with incarnation as a theological source for embodiment contributes much to the field of pastoral theology. Though a sociologist and ethnographer of religion, rather than a theologian, Eieseland’s *Disabled God* is in my assessment constructing a theology of embodiment – one that demands the consideration of *all* bodies, “disabled” and “temporarily able-bodied” (Eiesland, 1994). All bodies encounter limits and contingency, and through those limits and contingencies, particularly those that are socially constructed as “disabled,” theological disclosure is facilitated. She then utilizes a hermeneutic of suffering and transfigured incarnation in the resurrected Christ:

In the resurrected Jesus Christ, [the disciples] saw not the suffering servant for whom the last and most important word was tragedy and sin, but the disabled God who embodied both impaired hands and feet and pierced side... Here is the resurrected Christ making good on the incarnational proclamation that God would be with us, embodied as

we are, incorporating the fullness of human contingency and ordinary life into God. (Eiesland, 1994)

Here Eiesland is articulating a Christology that critiques the myth of bodily perfection (both for the resurrected Christ and for humanity), and constructs a God-image with the impaired and contingent lives of bodily finitude as its starting point.

Eiesland's contribution to pastoral theology is significant both in communal and clinical contexts. Her theology of embodiment necessarily leads congregations to deconstruct their operative theologies of "normal" body and God-image, and equips caregivers to utilize new paradigms of care. She also takes her work into the area of pastoral practices, especially performative embodiment in liturgy and ritual. In this way the Eucharist presents an opportunity for the broken body (limits, contingencies, disabilities) to become the means by which resurrection (wholeness, personhood, communion) is made possible. The other significant contribution is that Eiesland's Christology defies binary categories of body, a theme explored in Chapter Five regarding transgressive ethics. Not only does this theological orientation challenge the binary of wounded/healed, it also transgresses other dualistic categories of abled/disabled and male/female. This represents an important shift towards a more precarious and ambiguous theology of embodiment (which I offer below), namely that all human embodiment is ambiguous.

We've considered the christic presence in bodies through Nelson's work, and the contingency of the human body as a means of incarnating Christ through Eiesland's work. I now move to Lisa Isherwood's work in *The Good News of the*

*Body: Sexual Theology and Feminism*. Isherwood, like Nelson and Eiesland, begins by engaging lived experiences of the body “as is,” rather than with an *a priori* theological overlay. Isherwood is a feminist liberation theologian who is particularly interested in queer theologies, ecotheology and psychology of religion. She roots her feminist theology of the body deeply in incarnation: “It seems that incarnational theology speaks of a world that experiences *metanoia*, is turned round, through the skin. God herself took flesh in order that this process might become embedded in fleshly reality” (2000, p. 13). This was not a one-time event for Isherwood, but is an ongoing incarnational process. “Once the body is placed at the centre of theological reflection, rather than the disembodied Word, then the starving and battered bodies of oppressed people demand that new ways are found. Their flesh becomes word, bodies become the incarnational starting point for liberating/redemptive praxis” (p. 14). Flesh becoming word – this is what she terms “divine bodies.”

It is through locating ourselves in our “divine bodies” that we are able to challenge and subvert patriarchy and hierarchical power structures. Incarnational embodiment, for Isherwood, is interconnected with and inseparable from protest against oppression and countercultural movements towards redemption. Incarnation demands engagement.

[I]t is in the radical nature of our incarnation that moves us into a place that may be called transcendent. . . In this way the divine body is a symbol of co-creation and co-redemption, it is through us, with us, in us by the power of our divine humanity that we change the world. We change it through the powerful enactment of embodied alternative. This is the meaning of incarnation. (Isherwood, 2000, pp. 32-33)

In a later work, “The Embodiment of Feminist Liberation Theology: The Spiralling of Incarnation,” Isherwood credits Nelle Morton’s infamous phrase “hearing one another to speech” with the advent of situating feminist theology within the body. “Word” incarnate within us is not a word of the disembodied God, but rather are the words quite literally and physically breathed, spoken to and heard within the body. This “expanding, enfleshed hermeneutical spiral” has heard the bodies of women and “cautiously and with much trepidation allowed the flesh to show us the divine rather than submitted to the divine moulding of the flesh” (Isherwood, 2004, p. 140).

Here Isherwood returns to her earlier theme of flesh becoming word. While orthodox incarnation theology reifies a narrative of one historical event in time, namely the mysterious conception of Jesus, Isherwood challenges her readers to suspend the metaphysics of incarnation in order to read the incarnation in a radically different way: to “dare to believe that the human and the divine dwell in one flesh and that flesh is ours” (p. 144). She argues that an embodied reading of the Jesus narratives suggests the *flesh* is becoming word, not *The Word* had been made flesh. To her critics Isherwood argues that her incarnation theology is rooted first in Judaism, Christianity’s foremother, and its narratives of the divine being made “known and seen walking with the people—Sophia herself rolling up her sleeves and getting involved in the everyday life of the market place” (p. 144).

Second, Isherwood relies on narratives of Jesus’ life and ministry which were profoundly located with the body: hunger and food, the use of bodily fluids to heal,

acts of touching and tears. The “demetaphysicised Christ” therefore shifts us from creeds and doctrines into a “place of living documents—back to ourselves—as the ongoing narrative” (p. 150). Bodies tell a story, she claims, and the embodiment of feminist liberation theology requires that space be created for those bodies to be, in the words of Morton, “heard.” This “enfleshed hermeneutic” *reads* the body, which facilitates its emergence as a site of divine revelation and moral praxis. Consider here Boisen and Gerkin’s “living human document” as a living *body* document, through which bodies are written upon and tell a story – often of pain, suffering, subjugation, discipline and categorization. This is discussed more in Chapter Five regarding the real effects of transgressing binary norms within systems of power.

It is worth noting here that Nelson, Eiesland and Isherwood each share a methodological starting point, namely the lived experience of bodies in their social contexts of discursive practices. Yet, the particularity of the bodies from which they construct their theologies has a significant impact on their conclusions. Nelson is responding to persons in the 1970’s who are insisting on the goodness of the body and the blessedness of sex, developing a theologically grounded sexual ethic. Eiesland’s consideration of “disabled” bodies leads her to construct a Christology that is rooted in contingency. Meanwhile, Isherwood’s consideration of starving and battered bodies, particularly bodies of women within patriarchal systems, leads her to construct a *Logos* rooted in liberating praxis. Nevertheless, their engagement of incarnation does share an important thread: the divine made known in the human body. Nelson calls this the christic presence. In this sense incarnation-based

embodiment theologies are seeking to articulate a Christology that takes into account the mysterious and divine nature made accessible to humanity in and through bodies in relationship.

I conclude this treatment of incarnation with the work of Elaine Graham. Graham engages a feminist hermeneutic of embodiment, particularly from a European practical (but pastorally oriented) theological methodology. Bringing into conversation pastoral, ethical and theological discourses in order to construct her work on embodiment, Graham proposes a “Body Theology” that takes into account the performative, incarnational nature of all theology (1999). She argues that “bodily practice” – the concrete and dynamic narratives of humanity’s embodied experience – become the “agent and vehicle of divine disclosure” (1990, p. 109). Her methodology clearly and quite intentionally begins with the lived embodied experience in practices of care, placing central emphasis on Word and sacrament as tangible expressions of the divine-human encounter. With a similar critique to dualism and metaphysics presented in Nelson and Isherwood, Graham posits that the body is the site of divine revelation. While her incarnational paradigm is not a radical inversion of word and flesh found in Isherwood, it does nevertheless seek to move beyond the historical incarnation of Jesus towards an affirmation of God’s ongoing self-revelation in the form of a human life – particularly “revealed in a human *body*, broken and suffering, whose resurrection proclaims that Love is stronger than death” (1999, pp. 113-114).

She argues that liberal white feminist theory and theology has demonstrated ambivalence towards the body in an effort to demonstrate women’s rational and



intellectual equality with men. Within this genre of feminist literature, embodiment is viewed as an impediment to emancipation and liberation. At the same time, Graham acknowledges social constructionist and poststructuralist feminists who reject the essentialist claims of gender difference based upon biology of the body. Indeed she recognizes that many feminists have “shown themselves nervous about women’s embodiment because it is associated with all manner of patriarchal theories of female inferiority, whether that be hormones, maternal instinct, penis envy or brain deficiency” (1999, p. 112). In this way Graham’s theology offers a *via media* to balance the essentialist and social constructionist trajectories with feminist discourse.

This *via media* is not unlike Eiesland and other disability theologians who aim to both deconstruct essentialist and ontological claims of persons who live with a disability while at the same time recognizing that such an embodiment is, in some way, constitutive of the person. I would argue that a theology of ambiguous embodiment may take into account both the need to resist and deconstruct disciplinary regimes upon the body (Foucault 1965, 1977) while at the same time addressing the real effects of those disciplinary regimes upon the human body. As I have already discussed, Butler claims that bodies are not materially static, they are discursively constituted and are cultural landscapes upon which discourses inscribe meaning and identity. Bodies are categorized as “male” and “female” through a set of norms – norms that govern “recognizability.” In this sense, the norms upon which bodies are recognized are discursively constructed and yet, do have real effects on the lives of persons who are othered.

This, of course, raises important questions of justice and emancipation. For Graham, bodies are not merely fixed repositories for the soul, but are sites of socially mediated dynamics of power and difference. In this way, Graham argues that body theology must take into account the patriarchal and racist discourses that objectify persons through disciplinary technologies.

Formerly subordinate groups, defined and constrained by patriarchal constructions, have sought to find new, more empowering ways of talking about themselves as bodily agents as well as objects. Black, gay and lesbian, subaltern or postcolonial, feminist or disabled political movements and critical theories have provided such space: but those who speak from the vantage-point of such subject-positions often still find themselves defined in opposition to a hegemonic and unexamined norm of white, able-bodied, first-world straight masculinity which is never itself required to own up to its own embodied nature. What would it mean for men to ‘write their bodies’? There is an urgent need for dominant, privileged groups to become critical about their own racial, sexual and gender identity, and begin to make it possible for everyone to think from the Body; or else bodily experience is restricted to a property of those speaking from a position of ‘difference’, which in practice means the abnormal, problematic, victimized body. (1999, p. 115)

As a queer-identified, white man who does not yet live with a disability, Graham’s indictment is quite poignant. This is precisely why I am engaged in this work.

It may be helpful here to pause a moment to consider a larger conversation of embodiment within feminist theologies. While most feminists argue that embodiment is of principal importance in deconstructing and constructing theological norms and practices within the church, there remains considerable variation in the operative definition of what “embodiment” means. As I have already noted in the comparison of Isherwood and Graham, there is no one definitive feminist perspective on

embodiment. At the same time Mary Catherine Hilkert suggests that there are several common themes within feminist approaches to theologies of the body worth noting: First, a critical suspicion of discourses that posit women are more “naturally” embodied than men, which has resulted in a dualistic hierarchy of mind/soul over body, a hierarchy by which men are identified with mind/soul and women with body; Feminist critical suspicion usually rejects this dualist framework. Second, an attentiveness to placing question of gender and body within historical and social contexts; third is a tendency to broaden questions of embodiment beyond merely the body towards wider questions of moral action and human relationships. And third, movement towards new forms of ritual and liturgy (Hilkert, 1995).

More recently, feminist theologians have shifted their epistemological orientation more towards social constructionist or poststructuralist theory (Fulkerson, 1997). Some, like Isherwood and Graham, seek to navigate a balance between essentialist and social constructionist claims about embodiment, preferring instead to deconstruct traditional doctrines of incarnation and rely upon the theological norms of justice and emancipation. Others have shifted away from *imago Dei* and incarnation altogether and have engaged *eros* in constructing their body theology (Heyward, 1989, 1994; Althaus-Reid, 2000).

### *Eros*

I now begin the third theme found in the landscape of embodiment theology: *eros*. This is an emerging theme within the field, particularly with postmodern,

poststructuralist and queer theologians. These theologians seek to resurrect and reappropriate the ancient theological discourse of *eros* in an attempt to construct a theology that affirms the erotic nature of the body.

Carter Heyward's work on embodiment seeks to eschew metaphysics by rejecting the body/soul dualism. She turns often to Jewish themes (particularly Buber) to reconstruct a Christian embodiment as erotic and relational. In *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* Heyward joins Audre Lorde in the reclamation of *eros* as an alternative to heteronormative discourses of the human body. Heyward brings a theological lens to this reclamation and offers *eros* as the embodied expression of the human in relationship to God and other – a unified experience of body, mind and spirit (Heyward, 1989). Here *eros* is a profound yearning, a “deep desire for mutuality, body-centered energy channeled through longing and desire” (1994, p. 132). From this perspective the yearning of the sensual body towards another body becomes the primary means by which the divine is experienced.

Her discussion of embodiment as erotic power also engages questions of relational justice. Her earlier work, *Redemption of God*, explored the distinctions between varying kinds of relational power: *exousia* – socially constituted patriarchal power and *dunamis* – inherent self-residing transpersonal power (1982). Within the context of the relational power of *dunamis*, Heyward proposes her framework for erotic power as the “life force” within mutual relationship. Contrary to dominant vernacular uses of erotic, *eros* (by its very nature) compels the human body towards

that which is beautiful and desirable and that which participates in the goodness of God. Ethicists and other feminist theologians quickly raised questions related to boundaries and power, violence against women's bodies and bodily integrity. Heyward countered that by its definition *eros* is inherently a power of right relationship and mutuality expressed in the movement of one body towards another, and that any acts contrary to the "life force" or the goodness of God are contrary to *eros*. Indeed, Heyward seeks to clearly differentiate between sexuality and violence by framing violence as a violation of mutuality and thus, not erotic.

Her reclamation of *eros* and her insistence that erotic power provides the means for divine relationality offers a significant contribution to pastoral theologies of the body, especially her use of the norm of mutuality in relationships. Again I return to the common thread of relationality as I consider Heyward's work. Regardless of whether *imago Dei*, incarnation or *eros* is utilized, most embodiment theologies seem especially interested in bodies in relationship. For L. Graham, Kamitsuka and Nelson relationality is presented in terms of ethics and justice and liberation. For Isherwood and E. Graham and other poststructuralists, relationality is considered to discursively constitute the body itself through language and disciplinary regimes. This suggests a movement of embodiment theologies towards public theology.

One theologian constructing a public theology of *eros* is Marcella Althaus-Reid, who offers a radical reading of embodiment in *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics*. She accesses a wide landscape of sources

from liberationist, feminist and Marxist to postcolonial and queer theories. She begins quite passionately with the embodied lived experiences of poor women in Brazil with edgy and raw narratives in order to do theology from the perspective of the poor. Embodiment for Althaus-Reid is first and foremost a question of human poverty and sexuality. Her contention is that if the everyday lives of people provide the starting point for doing practical, contextual theology, and if poverty and sexuality are embodied experiences of the poor, then theology must be both economic/political *and* sexual. In this way she claims “every theology is always a sexual theology” (2000, p. 4).

Her “indecent” theology argues for “leaving decency” and advocating a “deviant sexual theology for social change.” “Deviancy is a category which can act as a reminder that an economic model, such as theology, is basically a social relationship model, conceptually linked to social science theory and classifications of anatomy and erotic conduct, definitions of nature and needs and desires” (p. 174). For Althaus-Reid, theology cannot separate bodily concerns of food, pleasure, violence, poverty, sex and capitalism, and therefore, all theology is sexual theology. In this way, Althaus-Reid is reclaiming the term “indecent” – a term used by hegemonic and dehumanizing systems of power to discipline bodies – in order to legitimate bodily resistance to those very same hegemonic and dehumanizing systems of power.

She presents the theology of the Virgin Mary as an example. The submission of Mary to God’s will is highly problematic for women in Brazil who face rape and incest in their poor overcrowded living condition, many of whom marry very young

and become pregnant with their first child when they themselves are still children. Althaus-Reid argues Mariology is a sexual theology; it is a narrative of divine insemination and bodily invasion. She writes, “Latin American women are not necessarily the ones to question why a young woman [Mary] needs to fulfill a vocation for accommodating God's desire when God pleases” (2000, p. 39). Given the theologically legitimated objectification of women’s bodies for the pleasure of men, she concludes “the Virgin Mary is a theologically casuistic case presented in feminicide” (p. 39).

Here human embodiment of thousands of young women become not only a praxis-based critique of deconstructing Mariology in Brazil, but bodies themselves become the site of Althaus-Reid’s construction of *all* theology (not just body theology). Eucharist provides another example:

God is what you eat, that fetish of bread and wine. God is what you digest, perspire and excrete from your body. God is the transit of bread and wine in your stomach and bowels. God is the peculiar smell that perspiration takes after drinking the wine of the Mass and the heavy-sweet breath of bread taken on an empty stomach...Every text carries with it a subversive version, and in communion there is an example of intertextuality or intersexuality with God who becomes (transubstantiation or not) our bodies and shares our complex sexualities. (p. 92)

One can identify similarities in this embodiment theology with Isherwood’s incarnation and Heyward’s *eros*, particularly in terms of the body being a site for intimacy between God and humanity. Indeed, several participants named the sensual and/or erotic nature of Eucharist as an important congregational liturgical practice,

which is discussed more in Chapter Six. Yet Althaus-Reid pushes even Heyward's erotic embodiment a bit further to include notions of redemption within pleasure: fetish theology (2006, p. 136). Fetish theology is an inversion of power within sexual/bodily expression, which has the potential to unveil God's love in queer and subversive ways, driven by a sense of urgency for social justice and alternative relations of power (2006, p. 152).

Here is another common thread: human sexuality. More specifically, the operative theological anthropology of human sexuality for each theologian or ethicist shapes their particular use of *imago Dei*, incarnation or *eros*. For example, Larry Graham frames sexuality in terms of relational embodiment of the *imago Dei*; Nelson argues for sexuality as an embodiment of the incarnational christic presence; Heyward claims sexuality is a manifestation of divine *eros*. And Althaus-Reid insists that *all theology* is sexual. Are these not the same arguments couched in different terms? I would argue that they are not – that the nuances of *imago Dei*, incarnation or *eros* really do matter. But the bigger consideration, for me, is one of operative theological anthropologies. There seems to be a growing movement to construct the relationship between bodies and the divine by means of union rather than difference. Isherwood's claim that "the human and the divine dwell in one flesh and that flesh is ours" is a prime example of this move (2004, p. 144). In other words, here is a shift from the old saying that "God is God and we are not," to embodiment theologies which claim the divine is within the human body, or at least found within bodies in relation to other bodies. This shift in theological anthropology of the body transcends



the categories of *imago Dei*, *incarnation* and *eros*, and poses an important factor in consideration of the landscape of embodiment theologies.

The final theologian engaging *eros* is John Blevins, who offers a postmodern and deconstructionist approach to queer pastoral theology. While not specifically focused on embodiment, Blevins, a clinically oriented pastoral theologian, offers a pastoral theology that challenges the “idolatry of Barthian complementarity” of male/female heterosexuality and opens new possibilities for framing *eros* in light of the gay male experience (2005, p. 201). Blevins brings Pseudo-Dionysius into conversation with Barth in order to negate the distinction between *eros* and agape. Pseudo-Dionysius defines *eros* as the quality of love between humanity and God – the passion and desire of God to be in relationship with humanity. Pseudo-Dionysius claims that “human beings participate in overcoming that distance and specifically names *eros* as the quality of love that draws human beings to God” (p. 204). At the same time, *eros* is also the quality of love that draws God to humanity. Blevin’s point here is in part to erase the distinctions between agape and *eros*, but more so to articulate a connection between human beings and the divine in terms of a dynamic interdependence in which erotic passion is mutually present between both humanity and God.

Blevins does so by constructing an incarnational Christology as a God who takes on a human body out of a desire, an *eros*, to know us.

The distinctive Christian belief that God became incarnate in Christ is an act of kenotic self-emptying not so much because of agapaic love but because of erotic desire...For Christians, the desire of God to

know us does not stop with the incarnation; rather it continues in the ongoing revelation of God. At the same time, our meditations as Christians on the incarnation cause us to reflect on the embodied Christ here and now and our present-day meditations on the incarnation are still marked by eros. This theological idea is unsettling because we are dealing with eros between human beings and an embodied God. And embodied eros is a threatening theological idea... (p. 207)

Here Blevins connects pastoral praxis and *eros* with Foucault's discussion of care of the self. To do this Blevins analyzes specific "narratives of sexuality" as presented in case studies of clients and explores the function these narratives play in gay men understanding their own sexuality. Care of the self becomes a spiritual practice: an opportunity and location (or in the words of one of Blevin's clients, a "crucible") for embodied human lives to desire, and to be desired by, God and one other – an "embodied eros that need not be genitally sexual at all" (p. 208). In similar fashion to Heyward, erotic is not necessarily about sexual acts (though all would argue that sexual acts are an expression of *eros*) but is about sexual passion located deeply within the body. Like Foucault, Blevins forefronts care of the self as the grounds for ethical reflection and practice, particularly in pastoral counseling. This is illustrated well in Blevins' "experimental theological method," (as distinct from revised correlational method), which uses the independent variable of ethical practices as a safeguard to correlative methods that have allowed heteronormative theology and psychology to collude in the oppression of gay men.

What is particularly unique to the work of these theologians engaging the theme of *eros* in their constructive body theology is that bodily desire becomes the

primary means by which our passion for God is experienced. Here bodily desire is not only sexual, but includes all bodily desires: thirst, hunger, breath, rest, touch, intimacy. Since all human experience is mediated through the body, it follows that all of our desires for relationality with God are also mediated through the body. This starting point is radically different than *imago Dei* and incarnation in as much as it claims that our bodies – including gender and sexuality – are not merely a reflection or indwelling of the divine, but rather constitutes the very means by which the divine is experienced and made known. At the same time, this grouping of theologians is also equally committed to keeping ethical practices at the forefront of its pastoral work, challenging pastoral practitioners to subvert the dominant cultural metanarratives regarding gender and sexuality. This leads me to wonder how pastoral practices which claim justice and liberation as ethical norms must necessarily involve disruption of, and resistance to, the dominant metanarratives of bodily and sexual normalcy.

### **Towards a Constructive Pastoral Theology of Ambiguous Embodiment**

In this chapter I've been making the case that theologians and ethicists engaging *imago Dei*, incarnation and *eros* each offer important contributions to the discourses of body theology. More importantly, I've considered the contribution these selected theologians offer to the more distinct discussion of how to account for gender and sexual identities that don't fit binary normative categories. As a result, several key questions emerge. How does one reflect theologically on an intersex

body, one that is neither male nor female, or both male and female, in light of these three theological themes? How does one reflect theologically on an androgynous body, which is at different times and different contexts either male or female or both, in light of a theological anthropology that affirms all bodies are created in God's image? How does one reflect theologically on bodies that experience desire and sexual longing with varying gendered bodies at varying times and in varying contexts in light of the Divine *eros*? What might such bodies say about the incarnate relationship between humanity and the divine? And what might such bodies invite in terms of practices of care and justice?

These are the questions that embody the specificity of the more broadly articulated research questions shaping this project, namely *how persons who don't identify within binary constructs of identity "make sense" of their ambiguity and how they understand their experiences of ambiguity in light of their understanding of God*. Moreover, these are the questions that instigated my curiosity to engage in conversation with such fluid and ambiguous persons, and which compelled me to develop the interviews in the first place. In the following three chapters I seek to offer a few answers to these questions – answers as articulated by the participants in this project – in an effort to begin considering how their first-person narratives and self-disclosive theological reflections might contribute to a more nuanced constructive theology of ambiguous embodiment.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FLUID SUBJECTIVITY AND IMAGING GOD

#### Queering Pastoral and Practical Theology

Jeanne Hoeft's recent work, "Gender, Sexism, and Hererosexism" in Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore's edited volume, *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* bemoans the lack of queer practical theologians in the published literature of our field. It is certainly the case that pastoral theologians have considered the social construction of gender within congregational practices (Neuger & Poling, 1997; Miller-McLemore, 1999). It is also the case that gay and lesbian identified pastoral and practical theologians have contributed much to the discipline, especially the work of Joretta Marshall (1997) and Horrace Griffin (2006), though most have tended to do so from an essentialist construction of sexual orientation and with an apologetic concern for inclusion. And while there is a growing number of queer-identified theologians and bible scholars publishing in their respective fields, there remains a dearth of bisexual, trans and queer identified pastoral and practical theologians. Isherwood, Althues-Reid and Blevins are a few exceptions.

Hoeft maintains that practical theology is "well placed" to consider the challenges and contributions of queer theory, primarily because of our methodological commitment to "integration of thought and practice in concrete lived experience" (p. 419). At the end of her chapter she asks several key questions about placing queer theory in conversation with practical theology:

How do people who live at the borders of male/female experience God?

Does a queer God function for a more or less abundant life?

Who benefits from disrupting common sex/gender and sexual orientation distinctions?

How does disrupting these categories make life better for all?

It is my intention to address these questions in the following three chapters.

In this chapter I specifically engage Hoeft's first question, "How do people who live at the borders of male/female experience God?" Taking into account one's experience of God is particularly important in considering the primary research questions of this study, namely, how the relationship between a person's experience of ambiguous and fluid gender identity might contribute to a more nuanced theological anthropology. In this chapter specifically, I seek to consider the narratives presented in individual and group interviews about the ways persons who experience their bodies as ambiguous may understand themselves as created in God's image. Doing so facilitates a reconsideration of prevailing theological anthropologies of *imago Dei*: of being "created by God" and being "a beloved child of God." This chapter is also interested in how persons who embody a fluid, liminal and/or ambiguous identity describe the relationship between the deconstruction of their embedded and operative images of God with their own deconstruction of gender identities and sexuality. In other words, how do participants construct an identity vis-à-vis their operative and embedded theological constructions of the Divine? Or in the parlance of Judith Butler, how do they "give an account" of themselves?

To do this I utilize the pastoral theological spiral presented in Chapter Two. The *human experience in context* is articulated in the transcripts from individual and group interviews and, in this chapter, transcript portions related to God-imaging and fluid sexuality and gender identity are of particular focus. I then *deconstruct* these first person experiences with pastoral *theological* and *adjunct/related* fields: Butler's poststructuralist theories of subjectivity, Kamitsuka's theology of ambiguity and the performative self, Blevin's theological work on *eros*, and psychological theories related to the bisexual/sexual fluid identity. Doing so presents an opportunity to *reconstruct* a theological anthropology of self and God in light of human fluidity.

### **Fluid and dynamic subjectivity**

One common theme that emerged in participant interviews was related to a deconstruction or rejection of the prevailing internalized idea that sexual and gender identity is static, and a reconstruction or preference for an identity which is more fluid and dynamic. Fluidity of identity was also articulated theologically within its relationship to images and constructs of God as dynamic, relational and fluid.

Any time I've made a decision about something that would lend to a non-dynamic or static identity it has ended poorly [slight laugh] or I've found it doesn't work in some way. I think a few years ago I gave up on that and came to acceptance around the dynamic mode, and maybe an acceptance around it through some permission I feel like that was given through theological discovery...God doesn't actually expect me to be static. (Seth)

Here Seth, who identifies as fluid and genderqueer, is making a claim of theological anthropology, namely, that identity is dynamic – not static – and that dynamic, fluid identity is God’s intention and expectation for Seth (and, perhaps by extension, all humanity). This claim raises considerable concerns related to personhood and human subjectivity (which we’ll explore later in this chapter). In response to this claim I asked Seth, “Are there things that the world of theology offers that you find helpful or more liberating in terms of your own fluid movement?”

Yeah, I mean, right from the beginning of my discovery around the option in the world of queerness and genderqueerness the first place that I ever experienced anyone saying that I could be something other than the binaries that I’ve grown up with my whole life were through the context of the [scripture] text. And specifically, the poetic books and the discovery in there around gender and what the original text does around pronouns – the way the original text expresses around who is in relation with whom and what that looks like. It was literally through the discovery of that text that I felt the first permission ever given...I think I continue to carry with me Song of Solomon / Song of Songs and some thematic pieces around the point of the relationship with God is *relationship*. That is something that has stayed with me through whatever, and I even think that I always come back to that when a lot of other things feel lost. (Seth)

Here Seth is correlating an experience of deconstructing images of God through the pronouns in the poetic texts with an experience of deconstructing gender in Seth’s own life. Indeed, an awareness of the fluid gender of God in the text became the opportunity in which Seth “felt the first permission ever given” to explore fluid gender identity. Through this process, Seth identified a shift in thinking about God from a personified to a more relational construct. Seth continues:



So in the deconstruction of gender around God I was also...it's not so established. And actually there are ways that God interacts with all of us through different gender expressions and different relational interactions. And that perhaps there is a purpose also in us having that kind of fluidity in our lives...So I think to me the piece around exploding God's gender from a rigid binary also exploded the options around relationship and partnership and how those things aren't actually just options but are critical parts of our growth and understanding of ourselves in the world by our relationships with others. (Seth)

Just as Seth “exploded” the rigid binary of gender as it relates to God, Seth is also exploding the rigid binary of Seth’s own gender identity. In full disclosure, this correlation between deconstructing God images and deconstructing gender identity was a curiosity I specifically brought to the interviews. In my pastoral work, many transgender persons have shared with me a similar correlation between the exploration of feminine and masculine metaphors for God and their exploration and transition from one gender identity to another. However, I remained unsure whether a similar correlation existed with persons who embody a fluid gender identity (rather than transgender experience of transitioning from one binary gender identity to another). Here the *human experience* of fluid gender identity is *deconstructed* with non-anthropomorphic and relational theological discourses of *imago Dei* in order to *reconstruct* an image of God that is gender fluid. Doing so legitimates the human experience of fluidity (e.g., embodied *practices* of gender), and the spiral continues.

Moreover, Seth’s deconstruction of Seth’s operative images of God results in not only a reconstruction of God in more relational, rather than anthropomorphic terms, but also in Seth’s relationship with others. This is illustrated in Seth’s

theological claim that “God interacts with all of us through different gender expressions and different relational interactions,” which is mirrored in different gender expressions and relational interactions in human relationships, especially polyamory (discussed later).

### *Performative Self*

If one’s identity is fluid and dynamic, and if one’s gender and sexual expression is theologically grounded in a dynamic, relational construction of God, how then do we account for the self and subjectivity? To explore this we return to Judith Butler’s proposition that the subject is not constituted by the essential “self,” but rather is a performative account of subjectivity. Butler’s earlier work in *Gender Trouble* maintained a rejection of any categories of selfhood, agency and autonomy precisely because we are discursively and relationally constituted. This is an account of a person that does not rely upon the transcendental subject.

Matter is repeatedly produced through performativity, that which brings into being or enacts that which is named, and so marks the constitutive or productive power of discourse...Crucially, performativity is not a singular act, but rather a reiteration of acts. (Butler, 1990, p. 96)

This is the critical link for Butler’s theory of body and the “I.” She offers the metaphor of performativity not only for her theory of gender, but for the constitution of the subject. The “I” is performed both in as much as it enacts itself discursively, but also in as much as it responds to the normative categories of the disciplinary regime (e.g., binary categories of sex and gender). While narrative constitution of the

subject is clearly performative, for Butler the body likewise constitutes the subjective “I.” The body performs exposure in response to the subjugation of norms. In this sense, relational power dynamics take place upon the body as a landscape – landscape upon which norms and discourses are applied. As Seth’s description of gendered bodily performance suggests, bodies are not materially static, they are discursively constituted and are cultural landscapes upon which discourses inscribe meaning and identity.

The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene...there is no 'being' behind doing, effecting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything. (Butler, 1990, p. 25)

In this sense, the relationship between language, meaning and subjectivity are critical components of identity formation. Here subject engages both language and body to articulate and constitute one’s reality. We will see this later with Seth’s comments regarding the tension between having a binary sexed body, while identifying as genderqueer. This illustrates that both language and body exist prior to the existence of subjectivity, and facilitate the parameters of the concept of the self and human reality.

This claim is particularly important for persons who are constructing fluid gender identities within theological discourses because such discourses reify and represent the disciplinary regimes of binary sex and gender that constitute the “cultural landscape” in which gender is performed. In other words, when Seth deconstructs God’s gender as a parallel process to deconstructing Seth’s own gender identity, and

when Seth performs a queer gender in fluid and ambiguous ways, Seth is rejecting the ontological claim of gender. At the same time, gender performativity is an embodied practice, which means that how the body performs or presents in bodily aesthetics – in bodily “deeds” – is important.

Gender performativity as it relates to bodily aesthetics, disciplinary discourses and God imaging was also identified in the interview with Rae. Rae identifies as queer and presents gender in fluid ways, depending on context and relationship. Rae mentioned being created by God and I asked Rae to explain in more detail what that phrase means:

Yeah, I guess created [by God] has the connotation that God created me which I would say, yes I think so. Also I think inherently I have sort of, I have...I'm very opinionated and yet I can't really say that that's inherent. You can't really pick apart what of that...you know my dad is always telling me you can do whatever you want – having two older brothers so having to stand up for myself in ways that some girls would not have had to – so I can't really parse apart what's created versus socialized. (Rae)

Here Rae is identifying a challenge for poststructuralist theology, namely, the tension between the theological claim of being created by God while also taking into account gender socialization and normative discourses. Rae continues by describing experiences of coming to awareness around socialized gender performativity such as wearing makeup and hair extensions, and the process of presenting gender in more disruptive ways:

I think [gender] presentation is tied to both recognizing that that was not being sort of authentic to my true self because [makeup and hair extensions] was for someone else. And because I think as far as the

long-hair, yeah, that was a socially constructed idea of what a woman should look like. So in my intellectual coming-out process and desire to disrupt a lot of social norms my presentation a lot of times is sort of enacting that desire to disrupt. So shaving the sides of my head. I wear a tie occasionally just to say, to bring up the arbitrariness of how what we're taught to wear. And I think that move can make a lot of people uncomfortable because we deal really well when people fit into boxes...(Rae)

Here Rae is describing Butler's claim that there is no ontological status of the body separate from disciplinary regimes of gender. The materiality of the body does exist – chromosomes and organs and physical characteristics – but such "bodily facts" do not constitute essential conclusions about gender (Butler, 1990, p.11). Why? Because the body is always performing discursively with and against norms constructed by disciplinary regimes. Any claim we make about the body is not merely descriptive but functions performatively, because the materiality of the body and socio-symbolic experiences of reality (i.e. aesthetics) are inescapably co-constructed by discourses.

This is illustrated with Rae's description of "presenting" with a shaved head or tie or other aesthetic enactments that seek to disrupt the binary discourses regarding gender. Yet Rae's gender presentation is fluid, dynamic and changes over time. In this case, Rae's performative subjectivity (both narratively and embodied) is contextual and relational. There are some contexts in which Rae "presents" more male and other contexts in which Rae "presents" more female, and other contexts in which Rae "presents" androgynous. But in all of those cases, Rae's gender presentation performs its subjectivity discursively with a normative gaze that demands particular enactments of gendered performativity. In other words, even my

descriptions above as “more male” or “more female” inherently assumes a normative discourse of aesthetic criteria for what constitutes “male” and “female” in the first place – the “recognizability” dynamic discussed in Chapter 2.

Butler is particularly interested in relationships of power related to naming *difference* – difference between “male” and “female,” for example. These terms, “male” and “female,” are not ontologically objective terms. Nor are they mere categories of social construction. “Male” is constructed as norm in our heteropatriarchal milieu and “female” is constructed as a category of alterity, of otherness. Indeed, heteropatriarchal theological discourses on God imaging illustrate this point well. God is ontologically male: the norm. Feminine images for God: the other<sup>16</sup>.

#### *God's beloved*

So far I've been exploring how the *human experience* of gender and sexual fluidity is *deconstructed* by poststructuralist and theological discourses, and how such experiences correlate with participants' *reconstructive* endeavors regarding their theological claims about God. This illustrates how these first person narratives are beginning to contribute to a greater understanding regarding the relationship between a person's experience of ambiguous and fluid gender identity, and how those

---

<sup>16</sup> Though beyond the scope of this study, it is worth noting the intense debate occurring between the radical feminist movement and the transgender/transsexual community. Two interesting examples of how gender identify vis-à-vis ontological gender norms plays out in genderqueer communities are: 1) the tense debate about whether transwomen may participate in feminist, women's only events (Kaveney, 2012); and 2) the lesbian-feminist critique that transsexuals reproduce oppressive patriarchal gender roles and sex reassignment surgery is the ultimate mysognist betrayal of feminist principles (Jeffereys, 2005).

experiences might contribute to a more nuanced theological anthropology of embodiment.

Another theme that emerged in the interviews, as it relates to fluid, ambiguous and queer identity, was being created in God's image. Rae mentioned being created by God briefly, but here Luke, who identifies as queer and a transman, discusses the relationship between a liminal gender and sexual identity vis-à-vis a (more primary) identity as *God's beloved*.

I think another place where I've definitely experienced God and where I've needed it – that's been a sanctuary to me – is the image of God...and being God's creature. And not being self-created. Being God's beloved kid is the center of my identity. And so for that to be my primary identity and for everything else, including my transition [as a transman] to be secondary to that. I think that has been kind of the thing that's held everything together. Because it's chaotic to go through transition but it's been a really awesome experience in terms of learning the importance of that being the center of who I am. And everything else being important and I can't run away from it so it's important that I follow my calling in terms of gender. (Luke)

Here Luke is placing a primacy on his identity as “God's beloved kid” over and above his liminal identity as a transman or as queer. In fact, the identity as God's beloved has “held everything together” through his deconstructing exploration of gender and sexuality, and his decision to transition.

Here we note Luke offering a nuanced hermeneutic for understanding the ways *imago Dei* is reflected in ambiguous gender, particularly gender performative identity within Christian communities. Again, as poststructuralist theory suggests, the self is constituted by means of multiple performative acts in relation to normative discourses. Luke's description of being created in the *imago Dei*, as God's beloved

kid, maintains a theological claim which supports and grounds Luke's embodied gender liminality and sexual fluidity. Here I'm suggesting that the *imago Dei* is reflected in Luke's liminal and fluid bodily performativity.

During the group interview I asked, "What's the relationship between the way that you image God and the way that you construct your own identities? Are those interconnected?" Luke continued his theological reflection on *imago Dei*:

For me it's really meaningful that the Bible talks about us as being created in the image of God because for me, there's a direct impact of the way that I image God which impacts the ways that I'm able to image myself... I found it very liberating to explore different aspects of a gender-liminal-and-a-strongly-gendered-at-different-times God.  
(Luke)

The dilemma, however, is that we live in and construct meaning around our bodies – and our bodies in community – in ways that cannot be separated from normalizing discourses of power which categorize, normalize and/or problematize our bodies in the first place. The theological claim that humanity is created in God's image – and that fluid, liminal and ambiguous bodies and identities are beloved – cannot be separated from the discourses that inscribe meaning upon our bodies in the first place.

As I discussed in Chapter Three, Kamitsuka's work *Feminist Theology and the Challenge of Difference* argues that if all aspects of human performativity are a reflection of who God is, then any discursive relationship that excludes some bodies as "other" and not reflective of God's image would render an incomplete *imago* (2007). In this sense, Luke's experiences affirm poststructuralist theology's claim that the *imago Dei* is reflective of a more fluid and dynamic Divine precisely because of



Luke's own liminal embodiment. This claim prophetically challenges Christian discourses to attend to the ways Christian communities become disciplinary regimes of truth that discursively constitute religious selfhood only in binary terms. In other words, the life experiences of persons like Luke, who live an ambiguous embodiment, demands from pastoral theologians and the church to construct a more nuanced, more fluid theological anthropology of the human. And, by extension, a more nuanced and complete theological anthropology of the *imago*.

### *Calling*

Luke also articulates his understanding of gender in terms of calling, rather than essential identity. Indeed, even if Luke were to claim an essential identity it would be as God's beloved kid – not as man, transman, queer, or even liminal. But in our conversation I became curious about the primacy of his beloved identity and his comment that gender is a calling. I asked him,

Jason: Your belovedness, a beloved child of God – I think God's beloved kid is what you said – in some sense it sounds like that's really foundational for you in terms of identity. Do I have that right?

Luke: Yeah. To me I can't imagine living my life the last couple years [through transition] without that as the center. Because otherwise there would be nothing, there would just be this kind of... I appreciate the liminal and I believe that it has a valuable place but I don't think that it's ever completely the center of my identity. We're always becoming... we're always self-creating but we're always created. Otherwise I would just end up being my own God and that just doesn't work.

I think a lot of my experiences have been from the negative experiences of queer theory and queer community. Or at least having been in it enough where I've seen things that I feel are negative coming

out of it and to feel a deep sense of tragedy over that. But to also have seen and wanted not to fall into the same traps and some of those traps are like being very self-righteous, being very self... viewing this whole thing as some radical experiment and formulating new identities and kind of what life looks like when you start living into that because I don't think that's what it's about. (Luke)

My field notes indicate that my reaction to Luke's comment here was "humility."

There seems to be a humility to how Luke is reflecting theologically on his own sense of identity and calling which is counter-cultural to prevailing discourses in queer theory, discourses which Luke describes as self-righteous or solipsistic. The primacy of one's identity in relationship to God seems to be an emerging theme in other interviews as well. Mary, who identifies as a woman and uses words such as "androgynous," "shape shifter" and "bisexual" to further describe her identity, claims the primacy of "connection with Spirit" over all other identities. Paul, who identifies as a bi man, describes the primacy as "being created by God just the way I am," over his bi and male identities. Seth describes the primacy of "being in relationship" with God over queer identity.

These interviews seem to suggest that persons constructing fluid, liminal or ambiguous identities, and who are actively engaging Christian theological discourses and communities, are constructing such identities in light of their operative theological constructions of God. This is a notable difference in comparison to the identity construction practices of the queer community generally. One critically important difference that seems to emerge from this study is the contrast between queer-identified persons who are actively engaged in Christian community vis-à-vis

queer-identified person who are not. Namely, that persons' relationships to God, or operative images of God, seem to play a primary factor in their construction of gender and sexual identities. The most common reference in this regard was being "created" by God. As I thought may be the case prior to this study, there was also a dynamic, fluid hermeneutic to engaging this theological claim:

I think that is the irony of [being created in] the image of God. Because God created. But the image...you can also interpret the image of God within us is this desire to create. Right? And so as soon as we create something we are participating in our image so we are responding to a call but were also doing something; we're being proactive. And that's why I like the gifts thing [i.e., gender and sexuality as gifts] because it's call in the sense that it's a gift. It's not something that I just randomly picked but at the same time, it's something that I have to use. It's something that I have to be a steward of. It's something that I have to be responsive to. (Luke)

Here I became very curious about responsivity to God and how gender and sexuality play a role in that, particularly ideas around *eros* and erotic theology. Yet, I was hesitant to introduce these ideas because I wasn't sure if Luke was familiar with this theological discourse. Luke seems to be familiar with queer theory and queer theology, and so I asked:

Jason: What you just said right there raises this question for me in queer theology around the erotic or eros...this idea that God is luring and that we are responding... I don't want to put words into your mouth but this idea of the luring, the enticing God...

Luke: [interrupting me] Yeah, the seductive God!

Jason: Right the seductive God

Luke: I love sexual theology. I love the images that come out of it and I love that God can both be that. Our role as creatures can be both

passive and active. So in the classic sense of male and female...not that I believe that things are...whatever... but God can be seductive like women are traditionally pictured as being seductive and yet God can also be the bridegroom and can be incredibly, terrifyingly persistent in pursual of us. So I think there's both. And I think the truth there is that in any erotic, in any remotely healthy erotic relationship, there's always both. It's this constant. I don't even know if it's co-creator as much as this fertility, this *eros*, this pursual of one another that always, always reproduces something. Always creates something and is always doing something new. (Luke)

Here we consider theologians working in the field of *eros* and the erotic, such as Carter Heyward and Rita Nakashima Brock. Brock's "Christology of erotic power" in her text *Journeys by Heart* is suggestive of Luke's narrative, something Brock describes as the "power of our primal interrelatedness" (1988, p. 26). We'll explore questions of the erotic in liturgical practices in Chapter Six, but germane to our discussion here of God-imaging and identity, we turn to one of the few queer pastoral theologians engaging *eros*, John Blevins (2005).

In Chapter Two we reviewed Blevins' postmodern and deconstructionist approach to queer pastoral theology. Blevins uses Pseudo-Dionysius' definition of *eros* as the quality of love between humanity and God – the passion and desire of God to be in relationship with humanity – in order to articulate a connection between human beings and the divine in terms of a dynamic interdependence through erotic passion. Yet the *eros* love in the relationship between God and humanity goes both ways: *eros* draws human beings to God, draws God to humans. The incarnational Christology Blevins articulates – a God who takes on a human body out of a desire, an *eros*, to know us – is illustrated in Luke's own descriptions of his relationship with

God. “God can be seductive like women are traditionally pictured as being seductive and yet God can also be the bridegroom and can be incredibly, terrifyingly persistent in pursuit of us. So I think there's both.”

The unique contribution that theological discourses on *eros* offers constructive body theology is that bodily desire becomes the means by which our passion for God is experienced. This starting point is radically different than *imago Dei* and incarnation – it is, in the words of Luke, a “calling,” a “luring.”

### *God's Unconditional Love*

I began with how imaging God using dynamic, relational and fluid constructions intersected with participants' own life experiences of deconstructing gender and sexuality, especially within disciplinary regimes of binary gender. I then explored identity construction as God's beloved, and the emerging suggestion that participants seem to place primacy on their theological identity (e.g., “God's beloved kid”) over other identities (e.g., liminal, genderqueer, bi) I turned briefly to Kamitsuka's work on erotic theology and ambiguity. I now continue in the relational theme as we consider the interviews of participants who construct their fluid, liminal and ambiguous identities within the theological construct of God's unconditional love.

In our conversation, Phyllis reflected theologically on the relationship between living in “straddling” and “in-between” places – especially as it relates to both gender and sexuality – and Phyllis' desire to feel acceptance and love. For many

years Phyllis has been involved with online communities of those who identify as bisexual and those who identify as genderqueer or gender androgynous.

Phyllis: There's always been people who don't accept me. That's...I mean...so the online folks...me being bi was part of, I don't know, my self-definition in a way. It does mean that some of the gay folks don't accept me as really gay. But I'm kinda used to that.

Jason: You're used to that?

Phyllis: Yeah, I don't know I'm like (long pause) because I don't fit their definition. And I know that I don't fit a number of people's definition of being Christian. I know that I don't fit a number of people's definition of being a woman. I know I don't fit a lot of people's definition of being male. But that's okay in a lot of ways. Because you were asking about how Christianity supports me where I am. And that's the whole thing of God loves me as I am. And made me for a certain reason. And sometimes I can't fathom it. But accepting how I am and how I'm built and who I love is important.

Jason: And all of those are gifts from God?

Phyllis: Yes totally.

Jason: Your sense of even being in this in-between life in these multiple ways...all that is a gift?

Phyllis: Yes entirely. And I think He did it for a reason. Or She.

Jason: God.

Phyllis: Right, for a reason. So I can help people to open up to the other children of God.

Phyllis is identifying two important considerations in our discussion of identity in pastoral theology: first, Phyllis is naming an important theological claim used by many theologians in the gay and lesbian liberation movements, namely, that God created me this way and loves me “just the way I am;” second, Phyllis has identified a purpose for being created as a person who embodies an “in-between” location. In this

case, “I think [God] did it for a reason...So I can help people to open up to the other children of God.”

### **Kamitsuka and Performative Imago Dei**

As we engage these narratives regarding being created and loved by God, let us return to poststructuralist theology and Butler’s performativity of gender, sex and sexuality to re-consider theological discourses on the *imago Dei*. Kamitsuka proposes a poststructuralist theological argument that if one maintains that the self is constituted in the context of multiple performative acts in relation to cultural discourses (which is Butler’s and other poststructuralist theorists’ argument), then the image of God would be constituted by godly performativity in every discursive relation. “To say that our humanity is created in God’s image means that our performativity has the possibility of being ‘an icon of who God is’” (2007, p. 79). If all aspects of human performativity (including gender, sex, and sexuality) can be iconic of who God is, then excluding any discursive relation from what is seen as reflecting God’s image would render an incomplete *imago*. Thus, persons whose discursive relationship with binary regimes of gender and sexuality are fluid and dynamic in their performativity, it reasons that such persons are, in effect, performing a fluid and dynamic image of God.

Moreover, such performativity occurs within the ethos and context of a faith community’s normative (including both embedded and reflective) theological constructs of the *imago Dei*. In other words, fluid performativity of the image of God

also occurs within disciplinary regimes that seek to reify heteropatriarchal, binary constructs of God. “As the believer cooperates with or resists aspects of these community-specific discursive conventions, they become constitutive of her religious selfhood, so that she is performatively constituted in part by relations of power (and grace, the theologian will want to add) with the discourse of creation of the image of God” (2007, p. 80). Here Kamitsuka is making an anthro-theological claim that selfhood “performatively deconstructs the notion that to be created in the image of God means having been given some putatively natural femaleness (or maleness); rather, femaleness is seen as a performed effect of discourse and not the cause of natural desire for its opposite (maleness)” (2007, p. 81). In this poststructuralist reformulation of the *imago Dei*, human sexuality is affirmed as part of what it means to be created in the image of God. Furthermore, humans, as embodied beings, have the possibility of godly performativity in the way we negotiate our gender, sex and sexuality – even if in fluid, ambiguous and liminal ways.

Indeed, Phyllis’ explanation of being one who embodies an “in-between” location and, by extension, a fluid or liminal identity, seems to suggest something about her understanding of what it means to be created in the image of God, but that the performativity of such identity then suggests something about the fluid, ambiguous and liminal nature of God. This echoes other participants’ comments, particularly Seth and Luke’s correlation with non-anthropomorphic and fluid images for God. As we begin to conclude our discussion of the relationship between God-imaging and construction of the self and identity, I turn to one additional interview



that also correlated a fluid identity with a more mystical construction of the Divine. Mary described experiences at an annual interfaith spirituality retreat as very embodied and spacious in terms of fluid sexuality and gender. The specifics of this retreat are explored in more detail in Chapter Six as part of the discussion of congregational practices, but for our purposes here Mary describes returning from these retreats and the intense connection she felt with Spirit:

I told you about this epiphany when I finally had the sense that here comes God and I'm home, I belong somewhere. I'm this spirit that has this connection and I'm not adrift all on my own like I thought I was. But I'm always aware of not belonging and of always being on the outside. I'm not a Jew. I'm not a Catholic although I go to [a catholic church in Colorado] with Sister. I'm not gay. I'm not straight. And yet it's okay. I'm here. And if I'm connected to Spirit I'm fine. But it's that thing of how do I stay connected and on the path and not feel alone or lacking. (Mary)

Here Mary is describing her fluid identity vis-à-vis a theological construction of the Divine as “connected to Spirit.” Mary is asking a critically important existential question, namely, how does one stay connected and on the path and not feel alone or lacking? This suggests something poignant about the theological metaphor of journey, particularly as it relates to sexual fluidity. It may be helpful here to engage some of the literature on sexual fluidity, thus I turn momentarily to discourses related to the “bisexual” experience.

### **Bisexual Experience**

Bisexuality is difficult to define. Although the word “bisexuality” is etymologically contingent upon attraction to two genders, many bisexuals are highly

critical of the binary construct of sexuality the term implies. There is no monolithic bisexual experience: some remain emotionally attracted and/or partnered with one gender while engaging in sexual intimacy with partners of the other; some are attracted to and engage in sexual intimacy with any gender; some remain in monogamous relationships but remain attracted to others whose gender is different than their partner's; some view sex and gender as irrelevant. "Bisexual culture tends to reject binaries in favor of spectrums, grids, or metaphors of fluidity, escape, and transgression. Whereas queer theorists frequently use the image of crossing borders, and admiring those who do, bisexuality tends to use the image of homelessness" (Robinson, 2002).

We see this metaphor of homelessness both in Mary's comments about being "adrift," "not belonging" and "always being on the outside."

Always being the other. Always being different. And even at this [gay and lesbian spiritual] gathering, when I organized it...I said this year we're going to have a bi [component]. And they said whatever for? I said for the bisexuals. Oh, we don't have any bisexuals. And I said I'm bisexual. And the woman from [a town in Colorado], who was a therapist lesbian, she would not hear that...There's no one who's bisexual. I'm bisexual! [They] never could hear it. (Mary)

Here Mary moved beyond the homeless metaphor which suggests persons who identify as bisexual don't belong or have a place – to an experience of being invisible, a non-person. The therapist lesbian described in Mary's account, along with the prevailing ethos of the gathering, "could not hear" that she identified as bisexual. Attempts to explicate the cognitive dissonance of the therapist lesbian in Mary's account is mere speculation, this description does illustrate a common theme among

participants who identify as bisexual, namely that they generally do not feel acceptance and/or “at home” in neither the straight nor gay/lesbian communities.

We note this in Paul’s comment, “The gay community thinks I’m just sitting the fence. And the straight community is threatened by me and thinks I’m incapable of being faithful. I don’t seem to fit in anywhere.” Mary says, “So yeah, the bisexual, the one who everyone likes to hate. The queers don’t like us. The straights don’t like us.” We also read this in Phyllis’ comments that “some of the gay folks don’t accept me as really gay. But I’m kinda used to that.” Mary, Paul and Phyllis identify as bisexual, rather than queer, and their comments illustrate several important characteristics common to many bisexual identified persons: 1) the role of community and social relationships; 2) the struggle to construct self-identity(ies) particularly in terms of sexual identity politics; and 3) the liminal experience of not fitting in with either straight or gay/lesbian communities.

Indeed, articulating a definition of bisexuality that takes into account the wide range of experiences is challenging; similarly, it is a challenging discipline as a bisexual queer pastoral theologian to resist using my own subjective experience of fluid sexuality as the only hermeneutical lens through which these life narratives might be read.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, several theorists attempted to construct models of the bisexual experience. Some theorists of sexuality focused on behavior rather than identity. Kinsey developed his 0 to 6 point scale of human sexuality based upon behavior of study participants. While significant critiques to his work abound, it is

important for the discussion here to acknowledge that Kinsey's work proposed an entirely new paradigm to understanding sexuality: relying upon a spectrum of sexual experiences rather than a binary of heterosexual and homosexual (Kinsey, 1948). That said, Kinsey's criteria for sexual identity were still based upon behavior, rather than self identity.

What if one is attracted to someone but does not express one's attraction in sexual behavior? What if one identifies as bisexual but never engages in sexual intimacy with anyone? In response to these questions, Klein developed the Sexual Orientation Grid, which included additional criteria: sexual attraction, behavior, fantasies, emotional preference, social preference, lifestyle and self-identification (Klein, 1993). The Klein grid was used to categorize persons using a numerical scale from 1 (straight) to 4 (bisexual) to 7 (gay or lesbian) for each of these criteria. While more nuanced than Kinsey's scale, the Klein grid did not take into account variations in attraction to different genders. Thus, Storms developed another sexuality framework that scaled a person's attraction to men (ATM) and attraction to women (ATW) independently. Thus, a heterosexual man would score higher on the ATW and lower on the ATM, while a bisexual women would score both high on ATW and ATM (or equally medium on both), while an asexual person would score low on both ATW and ATM (Storms, 1979).

Despite the frameworks, it remains difficult to account for varieties in human sexuality when the variables used for constructing sexuality (e.g., attraction, gender, behavior, identity, etc). do not remain constant. For example, must one engage in

sexual activity with both sexes to assume a bisexual identity? What if a person has sexual or affectional desires for both sexes but does not act on them? What if a person is involved in a monogamous relationship with a same-gender partner, but had a previous heterosexual relationships (Burleson, 2005, p. 42)? For our purposes here, Firestein's definition of bisexual may prove most helpful. Bisexuality is:

pertaining to one's experience of erotic, emotional, and sexual attraction to persons of more than one gender. Such individuals may identify as a bisexual, homosexual, lesbian, gay, heterosexual, transgendered, or transsexual or may choose not to label at all...Bisexuality here is defined as the capacity, regardless of the sexual identity label one chooses, to love and sexually desire both same and other-gendered individuals. (Firestein, 1996, pP. xix-xx)

In other words, bisexuality is the *capacity* to experience emotional or sexual desire to any gender, a capacity which may change over time or which may be embodied differently in different relationships.

I don't identify as gay. I identify as queer. And I think that initial sort of wanting to be with women, I wanted to be gay. And so I wanted to attract, you know, these types of people who presented in that way. And identifying as queer for me is different in sexual orientation and gender performance because I'm not opposed to...[pause]...I would date someone with a penis. That doesn't really bother me as much because...well it's more about how someone both presents and maybe looks-wise, as well. I'm more attracted to women but sort of presenting in this more androgynous sort of way is much more attractive to me. So the attraction comes because I can see those people who are not just trying to find another woman but they're trying to sort of mess with things in the same way that I am. In a certain sense in how they're presenting maybe I can guess some of their politics around gender and even more than that. (Rae)

While Rae identifies as queer rather than bisexual, the description of fluid sexuality is illustrative for our conversation on bisexuality. Here we identify the intersection of

Rae's capacity for emotional and sexual desire with behavior and identity, which does change over time, particularly in response to the gender presentation of the person whom Rae finds attractive. Rae's experience poses a significant challenge to prevailing discourses in the gay and lesbian liberation movement because it critiques fixed sexuality orientation. Indeed sexuality fluidity and bisexuality challenge prevailing theories of monosexism by critiquing the assumption that sexual orientation is naturally fixated on one easily identifiable sex and is static over time (Robinson, 2002).

This also poses an epistemological challenge to essentialist constructions of sexual orientation because it implies choice, rather than an inherent nature of one's "true" self. This presents a dilemma for the contemporary gay and lesbian liberation movement, which has sought human and civil rights as a legally protected class based upon essentialist constructions of sexual orientation. Moreover, this construction of sexual orientation has also dominated the theological arguments of LGBTQ-affirming movements within the churches – arguing that sexual orientation is immutable, unchangeable, and persons were "born this way."

Yet the argument for choice and fluidity in the bisexual experience is not without its liabilities. If bisexual persons are equally attracted to persons of any gender, then orthodox perspectives argue they should choose the "normal" or "moral" option of an opposite-gender partner (Siker, 2007). And if sexual orientation is fluid and unfixed, then supporters of reparative therapy can argue for the conversion of homosexuals by using a similar claim. This has contributed to gay and lesbian

communities' criticism of bisexuals either with assertions that bisexuals are "riding the fence," "going through a phase," or "afraid to come totally out of the closet."

I don't feel welcome in the gay community...I'm active in leadership in [a large gay organization] but I feel like most of the gay and lesbian people I work with think I'm using 'heterosexual privilege' because I'm in a relationship with a woman. They have no idea how difficult it is to be in a relationship with a woman but still try to maintain a bisexual identity. And, in fact, their rejection of me as a bi person is no different than straight people telling gay people that they're not 'really' gay. (Paul)

This echoes the earlier metaphor of homeless that we read in Mary's account to describe her bisexual experience. It also presents a rich point of connection between theological metaphors of exodus, sojourner, aliens in a strange land, lost sheep, and wandering in the desert.

The embodied experience of fluid sexuality presents a critique to the binary construct of sexual orientation, namely heterosexuality and homosexuality. Indeed, there is far more variability and fluidity in many people's sexual experiences (i.e. attraction, fantasy, intimacy, identity) than most theoretical notions tend to provide. "The tendency is to deny the legitimacy of one's erotic responsiveness to either males, or females; thereby, one assumes that all people are either basically heterosexual or homosexual" (Paul, 2000, p. 11). In this way, fluid sexuality presents an ambiguous embodiment because it transcends and transgresses binary categories found in normative discourses on embodiment and human sexuality.

As previously mentioned, fluid sexuality is experienced within the context of heteronormative and homonormative disciplinary discourses, which results in the

oppression often named as “biphobia.” At the same time, biphobia occurs within other interlocking systems of oppression beyond homophobia and heterosexism, especially gender and race. Burleson makes the point that bisexual women face two burdens that bisexual men do not: “First, bi women are accused of bringing sexually transmitted infections (STI’s) to the lesbian community. Second, bi women have been accused of being ‘traitors to feminism’” (2005, p. 24). Indeed, the legacy of Adrienne Rich’s “compulsive heterosexism” continues to influence the ways in which bi women have been received by the wider feminist movement (1980).

Relying heavily on the work of Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler, Monro proposes a poststructuralist theological methodology in her work *Resurrecting Erotic Transgression: Subjecting Ambiguity in Theology*, which frames subjecting ambiguity as the “bringing into discourse or human communication, and therefore into theology and Christian community, an adequate recognition of the multiplicity of human language and identity” (2006, p. 26). This recognition comes from a sustained attention to the “otherness” or alterity of language and subjectivity, which opens up multiple and ambiguous discourses of identity. Ambiguity, therefore, is the means by which embodied persons who are gazed upon as “other” might perform their identities critically or subversively (*lit.* changing from underneath) within normalizing discourses.

It seems that embracing an ambiguous christology may facilitate a liberating experience of affirmation and increased self-worth for persons who tend to be subjugated by heteronormative and homonormative discourses within and outside of



the church (explored in more detail in Chapter Five). In other words, identification with a God or Christ or Savior that encompasses the fluidity of bisexual persons may present powerful opportunities for emancipation and healing. In this way the church has a rich opportunity to remind bisexual persons that they have not only been created in the image of God, but that the God image in which they've been created is especially fluid and dynamic. This is certainly the argument Monroe puts forth in her "Ambiguous Christ." We also see this in Goss's construction of the "Queer Christ" (2002) Althaus-Reid's "Bi/Trans Christ," which opens up the possibility of queer persons imaging their own embodiment in light of a Christ who is equally fluid and transgressive (2000; 2006). (These christological formulations are explored in more detail in Chapter Five).

Just as some gay/lesbian liberation theologians seek to bring a gay/lesbian hermeneutic to scripture or theological discourse to suggest, for example, that Jesus was gay and the "beloved" disciple was his male partner, so too bisexual theologians employ fluid embodiment as a primary hermeneutic. While feminist theologians resurrected and articulated a feminine Christ, and African American theologians a Black Christ, and Liberation theologians a poor-identified Christ, so too bisexual persons are constructing a fluid and transcending Christ – a Christ that transgresses by its very nature the binary hetero and homonormative constructs of sexuality.

Here several of the participants in this project are offering a theological reflection on how their own unconventional and anti-conventional lived embodiment connects with unconventional and anti-conventional constructions and images of

God. In this sense the participants in this study are turning the normative gaze and disciplinary regimes of *differance* on their head by reappropriating the narrative of a “different” God. Indeed, the bisexual or sexual fluid hermeneutic begins with transgressive experience: people who live in liminal spaces beyond binary categories read their life experience into the narratives of the faith and construct a theology that mirrors the liminality of their lives.

Bisexual and sexually fluid participants in this study present a disruption to hetero-normative and homo-normative disciplinary regimes (especially within the churches) by their very lives and thus, these life narratives represent rich occasions for constructive and public theology. Similar to transgender and intersex narratives that disrupt binary constructions of gender, fluid sexuality narratives – by their very telling – necessarily challenge dominant binary theologian discourse on sexuality.

### **Towards a Constructive Pastoral Theology of Ambiguous Embodiment**

The two primary research questions in this project are interested in identifying the theological themes, resources or metaphors participants utilize in the construction of their fluid identities and how such constructive theologies might be used to resist binary normalizing discourses. In this chapter I’ve focused primarily on the former question: the theological themes, resources and metaphors utilized in the construction of fluid and ambiguous identities. I’ve also considered how the narratives of fluid subjectivity and gender performativity relate to theological discourses on God-imagining, *imago Dei* and unconditional love. I also placed psychological theories of

fluid sexual orientation in conversation with the first person accounts of participants' own experiences of bisexual and queer sexual identities. Now I will conclude this chapter on fluid subjectivity and imaging God with a brief portion of my conversation with Seth in which we explore the relationship between queer identity and one's relationship to God.

Jason: I'm sitting with how genderqueer identity is embodied. Would you describe this as a kind of a gift or blessing? What's the relationship between the way you image God and this particular queer identity you embody?

Seth: Well...I do see it as a gift but...I think I see the framework of genderqueer and queerness as a gift. But a gift that everyone has access to, you know. I don't see it as something uniquely given me or even to a specific group or community. I see it as a gift that everyone has access to around discovering our freedom around our own identities, you know. I think what it allows me, as far as discovery around embodiment or image of God and those sorts of things, is it allows me a lot of freedom to understand and engage in relationship with God in a way that doesn't limit how I'm allowed to identify with God or interact with God.

For instance, growing up I was very much taught that God is masculine and so the ways that I could enter into expression were as this feminine opposite, you know...To me the gift genderqueer identity has brought to me is, no I can actually engage in what feminine aspects of God are, and how that plays out in the world; and what masculine aspects of God are; that there's a time and place and ways that all of them are used in there's different roles for them in community and all those pieces. So to me it exponentially expanded the way that I could dive into the discovery of the nature of God and how it plays out in the body of Christ.

In some sense the gift of genderqueer and queerness that Seth is describing – which is also echoed in other participant interviews – is a gift to which everyone has access regardless of identity: freedom to understand and engage in relationship with God in

ways that not only allows for a more nuanced, authentic “reading” of the nature of God as constitutively dynamic and fluid, but an awareness of how such dynamic and fluid images of God are embodied in the body of Christ. To keep exploring this “reading” of the nature of God and its role in constructing fluid and ambiguous identities, I will now turn in Chapter Five to operative texts and hermeneutics that emerged in interviews – particularly christologies and theological motifs that are suggestive of a *transgressive* ethic.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### TRANSGRESSIVE TEXTS AND AMBIGUOUS CHRISTOLOGY

#### **Hermeneutics**

In the last chapter I explored the ways participants constructed their fluid, queer or ambiguous identities vis-à-vis their image of God in an effort to begin answering the first of two research questions in this study: what theological themes, resources or metaphors are engaged by participants in the construction of their fluid and ambiguous identities? This was the primary focus of the previous chapter. This chapter shifts towards the second research question: are these constructive theologies used by persons to resist binary normalizing discourses that problematize such identities within Christian congregations? To begin answering this question, I consider portions of the interviews that describe biblical and faith narratives which suggest a *transgressive* theological anthropology of the human experience<sup>17</sup>. These transgressive themes are suggestive of acts of resistance to binary normalizing discourses related to gender and sexuality.

Three themes emerged in the interviews regarding the ways participants “read” their lives into the narratives of their faith tradition in transgressive ways: 1)

---

<sup>17</sup> Here I’m using *transgressive* as a term from Foucauldian philosophical discourse, rather than from moral theology. Transgressive describes the process of “crossing over” or movement outside of prescribed boundaries. For Foucault, the concept of transgression is a necessary act that clarifies and illustrates the limits and boundaries of normalizing discourse. Moreover the transgressive act of continually crossing normalizing boundaries results in the demarcation of the Self and Other, a concept in poststructuralist theory explored more in Chapter 1 (Foucault, 1977).

references to gospel narratives in which Jesus transgressed binary norms and social categories; 2) identification with biblical characters and themes which legitimate the human experience of fluidity and ambiguity; and 3) scriptural references to relationships with God and others which don't fit into binary categories, and which suggest something about the multiplicity and variation of the human condition.

Before turning to these texts, it is important to note a methodological concern, namely, that I am not a biblical scholar nor is the intent of this conversation the exegesis of specific texts. Rather, the purpose here is to explore the text as *understood* and *used* in the lives of participants. It is irrelevant, in my view, whether the interpretation of these texts can be supported by biblical scholarship because regardless of biblical scholarship, these texts are functioning as constitutive in the identities of participants. In other words, the texts are being used by participants in ways that constitute identity and construct operative theological anthropologies of human embodiment. More to the point, I am particularly interested in how participants' hermeneutical approach emerges from their lived experience of fluidity and ambiguity, rather than whether their interpretations of the text are "legitimate."

### **Historical Jesus Transgressing Binaries and Boundaries**

When participants were asked "What resources from your faith tradition provide a source of strength or support as you embody your "fluid" identity (or queer or bi or whatever word the person preferred to use for identity) the most common reference was to Jesus. More specifically, gospel narratives that illustrated the

historical Jesus embodying a transgressive or ambiguous identity himself – as well as engaging an ethic of transgression over and against binary religio-cultural systems – were commonly used to illustrate the theological significance of fluid identity.

Phyllis is active in several online communities, especially communities of those who identify as bisexual, and who identify as both male and female. Phyllis is also involved with communities that identify racially as “neither black nor white.” Phyllis’ sense of ministry and calling is grounded and defined by the gospel narratives of Jesus being “in-between” and “stepping around the lines other people had drawn for him.”

Jesus is the carpenter who ran around telling everyone to do a particular thing even when it was against the laws of his times or against accepted practices of his time. And accepting the people everyone else considered unclean. I think living by that example helps me realize that we’re all included, that the transgressions can be done by anybody...because, in a way, he lived in those in-between places too because he wasn't accepted in his time... I guess if we go back to Jesus or back to Christ or back to where he's talking about where the laws and the boundaries are, he stepped around the lines other people had drawn for ... not healing on Saturday... or not doing work on the Sabbath or what other people thought was work or transgressing all of the boundaries of clean and unclean. He distilled it down to the two laws: love God and love your neighbor as yourself. And those are relationship boundaries, so I guess it goes back to that and all of the human-defined boundaries I step over with impunity. (Phyllis)

Here Phyllis is appropriating the gospel narratives about Jesus in two important ways. First, Jesus’ own social location is “in-between,” as not fitting into the binary categories of his historical context. Paul also picked up on this theme when he said, “Jesus didn’t fit in: he wasn’t married, which was queer for a Jewish man in his thirties; and he socialized with the freaks and outcasts of his day.” For Phyllis and

Paul, the fact that Jesus transgresses binary categories seems to present an opportunity to not only “read” oneself into the text through identifying with Jesus, but to legitimate one’s ambiguous identity as it relates to gender and sexual fluidity. In other words, since Jesus didn’t fit into binaries, I don’t either.

The second appropriation that Phyllis is making from the gospel narratives about Jesus is his ethical practice which rejected the binary categories and behavioral norms of the dominant religious discourses of his time. Eating with the tax collectors, healing on the Sabbath, transgressing boundaries of clean and unclean seems to legitimate Phyllis’ own ethical practice of transgressing binary norms: “so I guess it goes back to that and all of the human-defined boundaries I step over with impunity.” Here identifying with Jesus as one who not only rejects the binary norms, but who also actively transgresses those norms – just as Jesus did – seems to suggest an ethical principle of ambiguity, especially in accepting and welcoming those who embody ambiguous identities in congregational life.

Rae also makes references to gospel narratives that present Jesus’ mission and ministry as transgressing disciplinary regimes.

I think that is really at the heart of the gospel...and look at different passages of Jesus either touching people that he shouldn't have touched, or speaking to the woman at the well which was not socially acceptable at the time, and all of these ways that he found people who were on the margins and sought them out. I guess to put it negatively I think we now so often run away from those people. So my queerness is both, you know, how I present who I am attracted to but I also find my drive to find sort of the most marginalized folks as a queer move, and one that aligns with the entirety of Jesus's life... you just see that, just Jesus's vagabond nature you know. I don't know how people can read



him and come up with this, you know, the status quo heterosexual family values construct that we have. (Rae)

Here Rae is moving beyond mere identification with a transgressive Jesus, but is constructing a “vagabond” christology grounded in the ethical practices and teachings of Jesus which suggest the norm for Christian community is at the margins – not the center – and with those who don’t fit the dominant categories of normalcy. In this way Rae’s identification as queer is not only a sexual and/or gender identity, but is also an ethical identity: to be queer is to locate oneself at the margins. “I also find my drive to find sort of the most marginalized folks as a *queer move*, and one that aligns with the entirety of Jesus's life.” In this way Rae is engaging a queer hermeneutic in this reading of the gospel narratives regarding Jesus in a way that seems to not only legitimate Rae’s queer identity, but also to queer the central focus and mission of the Christian community: an embodied movement in the lives of real people.

Finally, Seth also makes references to Jesus in the gospel narratives, but from a different perspective. Seth cites Jesus and the twelve disciples as an example of the multiplicity of relationships in the human experience:

What I find liberating is this incredible body of texts that we've been given, that are all stories about different kinds human relationships. To me, especially in the context of the Old Testament or even in the context of like Jesus and the twelve disciples, it wasn't one relationship that made Jesus' ministry happen. He had this body of relationships around him. And the Old Testament is like this collection – you couldn't take one or even ten of those stories and have all of the metaphor and all of the setup and all of the construct that we need for the rest of the text. It requires these hundreds of stories to be able to give us everything we need that, to me is the liberating piece. I require lots of relationships, lots of different kinds of relationships in my life that have lots of different expressions, you know, in order to really be

in an intentional process around my own transformation and reconciliation and redemption. (Seth)

Here Jesus is transgressing binaries and boundaries in the way he models diversity and multiplicity of relationships – in varying degrees of intimacy and vulnerability – which are contrary to the religio-cultural norms of his historical context. Seth utilizes this metanarrative of diversity of human relationships to construct an ethical practice regarding polyamory and a theological anthropology that suggests diversity and multiplicity of human relationships are, in fact, the paradigm modeled not only by Jesus, but other relationships throughout the canon. In this way, the paradigm of the married, heterosexual relationship as normative in the Christian tradition is being deconstructed and critiqued with counter-narratives of multiple, non-married relationships with varying degrees of intimacy and vulnerability as the new norm – one grounded in Jesus’ teachings and relationships in the gospel regarding marriage, along with Pauline theology which preferences celibacy (Stuart, 1997; Mollenkot, 2007; Fletcher, 2009).

Other references to Jesus throughout participant interviews include not being married (e.g., contrary to Jewish norms), displaying intimate interactions of touch with women against proscribed moral codes (e.g., Mary washing Jesus’ feet with perfume, the woman at the well), rejection of familial legal responsibilities (e.g., let the dead bury their dead, hating your father and mother); and relationships with ritually unclean persons (e.g., tax collectors, presumed prostitutes, Roman Centurions). These all seemed to represent in the lives of participants a subversive

narrative about Jesus which suggests two conclusions: 1) identification with a Jesus who transgresses and thus, a legitimization of one's own transgressive identity; and/or 2) the modeling of an ethic which rejects or transgresses binary norms.

For our purposes here, I make a brief mention of Halvor Moxnes's work, which provides a queer reading of Jesus' life and ministry as a critique to the first century-household and "to challenge the traditional image of men" and "the image of masculinity" among the followers of Jesus (2003, p. 73). Moxnes argues that the household of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century C.E. was a social space in which roles and boundaries were clearly defined, bound by a patriarchal social order. "The male role is identified with that of the householder as overseer, father, husband, supplier of resources, person responsible for the house and its inhabitants, and so on" (Moxnes, 2003, pp. 95-96). By extension, the household and *pater familias* served as the norm by which the disciplinary regime established behavioral norms around gender and sexuality throughout the social strata. Jesus, then, inviting men to leave their households and their livelihoods (which provided identity and social location) to follow him presented a transgression to the household norm. Moxnes writes, "There were structural similarities between the young males who identified with the kingdom of heaven and the women who followed Jesus. They inhabited the same space outside of the household, and thereby outside the village system based on households" (2003, pp. 100-1).

These conclusions echo many biblical scholars and queer theologians making similar claims. Amy-Jill Levine notes Jesus' comments would have been received as

quite anti-family and nonconformist among the Jewish communities of which he was a part (Levine, 2006, pp. 55-6). Virginia Ramey Mollenkott comments that if we take seriously New Testament descriptions of Jesus' relationships with Mary Magdalene and with the Beloved Disciple "we might conclude that Jesus was bisexually oriented" (Mollenkott, 2009, p. 52). Robert Goss makes similar claims in his work *Queer Christ* (2002) as does Marcella Althaus-Reid's construction of the Bi/Trans Christ (2000; 2006). Indeed, a queer reading of these gospel narratives does seem to correlate with the ways participants in this study use these texts about Jesus as transgressing dominant roles and social order. The implications of this correlation is considered with more detail in Chapter Seven.

*Transgressive Jesus, Ambiguous Christ, Queer Communities*

To conclude our discussion of how participants use narratives about Jesus as both embodying a transgressive identity and embodying ethical practices of transgression and justice, we return to the idea of constructing an ambiguous christology. To propose this ambiguous christology I begin by considering the implications of a pastoral theology of incarnational embodiment when we use as our starting point the embodied experiences of sexual and gender fluidity. In this case, the lives of the participants in this study. The theological conclusion suggested by these readings of the text suggests that Jesus embodied the full range of fluidity in human experience – including gender and sexuality – and thus our christological formulations necessarily demand a more fluid and ambiguous construction (Goss,

2002; Stuart, 1997; 2003; Isherwood & Stuart, 2000; Kamitsuka, 2007). Moreover, the specific contribution participants in this study offer to this conclusion is two-fold: while Jesus incarnates a sexual and gender identity that is non-normative and queer, his life and ministry suggest something to us, as Christian communities, about the ethical norms of congregational practices which invite, include, honor and empower fluid and queer identified persons (explored in more detail in Chapter Six). For our purposes here, the conclusion suggests that congregations and Christian communities might well engage in deconstructive reflection of their operative theologies of “normal” body and God-image – especially as it relates to gender performance – and to equip congregants with tools to actively deconstruct “normal” in order to create space for those who don’t fit into binary categories.

As was previously discussed, Eiesland’s construction of the resurrected Christ as the disabled God represents an important contribution to the field of incarnational Christology. Here Eiesland is articulating a christology that critiques the myth of bodily perfection – both for the resurrected Christ and for humanity – and constructs a God-image with the impaired and contingent lives of bodily finitude as its starting point. Such an incarnation suggests a Christ that is fluid and ambiguous, a Christ that transgresses binary and normalizing categories of wounded/healed and abled/disabled.

Robert Goss in *Queering Christ* (2002) utilizes a queer methodology to disrupt the repeated archetypes of Jesus and to reconfigure them into new paradigms for liberation. To do this, Goss subverts and deconstructs the dominant masculine

heteronormative metanarrative projected onto Jesus, arguing for a Christ who embodies a fluidity of sexual configurations and gender (2002, p. 181). Marcella Althaus-Reid also utilizes a queer methodology to construct the Bi/Trans Christ, which opens up the possibility of queer persons imaging their own embodiment in light of a Christ who is equally fluid and transgressive. Patrick Cheng's new work *From Sin to Amazing Grace: Discovering the Queer Christ* develops a seven-fold typology of the queer Christ: the Erotic Christ; the Out Christ; the Liberator Christ; the Transgressive Christ; the Self-loving Christ; and Interconnected Christ; and the Hybrid Christ. There are several lines of similarity between the christologies articulated in participant interviews with Cheng's Transgressive Christ and Hybrid Christ, as well as the subversive and deconstructing paradigms of Jesus in both Goss' and Althaus-Reid's works. In other words, the fluid and transgressive Jesus in the text becomes an ambiguous, fluid Christ, which then legitimates fluid, queer and ambiguous identities for persons locating themselves in queer Christian communities (see discussion of congregational practices in Chapter Six).

### **Queering Biblical Characters**

In addition to references to gospel narratives of Jesus, a second theme emerged regarding scripture as a resource in the construction of participant's fluid and ambiguous identities: biblical characters. This theme emerged as an interpretive practice of identifying with biblical characters in scripture that either: a) embodied a

fluid or ambiguous identity; b) represented a source of inspiration; or c) legitimated the participant's constructed identity.

I really like the word queer. I feel like it's a really helpful word even though I know there's sort of a generational divide with that word. I think it's a really helpful way of thinking about kind of non-normative gender identities so I really like queer. I like transgender. I identify as transgender and I also really like the word liminal... The thing I appreciate about liminal spaces is that they're messy. It's really messy. And it can be a little too easy to try to fully embrace queer. Yes, we can be completely androgynous. But as someone who has experienced their own body in transition, this is messy. (Luke)

Here Luke is using liminal as a theological category for the in-between place of a body and identity in transition. The “messy” descriptor describes his experiences with hormones and the changes he experienced in his body, as well as the relational challenges he continues to face entering into intimate relationships with others now as a male, but in a non-conforming body (i.e. “slight build” and “without a penis”). In this way his body doesn't conform to the binary categories of female/male, even though his identity as a F-to-M man does suggest a binary transition from woman to man. In this sense the liminality of his identity is one-way-directional in that he has transitioned from female to male; and yet, the liminality is also continual in the sense that he doesn't feel completely at home in conforming to the dominant criteria of “man.” Am I in relationship with Luke, or in relationship the gender norms to which Luke does or does not conform?

The biblical character with whom Luke most clearly identifies is Mary, the mother of Jesus:

Mary allowed something to be born in her that she didn't completely know about and that didn't seem like a blessing for her but it was. And how that is kind of a virtue because undoubtedly it didn't feel – it couldn't have felt – like a blessing to have your belly be growing and have suspecting eyes be looking at you because you're not married. It couldn't have felt good to have had to deal with all of that with Joseph even though he went along with it. It couldn't have felt blessed to have given birth in a manger. It couldn't have felt blessed to see your son crucified on the cross. So that's been really helpful in terms of it not always being okay, to not be able to completely articulate what's going on inside of me, but just to be able to say “that it be with me as God has said.” (Luke)

The narratives of Mary the mother of Jesus, especially the annunciation and birth of Jesus, serve as an important resource of strength and comfort for Luke. As Luke continues to experience the emerging of his identity and the resulting consequences of disciplinary regimes that reject his liminal body and gender, he reads himself into the narratives of Mary as a way to: 1) identify with Mary's experiences of finding herself caught in the dominant moral gaze of being an unwed pregnant woman; and 2) to appropriate Mary's response to God (e.g., “that it be with me as God has said”) as a means of embracing the blessing of not conforming to the disciplinary regimes of gender and sexuality in Luke's own life. Here Luke constructs a redemptive theological anthropology.

Through this hermeneutic, Mary the mother of Jesus embodies a transgressive social location and subjectivity – one which Luke acknowledges as bearing significant consequences (e.g., “eyes looking at you because you're not married,” “given birth in a manger,” “see your son crucified on the cross”) – and one which is then transformed into a blessing. This hermeneutic, which takes transgressive



characters and reframes them as blessed or empowered, emerged in the interviews in other ways as well.

The transgressive biblical character into which Mary (the project participant) reads her own life is Mary Magdalene.

Mary Magdalene represented more of a bi person...I think about [da Vinci's] *Last Supper*. They say that was Mary sitting there but it looks male. She had some of the masculine qualities. Like she had her own money and they said she was a prostitute but from what I've read she was a businesswoman and she had her own money and she had independence and the ability to make decisions and freedom that women traditionally didn't have. So that was a better model for me than mother Mary. (Mary)

Through this hermeneutic Mary Magdalene inhabits a transgressive identity within the binary gender norms of her socio-historical context. Just as Mary identifies as woman but performs her gender and presents in both masculine and feminine ways, so too Mary identifies as a woman who performs her gender and presents in both masculine and feminine ways. For Mary this narrative legitimates the fluid performativity of her gender. Moreover, it also represents for Mary a theological source of empowerment as a bi-identified women. This reading of the text seems to facilitate, and possibly inspire, Mary to claim her own capacities and strategies as a woman who performs her gender identity outside the binary norms of the disciplinary regimes.

Both Luke and Mary read themselves into the lives of the biblical characters in order to identify with the character and (perhaps more importantly) to draw a theological conclusion about the agency, capacities and strength embodied in the

character. As a result, Luke and Mary then have access to this theological resource as a potential source of agency, capacity and strength in their own lives.

As I anticipated asking this question about biblical characters with project participants, I had several come to mind from my own faith formation. Methodologically I decided to ask participants to name for themselves any characters they found helpful or to which they resonated, rather than offering my own preferred characters and seeking participant comment. But there was one character that I expected would be named in the interviews, which was not. That was the eunuch. Four of the participants in my study identify as genderqueer, one identifies as female but performs her gender as both masculine and feminine, and one identifies as male and bisexual. In this way, most of the project participants embody and/or inhabit a gender identity outside of the binary norms. As I considered my own theological resources for gender non-conformity, I immediately thought of the eunuchs who embodied and inhabited a gender identity outside of the binary norms.

Beyond the narrative of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8, Jesus is also recorded in the Gospel of Matthew as suggesting that he and his male followers “have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:12). In this way eunuchs, who embodied liminal gender space, represent a preferential status in the kingdom of heaven and, by extension, modern day eunuchs who embody liminal gender space (i.e. trans, genderqueer, gender fluid, intersex) also represent a preferential status in the Christian community. Moxnes makes this conclusion: “Jesus was an ascetic who transgressed the boundaries of what it meant to

be male in first-century Palestine. Moreover, he introduced that transgression as characteristic of the kingdom” (2003, p. 105). Many queer theologians concur with similar conclusions (Mollenkott, 2009; Cornwall, 2010; Isherwood, 2002; Mollenkott & Sheridan, 2003; Tanis, 2003). I remain somewhat curious as to why the eunuch wasn’t identified as an important biblical character in the lives of participants in this study, given its use by queer biblical scholars as representative of the “third sex.”

### **Legitimizing Texts**

Returning now to the pastoral theological spiral, we’ve been considering a transgressive hermeneutical analysis which begins with the *lived experiences* of persons who identify as fluid, queer or ambiguous either in gender or sexual identity. We then moved to the *theological discourses* section of the pastoral theological spiral, in order to *assess* the role that scripture plays in the fluid identity construction of participants. It is clear from the interviews that the most common texts used by participants were gospel narratives of Jesus either embodying an “in-between” location himself, or enacting an ethical practice that rejected or transgressed binary historic-cultural behavioral norms. We then moved to other biblical characters that provided a source of identification or inspiration for some participants, namely Mary the mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. We now turn to other biblical texts that are used as a theological source of legitimization or empowerment as participants seek to embody an ambiguous, fluid or queer identity. There are two themes that emerged in

this regard: 1) texts that present change and movement as normative; and 2) texts that deconstruct categories of ritually clean/unclean.

*Texts that present change and movement as normative*

Seth identifies as fluid and genderqueer, which “brings up the ability to engage different energies in different contexts moving between different expressions – all of those pieces. So fluidity is something that, as a word, really resonates with me that I really like to intentionally use.” This theme of movement in gender and sexual expression are critically important to Seth, and also serves as an important theological theme. But movement, for Seth, is a bit different than the movement represented by transgressive narratives explored above.

The parts that I love the most about the stories and characters within the text of the Bible are those moments of change or those moments of movement. To me those moments are really what the gospel brings as far as empowering people...It’s the message of hope.... Hope is encapsulated there that we can move, that we are not stuck with...you know...what we’re given or what is. It’s like we’re constantly in the process with God creating and re-creating. And so to me that’s always the point in the narrative of the text that I’m most excited about. (Seth)

Constant movement and change are key theological themes for Seth; in fact, movement and change represent the opportunity for hope in a person’s life. As Seth was describing this theme of movement in our conversation, I began thinking about my own exploration of movement and liminality, particularly my decision to use Bhabha’s definition. I experienced the impulse to interject my definition of movement during the interview, but I caught myself. The tension continued over into my field notes:

There seem to be several themes coming forward, especially as I recall from memory some of the other interviews that have already occurred. Transformation/change seems to be a big one. For [Seth], the theme of transformation is quite important...but I'm disappointed that there wasn't more reference to liminal theological themes. Fluid was important, but more in terms of change rather than in-between. I'm wondering if I should've designed this study to include offering some of my own ideas around liminality, and asked participants to comment/engage. Oh well.

The point here is that I wasn't altogether sure Seth and I were using the same operative definitions of movement. In some ways Seth seemed to be suggesting movement as change and transformation – but was it movement in a particular direction or towards a particular goal (e.g., transitioning from one gender to another)? As I continued to engage Seth's transcript, more emerged in the definition of movement and change, which for Seth are both grounded in experiences with the Divine.

Those crisis moments that lend to people being able to move, too...you know...where they ask a certain question of God or they have this certain encounter and they cannot walk away from that encounter unchanged. It's impossible, you know. And so to me that's like exactly the concept of movement...I think, I think about it more as a spiral. There is an ebb and flow but it's not necessarily back and forth. It's like we come back to the same place but we're a different being. And then we'll come back to that place again and we're a different being that time. It's like we keep revisiting always as a new person...definitely not like a static movement, you know. And definitely not like once we've been there we never go there again.  
(seth)

So the spiral represents a metaphor for the ways in which life is constantly moving and changing, including our identities and bodies. But what are the implications of returning to the same point? So I became curious about how that

plays out in terms of Seth's own gender or sexual identity expression. How does the spiral play out?

To me that is the journey around gender which is why I really strictly identify as genderqueer and not as transgender because there's some loadedness even in that one-to-one kind of movement. And to me, my journey, first of all, around gender, I expect to never end. (Seth)

Here it seems Seth is, indeed, using the same operative definition of movement – or fluidity – in as much as it is not necessarily a movement from point A to point B, but continual movement. To do this Seth engages the metaphor of the spiral, the constant returning to moments of potential transformation as a new person<sup>18</sup>. This is an evocative metaphor, one that echoes my previous mention of Nelle Morton's "journey is home" (1985). So here Seth is taking the entirety of the canon, not just a particular text, and uses the broad metanarrative of the Christian tradition to suggest two important anthro-theological conclusions in the construction of a genderqueer and fluid identity: 1) change and movement are normative and thus, fluidity of gender and sexual identity are also normative; and 2) change and movement facilitate transformation through divine encounters.

---

<sup>18</sup> Note here Seth's use of a "spiral" metaphor is different than the "pastoral theological spiral" used as a primary methodology in this project, though it is worth noting the serendipity of such reference.

*Texts that deconstruct categories of ritually clean/unclean*

Luke, who we discussed regarding Mary the mother of Jesus above, also identified texts that addressed the theological theme of ritually clean/unclean. He begins with Job:

It's right after Job has this kind of tirade with God a little bit and God comes back and says "Whoa, whoa! Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?" And as God is doing this God goes into this long, long list of things – random, really random things in nature. Things like ostriches and sea monsters and all of these things. My pastor told me when she took a class on Job the professor who did it who knew Hebrew and Hebrew culture and knew that a lot of the animals that God named were considered unclean – like ritually unclean. And one of the primary reasons for that, like with the monster of the sea, was because it's chaotic, because it's unfathomable, because it's big, because that must be awful. And then there's things like ostriches because it's a bird but it can't fly, so we can't classify it. Therefore we can't eat it and it's unclean and there's other animals that are kind of like in between their categories. And because they were in between categories they were considered unclean. And God's talking about all these animals and says "I made that and it was fun and I take delight in that." And so I take that...I just like that image – a lot of people considering something cursed but it actually being a blessing. (Luke)

Here Luke returns us to the theme of transgression, but through the narrative of holiness codes and binary categories of ritually clean/unclean. This theme of clean and unclean was also named by Phyllis and Rae earlier, particularly around Jesus touching and being in relationship with those who are considered unclean. But Luke's comments take us beyond the ethical practice of transgressing holiness codes and uses the Job text to legitimate Luke's own liminal, in-between identity. Moreover, this text is used to proclaim the blessedness of such an identity and embodiment. Just as God delighted in the creation of animals who don't fit within the binary construct of

holiness codes, so too God delights in the creation and blessedness of Luke's embodied experiencing in-between the binary categories of gender and sexuality.

Here we return to the transgressive hermeneutic again, primarily as a deconstructive endeavor to "queer" a text in order to not only legitimate one's fluid, queer or ambiguous identity, but to conclude that identity as blessed. Judith Butler's work in *Giving an Account of Oneself* might be helpful (2006). Butler is interested in exploring the ways in which the "other" is recognized, and how one gives an account of oneself to the "other" through a set of norms – norms that govern "recognizability." As I mentioned previously, Butler is positing that when one recognizes the "other," one does so by recognizing norms – norms which do not entirely belong to the other. These norms, *a la* Foucault, are discursive categories of the disciplinary and normalizing regime (the "gaze") which determine which categories are "clean" and which are "unclean."

In this study, participants are identifying with being outside the normative criteria of gender and sexuality and thus, outside the theological metaphor of ritually clean. And yet, they don't have discursive power to establish the normative criteria. In other words, they are giving an account of themselves vis-à-vis the dominant hetero-normative discourses which don't allow for their embodied experience in the first place. When a transgender or genderqueer person ("I") engages with dominant hetero-normative communities ("you") as androgynous, asexual or gender fluid, dominant hetero-normative communities can only relate to the transgender person via the binary norms of male/female. Hetero-normative *you* is not in a relationship with a



transgender *person* because the person is performing outside of the hegemonic norms; instead the hetero-normative you is in relationship to the *norm* of binary sex. Thus, hetero-normative communities (especially congregations) are at a loss because they don't know what to do with such transgressive and ambiguous embodiment and thus, they utilize normative theological categories such as "ritually clean and unclean" to establish disciplinary norms for bodies (e.g., male and female are essential, binary, ontological categories ordained by God despite the existence of bodies that transgress such criteria).

The point here is that it is impossible to be in relationship with a subject outside of the normative categories of language. As such, participants in this study (re)claim their queer identity as ritually unclean, or outside the bounds of normalcy, as an agential act of resistance to these hetero-normative discourses. Then, using a queer transgressive hermeneutic, they claim blessedness of their embodied identities. Or as Luke puts it, "I just like that image – a lot of people considering something cursed but it actually being a blessing."

The focus of this chapter has been the research question related to how theological resources might be used by participants to *resist* binary normalizing discourses that problematize fluid and ambiguous identities. Here I'd like to suggest that the very act of embodying a fluid, queer or ambiguous identity – one which transgresses the normative discourses of gender and sexuality – is, in and of itself, an act of resistance over and against hetero-normative discourses. Rae and Seth specifically mentioned the political implications of their queer identities and the

deconstructive implications of their embodied transgressive identities. This is identity politics. But, as Butler maintains, identities are bound to bodies – and bodies are not materially static, they are discursively constituted and are cultural landscapes upon which discourses inscribe meaning and identity. This is significant in light of participants identifying with transgressive biblical characters and ritually unclean categories.

Discursive power is inherent in naming difference (e.g., male/female, gay/straight, ritually clean/unclean) because the subject is constituted within discursive categories of difference which are operative before the subject even begins to perform one's identity. For example, "white" is constituted over and against a constructed category of "people of color." While there is significant movement within dominant discourses to recognize "white" as a racial category, those same discourses continue to construct whiteness vis-à-vis non-whiteness. This perpetuates the fallacy of "white" as norm, and "people of color" as other. Likewise, feminist theorists have long noted that subjugation based on difference and other is similarly operative within gender discourses: man is constructed as norm and woman as other. Straight is constituted by the othering of those whose embodied experiences are different than those of the "normal" hegemony. In this sense the disciplinary regime of truth establishes the norm in order to construct the categories and terminology of "other" or "queer" or "bi." In short, that which is different gets defined as "other" over and against that which subjugates.

This is both empowering and problematic. In one regard the resistance represents an opportunity for discursive empowerment to reject linguistic categories such as “male” and “female” or “gay” and “straight” by using alternative categories such as “queer,” “genderqueer,” “fluid” or “bi.” But in another regard, using such alternative linguistic categories also reifies the power of the binary. Foucault argued that by refusing the category heterosexual, the queer person necessarily must acknowledge the ways in which the hegemonic discourse perpetuates a construction of orientation as a discursive category. Likewise, when one refuses to be labeled “male” or “female” and insists upon performing genderqueer or gender fluid, one is already acknowledging the construction of gender as a normative and ontological category.

### *Othering and alterity*

I have identified themes emerging from my conversations with participants regarding their access to, and use of, faith narratives as a resource in the construction and embodiment of their fluid, queer and ambiguous identities. I now seek to place these comments in conversation with poststructuralist ideas regarding otherness or alterity. Monro, in her poststructuralist theological methodology, frames subjecting ambiguity as the “bringing into discourse or human communication, and therefore into theology and Christian community, an adequate recognition of the multiplicity of human language and identity” (2006, p. 26). Note that in most of the narratives named by participants, there was significant attention paid to the categories of

difference and “othering.” Alterity, then, constructed through discursive categories represents both oppressive and liberative opportunities. In other words, alterity is used by participants in their re-telling of the narratives of Jesus or other biblical characters to the extent that those narratives suggest the transgression or rejection of the normative categories used to “other” in the first place. For example, the alterity of the “Good Samaritan” or “Woman at the well” is reified in the re-telling of the narrative because the othered subjectivity in the text presents an opportunity for a liberative ethic.

However, when identifying with a biblical character or reading narratives which suggest the amelioration of the binary categories of the dominant normative discourse, alterity is downplayed. For example, Mary Magdalene was a woman *but* performed her gender in both masculine and feminine ways and thus, the alterity of her gender is moderated. This may suggest that alterity represents a discursive strategy by which embodied persons who are gazed upon as “other” may perpetuate the “othering” of others in order to perform their identities critically or subversively (*lit.* changing from underneath), while at the same time strategically resisting the discursive act of “othering” in order to legitimate their fluid identity as an act of resistance to normative discourses.

This is not, however, without consequences. As Foucault would argue, the othering of persons who are different is rooted in the social construction of normalcy, which is constituted by disciplinary regimes that view the “other” through arbitrary norms. As a socially constructed category of *differance* (Derrida, 1976), “straight”

and “gay/lesbian” are used by the dominant monosexual person to normalize their own experience and to pathologize the experience of sexually fluid persons to “other” them. This discourse may be rooted in subjective constructions of self-identity, the result of monosexual persons’ own inner anxiety or angst about the possibility of their own fluid sexuality. Likewise, as a socially constructed category of *differance* “man” and “woman” are also used by the dominant monogender person to normalize their own experience and to pathologize the experience of gender fluid persons to “other” them. Though beyond the scope of this study, a poignant example of how existential angst or anxiety caused by the existence of fluid sex within the medical and cultural discourses of our society can be noted in the continued practice of genital assignment surgery on infants born intersex<sup>19</sup>.

### **Towards a Constructive Pastoral Theology of Ambiguous Embodiment**

Returning now to the pastoral theological spiral, I have begun with the *human experience in context* – particularly the lived experiences of genderqueer and gender fluid persons within the context of hegemonic Christian theological discourses that reject gender fluidity. Participants, through their interviews, have articulated their utilization of biblical texts and faith narratives as agential and/or constitutive sources in the construction and embodiment of their fluid, queer or ambiguous identities (e.g., *assessment and reconstruction*). Several important themes were identified. They

---

<sup>19</sup> See Susannah Corwall’s *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ: Intersex Conditions and Christian Theology* (2010).

include Jesus embodying a fluid or ambiguous identity, and engaging in ethical practices that transgressed binary norms. Other texts include biblical characters or categories that similarly transgress binary norms, and themes of movement and change. These texts suggest something about a transgressive hermeneutic, while at the same time also suggest some ambivalence to the ways they also perpetuate “othering” discourses of alterity and subjectivity.

In Chapter Four the primary focus was the first research question of this project: what theological themes, resources or metaphors are engaged by persons – persons who experience their embodiment as ambiguous – in the construction of their identities? In this chapter, I began to shift towards the second research question: are these constructive theologies used by persons to resist binary normalizing discourses that problematize such identities within Christian congregations? I have made the claim that the very act of embodying a fluid, queer or ambiguous identity – one which transgresses the normative discourses of gender and sexuality – is, in and of itself, an act of resistance over and against hetero-normative discourses. What was not addressed, however, is the phrase in the research question: *within Christian congregations*. In other words, how are congregational practices experienced by participants? What liturgical and communal practices contribute to a sense of welcome and belonging? This is the topic to which I turn next in Chapter Six.

## CHAPTER SIX

### EMBODIED CONGREGATIONAL PRACTICES

In Chapter Four, I explored the ways participants correlated their operative images of a fluid and dynamic God with their own embodied experiences of fluid, liminal and ambiguous gender and sexuality. I did so in an attempt to consider the first research question of this project, namely, *how persons who don't identify within binary constructs of identity "make sense" of their ambiguity and how they understand their experiences of ambiguity in light of their understanding of God*. In Chapter Five, I turned to the second research question related to how persons utilize scripture and other faith narratives with a transgressive hermeneutic as an *act of resistance to binary normalizing discourses* that problematize fluid and ambiguous identities. This led to some preliminary conclusions regarding transgressive and ambiguous christologies. In this chapter, I consider the congregational and pastoral practices that were described by participants as having a significant impact on their sense of belonging to a community, an experience of embodied liberation and/or an affirmed identity. In this regard, the focus here is on two specific sections of the pastoral theological spiral: *Assessment* and *Generate Practices*.

As we already noted, Elaine Graham is particularly interested in the ways practices not only shape, but construct identity and representations of identity in congregational contexts. Graham argues that “*bodily practice* is the agent and the vehicle of Divine disclosure; and the faithful practices of the Body of Christ are ‘sacraments’ of suffering and redemption” (2009, p. 79). In *Words Made Flesh*,

Graham grounds her practical theology within her feminist commitments, especially the methodological orientation to begin constructive theology rooted in “the stories of women’s pains and joys” (2009, p. 79). In this way the queer practical theology being constructed in this project is similar to Graham’s feminist practical theology in as much as it is both critical and reconstructive with a hermeneutic grounded in the lived experience of those who identify as gender or sexual fluid, liminal and/or ambiguous – or what Graham calls “dissonant bodies.” Moreover, this project seeks to answer Graham’s questions, “To what extent can narratives of embodiment act as disclosures of Divine reality and activity; bodies as incarnating theological truth-claims?” (2009, p. 86).

To answer this question, I consider the religious and symbolic practices of congregations, and the ways those practices are embodied by participants with both supportive/liberative and unhelpful/oppressive consequences: the *human experience in context* of the pastoral theological spiral. I then *deconstruct* and *assess* those practices in order to suggest a few examples of how newly *generated practices* within the congregational context may serve as a “disclosure of Divine reality” (Graham).

### **Official Statements of Inclusion**

All of the participants in this project are active in congregations that are explicitly welcoming and accepting of LGBTQ persons, either through an intentional discernment process (e.g., “Open and Affirming,” “Reconciling,” “More Light,” etc.) or through formal statements adopted by the governing leadership body of the



congregation. My own pastoral experience serving Open and Affirming congregations has led me to consider to what extent such formal statements are important, but also limited. For example, the congregation I currently serve just celebrated their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of becoming Open and Affirming. While the congregation has a long history of inclusion, I've become increasingly curious about how to move the congregation beyond mere acceptance and apologetics – especially on questions of gender identity and fluid sexuality. This curiosity led me to ask participants whether the practice of making explicit, official statements was an important component to their own sense of belonging to a congregation, and whether there were other congregational practices that seemed to suggest something beyond an inclusive apologetic. Luke indicated a response which was common to many participants, namely that the official statements were important but only because they reflected the relationships that already existed in the congregation.

The reason we wrote those statements and we said that we're queer inclusive is because we already were. As a church that had already been forming we had to put that in because there were several queer people in the community. And so I think that's a big thing, the fact that we have an open table without exception is huge. I don't think I would've kept coming if it weren't for that. Not only because of my sexuality or gender but because when there's not that sort of stated openness I tend to suspect that once I stick around and people get to know me it won't be okay. (Luke)

Here the official statement was both an expression of the congregation's already inclusive demographic, and yet it also signaled to Luke the "stated openness" was taken seriously and was long-lasting. Mary described several examples of official statements that communicated acceptance, such as public signs that supported same-

gender marriage. And yet, she also indicated that the ways welcome and acceptance are enacted by persons in the congregation and in the relationships among congregants, was as important as official statements. This was echoed by Paul:

It's one thing to put a rainbow on the door or say you're inclusive on your website, it's another thing when I show up to church and talk about my different gender partners. And then wait to see if they are really welcoming or not. Sometimes I experience churches that say they're 'Open and Affirming,' but they really just print that on their bulletin and never really have any intention in really accepting me. (Paul)

Similarly, Phyllis indicated that relational acceptance – beyond the denominational moniker of LGBTQ-friendly – was critically important to being active and out as an “in-between” person.

They accept me as I am but they also ask questions of my point of view. Like in the adult ed classes sometimes people go, “Well, what do you think about this”? Or ‘How does this work with where you're at’? I mean they have also the LGBT meetings... It helps that [a gay identified man] is one of the pastors because even though he's more conservative than I am (laugh) it's kind of interesting but I think it also helps me feel safe when everybody's opinion is solicited, even if I don't agree. And the whole atmosphere of agreeing to disagree but still being part of the community helps immensely. I know in the old Catholic and Baptist traditions [in which I grew up] that made me feel very unsafe when disagreements were disallowed. If you didn't fit the bill you are either kicked out or said ‘No you're not acceptable.’ And that you know the whole binary of the old traditions versus the inclusive aspects of [my current denomination] helps me a lot. (Phyllis)

These comments move us beyond the official statements of congregations towards two key characteristics of communal practice: 1) a congregational attitude of curiosity and acceptance of a person who embodies a fluidity of gender and/or sexual identity; and 2) a congregational ethic in which theological exploration, difference and

disagreement are considered fruitful and welcomed, rather than threatening. In this way, becoming “Open and Affirming” or “Reconciling” or “More Light” is not enough – at least in the estimation of participants. A more nuanced and relational justice is necessary. Luke, while describing his gender transition and the ways his congregation created a “sanctuary” for him during that difficult process, illustrated how this relational justice is embodied in the worship space:

It’s the grace of having a community – my community has been a big part of that – of having a community where [being trans] is okay and where I am supported and loved unconditionally. And where I’m not just the weird trans kid. Or I’m not even the trans guy. I’m just Luke. I don’t know that I could’ve done this without that. Because I can withstand a whole lot of crap from the social outside as long as I have some solid place to fall back on and that’s been my community.  
(Luke)

Luke goes on to describe the importance of people recognizing his gender transition both in formal ways such as through a name changing ritual, but also during the course of regular, ordinary liturgical acts like people using his new name during the passing of the peace. In this way, the official LGBTQ-welcoming statements of his congregation are embodied in the communal liturgy in very concrete, relational ways: members of the congregation use his new name during the rite of passing the peace. Luke also described his congregation incorporating recent news regarding increased numbers of queer youth suicides in their stations of the cross during a Good Friday service. Luke said this was “a really powerful acknowledgement and incorporation of those things without it just being this sort of mushy liberal talk, ‘Oh we love everybody.’” To which I asked, “So it’s much more integrated into the worship and

fellowship life?” “Right, it didn’t feel forced. We were just naming what was already there. I don’t think all of that could go smoothly if there weren’t already a good number of queer people in the congregation.”

Here Luke’s experience is suggesting that communal practices which embrace – rather than problematize – gender expression, identity and transition as integrated in congregational life is critically important. Moreover, liturgical practices that enact and embody the congregation’s official statements through sacramental expressions within the worshiping community are also key. This takes us back to Mary’s earlier comments and the metaphor of “homelessness,” “not belonging” and “always being on the outside.” Mary described the experience of being at a gay and lesbian spiritual gathering. When she suggested that the organizers include a bi component the leaders were incapable of recognizing the presence of bisexual person at the gathering:

I said this year we’re going to have a bi [component]. And they said whatever for? I said for the bisexuals. Oh, we don't have any bisexuals. And I said I'm bisexual. And the woman from [a town in Colorado], who was a therapist lesbian, she would not hear that...There’s no one who's bisexual. I’m bisexual! [They] never could hear it. (Mary)

Nelle Morton’s “hearing one another to speech” echoes through Mary’s account; they could not recognize her bisexual identity and thus, she was rendered invisible.

This raises important considerations regarding relationships of power embedded in the discourses of the LGBTQ-welcoming movement within many denominations. What power relationship is being enacted when a congregation decides to become “Open and Affirming” or “Reconciling” or “More Light”? Who is

hearing whom into speech? What are the justice implications of a congregation which has adopted and practiced heterosexist discourses for many years eventually deciding to become welcoming and accepting of LGBTQ persons without taking responsibility for the effects of its congregation's contribution to homophobic violence? In this way the language of "inclusion" is problematic: the same persons previously doing the excluding are now doing the including. Seth picks up this theme:

I mean I think some of the first steps are even just some exposure of the church or leaders of the church to what's happening around queer theology. And linked to that, potentially, a distinct step is the church changing its narrative around queerness from one that needs to be defended and explained and let in, to one that recognizes those identities and the people who embody them are essential to the church's own liberation, you know. Changing its own paradigm around that... I really kind of rebel against inclusiveness language because the conversation to me is not about how we can, you know, even change a sentence in the liturgy on Sunday to make someone feel included. But it's actually about how do we need that person and what they're embodying and how they're striving in this world to understand our own relationship with God... And I've noticed around [inclusion initiatives], all of them, almost all, the language is loaded around feeling, you know, like we want people to feel more included. We want people to feel accepted and I'm just, like, you're exposing the power dynamic right there! This is located in someone feeling different and not actually participating differently... or you participating differently. It doesn't require a change from the system. (Seth)

Thus, mere inclusion is not enough. Systemic change and deconstruction of power relationships within heteronormative disciplinary regimes is necessary. Indeed, my own experience in Deaf ministry has led me to similar conclusions regarding disability ministry and accessibility.

For example, many hearing congregations hire sign language interpreters and are exasperated when no Deaf persons come to worship. The hearing congregation has made an act of inclusion, but has failed to take into account the audist and hearing cultural bias in their worship service which, for many Deaf persons who use American Sign Language, is not welcoming. By contrast, the Deaf congregation I served beat a large bass drum for music rather than signing to audio music, used originally composed hymns in ASL rather than interpreting English hymn texts into ASL, and never used responsive readings which are very difficult to navigate visually. The point here is that without a shift in the power structure of a congregation and an awareness that *feelings* of inclusion are not enough – without an awareness that the justice objective is an honoring of the mutuality of gifts of identity and presence – then persons who embody liminal, fluid and/or ambiguous identities will not experience belonging.

### **Embodied Worship**

One clear theme that emerged in the interviews was the importance of embodied worship. Many participants described the relationship between their own exploration, deconstruction and expression of gender and sexuality in theological terms, and the importance of expressing their gender or sexual fluidity within the context of worship and sacred space. Mary described the importance of a more body-oriented worship experience for her:

You have to get out of the brain. You've got to get into the body and into your heart space. So you've got to go into gratitude. Getting in the body – one of the things it does as people are singing is breathing, their toning. And there's this breathing, there's a rolling sound and a chant or some of the songs [the congregation uses] that it starts this flow and then it begins then it's a natural flow and rhythm in the body. It's like a water vortex like the tides and that builds and it gets you out of here [pointing to her head] down into here [pointing to the center of her chest]. (Mary)

Beyond a mere shift from the intellectual to the embodied in worship, Mary also described deeply transforming experiences at an annual spiritual retreat during which touch, massage and sexual exploration were grounded in spiritual practices from a wide variety of religious traditions. These experiences were formational in her emerging awareness of the connection between her bisexual identity, her “connection with Spirit” and her awareness of embodied worship.

In my conversation with Rae, the theme of embodied worship also emerged, particularly in terms of engaging multiple senses and body movements:

We had Eucharist growing up which consisted of the metal plate being passed around and there's not a lot of embodiment. There is no tearing of the bread. I mean it's cubed and very, very individualistic. [In my current congregation] the space is constructed and set up so that the chairs are in sort of half-moon semi-circle and there's less of the emphasis on the pastor. There's incense being burned. At times you can actually get up and move to a space to pray and light a candle. So those experiences sort of allowed me to get out of my head a little bit...All of this kind of works on you in different ways. I think just not kind of sitting there passively. So I don't know if I would tie that directly to gender presentation but I think overall, since I've moved here and found yoga and different things that connect me to my body...connecting what I'm feeling in my body. (Rae).

After several individual interviews I began reading through transcripts and became aware of what seemed to be a nuanced suggestion regarding the theme of embodied

worship. Specifically, I became curious about references to experiences of the erotic in worship. For example, Rae described seeing another genderqueer person taking communion and being attracted to the person, and Paul “couldn’t take my eyes of this guy in the choir.” Both Mary and Luke noted the role that touch played in their worship experiences from passing of the peace, to foot washing, to massage. So during the group interview, when we were discussing the theological theme of “incarnation,” this hunch I had about erotic experiences of worship became more clear:

Jason: How do you make sense of your fluid experience in light of how you understand your own incarnation, how you understand the way that sexual connections show up in the body of Christ?

Seth: It's been a big part of the incarnated theology to reclaim the erotic in liturgical practice, like what is it literally within the context of liturgy that my body tells me because of the sensual experience that I can't get as information any other way? I can't even specifically feel, you know, what I mean? It's like my body's giving me information which is a connection to God and spiritual practice that I wouldn't have access to without my body. And that to me is the definition around the erotic, particularly as it's described by Audrey Lord. So it's been a really interesting process for me...to acknowledge that there is an erotic exchange going on in the liturgy between me and other people. And somebody feeds me in the context of liturgy! Where else is that happening? That's so erotic.

Here we consider the intersection of Luke’s earlier comment regarding the value of an “open table” with Seth’s description of the Eucharist as “an erotic exchange going on in the liturgy between me and other people.” The emerging conclusion suggests that ritual practices of Eucharist, when enacted in worshipping communities that explicitly welcome and integrate queer persons as full, participating members of the



Body of Christ, connect persons religiously to their bodies in ways that honor fluid, liminal and/or ambiguous embodiment. It may very well be the case that such erotic experiences may also serve, in the words of Elaine Graham, a “disclosure of Divine reality” (see also Blevins, 2005; Heyward, 1989; Goss, 2002). The tentative conclusion emerging as a result of these interviews is that congregations who attend to the physical, sexual, gendered, erotic and in-body dynamics of communal worship seem to also be places where fluidity and liminality and ambiguity are welcome.

This is not without its challenges, however. Seth shared in the group interview that presenting different genders at different times in the worshipping community also challenged the congregation who struggled, at times, to “read” the gender Seth was presenting. Luke also described the challenge of shifting gender presentation within the congregation as well:

In terms of erotic, in particular, it's been helpful in reclaiming kind of the theological talk in Scriptures and tradition of God being constantly creating. So creation wasn't this thing that just happened once but is something that continues happening. In creation something that's inherently erotic, like for me, the function of intimacy is always creating something new that may not be a new life, but it's always something different, something new. And claiming my own ability to do that with my own body has been difficult. And a really helpful kind of the agency that we have in that, as part of God's creation is to continue participating actively in creating, whether that synergy or with our body liturgy or with our bodies or our bodies in liturgy.  
(Luke)

Luke’s comments correlating his own experience of fluidity and transition of gender as part of the ongoing Divine creativity is worth noting here, particularly as he relates it to ritual practices of “bodies in liturgy.” How might congregations enact the *work*

*of the people* in liturgy through embodied ritual that takes into account fluidity and ambiguity of gender and sexuality? How might worshipping communities attend to and honor the erotic potency of sacramental experiences?

To approach these questions I offer two specific examples of congregational practices which were identified by participants as not helpful. The first was described by Rae, who recounted an experience in a congregation that gendered Rae as a girl and reified the binary gender disciplinary regime.

I can remember sitting in the church narthex and we – I think we were in sixth grade – they had Mary Kay representatives come in and they put makeup on our faces. I remember sitting there thinking I want to make a pinewood derby car. And I think that's a fairly...that's not in any means a story that's only true to me. I think a lot of girls have that in their Girl Scouts or whatever. It was wanting to do activities of the boys. But I think in church it's especially – it holds this, like you have to be this way, not only because you're a girl, but because for God. And you're saving yourself for a man that He's [God] going to send. And all of these sort of implicit messages. (Rae)

Rae's description is but one example of how binary disciplinary regimes are practiced and reified in congregational life in so far as they construct gendered subjectivity in persons. Graham's work, *Transforming Practice*, challenges practical theology to take seriously the feminist critique of such practices as bringing Mary Kay representatives to church youth groups. "Theology now becomes not an abstract series of philosophical propositions, but a performative discipline, where knowledge and truth are only realizable in the pursuit of practical strategies and social relations" (2002, p. 204). In other words, the performative disciplines of Rae's congregational practices not only reified binary gender and heteronormativity, and sought to impose

a gender subjectivity upon Rae, such practices also constructed a theological worldview in which girls were ontologically “this way, not only because you're a girl, but because for God” (Rae).

It could be argued that, in fact, the church has been *the* most problematic institution and source of binary gender discourse for genderqueer, fluid and sexually diverse persons. Mary, for example, who is in her 60's, commented that it was through women's consciousness raising group in the 60's and 70's and interfaith gay and lesbian spiritual retreats in the 80's – experiences specifically outside the church – where she became more aware of her own fluid sexuality and “sacredness” of her body. These examples suggest congregations would do well to intentionally deconstruct and evaluate the gendered assumptions and practices in a wide variety of contexts: from Christian education curriculum for children, youth and adults; to heteronormative language regarding couples, families, spouses, partners, anniversaries, birthdays; to practices of congregational and pastoral care that assume binary gender and fixed sexual orientation.

The second example of congregational practices which were identified by participants as not helpful was related to liturgy and singing. In fact, during the group interview this experience was common to *all* participants: congregational singing and litanies that divide the congregation into “men” and “women” voices:

I love congregational singing and then when we're singing and all of a sudden the instruction about men sing one verse and women sing another verse [everyone in the group beings laughing] Argh! I'm so into the text and the theology around it and the voices and now I have to choose a gender and I freak out a little bit [the group continuing to

laugh]. In spaces where low voices and high voices or something like that is put out ...more like a quality...I could choose the voice for my gender that day. It's like nothing has distracted me from my worship so I almost think about it as spaces that remove the distraction of the binary mean the most to me – as far as a place that liminal identity is very welcome....It's distracting when we have to make a choice about [gender] and worship. You know what I mean? It confronts you right now in the moment to choose the identity in order to continue to interact and worship. (Seth)

Here we consider a congregational practice that is somewhat difficult to define, namely the ways a congregation creates spaces that “remove the distraction of the binary” and where “liminal identity is very welcome” (Seth). Certainly use of language and awareness of binary gender constructions in liturgical formulations is one strategy. But this removal of the gender binary also goes beyond liturgical language. For example, do we use phrases such as “boys and girls” in children’s sermons, or “ladies and gentlemen” in public discourse, or do we use gender-neutral terms such as “children” or “friends”? Do our church buildings include a unisex bathroom or are all the bathrooms force persons to choose male or female? In our pastoral care, do we immediately ask a family who is celebrating the birth of a child, “Is it a boy or a girl?” or do we ask a gender-neutral question such as, “How is the baby doing?” Language matters.

This comment regarding the jarring experiences of Seth having to choose a gender in worship, and the challenges of ambiguous and fluid gender within congregational practices leads us to consider (albeit briefly) the experience of intersex persons in the life of the church. Susannah Cornwall in *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ: Intersex Conditions and Christian Theology* (2010) maps the effects

of male-and-female theologies on the lives of persons who are intersex or have “disorders of sex development” (DSD). It is estimated that approximately 1 in 2,500 births in Europe and North America – nearly the same prevalence as Down’s syndrome – are of children who are born with an intersex/DSD condition.

Theology has both shaped and been shaped by a culture which has tended to shun ambiguity and liminality in favour of clearly demarcated categories of sex and gender... However, prompted by intersex and other marginal or contested sex-gender identities, a deconstructing or querying of male and female as essential, necessary or all-embracing human categories is possible. (p. 1)

Though this project was open to, and interested in, interviewing persons who identify as intersex, there were no intersex-identified participants in the study. That said, however, several participants referenced research and theories related to intersex/DSD conditions as illustrative of the “myth” of binary sex and relative to their own fluid embodiment, especially when genderqueer participants discussed the relationship between their sexed, anatomical bodies and their gender expression/performance. The following portion of the group interview demonstrated the significance that the intersex experience poses for questions of fluid and ambiguous embodiment.

Luke: I haven’t dated anyone since transitioning and I was dating someone while I was transitioning. But I’ve been thinking about it lately and the intersection ...between body and being seen or feeling like you’re being seen for who you are or who you experience yourself to be – that’s a difficult intersection it seems like, for fluidity, because at least when I speak with people about fluidity there can be this kind of disembodied, kind of like... your spirit can be whatever, and you can change your body...

Seth: I think mentally I kind of bought into [this disembodied body/gender split] in a lot of ways because when you start talking with people about bodies and especially about anatomy in particular, things start coming up that weren't before. And I think we do associate anatomical things with gender whether we want to or not and that creates issues.

Luke: That's why the presence of intersex folks is so disruptive for people... Intersex condition is one of the things that I'm studying in grad school for a while and I found it difficult in terms of my own internal processing. As I was studying these things I was almost wishing that I was [intersex] because there was this tangibility to that that seems to prove or substantiate something and it feels less substantial to have to not have that sort of body.

Jason: Because?

Luke: I mean I know I feel like I know the answer but I feel like the binary, the binary that we've been trained to think that males are this way in the females are this way in this is how it works reproductively and that's the end of it.

Seth: I just want to say to me the desire, when you are asking about what's the desire around like intersex bodies, or what's the significance around that, and to me it's exactly what I was saying before about how if all these other ways I understand myself I don't have to choose, then why has my body chosen, you know what I mean? It becomes this mind fuck around the desire around intersex be like as though your body had chosen all of all the other ways you know yourselves has chosen.

My first response to this exchange in the group interview was delight, because although I did not have any intersex identified persons as part of this project, the topic did emerge in the interviews as an important consideration in the discussion of ambiguous sex, gender and sexuality. My second concern remains, however, whether the participants were glamorizing the intersex experience, and in what ways they were projecting their own desire for their bodies to anatomically match the fluid,

liminal and/or ambiguous identity they express in their genderqueer identity. In some ways, Seth and Luke were describing a congruity that would be possible if it were the case that their bodies were intersex.

This raises significant questions about the coherence between sex, gender and sexuality, the intersection and interconnection between those three terms, and their ever changing definitions. Cornwell seeks to address these questions, as they relate to the intersex/DSD condition:

The whole structure of gender relies upon an appearance of internal coherence between sex, gender and sexuality, but in fact the labels are never finished and are being continually redefined – it is society itself which sustains the myth of the finished norms. (2010, p. 20)

In fact, this tension in the relationship between anatomical and chromosomal bodies and theories of socially constructed, performative gender fueled the critique of Butler's earlier work, *Gender Trouble* (1990), namely that she had failed to take into account the materiality of sexed bodies.

If Butler is correct in positing that “sex” is as culturally constructed as gender, then how does one account for the experience of gendered persons in their bodies? Butler's response in *Bodies That Matter* (1993) claimed that the performative nature of gender does not negate the materiality of the body and why, for example, some bodies may become pregnant and other may not. The point is that “nature has history, and not merely a social one, but, also, that sex is positioned ambiguously in relation to that concept and its history.” In other words, Butler is arguing that the concept of natural sex is a constructed and contested linguistic category the moment it enters into

discourse. In doing so, the “natural” falls away to the “social” (1993, p. xv). Cheryl Chase (1998), Alice Dreger (1999), Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000, 1993) and other intersex theorists are also challenging the claim that sex is a natural determinate of gender, precisely because “since intersexuals quite literally embody both sexes they weaken claims about sexual difference” (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p. 8). “What constitutes anatomical sex,” Will Roscoe alleges, “has been shown by scholars in several fields to be as much a social construction as what has come to be termed gender” (Roscoe, 1994, p. 345).

Cornwall, a theologian writing on the intersex question, makes the case that our operative theologies of the body must take seriously the relationship between bodies and gender, but to also account for the provisionality of human sex:

Theologies which claim an immovable male-and-female model, with no conceptual or pastoral space for exceptions, likewise protect and fetishize a non-existent truth, shifting allegiance from God to human ideology. However, theology has helped to construct discourse around goodness and legitimacy for bodies, and can help to change it too...Theology’s resistance of ideology must involve accepting the *provisionality* of human sex, and of human systems generally, whilst at the same time acknowledging that since humans partake in building and constituting the new creation, what we do in, to and through bodies profoundly matters. (Cornwall, 2010, p. 232)

For our purposes here, I am most interested in how communal practices represent acts of resistance to binary sex ideologies by their ritual acceptance of the *provisionality* of human sex. To do this I return to Seth’s description of the provisionality of gender presentation (which is, clearly, different than the provisionality of sex named by Cornwall – though I believe the two have some similarities).



So spiritually I identify in this really liminal fluid space and sometimes even expression-wise and even emotionally or mentally. But then as far as gender goes I've been placed, for some reason, in a binary gendered body. And then I realize that that theology is really poor because it was a dis-incarnated theology; it was one in which my spirit and my body were these two separate things. And so actually getting back to – and maybe even discovering for the first time – a truly incarnated theology has been really amazing. And at the same time it doesn't mean I have a lot of answers around that but I just realize that in my search for a genderqueer identity the only option I was being given for a while, spiritually, was to disembodied myself. And so reclaiming the body as not a distinct thing from spirit has been, I guess, a liberatory practice. (Seth)

As I reflected on this transcript, which came from the group interview, I immediately wondered about the inner tension expressed by Seth between the experience of being in a binary sexed body while at the same time presenting a more provisional, fluid and contextual gender. Rae tried to capture this in a brief description of the relationship between anatomy and gender:

I think that there's something about the anatomy that you carry around; you're supposed to alert people of that by what you wear and I think a lot of that is not only to keep people in gendered boxes but also to be able to police people's hetero or homosexuality. We don't want a lot of blurred lines there so my presentation is in part to say I think that's ridiculous and I think that's hurtful to a lot of folks whose bodies, for whatever reason, you know, women who are heavier set or don't have the right size boobs or whatever. There are not a lot of women and there aren't a lot of men who can fit into the penultimate, you know, the best female or male bodies. So I think it's helpful to disrupt that. (Rae)

Luke and other trans persons who undergo sex reassignment surgery seem to mediate this tension between binary sex of the body and gender aesthetically and hormonally. But for Seth, Mary, Rae and Phyllis, all of whom identify as gender fluid or genderqueer, their sexed bodies remain static; they are not intersex. This means their

bodies remain one sex despite their gender presentation, identity and expression which remain more fluid and ambiguous. It is interesting to note here that the four participants just described (Seth, Mary, Rae and Phyllis) were socialized as girls; whereas the one participant who did not identify as genderqueer or gender fluid – Paul – was socialized as a boy. Though beyond the scope of this project, this dynamic may suggest something about a wider spectrum of gender performativity and identity for persons gendered socially as girls/women as compared to persons gendered socially as boys/men.

### **Embodied Leadership and Practices of Justice**

Returning now to the pastoral theological spiral, I have begun with the *human experience in context* – particularly the lived experiences of genderqueer and gender fluid persons within the context of congregational practices of liturgy and worship. In the consideration of communal practices we've discussed the helpful, but limited, role that official statements regarding a congregation's welcome and acceptance play, and an awareness of an emerging value for congregations to enact a more nuanced and relational justice regarding fluid, liminal and ambiguous identities. I then considered liturgical, ritual and worship practices that created space for fluid bodies to participate in congregational life, particularly the role of touch and the erotic. This led to a discussion regarding genderqueer identified participants' self-reflections on their sexed bodies and congruity between sex, bodies and gender – noting the contribution that intersex/DSD discourses play in the identification of gender neutral

congregational practices that communicate relational hospitality. These congregational practices were then *deconstructed* and *assessed* in conversation with Elaine Graham's work and as a result, several suggestions for new, *generative congregational practices* emerged, particularly language and ritual practiced in liturgy and pastoral care.

I now turn to a few additional themes regarding congregational practices that were identified by participants as being particularly important to their sense of belonging to a congregation. These descriptions I've placed under a more general descriptor as practices of justice. The first example of practices of justice is related to congregational leadership and, more specifically, pastoral leadership. We noted earlier that Phyllis described the importance of the congregation's associate pastor being an out, gay-identified man and how that contributed to feeling "safe." And even though the pastor holds more conserving theological views as compared to Phyllis, the congregation's decision to call an out gay-identified pastor embodied a congregational practice of asking questions, respecting difference and "the whole atmosphere of agreeing to disagree but still being part of the community."

Indeed, pastoral leadership as embodied in the person inhabiting the pastoral office was also identified by Rae as an important symbol of fluid and liminal congregational space. Rae grew up in a Calvinist tradition and had never experienced a female pastor. Rae recalls the joining a new congregation:

It's the first time I had experienced a female pastor. So that was one. Then she happens to be six-foot tall and heavily tattooed and so there was, I mean, there was that. That opened up space for folks who

maybe don't get that traditional – or choose not to fit – traditional gender roles...I describe her as masculine for just how she moves in her space...and that probably opened up space to see other people. There was this sort of the contradiction of being what I consider to be this very formal space and ritual and yet you didn't have to present as if you were, you know, any other day. (Rae)

Here the pastor is described as presenting her gender as a woman in masculine ways, moving in her body through the congregational space in ways that model, or at least participate in, an opening for others who embody more fluid, liminal and/or ambiguous bodies. This suggests several important considerations regarding congregational leadership.

First, what are the congregational policies and practices of placing genderqueer and fluid identified persons into positions of leadership, especially in pastoral leadership? It may be helpful here to return briefly to the earlier conversation regarding the limited value of “Open and Affirming,” “Reconciling” and “More Light” movements. In other words, it seems that merely discerning and adopting such monikers is not enough; are there LGBTQ persons in positions of leadership? And if not, how might a congregation deconstruct the heteronormative practices that create institutional barriers to such leadership?

Second, as an echo of the earlier discussion on embodied worship, it seems that pastors and worship leaders play a critically important role in creating embodied liturgy and worship experiences that invite the congregation to enter the worship space using more of their body. Moreover, how are pastors and worship leaders using their own bodies in the worship space? What is being communicated to congregants

through a pastor's bodily and gender presentation through such aesthetics as clothing, hairstyle, body art, jewelry, vestments, movement and makeup? Elizabeth Stuart, Lisa Isherwood, Marcella Althaus-Reid, Robert Goss and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott have all addressed, with differing hermeneutical orientations, fluidity of gender performance by leaders in religious ritual. I would suggest, however, that those queer scholars remain descriptive in their methodology in as much as they are theorizing the effects of gender aesthetics and discourses on persons who lead religious ritual. The interviews in this project are suggesting to leaders of congregational worship to not only deconstruct their own gender presentation and performance within the worship space (using the analyses of gender and queer theorists noted above), but more importantly, to consider strategies that intentionally disrupt and transgress binary gender and sexuality regimes as an act of prophetic witness.

### **Resistance**

Before reviewing the findings of this chapter, it would be prudent to pause here to identify my own response to this discussion regarding congregational practices. My second research question for this project was: "Are these constructive theologies used by persons to resist binary normalizing discourses that problematize such identities within Christian congregations? If so, how are they being utilized?" In this question I was curious as to whether the constructed theologies articulated by participants – theologies we discussed in Chapters 4 and 5 – were used by participants in ways that suggested resistance to the binary disciplinary regimes that are embedded

in most Christian congregations. This research curiosity was a result of Lee Butler's works on cultural resistance as identity formation. "When one's experience is invalidated by popular culture, resistance is often the response. While these acts of resistance can take many forms, the purpose is always self-preservation" (Butler, 2001, p. 41).

It was my hunch – or my hope – that participants would frame these constructed queer theologies in terms of enacted resistance as an ethical, prophetic or self-preservation stand against binary discourses. There were certainly references that suggested resistance to binary norms. One such example came from my conversation with Seth:

Yeah, it's like [my genderqueer identity] serves as an act of resistance because of the power dynamic that exists. I've asked myself this a lot, especially my own sort of philosophy around social justice and political change. How I'm involved in change is that am I really switching from a place of not just being able to say what were against – what we're resisting or whatever – but actually trying to build a house that's getting embodied. (Seth)

In this comment, Seth seems to be articulating what is similar to others regarding resistance, namely, that while participants' fluid, liminal and/or ambiguous identities are important and constitutive of an embodied presentation/performance – presentation/performance which transgresses the binary regimes of North American cultures – participants seem more interested in participating in and co-creating communities that embody fluidity and liminal identities as part of the diversity of creation. In other words, rather than resistance, participants seem to be more interested in creating "safe," "fluid" and "open" congregational communities. I must

admit that I was somewhat disappointed in this emphasis; I had hoped the participants would be more interested in the possibility that their embodied ambiguity might represent a more distinct act of resistance to binary normalizing discourses within the church. That said, it may be the case that participants are already active in “safe,” “fluid” and “open” congregations and as such, they are participating in congregations that are already – to one degree or another – engaging in practices that no longer require significant resistance.

### **Towards a Constructive Pastoral Theology of Ambiguous Embodiment**

I began this chapter with a curiosity regarding the religious and symbolic practices of congregations – the *human experience in context*. I then considered participants’ experiences of congregational practices in light of participants’ – and my own – liberative and emancipatory ethics in order to *assess* which congregational practices were supportive/liberative and which were unhelpful/oppressive. Doing so suggests generative practices for other congregations seeking to fully welcome and integrate persons who embody a fluid and/or ambiguous identity.

There were three general practices that emerged from the interviews. The first related to official statements of inclusion. The role and efficacy of denominational monikers and public statements regarding LGBTQ inclusion was identified by participants, though most also acknowledged that questions of relational justice, particularly within the context of congregational relationships, was just as important as public pronouncements and inclusive language. This seems to suggest that while

denominational movements for LGBTQ-inclusion remain useful for congregations considering issues of acceptance and apologetics, congregations who have already adopted such monikers have opportunities to embody practices of relational justice within their congregations that communicate more nuanced levels of acceptance and inclusion – particularly with genderqueer and sexually fluid persons. The interviews in this study also suggest that such congregations are challenged to continue deconstructing issues of gender and sexuality, and to consider and integrate the contribution of queer theology into the operative theologies and communal practices of their local church.

The second general practice that emerged from the interviews was embodied worship. Worship and liturgical practices that created space for fluid bodies to participate in congregational life were mentioned by *all* the participants, and several explicitly identified the effects of erotic experiences in worship. This seems to suggest that congregations play an important role in creating spaces (both within and outside the sanctuary) in which sexual bodies may participate in erotic sacraments such as foot washing, feeding each other in Eucharist and touching in passing of the peace. These erotic, embodied rituals are bodily practices which present an opportunity for “divine disclosure” within the Body of Christ (Graham, E.).

The third general practice that emerged from the interviews was embodied leadership. Questions about who holds positions of leadership – especially queer-identified persons in leadership – were raised by participants as important concerns of relational justice within the congregation. This suggests that conducting analyses of



power and privilege within the context of congregational leadership might ensure that congregations are enacting their professed commitment to LGBTQ-inclusion.

Examples include assessing search/call and appointment processes that intentionally include LGBTQ candidates; reviewing nominating procedures for lay leadership positions in congregational governing bodies; developing and welcoming the sharing of gifts in all areas of ministry including education, ministry/outreach, social justice, congregational care, administration, and worship leadership by LGBTQ-identified persons. These governance, administrative and leadership practices may also disrupt and transgress binary gender and sexuality.

I began my analysis of participant interviews in Chapter Four, exploring the ways participants correlated their operative images of a fluid and dynamic God with their own embodied experiences of fluid, liminal and ambiguous gender and sexuality. This was in response to the research question regarding how persons who don't identify within binary constructs of identity "make sense" of their ambiguity and how they understand their experiences of ambiguity in light of their understanding of God. I then moved to the second research question in Chapter Five, namely, how persons utilize scripture and other faith narratives with a transgressive hermeneutic as an act of resistance to binary normalizing discourses that problematize fluid and ambiguous identities. This led to some preliminary conclusions regarding transgressive and ambiguous christologies. Finally, it has been the intent of this chapter to consider the congregational and pastoral practices that were described by participants as having a significant impact on their sense of belonging to a

community, and what those congregational and pastoral practices might suggest about relational justice regarding gender and sexual identities.

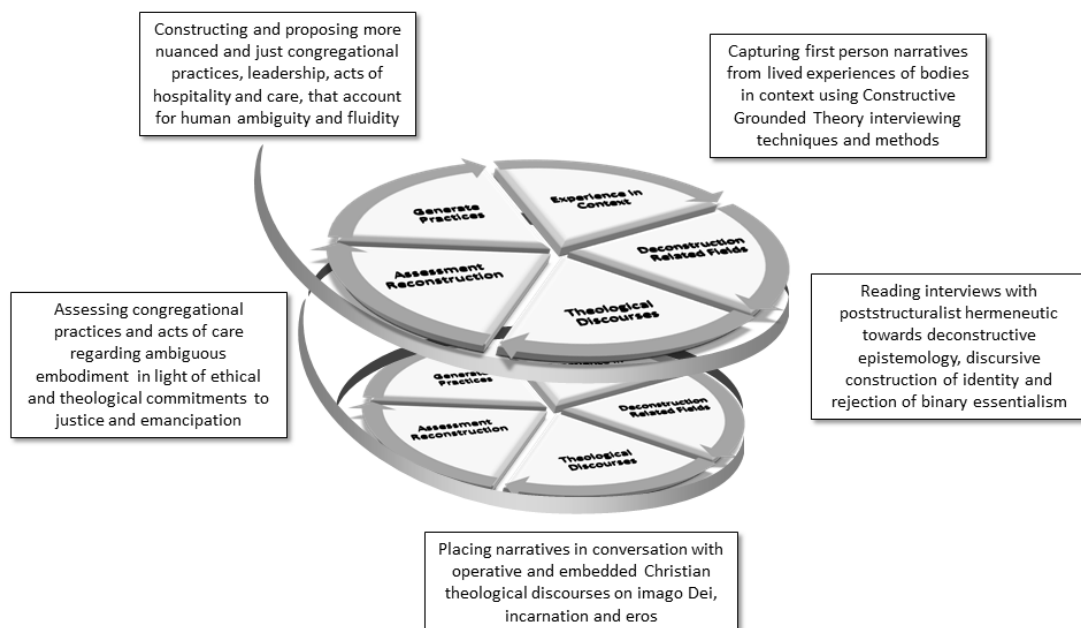
In the concluding chapter, I will return to the pastoral theological spiral in order to review some of the preliminary conclusions that emerged from the interviews and to propose a more nuanced theological anthropology of embodiment that takes into account the ambiguous and fluid experiences of participants in this project.

**CHAPTER SEVEN**  
**A CONSTRUCTIVE PASTORAL THEOLOGY OF**  
**AMBIGUOUS EMBODIMENT**

I began this project with John Caputo's rhetorical question: "*What could be clearer than that our lives are ambiguous – deeply, provocatively, dangerously, beautifully ambiguous?*" (2005, p. 15). Indeed, it does seem to me that the human experience is deeply, provocatively, dangerously, beautifully ambiguous. Though I recognize the project participants preferred other terms (e.g., fluid, liminal, in-between, queer) to ambiguous, I still maintain that there is something evocative about its use as an existential and theological descriptor. I maintain that indeed, human embodiment *is* ambiguous; it transgresses dualistic categories of male/female and straight/gay. In fact, one could go far as to say that the lived experiences of most persons rarely fit neatly into binary categories. Most persons inevitably find themselves located somewhere in-between the binary normalizing gaze whether it be race or gender, sexuality or dis/ability, ethnicity or cultural identity. This is ambiguous embodiment.

The pastoral theology of ambiguous embodiment that I'm proposing challenges the dualistic constructs of prevailing theological categories in order to reconstruct a theological discourse that is more nuanced and multilayered – a discourse that reflects the ambiguous experiences of everyday life. This ambiguity moves us away from ontological categories into a more messy, transgressive and fluid embodiment.

I grounded this study in the lived human experience of persons with bodies in their congregational and theological contexts. Doing so invited poignant insights and reflections on the meaning of gender, sexuality and body within the lives of the participants, and presented first-person narratives with which I engaged theological and philosophical theorists. Specifically I brought to these interviews a poststructuralist hermeneutic that sought to “read” the interviews with a predisposition towards how identity is discursively constituted. I then placed the interviews in conversation with theologians working in *imago Dei*, incarnation and *eros* in order to assess the ways in which the narratives offered by participants may have something to offer the field of pastoral theology and theological anthropology. This resulted in several theological contributions and congregational practices.



### *Pastoral Theological Spiral*

## Theological Contributions

### *God Imaging and the Construction of Identity*

There are several contributions which emerge from the findings in this study. The first of these contributions is related to the correlation between the deconstructive enterprise in *imaging* God and the deconstructive enterprise of *imaging* one's gender and/or sexual identity. The first-person narratives of this project made a compelling case for a correlation between fluid subjectivity through the deconstruction of one's own binary identity with the practice of deconstructing images for God. There was also a sense in which being genderqueer or sexually fluid was experienced as a gift (despite the challenges imposed by binary discourses) and that such a gift is accessible to all of humanity regardless of gender or sexual identity. This seems to suggest a freedom to understand and engage in relationships with God in ways that not only allow for a more nuanced, authentic "reading" of the nature of God as constitutively dynamic and fluid, but an awareness of how such dynamic and fluid images of God are embodied in the body of Christ.

There are two significant implications for the field of pastoral theology, care and counseling resulting from the correlation between deconstructing images of God and deconstruction one's own gender and/or sexual identity. The first is a theo-anthropological claim: the *imago Dei* is reflected in our ambiguous embodiment and, as a result, operative images of God which take into account liminal and fluid identities renders a more nuanced and complete imago. This raises important

considerations beyond inclusive language and prevailing metaphors for God. While broadening language about God is an important theological endeavor, it is significant for me as a pastoral theologian to make the theological claim that God is not static or fixed, but is fluid and ambiguous. This challenges theological claims which construct God as unchanging and constant towards constructs of God that suggest reflexivity and responsiveness. This raises several important questions: What might be the implications of entering into covenant with a God who is liminal and fluid over time? What might be the consequences of embodying relational justice with a God who is ambiguous? How might queering God open up erotic opportunities for mystical union with the Divine?

The second implication is related to practices of pastoral care and counseling. Pastoral practitioners and counselors who suspend their operative theories of binary gender and sexual orientation open up space in the therapeutic/pastoral relationship for persons to explore their own fluid gender and/or sexual identities. This presents a powerful opportunity for liberation, healing and justice-making, particularly in light of binary disciplinary regimes within the church and society which deny the existence of gender and/or sexual fluidity. Here I'm arguing that suspending operative theories of binary gender and sexual orientation is not only helpful to persons seeking care, suspending such binary theories is an ethical mandate because continuing to provide care and counseling from a binary gender and sexual worldview causes harm.

*Transgressive Ethics*

The next theological contribution of this study is related to the transgressive ethic explored in Chapter Five. The lived experiences of genderqueer and gender fluid persons within the context of hegemonic Christian theological discourses – discourses which often reject gender and sexual fluidity – represent an opportunity for transgressive acts of resistance against binary disciplinary regimes. Participants, through their interviews, articulated their utilization of biblical texts and faith narratives as agential and/or constitutive sources in the construction and embodiment of their fluid, queer or ambiguous identities. Such texts and narratives include Jesus embodying a fluid or ambiguous identity, and engaging in ethical practices that transgressed binary norms, and other biblical characters who similarly transgress binary norms.

The primary implication of this conclusion represents an important opportunity for liberation and emancipation, but also raises considerations regarding the ethics of boundary-crossing. How might pastoral theology draw upon the transgressive hermeneutic presented in this study, while at the same time remaining aware of ethical boundaries in practice and ministry? The transgressive acts of resistance identified by participants suggest a prophetic stance to disciplinary regimes that dehumanize and problematize fluid and liminal embodiment. This has liberative possibilities. At the same time, boundaries are also necessary for the protection of those who are vulnerable. How might we assess which boundaries are unjust and legitimate targets for transgressive crossing, and which must be honored and

maintained for the protection of those who are vulnerable or who exercise less institutional power? In light of increasing awareness of clergy abuse and the harm caused by lack of boundary-honoring in congregations, the question of how to assess which boundaries should be legitimately crossed and which shouldn't is of great importance.

It is clear this question needs further consideration, but several key criteria do seem to present themselves in this project. First, relational power should be a primary consideration. In the examples offered by the participants in this project, most described an experience of disempowerment resulting from binary disciplinary regimes. Thus, the questions of whether the transgressive act of boundary crossing is enacted by a person with less relational power or more relational power matters.

Second, a distinction between cultural and personal boundaries is of critical importance. The crossing of the boundary regarding gender and/or sexual identity – as presented by the project participants – was primarily over-and-against cultural discourses, not another human being. In other words, presenting as genderqueer or resisting binary categories of sexual orientation are not acts of boundary crossing against another person's boundaries – they are enactments of power that transgress cultural boundaries. This is an important distinction. That said, there may be situations in which a transgressive ethic does require the crossing of personal boundaries, such as some cases of civil disobedience or direct action. Such acts should be done with great self-awareness and discernment to ensure the transgressive act is just and that vulnerable persons are protected.



Third, transgressive acts are by their nature disruptive. This presents an important question regarding how to discern when a transgressive act is ethical, and when it is merely obstructionist. And – more importantly – who gets to decide. This is particularly important for considering how pastoral and congregational practices tend to reify binary gender and/or sexual identities and to resist embodied fluidity. If a group of congregants embody a transgressive identity or enact a transgressive act within the context of a liturgical gathering or communal event, how do pastoral and congregational leaders evaluate whether the transgressive act was prophetic, or was merely a group of persons who want to “get their own way”? Affirming the transgressive ethic suggested in the pastoral theology of ambiguous embodiment offered in this project also necessitates questions of how to discern questions of justice within the act of transgression – including criteria for what justice actually is and who gets to decide.

### *Beyond Inclusion*

In Chapter Six I considered participants’ experiences of congregational practices in light of their – and my own – liberative and emancipatory ethics in order to assess which congregational practices were supportive/liberative and which were unhelpful/oppressive. As a result, the pastoral theology of ambiguous embodiment and communal practices offered in this project seek to take into account both the benefits and liabilities of public statements regarding LGBTQ inclusion, while also attending to questions of relational justice and a movement beyond apologetics

towards an integration of queer theology and queer justice throughout the life of the congregation.

### *Worship and Liturgical Practices*

Worship and liturgical practices that create space for gender fluid bodies to participate fully in congregational life emerged as a critical component, particularly in creating spaces (both within and outside the sanctuary) in which sexual bodies may participate in erotic, embodied practices (e.g., foot washing, feeding each other in Eucharist, touching in passing of the peace). These erotic, embodied rituals are bodily practices which present an opportunity for “divine disclosure” within the Body of Christ (Graham, E.). Of course, this raises important questions regarding personal boundaries and preferences regarding bodily touch and space. This also raised questions regarding who holds positions of liturgical and pastoral leadership. How are gender and/or sexually fluid person invited to contribute to liturgical and congregational practices? Are queer-identified persons in positions of leadership? How are concerns of relational justice assessed within the congregation? This suggests that conducting analyses of power and privilege within the context of congregational leadership might ensure that congregations are enacting their professed commitment to LGBTQ-inclusion. At the same time, these governance, administrative and leadership practices may also disrupt and transgress binary gender and sexuality.

### **Project Limits and Areas of Additional Research**

These contributions offer to the field of pastoral theology, care and counseling several important considerations related to operative theological anthropology regarding gender, sexuality and God-imaging, and communal practices that have the potential for liberation and emancipation for gender and/or sexually fluid persons. At the same time, there are several important limits of this study. The first is related to the size of the participant pool. While six intensive individual interviews and one group interview did generate significant material to begin constructing some themes for this emerging pastoral theology of ambiguous embodiment, it is by no means enough to come to anything beyond a few tentative conclusions. That said, the general themes I outlined above do suggest there are some similarities in participant experiences that are worth noting.

Moreover, there are several themes that emerged from this project that warrant additional consideration and research. First, the topic of polyamory and multiple intimate partners was identified by all six participants. Several framed polyamory in terms of multiple partners at the same time, some as varying degrees of intimacy with different people, and some as differently gendered partners at different times in their lives. The point here is that the question of polyamory is critically important, particularly because it challenges the hegemony of the exclusive two-person committed relationship which is prevalent in contemporary Christian ethics

(including LGBTQ-affirming Christian ethics)<sup>20</sup>. The question of polyamory is primarily one of ethics and moral theology, and one which is clearly germane to the question of how congregational norms and practices impact gender-queer, queer and sexually fluid persons. While not within the scope of this project, constructing ethical practices related to polyamory is an important “next step” in moving forward with this pastoral theology of ambiguous embodiment.

Second, as I noted in Chapter Six, all the gender fluid and gender-queer identified persons in this study were gendered socially as girls in childhood; there were no gender fluid or gender-queer identified persons who were gendered socially as boys in childhood. Again, it was beyond the scope of this study to reach any conclusions regarding this result, though adjunct resources in sociology, queer theory and gender theory might present a rich opportunity for such an analysis.

Finally, though this project was open to, and interested in, interviewing persons who identify as intersex, there were no intersex-identified participants in the study. This presents a significant loss of opportunity because the intersex person’s experience of fluid, liminal and ambiguous embodiment is critical to moving forward in developing further this pastoral theology of ambiguous embodiment. Cornwall’s *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ: Intersex Conditions and Christian Theology* (2010) is critically important work, though it remains somewhat theoretical,

---

<sup>20</sup> Note the current debate regarding marriage equality. Many queer-identified persons express indifference towards marriage equality because it suggests participation and reification of a hetero-patriarchal institution, even if constituted by two persons of the same gender.

and does utilize qualitative research methods. As such, a constructive pastoral theological project which utilizes a grounded theory or ethnographic research methodology with intersex participants would have much to offer the continuing conversation regarding ambiguous embodiment.

### **Final Word**

I remain immensely grateful for the willingness of project participants to share their stories with me and to welcome me into their deeply, provocatively, dangerously, beautifully ambiguous lives. I have been moved by the depth of their theological reflection, and the sincerity with which they seek to remain connected to a faith tradition that has (in most cases) denied their in-between-ness and as a result, has been a source of great pain. Yet, the resiliency they show in remaining part of the body of Christ has demonstrated something nearly ineffable in my attempts to construct this pastoral theology of ambiguous embodiment: namely, the power of centering one's identity foremost on the confidence of being one of God's beloved creatures (Way, 2005). I'm reminded of Luke's comment:

To me I can't imagine living my life the last couple years [through transition] without [my beloved identity] as the center. Because otherwise there would be nothing, there would just be this kind of... I appreciate the liminal and I believe that it has a valuable place but I don't think that it's ever completely the center of my identity. We're always becoming... we're always self-creating but we're always created. Otherwise I would just end up being my own God and that just doesn't work. (Luke)

Ultimately, it is my hope that this project might offer encouragement to others who find the journey of ambiguity as home; that these theological themes might contribute in some way to a broadening of our understanding of the human condition; and that our congregations might embody communal practices which honor the faith claim that we are all God's beloved.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Althaus-Reid, M. (2000). *Indecent theology : Theological perversions in sex, gender and politics*. London ; New York: Routledge.
- Althaus-Reid, M. (2003). *The queer god*. London ; New York: Routledge.
- Althaus-Reid, M. (2004). *From feminist theology to indecent theology: Readings on poverty, sexual identity and God*. London: SCM Press.
- Althaus-Reid, M. (2006). Fetishism: the scent of a Latin American body theology. *Toward a theology of eros* (p. 134). New York: Cambridge Univ Press.
- Ashbrook, J. B. (1984). *The Human Mind and the Mind of God: Theological Promise in Brain Research*. Lanham: University Press of America.
- Ashbrook, J. B. (1997). *The Humanizing Brain: Where Religion and Neuroscience Meet*. Cleveland : Pilgrim Press,
- Atherton, C. (2008). *The Stoics on Ambiguity*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Berger, P. L., & Luckman, T. (1963). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. London ; New York: Routledge.
- Blevins, J. (2005). *Queer as this may sound*. (Doctoral dissertation), Candler School of Theology.
- Boswell, J. (1980). *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Bringle, M. L. (1990). *Mary Louise. Despair: Sickness or Sin? Hopelessness & Healing in the Christian Life*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- Brock, R. N. (1988). *Journeys by heart: A Christology of erotic power*. New York: Crossroad.
- Brown, P. (1989). *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. London: Farber & Faber.
- Burleson, W. E. (2005). *Bi america : Myths, truths, and struggles of an invisible community*. New York: Harrington Park Press.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of "sex"*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing gender*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2005). *Giving an account of oneself* (1st ed.). New York: Fordham University Press.
- Butler, L. (2001). The unpopular experience of popular culture: cultural resistance as identity formation. *Journal Of Pastoral Theology*, 1140-52.
- Butler, L., & Ashby, H. (2010). *Listen, My Son: Wisdom to Help African American Fathers*. Abingdon Press.
- Cahill, L. S., & Farley, M. A. (1995). *Embodiment, morality, and medicine*. Theology and medicine, v. 6. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic.

- Cannon, K. G. (1988). *Black Womanist Ethics*. Atlanta : Scholars Press, American Academy of Religion Academy Series.
- Caputo, J. D. (2005). In Praise of Ambiguity. In De Paulo, C. J. N., Messina, P. A., & Stier, M. (2005). *Ambiguity in the western mind*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory. A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London: Sage.
- Charmaz, K. (2009). Shifting the grounds: Constructivist grounded theory methods. In J. M. Morse, P. N. Stern, J. M. Corbin, B. Bowers, & A. E. Clarke, (Eds.). *Developing grounded theory: The second generation* (pp. 127-154). Walnut Creek, CA: University of Arizona Press.
- Chase, C. (1998). Hermaphrodites with attitude: Mapping the emergence of intersex political activism. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 4(2), 189-211.
- Chopp, R. S. (1986). *The praxis of suffering: An interpretation of liberation and political theologies*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Comstock, G. D. (1993). *Gay theology without apology*. Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press.
- Cooper-White, P. (2008). Interrogating Integration, Dissenting Dis-integration: Multiplicity as a Positive Metaphor in Therapy and Theology. *Pastoral Psychology*, 57(1/2), 3-15. doi:10.1007/s11089-008-0135-0
- Cooper-White, P. (2011). *Many voices: Pastoral psychotherapy in relational and theological perspective*. Fortress Press.
- Copeland, M. S. (2010). *Enfleshing freedom: body, race, and being*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Cornwall, S. (2010). *Sex and uncertainty in the body of Christ: intersex conditions and Christian theology*. Equinox.
- Couture, P. (1991). *Blessed Are the Poor? Women's Poverty, Family Policy, and Practical Theology*. Nashville : Abingdon Press.
- Couture, P., and Hunter, R. J. (1995). *Pastoral Care and Social Conflict*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- Davies, E. W. (2003). *Dissenting Reader: Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- de Beauvoir, S. (1948). *The Ethics of Ambiguity*: translated by Bernard Frechtman. Secaucus.
- de Beauvoir, S., Borde, C., & Malovany-Chevallier, S. (2010; 2009). *The second sex* [Deuxième sexe.] (1 American ed.). New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- de Chardin, P. T. (1961). *The phenomenon of man with an introduction by Sir Julian Huxley*. Harper & Row.
- de Chardin, P. T. (1965). *Hymn of the Universe*. Collins.
- De La Torre, M (2007). *A Lily Among the Thorns*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- de Saussure, F. (1916/1959). *Course in general linguistics*. (W. Baskin, Trans). New York: The Philosophical Library.
- Derrida, J. (1976). *Of grammatology* (G. C. Spivak, Trans.). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.



- Douglas, K. B. (1999). *Sexuality and the Black church: A womanist perspective*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books.
- Dreger, A. D. (1999). *Intersex in the Age of Ethics*. University Publishing Group.
- Eiesland, N. L. (1994). *The Disabled God: Toward a liberatory theology of disability*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- Empson, W. (1947). *Seven Types of Ambiguities*. New York: New Directions.
- Eskenazi, T. C. (2008). *The Torah: a Women's Commentary*. New York: URJ Press.
- Farley, W. (2005). *The Wounding and Healing of Desire: Weaving Together Heaven and Earth*. Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Fausto-Sterling, A. (1993). The five sexes. *Sciences*, 33(2), 20.
- Fausto-Sterling, A. (2000). The five sexes, revisited. *Sciences*, 40(4), 18-25.
- Firestein, B. A. (1996). *Bisexuality : The psychology and politics of an invisible minority*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Firestein, B. A. (2007). *Becoming visible : Counseling bisexuals across the lifespan*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Fletcher, P. (2009). Antimarrriage. In Loughlin, G. (Ed.). *Queer theology: rethinking the western body*. Malden, Ma: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Foucault, M. (1965). *Madness and civilization; a history of insanity in the age of reason*. (R. Howard, Trans.) New York: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (1975). *The birth of the clinic; an archaeology of medical perception*. (A. Sheridan, Trans.). New York: Vintage Books.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish : the birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). New York: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (1990). *The history of sexuality [Histoire de la sexualité.]* (Vintage Books ed.). New York: Vintage Books.
- Fulkerson, M. M. (1997). Contesting the Gendered Subject: A Feminist Account of the Imago Dei. *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms*, ed. Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).
- Gergen, K. J. (1985). "The social constructionist movement in modern psychology." *American Psychologist* 40: 266-275.
- Gergen, K. J. (1994). *Realities and Relationships: Soundings in Social Construction*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gergen, K. J. (1995). Social Construction and the Transformation of Identity Politics. New School for Social Research Symposium, April 7, 1995.
- Gergen, K. J. (2001). *Social Construction in Context*. London: Sage.
- Gergen, Kenneth J. (1991). *The saturated self: dilemmas of identity in contemporary life*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gilson, A. B. (1995). *Eros Breaking Free: Interpreting Sexual Theo-Ethics*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim.
- Gorsuch, N. J. (2001). *Introducing feminist pastoral care and counseling*. Introductions in feminist theology. Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press.

- Goss, R. (1993). *Jesus acted up : A gay and lesbian manifesto* (1st ed.). San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Goss, R. (2002). *Queering christ : Beyond jesus acted up*. Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press.
- Graham, E. L. (1996). *Making the Difference: Gender, Personhood, and Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- Graham, E. L. (1996). *Making the Difference: Gender, Personhood, and Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- Graham, E. L. (2002). *Transforming practice : Pastoral theology in an age of uncertainty*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Pub.
- Graham, E. L. (2009). *Words Made Flesh: Writings in Pastoral and Practical Theology*. SCM Press.
- Graham, L. K. (1992). *Care of persons, care of worlds : A psychosystems approach to pastoral care and counseling*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- Graham, L. K. (1997). *Discovering images of god : Narratives of care among lesbians and gays* (1st ed.). Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Griffin, H. L. (2006). *Their own receive them not: African american lesbians and gays in black churches*. Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press.
- Gudorf, C. E. (1994). *Body, sex, and pleasure: Reconstructing Christian sexual ethics*. Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press.
- Hall, D. J. (1986). *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Hauerwas, S. (1990). *Naming the silences: God, medicine, and the problem of suffering*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans.
- Hays, J. (2009). *Poststructuralist Theory and Bodily Difference: Constructing pastoral theologies of ambiguous embodiment*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Rocky Mountain-Great Plains Regional Meeting, Omaha, NE.
- Hays, J. (2010). *Bisexual Theology: Fluid Sexuality and Ambiguous Christologies*. Paper presented at Beyond Apologetics: Sexual Identity, Pastoral Theology, and Pastoral Practice symposium, Phillips Theological Seminary, Tulsa, OK.
- Heyward, C. & Harrison, B. W. (1994). Pain and Pleasure: Avoiding the Confusions of Christian Tradition in Feminist Theory. In Nelson, J. B., & Longfellow, S. P. (1994). *Sexuality and the sacred : Sources for theological reflection* (1st ed.). Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press.
- Heyward, C. (1989). *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God*. Harper and Row.
- Heyward, C. (1994). Notes on Historical Grounding: Beyond Sexual Essentialism. In Nelson, J. B., & Longfellow, S. P. (1994). *Sexuality and the sacred : Sources for theological reflection* (1st ed.). Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press.
- Heyward, C. (1995). *Staying Power: Reflections on Gender, Justice, and Compassion*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim.

- Hilkert, M. C. (1995). Feminist theology: a review of literature. *Theological Studies*, 56, n2. p.327(26).
- Hiltner, S. (1958). *Preface to pastoral theology*. New York: Abingdon Press.
- Hoelt, J. M. (2012). Gender, Sexism, and Heterosexism. In B. J. Miller-McLemore (Ed). *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Hogue, D. (2003). *Remembering the future, imagining the past: Story, ritual, and the human brain*. Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press.
- Hutchins, L., & Kaahumanu, L. (1991). *Bi any other name : Bisexual people speak out* (1st ed.). Boston: Alyson Pub.
- Ingram, D. (2006). *Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes* (Vol. 431). T&T Clark.
- Isherwood, L. (1999). *Liberating Christ: Exploring the Christologies of Contemporary Liberation Movements*. Pilgrim Press.
- Isherwood, L. (2002). *Introducing feminist christologies* (Vol. 8). T&T Clark.
- Isherwood, L. (2004). The Embodiment of Feminist Liberation Theology: The Spiralling of Incarnation. *Feminist Theology: The Journal of the Britain & Ireland School of Feminist Theology*, 12(2), 140-156.
- Isherwood, L., & McEwan, D. (2001). *Introducing Feminist Theology*. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press.
- Isherwood, L., & Stuart, E. (2000). *Introducing body theology*. Introductions in feminist theology, [2]. Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press.
- Isherwood, L., ed. (2000). *The Good News of the Body: Sexual Theology and Feminism*. New York: New York University Press.
- Jeffreys, S. (2005). *Beauty and misogyny: Harmful cultural practices in the West*. Routledge.
- Jennings, T. (2005). *Jacob's Wound: Homoerotic Narrative in the Literature of Ancient Israel*. New York: Continuum.
- Joh, W. A. (2006). *Heart of the Cross: A Postcolonial Christology*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Kamitsuka, M. D. (2007). *Feminist theology and the challenge of difference*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kaveney, R. (2012). Radical feminists are acting like a cult: The banning of trans people from RadFem2012 is just one of the disturbing aspects of this monolithic conference. *The Guardian*. Friday 25 May 2012. Retrieved from [http://www.guardian.co.uk/\\_commentisfree/2012/may/25/radical-feminism-trans-radfem2012](http://www.guardian.co.uk/_commentisfree/2012/may/25/radical-feminism-trans-radfem2012)
- Kinsey, A. C., Pomeroy, W. B., & Martin, C. E. (1948). *Sexual behavior in the human male*. Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders Co.
- Klein, F. (1993). *The bisexual option* (2nd ed.). New York: Haworth Press.
- Klein, F., & Schwartz, T. (2001). *Bisexual and gay husbands : Their stories, their words*. New York: Harrington Park Press.
- Kuefler, M. (2001). *The manly eunuch: Masculinity, gender ambiguity, and Christian ideology in late antiquity*. University of Chicago Press.

- Kwok, P. (2005). *Postcolonial imagination and feminist theology* (1st ed.). Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press.
- LaCugna, C. M. (1991). *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*. San Francisco: Harper Collins.
- Lapsley, J. N. (1972). *Salvation and Health: the Interlocking Processes of Life*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.
- Lartey, E. Y. (2003). *In living color : An intercultural approach to pastoral care and counseling* (2nd ed.). London ; New York: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Lartey, E. Y. (2006). *Pastoral theology in an intercultural world*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press.
- Lee, S. H. (2010). *From a Liminal Place: An Asian American Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Levine, A. J. (2006). *The misunderstood Jew: The church and the scandal of the Jewish Jesus*. HarperOne.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1963; 1976). *Structural anthropology* [Anthropologie structurale.]. New York: Basic Books.
- Loughlin, G. (2007). *Queer theology : Rethinking the western body*. Malden, MA ; Oxford: Blackwell Pub.
- Maalouf, A. (2000). *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*, trans. Barbara Bray. New York: Penguin Books.
- Marshall, J. L. (1997). *Counseling Lesbian Partners*. Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Marshall, J. L. (2004). Methods in Pastoral Theology, Care, and Counseling. In N. J. Ramsay (Ed.), *Pastoral Care and Counseling: Redefining the Paradigms* (pp. 133-154). Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004.
- McClure, B. J. (2010). *Moving Beyond Individualism in Pastoral Care and Counseling: Reflections on Theory, Theology, and Practice*. Cascade Books.
- McFague, S. (1993). *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Fortress Press.
- McKim, R. (2001). *Religious ambiguity and religious diversity*. Oxford University Press on Demand.
- McKinlay, J. (2004). *Reframing Her: Biblical Women in Postcolonial Focus*. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press.
- Miller-McLemore, B. J. (2012). *Christian Theology in Practice: Discovering a Discipline*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.
- Miller-McLemore, B. J., and Gill-Austern, B. L., eds. (1999). *Feminist and Womanist Pastoral Theology*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- Mollenkott, V. R. (2001). *Omnigender: A Transreligious Approach*. Pilgrim Press.
- Mollenkott, V. R. (2007). *Omnigender: A trans-religious approach*. Pilgrim Press.
- Mollenkott, V. R. (2009). We come bearing gifts: Seven lessons religious congregations can learn from transpeople. In Althaus-Reid, M. & Ishwerwood, L. (Eds.). *Trans/Formations*. London: SCM Press.
- Mollenkott, V. R., & Sheridan, V. (2003). *Transgender journeys*. Pilgrim Press.

- Moltmann-Wendel, E. (1995). *I Am My Body: A theology of embodiment*. trans. John Bowden. New York: Continuum.
- Monro, A. (2006). *Resurrecting Erotic Transgression: Subjecting Ambiguity in Theology*. London: Equinox.
- Morton, N. (1985). *The journey is home*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Moxnes, H. (2003). *Putting Jesus in his place: A radical vision of household and kingdom*. Westminster John Knox Press.
- Nelson, J. B. (1978). *Embodiment : An approach to sexuality and christian theology*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House.
- Nelson, J. B. (1983). *Two Gardens: Reflections on Sexuality and Religious Experience*. New York: Pilgrim, 1983.
- Nelson, J. B. (1992). *Body Theology*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992.
- Nelson, J. B., and Longfellow, S. P., eds. (1994). *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox.
- Neuger, C. C. (2001). *Counseling women : A narrative, pastoral approach*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Neuger, C. C. (2007). Class handout. Brite Divinity School.
- Neuger, C. C., & Poling, J. N. (1997). *The care of men*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- Neuger, C. C., ed. (1996). *The Arts of Ministry: Feminist-Womanist Approaches*. KY: Westminster/John Knox Press.
- Niebuhr, R. (1943/1996). *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation: Human Nature*. Westminster John Knox Press.
- O'Neil, J. M., & Egan, J. (1992). Men's and women's gender role journeys: Metaphor for healing, transition, and transformation. In B. R. Wainrib (Ed.), *Gender issues across the life cycle* (pp. 107-123). New York: Springer.
- Patton, J. (1993). *Pastoral care in context*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press.
- Paul, J. P. (2000). Bisexuality: Reassessing our paradigms of sexuality. In P. Rust (Ed.), *Bisexuality in the United States*. Columbia University Press.
- Piaget, J. (1970). *Structuralism [Structuralisme.]*. New York: Basic Books.
- Poling, J. N. & Neuger, C. C. (1997). *The care of men*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- Poling, J. N. (1991). *The abuse of power: A theological problem*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- Poling, J. N. (2003). *Understanding male violence: Pastoral care issues*. St. Louis, Mo: Chalice Press.
- Poling, J. N. (2011). *Rethinking Faith: A Constructive Practical Theology*. Fortress Press.
- Poling, J. N. (2012). Ambiguity in God and Humans. *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 22(1).
- Prokes, M. T. (1996). *Toward a theology of the body*. Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans.
- Rahner, K. (1970). *The Trinity*. New York: Herder & Herder.

- Ramsay, N. J. (2004). *Pastoral care and counseling: Redefining the paradigms*. Abingdon Press.
- Rich, A. (1980). Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence. *Signs*, 5(4, Women: Sex and Sexuality), 631-660.
- Robinson, M. (2002). Bisexuality and the Seduction by the Uncertain. Retrieved March 3, 2013 from <http://www.margaretrobinson.com/scholarly/bisexuality.html>
- Rogers, E. F., Jr. (1999). *Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way into the Triune God*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Roscoe, W. (1994). How to become a berdache. In G. Herdt (ed.) *Third sex, third gender: Beyond sexual dimorphism in culture and history*, New York: Zone Books.
- Ruether, R. R. (1983). *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Schaus, M. (2006). *Women And Gender in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopedia*. New York, Routledge.
- Schüssler Fiorenza, E. (1983). *In Memory of Her. A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, New York, NY: Crossroad.
- Siker, J. S. (2007). *Homosexuality and religion : An encyclopedia*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press.
- Smith, A. (1982). *The relational self: ethics & therapy from a Black church perspective*. Nashville: Abingdon.
- Stone, K., ed. (2001). *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
- Storms, M. D. (1979). Sexual orientation and self-perception. In P. Pliner, K. R. Blankenstein, & I. M. Spigel (Eds.). *Advances in the study of Communication and affect: Vol. 5. Perception of emotions in self and others*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Stuart, E. (1997). *Religion is a queer thing : A guide to the christian faith for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people*. London ; Washington: Cassell.
- Stuart, E. (2003). *Gay and lesbian theologies : Repetitions with critical difference*. Aldershot, Hampshire, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Tanis, J. E. (2003). *Trans-gendered : Theology, ministry, and communities of faith*. Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press.
- Thatcher, A. and Stuart, E., eds. (1996). *Christian Perspectives on Sexuality and Gender*. Grand Rapids, Leominster: Eerdmans, Gracewing.
- Thatcher, T. (2006). *Jesus the riddler: the power of ambiguity in the Gospels*. Westminster John Knox Press.
- Tillich, P. (1951). *Systematic theology* (Vol. 1, p. 20). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Townes, E. (1998). *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African American Health Care and A Womanist Ethic of Care*, Continuum.

- Townes, E. (2006). *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, Palgrave Macmillan Press.
- Tracy, D. (1975/1996). *Blessed rage for order: The new pluralism in theology : With a new preface*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tracy, D. (1994). *Plurality and ambiguity: Hermeneutics, religion, hope*. University of Chicago Press.
- Turner, V. W. (1969/1995). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Tutu, D. (2008). Ubuntu Philosophy & Meaning. Retrieved February 28, 2013 from <http://www.ubuntu.thiyagaraaj.com/Home/about-ubuntu/ubuntu-philosophy-meaning>
- Volf, M. and Welker, M. ed. (2001). *God's Life in Trinity*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Warner, D. (2004). Towards a queer research methodology. *Qualitative Research In Psychology*, 1(4), 321-337. doi:10.1191/1478088704qp021oa
- Watkins Ali, C. A. (1999). *Survival & Liberation: Pastoral Theology in African American Context*. Chalice Press.
- Way, P. (2005). *Created by God: Pastoral Care for All God's Creatures*. St. Louis: Chalice Press.
- Weems, R. J. (1995). *Battered love: Marriage, sex, and violence in the Hebrew prophets*. Overtures to biblical theology. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- West, T. C. (2006). *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism And Women's Lives Matter*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- West, T. C. (2006). *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter*. Westminster John Knox Press.
- Whitehead, J. C. (2010). *Constructing a neuroscientific pastoral theology of fear and hope*. PhD Doctoral, University of Denver, Denver, CO.
- Wilchins, R. A. (2004). *Queer theory, gender theory : An instant primer* (1st ed.). Los Angeles, Calif.: Alyson Books.
- Wilkerson, W. S. (2007). *Ambiguity and sexuality. A theory of sexual identity*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Williams, D. S. (1993). *Sisters in the wilderness: The challenge of womanist God-talk*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books.

## APPENDIX A

### Sample questions for reflexive interviews and group discussion

1. You have identified yourself as “ambiguous.” How do you define that word? Why is it an important word to describe your identity?
2. As you think about your Christian faith, is there a part of your faith that you would say has helped you make sense of your ambiguous identity?
  - a. Are there any bible verses or bible stories that are important to understanding your ambiguity?
  - b. Are there any people in the bible that you identify with? In what way?
  - c. Are there any images or metaphors from the Christian tradition that speak to you as an ambiguous person?
  - d. Are there any beliefs or themes from your faith that are important to living as a person with ambiguity?
3. Would you describe your ambiguity as a gift? As having a divine purpose? Or would you describe it as being a burden? Or as a “cross to bear?”
4. Describe your Christian community/congregation? How would you describe your involvement with the community/congregation?
5. As you think about your participation in a Christian community, is there anything the congregation has done that you have found helpful or supportive in living your ambiguity?
  - a. Are there specific ways the congregation has made you feel welcome and/or accepted?
  - b. Are there any experiences you’ve had in a worship service when you felt your ambiguity was recognized and/or celebrated?
  - c. Are there things the congregation could do better in acknowledging and/or supporting you an ambiguous person?
  - d. Are there specific ways that persons have provide support or care as you made sense of your ambiguous identity?
6. Have you ever thought about your ambiguous identity as taking a stand against the binary categories of our culture?
  - a. In light of our dominant culture’s tendency to reject anyone outside of the binary norms, is there anything that helps you claim your ambiguous identity despite these cultural messages?



- b. Would you consider your ambiguous identity as an act of “resistance” against these messages? If you wouldn’t use the word “resistance,” is there another word to describe your ambiguous identity vis-à-vis these binary norms?
7. Is there anything else about your experience of ambiguity that you haven’t named, that would be important for you to name now?
8. Our conversation may have (or seemed to have) raised some difficult/painful experiences. I want to make sure that you feel supported as we come to a close. Do you sense that you might need someone to process any of these experiences with? If so, would it be helpful for you if I introduced you to a pastor or counselor or spiritual director who could help? (Or do you already have a support network?)

## APPENDIX B

### Survey

#### Following reflexive interviews and group discussion

- 1) You have described several ideas relating your faith and your experience of ambiguity. On a scale from 1-5, how important would you say these ideas are in your life?

---

5	4	3	2	1
Very		Somewhat		Not important
Important		important		

- 2) How much have your ideas about faith and ambiguity changed as a result of our conversation?

---

5	4	3	2	1
Very		Somewhat		Not important
Important		important		

3) If your ideas have changed because of our conversation, what has changed?

---

---

---

---

4) Is there anything you didn't mention in our conversation about faith and ambiguity that you want to mention now?

---

---

---

---

## APPENDIX C

### Telephone Screening Questions

Thank you for your interest in the project. I'd like to ask you a few questions to make sure you meet the criteria for participating. If you meet all the criteria, then we can move to the next step in the process.

- 1) How did you find out about the project?
- 2) Are you at least 18 years old?
- 3) Do you live within 100 miles of Denver?
- 4) This study is interested in interviewing people who identify as "ambiguous." What we mean by "ambiguous" is someone who experiences their body as in-between the binary categories most common in our culture. For example, we're interested in talking with people who identify their bodies as in-between the binary categories of abled/disabled. Or, for example, people who identify as in-between the binary categories of female/male or gay/straight. Another example would be those who identify as bi-racial. Now that you have heard a brief description of "ambiguity," would you say that this word describes your experience?
- 5) If yes, how would you describe your identity as an ambiguous person?
- 6) Would you be willing to talk about your ambiguous identity and your religious beliefs with a small group of others who also identify as ambiguous?
- 7) Do you identify as a Christian?
- 8) If yes, how long have you been active in Christian congregations?
- 9) Can you describe one of your favorite bible stories or biblical characters? Why is this story/character important to you?
- 10) During the past 12 months, how often have you attended worship services?

If YES: Thank you for answering all those questions. Your experience meets the criteria for our project. So the next step in the process is to send you an information packet. Can you give me a mailing address where I can send you the packet?

If NO: Thank you for answering all those questions. Your experience doesn't meet all the criteria for our project. We are grateful that you have taken the time for this conversation, but won't be able to interview you for the project.