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# "Femme Fatales of Faith": Queer and "Deviant" Performances of Femme Within Western Protestant Culture

## Abstract

Women and queer folk are changing the religious landscape of Christianity in America, and the scope of visibility for these figures and their apostolic endeavors is widening as more and more Christians are seeking out communities rooted in doctrines of love and connection rather than exclusion and hegemonic piety. Thinking on this phenomenon, this dissertation focuses on the intersectional dilemmas of faith practice and rhetorical discourse with Western Christianity, particularly as it revolves around those female pastors and clergy - considered "dangerous" by many within the church - who are advocating for a more inclusionary church space. By conducting a rhetorically-motivated investigation centered within feminist and religious dialogues, this project attempts to answer the following questions: How can the *femme fatale*, as read through a lens of queer performativity, be a hallmark of identity-making for women within religious spaces? How does the rhetorical act of confession, specifically the memoir, work as a performative tool of resistance when used by the "*femme fatales of faith*" What do the alternative and 'out-law' narratives and embodiments of Nadia Bolz-Weber, Paula Stone Williams, and Pamela Lightsey speak to in terms of female church leaders marking themselves as "*femme fatales of faith*?"

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“*Femme fatales* of Faith:” Queer and ‘Deviant’  
Performances of *Femme* within Western Protestant Culture

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Faculty of Arts and Humanities  
University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

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by  
Kelsey W. Minnick  
June 2019  
Advisor: Darrin Hicks

Author: Kelsey W. Minnick  
Title: “*Femme fatales* of Faith:” Queer and ‘Deviant’ Performances of *Femme* within Western Protestant Culture  
Advisor: Darrin Hicks  
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## ABSTRACT

Women and queer folk are changing the religious landscape of Christianity in America, and the scope of visibility for these figures and their apostolic endeavors is widening as more and more Christians are seeking out communities rooted in doctrines of love and connection rather than exclusion and hegemonic piety. Thinking on this phenomenon, this dissertation focuses on the intersectional dilemmas of faith practice and rhetorical discourse with Western Christianity, particularly as it revolves around those female pastors and clergy—considered “dangerous” by many within the church—who are advocating for a more inclusionary church space. By conducting a rhetorically-motivated investigation centered within feminist and religious dialogues, this project attempts to answer the following questions: How can the *femme fatale*, as read through a lens of queer performativity, be a hallmark of identity-making for women within religious spaces? How does the rhetorical act of confession, specifically the memoir, work as a performative tool of resistance when used by the “*femme fatales* of faith?” What do the alternative and ‘out-law’ narratives and embodiments of Nadia Bolz-Weber, Paula Stone Williams, and Pamela Lightsey speak to in terms of female church leaders marking themselves as “*femme fatales* of faith?”

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

The sanctuary was large—an old synagogue renovated in the late 2000s—but it was crowded that day and felt much smaller than usual. I had been coming here most Sundays for the past two years, my husband and some other close friends usually joining me during those times. Denver Community Church (DCC) had branded itself as Christian, missional, and, recently, inclusive—three phrases that had never gone together in my spiritual vocabulary. I was excited to re-explore the church in a space that aligned with my feminist and activist beliefs. On this particular Sunday, in the wake of DCC announcing that it was publicly accepting/affirming of the LGBTQ community in the Spring of 2017, I sat awaiting that morning’s lecture with much anticipation. Every summer over the span of five or six weeks, DCC hosts guest speakers for the Sunday services—bringing voices from all over the Denver area to preach. When the speaker for that day walked up onto the stage, you could feel the immediate tension in the room—both from those who were unsure of who this person was and from those who were, for the first time, seeing a member of their own community at the pulpit. Dr. Paula Stone Williams, a transwoman pastor and counselor based in Colorado, began the morning with reading scripture—the story of the prodigal son. A popular biblical story, Williams used this parable from the book of Luke to tell her own story: of transitioning, losing her community, and establishing hope through her new life as a woman of faith. She was

soft-spoken, yet theatric in cadence. She smiled often throughout her sermon—even if it didn't reach her eyes.

As I sat and listened to her speak, my throat tightened and my eyes began to water. Even after attending DCC for almost two years, I never thought I could feel *truly* at home in a church space again—not after everything I had seen go on in “the name of God” at the hands of the Christian church. Not after the harassment, gas-lighting, and division that had plagued my religious upbringing. But here was a kindred spirit: a woman—ridiculed, persecuted, and called a heretic by her peers—speaking to my soul about love, inclusion, and storytelling as faith works.

Growing up in a Pentecostal Christian household in rural South Carolina, I knew very early on in life what my gendered and sexual aesthetic was meant to portray to the world: docility in my actions, subservience to God and my future husband, and the absence of all sexual desire until marriage. I would go so far as to say that this wasn't just a regional “Bible-belt” ideology, but a strongly historicized and universal image of the Christian woman. This archetypal image of the *good* woman was not even a purely social construction—there was biblical precedent for the female's endless journey out of sinfulness and into sanctity.

When I first began conceptualizing this project, I knew I would be reaching into a very deep and old wound—both within the history of the Christian church and within myself. The “woman's story” within Christianity is a history that is to be both celebrated and rebuked, especially within the Western doctrine. Originating with hegemonic, masculine origins of biblical interpretation, Christianity's timeline is wrought with anti-

feminist rhetoric that demonizes any form of performance—particularly sexual—that falls outside of those heteronormative and supremacist understandings of order and rule. From the immediate threat of Eve as the temptress in Genesis, to the Salem witch trials of the 1600s, to the “Billy Graham Rule” or “Pence Rule” of the late 1900s and early 2000s—the female body has always been a social outlier within systemic religion. What is interesting to note, however, is that the positionality of outlier (*outside*, but *within*) has afforded women a space of connection (to the *earth*, to the *body*, to one *another*) through the very realm of abjection. The female body is an affective body because it is abject within societal hierarchy. When allowed the opportunity to channel this alterity through non-normative processes of identity formation and meaning-making, the outcome is often one that disrupts not just those spaces *outside* of systemic religion but, also, the spaces *within* the systems that created the divide. Thinking critically on the possibilities of affective and abject bodies—particularly those that play on ‘deviant’ forms of the feminine—I am proposing a project that would foster a new kind of conversation around the relationship between women and the church. This conversation is one that is rooted in intersectional and feminist discourses, cultivating rhetorics of *re-visioning* and *re-claiming* as its central priorities (instead of trauma and erasure) as they merge with both historical and contemporary rhetorics of Western Christianity. As a dissertation, this project attempts to address those core problems that undergird the relational dynamics of Christianity and gender through both an academic and experiential framework—addressing body, performance, and rhetoric in conjunction with one another.



## **RESEARCH CHALLENGES/MOTIVATIONS**

### *Gendered Expression within the Public/Private Dichotomy*

There are three specific challenges that have significantly affected the role of women as contributors/practitioners within Christianity on both a historical and contemporary scale. The first challenge is the gendering of thought and language as it applies to the binary of public versus private space, overflowing into public versus private expression. The gendered separation of the “public” and “private” realm dates to Aristotle and is still a contested issue in political and social policy today. Women have categorically been limited and diminished as a gender to the realm of the private—they are the “caregivers” and the “homemakers.” The lines of the public and private realms are blurred with the intervention of political and social thought into religious space, but the relegation of women to the “behind the scenes” work of organization and policy-making is still present. While the gendered language and oppressive spatial/corporeal confinements of women that were present in the doctrines of philosophers like Aristotle have understandably been refuted through modern philosophical consideration over the past century, the ideology that grounded the gendered separation of those public and private spheres is not so easily erased. Merging together the disparaging discourses of religious and political affiliation, boundaries begin to blur and conflate when it comes to the realities and lives of women, people of color, and non-conforming folks who disrupt the traditional, dichotomous classification of operations.

Sarah and Angelina Grimke were two extremely vocal advocates in the eighteenth and nineteenth century for of women and minorities in the church, focusing heavily on

the role of women in public service and policy. In the early 1800s, the leaders of the Congregational churches in Massachusetts circulated a “Pastoral Letter” to each of their congregations—stating explicitly that the role of the woman was relegated to the private sector:

III. We invite your attention to the dangers which at present seem to threaten the female character with wide-spread and permanent injury. The appropriate duties and influence of woman are clearly stated in the New Testament. Those duties and that influence are unobtrusive and private, but the source of mighty power. When the mild, dependent, softening influence of woman upon the sternness of man’s opinions is fully exercised, society feels the effects of it in a thousand forms. [...] We appreciate the unostentatious prayers and efforts of woman in advancing the cause of religion at home and abroad; in Sabbath-schools; in leading religious inquirers to the pastors for instruction; and in all such associated effort as becomes the modesty of her sex; and earnestly hope that she may abound more and more in these labors of piety and love. But when she assumes the place and tone of man as a public reformer, our care and protection of her seem unnecessary, we put ourselves in self-defense against her; she yields the power which God has given her for protection, and her character becomes *unnatural*. (“Pastoral Letter”, emphasis added)

Though no specific mention of either Grimke sister was present in the letter, it was very clear at the time that both Sarah and Angelina were the primary culprits of those statements being served by the pastorate. Sarah Grimke responded to these claims in the third letter of her series, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes*, in which she states:

No one can desire more earnestly than I do, that woman may move exactly in the sphere which her Creator has assigned to her; and I believe her having been displaced from that sphere has introduced confusion into the world. It is, therefore, of vast importance to herself and to all the rational creation, that she should ascertain what are her duties and her privileges as a responsible and immortal being. [...] How monstrous, how anti-Christian, is the doctrine that woman is to be dependent on man! Where, in all the sacred Scriptures, is this taught? Alas! she has too well learned the lesson, which MAN has labored to teach her. [...] She must feel, if she feels rightly, that she is fulfilling one of the important duties laid upon her as an accountable being, and that her character, instead of being "unnatural," is in exact accordance with the will of Him to whom,

and to no other, she is responsible for the talents and the gifts confided to her.  
(Grimke)

Grimke made it very clear to those who had ulterior ideas of female influence within the religious sphere that her space—and the space of every woman—was to be just as “public” as that of male practice. Many seem to have forgotten the zealousness of Grimke in the modern-day Protestant church, most likely due to the shift in sexist-religious oppression becoming more and more subtle (yet no less sinister) and intrinsic within “progressive” religious practice. The current climate of Western Protestantism seems to still prioritize the relegation of female work to the private realm and—even in those instances where female pastors are encouraged on the public platform—the rhetoric is still expected to abide by the societal rules of public/private expression. Vulnerability, confession, and struggle are not given weight within the public sector of address, as these do not reflect the masculine values of public discourse. I’ve seen the paradox of progressivism that encourages female leadership but insists on those women conforming to a masculine embodiment of public address. We have not quite escaped this divide.

#### *Sexual Censorship within the Church*

The second challenge this project stems from is the erasure and censorship of female sexuality within Western Christian doctrine and practice. This is an immediate continuation of problem one—wherein sexuality is relegated to the realm of the private and that which is private is censored in (religious) public discourse. Most conversations around religious sexuality focus on the ways in which female sexuality and/or robust sexual performance in any form inhibit religious growth or vice versa. There are only a very small amount of conversations happening in academia or the church that focus on

the ways in which religious affiliation and sexuality can and should work together outside of a heteronormative, monogamous, or “missionary” space. There are obvious biblical connections to the danger of feminine sexual immorality; the book of Proverbs goes into detail on the chronicling the downfall of the wayward woman. One particular verse (a favorite of mine) from the New Living Translation that stands out in this endeavor is Proverbs 30:20, which states that “an adulterous woman consumes a man, then wipes her mouth and says, What’s wrong with that?” How deliciously monstrous! Sentiments such as this are often used to affirm the persistent, religious dichotomy of womanhood. This kind of polarizing, gendered rhetoric also provides religious leadership with scriptural support for practices of censorship and erasure upon female sexuality within the Church.

This underlying challenge of villainizing female sexuality has often emerged in contemporary scandal, as well. One of the most recent instances of public debate on female sexuality within the religious public realm involved Beth Moore. Moore is a prominent evangelist, author, and founder of *Living Proof Ministries*—a bible-based organization for women out of Houston. Known for her best-selling studies that are catered to women, Moore was considered a prominent voice within the conservative, evangelical sphere—that is, a prominent “female voice.” In the Spring of 2018, Moore released a provocative and compelling blogpost titled “A Letter to my Brothers” on her website, *The LPM Blog*. In this letter, Moore outlines the ways in which she has faced continued discrimination, exploitation, and silencing by a culture that deemed her inferior because of her sex.

As a woman leader in the conservative Evangelical world, I learned early to show constant pronounced deference—not just proper respect which I was glad to

show—to male leaders and, when placed in situations to serve alongside them, to do so apologetically. I issued disclaimers ad nauseam. I wore flats instead of heels when I knew I'd be serving alongside a man of shorter stature, so I wouldn't be taller than he. I've ridden elevators in hotels packed with fellow leaders who were serving at the same event and not been spoken to and, even more awkwardly, in the same vehicles where I was never acknowledged. I've been in team meetings where I was either ignored or made fun of, the latter of which I was expected to understand was all in good fun. I am a laugher. [...] I've been talked down to by male seminary students and held my tongue when I wanted to say, "Brother, I was getting up before dawn to pray and to pore over the Scriptures when you were still in your pull ups. (Moore)

Moore is one of many women who, upon entering ministry, have written about the loneliness and exile that comes with being a woman pursuing leadership in the Protestant church—particularly within more conservative spaces. But silencing and mocking were not the only issues that arose because of her sex—Moore was also sexualized in the same vain.

About a year ago I had an opportunity to meet a theologian I'd long respected. I'd read virtually every book he'd written. I'd looked so forward to getting to share a meal with him and talk theology. The instant I met him, he looked me up and down, smiled approvingly and said, "You are better looking than \_\_\_\_\_." He didn't leave it blank. He filled it in with the name of another woman Bible teacher. These examples may seem fairly benign in light of recent scandals of sexual abuse and assault coming to light but the attitudes are growing from the same dangerously malignant root. Many women have experienced horrific abuses within the power structures of our Christian world. Being any part of shaping misogynistic attitudes, whether or not they result in criminal behaviors, is sinful and harmful and produces terrible fruit. It also paints us continually as weak-willed women and seductresses. I think I can speak for many of us when I say we are neither interested in reducing or seducing our brothers. (Moore)

What made this pronouncement so profound was the incongruity of its message within the traditional themes of *Life-Proof Ministries*, as well as Moore's seeming awareness of how her primarily conservative following would read this text. For someone with as much fame and power as Moore to risk her "witness" with a letter denouncing those

“brothers” in Christ who have shown harm and grievance with their words and actions is often unheard of. These kinds of testimonies are usually met with backlash, critique, and exile (as seen with public disavowal of evangelical author Jen Hatmaker in the wake of her pro-LGBT marriage comments). Speaking on the behalf of oppressed female sexuality is unrewarded in the Christian church. Primarily stemming from the first challenge I articulated previously surrounding women and the private sphere, the public debate around this issue is often deemed too unimportant or unbiblical to be held on a public platform—that is, unless the room is full of men.

### *Queer “Deviancy”*

The third challenge—one that fully merges and encompasses the first two—is the demonization and silencing of those “deviant” or queer performances by women, particularly as they fall into the literary and stylistic trope of the *femme fatale*—the “dangerous” or “fatal” woman. The majority of those who have historically engaged with religious alterity through a queer or *femme* lens are queer women writers and thinkers such as Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, bell hooks, and Mary Daly. Queerness, as rooted in a definitional context of *resistance* and *non-normative performance* (Butler, Sedgwick, Foucault, etc.), is an essential part of the future of Christianity if it is to become a truly anti-oppressive space. If Christian churches cannot embody queerness, there will never be space for new conversation or thought outside that of the traditional, heteronormative doctrine.

By allowing the *femme fatale*, an erotic body in literature and art, to be read only through hegemonically masculine gazes/rhetorics, we severely limit the potential of

identity-making rhetorics for female-agency and power—especially for marginalized bodies. Unlike the censorship of female sexuality for the sake of religious piety, “deviant” female sexuality—including *femme* performances—are even more routinely and harshly punished in both secular and religious spaces.

Christianity has failed tremendously in responding appropriately (or at all) to sexual abuse allegations against clergy and pastoral staff. Simultaneously, the culture has made it widely known that many denominations do not tolerate any form of sexuality that falls outside of heteronormativity and monogamy (i.e. the most recent General Conference of the United Methodist Church in February 2019 adopting several resolutions that reaffirmed the church's longstanding conservative and anti-LGBTQ+ positions). We have evolved into a culture that fears consensual, queer sex more than abusive power.

In the wake of the popularized #MeToo movement of 2017, churches across the nation have wondered how best to “respond” to these stories that place women in vulnerable positions for the sake of their justice. Unfortunately, the typical response has been one of disbelief and disdain. “When gender makes women uniquely vulnerable, and inescapably inferior, the stage is set for victimization,” wrote Ruth Everhart for *Sojourners* in her autobiographical expose of the church and the #MeToo movement (Everhart). Women become doubly shamed and labeled as “seductress” in the wake of their stories, like Moore addresses in her “letter” to her male peers. Knowing that queer women are twice as likely to experience rape, assault, or victimization as heterosexual women, it begs the question—why has the church used the queer community as a

spotlight of deviancy when queer culture has been one of the most under-served communities by the church itself?

*Using the Femme fatale as a Research Discourse*

Each of these challenges bring me back full-circle to the *femme fatale*, a critical point of departure for this dissertation. In line with her role in the *film noir* genre, as well as her literary and entertainment industry proliferation, the *femme fatale* becomes construed within discourses of religion and Christianity as the dramatic, anti-heroine in relation to a more traditionally read “godly woman” of merit. Ontologically speaking, the trope of the “godly woman” is one that has permeated our histories of storytelling and religious narrative. This woman—the one upon whom God’s favor flows because of her proclivity to a nature of piety and passivity—is the woman upon which Western society bases their religiously, gendered notions of morality and goodness within ideological rhetorics. We see her positionality within the oral and written histories of orthodox religion as constantly evolving but, simultaneously, very static. She is Esther, she is Ruth, she is Mary. She uses her femininity as a channel for the desires of others. She is not Delilah, nor Jezebel, never Lilith. She never uses her femininity for selfish desire—those women are the *femme fatales* within religious literature. Moving past the Biblical narratives and Apostolic age, we see this same figure of the “godly woman” persisting with stories of Joan of Arc, Frances Willard, and Mother Teresa. These kinds of figures have created both the metaphorical and literal image of what society deems the pious female through terms of faith subscription, ethical practice, sexuality and gender expression, and race; the “godly woman” is worthy of salvation and protection. The



“deviant” female body, on the other hand, is worthy of none of these accolades. Even in present day, it is still very clear how this notion of “good” versus “bad” in terms of gender performance is present in contemporary faith rhetoric. What has happened in the wake of this dichotomous split between the *femme fatale* and the “godly woman” is a public display of oppressive rhetoric and physical erasure towards the non-conforming body. Society places these women’s behaviors and bodies within the forefront of the public eye in a very calculating manner—a once “private” body now open to scrutiny, influence, and dissent from those communities invested in the conversations around faith and ethics as it pertains to gender and sexual ideologies.

Addressing these problems as interwoven phenomena, this dissertation focuses on a recent ideological shift happening within the Christian church, centered in the bodies of non-conforming, female figures—women I call “*femme fatales* of faith.” Placing a queer lens over those religious histories of feminine “deviancy” and “dangerous” gender performances, we can more accurately re-vision and re-claim the trope of the *femme fatale* as a title of agency outside of white and cis- narratives. Reading religious, memoir-style texts as outlaw rhetorics of performativity (pulling from Ono and Sloop’s terminology), I hope to highlight the recent movement of social and theological change within Protestant Christianity that is being cultivated and led by female pastors. Combining personal narrative of my own experiences through performance writing, as well as a close critical and rhetorical reading those *femme fatales* who are navigating this arena—namely Reverend Nadia Bolz-Weber, Reverend Dr. Paula Stone Williams, and Dr. Pamela Lightsey—this project can begin to fill the gaps between religious and

rhetorical studies as they intersect along the lines of gender performance and feminist theory.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Using the framework outlined above, this dissertation hopes to answer the following questions: How is the “*femme fatale*” an ideal figure in identity-making for women within religious spaces? How can the rhetorical act of confession, specifically the memoir, be read as a performative tool of resistance when used by the “*femme fatales of faith*”? What do the narratives and performances of Reverend Nadia Bolz-Weber, Reverend Dr. Paula Stone Williams, and Dr. Pamela Lightsey tell us about female church leaders marking themselves as “dangerous” to traditional clergy and Protestant institutions by becoming “*femme fatales of faith*”?

## **IMPLICATIONS**

Analyzing the rhetorical situations of each of my case studies as literature potentials, this project explores the possible spaces and platforms in which these women’s bodies and words could create a disruptive and discursive space within hegemonic Christianity. It should be addressed in this analysis, however, that two of the three contemporary figures highlighted are white women—performing just enough of the embodiment of “good” femininity to allow them discursive space to challenge the norm without the same threat of violence or erasure that would most likely be enacted upon them had they been women of color. While this does not invalidate their positions as insightful, religious women, I do not wish this analysis to be non-intersectional; factors of race, class, and access will be taken up in the discourse. I think Dreama Moon’s work on

“good” v. “bad” white performances of gender and femininity is a necessary foundation of this work when addressed through this reflexive, intersectional lens of marking “whiteness.” Moon writes on the discursive processes by which “good white girls” are formed and marked, noting that it stems from theories of particularization of whiteness as informed by discourses of heteronormativity and femininity. Playing off formulations of the “homespace” and the truth claims associated with this reproduction of whiteness through family, gender, and socioeconomic relations, Moon’s work is necessary for my own characterizations of *femme fatales* who disrupt theories of femininity, but particularly theories of feminine *whiteness*. The *femme fatale* is a clash against the “good white girl” construct, but it still exists inside the presence of whiteness as a system of domination—which must be addressed. How are these women cultivating solidarity through queerness and connection for *all* women? Where are the disrupts and chasms within the feminist-religious counterpublic of Protestant Christianity and how are they racialized and sexualized? Religion is an extremely wrought space when it comes to implications of femininity and if disruptions against whiteness are happening within these specific spaces, it is worthy of address.

This project is important; not just to me, but to all women and queer persons who are labeled as abject and pushed out of their spiritual communities of belonging. It should be known that there is a very real political and social shift happening within the discursive spaces of feminist thought that is making room for the emergence of a faith-based practice of resistance and the aim of this project is to further that knowledge through a critical, communicative pathway. By giving space to the “*femme fatales* of

faith,” we can start changing the conversations for women, queer folk, people of color, and non-normalized bodies within the church to be more about power within rather than power over.

## **THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND PREVIOUS SCHOLARSHIP**

In this section, I will further contextualize the problematics motivating this dissertation by providing a concise contextualization and overview of the theoretical underpinnings that frame my project. The first section will include a brief review of religious rhetoric as an academic realm of study, from Augustine to Burke. Moving into a thorough mapping of the current climate around feminist-religious scholarship and rhetorical studies, I will end the chapter focusing on the intersections that promote an interrogation into feminist publics and counterpublics.

### *Rhetorics of Religion*

One of the core disciplines that this project stems from is that of religious rhetorical studies and the intersections of religion and rhetoric as discourses of thought. Religions are made through social relations and constructs, and speech and language are two of the most important tools in creating these dialectics of social and shared meaning. Religion *is* rhetoric. If a traditional understanding of rhetoric is, at its core, the act of persuasion, then the whole of religion as a concept could fall under rhetoric as a discipline and a theory—for what is religion but an attitude by which to approach the act of persuasion? It is a series of actions by which societal motives and “problems” can be addressed *through* persuasion. This is why dissemination and interpretation of scripture is

so highly revered within Christian doctrine, for persuasion is rooted in repetition and intellectual or mass support.

A classic example of this is Augustine's canonical text, *On Christian Teaching*. Written in 5<sup>th</sup> century Algeria (then Hippo), *On Christian Teaching* was meant to be read in accordance with his teachings on textual interpretation and biblical theology, religious predecessors to modern rhetorical criticism. Augustine's words can be read in an almost feverish tone, imploring the reader to think critically within the hermeneutic realm of interpretation. "There are two things on which all interpretation of scripture depends: the process of discovering what we need to learn, and the process of presenting what we have learnt" (Augustine 8, trnsld. R.P.H. Green). One of the first modern, Christian philosophers and saints to make poignant connections between religion and language, Augustine developed a prototype of "religious rhetoric" through the adaptation of hermeneutics, semiotics, and logical reasoning. Augustine is highly regarded by contemporary rhetoricians when addressing religion through any rhetorical lens, as it was his early works that created a foundational process by which religious text was to be read and distributed. And while Augustine is worthy of note as a predecessor to this analysis, especially considering both *On Christian Teaching* and *Confessions* are relevant to this project's foundational origins, much of the theory that I pull from to support my theorizations of religious rhetoric build off these ancient texts to center more around contemporary theorists of the late 1900s and early 2000s. One of the main thinkers within this contemporary timeline is Kenneth Burke and it is his proposal of logology and theories of analogy between religious and secular language/thought that allowed me to

begin critiquing gendered ideologies of religious text . Following the intersections of religious studies and rhetorical criticism, almost all lines of thought will at some point cross paths with Burke’s work on religious rhetoric, even if to challenge his propositions (as I have done myself). A renown rhetorical and literary theorist, he was a key scholar in the implementation of rhetorical understanding through discourses of language, symbolism, and action. Religion, for Burke, was a discursively rich platform for theorizing this implementation of rhetorical understanding and *The Rhetoric of Religion* addresses this connection. Religion is a persuasive space and rhetoric is how Burke believed it could best be understood. The framework through which this sort of analysis could take place was *logology*—a term pseudo-coined by Burke in reference to his work on the nature of words. Unlike theology, which is candidly defined by Burke as the study of “words about God,” logology is (also in Burkean-terms) the study of “words about words” (Burke 1). Logology is an important counter for Burke’s accompanying rhetorical frameworks, as it highlights the ways in which discriminations within ontological language create situated and hierarchical knowledge. Knowledge-making is rooted in our vocabulary and our vocabulary is rooted in systems of domination. To move forward on a project that revolves around the role of confessional rhetoric centered in feminist and religious experiences, a deeper understanding of Burke’s contributions is necessary to have a fully engaged dialogue with the concept of “rhetorics of religion.” In terms of addressing gendered language present in both theological analyses and rhetorical studies, the veil of objectivity must be removed from a clearly masculine-oriented space dominating the study of religious rhetoric. Engaging in a feminist critique of religious

address, I use Burke's central analogies to build a new theory of "Godly language" that revolves around my preferred God pronouns, which are female or non-binary. I will explain, briefly: Burke proposes that the realm of "words"—as in those words that have a "wholly naturalistic, empirical reference" (Burke 7)—can be used in an analogical interpretive aspect to reach into the dimension of "The Word" (a realm of words that is relegated to the supernatural). This process is analogical in nature because it is not linear; it does not just move from empirical to supernatural and stop. What happens, instead, is a cyclical process of borrowing by which words that were "borrowed" by the realm of the supernatural are then "borrowed" back by the realm of the empirical, again, taking on a new secular meaning that is similar-but-not-quite as the original secular term. Burke builds his analogies off masculine-oriented God-terms (He/Him/Father/Son/Man). With these God-terms holding power in the religious realm, they begin to hold power in the secular realm—creating a gendered hierarchy. I propose that we continue Burke's analysis of creating analogical connections between the supernatural and the secular; however, I insist on a refutation of only masculine terminology for God-terms. Instead, we can begin to see a potential for queer and feminine power in the secular realm, a "new dimension," if we insist on female or non-binary pronouns and identity-markers for the supernatural. This analogical addition of a "new dimension" to words by its movement from, into, and throughout the empirical and supernatural realms is the "logological justification" (8) for analogy as an interpretive method for Burke. This "new dimension" is the transcendental nature of words—the ways in which words create meaning beyond the non-verbal realm. It is here that I see the beginnings of Burke's connections to the

epistemological processes of religious rhetoric; it is the foundation of analysis that comes from an agreement on the roles of the verbal and non-verbal in terms of meaning-making and power. This connection is crucial for embarking upon a feminist rhetorical analysis of those confessional, religious texts (such as the memoir, sermon, etc.) that my research subjects use and embody in their lived experiences as *femme* pastors.

To complement Burke's analogical contribution to this project, I also pull from Wayne C. Booth and his chapter in *Radical Pluralism & Truth*, in which he addresses the deeper connections of rhetoric and religion outside of just the religious yielding of truth that rhetoric propagates (Booth 62). Booth titles this essay "Rhetoric and Religion: Are They Essentially Wedded?" Leading readers with this title to believe he is making a case for the disenfranchisement of the two as inherently connected, Booth is making the argument that both are essential to the other for any point of study within the disciplines.

My claim is not only that these two subjects, as interesting "fields," or "areas," reveal interesting relations. I want to argue that whenever any inquirer pursues rhetoric vigorously into its true habitat, whenever anyone thinks hard not only about how to persuade to belief but about the grounds of human persuasion, whenever asks honestly how it is that minds can ever meet at all through symbol systems, sooner or later that that inquirer will discover that the entire enterprise depends on belief in... well, I ask my readers to choose their own preferred God-term to complete that sentence. (Booth 64)

Booth's convictions are crucial for my dissertation and its own purposeful pulling of religious rhetorics, namely that of the confessional text. Those authors of faith—performing their words through the realm of storytelling and confession—are ripe with the same conviction: to read words of God is to know God (whatever that God may be) as we'll see in the myriad of theological definitions of God and God-speak amongst more "unorthodox" female pastors. Booth believed that for this connection between rhetoric



and belief to become apparent in study, rhetoric should not be viewed as “mere manipulation,” but rather as a resource for those instances of disagreement (64).

In a more recent volume of essays, Walter Jost and Wendy Olmsted compile an anthology titled *Rhetorical Invention & Religious Inquiry*, which explores faith through rhetoric, God speak, rhetorics of excess and the sublime, and community-building through rhetoric. Featuring authors like Booth, as well as Walter Ong, David Tracey, Stephen Webb, and Susan Shapiro, this anthology includes theoretical interventions into religious rhetoric as well as rhetoric criticisms of theological work. For any scholar like myself who is approaching religious inquiry from a communications discipline, the utility of collections like these extends beyond mere intervention and provides inquiry into those deep investigations between language, philosophy, and religion. In this vein, Michael-John DePalma’s and Jeffrey Ringer’s *Mapping Christian Rhetorics: Connecting Conversations, Charting New Territories* is similarly essential for my religious rhetorical grounding. Touching multiple intersections on rhetoric and composition and Christianity, a “mapping” of scholarship is created through a series of essays in which five sections of territory are covered. These five areas are categorized by Christianity and Rhetorical Theory, Christianity and Rhetorical Education, Christianity and Rhetorical Methodology, Christianity and Civic Engagement, and (Re)Mapping Religious Rhetorics. What DePalma and Ringer create with this anthology is less of a “read-through” text and more of a resource list for those wishing to invest interest in specific areas of faith integration within the academy. For my own purposes, Brian Jackson’s “Defining Religious Rhetoric: Scope and Consequence” and Lisa Shaver’s “The Deaconess Identity: An

Argument for Professional Churchwomen and Social Christianity” were two paramount chapters in my framing of a feminist rhetorical approach within religious text.

Classical rhetoric and religious texts hold most of their developmental similarities through their use and constructions of gendered language and power dynamics in terms of ontological ideology. By recognizing the roots of these gendered connections through religious doctrine and religious rhetorical criticism, a project with my objectives can begin to develop new thought and disruptions within the more traditional and essentialist rhetorics within the modern Christian church—moving toward a better understanding of the possibilities for non-binary thought and dialogue between intersectional feminist rhetoric and Western, Christian dialect.

#### *Feminist Rhetorics of Religion and Christianity*

Reconciling a feminist rhetoric and a religious rhetoric has been a source of contention within Christianity for decades. Questions surrounding the role of women in service and public forum, egalitarian versus complementarian beliefs of gender and race, and heteronormative sexuality politics have left the openings for feminism and Christian collaboration wrought with dissent. Yet women have been pursuing these questions and advocating for change and a realm of possibility within the Church for decades—using a rhetorical platform to merge these spaces and create a new conversation within the feminist-religious discourse. Before moving to contextualize this space in terms of public forum, I first must assess the current scholarship that is continuing to foreground the conversation within the academy in order to better frame my own place within these scholarships and conversations.

Some of the earliest records of public feminist rhetoric was situated within a religious context. In Karlyn Campbell's first volume of *Man Cannot Speak For Her*, we see a long history of prolific thinkers, writers, and activists who worked both within and against the church to advocate for equality and justice within an intersectional jurisdiction of demands. Defying those limits of "true womanhood" (Campbell 10), women like Maria Miller Stewart, Sojourner Truth, and Angelina Grimke were using their voice as a space of change—re-cultivating the rhetorical situation into a functioning space of female public address. Campbell's volume identifies this as the 'feminine' style: a variation of speech or text that builds off the women's experience and adapts to those instances of feminine-connection. She uses the analogy of craft, both the learning of and the making, to emphasize this style:

That style emerged out of their experiences as women and was adapted to the attitudes and experiences of female audiences. [...] If the process of craft-learning is applied to the rhetorical situation (and rhetoric itself is a craft), it produces discourse with certain characteristics. Such discourse will be personal in tone (crafts are learned face-to-face from a mentor), relying heavily on personal experience, anecdotes, and other examples. It will tend to be structured inductively (crafts are learned bit by bit, instance by instance, from which generalizations emerge). It will invite audience participation, including the process of testing generalizations or principles against the experiences of the audience. Audience members will be addressed as peers, with recognition of authority based on experience (more skilled craftspeople are more experienced), and efforts will be made to create identification with the experiences of the audience and those described by the speaker. (Campbell 13)

I find that Campbell's analogy of "rhetoric as craft" is applicable to the confessional and "memoir" style of audience connection, specifically when channeled through a female speaker. The women examined and addressed in this dissertation are contemporary advocates of the same pursuit of "craft" that Campbell characterizes, narrowed through a

lens of specifically religious-feminist thought. While the analogy of feminine craft is quite influential within my project's conjectures of confessional rhetoric as communal, I must state my hesitations when using Campbell within my theoretical foundations—namely, her use of traditional, empirical methods of rhetorical critique upon untraditional contexts. Outside of her insertion of the “feminine style,” Campbell often uses a tripartite standard for judging rhetorical efficacy (i.e. “grand”, “middle”, and “low” styles; conservative interrogation of political advocacy within women’s suffrage, etc.). Campbell’s Volume is a paramount piece of literature for feminist oratory history and for this reason alone is worthy of note in this analysis, despite my disagreement with her traditional limitations of rhetorical criticism.

Regarding the role of the feminist “prophetic” as an intersectional voice of change within the contemporary Christian landscape, Melissa Browning and Emily Reimer-Barry are continuing the work of “feminine style” interrogation by advocating for a pursuit of the “voices on the margins” for the future of policy and ethic within Christian rhetorical spaces.

In building on Long’s argument, we agree that preaching and the prophetic are deeply linked to witness. The people who surround the prophetic speaker are those who shape the content of the speaker’s message. As we tie this argument to the work of women religious, we are reminded that prophetic voices come not only from the “pews” but are shaped in the margins, in places where the “least of these” live, where women religious often work. Here, we are not only questioning where the prophetic is located, but also the proper location for “church.” In terms of margin and center, we believe it is necessary for the prophetic church to live in the “margins,” prioritizing lived experience as a starting point for theological reflection and prophetic speech. (Browning et al. 72)

Envisioning a new era of Christian practice in which the “concerns of the margins shape theology at the center” (72) is this dissertation’s core ethos. Browning and Reimer-Barry

contextualize this marginality-focus beautifully through their work on Catholic nuns' prophetic voice—an interesting take on women's voice, as the history of the convent is a paradoxical space of female privilege and submission. But the “feminine” style of rhetoric always boils back down to thus—highlighting the nuances and voices of marginality for the sake of universal, Christian intersectionality.

Building off this theme of feminist cultivation through critical, intersectional practice, I also look to those theorists and writers who turn their work toward the homiletic space of preaching. For this project, my research is concerned with the potentiality and limitations within the recent popularization of Protestant women preachers in the United States. Lisa Shaver addresses the role of the feminine style of ‘meaning-making’ through the homiletic in her book, *Beyond the Pulpit: Women's Rhetorical Roles in the Antebellum Religious Press*. Looking specifically at the Methodist periodicals of antebellum era to highlight how women created spaces of connection and faith-practice, Shaver's illustrations characterize the academic shift toward the ‘feminine’ within the pulpit. This shift is a primary proponent for my research questions surrounding the role of Bolz-Weber, Williams, and Lightsey as oratory leaders within the Protestant realm. Likewise, Roxanne Mountford's *The Gendered Pulpit: Preaching in American Protestant Spaces* is another significant contribution to feminist-homiletic rhetorical studies, as it interrogates the often-overlooked trials and consequences of gendering “sacred” spaces—such as pastoral leadership roles within the church. Using the grounding lens of rhetorical space, both Mountford and Shaver's works frame the bulk of the conversation supporting rhetorical interrogation into the feminist-religious. What this

framework also highlights, however, is the large gap in the conversation in terms of queer aesthetics and confessional rhetoric.

### *Publics and Counterpublics*

To discuss the possibilities of confessional rhetorics in terms of *femme fatale* discourse and communal connection, I cannot fully do so without pointing to the ongoing discussion around publics and counterpublics. This dissertation is rooted in rhetorical critique, but the much of that critical influence comes from audience-driven rhetoric and narrative. When I look at my subjects—their books, sermons, blogs, and affect that make up the space of critique—I see a discourse that is interactional and primarily driven by audience interpretation, relational dynamics, and public negotiation. Their role in public discourse has helped foster the growth of a very specific counterpublic catered and influenced by questions of feminism, sexuality, and justice within the Protestant church.

Arguably, the very possibility of a public would denote a counterpublic within the analogical systems of Burke's religious rhetoric—but what constitutes a public is still widely contested and debated upon within the philosophical and rhetorical discipline. In terms of spatiality, scholars have supported different definitions and theories over what constitutes the “public sphere” in relation to the ambiguous make-up of a public as a space, and its effects through spatial categorization and contextual temporalities. What is interesting to address within these debates, however, is that the underlying assumption of a public space is the necessity and production of democratic discourse. If the public sphere is a legitimate space of democratic dialogue, it can then be inferred that the inevitable rise and role of counterpublics was equally democratic—if antithetical to the

presumption of a *whole* in terms of experience and issue. By looking at the theoretical works produced around these spaces, I can better address how publics and counterpublics are maintained in the modern arena of discourse management and further interrogate what the role of each would play in a project that uses feminist rhetorical analysis as an interrogation into public address. Feminist discourse and dialogue—as relegated within the realm of the public sphere—is a nuanced space of critical distinction, particularly when it comes to addressing the role of feminism as both a public *and* a counterpublic. This both/and approach to feminist dialogue is reminiscent of much of the discourse around feminist theory, particularly for those scholars, activists, and persons who operate *within* systems of oppression and patriarchy to better dismantle those institutions of injustice. On a more meta-philosophical level, it stands that the female has always been forced to negotiate her position as a both/and body: biblically—both *of* man and *not* man, ontologically—both *within* man and *outside* of man.

This nuanced nature is a point of contention within feminist politics, particularly as it revolves around the creation of an “outlaw” community: creating communities where social affinity allows for emotional and physical connection. Women have often sought a feminist-led community through two camps of affinity around what constitutes “woman”—first, a connection through the naturalization of the “universal” woman or second, a series of “essential” characteristics that individual women share (Stoljar 263). Both of these camps can be easily problematized in terms of essentialist exclusion and I think that Natalie Stoljar’s concept of a “cluster” mentality is the best understanding for how social affinity should be theorized within ideal feminist publics.

The concept "woman" is a cluster concept and [...] the concept applies to a resemblance class. There is no single set of features an individual must have in order to be a woman; she is a member of the type just in case she participates in the relevant resemblance structure. (Stoljar 264)

Rita Felski reiterates this in her assertion that feminist counterpublics are essential to the feminist aesthetic:

The women's movement has offered one of the most dynamic examples of a counter-ideology in recent years to have generated an oppositional public arena for the articulation of women's needs in critical opposition to the values of a male-defined society. Like the original bourgeois public sphere, the feminist public sphere constitutes a discursive space which defines itself in terms of a common identity; here it is the shared experience of gender-based oppression which provides the mediating factor intended to unite all participants beyond their specific differences. (Felski 166)

I believe that Felski makes this argument not to just outline the possibilities and limitations of the feminist public sphere and its dual nature as a counterpublic, but also to make possible the insertion of a new conversation within the role of publics and counterpublics as umbrellas for subsequent counterpublics based on building social affinities. Not only does Western religion, namely Protestant Christianity, absolutely operate in our present-day manifestation of the public sphere—it also often finds itself with political and social alignments in terms of ideological belief. What has begun to emerge in response to this blurred church and state doctrine of policy and rhetoric is a new wave of movements characterized by two counter-ideological doctrines: intersectional feminism and progressive Christianity. Women, LGBTQ folk, persons of color, and other marginalized bodies are reclaiming the Christian faith in line with a model of intersectional feminism. The persons occupying this space (primarily women) find themselves aligned on issues of morality, social justice, and theology and are



cultivating an entire movement of rhetoric and social distribution through social media, sermons, hashtags, books, zines, blogs, etc. Pushing *against* the singular notion of concern that erases difference and operates within more mainstream, progressive social publics that have religious affiliation, the feminist-religious counterpublic creates a tension. It emerges as an interrogation into/between bourgeois mentality and radical, grassroots transformative practice as a space of resistance, change, and new social consciousness that can migrate between political, social, and religious realms.

Whereas this chapter has focused on the history of literature and theory that allowed for this project to come to fruition, Chapter Two will begin to focus on those theoretical trajectories and methodological considerations that are foregrounded in my research questions and case studies. If Chapter One is a review of the major literary and scholarly contributions in my own rhetorical fields of interest, Chapter Two is an interrogation of rhetoric as it appears within the research.

## CHAPTER TWO

Within the larger epistemological realm of rhetoric, this project takes up two major sub-genres of discourse: performativity and confession—specifically, queer performance of feminine gender constructs and rhetorics of feminist-religious confession. Each of these areas have derived from the theoretical groundwork in Chapter One and will further contextualize the motivations of this research, opening up a platform for study that is both situated and new within the academic disciplines of communication studies, women’s studies, and religious studies.

### **GENDER AND PERFORMANCE: FROM BUTLER TO THE MONSTER**

#### *Performativity as Deviant Practice*

To study how *femme*-gendered bodies choose to operate as outlier/outlaw within an institution such as Christianity, we must address the ways in which gender is a performance. Performance theory—or *performativity*, in line with Judith Butler’s work—is essential for understanding the manifestations of the gendered self, especially regarding those perpetuations/disruptions of ideological masculinity and femininity. My own theoretical introduction to performance theory was relegated to Judith Butler’s work on performativity—her essays and interviews throughout the 1990s and her most popular book, *Gender Trouble*. As a gender theorist with a heavy influence on critical literary and queer studies, Butler is best known for her contribution of performativity. She is hyper-critical of the ways in which we categorize our lived experiences through the linguistic

binaries of gender and performance. Butler often states that much of contemporary feminist theory and the conversations around “gender” are too dichotomous in nature, reminding us that gender and sexuality must be addressed from a lens outside of heteronormative histories to be truly understood. Performance, for Butler, was the crux of understanding how corporeal and metaphorical stylization of gender manifested in mainstream culture.

In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. (*Gender Trouble* 185).

What this proposition addresses, within the context of feminist and queer theory, is that the signifiers of gender identity and expression are not meant to be read as inherent or biological (in the generalist of terms) but *naturalized performances* that align with societal norms and pressures on the body. They are a “public regulation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body” (*Gender Trouble* 185). Performativity creates one’s gender constitution—constitution, in this sense, referring to Butler’s ideas “of acts to mean both that which constitutes meaning and that through which meaning is performed or enacted” (“Performative Acts” 521).

Butler’s pulls from Jacques Derrida’s theories of performatives to further her theory of performativity as rooted in repetition. Derrida reformulates performance as speech acts by emphasizing the *iterability* that repetition provides as validating performance. Butler relies heavily on this notion of iterability, stating that it is “the

vehicle through which ontological effects are established” (“Gender as performance: an interview” 236). Repetition of action allows for *naming*:

[i]f a performative provisionally succeeds (and I will suggest that ‘success’ is always and only provisional), then it is not because an intention successfully governs the action of speech, but only because that action echoes prior actions, and *accumulates the force of authority through the repetition of citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices.* (*Bodies That Matter* 226–27)

Performance and rhetoric are harmonious players within this dissertation project, building off one another to renew the processes of textual analysis as rooted in the body.

Bernadette Calafell theorizes this rhetorical performance connection as a queer space of embodiment, using primarily Latina/o and Chicana feminist text and thought as an example of this action. Calafell makes a call for more academics to embrace “theories of the flesh” (*Latina/o Communication Studies: Theorizing Performance* 8) in their rhetorical work, citing the ways in which texts centered around queer Chicana/o identities have used performative writing to open up the space of rhetorical theory—particularly through feminist and queer analysis. Calafell’s theories of rhetoric as performances of textual embodiment enhance the intelligibility of this project’s attempt to theorize textual rhetorics as excesses of body rhetoric.

Thinking outside of commercialized understandings of the hetero-, cis-, and white *femme fatale*, this dissertation makes a claim for a re-visioning of the *femme fatale* as I believe she was meant to be seen—queer, powerful, and centered in a discourse of/for/by woman. This reclaiming narrative, when built off Butler and Calafell interventions into rhetorics of bodily performance, can be further theorized within the context of disidentification theory and difference.

Performance scholarship as applied in this project is rooted in Butler's constitutive iterations through the body and queered through Calafell's embracement of "theories of the flesh"—which leads me to José Esteban Muñoz's theory of disidentificaiton. The modern *femme fatale*—as I choose to write her—has her power and affect rooted in a performance of queerness that comes through a *disidentification* with those non-intersectional characteristics of the traditional stories of "fatal" women. In doing so, she allows for the actions aligned with "dangerous" womanhood to be re-read as a transformative gender practice: one that promotes the erotic as necessary for growth. I use disidentification in alignment with Muñoz's as a performance-based practice rooted in a *differential conscious* and formed through intersectional signification as a "reclaiming" tactic for those stereotypes and identities that were limited by "ideological restrictions implicit in an identificatory site" (Muñoz 7).

Muñoz's disidentification theory is meant to foster connections on "difference" from "within." The *femme fatale* archetype, for Muñoz, would be that "disidentifying subject" that holds on to its object of invention and "invest[s] it with new life" (12). It is important to note, here, that Muñoz proposed this theory for queer persons of color. I wish to use Muñoz's theory for my own project of queering the *femme fatale* through a rhetoric of reclamation and affinity within systems of domination (religious and feminist counterpublics), but it must be addressed that many of the women embodying this performance are queer white women, with a few queer women of color also occupying this space. Moving forward in this project, this will not change my own use of disidentification theory, but it will absolutely affect the ways in which I will ask my

readers to theorize and understand queerness. Queerness, as I stated earlier, is definitionally rooted in the possibilities of unintelligible difference:

‘Queer’ means strange, weird, oblique. If it was originally used in a derogatory sense, it is now proudly revindicated by those who were looked down upon with such adjectives. The queer theory in some aspects presents a line of continuity with gender theories, for others it introduces new and even more radical elements that break away from previous thought. (Palazzani 44)

This understanding of queerness can be seen as a furthering of Derrida’s theory of *différance*. The core of *différance* is grounded in those performances that embody orders of opposition, spaces of resistance, and abjection.

we must be permitted to refer to an order which no longer belongs to sensibility. But neither can it belong to intelligibility, to the ideality which is not fortuitously affiliated with the objectivity of therein or understanding. Here, therefore, we must let ourselves refer to an order that resists the opposition, one of the founding oppositions of philosophy, between the sensible and the intelligible. (Derrida 5)

Throughout this dissertation, queerness should be read rhetorically as a mark of destabilization within the public sphere of heteronormativity. Using queerness in this way, I promote a queering of the *femme fatale* through a lens of monstrous performance, addressing her role as an archetype within the feminist-religious counterpublic.

### *Monstrosity and Performance*

Monstrosity and performativity are aligned discursively through a focus on the bodily realm, as it is read in a larger context. Both discourses rely on the fears and manifestations of “otherness.” In her recent book, *Monstrosity, Performance, and Race in Contemporary Culture*, Calafell states that these connections between demonization and the “making of monsters” in terms of alignment with racial and gender performances is not a new phenomenon.

I share these stories because they are representative of how we are made monsters, [...] how our difference, or Otherness, gets constructed as monstrosity in a world that has become more and more conservative. I am interested in the ways cultural anxieties and fears around Otherness, whether they are about race, class, gender sexuality, body size, or ability, manifest themselves in representations of both literal and symbolic monstrosity. (*Monstrosity, Performance, and Race* 4)

When we think of monsters, what do we see? Better yet—when we *create* monsters, what do we *want* to see? Jeffrey Cohen crafted the seven theses of monster culture; stating that a monster is, first and foremost, a cultural creation: “The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster only exists to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically “that which reveals,” “that which warns,” a glyph that seeks a hierophant” (Cohen 4). A monster is so much more than our simplistic understandings of “fear”—a monster is a creature of fascination, reality and fantasy, crisis, and longing. To create the monster is to know the monster; however, we configure monstrous bodies as that which is unknown and, therefore, abject. We need monsters to understand ourselves without necessarily revealing those same fascinations and longings that would render us to the wrath of “civil” society. This is the space of abjection Julia Kristeva theorizes—the spaces in which a body is rendered visibly-invisible to the powers of identification.

what is abject, [...] is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses. A certain "ego" that merged with its master, a superego, has flatly driven it away. It lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter's rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master. Without a sign (for him), it beseeches a discharge, a convulsion, a crying out. To each ego its object, to each superego its abject. (Kristeva 2)

The monster is a creature of cultural abjection, but the *femme fatale* as monster is much more succinct in its creation. The *femme fatale* creates her performance based on very specific fears—fears surrounding gender fluidity, racialization, maternal ambivalence, feminine excess, and sexual-power. Stacy Holman Jones and Anne Harris make these connections in their essay, “Monsters, Desire, and the Creative Queer Body.” Looking at the ways in which *femme* sexuality and queerness become read as monstrous in the bodily realm, Jones and Harris begin to play with the manifestations of bodies as in/visible and un/intelligible.

We write the power of being seen but not understood, of passing unnoticed, of subverting sexual and gender fixities by simply moving and speaking through human landscapes, like Frankenstein’s monster (like Mary Shelley). We don’t ask why queer desires and embodiments continue to be seen, read, and understood as monstrous; rather, we reckon with monstrosity as a kind of creatively queer embodiment of gender, sexuality and desire. (Jones and Harris 519)

Excess, when manifested through gender constitution, becomes something to fear; it defies the preconceived borders of containment and disrupts typical categorization, queering itself into a monstrous performance of fantastical unintelligibility. The monstrous body, according to Jones and Harris, creatively *becomes* a queer body because of its very nature of difference. More so, the female body is *already* monstrous in its relation to the male fantasy because of its unintelligibility. In her essay, “Lesbian Bodies: Tribades, tomboys and tarts” from *Sexy Bodies: the strange carnalities of feminism*, Barbara Creed states that the lesbian is othered first and foremost because she is woman.

Regardless of her sexual preferences, woman in whatever form—whether straight or lesbian—has been variously depicted as a narcissist, sex-fiend, creature, tomboy, vampire, man-eater, child, nun, virgin. One does not need a specific kind of body to become—or to be seen as—a lesbian. All female bodies represent the threat or potential (depending how you view it) of lesbianism. (Creed 87)



Some common themes begin to emerge when we read monstrosity, femininity, and performativity together through this theoretical lens, particularly the notion of desire as it interweaves with action. Butler saw desire as a localized within the “self” (*Gender Trouble* 186) and displaced from consciousness. This is reminiscent of Jeffrey Cohen’s theses, in which the “fear of the monster is really a kind of desire” (Cohen 16). We fear the *femme fatale* because she represents a desire for the unintelligible within the lens of traditional gender performance. She is *queered* by her very nature of being a monster—a being that destabilizes sexual norms and holds its potential in the wake of fear *as* desire and vice versa.

## **THE FEMME FATALE**

### *Contextualizing Femme*

Who is the *femme* in contemporary culture? Is she the pretender? The prostitute? The invisible lesbian? Is the *femme* only articulated through the context of the butch? Or is she an agent of “feminist consciousness” that allows a break from the virgin/whore dichotomy? A queer figure producing their own dialectic-desirability that is both transgressive and liberating—she is the post-modern ‘bad girl’ that is neither bad nor girl.

In 2016, *beautiful.bizarre* magazine curated an art exhibit titled “*Femme to Femme fatale: The Feminine in Contemporary Art*” at the Modern Eden Gallery in San Francisco. Featuring works from a diverse group of artists from various styles and genres, the concept aimed to explore the “feminine” in contemporary art and society. Editor in chief of *beautiful.bizarre*, Danijela Krha, explained that the goal of the exhibit was to

take the magazine's commitment to inclusivity amongst female artists and curate a show meant to enlighten the modern eye to femininity and its ever-changing appearance.

In one lifetime a woman can be all of these things. Big and small, strong and weak, dominant and submissive, leader and nurturer, she shrinks then expands, she grows and evolves. The life of the modern woman is still riddled with difficulties. We have worked hard to empower ourselves in this patriarchal society. Some have succeeded and others still struggle. Trying to fit in and stand out, to stay healthy, relevant, career driven and nurturing, who are we in today's modern world? (Violetta, quoting Krha)

Krha and her contributors are not the only ones still asking this question. The *femme* figure is one that is ever undefinable, particularly in the context of LGBTQ spaces. The *femme* is both excessive, yet invisible. The *femme* is queer—yet deemed a hetero- desire? The *femme* is a character of trope—yet constantly evolving? Which is it: life imitating art or art imitating life? Thinking through this project's goals of contextualizing the *femme fatale* through a religious and mythological lens, I find it is first and foremost important to interrogate the ways in which the identifier of *femme* has been used in the context of queer circles, as this will heavily influence how we construct the *femme fatale* within a religious context.

My first exposure to the ideology of *femme* was a naïve-labeling of aesthetic practices within a heteronormative context. I had heard the terms “high *femme*” and “low *femme*” in my interactions at queer bars and social scenes while I was living in Atlanta in the early 2010s, but I assumed the terms applied solely to the physical attributes that set many of the women in question apart from their more masculine or feminine partners and acquaintances. In fact, I had begun to associate *femme* as a scale upon which to be judged within the confines of capitalist markets and consumerism—it was all about “the look”.

However, I have learned over the years that a *femme* is not just an aesthetic within the queer framework—it is a body politic engrossed in decades of vilification, invisibility, and questioning from the LGBTQ community.

In their collection of essays, Laura Harris and Liz Crocker create *Femme: Feminist, Lesbians, & Bad Girls*. Exploring the ways in which ‘*femme*’ as an identity marker has been constructed, taken apart, vilified, and historicized through the context of feminism, queer culture, and butch-*femme* dichotomies, Harris and Crocker propose in the book jacket’s excerpt that the collection dedicated to the “*femme* voices as they speak to the intersections between - and push the envelope of - queer, feminist, and lesbian thought”. Harris and Crocker are very clear that their commitment to taking up the *femme* as a subject identity is not an attempt to conflate “desire with political practice” (*Femme* 3). Rather, their project “takes as its subject a femininity that is transgressive, disruptive, and *chosen*” (“An Introduction to Sustaining *Femme* Gender” 3, emphasis added). The *femme* has been historically denied its radical nature because of its coding within a heterosexual context. This reification of expectations of *femme* come to a crashing halt in alternative spaces of power—particularly those in which women are expected to adopt masculine tendencies in order to “climb the ladder” of success in corporate America. Thus, the *femme* has no place within heteronormative standards of daily performance.

What is necessary, then, is a “model of *femme* as a sustained gender identity” (“An Introduction to Sustaining *Femme* Gender” 5) that is intentional and radical and moves beyond the binary thinking within traditionalist lesbian genres of thought. For the *femme fatale* to be taken up as a queer subject within this dissertation, a case must be

made for the queer ontology of *femme*. As prominent *femme*-lesbian activist Madeline Davis writes, “[*femmes*] are the queerest of the queer” (“An Introduction to Sustaining *Femme* Gender” 4). Harris and Crocker seem to agree with this sentiment and highlight works that focus on revisioning the *femme* as a multi-modal body/identity, rooted in “desiring relationships”.

Rather than being defined by the outer trappings of femininity, *femme* gender is linked to a particular set of desiring relationships which occurs in the butch-*femme* as well as other sites. By understanding *femme* as a sustained gender identity, we avoid the entrapment of *femme* in either too stable—one that sees femininity as biologically assigned—or too flexible—one that sees *femme* as one of many costumes—an identity category. (“An Introduction to Sustaining *Femme* Gender” 5)

In their featured essay, “Bad Girls: Sex, Class, and Feminist Agency,” Harris and Crocker begin to weave their connection to this project’s discursive goals—supporting a notion of *femme fatale* as a *femme* identity within the queer diaspora of aesthetics and practice. This is done, namely, through an interrogation of desire as an agentic promise. Marking the distinct differences between Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues* and Madeline Davis’ “The *Femme* Tapes,” Harris and Crocker denounce the premise that *femme* desires should be conflated to either heterosexuality or invisibility. Rather, they promote the contradictory action of “*femme* cruising” to dismantle this, quoting Davis:

Some of my partners were very feminine men. They were Sal Mineo when he was a pretty, big-eyed, soft-looking baby-butcht type... [...] I love that combination of toughness and softness, that combination of masculinity and femininity. And then I began looking for it in women too.. (“Bad Girls” 97).

Allocating the bar scene as a narrative space that allows for women like Davis to navigate desirability and action confronts the notion that *femme* passivity is inherent within the gender politics of butch-*femme* relationships. This “activity and mobility” (“Bad Girls”

97) constructs the *femme* outside of the rigid lines of static lesbian communities and allows for those negotiating a *femme* gender to explore the nuances of their desire within less truncated settings. It is this connection that then allows Harris and Crocker to move into an exploration of the *femme* as “bad girl” role model—namely, the prostitute. Pursuing the writings of Joan Nestle, the prostitute is named as an icon of femininity within the prescription of *femme* womanhood. Nestle remembers her identification with Pat Ward—a famous ‘good girl turned prostitute’ in the 1950s—as producing a “*femme* role model who combines a visible, seeming proper femininity with a female sexuality that satisfies her own desires, not someone else’s” (“Bad Girls” 99). This was the virgin/whore dichotomy that plagues feminine sexual intuition and embeds itself within cultural norms of what constitutes a “real” woman.

The *femme* as prostitute is an extremely laden discourse within this project’s origins—the prostitute is a culturally devious being and this deviation revolves magnificently around the role of sexuality. As a scholar who is advocating for a discourse of sexual “deviancy” as agentic within religious space, there is no better arena to interrogate this than the Christian Bible. My thoughts go to Rahab, the prostitute of Jericho who betrayed her people to help the Israelites capture her city. Rahab is the quintessential body of the prostitute seen through the hegemonic gaze—ultimately devious in both sexuality and patriotism.

This is the charged history of the *femme* as a body, a politic, a desire. *Femme* as an identity has always been made into something devious—so, as Harris and Crocker propose, “it is not a coincidence that many *femmes* self-image as bad girls” (“Bad Girls”

101). The *femme fatale* is a character of feminist consciousness that amplifies this coincidence, breaking down the simplistic understandings of female agency and instead producing a transgressive and pleasurable dialogue for hallmarking a new era of the female sex.

*Queering the Femme fatale: Goddesses, Wolves, and the Bible*

The *femme fatale* is an iconic figure of film and artistic creation, capturing those audiences who seek her dark fantasies of pain and pleasure through story. But the *femme fatale* is much more than just a caricature of a dangerous woman for a plot device—she is an ideological construct of feminine sexual deviancy. Most notably connected to the wave of *film noir* in the 1940s and 1950s, the *femme fatale* was a new kind of monster for the cinematic screen—but her origins stem much further back than mid-twentieth century.

Of the three types of noir women, the *femme fatale* represents the most direct attack on traditional womanhood and the nuclear family. She refuses to play the role of devoted wife and loving mother that mainstream society prescribes for women. She finds marriage to be confining, loveless, sexless, and dull, and she uses all of her cunning and sexual attractiveness to gain her independence. ... She remains fiercely independent even when faced with her own destruction. And in spite of her inevitable death, she leaves behind the image of a strong, exciting, and unrepentant woman who defies the control of men and rejects the institution of the family. (Blaser)

Known for her beauty, sexuality, power, and (most importantly) deviance, the *femme fatale* is a woman of ire and lust whose mission is to take as many bodies (preferably male) with her to her grave of destiny. Of all the tropes that accompany the *femme fatale*, the one that bears the heaviest of roles is that of her ‘wayward’ sexuality. Unfortunately, many modern film and literary characterizations of the *femme fatale*’s sexual prowess

continue to revolve around heterosexual motifs and desires—in fact, often only using “girl-on-girl” stereotypical encounters to further the gaze and desire of the doomed male body in association. I’m left disappointed and wanting with these heteronormative narratives. The *femme fatale* is not meant to be centered through the male gaze, yet that is what modernist retellings of the “dangerous woman” paint her through. Instead, the liberated *femme fatale* nature allows society to reject traditional “realities” of femininity so it can pursue a more inclusive, radical possibility in terms of gender performance and agency.

Thinking through the theories of monstrosity, queerness, and performance I outlined previously, the bulk of the scholarship centered around the *femme fatales* within these contexts build off those essays and scholars that choose to re-vision the *femme fatale* through an intersectional lens. Three of the main texts supporting this re-visioning are Helen Hanson’s and Catherine O’Rawe’s anthology titled *The Femme fatale: Images, Contexts, and Histories*, Clarissa Estès’ *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, and Jean Bolen’s *Goddesses In Every Woman*.

In 2010, Helen Hanson and Catherine O’Rawe put together a collection of essays and articles encompassing a broad range of theory and intersections surrounding the *femme fatale* as a figure and trope. Hoping to push beyond the more traditional understandings of the *femme fatale* as a mere ploy of the *film noir* franchise and era, Hanson and O’Rawe brought in scholarship that addressed the *femme fatale* as a woman of complexity, agency, awareness, and diversity. Like myself, these scholars saw the *femme* as a site of potential within a feminist dialogue—and not just a “white feminist”

dialogue. To truly create a discourse that centered the *femme fatale* within predominantly Western culture but outside of merely whiteness and passivity, attention must be called to the role of storytelling and myth, the physical and psychological monsters and demons of puberty and coming-of-age, womanist power, sexual and racial hybridity, and queerness as survival.

The first essay by Karen Edwards surrounds the quintessential religious *femme fatale*, Eve of Eden. Linguistically, *femme fatale* is the French translation for “fatal woman.” Her fate is intertwined with both doom and desire—two common themes within discourses of Western Christianity. What better symbol for the connected fates of women, death, and desire than the original woman/sinner of creationist theory—Eve. Eve is a heavy-laden biblical figure in terms of phenomenological and epistemological frameworks of gender roles and ideologies. Not only is Eve the “first woman”, she is also the first sinner of supposed human origin. In the third chapter of Genesis—contemporarily labeled the story of “The Fall” (i.e. the fall of [wo]man from divine favor)—Eve is tricked by the serpent into eating fruit from the forbidden tree of the Garden of Eden. She then shares the fruit with her partner, Adam. It is only after their indulgence that they realize their true form—nakedness—and hurry to cover themselves. From this beginning stems a very long and destructive history of man’s origin and separation from God. Christians call this history the Old Testament. It is from this story that we see the foundations of biblical interpretation, chief among those being the root of feminine existence—manipulation. It is not Adam that was written into the place of original sinner, but his female counterpart, Eve (Edwards). Although anyone who reads



Genesis could quite easily see how Adam's fate is completely intertwined with the plot, it is Eve who popularizes the narrative of sinfulness while Adam is still the foundation for existence (Edwards). Adam is the creator; Eve is the destroyer. If Eve is the phenomenological metaphor for woman, that metaphor is death.

While the Hanson and O'Rawe anthology is rooted in academic theories of performance, rhetoric, language, and arts, the Estès and Bolen texts both center themselves in more of a psychoanalytical framework—focusing more on the experiential space of womanhood and archetype as it applies holistically, mythically, and spiritually. The wolf and the goddess are two symbols of spiritual feminine power that alter the normalization of femininity outside of discourses centered in whiteness, abelism, cis-gendering, and heteronormativity.

In *Women Who Run With The Wolves*, Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estès takes a deeply spiritual approach to feminine storytelling through a history of “wild woman” craft and symbolism. As a Jungian psychoanalyst, poet, and “*cantadora*” or “keeper of old stories,” Estès laments the diminished and colonized instinctive nature of the feminine. Through a series of stories and psychoanalysis, she is committed to rejuvenating in her readers a reminder of the “Wild Woman” archetype. From the monstrous to the innocent—the Wild Woman is the creator. She is the “patroness to all painters, writers, sculptors, dancers, thinkers, prayermakers, seekers, finders—for they are all busy with the work of invention, and that is the instinctive nature's main occupation” (Estès 11). The process of sharing this nature with her readers is done through stories. “Stories are medicine [...] they have such power, they do not require that we do, be, act anything—we need only

listen” (15). This play on wild women and storytelling is integral to the core of my own project’s pursuit of the *femme fatale* through confessional literature. The “wild woman” is instinct, but her domesticated nature is the “norm.” It is often the *femme fatale* who rejects the normalization of her oppressors and lives in her ‘wild state.’ And Estès knows—just as many of the female pastors who choose to step into their “instinctual” nature—that this makes them vulnerable to attack.

I postulate the feral woman as one who was once in a natural psychic state - that is, in her rightful wild mind—then later captured by whatever turn of events, thereby becoming overly domesticated and deadened in proper instincts. When she has opportunity to return to her original wildish nature, she too easily steps into all manner of traps and poisons. Because her cycles and protective systems have been tampered with, she is at risk in what used to be her natural wild state. No longer wary and alert, she easily becomes prey. (Estès 230)

I connect deeply with Estès style of pursuing the *femme* narrative through the ‘wild’ woman archetype of storytelling. It is personal for her as an author and personal for her readers as women longing to connect with their inner ‘wild woman.’

In line with Estès’ stories of folklore, goddesses of myth and history have played a central artistic and literary role in the facilitation and representation of women within ideological discourse for thousands of years. The Greek goddess is an excellent archetype for this realm of study and for this project—she represents the epitome of monstrous femininity through a deadly combination of sexual prowess and ‘power-over’ the mortal man. In her national bestseller, aptly titled *Goddesses in Everywoman: A New Psychology of Women*, Jean Shinoda Bolen, M.D. provides a detailed account of the goddesses of ancient Greek mythology and the power they hold when addressed through a critical analysis for the “everyday woman.” This is an interesting and captivating way of

channeling “goddesses” into modern psychology, but it is not an uncommon one. What I love the most about this theoretical application is that it brings the elements of mythical power and danger that accompanies the goddesses of Greek mythology and interweaves them into the realm of the personal—the feminine power that is accessible to the “everywoman.”

When a woman senses that there is a mythic dimension to something she is undertaking, that knowledge touches and inspires deep creative centers in her. Myths evoke feeling and imagination and touch on themes that are part of the human collective inheritance. The Greek myths - and all other fairytales and myths that are still told after thousands of years - remain current and personally relevant because there is a ring of truth in them about shared human experience. (Bolen 6)

By this account, my own project’s theoretical connections would take this a step further by addressing the ways the “everywoman” is a performance and how this performance could not only access to an inner-goddess, but an inner-monster.

Estès’ book is a deeply spiritual and personal narrative of her life as it has served as a reflection of larger narratives of ‘untamed’ women and the female soul, while Bolen’s work provides a detailed account of the goddesses of ancient Greek mythology and the power they hold when addressed through a critical analysis for the “everyday woman.” Both texts are an interesting and captivating way of channeling female archetype into modern psychology—a common genre of text catered to readers hoping to access insight to their “internal” struggles. This style of theoretical application brings the elements of mythical power and danger that accompanies the goddesses of Greek mythology, ghosts and legends of Native American and Mestiza culture, and the like and interweaves them into the realm of the personal. The “everywoman” is a *performance*

and this performance is a foundation for accessing one's inner-goddess or spirit—maybe, more importantly, an inner-*femme fatale*.

I choose to use this style of vernacular as a compliment to academic anthologies because I believe this project will contribute equally to conversations around archetype and accessibility when it comes to female space and community building. This style of writing and perspective is very posthumanist in its undertaking, pursuing what Mari Ruti calls an “unearthing” of psychoanalytic perspectives in order to “arrive at a better understanding of what it means to live in the world as a creature of consciousness” (Ruti xi). Thinking back on the feminist-religious counterpublic and the role of connection and social affinity, it is this style of text—that both maintains and disrupts Dana Cloud’s “rhetoric of therapy” and psychotherapy lexicon—in which the confessional literature I study will center itself as a tool of *process* and awakening. The “therapeutic,” for Cloud, refers to a “set of political and cultural discourses that have adopted psychotherapy’s lexicon—the conservative language of healing, coping, adaptation, and restoration of a previously existing order—but in contexts of sociopolitical conflict” (Cloud xvi). This layering of connective processes through confessional literature within feminist spaces will be analyzed largely through a rhetorical lens.

Each of these theoretical layers will provide the groundwork for my own interrogation into the *femme fatale* as she emerges within the three women of this study: racialization, maternal performance, and an aesthetic of excess. The *femme fatale* is first and foremost an aesthetical performance—she is *seen* by her dress, her style, her ‘darkness.’ Nadia Bolz-Weber plays this role beautifully through her unapologetic

displays of butch-*femme* clothes and hair, dark makeup, sleeve tattoos, and profane verbiage. Thinking through Hanson's and O'Rawe's anthology, we also can recognize the *femme fatale* as a racialized body. The woman of color has long been seen as dangerous in her own right just by her "nature" of lying outside of "whiteness" and, therefore, purity. A threat to white femininity and docility, the woman of color is abject through her skin's worldly perception. Pamela Lightsey is hyper-aware of this as a black woman who is both queer and religious—navigating the spaces of activism and prophetism through her writings on racial justice within the contemporary judicial system and how churches of color can support this cause... even if it means becoming an outlier in her faith community. Lastly, the *femme fatale* as the "anti-mother" is another perceived performance of the "dangerous" woman trope. Paula Stone Williams is a transwoman pastor and speaker who was initially rejected by her son because of her transition. She upholds this notion of inaccessibility to the role of the "mother" because she poses a *threat* to the sanctity of maternal possibility. She has rendered herself a cause for "concern" by those TERF's and even religious progressives who have continuously ignored the powerful potential of gender-talk within religious homiletic spaces. These three aspects will cultivate the lenses through which I will frame my own interaction with this research, including the way I hope to highlight the strengths of each of these women.

## CONFESSION: MEMOIR AND FEMINIST-RELIGIOUS RHETORIC AS GENRE

### *Confession as Feminist Aesthetic*

Rita Felski, on top of informing my theory of feminist-religious counterpublics, also devotes an entire chapter of her book *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* to the *confession*—a term she uses to “specify a type of autobiographical writing which signals its intention to foreground the most personal and intimate details of the author’s life” (Felski 87). The confession is a tool of solidarity and connection amongst feminist spaces, particularly the feminist-religious counterpublic and women who identify “outside” of heteronormative dichotomies of gender performance. Pushing against the linear understanding of autobiography, the confessional text is a consciousness-raising text that breaks the dichotomy of public/private life. This happens through the radical process of women authors sharing their stories *for* other women. The confession shares an “explicit rhetorical foregrounding of the relationship between a female author and a female reader and an emphasis upon the referential and denotative dimension of textual communication” (88). Felski states that the biggest concern regarding the confession as a tool for feminist solidarity is the dilemma over whether it is truly a critical act of consciousness-raising or ultimately a self-absorbed pursuit of an unobtainable authentic-self through written exploration (89). Authenticity is mentioned multiple times throughout Felski’s chapter and seems to be an important concept within the creation of the autobiographical genre. What would authenticity through writing look like if we are to characterize the confession as a distinct form of autobiography? For Felski,

authenticity becomes apparent in the contractual nature of a text. The confessional text is a promise to the reader of truth—truth of experience, connection, and substance. Each of these is a subjective space of epistemological concern, for each relies on the interpretation of those engaged (namely, the reader). Interpretation of authenticity on the part of the reader is all that matters, but this is not taken lightly by the author. The confessional text further categorizes itself from/within the autobiographical genre by foregrounding itself in “truth” claims.

We may generalize these claims as follows. First, the author is assumed to be both creator and subject matter of the literary text [...] Second, a claim is made for the truth-value of what the autobiography reports, however difficult it may in fact be to ascertain this truth-value in practice. Third, the autobiographer purports to *believe* what she or he asserts. (Felski 90, emphasis added)

Within a feminist context of connection and community-building, this is the closest many are willing to get in claiming authenticity as a worthy pursuit within solidarity building.

What characterizes the confessional genre as primarily feminist texts (which isn't necessarily true about all autobiographical texts) is its reliance on reader identification through the sharing of women's experiences. Thinking back on my arguments for the “cluster” concept of womanhood, the confessional autobiography finds a home within feminist literature because of the interpretation of performance on the part of those readers seeking ‘truth’ and solidarity among their female and non-male peers.

Recent years have seen the publication of large numbers of feminist texts which are written in an unrelativized first-person perspective, are strongly confessional, and encourage reader identification. [...] they occur within a context of *reception* which encourages an interpretation of the text as the expression, in essence, of the views and experiences of the writing subject. (Felski 93)

This shift from traditional autobiography to thematically interpretive writing as storytelling is what makes the confessional text a radical text—it transforms problematic ideas of authenticity and identity-formation from spaces of isolation into spaces of connection. I see this most profoundly within the context of the memoir. The memoir is that blurred-style of autobiography that captures attention through experiential connection. Nancy Miller, a twenty-first century memoirist stated that, when writing a memoir:

I could write down what I remembered; or I could craft a memoir. One *might* be the truth; the other, a good story... When I sit down to reconstruct my past, I call on memory, but when memory fails, I let language lead... As a writer, the answer to the question of what ‘really’ happened is literary – or at least textual. I will know it when I write it. When I write it, the truth will lie in the writing. (Miller, 44)

The memoir is expressive—it calls for connection through stories, events, and moments in one’s life as they read onto another’s truth. In his history of the memoir, Ben Yagoda states the memoir is a “central form of culture” in that it doesn’t just tell a story, but it creates a discourse (Yagoda 2). This idea of storytelling as interwoven with discourse, particularly as it performs an epistemological function for radical feminism and spirituality, is crucial to this dissertation’s research goals. We must identify those discourses being created through radical confession. For the feminist-religious counterpublic, this discourse is one of solidarity, resistance, and love.

### *The Feminist-Religious Memoir*

The feminist-religious confession is similar to Felski’s patterns of the “diary” that structures its storytelling around the “dailiness” of women’s lives. This is especially true considering the larger context that women are operating within—the domestic sphere.



The diary style has always “been an important form for women” (Felski 96) and it especially interesting as a methodological form of capturing women’s experience. Used as a tool within the feminist-religious counterpublic, the diary/memoir as a dialectical project has been essential in creating the modern-literary genre that helped build this counterpublic space.

Looking at the feminist-autobiographical confession—particularly in the style of memoir—as it has emerged within the scope of western Christianity, quite a few titles and authors come to mind, including Jen Hatmaker, Glennon Doyle Wambach, Sarah Bessey, Rachel Held Evans, Nadia Bolz-Weber, Edyka Chilome, Brene Brown, Christine Lee, and Austin Channing.

Although each of their texts is different from the other, they all share an explicit rhetorical foregrounding in the relationship between author, subject, and reader. They navigate the realm of womanhood, non-conformity, religious doctrine, and feminism in each of their stories—building relationships as they go. A community has been built through the examples of these women authors—a community that fosters radical projections of womanhood in relation to Christianity and intersectional feminism. This is what constitutes the feminist-religious counterpublic: a space of women pushing back against the societal and religious standards of civility and creating new foundations of faith and feminism that are rooted in intersectionality and love. In the next section of this chapter, I begin to outline the possibilities for approaching this project through a pluralist methodology, briefly outlining the roles that personal performance narrative, rhetorical analysis, and outlaw rhetoric contribute to my dissertation writing process.

## **METHODOLOGY: USING NARRATIVE TO ACCESS OUTLAW RHETORIC**

As I am drawn to theories of performance to situate my case studies, I am equally drawn to a performative method in a hope to better situate my rhetorical practice as connected to the body as much as the text. Thinking through the theoretical foundations and previous scholarship I outlined in Chapter One and the beginning of Chapter Two, I use this section to make an argument for pluralist methods—such as a qualitative combination of narrative, performance writing, and rhetorical criticism—as well as situate my three case studies.

### *Assessing Pluralist Methods*

Assessing appropriate qualitative inquiry methods and research design is a difficult task when approaching a rhetorical project with multiple layers of theory and access, but this is made easier through the introduction of pluralist methodology. Pluralism is used in this project as a compliment to Dennis Bielfeldt's referential definition, in which philosophical positions that emphasize diversity and multiplicity are prioritized over those that emphasize homogeneity and unity (Goodbody and Burns 171). Considering the religious aspect this project embodies, pluralism as a methodological approach is extremely resonant as a method of approach for the dissertation and within the project's subjects' ideologies of religious fluency. Pluralism is that epithet of reasoning for theory, method, and practice within this entire dissertation process. A pluralist methodology is necessary, therefore, as my project employs critical theory through a variety of lenses and perspectives. Critical theory is not tied to any *one* qualitative method, and this project is an example of this.

One aspect of methodology incorporated through this project is the use of performance narrative. A narrative study is situated within the use of experience, observation, and memory to assess a specific cultural phenomenon or process. My take on this methodological approach is highly influenced by Goodbody's and Burns' critical narrative analysis methodology, as well as Shadee Abdi's textual blend of auto-ethnography through performance narrative. This dissertation process will be a product of years of mental, physical, and emotional stress that has extended from early childhood to college years and I know that it is only through reflexive writing that much of the analysis and data I situate will need to be contextualized. Goodbody's and Burns' terminology for method is beneficial for the pluralistic needs of this project's methods and Abdi's own contextualization of performance writing and narrative is equally contributing to my rhetoric.

In an attempt to evaluate the extent to which knowledge can be derived through quantitative pluralist research practices, Goodbody and Burns propose a project rooted in pluralistic practices of data analysis. They titled this method: critical narrative analysis.

Both relativist and intersubjective approaches place particularly high demands on research reflexivity and transparency. Reflexivity can be seen as an epistemic practice that in itself structures and organizes knowledge but at the same time, should extend and perturb the researcher's horizons. The kind of critical social reflexivity [...] was clearly required for the present research, along with "analytic reflexivity" (Stanley 2004) between the text and researcher. In addition, Butler (2005) has contended that self-knowledge is a function of social relations; therefore, no full transparency is possible, but the responsible self knows the limits of its own knowing. These considerations led to a pluralism of reflexive practices [...] including creative methods (e.g., experimental writing), dialogue and feedback from a variety of sources (including specific consultations) in addition to usual diary methods for instance. (Goodbody and Burns 176)

Using narrative as a form of data collection for the purpose of reflexivity and transparency is a useful tool within humanist projects focusing on intertextual and relational subjects. Narrative methods are necessarily intersectional—pursuing a subjectivity that relies on multiple points of departure for critical analysis.

They have the potential, in some forms, to represent the individual as an intentional agent whose subjectivity, experience, and actions are shaped by the constraints and opportunities of the social world, that is, as an agent operating within structures in a relationship of what we would describe as emergent reciprocal in/determinism. (Goodbody and Burns 177)

Truth is not an essential outcome of method (176), but truth claims are more contextually grounded when approached through a pluralistic lens.

Abdi furthers this push for narrative methods in her own work on queer, Middle Eastern identities. Building off previous theories of narrative that focus on experience as story, Abdi pursues narrative as a critical reflexive process of identity-formation.

The focus on performing personal narratives highlights the ways in which narrators tell stories and shapes language, identity, and experience. Thus, the cultural stories we share about ourselves create new meanings for our lives and allow for better cross-cultural association. (Abdi 6)

As a performance writer, Abdi vividly expresses reflexive writing through memory and dialogue. This performance style of method and rhetoric will serve as a strong example for my own writing moving forward.

Two of the three women I have chosen to focus on in this study are local to the Denver/Boulder, CO area and speak mostly in open, public forum. Nadia Bolz-Weber was the late head-pastor at House for All Saints and Sinners in metro-Denver before transitioning to public theologian and Paula Stone Williams is a co-pastor at Left Hand Church in Longmont, CO. This proximity has afforded me opportunities to hear these

women speak in person and interact with them as an audience member. By placing myself as both a listener and a reader within predominantly church spaces, I enact my observations through a performative space that feels interactive—almost dialogic, in accordance with Bhaktin’s reference to language structures as embedded within meaning-making processes based on the motivations and predispositions of individuals in *relation* to one another (Baxter 29). I wish to cultivate a research that is highly aware of the role of outside influence, religious belief, and speaker/audience relationships—letting each craft a collection of data that is impossible to stand alone outside of context. This level of fieldwork is extremely personal and visceral, as my own connection to religious spaces of worship is wrought with both positive and negative history. Incorporating the knowledge I acquire through observation and visceral memory—both as it supports and disrupts my own notions of religious space—I employ this tactic of personal narrative and observation to better situate these women within a larger context of public performance and queer-religious identity formation. Much of the data collected through this integrated fieldwork will be placed alongside my own reflections—a combination I hope to utilize through performance writing as a process of reflexive performativity.

### *Outlaw Rhetoric*

Alongside performance narrative, this study also employs a method of textual analysis for those documents, sermons, memoirs, and blogs that fill the space and rhetorical connections of outlaw rhetoric within the feminist-religious counterpublic. This will be done through a close, rhetorical analysis of the confessional memoirs, blogs, sermons, and talks as rhetorical acts to be evaluated within theories of performativity and

gendered confession. These include Bolz-Weber's memoir *Pastrix*, Williams' blogs and TED Talks, and Lightsey's queer, critical reflection *Our Lives Matter*, on top of the fieldwork study.

Rhetorical criticism as a method is grounded in purpose and extraction, looking at multiple access points for rhetorical acts of study. For this dissertation, I will be looking at the rhetorical acts of confession through a lens of *outlaw rhetoric*—as framed in Ono and Sloop's *Shifting Borders*. I have mentioned the purpose of outlaw rhetoric throughout this dissertation but wish to expand upon it here. Using a “purposeful poststructural critical rhetorical” analysis (Ono and Sloop 11), the textual and oral performances of Bolz-Weber, Williams, and Lightsey can best be read through a notion of outlaw discourse—rhetoric that is incapable of being truly understood or judged from within the same discursive spaces as dominant discourses because of their incongruent nature of thought (14). Ono and Sloop saw outlaw discourses as separate from dominant discourses based on a logic of “judgement” (14). There is no common standard between dominant and outlaw, therefore they cannot be read within the same lens. This is applicable to those feminist-religious rhetorics because the women occupying this space belong neither fully to the religious vernacular or the feminist vernacular—as those dominant rhetorics operate within two logics that have been culturally deemed paradoxical. Unlike previous work on the feminist-religious intersections of rhetoric, I am focusing on a space that can be identified by what Ono and Sloop label a “progressive vernacular outlaw discourse”: progressive by its intersectional call for LGBTQ+ inclusion, vernacular by its specificity to both Protestant Christian theology and western-feminism practice, outlaw by its

disconnect from the dominant spaces through its dissent, and discourse through the method of exchange that creates a specific dialogue between active voices.

One of the hardest aspects of a rhetorical project is finalizing an appropriate method. Through a pluralistic approach—one which combines performance narrative, rhetorical criticism, and dialectic reflexivity—I believe this project can better address the core research questions of study through a lens of intersectional growth and transparency.

*Case Studies: The “Femme fatales of Faith”*

The three women I have chosen to highlight more intimately within this study are Dr. Pamela Lightsey, Reverend Dr. Paula Stone Williams, and Reverend Nadia Bolz-Weber. Each woman will be devoted an entire chapter of analysis, followed by a concluding chapter on the future of this study through its political and social implications both within the discipline and within society at large.

**Pamela Lightsey**

In the wake of national outrage and protests amongst communities of color and marginalized peoples emerging in response to excessive force by police on the bodies of black men, Pamela Lightsey felt called to write a reflexive, confessional book that employed womanist methods to explain the impact of oppression on the part of queer bodies—specifically as situated within the role of the Christian church. She titled this work, *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology*. Lightsey is a queer, Christian, woman of color and her own positionality within this conversation is the foundation for this text:

I am a Black queer lesbian womanist scholar and Christian minister. To say that I am queer is not only my self-identity; it is also my active engagement against

heteronormativity. Indeed, queer ideology supports my long-held suspicion that sexual identity may not be as fixed as my generation was taught by society and the Church. (*Our Lives Matter* ix)

Lightsey holds an extremely unique and powerful positionality as the author of this book. She is an associate dean and professor at the Boston School of Theology, a mother and military veteran, and the only African American, queer elder ordained by the United Methodist Church. She holds in her work and body the trauma of years of sexual suppression and clerical oppression within the church as a female, as well as the historical and systemic oppression that accompanies her race. Lightsey wrote *Our Lives Matter* to awaken the modern church on its role within this larger conversation of race, gender, sexuality, and ally-ship and has made a name for herself within this rhetorical space.

I chose to highlight Dr. Lightsey in this project for two reasons: she is one of the few black, queer women writing and preaching within a Protestant denomination that still does not recognize her sexual orientation as affirming and she is an inspiring figure of performance within my projections of religious *femme fatales*. Focusing on her work through “queer-y” and womanist theology, I hope to situate Lightsey as a potential archetype of the *femme fatale* within womanist faith—looking to the historical contexts of black women as demonized and sexualized bodies. Womanism is extremely influential in the confessional genre of literature as it promotes queer women and their spiritual ideology, and Lightsey uses her own identity as a queer, womanist, Christian, activist to influence the overarching conversations around ideological performance within the Church.



At the end of the day, eradicating oppression is the heart of queer womanist theological reflection. We must examine not just racism but sexism, not just homophobia but transphobia, not just poverty but war, and not just the fluidity of boundaries but the hegemony of the status quo. The efficacy of womanist queer theology will be its ability to be inclusive in its methodology, appreciative of its womanist history, and relevant in its scholarship, all towards the goal of helping usher in freedom and justification for all people. (*Our Lives Matter* 99)

### **Paula Stone Williams**

For 35 years Paula worked with the Orchard Group, a church planting ministry in New York. For most of that time she was Chairman and CEO. For 12 years she served as a weekly columnist and Editor-At-Large for Christian Standard magazine. She was also a teaching pastor for two megachurches. Those responsibilities ended when she transitioned to live as Paula. (“About”, *And So It Goes*)

This is the opening quote in Reverend Dr. Paula Stone Williams’ “About” section on her blog, *And So It Goes*. Williams has never shied away from rooting her identity as a minister and counselor in her transition. This is what makes her so inspiring and—simultaneously—dangerous to those within the faith. She first disclosed to her community her struggles with “Gender Dysmorphia” in the summer of 2014, stating:

With Gender Dysphoria there are no perfect answers. Lots of folks are quite certain about what I should do, but I am the only one accountable for how I live my life. I value the counsel of those who have not walked a mile in my shoes, but then again, they have not walked a mile in my shoes. Ultimately I am the one who must struggle and decide. I am cognizant of the impact of the decisions I make. The burden is great. This much I know. I have lived my life with integrity. I will continue to do so. (“My Story”)

A month later, after fully beginning her process of transitioning and identifying as female, Paula wrote again:

People like me are in your church right now. They are struggling and feeling hopeless. Almost half are considering ending their lives. I have heard from them. There are far more than you think. They love their church, but few are offering them any real hope. They are likely to either lose their own lives or lose most everything else. I know you would like them to go away, or you would like them

all to be flamboyant cross dressers or drag queens you feel you can easily dismiss. But they are not. They are good people trying hard to be better people. You can pretend they are not there, but most of the developed world has come to realize it is time to let them live in some semblance of peace. (“Dear Reader”)

Williams redefined her entire life around her transition, but she was the most adamant during this time in regard to her faith. Disrupting traditional narratives of gender performance, yet simultaneously adopting a highly *femme* expression post-transition, Williams is an interesting figure in terms of a woman being labeled “dangerous” within the Christian faith. By following her blog posts, TED Talks, and live speaking events, I hope to situate Williams as a *femme fatale* within her gender fluidity, as well as her recent publicity within the media surrounding her role as a parent. No longer a “father,” but also not the “mother,” Paula and her son Jonathan navigate a tumultuous relationship that is no longer defined by the father-son roles they once held. Instead, Paula’s gender transition has allowed her to become almost an “anti-mother” or “never mother” in the rhetoric surrounding her new life as a woman, a characteristic also fitting of the *femme fatale* trope.

### **Nadia Bolz-Weber**

Nadia is the last figure I have chosen to highlight within this project. A Lutheran pastor based in Denver, Colorado who grounds her ministry around her past struggles with addiction, her disabilities, and her queerness, Nadia writes and speaks of a Christianity and a Jesus that embraces the intersectional Christian and loves the sinner such as herself.

Nadia is one of the first figures I thought of when I imagined the *femme fatales* of modern faith—read by many as lewd, untrustworthy, and dangerous because of her

unintelligible gender performance and sexual incongruity. However, just as my own theoretical project is a call for a reclaiming of autonomy within the trope of the *femme fatale*, there has been a gradual “reclaiming” of this identity within the modern church. Nadia is a prime example of this. She knows her power within the religious faith doctrine and public rhetoric and she knows just how dangerous it is—not to the Christian faith itself, but to the men who wish to keep the faith as hetero-, cis-, and white-centric as possible.

Nadia is an even more interesting figure within this narrative of re-claiming because of her own rhetorical re-claiming within her ministry. In 2013, she released a memoir-style confessional text that centered around her transition from alcoholic to pastor of House for All Saints and Sinners, and ECLA mission church based in Denver. This work is titled *Pastrix*, and it will be one of the two primary memoirs of focus within her section. She uses story-telling and narrative to give glimpses into her own past and history of becoming a Christian to “re-claim” the term *pastrix*. In the opening acknowledgements of the book, she lays out the narrative etymology of the word.

*pastrix* (pas – triks) noun

1. A term of insult used by unimaginative sections of the church to define female pastors
2. Female ecclesiastical superhero: Trinity from *The Matrix* in a clerical collar.  
“What on earth was that noise?”  
“A *pastrix* just drop-kicked a demon into the seventh circle of hell!”
3. Cranky, beautiful faith of a Sinner & Saint.  
- NewWineskinsDictionary.com (*Pastrix* xiii)

A *pastrix* is a reclaimed *femme fatale*. The *pastrix* holds her power in her gender, wielding it to eradicate those harmful and limiting narratives and ideas that threaten the gender and racial and sexual inclusivity of the church. Like the *femme fatale*, the *pastrix*

also lends itself to a caricature within literary and pop-culture scenarios through these definitions. And, also like the *femme fatale*, the pastrix is a creature of becoming, another “not yet” identity-in-difference.

Not only is Nadia an interesting character of faith in terms of her rhetorical identifiers, such as calling herself a pastrix, but she also visibly marks herself as someone who transforms the faith through queerness and monstrosity.

The sky was so gorgeous that I rolled down all my windows and leaned forward to try to see more of it out of my windshield. A trucker next to me winked and eyed my tattooed arms – unaware, I’m certain, that the big tattoo covering my forearm was of Saint Mary Magdalene and that I was a Lutheran seminary student, soon to become a Lutheran pastor. Truckers, bikers, and ex-convicts smile at me a lot more than, say, investment bankers do. (*Pastrix* xvi)

Pictured on the front of her book, she is shown sitting with her arms rested on her knees, shrouded in half-light that illuminates her cropped salt and pepper hair, full-sleeved tattooed arms and chest, dark lipstick on her pursed mouth. She does not display femininity, but she does display a notion of *excess*. Reading Nadia as queer is easy to do, and not just because of her excerpts in her book where she recounts her non-normative sexual history. Her very aesthetic is one of gothic religion: dark colors, heavy make-up, and ‘shady’ ideologies. In fact, within Western, religious publics, Nadia is easily read as the abject.

I use the term *aesthetic* in this analysis to refer the ways in which women like Nadia, or even monsters like the *femme fatale*, embody their cultural positionalities through a relation of symbolic interactions both in and outside of their respective communities. If “man” is a symbol-wielding animal, then woman can be the symbol-welding monster. I think that the characterizations of the female monster, the “dangerous

woman,” can disrupt the condensed and fixed symbolic orders of femininity and create new semiotic aesthetic relations, especially those that revolve around Cohen’s, Holman Jones’ and Harris’ theories of difference, excess and monstrosity. This *queering* of aesthetics is crucial to theories of monstrosity and abject femininity that will play a role in my larger project.

## CHAPTER THREE

*Each person's life must be defined, nurtured and transformed, wherein the self is actualized, affirming the inward authority which arouses greater meaning and potential with each mystical experience. —Katie Geneva Cannon, Black*

### *Womanist Ethics*

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Navigating the socio-political realm of Western religion is a task wrought with negotiation and survival. It requires a dismantling of oppression within the judicial system whilst preaching pious submission to a benevolent God, creating new doctrines of religious inclusion whilst adhering to a scriptural boundary thousands of years old, sexuality within modesty, rhetoric within righteousness, etcetera, etcetera. Doing this as a white, male, ally is challenging. Doing this as a queer, black, womanist theologian is dangerous. This chapter takes an in-depth look at Reverend Dr. Pamela Lightsey, a professor of contextual theology and ordained elder within the Boston University School of Theology, and her paramount text, *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology*. By conducting a close reading of the text as a rhetorical artifact and a confessional memoir, I attempt to outline the ways in which Lightsey's words reverberate with truth—allowing for her reader to be at once both student and bystander to her intention of creating a womanist theology centered around social justice within and outside of the black church. By exploring her text as a memoir, this chapter will also highlight the ways in which

Lightsey's theories have marked her as a *femme fatale* of faith within the hegemonic church—a lesbian, woman of color preaching inclusion, insurrection of power, and promoting a queer love that is rooted in the “indecent.” Historicizing the ways in which *femme fatales* have been demonized through a discourse of racialization, this chapter ends by looking at the history of the Christian church as a platform for eradicating, vilifying, and sexualizing the voices and bodies of women of color, which Lightsey pushes against in Chapter Seven, “Imago Dei, We Flesh That Needs Lovin’.”

*Pamela Lightsey, the Activist Theologian*

Lightsey is an interesting figure within the current climate of religious activism, particularly as her rhetoric and actions have been taken up in conversations of “heresy or gospel?” (Tisby). In 2012, Lightsey published two chapters centered around her experience as a black woman in the protestant tradition, namely as it pertained to social justice and salvation rhetoric: “Reconciliation” in *Prophetic Evangelicals: Envisioning a Just and Peaceable Kingdom* and “If There Should Come a Word” in *Black United Methodists Preach!* Her chapter, “Reconciliation”—which appeared in an edited anthology—was devoted to the personal journey of a queer woman emerging from a fundamentalist culture. Lightsey was a “Scripture-quoting, heaven-and-hell-believing, nonheterosexual Christian” who had received mixed responses to her reconciliation work (hence the title) for LGBT persons within the Christian church (“Reconciliation” 169). But reconciliation was the role of the gospel and Lightsey saw this most clearly in the lives of LGBTQ Christians. The anthology was meant to be a collection of essays that envisioned what steps were necessary for a “just and peaceable Kingdom” to come to

fruition—but Lightsey was not necessarily calling for peace in the sense of complacency. Lightsey is known for her activism and political/religious disruption. She has worked within the LGBTQ community to end the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy in military camps, as well as for LGBTQ marriage equality. Dr. Lightsey has a history of critiquing churches for homophobic theology, liturgy, and homiletics and continues to frame much of her written work and lectures around this critique. In 2014, she was on the ground protesting in Ferguson against police brutality and was one of several live-streamers providing ongoing broadcasts during that time. Her work in Ferguson heavily influenced *Our Lives Matter*, which she details in the text. On top of her on-the-ground activism, Lightsey is known to collaborate with other religious and BLM activists to specifically address the violence against Black female and trans- bodies, racism within collegiate and church institutions, and police violence.

It is this strong declaration for institutional change advocated for in Lightsey’s works and protests that have lent toward a “dangerous” reading of her body within certain religious spaces, especially the United Methodist Church. At the 2016 United Methodist General Conference in Portland, Oregon, Lightsey was photographed leading a group of Black Lives Matter activists through the plenary sessions—marching, chanting, and disrupting the proceedings. One photo is quite powerful, showing Lightsey mid-chant with her fist in the air and wearing a BLM t-shirt with a brightly colored clergy stole. She is unapologetic—about her blackness, her queerness, and her Christianity. If this is heresy for some, it’s the gospel for Lightsey. This paradox of activism and spiritual adherence is what marks Lightsey’s rhetoric as “outlaw” in terms of Ono’s and Sloop’s



referential process of rhetoric that is incapable of understanding within the dominant logics (in this case, secularism.) Lightsey is framed as the woman who is ‘outside, but within’ the Methodist tradition and it causes many to pause and wonder—why the adherence to a particular denomination at all? Her loyalty to the church seems to stem from her commitment to evangelicalism, but by no means does Lightsey identify as fundamentalist. Evangelical Methodist is a space for Lightsey to usher in the “Kin-dom” of God, in which the “working to ensure the poor are raised up, the sick receive adequate care, children are protected, discrimination is eradicated and war ended” (“Reconciliation”). The United Methodist Church is a foothold for Lightsey’s call to eradicate sexism and homophobia in the black church, in line with the recent waves of activism against the violence perpetrated against black bodies in the U.S.

### *Our Lives Matter*

After the publication of her full manuscript *Our Lives Matter* in 2016, Lightsey’s text was immediately and timely situated against the backdrop of violence being shown in mass media surrounding black bodies—including Michael Brown and Eric Garner. This violence is a not only a political issue for Lightsey, but a theological one. The black body—the *queer, female* black body—is under attack in the church and in America and Lightsey’s book is a manifesto for the liberation of these communities through gospel-based loving. Valerie Bridgeman calls Lightsey’s work a “theological love letter to Black Queer protestors—those who see themselves in the line of prophetic work and those who don’t” (Bridgeman 176). Not meant to be “exhaustive,” Bridgeman states that the text is meant to be “representative and reflective” of the religious foundations for queer

theology as it was meant to dismantle the “homo-antagonism and homophobia, especially in movements and in (black) churches” (177). Feminist communication scholar, Leland Spencer, also upholds Lightsey’s text as worthy of note in this era of resistance, stating in their review:

Readers invested in feminist and womanist epistemologies and qualitative research based on subjective experiences will appreciate Lightsey’s approach. While other intentionally reflexive contextual theological monographs might present a more unified and coherent articulation of their core tenets, Lightsey’s book feels immediate and intimate in a way other topically comparable works do not, [...] Lightsey’s intentional work to tell her own narrative about Ferguson illustrates an astute awareness of media framing that communication scholars ought to appreciate, too. (Spencer)

Lightsey outlines her text into seven chapters—not including her introduction and epilogue. Carrying her readers through a timeline of thought, Lightsey begins with chapters focusing on blackness and queerness as theories and experiences before moving into the practical applications of spiritual justice for those black and queer bodies and then ending with a focus on the concept of *imago Dei* in Chapter Seven. Lightsey begins in theory, moving outward toward community and praxis, and then turns upward toward the spiritual before bringing us back to the body once again through the *imago Dei*. Chapter One begins with a brief exploration of womanism as it has shaped her own trajectory of thought both within academia and the church, making clear distinctions between those authors who focus on the LGBTQ and those who do not. Chapter Two digs deeper into Lightsey’s methods and their home in queer theory, from Kant to Saussure to Derrida to Butler. While acknowledging the importance of these foundational theorists, Lightsey quickly pushes back against identity politics as a necessity for black scholarship within queer theory and looks to the Civil Rights movement to dissect this

intersection. Chapter Three seems to round out Lightsey's theoretical review by outlining the ways in which queer interrogation within black churches and communities has been historically needed but absent—queer methodology as a praxis for the entire text seems most apparent in this chapter. In Chapter Four, readers see the beginnings of a thematic turn from theory to praxis, specifically through biblical interpretation as it pertains to “queers of faith” in an exploration of God as it works within and against orthodox accounts of the Divine. In the fifth chapter, Lightsey takes a queer, womanist praxis and addresses interrogation through a practical realm—the real time protests happening throughout the U.S. and in Ferguson in the wake of outrage over police brutality and black death. She details her experience travelling to Missouri and the tensions that were present between older clergy and younger activists on what the role of the church was in Black Lives Matter. Chapter Six begins Lightsey's shift from the ground toward the spiritual. This chapter plays on the theoretical ideas of queer transformation as it pertains to spiritual transformation ordained by God. Chapter Seven picks up the notion of bodily transformation and proposes an extremely important interjection on *imago Dei* as it encompasses the queer body.

In this dissertation, I look specifically at her opening chapters (the Introduction through Chapter 3) and Chapter 7 to emphasize my own theoretical connections between Lightsey as an author/activist, her use of memoir, and her typing as a *femme fatale*. Lightsey's entire manuscript is rooted in her queer, lived experience. The alterity of ‘queer’ as it manifests in religiosity is a core tenet of Lightsey's project—even as it holds tension within the feminist and LGBTQ community. In her introduction to *Our Lives*

*Matter*, Lightsey contextualizes queerness as definitionally and connotatively rooted in alterity for her purposes. It is best explained in her essay “Inner Dictum” from the *Black Theology* journal in 2012:

Instead of being subjected to living passively within these status quo notions of binary genders, queers are rejecting and taking onto themselves the denigration and pejorative connotation with which being a same-gender-loving person has been historically associated. Why should we even remotely care whether a heterosexual “condones” our loving relationships? We should not. Specifically this means not seeing ourselves through the veil of societal expectation and constructions of what presents as “normal,” but instead seeing ourselves as part of the creative work that God called “good.” (“Inner Dictum,” 342)

Lightsey’s ideological emphasis on queerness in all of her written work sets a precedent for a text like *Our Lives Matter*. She uses queer theory to propose womanist methodology as necessary in black feminist consciousness and activism.

#### *Womanist Methodology and Theology*

Lightsey’s connection to the womanist movement is both academic and spiritual. Womanism becomes a theology in its insistence upon a liberating language for black women working on/for loving other black women (and men) within the church. The interreligious space of womanism is connected to a larger dialogue in which black women are seen as cultural footholds for the spiritual/sexual connection. Lightsey—who grew up religious—was led to womanist theology because of this seemingly unexplored space in her Pentecostal education. It was Walker’s definition of womanism—the emphasis on the “folk,” a people as a whole—that was Lightsey’s ‘click’ in terms of reconciling black queer identity with Godly purpose.

In 2010, Melanie Harris published *Gifts of Virtue, Alice Walker, and Womanist Ethics*. In her sixth chapter, “Third-Wave Womanism: Expanding Womanist Discourse,

Making Room for Our Children,” Harris details the way that womanism can be divided into “waves”—much like the language adopted by the feminist movement in the late 1990s. For Harris, the “third-wave” of womanism is the current critical turn for black female scholarship that is “expanding the interreligious landscape of womanist religious thought, focusing on the global links within the field, and taking special note of the connections between African and African American womanist literary and scholarly writers” (Harris 125). This is an interesting turn for womanist linguistics for a few reasons—namely the insistence upon “global links” that produce a necessary separation from a primarily Walker context. From reading Lightsey’s *Our Lives Matter*, I can’t fully place her within any particular “wave”. However, I can see how she moves away from a singular idea of womanism and instead merges into a conversation that includes global activism. Lightsey places herself and her text within the womanist realm purposefully—it is womanist methodology that allowed for her research to appear in the first place.

### **HER WORDS, OUR LIVES: CONTEXT AS CONFESSION**

I have read Lightsey’s *Our Lives Matter* a handful of times. It was not until the third or fourth reading that I truly understood the text as confessional rhetoric. Let me be clear—Lightsey begins and ends the book with a centering of her own positionality through political and religious contexts. However, I was so focused on taking in all of Lightsey’s profound offerings on queer theology and examples of Black women’s bodily experiences that I missed the connection all of these words held to her own personal story. Lightsey is a queer, Black, lesbian minister—there is no aspect of this book that she does not hold herself a part of in an *intimate* way. As I stated earlier in this

dissertation, the confessional memoir holds an explicit rhetorical foregrounding in the relationship between author, subject, and reader. This relationship was lost on myself in my first encounter with Lightsey. I found her to be an intellectual (which she is) and a scholar (which she is, again), but I did not see her as a memoirist, nor as an author who embodied a discourse of confessional rhetoric in her text. I was reading Lightsey through my “student” lens—taking in the information and processing at a purely academic level. It so happened that I did not realize how unfair and privileged this reading was until I stumbled upon an interview with Lightsey on YouTube, posted by Wipf and Stock Publishers. When asked “What inspired your book?,” Lightsey states:

The book is, has been years in the making. And it came about as I was struggling with my own sexual identity and trying to talk about who I was. And, at the same time that I was trying to talk about who I understand myself to be, I heard this fabulous term, which is pejorative for some people, and that is *queer*... (“A Womanist Queer Theology”)

Going back to Felski’s theory of confession, Lightsey makes it known that *Our Lives Matter* arose from a time in which she was looking to “express the essential nature, the truth, of the self” (Felski 87). Finding the term “queer” and taking it up as an identity marker was the connection Lightsey needed to make this text her own:

There’s a resistance, a pushback, to being put in a box in terms of one’s sexual identity. So, I thought, you know that’s exactly what I want to say, that’s exactly how I understand myself to be! I don’t want to be a divided, kind-of, dichotomous person, I want to be thought of as someone who is whole, whose sexuality is complex. And so queer theology is written with that in mind. (“A Womanist Queer Theology”)

Emphasizing the “autobiographical dimension” (Felski 93) of her textual inspiration, Lightsey claims herself and her work to be holistic—you cannot separate the two. Her sexuality is just as much a part of her Christian practice as her ministry and *Our Lives*

*Matter* is the product of this ideological and spiritual merger. Felski states that confessional writing “proceeds from the subjective experience of problems and contradictions as encountered in the realm of everyday life” ( Felski 95). For Lightsey, this was evident in her previous separation of self and sexuality that she lived on a daily basis. Once finding her truth, Lightsey could then write the book that was necessary for sharing this truth with others, or, as Felski theorizes, write the book that “possess[ed] a representative significance in relation to the audience of women it wishes to reach” (95).

The YouTube interview moves on to ask Lightsey how her “context enables [her] to articulate the gospel in a unique way.” Lightsey does not hesitate to explain her “context” to the audience—“I’m a black woman working in the academy; who is also an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church” (“A Womanist Queer Theology”). Considering the current disciplinary practices of the United Methodist Church still do not allow “out” persons to be ordained and practice within the clergy, coming out as a queer lesbian was a “major step” for Lightsey. “There are no other out, queer, Black, lesbian ordained elders in the United Methodist Church... at this point,” Lightsey states (“A Womanist Queer Theology”). She makes known and accepts her current status as an anomaly within her spiritual space—but it doesn’t mean she is satisfied with this fact.

You know, I want there to be more. But we’ve not heard of any ordained lesbian, queer lesbian, elders within the United Methodist Church. So, that’s a step in and of itself. As a scholar, ah... I have the privilege of being able to do research and to write about various, ah... ideas to look at the doctrines of the church. Look at the dogmas in the church’s history. And to write about those. [...] I still think it’s really important to try to write about those things from my context because I know that they’re people who may be, ah, who may be struggling with their sexual identity, who need to hear from a scholar. And, also need to hear from somebody who really understands the church about what it means to be queer and what that says about their relationship with God. And it’s particularly important

for Black people because, before this year or perhaps the last five years, there has been a real... To be Black and to be queer in the Black community has been a bit of a challenge, to say the least. (“A Womanist Queer Theology”)

Felski roots the dialectic of confession as an autobiography-offshoot that develops out of the genre of religious confession, in which there is a gradual shift in the mode of reflection. The feminist-religious confession moves from self-analysis for the sake of identifying sin and conviction into an “exploration of intimacy, emotion, self-understanding” (Felski 103). Lightsey—situating herself within a ‘context’ of identity—has crafted a journey for her followers and readers that centers the latter form of religious confession. Lightsey’s emotion is *felt* when listening to her explain the loneliness of her status while still committing to the work because she *knows* the struggle of Black queers; she also knows the privilege she has as a scholar to provide the content needed for those who have not had the opportunity to come out publicly or negotiate a merger of their spiritual communities with their queer individuality. Another telling aspect of Lightsey’s confessional modality of speaking/writing is her navigation of intimacy and alienation, which Felski devotes much attention to in her theorization of the feminist confession.

The longing for intimacy emerges as a defining feature of the feminist confession at two interconnected levels: in the actual representation of the author’s own personal relationships and in the relationship between author and reader established in the text. [...] This pattern of an overwhelming desire for fusion which is followed by rejection, the problem of “feeling too much,” emerges clearly in many examples of feminist confession. (Felski 108-109)

Lightsey conveys this desire in her lament of the lack of “out” ordained elders and clergy within the United Methodist Church: “I want there to be more.” Religious work is a lonely business, only amplified by queerness considering how non-heteronormative sexual identity can create even more seclusion within a religious institution. But, this



alienation is countered with the author's created intimacy through readership. Lightsey knows there are queer, Black folk out there who need her story, her research, her words—and she can be the one to provide them with the content necessary to re-claim intimacy. Felski sees this as a paramount characteristic of the feminist confession—"the act of self-disclosure embodies the attempt to construct the independent sense of self which the author often feels she lacks" (111). Felski is bold to assert this as a universal truth of feminist confessional writers, but I believe she is pulling from a history of confession that was negotiating a culturally-embodied "female" self. The back and forth between narcissistic intention and unwilling alienation often makes it difficult to find the balance for how to craft the confession necessary for both critical self-analysis and communal epiphany, which I wonder if Felski even believes is possible—even though she sees the feminist confession as affirming female experience through writing.

I have come to read Lightsey as finding this balance—placing her own foundations and identity formations on a platform for crafting a scholarly discussion surrounding human sexuality within a spiritual context (particularly Black, queer sexuality). In the next sections of this chapter, I attempt to contextualize aspects of Lightsey's text through a lens of confessional dialectic, moving into an analysis of the Black, queer body as being centered through Lightsey's words.

*"I am...": Embodiment as Confession within Religious Rhetoric*

The very first sentence of Lightsey's *Our Lives Matter* is framed as a confessional statement: "I am a Black queer lesbian womanist scholar and Christian minister" (*Our Lives Matter* ix). The power of the "I am..." statement within the Christian church comes

from a heavily laden context of authority. In the book of Exodus, when Moses confronts the burning bush in Midian, he has a conversation with God in which he asks, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?” (Exodus 3.13). God responds with an “I am” statement, asserting his authority in a way that belies the labeling accompanying these kinds of sentences: “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” (Exodus 3.14). Throughout the Old Testament, God is written as speaking in “I Am” statements over twenty different times. The voice of God/Jesus is recorded doing the same in the New Testament more than ten times. The “I Am” statement is a pressing philosophical phrase in more than just biblical rhetoric. The status of one’s “being-in-the-world,” as Heidegger states, rests on the notion of the “I”—but only in its relation to the “Thou.” To state “I Am” is to also state “I am not.” Burke, in *The Rhetoric of Religion*, explores this in his six analogies. Burke’s third analogy makes space for the negative in terms of the relationship between the word/name and the thing/named. What he is stressing here is the role of “not” in identifying processes: “Language, to be used properly, must be “discounted.” WE must remind ourselves that, whatever correspondence there is between a word and the thing it names, the word is not the thing” (Burke 18). But with this discounting of language comes a paradox—for just as the word is verbal and the thing is non-verbal, all verbal words must discuss the non-verbal in terms of not just what *it is*, but what *it is not* (18). Burke calls this the principle of the negative. This pulls from the second analogy in terms of the power given to the verbal realm—the power of words. For even to conceive of

nothing, to conceive of a negative, can only be done by conceiving of something. To make an “I Am” statement, one asserts the authority of language in a masculine context while simultaneously aligning oneself with a particular code of being (usually ensconced in a binary of I Am/I Am Not, White/Black, Man/Woman, Good/Bad, Norm/Queer, Christian/Heathen). Often, the power to hold truth within these “I Am” statements has been notoriously sequestered to the former in each of those dichotomous examples: white, man, good, normal, Christian.

By beginning her book with an “I Am” statement that explicitly enacts the authority of Blackness and queerness *in conjunction* with Christianity, Lightsey is using self-identification as a tool for reconstruction. Her readers are confronted with the task of accepting words written by a woman who is both marked by her communities and revered by her communities. Lightsey herself addresses this reconstruction in just a few short lines after this opening statement:

Many who are familiar with my work will now likely question the very adjectives they once used to describe my work: *anointed* preacher, *brilliant* scholar, *effective* pastor, *Christian* disciple, *compassionate* counselor, *fruitful* evangelist. They will likely not grasp the possibility that God has been present and working through the life of a queer woman. Many will likely disavow every good work I have done, unable to reconcile my life and this writing with that of a “real” Christian believer. (*Our Lives Matter* ix)

Emphasizing the adjectives she was ‘once’ described as, Lightsey sheds those expectations for the purpose of reconstructing herself and her work as a call for action that pushes back against hegemonic practice while still calling on hegemonic theology. This is the progressive-vernacular outlaw that Sloop and Ono refer to in *Shifting Borders*—marking oneself as “outside” while working “within”. Lightsey states in the

preface that she “learned to think within the box to understand provincial old-school churchy arguments” while being “challenged to think outside the box designed by Western theology” that offered a narrow idea of ‘truth’ and understanding (xi). Lightsey is the outlaw, but she is also the pastor.

*Womanist Research, Queer Confession*

Lightsey is a queer womanist and her text is centered in narrative, intersectional, and cross-disciplinary research (xx). The narrative, specifically prioritizing the stories of Black women, is a critical part of any womanist methodology. Lightsey centralizes womanism because of her commitment to a queer, Black narrative within the church. Pulling from Alice Walker’s definition of womanism, Lightsey frames womanist theology as providing “historically marginalized Black women a platform from which to speak of both God and the Church in ways that set the ‘church captive’ free” (xi). Womanist theology gave Lightsey a new lens through which to explore queer theory in her religious settings. Queer was a term that had been a source of contention in her journey to write a contemporary womanist theology. Acknowledging that asserting a “queer” label onto her rhetoric and her body is to assert a notion of fluidity, Lightsey was concerned over the ways in which queer was being used as a separatist term for those who were still advocating for rights within an hegemonic institution (xxi). Queer, then, became the “ambiguity amidst sexual ambiguity” for her work. Avoiding the conflation of queerness as an epistemic community, queer could function as a lens of theology that “dispels the notion of expertise” surrounding sexuality studies and instead reclaim sexual possibilities beyond understanding (xxii). As a self-identified queer lesbian, it must be

noted that Lightsey's commitment to interrogating the terminology and subjectivity of "queer" is an extremely vulnerable task made paramount by her positioning within the church. For a woman to express her queerness within the church, consequences are often expected. For a woman *pastor* to express her queerness within the church, consequences are demanded. Lightsey takes these consequences and folds them into her writing, choosing to explicitly address the ways in which the term queer is both transcendent and problematic within her positionality as a Black, Christian minister and explaining to her readers how she theorizes the use in her text and—simultaneously—in her life. She could easily move on from this definitional problem in her work to focus on justice as a purely racial issue, but Lightsey refuses to begin her text without this accompanying preface in which queerness is deconstructed. In the paradigm of sexual fluidity within certain queer communities, sex is no longer synonymous with gender (xxii) and it is this facet of truth that conditions Lightsey's womanist approach. Womanism is not just a practice centered in race—it is a practice centered in racial queerness. Dr. Lightsey's first few pages of text end in almost a complete circle, bringing it back to her opening confessional "I Am" statement. In the last line of the introduction, she states, "Thus, we have come to see how powerful are the cultural norms that demand we live our lives with a binary presupposition of either man *or* woman and moving our bodies in acceptable masculine/feminine ways" (xxiii). In the opening statement of the preface, Lightsey claims her identity as a Black, queer, lesbian, Christian minister—and in her last line of the introductory pages, ends with a powerful lead into the constant deconstruction that comes with an acceptance of a fluid body.

Her confessional opening is an interesting and almost paradoxical instance in terms of understanding where Lightsey's identity politics and boundaries fall. While Lightsey uses the powerful, almost rigid, words of the "I Am" statement to frame her identity, she also follows this claim with an exclamation of queerness that is fluid and ambiguous—allowed to transform, if need be. It is the transformative expectation of her queerness, in fact, that allows Lightsey the confidence to make the authoritative "I Am" statement in the first place. As a teacher, Lightsey is often expected to use this kind of rhetoric in her preaching and teaching and counseling. Many of the rhetorical strategies for claiming authority as a minister or preacher rely on "I Am" claims that align with pastoral adherence to godly reverence and example—only sharing trials and tribulations as they would best adhere to the conviction of the congregation. What Lightsey's opening chapters allude to, however, is not authority through the masculine "I Am" that would be theorized by rhetorical scholars like Burke, but an authority of identification that embraces queerness as a possible derailing of that identification.

*Centering the Black Queer Body: Authenticity, Confession, and History*

Queerness, as a deconstructive term, is expanded upon in the beginning of the second chapter of Lightsey's text. Lightsey begins to expand upon queerness through the modality of the queer-as-verb: "To do it well, *to queer*, is simply to do it, without drawing attention to the mechanics, though they are operative in every work" (15). While this enactment holds truth for Lightsey, she takes up the lack of work being done to truly postulate *queer* for the "novice" that wishes to understand queer works as a basic theory

and, subsequently, a basic theology. Further study, further archival work, must be done—both for the queer student and the womanist.

Womanist queer theology must investigate how the practice of identity politics has done and continues to do damage to women and Black communities. Our methodological concerns should include a sound critique of essentialism within our communities and avoidance when possible within our writing. [...] For Black LGBTQ women, this means that I am making the case that none of our self-identities is subordinate or should be made subordinate to the other. Of course, I am writing with the benefit of history - of knowing that often Black women and Black LGBTQ women have placed or been made to place their own self-interests on the backburner for the purported sake of the uplift of the race. (16)

Not only does Lightsey lament the lack of work being done to repair the history of hurt done to Black queer women and communities, but she also makes aware to her readers her own knowledge surrounding the positionality of women in terms of racial reparation. Lightsey proposes a hard truth to this problem: “Queer womanists must do the work” (1). Womanist scholars have ignored the intersections of LGBTQ communities within their exploration of a Black sexuality and queer scholars have ignored the intersections of race within their exploration of a non-binary sexuality. A “full queer theology manuscript totally committed to the lives of Black lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer women” (1) does not exist—and this is largely due to the lack of “basics” in queer education that Lightsey laments in the second chapter of *Our Lives Matter*.

Lightsey begins this educational process by reviewing for the reader those specific texts that work to from a self-identified LGBTQ womanist perspective and have impacted her personally. First, and only briefly, is Jacqueline Grant’s *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus*. Lightsey mentions this text to explain to her readers the importance of connecting with a text written by someone who has a similar history to

yourself. Grant's work was one of the first for Lightsey that articulated her feelings of disconnect from white, Christian feminists who could not understand the spirituality practices of Black women. While not considered by Lightsey a theoretically womanist text, Grant's book opened up space for her and others to begin an exploration into the necessity of difference between the theology and practice of white women, Black women, and Black LGBTQ folk. This is a foundational predecessor to many confessional works. Felski, in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, explains this through the lens of writer's "inner-self:"

Most obviously, the social constitution of the inner self manifests itself in the ambivalent self-image of woman writers, which reveals the powerful psychological mechanisms by which gender ideologies are internalized. It is clear that autobiographical writing by oppressed groups will be particularly prone to conflicts and tensions. On one hand, the depiction of one's life and experiences as a woman, a black person, a homosexual, can be a potentially liberating process insofar as it expresses a public self-acceptance and celebration of difference. (Felski 105)

The "authentic self" is a social product to Felski, arising within a text through the authors' own understanding of initial difference from *their* work compared within the larger genre of *others'* work. This is interrogated more thoroughly in Lightsey's third chapter, in which she details the key strategies of objective claims by Black LGBTQ persons in discourse. Grant's book was the cornerstone for Lightsey's introduction to the black, religious confessional as a truth claim for Black religious experience and it was also a stepping stone for Lightsey to begin her own journey of crafting a womanist confessional text. "Womanists have always maintained the right to make claims about their experience and ways of knowing," Lightsey states at the beginning of Chapter One (1). I find this statement to resonate heavily with Patricia Hill Collins' ideas surrounding



Black feminist thought. Collins stresses that there is no “homogeneous Black *woman’s* standpoint” (Collins 32). Any pursuit of an “authentic” experience that defined a Black woman’s modality and positionality would be essentialist and suppress those differences that individualize Black women. Instead, Collins states that there *is* a Black *women’s* collective standpoint and it is characterized by the “tensions that accrue to different responses to common challenges” (32). If one were to attempt to harmonize both Felski’s and Collins’ theories on authenticity and experience to craft an “authentic” confession—it would look similar to Lightsey’s *Our Lives Matter*.

After foregrounding Grant, Lightsey then uses the rest of Chapter One to look at Kelly Brown Douglas’ *Sexuality in the Black Church*, “a salacious book written about the Black church!” (3), and M. Shawn Copeland’s *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, a “theological anthropology of suffering Black women’s bodies” (7). Douglas’ and Copeland’s texts are two of the resources available to Black LGBTQ persons and allies for deconstructing and exploring the nuance of Black sexuality and the Black female body within Protestant and Catholic churches. Lightsey laments this limited canon; while she admires the knowledge these texts can give, she pushes for a more extensive space of discourses surrounding these issues—“extensive and frank discussion about the loving ways in which LGBTQ sexuality is expressed, as well as reflection on God’s gracious act of creating our bodies in God’s image and likeness” (10). These are the only texts and conversations within Black Christian culture that are working to prove God’s queer nature:

The bodies of Black LGBTQ women are part of the body of Jesus Christ who, according to Copeland, “embraces *all* our bodies passionately, revalorizes them as

embodied mystery, and reorients sexual desire toward God's desire for us in and through our sexuality." This is no puritanical argument. It is inclusive and affirming of Black LGBTQ women and reminds the church of the queer nature of Christ's body. (10)

Emphasizing the queerness of Christ, Lightsey makes an argument from these texts (along with Audre Lorde's understanding of *eros* and power) for the decriminalization of queer sexual acts within the church. An embrace of sexuality outside of constructs of celibacy, or heteronormativity, or marriage is necessary for everyone to become "whole persons within the churches we adore" (11).

This is not a new plea within Christian discourse, but it is continuously a polarizing one. In 1968, Anglican priest Hugh W. Montefiore published a controversial essay entitled, "Jesus, the Revelation of God" in which he argued the celibacy of Jesus was grounded in homosexual leanings. Montefiore also felt this notion to be further proof for Jesus' inclination to associate and identify with those who were the 'outcasts' of the time (Montefiore 110). In 1972, Howard Wells, pastor of the Metropolitan Community Church of New York, wrote the canonical essay, "Gay God, Gay Theology," declaring that the gay community had both the right and the need to claim a "gay God" as a liberating theology (Wells 7). Reverend Dr. Carter Heyward published *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* in which she drew upon her own embodied experiences to promote the presence of God within lesbian and female romantic relationships. Marcella Althaus-Reid, in the 2000 publication of her work *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics*, discusses masturbation and eroticism and other acts through the lens of "indecent" to declare their aligning with God.

Lightsey's own work finds itself inserted within this discourse through its call for the eradication of heteronormativity and celibacy language—but different in its womanist perspective. Lightsey believes that it is the duty of Queer womanist theologians, like herself, to demonstrate a healthy understanding of sexuality for Black LGBTQ Christians who find themselves confronted with the power of the erotic, to quote Lorde. Embracing the sensual is not effective if it limits the expressions of Black queer persons' sexual drive and liberation—many within the church will preach a message of embrace towards the queer person but will advocate for a level of control to be placed upon the queer expression. This control can come from the self or the clergy, but it must be present for the “queerness” to be allowed within theologically sacred space. Lightsey pushes back against this limited acceptance of queer expression, particularly as it disproportionately affects Black LGBTQ Christians. “Black LGBTQ must guard against linguistic representations that perpetuate binaries or naively endorse a kind of internalized oppression” (14). To *confess* one's queerness within the church must be accompanied by not just a promise of full-acceptance, but a practice. Womanism, or womanist theology, is the platform for creating this practice. Womanist theology, according to Lightsey, is a space that doesn't stop at the end of the realm of Black women and Black culture—it addresses “ecological needs, the struggle for quality education, self-care, quality of care for the poor and oppressed, and so forth” (13).

To center the Black queer body as a subject for confessional rhetoric within this larger project, I am compelled to explore the nuances of Lightsey's own struggles with the language resource. This was displayed most clearly in Lightsey's second chapter,

“Philosophical Background to Queer Theology.” After providing a foregrounding of canonical queer theory in terminology and academic waves, Lightsey confronts the notion of identity politics as a useful theme within theologies of liberation.

What postmodernism has given us is indeed a way to speak of the social construction of our realities and especially the social construction of the categories of our existence whether by race, gender, class, etc. Those categories are certainly subjective. However, the language of these categories, the words which signify how we are perceived in society, do objectively impact our social location. Therefore marginalized persons do well to develop modes of describing the experiential consequences of these categories. (22-23)

Again, I am reminded of Patricia Hill Collins’ work on Black feminist thought. Claiming a distinct knowledge-space, as with Black feminist thought, is naught if the goal isn’t tied directly to some form of deconstruction/reconstruction for the sake of those involved (Collins 35). This is why Lightsey takes the Black feminist experience, the womanist experience, and moves a step further in contextualizing it through a queer and religious lens. *Queering* becomes a theological methodology that allows a deconstruction of gender *through* scripture.

### **A CASE FOR THE SACRED, BLACK, QUEER BODY: IMAGO DEI AND *FEMME FATALE***

In the last chapter of her book, Lightsey interrogates the doctrine of *imago Dei* as it applies to the bodies of Black LGBTQ women and queer persons. If she spent the first six chapters centering the Black queer body within culture, Lightsey finishes by making a case for its place within the church. Lightsey contextualizes her argument through Dr. Phillis Sheppard’s challenge of bodily consideration, in which “the body” must be recognized as entrenched within a cultural mode of exploitation that subsumes desire in

terms of commodification (79). This is important because it changes the way we understand “the body” as Christ-like, or “made in the image of Christ,” or *imago Dei*.

*A Queer Theology of Imago Dei*

*Imago Dei* is the concept that all of humanity is created in the image of God, implying an inherent “value” of all people. The “fall of man,” that moment in which Eve ate from the forbidden tree and caused an eruption of sin into this world that marred the sacred connection of *imago Dei*. Ever since, humankind has been on a never-ending quest to “renew” themselves to their original state. Even with the element of sin, it is still accepted widely in most Christian denominations that every human bears a “likeness” to God. “Likeness” in terms of image, however, is a highly vague notion. *Imago Dei* as primarily physiological is a commonly held belief for creationists, especially those who ecologically hold humans to be the ontological top-tier of the universe. Arguments have also been made for *imago Dei* to be more of a behavioral chain of actions rather than pure aesthetic—less a case for the pure superiority of the human and more a case for the call upon humankind to enact relationships between all life-forms on earth *like* God does (Schuele 6). The latter would seem to make the most sense to avoid any qualifier of God as bearing “human” likeness, yet many within the Christian tradition are left still wondering how the human body fits into God’s plan. In Genesis 1, God forms the ‘heavens and the earth’ to which he gives animation to all things. In verse 26, God forms ‘mankind:’

Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

So God created mankind in his own image,

in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.  
God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” (Genesis 1.26-28)

In almost all translations, God states that mankind was made in “our image”—a pluralistic enunciation that implies God as existing outside of the singular. Some theologians go so far to say that God’s *gender* also exists outside of the singular, for both “male and female” were created in God’s image. The concept of *imago Dei* originates from these verses and has most notoriously been used in a theological landscape that privileges the male over the female, both biologically and in gender expression. However, the Apostle Paul writes in his letter to Galatia that “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3.28). This statement is contradictory to concept of *imago Dei* as relegated to the biological level of maleness; instead, it relegates the concept of *imago Dei* to holistic and communal. I have personally found the concept of *imago Dei* to be that of a liberation of the soul—that humans hold an aspect of the *divine* in their *inherent* selves, regardless of biological or physical or cultural determinants. Therein lies a necessary alluding to a concept of power, ethics, and compassion as they manifest in relationships and ideologies of humans.

Lightsey is looking at the concept of *imago Dei* through a combination of all aspects; the corporeal capacity (bodies, sexualities, and intentions) and the relational capacity (communication, behavior, and love). The concept of *imago Dei* holds great weight within womanist theology for Lightsey; it is the epitome of queer fluidity. An

“imagery of interconnected and unconstrained relationships with one another, God, and Creation” (Lightsey 80). In both Genesis and Galatians, we see a rhetoric of queer possibility: “our image” as pluralistic in nature (Genesis), and “neither x nor y...” as defiance of cultural labels (Galatians).

In her Chapter Seven, Lightsey is excited about the possibilities held within a doctrine of *imago Dei* for queer communities to embrace union with one another through a universalist idea of God. However, *imago Dei* does not serve purpose if it cannot contain a commitment to “nurture appropriate self-love” (81). This means that the concept of the “image of God” cannot be contained within a hetero-, white, cis- lens of bodily enactment and cultural relation, as it often subsumes through the dominant rhetoric of the “Christian body.”

It is precisely because Black women’s bodies have, as Sheppard claims, “become the scapegoats for internalized black body ambivalence” that we must turn the tables, declare our bodies to be good, and encourage healthy self-love. [...] So, not only must we love ourselves but that love of self must also extend to *loving thy neighbor as thyself*. This is why the communal nature of womanism is so critical. We must love the folk, be with the folk, and not live our lives as separatists or staunch advocates of other-worldliness. (83)

Lightsey’s claim that the black body is a *good* body is not just for the womanist camp—it is for all ideologies and cultural systems that would claim otherwise, including white femininity and sexuality.

Like the *femme fatale*, Lightsey is unashamed of the power that the female body, particularly the black and racialized female body, holds in terms of rawness and relational potential. This is the powerful body that sits on the intersection of Godliness and

queerness. Hanson and O’Rawe emphasize this in the introduction to their anthology on the *femme fatale*:

Ultimately, the *femme fatale* is ‘a sign, a figure who crosses discourse boundaries, who is to be found at the intersection of Western racial, sexual and imperial anxieties’ (Stott 1992: 30). Thus the *femme fatale* marks the borders of race and sex, and her ‘darkness’ is the perfect trope of both her illegibility and unknowability, and of the threat of miscegenation and ‘male fears of an engulfing femininity.’ (Hanson and O’Rawe 3)

Making sacred the black female body within the church is a radical act of defiance from Lightsey’s own religious history, in which she was taught that the female sex was the weaker sex and therefore subservient to the man. But if the *imago Dei* would allow for blackness, queerness, and female-ness to be as transcendent as whiteness, straightness, and male-ness—this story of the weaker sex cannot hold merit in any religious foundation. Inclusion is the womanist way; *full* inclusion as it applies to race, gender, sexuality, and expression. If the *imago Dei* can include bodies like Lightsey’s, then what arguments could also be made for the canon to include *femme fatale*’s as equally powerful and agentic and black?

### *The Black Femme in the White Church*

The *femme fatale* has historically been white-washed within the canon of film and literature, namely because the *femme fatale*’s danger relies on her paradoxical nature: white femininity as “deviant” femininity. Like Mata Hari, who only “plays” at racialization, this erasure of the *femme fatale* as anything other than white falls back on what Harris and Crocker attribute to the *femme fatale*’s coding within a heterosexual context which denies her any kind of “radical” nature. So why take up the marker for women like Pamela Lightsey, who pushes against heterosexual coding in any systemic



context? I believe that the *femme fatale*, as she was meant to be seen, must embody *all* that is her queer nature. Embracing the “othered” side of oneself is to embrace all of those attributes that are othered along with the *femme*. Someone like Lightsey—who is doing this embracing within a heavily traditional system such as Protestant Christianity—is a hallmark for this radical renaming and revisioning. The outlier on the margins, the outlaw in the vernacular.

In their book, *Rescuing Jesus: How People of Color, Women & Queer Christians are Reclaiming Evangelism*, Deborah Jian Lee recounts the generational changes and shifting makeup of the evangelical Protestant church in the United States. One of the shifting tides is that of racial awakening, in the wake of a history of failed attempts:

Of course, evangelicals do not own the market on racial conflict. Integration was and still remains a problem for American society as a whole. [...] African American activists tried to challenge the status quo. In the 1960s teams of mixed-race or black activists attempted to attend segregated white congregations, but were routinely turned away, arrested or placed in separate seating. [...] From there the homogenous unit principle fueled the church growth movement, which caught fire and gave way to the megachurch landscape, single-ethnic congregations and churches catering to specific economic classes - and it established the massive evangelical base we know today. (Lee 97-98)

The church’s history in racist practice is not subtle and the black female/queer body has always been a target of this insidious ideology of segregation and whiteness. In the beginning of this project, I reference Dreama Moon’s “good (white) girls” theory of white enculturation. Moon states that the dichotomy of good/bad in terms of femininity can be brought back to race—the realm of womanhood is only exalted as “good” when it performs a heteronormative, “respectable,” whiteness (Moon 181). Within the Christian tradition, this dichotomy has permeated religious culture through the stories of the “good,

Godly woman.” She was devout, she was pious, she was celibate, she was *white*. The black woman, in turn, was not afforded any of these traits (whether she wanted them or not) and was always considered outside of true “goodness”. When the black female body did show up in Christian and Jewish history, she was the over-sexualized antagonist. There was the Queen of Sheba in 1 Kings, who came to question and test Solomon’s wisdom. There was Zipporah, Moses’ Cushite or “dark-skinned” wife, who was an outsider from Moses’s family and brought suspicion upon Moses because of their marriage. Hagar, Abraham’s sex slave in Genesis, who was cast out by Abraham’s first wife when she bore him a child. These women were pitted against their white counterparts as ‘disruptions’ of the goodness of femininity. They were the first black *femme fatales* of faith. For Lightsey, however, these women were the embodiment of *imago Dei* because of their race and sexuality.

The black queer woman was further denied access to identity-markers because of its disassociation with *femme*. In an interview with Jewelle Gomez, an African American writer, activist, and *femme*, Heather Findlay asks her about this invisible barrier that exists between the LGBTQ and *femme* communities and black women. Gomez replies:

It’s an interesting phenomenon. You become a very precise “other” that people don’t know how to integrate into their world view. I had this weird experience around being black. [...] The same thing happens when people see me as a black woman; they can’t see me as a lesbian. I was talking with some people I was working with once about a comment a man had made in the room. I was the only lesbian in the room and there were four other black women who were heterosexual. I said, “Well, I found his comment a little offensive to black women, and as a lesbian I definitely found it upsetting.” This woman said to me, “If the black women weren’t upset about it-” and I said, “Well, I’m a black woman!” Somehow, to this other black woman, I wasn’t black because I identified as lesbian. (Findlay, quoting Gomez, 148)

In an overwhelmingly white institution such as the Western Protestant church, being a black queer body (outside of those predominantly black church spaces) means navigating suspicion and, sometimes, attack on one aspect of your identity or another. Oftentimes, the *femme* in particular is forced to pick a “fight” within the church: racial reconciliation or LGBTQ rights. Pamela Lightsey’s work is changing the way churches read certain bodies, allowing for an intersectional approach to be had. She is placing herself as a queer, black woman at the forefront of the verbal and physical attacks from the conservative sects for the possibility of visibility on the part of her queer sisters of color. In terms of the *femme fatales* of faith, Pamela Lightsey is carving out a policy of identity politics that doesn’t align with the heterosexual standard. The black, queer woman is the epitome of deviant femininity; her role in the church outliers her body even further.

Pamela Lightsey is ministering to those image bearers of God—the queer body that holds its divinity in its fluidity. Her work offers up a new conversation for a queer theological standard while simultaneously dismantling the patriarchal practice of white religiosity.

## CHAPTER FOUR

*So long as we refuse to accept that “woman” is a holistic concept, one that includes all people who experience themselves as women, our concept of womanhood will remain a mere reflection of our own personal experiences and biases rather than something based in the truly diverse world around us.*

—Julie Serano, *Whipping Girl*

### **PAULA STONE WILLIAMS: AN IN-DEPTH LOOK**

This chapter takes a close look at Dr. Paula Stone Williams as a *femme fatale* of faith, including her transition, her rhetoric, and her relationships that make up her public image within the progressive evangelical community of the United States. Throughout this project, I have pursued the possibilities of revising the representation of *femme* within the Western Protestant church, highlighting those women I believe are creating the most opportune space for this reclamation to happen through their written work, namely the confessional text. In the previous chapter, I focused on Dr. Pamela Lightsey. Lightsey is a womanist theologian and an ordained United Methodist elder located in Boston, whose most recent book, *Our Lives Matter*, is an exploration of theological concern from the queer womanist perspective. My hope for this chapter, as a follow up to Lightsey’s analytic, is a deep and transparent examination into the life and words of a woman who was once one of the most heralded public figures within conservative religious spaces and the subsequent shift in perspective on religious ideology that comes when one

embraces the feminine. Chronicling Paula Stone William's transition from male to female and how her journey with gender dysmorphia affected her writing in her personal blog, *And So It Goes*. Accompanying this textual critique, this chapter will also highlight what the recent interactions with her son and his new book reveal about our ideas of motherhood. Doing this analysis, a better assessment of the larger discourses surrounding the ambiguity of the masculine/feminine binary within Christian politics and social order can be made known. As a *femme fatale* of faith, Paula's own orientations surrounding motherhood and parental gender norms are interesting juxtapositions within the larger ideology of "good and bad" motherhood—stemming from biblical precedent to modern day examples. The *femme fatale* is never "fit" to be a mother because of her innate desire for self-fulfillment. As a transwoman, Paula is perceived as having automatically choosing herself over her children in terms of 'emotional need.' This is what makes her 'liveness' so apparent in her writing—a woman and a parent, but not a mother. Her thoughts and musings create an intertextual space of tension between reality and the perceived situation.

### *Paula, A Live Recording*

It's a Tuesday in November and I'm trying to get as comfortable as possible in one of the dozens of white, fold-out garden chairs set up in the large basement level of Denver Community Church (DCC), while balancing my laptop on my knees and keeping my pleather mini-skirt from riding up too high. I pull out my glasses and open up a fresh page on OneNote while the rest of the conference goers file in and find their own chairs. It's the first day of the W/ Collective National Gathering and DCC was playing host to

between forty and fifty different church planters, organizers, authors, thinkers, artists, and activists from around the U.S. who were pursuing radical change and social justice from a faith perspective. Having just come from the National Communication Association academic conference the week before in Salt Lake City, I was feeling a strong and conflicting mixture of both burnout and rejuvenation. While my mind was tired from the week previous of non-stop panels and presentations on communicative rhetoric and performance methodology, my heart was near bursting at the presence of other academics, artists, queer folk/allies, and community organizers who were speaking my spiritual language and filling the space around me. I had never been to any kind of Christian-oriented conference that wasn't rooted in the Pentecostal tradition, or women's ministry, or abstinence-only youth rallies. I had no idea what to expect from the panels on "Faith & Belonging," "Gender & Power," and "White Privilege & the Church," and "Intersectionality & Justice." It felt surreal and glorious and impossible. My palms were sweaty—maybe the pleather mini-skirt was a poor choice.

The morning sessions had opened up with worship, followed by a keynote from Michael Hidalgo—the lead teaching pastor at DCC. After the morning panels and a break for lunch, we reconvened for the afternoon session. The first item on the agenda was a live podcast recording. Carla Ewert, one of the co-founders of the organization *She Is Called* and creator of the *Holy Writ* podcast, would be sitting down to facilitate a conversation with Reverend Dr. Paula Stone Williams and her son, Jonathan Williams. This was what I had been waiting for the most during today's sessions. I had known for a while that I wanted to focus on Williams and her story in my dissertation work and I was

anxious at the opportunity to see her speak outside of the pulpit. I knew she had a son, but I didn't know that he was also a pastor and author. This interview was coming on the heels of Jonathan William's book release, *She's My Dad: A Father's Transition and a Son's Redemption*, which is a memoir of Jonathan's experiences during Paula's transition from male to female. The room feels tense as Carla begins with her podcast introduction.

Paula and her son sit on two raised, bar chairs at the front of the room with microphones on the table in front of them. There is tension, but there is also vulnerability. I begin to notice this duality even more so in the beginnings of the conversation, as Carla opens up the table to discuss Jonathan's book. The book, she explains, dives into the forays of Jonathan's own thoughts and processing during Paula's transition. Carla and Jonathan and Paula all quip back and forth about the intentions and negotiations of getting this manuscript to press. Carla looks at Jonathan and wonders out loud if he had asked permission from Paula before writing the book

"No, he did not," Paula states to a round of soft laughter.

Paula continues, looking at Jonathan and saying, "But I also didn't ask permission from you to transition." (Ewert)

Throughout the interview, Paula gets visibly emotional, but she makes it clear her commitment to authenticity through the familial drama of transition. She holds tight to her parental role—"I'm allowed to have pain, but I'm not allowed to have grievances, because I'm a parent" (Ewert). Her son disagrees, but he can only speak to his own pain—which seems to be paramount in his upcoming memoir. The interview comes to an end and it is clear that Paula and her son have an ongoing and loving relationship; but

Jonathan's book and his emotional history are still a sore subject between them. I feel a bit uncomfortable—almost angry—as an image of Paula gets painted in my head throughout the interview: “bad father,” “bad parent,” “never a mother.” The session ends and everyone moves to stretch or get a snack or approach Paula or Jonathan. I decide to go home for the rest of the afternoon before reconvening for the evening keynote. I need to process what I have just seen. This is the same Paula Stone Williams who was an inspiration to me as both a pastor and speaker and, yet, I found myself confronted with a new aspect of her being that shook me. She was not this “stand-alone” public figure. She was also a parent, an ex-spouse, and the “selfish-villain” in some of her most intimate relationships.

### *Becoming Paula*

In 1979, Paula Williams (Paul, at the time) joined the church planting organization, *Orchard Group*. Church “planting” is an interesting term within evangelical missions—relatively new yet stemming from biblical origins. At its core, church planting is the process of traveling under the financial and spiritual support of a larger organization to an area considered “in need” and establishing a church within the city or town. The *Orchard Group* states that their mission of church planting is fueled by a biblical model.

With present trends like unprecedented urban population growth, rapid globalization, and ever-shifting cultural values, the complexity of ministry and church planting in today's world can seem daunting. For this reason, stories like this one Acts 14 are crucial because they serve as reminders that establishing new churches has always been deeply challenging, and it is always accomplished only by God's grace. (“Church Planting's Purpose, Potential, and Power”)



The Acts 14 mention is a reference to Paul and Barnabas, who sailed from Attalia to Antioch to seemingly “gather a church.” The *Orchard Group* is adamant in its service to “completing churches established in the grace of God” (“Church Planting’s Purpose, Potential, and Power”). Within ten years of joining, Paula had moved up to the position of President and Chairman of The *Orchard Group* with no inclination of slowing down. The *Orchard Group* was known for its conservative and simple belief statements, in which full authority of the Bible was privileged and revered as the divine word of God through the Holy Spirit. Based out of New York, the group has planted churches all over the country that sometimes reach over a thousand in membership. One of those churches was Paula’s son’s—Forefront Brooklyn. Paula had followed their own father into ministry and became a prominent guest speaker and minister within the evangelical community of the United States. Starting churches with their family—Paula’s ministry and life were thriving.

In 2012, Paula told her son for the first time that she believed she was transgender (Leland). In 2013, Paula (at the time still going by Paul) told her colleagues and was abruptly asked to resign (Leland). The *Orchard Group* released an announcement in 2014 that stated the following:

Paul Williams gave vital leadership to Orchard Group for decades, including serving as President from 1989 until 2009. At that time, Brent Storms assumed the role of President and began providing both visionary and operational leadership, while Paul transitioned to Board Chairman, representing Orchard Group in a variety of ways.

On December 31, 2013, Paul retired quietly from Orchard Group. The Orchard Group board, staff and extended church planting family wish Paul and Cathy God’s best as they step into the future. (“Orchard Group Staff Announcement”)

As if ‘Paul’ had just disappeared, any remaining friends and colleagues within the church slowly began to disavow all of their history and work, and Paula was excommunicated from her evangelical community during the crux of her transition.

In July of that same year—almost two years after she had first disclosed to her son that she wanted to live her life as a woman—Paula wrote a blog post for her online webpage, *And So It Goes* titled, “My Story.” In it, Paula tells her followers:

For my entire life I have had to contend with what is psychologically known as Gender Dysphoria. I was aware I did not want to be a boy from as early as I can remember, probably age three or so. As I grew through puberty and into adulthood, virtually no information was available on the subject. The silence of scripture was difficult. I wanted answers and there were none. I read every piece of information I could find that looked at the diagnosis from a biblical perspective, but little of it was helpful. When I chose to enter the ministry, which has been richly rewarding, I knew talking with anyone in the church could jeopardize my ministry, so only a handful of people knew. Last year I realized hiding the struggle was no longer working. I am transgender. (“My Story”)

Paula explains the nuances of Gender Dysphoria and the title of Transgender in the LGBT community. She clarifies that her sexual orientation is and has always been towards women, making it known repetitively that what is happening in her life is about her gender and not necessarily a transition of sexuality. She ends with a sign-off from “Paul.”

Ultimately I am the one who must struggle and decide. I am cognizant of the impact of the decisions I make. The burden is great. This much I know. I have lived my life with integrity. I will continue to do so. I know many will find this news shocking. Because it is unusual and difficult for people to understand, it takes a long time to process. As you come to terms with the reality that I am transgender, I do hope it will not impact how you view my former employers or my family. How you choose to view me is, of course, your decision. Thank you for taking the time to thoughtfully read this information. As I continue to search diligently for God’s direction, I will appreciate your prayers. My wife and I will also appreciate your respect of our privacy. —Paul (“My Story”)

By August 2015, Paula had been living outwardly as transgender for close to a year. Quite a few of the posts in late 2015 revolved around her reflections of that past year and of the pain many felt at “losing” Paul—including her own. She was living authentically and, as a reader, I could see this in her writing. She was continuing her ministry and counseling as Paula, but was living a life ‘under the radar’ in a way. She was still guest-speaking and ministering, as well as working as a counselor with her former wife in their practice RLT Pathways, Inc. She worked for the Center for Progressive Renewal, began to serve on the board of the *Gay Christian Network*, and became an active member and speaker at Highlands Church in Denver, CO. While this may not seem like a life ‘under the radar,’ it was a huge step into the shadows compared to her former life as “Paul”—a mega-pastor and national figure.

In November of 2017, Paula emerged into the public eye with her TEDxMileHigh talk at the Bellco Theater. In front of over 5,000 people, Paula shared her story and what living a life as both a man and a woman had taught her. She opened with funny quips about the differences between men and women’s clothing and the price differences between women’s and men’s haircuts—but she then took a more serious tone and began explaining the ways her eyes were opened for the first time to the discrimination and verbal abuse women receive on a daily basis just because of their sex. “The truth is,” she states in the middle of her talk, “I will not live long enough to lose my male privilege” (“I’ve Lived as a Man & a Woman”). She cannot fully fathom those moments in which her integrity or honesty are questioned, and she also cannot comprehend how to deal with “man-splaining” (“I’ve Lived as a Man & a Woman”)—she does not mention whether

she ever felt herself guilty of this very feat during her years as Paul. Paula’s TED Talk received almost two million views on YouTube and was a huge boost in her media presence.

It was during this period that I first heard Paula speak—the experience I recount in the first few pages of this dissertation. A gentle, yet firm voice speaking from the margins and navigating a mentality that was warring against her slow loss of power as a woman—advocating for a future that treated Paula as well as the past had treated Paul.

### ***AND SO IT GOES: THE CONFESSIONAL ‘LIVENESS’ OF BLOGGING***

When I began choosing the women I wanted to highlight in this project, I immediately felt concern over choosing Paula for no other reason than she didn’t have a published manuscript. As a rhetorical scholar, I enjoy the epistemological comfort of a concise and unified text to fall back on in my research. Having chosen to focus on the memoir as my confessional genre, I wondered how Paula would fit into my methods in the way that Pamela Lightsey or Nadia Bolz-Weber did with their books. All I had from Williams was a blog site that expanded from 2014 to present—it felt overwhelming and out of place. But I was brought back to Felski and the theorization of the diary. The “journal form” of confession, according to Felski, was that of the “open-ended structure written in the present tense, in which the author records the details of daily events as they occur” (Felski 96). Felski believes that the guiding desire for choosing this particular style is the “belief that it is only by setting down every detail of experience as it happens that the author can hope to bridge the gap between life and the text” (97). In this way, the

“confessional diary” distinguishes itself from a canonical category of literature and holds within that separation a sense of authenticity.

Over the past year of my research, I have come to appreciate the rich material that creates the “blog” and its timeline—what I have found is a more realistic and continual space of “confession” than many of the recounted memoirs I have studied elsewhere. Paula’s site, *And So It Goes*, holds the characteristics of the memoir while still pursuing a digital rhetoric rooted in certain commonalities. Jamey Gallagher’s pedagogical push for blogs as a rhetorical site of inquiry highlights these “commonplaces:”

Although the blogs I looked at ranged widely across the political spectrum, they all shared certain commonplaces, recognizable textual family resemblances that included the use of

1. Informal language
2. Intertextuality
3. The personal address
4. The rhetoric of the provisional (Gallagher 287)

What strikes me as most obvious and simultaneously brushed over is the intertextual possibilities of the blog forum. If confession is a genre, then the discourse of community that arises out of that genre must be interrogated through its own writing and interaction. What is challenging for rhetorical critics, in this regard, is the sheer immensity of context that floats around the stand-alone blog post. The nature of a blog’s “liveness” is necessarily paired with the blog’s dynamic, textual nature:

Intertextuality provides rhetoric with an important perspective, one currently neglected, I believe. The prevailing composition pedagogies by and large cultivate the romantic image of writer as free, uninhibited spirit, as independent, creative genius. By identifying and stressing the intertextual nature of discourse, however, we shift our attention away from the writer as individual and focus more on the sources and social contexts from which the writer’s discourse arises. According to this view, authorial intention is less significant than social context; the writer is simply a part of a discourse tradition, a member of a team, and a participant in a

community of discourse that creates its own collective meaning. Thus the intertext constrains writing. (Porter 34-35)

*The Burden of 'Liveness' as Digital Dissent*

Confession becomes a feminist practice because of its creation of community. The sharing of pleasures, grievances, mistakes, and doubts with those who chose to engage with your life's happenings as if they were their own. Encapsulated within the memoir—particularly the published manuscript—this sharing becomes localized to a story within edited pages often months after the writing has ended. The engagement is delayed and, again, localized to the forums of reception that align with a manuscript's due process, such as published reviews, book tours with Q&As, sales numbers. The blog does not conform to these conventions of memoir as a literary genre. The confessions and thoughts released within the digital forum are immediate, often un-proofed, and susceptible to direct engagement if the site allows commenting. It is "live" in the sense that it is created for immediate consumption on the part of the community who chooses to engage with the content. For Paula, this is another way of performing her identity as a transwoman—a queer body—that is a double-edged sword. On one hand, the queer body is constantly policed through elements of surveillance and expectation, making every blog post either a 'wrong' or 'right' performance of *femme* that Paula is judged upon by her peers and social followers. On the other side, the benefit of a live platform for sharing and expressing one's thoughts is paramount for a writer and activist like Paula whose voice is desperately needed within the current religious-social-political climate. This issue is articulated beautifully in José Muñoz's *Disidentifications*. The last chapter of Muñoz's text ruminates on "the burden of liveness" as both an embodiment and a temporality in

which the queer body is in a perpetual state of being “live.” Earlier in this dissertation, I center Muñoz’s work on disidentification as a central tenet of my theories of queer performance and the *femme fatale*. Disidentification within my research parameters becomes a practice rooted in a consciousness of difference and formed through intersectional signifiers—it is a tactic of reclaiming, of performing for the regime in a way that undermines their power. For *femme*’s in the church, disidentifying is a continual process of negotiating the “outside/within” ontology that crafts a queer female pastor’s role. Oftentimes, what is placed upon these bodies is the “burden of liveness”—history and futurity are denied while spectacle in the “now” is demanded. Women in the church are beginning to take advantage of this scrutiny through public performances of dissent.

Blogging her transition on what was once a predominantly conservative webpage is Paula’s dissent. It’s her infiltration into the public sphere as a transwoman who both loves God and is fed up with the patriarchal hypocrisy of the church. Paula makes this known in posts like the following from June of 2017, titled “This Is Why I Speak,” where she comments on how difficult it can be to make yourself available for the interviews and events that request her time and insight. She states:

Why am I willing to be profiled in the Denver Post and the New York Times? Why do I take every newspaper and television interview I am offered? Why do I accept every invitation to speak at Christian universities, even though I pay my own expenses? Why do I travel the country to speak at GCN, PFLAG and Pride events, often for remuneration that does not cover half of my expenses? I have already spent decades building kingdoms and slaying dragons. I am not building a brand. I do not need attention. I do not relish the emails, Facebook messages and newspaper comments that arrive every day from an assortment of naysayers. Nor do I have a masochistic spirit that requires regular doses of sarcasm and vitriol. So, why do I choose to live such a public life? The reason is simple. Lives are at stake. (“This Is Why I Speak”)

Paula has never shied away from admitting when her knowledge is insufficient, or when her words fail her, or when she is tired and stumbles. The blogging platform keeps record of her strong days and her lulls. As a digital memoirist, her audience demands she present herself as honestly and transparently as possible. This is her “burden of liveness” and it is a continual process of absorbing and pushing against the mainstream Protestant media and ideologies that once supported her in order to cater and create content. She continues in her declaration of intent:

I feel the weight of the responsibility. In my previous work, I hoped to save people from spiritual suffering. In my current work, I hope to save people from dying.

The pain experienced by these precious souls comes from a church more interested in abstract truth than in the incarnational truth before their eyes – embodied souls who have been driven to the edge of despair by people who use an abstract idea as a very real and dangerous sword.

The truth is, I do not care about their brand of orthodoxy. I have no interest in debating it. It is of little interest to me. However, I do care about their orthopraxy, how they practice the Christian faith. I find it lacking. I find any religion lacking that leads with judgment instead of leading with acceptance and love. (“This Is Why I Speak”)

I am drawn to her confessional rhetoric in this piece— “I hope to...”, “The truth is...”, or “I do not care about.” Similar to Pamela Lightsey in her “I am...” statements, Paula Stone Williams is making her allegiance known to those within and outside of her community that she is on the side of the oppressed—not the oppressor. Yet, her “truth” is still concerned with (somewhat entrenched in) the practice of the oppressor on a macro-level. Christianity is still Paula’s spiritual practice of choice, even if the church is no longer fully aligns with her identity. She admits to finding her religion’s orthopraxy “lacking”, but she does not disavow it. Rather, she laments the potential that is not being fully expressed.



At first, I read Paula’s disdain and lament as a form of *acedia*, that “weariness or distress of heart” that Ann Cvetkovich details as a spiritual crisis of heart and body in her book, *Depression: a public feeling* (Cvetkovich 85). Yet *acedia* is not quite the spiritual anecdote present in this rhetoric, as it is characteristic of a lack of action—and Paula is clearly writing through her blog to show the ways in which she is called to action. So, what is this interesting mixture of apathy toward the larger discourse of Christianity while stirring a deep sadness and anger toward the public practice of Christianity? Bringing it back to Felski, I see Paula pursuing a call to intimacy with her readership over the failures of the church that she and many of her supporters call home. Felski calls this an attempt to attain a “mutuality” not present in the author’s own life:

Even when the confession appears most concerned with expressing emotions toward others, however it constantly refers back to the writing self; the act of self-disclosure embodies the attempt to construct the independent sense of self which the author often feels she lacks. (Felski 111)

Paula offers an olive branch to her fellow LGBTQ community members and allies—in the midst of what seems like overwhelming oppression from the church, she reminds her readership that she gets it. She understands, she mourns with them, and she is angry at the consequences of oppressive practice on the bodies of her fellow trans-community. While she may be called elsewhere with her duties as a public figure and speaker, she wants them to know that her work *now* is different from her work as *Paul*—even if it feels just as public and mediated.

The confessional blog is Paula’s way of connecting with her new community as a transwoman while still mediating her impact on the more conservative following she once held as Paul. Navigating relationships with friends and peers after transitioning is

often a private practice, but Paula gave her following a public glimpse of her healing and reconciliation process through her words. Whether she was writing to herself, to her peers, or to the nameless online community, she was placing her lived experience in the hands of her readers through a continual and cognitive textual space. It is only a glimpse, but it is a glimpse into a world that was marginal and provocative and desperately needed within the church.

### **TRANS-PARENTING: GOOD MOTHERS, BAD MOTHERS, AND “NEVER MOTHERS”**

At the beginning of this chapter, I shared some of my highlighted memories from a sit-down interview between Paula Stone Williams and her son, Jonathan Williams, that took place in November of 2018 in front of a private audience. This was a precursor of what was to come in the first few days of 2019—a TED Talk featuring this same duo, sharing their story together. While the video from the TED Women Conference received over 600,000 views within the first week, Jonathan first shared his story publicly in 2017 to the *New York Times*. The piece centered on both Jonathan and Paula as ministers and relatives—giving an in-depth look into their estrangement, coping, and eventual reconciliation. In the *New York Times* piece, Jonathan is quoted in his “aha” moment of truth surrounding his father’s identity: “This is how God sees my dad. [...] The way my kids see my dad is the way God sees my dad. They’ve got nothing but love, nothing but joy. At that point I was like, O.K., we’re going to publicly talk about this now, as a church” (Leland).

*TEDWomen 2018: “The Story of a Parent’s Transition and a Son’s Redemption”*

At the time of the TED Talk release, it had been almost two months since I had seen both Paula and Jonathan share their story in person for those present at the W/ Collective Gathering. Whereas the podcast interview was informal—at times, awkward—the TED Women Talk was rehearsed and performative. Paula and Jonathan took turns speaking—never necessarily towards one another, but towards the audience. Together, they crafted a pieced-together talk from two perspectives that followed their relationships after Paula’s transition. It was raw, but it was also like a play. Each one had a part that was independent of the other, but together a story was told. In this TED Talk, hosted at a venue in Palm Springs, Paula is dressed informally: jeans and flats, with a pretty red sweater and blue scarf. Jonathan is similarly informal, wearing a plain, light blue button down and jeans. They look like a mother and son dressed to go to lunch. Paula uses her hands a lot when she speaks—she holds them close to her chest and shakes them emphatically with her words. Jonathan moves much less, his hands often at his sides or held together in front of him. Paula opens with a backdrop of her story: her positions in ministry, her beliefs in authenticity, and her confidence in her gender identity from a very young age. This backdrop sets the stage for an alternative side to her story—one that isn’t always seen by the liberal or conservative Christian media outlets—the story of familial struggle. She states:

My family was supportive, but struggling. Most of my friends and coworkers had rejected me, the rest were confused. One friend said, “You really messed with me.” I said, “Yeah, well, get in line.” He said, “You were my only example of an alpha male who was gentle.” And I thought, “Oh! You’re right. I was an alpha male. And I was gentle.” And if it was hard for him, how much more difficult was it for my own son. (Williams and Williams)

The stage is immediately set for Jonathan to begin. Paula backs away and Jonathan begins his own portion of the talk. He references his memories from that first Father's Day after Paula transitioned and how estrangement was no more an option than an embracement. He had no solutions for the "denial," or the "pain and mourning and sadness" that was sure to come if he truly lost all contact with his father. But what he found in the encounters over the following months was not his "father," but Paula, which caused him to question his past: "I knocked on the door and this woman answered. It definitely wasn't my Dad. [...] Didn't sound like my Dad, either" (Williams and Williams). They went to lunch, he went on to describe, and he was in a constant state of conflict over his memories of his father and the woman who sat across from him. He intentionally uses different pronouns to explain the father of his memories and the "father" who was now Paula. He states, "Here was this woman who knew everything about me. And I knew nothing about her. I don't even remember saying goodbye..." (Williams and Williams).

The narrative continues in this way, a back and forth of interjected monologue. Sometimes there is laughter from the audience, but most of the time it is contemplative silence that follows a spoken pause. At one point, Paula emphasizes the role that the church played in her stressed relationships, stating that "religious tribes" are prone to creating enemies.

When I lost all my jobs it was nothing personal: it's what religious tribes do. They believe an enemy is necessary for a tribe to survive, so where no enemy exists - they create one. Right now, sexual minorities are the enemy. My departure was swift and sure. I was surprised when my son left his job teaching in West

Philadelphia to go into the ministry. I did not see that one coming! And now I wondered... what would he do? (Williams and Williams)

Jonathan picks up again, painting a picture of his dilemma—he was a new minister at a progressive church that had financial dependence on a very conservative organization. The very organization was *Orchard Group*, which had let Paula go very soon after her coming out. What was he to do? He proposed this question to Paula, who at the time had told him her extreme hurt at those who would ask her to live a lie. And Jonathan, to a round of applause from the audience, says: “I cannot ask my father to be anything other than her true self” (Williams and Williams).

The performance aspect of this larger story has been one of the most interesting facets to follow as someone who has watched this unfold from an outside perspective over the past two years. From the *New York Times* article, to the live podcast interview, to the TED Talks—the story condenses and magnifies with each re-telling. This is obvious, in most regards—the more you tell a story, the better storyteller you become. Paula and Jonathan have more than likely had multiple brainstorming and heart-to-heart sessions where they discuss how best they want to portray themselves and one another in their words, even more so with the release of Jonathan’s book, *She’s My Dad* (which Paula was requested to respond to multiple chapters). Performance always hones itself into a craft with every enactment. But what is less obvious upon initial inspection are the messages being honed, as well. Within each of the major stories, I am flooded with images of Jonathan as a victim of ‘bad’ parenting or—in a more favorable light—parenting ‘flawed’ by incongruent gender roles. Audiences are deeply empathetic to Jonathan—“Of course his world was turned upside down” and “Of course he had a right

to be angry” and “How ‘big’ of him to pursue a relationship with Paula after she ‘lied’ to him his entire life.” But in the wake of these problematic messages, Paula herself was the buffer that allowed both of them to craft a redemption story and not a story of blame. She embraced her role as someone who caused familial hurt, but she never wavers in her role as the “parent.” Back in the November podcast interview at W/ Collective, she held tight to this identifier throughout her transition, stating to the audience, "I'm allowed to have pain, but I'm not allowed to have grievances, because I'm a parent" (Ewert). Paula is always the parent in this performance, and she is referred to by Jonathan continuously as “father.” I wonder if Paula had transitioned earlier in life—maybe when Jonathan was younger—would he call her “mother” now, instead? However the alternatives may have played out, one thing is for sure in Paula’s life now and that is she is female, she is a parent, but she is *not* a mother

*Femme fatale as the ‘Anti-Mother:’ A Cultural Recap of Deviant Motherhood*

When I look at Paula Stone Williams, I am first reminded of the classic *femme fatale* that was Mata Hari—a Dutch woman who existed in-between the realms of fact and fiction due to her sensationalized life as a spy who was executed by the French government in the First World War. This infamy was only able to exist, however, because of history’s proclivity to demonize certain stereotypes of gender, race, and class. In Hanson and O’Rawe’s collection, Rosie White details how Mata Hari, in both history and fiction, was an attempt to map the horrors of dangerous femininity when “unleashed.”

Regardless of what Margaretha Geertruida Zelle, or Mata Hari (as was her stage name), had done in reality during her alleged time as a spy for Germany during WWI, it didn't truly matter. It was what she *represented* that was her doom: exotic, dangerous, powerful, mobile.

This active role marks her out as not 'proper', not 'feminine'; in her wifely behavior as in her subsequent career she exceeded the bounds of her gender, class and race. Like the 'hysterics' who fascinated Charcot and Freud, Mata Hari performed femininity for a range of spectators (Showalter 1985: 145– 64). Her final audience, the prosecution at her trial in Paris in July 1917, imagined her as the threat of unconfined femininity – worse, a woman who allegedly engaged in the masculine sphere of international intelligence. In these terms Mata Hari offers a transgender, transracial account of modernity, slipping between masculine and feminine, public and private, self and other, Occident and Orient. (White 75)

Mata Hari went on to become a caricature within the more sexual scopes of historic wartime and it was her sexual inaccessibility, her gender fluidity, her racial performance within those stories that allowed her to maintain the hallmark of traditional *femme fatale* status. I, too, find that Mata Hari was a transformative figure of her time and it was those very aspects of fluidity and performativity that made her a *femme fatale* for all of the right reasons, instead of the wrong ones—Paula offers up something to this respect.

As she stated in her TED Talk, Paula has been made an enemy of the church because she is a sexual minority. But I also believe that Paula has been read as an enemy of the institution because her gender fluidity throughout her life has marked her as a somewhat of an “anti-mother”, a woman who—because of her very ‘deviant’ nature—cannot be that which a mother ought.

The idea of anti-motherhood is a notion of maternal ambivalence, deviance, or necessary restriction. It can either be championed as a postfeminist attack on the

institutionalized, oppressive construction of motherhood seen in the June Cleaver aesthetic or it can be wielded as a knife to cut down those outlawed bodies who would seek to engage/perform maternalism through a non-mother state. Amanda Greer uses “anti-motherhood” through the first lens, crafting an image of maternal ambivalence through the fictionalized genre character of the female crime investigator (Greer 339).

Greer proposed motherhood as a theory rooted in ‘selflessness:’

Motherhood, historically, has been established as a necessary component of feminine identity. It is assumed that most women will have children someday – those women who choose not to have children are seen as failing to adhere to womanhood’s narrative. These assumptions are rooted in a reductionist view of female biology: women should have children because they can. The sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s finally brought forth, arguably for the first time in dominant popular culture, a discussion of maternal ambivalence – of conflicting positive and negative emotions circling motherhood. (332)

Greer interrogates this nuance between constructivism and postfeminism,

“demonstrat[ing] the political power of ambivalent feelings, and, by extension, the power of popular media to create and naturalize certain representations of mothering,” (334)

which is used to enhance one’s understanding of motherhood and ambivalence. Many of the characters are positioned as “work-first” women, which is seen as a large factor in the good/bad mother dichotomy. A working mother cannot commit herself fully to her children—it’s the *wrong* kind of sacrifice. The *femme fatale* is an anti-mother in these respects, both as a postfeminist caricature and a denied body. She rejects her role as parent in favor of her own desires. The child suffers, while the ‘mother’ flourishes—yet societal demand requires true motherhood to only flourish through committed maternity.

Discerning this “anti-mother” through a rhetorical lens is a process of weighing “motherly” attributes in accordance with the demands of authoritarian ideology and



media attention; from the maternal horrors of historic figures like Elizabeth Bathory and Belle Gunness, to ideological characters such as Reagan's "welfare queen," or single-mother Murphy Brown. There were always "bad mothers"—but then there were the women who were deemed so unfit within the realm of maternity that they were stripped of the title all together.

The connection between the classic *femme fatale* of popular culture and "anti-motherhood" is a deep-seeded relationship that is carried by an overarching political and cultural dichotomy that places self-fulfillment or self-desire as the antithesis to maternal nurturing. If the "anti-mother" isn't purely "work-driven," then she's still too "sexually-driven"—God forbid, both! The dangers of female desire in maternal practice was fully driven home for me the first time I watched the cult-classic, 'docudrama,' *Mommie Dearest*. Faye Dunaway plays actress Joan Crawford, a real-life American actress who appeared in a variety of films and shows from the 1930s throughout the early 1970s. Christina Crawford, Joan's adopted daughter, wrote a memoir titled *Mommie Dearest* in 1978 after Joan's death that was explicit in 'telling-all' about the atrocities of Joan's mothering tactics and neglect and abuse in pursuit of fame. Receiving mixed claims of accuracy and denouncement, the film drama was written based on the memoir. It was the perfect scandal that played into the media-hungry hands of the moral right—the hidden dangers of wayward femininity gone terribly wrong, right under the public's eye.

To the wider public, Christina's mother was not the abusive parent, prone to uncontrolled bouts of fury. She was not the alcoholic, given to occasional bursts of sporadic violence. She was not the tyrannical harpy who apparently let rip behind closed doors. To everyone else she was simply Joan Crawford, Hollywood movie star. (Day)

Joan Crawford was the starlet mother who, while trying to prove women could “have it all”—a booming career, sexuality, and children—ultimately became the caricature of evil-motherhood that was rooted in selfish desire as a mental and physical undoing. The 1981 film heightened this disconnect for its viewers with the many scenes of Faye Dunaway alternating between the extremes of aesthetic: glamorous shots in full makeup with luxurious hats and accessories, to chalky face-masks in a dimly lit bedroom meant to give her a terrifyingly haggard appearance (*Mommie Dearest*). The character of Joan Crawford was manic and dark—an *obvious* unfit mother in the larger story. It is interesting to watch Dunaway’s portrayal of Crawford as “mother” in comparison to how the actual Joan Crawford brought to life film characters that were a timely representation of the female-moral-mania to come in her time. In the revisionist Western, *Johnny Guitar*, Joan plays Vienna, a strong-willed saloonkeeper who at one point in the film states: “A man can lie, steal... and even kill. But as long as he hangs on to his pride, he's still a man. All a woman has to do is slip - once. And she's a "tramp!" Must be a great comfort to you to be a man” (*Johnny Guitar*). If a woman who slips once is a ‘tramp,’ then the mother who slips once is a ‘Mommie Dearest.’

For those who would counter this notion as ‘outdated,’ I encourage a quick glance at the modern-day media headlines and the intrinsic nature of “mommy-shaming” that happens on a daily basis with celebrity mothers who perform in a manner even slightly out of what is considered the “norm” for maternal standard (i.e. Kim Kardashian and the *Paper* magazine cover shoot, Angelina Jolie and Gwen Stefani on gender-neutral children’s clothing, P!NK and cooking while baby-wearing, etc.). The overall message of

films like *Mommie Dearest* and similar public controversies surrounding “moms in the spotlight” seem to be two-fold: maternal performance will be directly correlated to a woman’s own personal balance of ‘desire’ and—when desire is too strongly felt toward anything other than the child’s welfare—disaster is inevitable. Whether it be vocational or personal, desire within the feminine is manifested as selfish and detrimental when notions of motherhood come into play and it is this thread of consciousness that has led to a continued societal standard (many times, societal or *state* intervention) for maternal relations that are deemed affected by the mother’s sexuality.

Paula’s mark as a ‘non-mother’ after her transition is equally marked by her sexuality. She is intentional to mention in her blog posts that her sexual orientation has not changed, yet she does not seem to identify as a lesbian anywhere within her writings. I find this absence intentional, even if Paula may or may not feel the same. The lack of strong rhetoric surrounding her sexuality post-transition—while unable to afford Paula the access to maternal possibility—still distances her from the “selfish desire” standard of judging and placating parental morality.

#### *Solomon vs. The Prostitutes: A Biblical Precedent for Good and Bad Motherhood*

Motherhood and Christian expectation are like-wise linked through a similar moral standard. The biblical anti-mother can be found in the scriptures of 1 Kings, Chapter 3. If Eve is the original deceiver, Delilah the manipulator, and Jezebel the slut—then “the other” prostitute in the story of King Solomon’s “wise ruling” is the anti-mother. This section of scripture promotes discernment on the part of a patriarchal authority in the case of wayward motherhood. Recorded as one of the “wisest” verdicts of

biblical times, it was obvious even to King Solomon what constituted a “fit” mother: complete selflessness.

Two women, both harlots in the same household, come before King Solomon with a case of child custody. The first woman tells the King that she and the second woman both gave birth within three days of each other, both having sons. She continues, telling the King that when the second woman rolled on her own child in the night, killing him, she made a plan to switch the dead son with the living son while everyone slept. Upon waking to nurse her son, the first woman saw that the boy was dead—but upon further inspection, she knew that it wasn’t her child. The second woman tells the King this is false and that the living son really is her son and that the dead son is really the first woman’s child. Solomon, marked by God as a wise ruler, hears their back and forth arguments. Finally, he tells the women that he will fix the situation in the fairest possible way—calling to his servants for a sword to be brought in, he will cut the living child down the middle and each mother will receive one half. The first woman, concerned for the child’s life, told the King to give the child to the other woman rather than killing him. The second woman agreed with the King, calling for the child to be cut in two so that neither woman could have him! When the King heard their responses, he told his court to give the living son to the first woman—for she *must* be the mother. (1 Kings 3:16-28)

Growing up in the church, this story was a classic tale in the Sunday School workbooks. It was meant to be suspenseful enough to garner the attention of children and simplistic enough to warrant a clear villain (the mother who agrees to the killing of the child rather than acquiesce any amount of power to her female counterpart). The scene is

set for a deceiver and a victim; the good/bad mother dichotomy is ready to unfold. A child is dead due to a mother's negligence and another child is on the brink of abandonment because this same mother has tricked her household to pursue a selfish desire. Neither mother is necessarily painted in a fond light—both are clearly labeled as prostitutes for the story's context. One, however, is claiming that the other is not just a negligent mother who killed her child, but an “anti-mother”—performing in a way that is so against everything a “mother” should be that she is the enemy of all mothers. Solomon was heralded by a case that rested on authoritarian notions of motherhood and femininity; the precedent of wisdom relied on the state's judgement of a woman.

In her utilization of feminist standpoint theory as a conjunction for reading biblical text, Avaren Ipsen, a lecturer at UC Berkeley, is intrigued at the cultural downplay of this story's sex work component within religious education. Most religious interpretations of the text avoid the notion of sex work through various cultural modes of erasure or removal:

Most readers need to be convinced that ‘prostitute women’ is what the biblical text really says. Even still, the prostitution aspect is usually downplayed by being portrayed as a naturalised component of ancient Israelite society or effaced by emphasising the women as mothers so that a comforting certitude of maternal nature can be discerned. [...] For Annelies van Heijst (1994), the good mother's renunciation of her maternity claim is theologized as an example of ‘women's wisdom’ that avoids divided thinking. She reads from a mother's perspective, but not a prostitute mother's perspective. (Ipsen 022)

These women were *both* mother and prostitute and—however warped “the other” or second woman's reasoning may have seemed—they both showed great turmoil over the loss of their children. It is doubly significant, then, that the most overt example of Solomon's judicial wisdom is displayed for the case of the sexual mother. Could it be that

this story unknowingly emphasizes the agency of the ‘deviant’ woman, even if religious scholars tend to downplay her?

Agency and maternity have evolved around a very specific relationship, one that relies on femininity as relegated within state-sanctioned practices of right and wrong. Postfeminist ideas of motherhood reject this relationship, calling instead for agency to take precedent over the rules of motherhood. Women can be “anti-mothers,” if they choose, and still demand autonomy. Paula Stone Williams, however, is not the postfeminist icon of the “anti-mother.” She has not blatantly rejected motherhood as a mark of her progressive attention; she instead seems to write about motherhood as an unattainable space, a consequence she embraces as someone who transitioned later in life. She is the body denied access to motherhood, *made* into the anti-mother because of her transgender status. The transwoman as “mother” is a surprisingly small realm of exploration within queer studies; many, like Paula, who transition male-to-female post-parenthood seem to hold their parental “titles.” This seems to definitely be the case for Paula and Jonathan, whose book title emphasizes that *she’s my Dad*, rather than she’s my parent—she’s definitely not his mother. We cannot know if Paula personally desires an identity of “mother,” but she writes about motherhood as if it were, even in her transition, unattainable.

In a post from early January 2019, Paula recounts her time at TED Women 2018 (where her talk with Jonathan was first recorded and aired). Of all of the memories of that period, she emphasizes one that is strikingly heart-wrenching in light of this larger conversation surrounding motherhood. Paula speaks of a moment, amidst the business of

the conference, in which she sees Helen Waters, the Head Curator of TED, face-timing with her child. Paula watches them, enrapt by Helen's complete focus on her child. She writes:

The scene was touching under any circumstance, but to me, it had special meaning. The mother holding the phone was Helen Walters, the Head Curator for TED. Here was this woman who carried the burden of the programming of TEDWomen on her shoulders, yet she was attending to her child as if that child was the only person in the world. I loved being a father, and when you watch the TED talk, it will be obvious that I adore my son. I always have, just as I adore my two daughters. But as much love as a father might show his child, he never has the look on his face I saw on Helen's face. Only mothers have that look. It is the look of a woman who knows every curve and ridge of her child's body. It is the look of a mother who discerns every subtle nuance of her child's mood, and anticipates the child's need before the child even knows to have it. What I saw was the adoring gaze of a mother who loves with abandon, and treasures every moment in her heart. ("TEDWomen 2018 – Goodness Reigns, Love Wins")

In her own words, Paula separates herself from motherhood, but also from fatherhood. She exists as a parent in her current life, but her transition has taken away her former title while still denying her a new one. She upholds the role of the mother as sacrosanct, while relinquishing her own right to that cultural title after transitioning.

## **CONCLUSION: TRANS-THEOLOGY**

Much of Paula's writings and public speaking events have focused primarily on her navigation of religious politics after her transition, advocacy for gender equality, and familial trauma. But what of Paula's theology, what of her faith? I want to conclude this chapter with a brief commentary on how Paula's faith is not to be separated from her advocacy and personal situation—her faith is that of the *femme fatale* pursuing God in margins. It is a theology of the marginalized, a theology of growth. Paula herself stated in a post from October of 2017:

We have so much more knowledge than was known in the early 1800s. We can only guess how that accumulation of knowledge would have affected the theology of those early leaders. I know how much my increase in knowledge has changed my theology over the past 40 years. (“Reconciled to My Heritage”)

At the time I was finishing this chapter, her most recent blog post on *And So It Goes* was titled, “Afflicting the Comfortable.” It was dated February 21, 2019. In this post, Paula pushes back against her ‘old self’ and the cowardice of keeping silent around her sympathy and affirmation of LGBTQ persons within the church. As Paul, she knew that any questions around her personal theology would lead to questions surrounding her job. As a conservative, evangelical figure, Paula was chained to those viewpoints. As a transwoman pastor and progressive public figure within the church, Paula is now facing her priorities as they are linked to her own identity and body. Biblical interpretation is a core tenet of theological concern—this has not changed for Paula, although she herself feels that her approach has shifted.

I do believe Jesus when he said Scripture can not be broken, though I do not know exactly what Jesus meant by that. Even the way in which the canon of Scripture was created was messy, not completed and generally accepted until the middle of the third century. That is the equivalent of America just now coming to a unified position on the actual words and sentences of the US constitution. I take the Bible seriously. I also take it too seriously to take it literally. It is a historical record of God’s work in the world. It is not a constitution. It is an inspired guide, helping us apply its principles in an ever-changing world. (“Seriously, Not Literally”)

Fluidity seems to be the common theme in Paula’s outlook on faith and life, and this is what makes Paula the *femme fatale* in our modern-day example of progressive Christianity—she is not tied to any one patriarchal ideology of thought or action, but has worked tirelessly to pave the way for women and LGBTQ folks in the church to create their own space of inclusion and affirmation in the wake of continued unclarity.



## CHAPTER FIVE

*I saw how Jesus didn't treat women any differently than men, and I liked that. We weren't too precious for words, dainty like fine china. We received no free pass or delicate worries about our ability to understand or contribute or work. Women were not too sweet or weak for the conviction of the Holy Spirit, or too manipulative and prone to jealousy, insecurity, and deception to push back against the kingdom of darkness. - Sarah Bessey, *Jesus Feminist**

### **NADIA: AN INTRODUCTION**

I was driving down Colorado Boulevard in the Fall of 2015 when I first heard Nadia Bolz-Weber speak. She was doing an interview for “Fresh Air” on *NPR*, just after the publication of her newest book at the time, *Accidental Saints*. I had only been living in Colorado for a month, unsure of where I stood on religious practice and cautiously exploring churches in my new city. And on that September day, I suddenly became enraptured by the voice of a local woman pastor who was speaking truth to my soul over the radio speakers. Nadia Bolz-Weber, a former stand-up comic who had a history of alcoholism—now sober and in ministry—now pushing the boundaries of what constitutes “church” space. If the traditional congregation was made up of middle-class, heterosexual, nuclear families, Nadia’s congregations expanded beyond this to include those deemed ‘outsiders’ such as herself: addicts, transfolk, homeless youth, and skeptics. And to top it all off—she was speaking as an ex-evangelical who still operated within

evangelicalism, like me. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America is a denomination I was unfamiliar with thanks to my narrower religious upbringing regarding denominational knowledge outside that of Pentecostalism, but the word “evangelical” was something I was extremely familiar with—almost too familiar. In fact, the word “evangelical” had grown to become a scathing idea of moralism rather than a posture of witness. Evangelical Christianity is rooted in the “born again” mentality of salvation, which comes through a commitment to Jesus Christ as the true savior because of his life and resurrection. It is commonly associated with a mission-based practice of Christianity that prioritizes “winning souls”—an expression coined around the practice of bringing in people to the church and converting them to Christianity. The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) define themselves through the borrowed language of historian David Bebbington, which focuses on four main tenets: conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism (“What Is An Evangelical?”). Conversionism is, as I stated previously, the “born again” process and experience that often happens through the missionary stance of activism. Biblicism and crucicentrism are tenets rooted more in the theological aspects of evangelicalism, which hold the Bible as an infallible authority and the crucifixion of Jesus as the only possibility for atonement. Growing up in a Pentecostal denomination that was heavily evangelical, these characteristics were heavily present in all aspects of my church’s convictions. We were encouraged to bring our friends to youth services every Wednesday night so they could potentially “give their life to Christ” and live as a daily witness of the Gospel. We were also discouraged from ever questioning biblical interpretation or our denomination’s theology. The NAE states that evangelicalism is not

influenced by “political, social, or cultural trends” (“What Is An Evangelical?”). But while the ‘four tenets’ upheld by the NAE were a basis for faith practice within my evangelical background, the rhetoric through which these were emphasized was extremely political and culturally biased. Conviction was primarily relegated to the realms of lust, provocative clothing and behavior, LGBTQ+ sexuality, and teenage pregnancy –all of which stemmed from a political and social abstinence movement that used the church as a channel for its totality message and hostages. Deviation from these evangelical tenets was not met with grace, but ostracization. Looking back on those seasons of my life in which I was most entrenched within evangelical culture, the values of that space did not feel like a source of confidence—they felt like the source of my shortcomings and spirals of shame.

This pastor on the radio was a clergy member of an evangelical denomination, a proponent of theological discipline, *and* made it known to everyone around her that her call in ministry is not for the privileged and holy, but for the marginalized and broken. The word evangelical began to soften in my ears.

Three years later, after reading almost all of her books and listening to some of her sermons online (I had decided to not join her church as a member, as I felt drawn to a non-denominational space), I finally went to hear her speak at Highlands Church in Denver. On the brink of her newest book, *Shameless: A Sexual Reformation*, and in the wake of her shift from full-time pastor to public theologian, Nadia was giving the keynote for the W/ Collective Conference (the same conference mentioned in Chapter Four where Paula gave her live podcast). After her talk, she was being interviewed by my

own pastor, Michael Hildalgo, before moving on to a Q&O session (she calls them “Q&O” because, as I’ve heard her say, “I don’t have any answers for you, but I have a lot of opinions”). This was the first time I was seeing her in person—an author I admired deeply—and as I settled in the auditorium chair beside my husband, I looked over at him and felt a deep sense of peace. Like the calm before a storm.

*Nadia, a Life of Tattoos and Reformation*

Nadia Bolz-Weber is a Lutheran pastor based in Denver, Colorado who grounds her ministry around her past struggles with addiction, sexuality and disability rhetoric, and her LGBTQ+ allyship. She writes and speaks of a Christianity and a Jesus that embrace the outsider and love the ‘sinner’ such as herself. Nadia uses a strong rhetoric of transparency and confession in her sermon and writing styles. She seems quite aware of her ability to disrupt the traditional intersections of religious faith doctrine and public space and knows just how “dangerous” her style and rhetoric may seem to many who share her faith. She considers her positionality only to be dangerous to those systems and institutions who wish to keep the Christian praxis as hetero-, cis-, and white-centric as possible.

This chapter is the last of the three case studies on “*femme fatale*” pastors and will conduct a rhetorical reading of Nadia Bolz-Weber as an author, a public theologian, and a woman on the forefront of Christian sexual reformation. I will be looking closely at her second memoir, *Pastrix*, and her most recent text, *Shameless: A Sexual Reformation*, along with supplemental oral speeches (sermons, public talks, etc.) of Nadia’s to accompany my own interpretive approach to confession and *femme fatale* aesthetic. This

will be done in the hopes of painting a picture of the “*femme fatale* of faith” as Nadia embodies it: aesthetically alternative, sexually expressive, and rhetorically outlawed by many of her Christian peers.

Born in to a fundamentalist Christian family in the late 1960s, Nadia was an immediate product of her family and Church of Christ culture—pious and reverent, but also willful and strong. In her early teens, she was diagnosed with Graves’ disease, an autoimmune disorder that causes hyperthyroidism. Tall, skinny, and “bug-eyed,” as she called it (abnormal protrusion of the eyes is common with Graves’), Nadia had always felt set apart from the crowd in one way or another. After a short stint at Pepperdine University, Nadia found herself living back in Denver with a group of drug addicts, misfits, and hospitality workers. For Nadia, almost like church, this life felt like a new kind of community:

Unlike my feelings toward the Christian fundamentalism from which I would soon part ways, I never stopped valuing the spiritual weirdness of hospitality and community. And without realizing it, I spent the next ten years trying to recreate a spiritual community of my own. Only I was looking for a community in which *all* of me would actually fit. (*Pastrix* 27)

Nadia pursued sobriety in the early 1990s and started going to Alcoholics Anonymous and addiction recovery meetings, and also found a new community of friendships through stand-up comedy. In 2004, a close friend in her community killed himself and Nadia was asked by their friends to do his eulogy, as she was the only ‘religious’ one in the group. It was in those moments at her friend’s funeral that Nadia first saw a crowd around her that was captivated by her words outside of comedy. She felt the call to pastoral care, but specifically to be a pastor to *these* people: the misfits, the

outsiders, the survivors, and the recovering. Nadia went on to attend Iliff Theological Seminary before starting House for All Sinners and Saints (HFASS) in Denver in 2008. HFASS started with just a small group of people gathered in a living room and has grown to now host a community of nearly 500 members. In 2018, Nadia left her role as HFASS's lead pastor in her transition to public theologian.

### **PASTRIX AS THE PASTORAL FEMME**

#### *'Spiritual' Waves: Cultural Reception of Nadia's Memoir*

Nadia's sexuality, history of addiction, and skepticism surrounding religion is blatantly apparent throughout her memoirs and she is clear in her texts that she has participated in a spectrum of relationships, communities, and 'unsavory' activities. I find the sexual and relational transparency in her writings to be significant, particularly in contrast to other written memoirs of public religious figures. It is obvious to anyone who reads her work or listens to her speak that Nadia is committed to openness—she *confesses* to her peers and parishioners her thoughts, faults, and processes, not for the sake of frivolity, but for the deep connection fostered through sharing trials with one another. Nadia is often found queering our symbolic understandings of God and religious practice in her books. She devotes an entire chapter of *Pastrix* to her time with “the goddess,” the spiritual manifestation of Wiccan practice, whom she calls “God's Aunt”.

There was no doctrine. We never talked about belief, we just shared our lives and spoke of the divine feminine in ourselves and in the world. The goddess we spoke of never felt to me like a substitute for God, but simply another aspect of the divine. Just like God's Aunt. (*Pastrix* 15)

Nadia embraces the divine power of the female and believes it to be central to her theology. This is a defining aspect of the *femme fatale*—the uplifting of womanhood as

powerful and transformative, channeling those spiritual and archetypal connections that are resonate of artistic representation of the feminine.

This alternative approach to Christian theology is what gained Bolz-Weber so much notoriety. When *Pastrix* was released in 2013, Nadia immediately made waves within Western Protestantism with this posture of writing. *New York Journal of Books* writer Cassandra Lawrence stated in her review:

Pastrix is not a typical narrative of a tattooed addict who found Jesus and rose above her ashes to become a respected and much-loved pastor. It is the story of an addict who reluctantly found sobriety, stumbled into Christianity and fell in love with the Lutheran church. Her tattoos are not from her life before recovery. Rather, they are the spiritual lessons of recovery engraved on her heart, revealed in the beautiful collection of icons now tattooed on her arms. Living into the growth of leaders who are allowed and encouraged to share their vulnerabilities, Pastrix mixes the anticipation of a mystery, a comedy, a book of prayer, and a confession. (Lawrence)

Lawrence's review heralded *Pastrix* as an exemplar for Christian authors and leaders in its 'encouragement to vulnerability.' This was similarly felt among those who made up that feminist-religious counterpublic. Rachel Held Evans, a prominent columnist and author who writes on womanhood and Christianity, is a pretty traditional figure in terms of Christian femininity and aesthetic: Southern, evangelical, and white. She admits to her incongruity with Nadia in aesthetic alone, noting in her blog that her "short, plump, and [...] flowey, floral peasant skirts and colorful beaded jewelry" are a stark contrast to Nadia's "tall, buff" and "tattooed" physique (Evans). I find it intriguing that so many choose to separate Nadia from the "usual" based on her looks, but I will expand on that later in this chapter. What I want to focus on here is the way in which Evans' review of

*Pastrix* was a clear look at the beginning of Nadia's future career as a public theologian; her memoir was *for* the people, not just for herself. Evans writes:

Nadia isn't just a pastor to the textbook down-and-outs; she is a pastor to people like me, people whose struggles may not be the easy-to-identify homelessness or alcoholism, but are instead the sneaky ones like pride, cynicism, discouragement, fear, and perfectionism. [...] This book reminded me of why I am a Christian. It stripped everything down to its most essential, its most hopeful. It reminded me of the goodness and grace of God in ways I struggle to articulate here. I cried through entire paragraphs, overwhelmed with both conviction and relief. Who would have thought a foul-mouthed, tattooed Lutheran preacher could have such an effect on a sweet, Southern evangelical? (Evans)

While Evans herself is quick to admit the ways in which she and Nadia are different women, they are committed to doing similar work; Evans is known for her more progressive political and social justice stance in her writings and Twitter feed. So a real shock in the wake of *Pastrix*'s publication was the review release from *The American Conservative*, a right-wing organization and webpage devoted to the following:

'Main Street' conservatism that opposes unchecked power in government and business; promotes the flourishing of families and communities through vibrant markets and free people; and embraces realism and restraint in foreign affairs based on America's vital national interests. ("About Us")

*The American Conservative* upholds almost the exact *opposite* view of many of those who run in Nadia Bolz-Weber's circles, in terms of ideology. However, in a review by senior editor Rod Dreher, *Pastrix* came out as surprisingly refreshing (if anecdotal):

Bolz-Weber is something else. I disagree with her fairly radically on many points of moral theology, but there's something so winning and authentic about her. I really like this chick. Let me explain why. What I expected to find was a cartoon version of a liberal Christian. [...] Even though she [is] far to the theological left, this is absolutely not Nadia Bolz-Weber. She is a foul-mouthed hot mess, for sure, but there's something so authentic and broken and great about her. [...] Reading this book, I found myself routinely pushed to the edge by the author's raw voice and liberal theology, but just when I would think that I was done with her, she would come back with an observation — usually a self-critical observation — that



pulled me back in, and made me reconsider my own thoughts and practices.  
(Dreher)

Dreher takes a critical stance towards Nadia, but the ‘criticality’ is both in adverse approval *and* analytical openness. Receptive to the message on a macro-level, even right-wing-leaning reviewers were enlightened by the vulnerable and frank tone of Nadia’s writing. Nadia was considered a “sincere” yet “misguided” woman and if there is one thing that sticks to Nadia across political, religious, and ideological viewpoints, it’s her honesty. Her truth is in her confession, regardless of who it was meant for.

*Thematic Memoir: Confession as Non-Linear*

“Messy” was a common adjective used to describe Nadia’s approach to storytelling—not necessarily in form, but in content. It’s hard work recounting the painful and rougher memories of one’s past, but Nadia commits herself to the task—an endeavor of connection with her readers. In this way, Nadia chose to distance her writing from the traditional process of *linear* biographical storytelling and instead piece together *Pastrix* as a series of *thematic* chapters and essays—the common theme being confession. Unlike a more traditional autobiography, Nadia’s memoirs share the stories, thoughts, and feelings that are less likely to be discovered through mere observation. Readers don’t receive a timeline of Nadia’s childhood in Colorado Springs, but they do read pieces of insight on her relationship with her mother from a very early age. The names and occupations of Nadia’s friends and lovers are often omitted, but one begins to learn of Nadia’s affinity for outsiders and misfits. She never specifically mentions where she lived in the interims of school, jobs, and seminary, but Nadia’s love for Denver is inked all over the page. She gives herself to her readers, one story and memory at a time.

Nadia continuously reaffirms her style as “confessional”. She states in the introduction of *Pastrix*, “I have only my confession - confession of my own real brokenness and confession of my own real faith to offer in the chapters that follow. My story is not entirely chronological - time often folds in on itself throughout the book—but rather, it’s thematic” (*Pastrix* xvii). In her sit-down interview with Pastor Michael Hidalgo in November, she was asked about her call to write memoirs on faith, brokenness, and sex, to which her response was, “Screw it, I’ll go first!” (“W/ Gathering Keynote”). At a later point in this interview, she re-emphasizes, “It’s all I’ve ever really had to offer—stories about my failings” (“W/ Gathering Keynote”).

This break from the linear is what separates Nadia’s memoirs from Paula Stone Williams’s blogs. Both are thematic, yet the latter is structured by time and the former not necessarily so. Nadia further pushes the boundaries of religious memoir by choosing to “go first” in terms of laying out her struggles for all to read. This is resonant of Felski’s feminist confession: a “consciousness-raising text” (87) that is not written for the simple act of reminiscing a timeline, but for the purpose of fostering a connection with readers. For Nadia, this connection lies in the halls of churches and the basements of coffee shops and bars—places from her past that have allowed her to create a dialogue with her readers and peers. Each chapter of *Pastrix* outlines a different moment or phase of her life that marked her journey to a life of pastoral care for the broken. Starting with her call to ministry in the wake of a friend’s death, the book weaves together stories of her youth as a product of fundamentalism, her non-sober years as a comic living with junkies, her religious experiences with Wicca and the ECLA, and the friends and

parishioners who continue to shape her life at House for All Sinners and Saints. Nothing is chronological, but it is transparent—which allows the entire memoir to beautifully weave itself together as a confession would in real, honest conversation. As I stated in Chapter Two, the feminist confessional literature is, according to Felski, that which seeks to explicitly disclose the most intimate and often traumatic details of an author’s life as a way of creating a more poignant dialogue (88).

As a Lutheran pastor, confession was an integral part of liturgy for Nadia. She insists upon this in the seventh chapter of *Pastrix*. As someone who admits to avoiding “truth” in her life for many reasons, she equally admits to the power that “truth” can have on one’s spiritual journey.

When someone like me, who will go to superhero lengths to avoid the truth, runs out of options [...] it feels like the truth might crush me. And that is right. The truth does crush us, but the instant it crushes us, it somehow puts us back together into something honest. It’s death and resurrection every time it happens. [...] eventually the confession and absolution liturgy came to mean everything to me. It gradually began to feel like a moment when truth was spoken, perhaps for the only time all week, and it would crush me and then put me back together. (*Pastrix* 74).

These are common elements in Nadia’s stories: failure, grace, and rebuilding. Felski reorients this in her understanding of the feminist confession as a text that “documents the failure of intimacy,” yet “the production of the text itself functions as an attempted compensation for this failure” (110). Intimacy is woven throughout Nadia’s words and the pages together create a beautiful story of a woman who continuously failed to see the bigger picture until she began to piece it together for her readers. “Even when the confession appears most concerned with expressing emotions toward others, however, it constantly refers back to the writing self” (Felski 111). Nadia knows herself as “the

writing self' and it is *her* story, interwoven with her relationships, that predominates the pages of *Pastrix*. This shifts, however, in her newest book, *Shameless*. While her story is on the pages, so are the stories of her parishioners. This is a new element to Nadia's repertoire—no longer a memoir of the self, but still a series of confessions... sexual confessions. The confessions of the *taboo* within the larger genre of religious memoir. But *Shameless* is not just a religious memoir, it is a feminist-religious confessional, and the feminist confession seeks to affirm those experiences which have been "repressed and rendered invisible by speaking about it, writing it into existence" (Felski 112). If one of the strongest tensions Felski notices within the feminist confession is the interplay of subjectivity and identity construction as either communal or individualistic, *Shameless* is an interesting text to disrupt this discourse of tension. Nadia's newest book is meant to be a collective of stories, both her own and her friends, that blurs the line between communal storytelling and singular author. Even more so once you open the book—the first chapter states explicitly who the book is for - *everyone* who falls outside of the mainstream teachings of sexuality and sexual health in the church:

It is for anyone who had to keep their love life secret. It is for all those who have been good and done everything right in the eyes of the church, and yet still have a sex life minus the fireworks and magic they were promised them if they just "waited." It is for the parents of the gay son, parents who love and support him because they know he is neither a mistake nor an aberrant sinner, and as a result of that support have become outsiders in their own church. This book is for everyone who ever felt ashamed of their sexual nature because of what someone told them in God's name. This book is for anyone who has walked away from Christianity and yet is still secretly into Jesus and always will be. This book is for anyone who has passed the traditional teachings of the church on sex to their own kids and now regrets it. This book is for the newly divorced man or woman who desires to be a caring and thoughtful lover, yet wonders: *Do the rules I learned in youth group still apply to me?* This book is for the young Evangelical who silently disagrees with their church's stance on sex and sexual orientation, yet feels alone

in that silence. This book is for anyone who wonders, even subconsciously: *Has the church obsessed over this too much? Do we really think we've gotten it right?* (*Shameless* 6-7)

*Shameless* is both communal and individualistic, because Nadia embraces a sexual ethic that is just as communal as it is individualistic. It is shameless in its incongruity. It is the story of a *femme fatale*—owning her own sexual story through herself and her peers—so that others may follow.

### **SHAMELESS, A FEMME FATALE'S STORY**

*Femme fatale, an Alternative Aesthetic*

It's a Tuesday night in November and I settle into the auditorium chair at Highlands Church in Denver. I thought that my extensive exposure to Nadia in different mediums over the past two years would prepare me for seeing her in person. But I was wrong. I had quite a visceral reaction—like an invisible string that streamed from her words and wrapped me tighter and tighter. I had not experienced anything like this since I had first heard Paula Stone Williams speak two years earlier. Here was another woman who had felt the trauma of church and chose to still *be here*, pushing for change. My home church has a female pastor and has brought in other women to preach multiple times, but this was different. Nadia was *shameless*. She was unabashed about her shamelessness. She let that shamelessness bleed into her words and writing.

She began with a narrative, almost a performance but not necessarily so. Yes, she was performing using both prose and song in her storytelling, but at the core of it all, it seems she is just *being*. Her 'being' looks unnatural in the space of the stage: she fidgets with her pockets almost constantly, she rarely makes eye contact with the audience, she

moves disjointedly behind the small, metal podium. She is so tall. The public speaking instructor in me screams. And yet, she conveys more authenticity in her stance, her cadence, and her pitch than most. Every pause between her story is filled with lyrics. I loved the interplay of hymn and narrative: speak a truth, sing a song. This was Nadia's insertion of vulnerability into an already vulnerable story.

She is dressed in her usual attire: red boots, red jewelry, red nails and lipstick over dark pants and a black shirt. She is playing with a very specific aesthetic of darkness and color that is often discouraged within church leadership. It's witchy and provocative and reminds me of why I initially thought of Nadia the first time I conceived a “*femme fatale* of faith.” She is standing on the stage, reclaiming her sexuality as shameless and good and *dangerous* to those who wish to hold on to the oppressive messages of sexual praxis within Christian culture. The *femme fatale* a woman of persuasion, and this rhetorical power is often found in her body. Body rhetoric is common in women like Nadia, who are hallmarked for their “drastic” physical aesthetic in reference to the norm (in her case, religious femininity and pastoral movement). If the *femme* is “undefinable” in her sexual and aesthetic evolution, the *femme fatale* is a ‘deadly’ combination of bodily power and sexual mystery.

Nadia gives us a glimpse into her bodily and sexual autonomy in *Shameless*. And yet, watching her share her story on stage reminds me - her audience and readership - that however much we believe self-disclosure can “embod[y] the attempt to construct the independent sense of self” (Felski 111), Nadia’s reality is *her* own to shape and command.

*'Flesh Made Word: Excess and Sensuality Between the Pages*

I received my copy of *Shameless: A Sexual Reformation* in the mail near the end of July of 2019. I read the entire book in almost one sitting and then I read it again over the span of a week. *Shameless* was nothing like I had ever read before, particularly within a Christian genre. Eliza Griswold, a contributing writer for *The New Yorker*, writes in her expose of Nadia while she on her book tour:

In *Shameless*, she sets out to build a sexual ethic around human flourishing rather than around rules encoded by men centuries ago. This begins by recognizing that with sex, as with everything else, “it’s not about being good—it’s about grace.” This, she argues, is actually just the natural extension of classical Lutheranism. (Griswold).

Griswold is intrigued by Nadia and her dynamic identity of mother/pastor/theologian, painting a picture of freedom and grace and a ‘burn it down’ mentality. But is it this very mentality that caused many within the church to question Nadia’s new book as, possibly, *too* shameless? In *Christianity Today*, Wesley Hill—a professing celibate, gay Christian—both applauds Nadia for encouraging the church to take on some self-reflexive work around its sexual ethics and doctrines while simultaneously admitting that Nadia’s ‘shame-free’ sexual practice is a “sad substitute for the truly shame-defeating word of absolution that the gospel of Jesus Christ offers” (Hill). He states:

What happened in between Bolz-Weber’s insistence that the gospel means recognizing that we’re all sinners and her new drumbeat in *Shameless* that, so long as the sex we have is consensual and marked by mutual concern, we have nothing ever to be ashamed of? (Hill)

Similar to the review of *Pastrix* in *The American Conservative*, even those who are open to “self-reflexivity” within the church believe that Nadia takes it “too far.” The notion of “excess” as it manifests rhetorically in both the body and address is transferable

to both the textual and bodily realm. Nadia seems to be walking the line between both. Kristeva touches on this in her theorization of the female body as *abject*, as monstrous, purely because of the associated “procreative functions” (Creed 87). “Insofar as woman’s body signifies the human potential to return to a more primitive state of being, her image is accordingly manipulated, shaped, altered, stereotyped to point to the dangers that threaten civilization from all sides” (87). The capability of the female body—more so, the queer female body—to purport herself into the necessary shapes and space of her choosing (including those spaces, like the pulpit, that were once off limits to her) is a radical practice and one that is terrifying to man. Operating outside of any boundary of femininity set by heteronormative and civil standards renders the female body “grotesque” in its excess. This excess is rooted in the woman’s desire for *more*: more freedom, more policy change, more inclusion. In terms of religious abject, Kristeva speaks of that which is read as “impure,” and often female.

The terms, impurity and defilement, that Leviticus heretofore had tied to food that did not conform to the taxonomy of sacred Law, are now attributed to the mother and to women in general. Dietary abomination has thus a parallel—unless it be a foundation—in the abomination provoked by the fertilizable or fertile feminine body (menses, childbirth). (Kristeva 100)

Nadia herself is a mother—a consummate of her “femaleness” in the eyes of the church. Her rejections of traditional “motherly” imagery in conjunction with her darker, excessive aesthetic furthers the arguments of those who would label her as an impure example of a “godly woman.” But that is exactly what Nadia wants for her congregation and spiritual community—to lead them astray from the dominant, hetero-patriarchal ideas



of God and religion and instead embrace a new ideological outlook on faith and love and community.

These are the attributes that have always drawn me to Nadia—and to women like her. Women whose bodies and ideas and words are considered “too much,” “too far,” “too soon” for those eyes and audiences and spaces that are controlled by the oppressor. Every radical idea that has ever changed the world was once considered “too much, too far, too soon”—and thank God it was the abundance the world needed for real change to be enacted.

One of the things that *Shameless* proposes within this “too far” category for many traditionalist Christians is the doing away with any form of “purity system.” Nadia states that purity, insofar as it has the best intention, does not make us holy (*Shameless* 26)

Our purity systems [...] do not make us holy. They only create insiders and outsiders. They are mechanisms for delivering our drug of choice: self-righteousness, as juice from the tree of knowledge of good and evil runs down our chins. And these purity systems affect far more than our relationship to booze: they show up in political ideology, in the way people shame each other on social media, in the way we obsess about “eating clean.” Purity most often leads to pride or to despair, not to holiness. Because holiness is about union *with*, and purity is about separation *from*. (*Shameless* 26)

“Purity” has become a misnomer for its purpose within the church, and Nadia believes this has been caused by the church’s focus on behavioral anecdotes as a moral compass, rather than true communal experience. Regulation for the sake of totality in favor of ‘preference’ should never have been held in regard over the spiritual, emotional, and physical health of the people of the church. This is the core thesis of *Shameless*: “we should not be more loyal to an idea, a doctrine, or an interpretation of a Bible verse than

we are to *people*. If the teachings of the church are harming the bodies and spirits of people, we should rethink those teachings” (*Shameless* 5).

Take, for example, the church’s stance on erotic exploration. Traditional Christian practice of the past two centuries has placed the realm of the ‘erotic’ in the sinful practice of idolatry - that which comes before God (regardless of the history of erotic-religious art found in many cathedrals, but I digress). Nadia proposes a different approach: what if the erotic were considered not as ‘dangerous,’ but *exposing*? In Chapter Eight of *Shameless*, “I Smell Sex and Candy,” Nadia interrogates the popular ‘youth group’ rhetoric surrounding lust and desire. She makes a bold statement to her readers, affirming the ridiculous nature of previous pastoral rhetoric surrounding sexual desire.

But I’m here to tell you: unless your sexual desires are for minors or animals, or your sexual choices are hurting you or those you love, those desires are not something you need to ‘struggle with.’ They are something to listen to, make decisions about, explore, perhaps have caution about. But struggle with? [...] No. (*Shameless* 139)

The human body was *made* to experience pleasure—made by God, in fact. The very creation of erotic imagery is a natural progression, according to Nadia, because of our intrinsic human nature. What if the erotic were a space for exploration instead of a space for exploitation? Nadia believes that the “erotic can be that which opens us, peeling back our protective layer [...] the erotic exposes complex layers of surface area: psyche, heart, body, desire, beauty” (146).

To say that I have always been fascinated by the element of the *sensual* within Christianity is no small statement. It is what led me to this project, just as Nadia was drawn to write a book on sexuality and the church. The sensual—that which is

pleasurable to the senses—includes the realm of the erotic, but it encompasses so much more surrounding the passions of the body and mind. I experienced the sensuality of potential eroticism as a bodily response. This was also the case for religion. Some of my most significant religious and spiritual experiences within the church have been rooted in my bodily affect and response: holding my breath as a pastor gently held the back and front of my head while guiding me under water for my first baptism, being touched by multiple women at once while they prayed over my kneeling form at an altar with shaking hands and audible tongues, watching my mother and father wash each other's feet while inviting me to participate in the ceremonial symbol of the Lord's Supper. Each of these moments were deeply passionate spaces of physical touch that were performed for sensual ceremonies bordering the erotic. The fact that my faith background was extremely charismatic gave testament to this aspect of spiritual practice; touch and movement and pleasure were encouraged. However, this was confined to the realm of surveillance on the part of leadership and 'saints.' Any exploration outside of sanctioned practice was relegated to the sinful pursuit of idolatry.

Thinking back on Pamela Lightsey's *imago Dei*, I have always been attracted to and drawn toward an image of the Divine that is rooted in the relationship of bodies. God herself is a divine communal being (the triune, the creation story rhetoric of 'we' in Genesis, etc.), and if we are to believe humanity is created in a divine image, then we must believe in a humanity that *requires* connection and intimacy. Sensuality as communal, particularly the religious communal, pushes the boundaries of heteronormative civility because much of the Christian church still relies on the Greco-

Hellenistic Christian idea of spiritual dualism: while the spirit is good and eternal, the body is temporal and susceptible to corruption. If the spirit was reason, the body was emotion. If reason was man, emotion was woman. The dichotomous nature of religious thought was never ending and left the modern day church with a set of rules that created a spiritual-gender binary boiled down to the “good” and the “bad.” But, like Nadia, I have chosen to pursue a faith that embraces the body and its potential for relationship and touch and sensuality. Perhaps this is the faith of the queer body, the woman, the other; perhaps this is the faith of Mary Magdalene.

*“Mary” of the Bible: The Patron Saint(s) of Femme fatales?*

Nadia embraces the divine power of the female and believes it to be central to her theology. This is another defining aspect of the true *femme fatale*, the uplifting of womanhood as powerful and transformative. This is also why she supports the notion of patron-saints, her own being Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene is an extremely interesting biblical figure, as she disrupts the dichotomy I laid out earlier. Mary Magdalene is both the image of repentance and abounding sin, sexuality, and humanity, and the one figure who has caused even Christians to doubt the chastity of Jesus. A woman plagued by demons and “saved” by Jesus, she becomes “one of the guys” throughout the New Testament Gospels and the retelling of the life of Jesus. Nadia finds an essence of strength in Mary Magdalene that she channels into her own ministry. In the wake of the 2012 Aurora movie theater shooting, Nadia gave a sermon on Mary Magdalene and “showing up” in the wake of crisis.

I think Mary would not shy away from naming the darkness and despair of an event like Friday’s massacre. She was familiar with darkness after

all [...] Because to be disciples like Mary Magdalene is to show up. It is to be a people who stand – who stand at the cross and stand in the midst of evil and violence and even if we are uncertain we are still unafraid to be present to all of it. [...] And to be disciples like Mary Magdalene is to be a people who listen and turn at the sound of our names. Amongst the sounds of sirens and fear and isolation and uncertainty and loss we hear a sound that muffles all the rest: that still, small voice of Christ speaking our names. (“Mary Magdalene, The Massacre in our Town, and Defiant Alleluias”).

What better patron-saint for women trying to have their voices heard in a male-dominated religious space than Mary Magdalene, another woman who no one really listened to, but seemed to have the most profound impact regardless?

Christianity has tended to downplay Mary’s alleged background as a prostitute and her independent wealth, choosing to focus more on her time as a “silent” follower of Jesus. I think about all of the times I watched *Jesus Christ Superstar*, the 1970’s film with Ted Neeley, and how conflicted I felt when I watched the fictional “love story” unfold. “*Of course, Mary would fall for Ted-Neeley-Jesus,*” I thought to myself, “*We would give the ‘redeemed-prostitute’ a love-interest who could never love her back.*” Because what better way to control Mary as a woman in a male-dominated narrative (i.e. the New Testament) than to leave her sexual power dead-ended. Mary Magdalene is so much more than a silent figure - she is a transcendental body. She lived in the space of taboo body and was still accepted in a divine embrace of the spiritual. She broke the dichotomy of spirit/body, reason/emotion, man/woman. She relied on her sensual nature to embrace the divine.

The very last chapter of *Shameless* focuses on Mary anointing Jesus. In her text, Nadia refers to Mary as “woman,” as many are conflicted on whether or not this Mary

was truly Mary Magdalene. I have always interpreted this woman to be Mary Magdalene and will do so for this chapter, as well. Mary in this story was the radical. She was the woman who defied tradition and etiquette to pursue a faith that was so rooted in the body—in the *sensual*—that her preferred form of anointing was to touch and kiss. Recorded in all four of the Gospels of the Bible, the “anointing of Jesus” takes place in Bethany. The book of John records the woman as Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus. Matthew and Mark leave her unnamed. Luke identified her as “a woman in that town who lived a sinful life” (Luke 7.37). Western Medieval Christianity identified Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene to be the same woman through a biblical interpretation of timeline and events; there is much debate over this. I personally have always read Mary of Bethany as Mary Magdalene, considering the close affinity between herself and Jesus, which was a source of contention for many. Nadia does not seem to read Mary of Bethany as Mary Magdalene, which I find interesting considering her connection to the now saint. The incongruities of the four Gospels does not lend me to doubt the account, but rather serves as a reminder that the larger narrative of Jesus in its macro-form is what is important for communities committed to exploring the purpose of redemption through storytelling.

The scene is set: a dinner party consisting of Jesus and a multitude of guests at the house of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7.36). A woman, Mary, enters the house unannounced with an alabaster jar of perfume that is considered to be an immense sign of wealth (most likely earned through sex work). She kneels before Jesus, weeping, and “began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume

on them” (Luke 7:38). She weeps, she touches, and she kisses. She uses lavish perfume that was paid for with her body to anoint Jesus. All of the barriers upholding the spirit/body dichotomy are being broken in this significant interaction. A woman, a sinner, embracing her choice to find spiritual peace on her own terms.

### **PAVING THE WAY FOR REDEEMING GRACE**

In my junior year of college, a friend of mine gave me her copy of *Passion & Purity* written by Elisabeth Elliot. Elliot wrote the book in the 1980s and it is a memoir/manifesto on romantic relationships and the empowerment that comes from waiting on the “right” man to pursue you at the “right” time. Elliot’s book focused primarily on her late teens and early twenties being courted by and married to Jim Elliot, a missionary who gained notoriety in 1956 after being killed while on mission in Ecuador. The primary takeaway of the book is learning to “wait on God’s timing” for relationships that are “pure” and “Christian”—like the one she shared with Jim for a brief time before he was murdered on mission. Elisabeth, I should note, has been married three times within the span of forty years, her first two husbands dying before she remarried each time. I did not fully recognize the irony of reading a book on singleness and purity written by a woman who had been consistently pursued by a man since her late teens, but I was told it was “life-changing” and I accepted it as such. *Passion & Purity* became a foundational text for Joshua Harris’ 1997 book, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, which was equally as ironic in nature—a manifesto on why you shouldn’t even kiss your dating partners until marriage that was written by a twenty-one year old boy who felt entitled enough to dictate every other woman and man’s intentions for dating within the Christian

realm. Harris' book took off even more so than Elliot's did within religious communities, sparking a nation-wide purity movement within Christian youth culture. As a twenty-year old woman, I could not even begin to fathom the invisible hold that those rhetorics had on my generation's sexual education. But Nadia did—and she rebuked it strongly in *Shameless*. Many of her parishioners were victims of this purity movement that left them bereft when “God's plan” of a loving spouse and nuclear family didn't ever come to fruition. “I thought, *You were robbed*. The church took away over a decade of her sexual development. All this time, she could have been gaining the kind of wisdom that comes from making her own choices, from having lovers, from making mistakes, from falling in love” (*Shameless* 17).

Maybe redemption could be found in the bodily and mental submission to Christian purity culture, but Nadia believed it was much more abundant in the messy and agentic ownership of one's sexual truth and journey. Maybe you saved yourself for monogamous marriage and your sexual life and is flourishing because of those efforts, but maybe you took an alternative path toward sexual fulfillment. Maybe you found your path to sexual health through experimentation. Or perhaps your sexual orientation developed into something new once you shed the messages of heteronormativity that encapsulated traditional sex education. Maybe you decided to try things that excited you. Maybe you are a *femme fatale* and your journey is completely and undoubtedly your own.

The *femme fatale* is a woman not without a redemption story; however, unlike the patriarchal overwriting of most *femme fatale* plots, she does not necessarily find this



redemption in turning away from her sexual nature or forfeiting ‘deviant’ desire. Rather, her redemption is a spiritual one—a beautiful coalescing of desire and spirit that is taken *back* through acts of agency. Nadia herself is a *femme fatale* in this right. She wrote a book on sexual health in modern Christianity and she did so because she *wanted* it, needed it. Her spiritual path to redemption did not look like her ECLA pastoral contract, nor did it look like celibacy post-divorce. She saw an unpaved path that allowed for a new and flourishing relationship between Christianity and sex, and she paved it with confession—her own alabaster jar of perfume.

### **THE NEW *FEMME FATALE*: PERFORMING *FEMME* THROUGH RACE, MOTHERHOOD, AND EXCESS**

In Chapter Two, I stated that the *femme* figure is incongruent within heteronormative standards of daily performance—a body read as unknown even within LGBTQ+ communities unless accompanied by a butch counterpart. *Femme* is meant for so much more than binary performance relationships; ideology of the *femme* should instead be intentional and radical and move beyond dichotomous, traditionalist lesbian genres of thought. Possibilities for *femme*, as theorized by Harris and Crocker, should revolve around the role of desire *within* relationship, rather than relationships *constrained* by desire. In this dissertation, I have pursued the notion of *femme fatale* as a *femme* identity within the queer diaspora of aesthetics and practice—namely through an interrogation of desire as an “agentic promise”. Agentic promise, as I use it here, is meant to emphasize the role of *chosen* sexual practice and aesthetic—not just because it coincidentally aligns with the trope of the “bad girl doing what she wants” in popular

media, but because the actions of a *femme* body is capable of intelligibility outside of storylines submission or consequence. The *femme fatale* is a character of feminist consciousness that amplifies this coincidence, breaking down the simplistic understandings of female agency and instead producing a transgressive and pleasurable dialogue for hallmarking a new era of the female sex.

The three women I have chosen to highlight as *femme fatales* of faith each represent an aspect of *femme* subjectivity that is deemed ‘deviant’ in hegemonic discourses of femininity—namely race, maternal ambivalence, and overt-sexuality. Pamela Lightsey is a black, queer lesbian marked by her role within a predominantly white clergy. Paula Stone Williams is a transwoman who is denied a role within cultural models of motherhood because of her transition. Nadia Bolz-Weber is a six-foot, tattooed, sexually-active, divorced pastor who, unlike most of her ECLA clergy peers, prefers dark red boots and lipstick to accompany her black clothing when she speaks publicly to audiences about sex and the church.

### *Femme fatale: A Racialized Body*

In their introductory essay of *The Femme Fatale: Images, Histories, Contexts*, Hanson and O’Rawe write that “the *femme fatale* marks the borders of race and sex, and her ‘darkness’ is the perfect trope of both her illegibility and unknowability, and of the threat of miscegenation and ‘male fears of an engulfing femininity’” (Hanson and O’Rawe 3). She is ‘darkness’ in so many ways, but it is also a specific reference to the body of the ultimate *femme fatale*—an encapsulation of the white man’s fascination with all things “foreign” and “exotic.” Hanson and O’Rawe push their readers to explore this

in the figure of Prosper Mérimée's Novella, *Carmen*. While *Carmen* is a footnote in this anthology, her story is resonant of Hanson's and O'Rawe's larger intuitive of the *femme fatale* as that blurred discourse between the unknown and the policed. *Carmen* is a particularly interesting tale because Carmen is all of those “terrifying” aspects of chaos, the “quintessential Other: female, black, a gypsy, proletarian” (Hanson and O'Rawe 8). She is a Romani woman—a gypsy—who uses her feminine wiles and cunning knowledge to aid her fellow smugglers and gypsy troupe in early 1800s Spain. After successfully bribing and seducing a young soldier, she enraptures him so fully that he becomes consumed by jealousy. He kills her husband, takes her as his wife, and—when she tells him she'll never belong to him—he kills her, as well. The novella is told from the perspective of the dragoon soldier, recounting his tale to the author of the story, most likely Mérimée himself. Carmen's “othered” status is never questioned by the soldier, yet he cannot “un-see” her.

And what had I got myself punished for? For the sake of a villainous Gypsy girl who had made a fool out of me and who was doubtless going about the town stealing at that very moment. Yet I could not prevent myself from thinking of her. [...] I used to look out into the street through the prison bars, and among all the women who went past I never saw a single one who could hold a candle to that devil in female form. (Mérimée 25-26)

Carmen takes multiple forms, but she is always marked by her race—Roma, black, exotic. In a 2002 rendition crafted into a “hip hopera,” Carmen is played by Beyoncé Knowles alongside Mekhi Phifer and Mos Def. Carmen is a “black” body in all renditions of tale, marking her as one of the classic, black, *femme fatales* of literature and cinema. The connection between the black body and the *femme fatale*'s story is rare, but Hanson and O'Rawe remind us that “darkness” is always present in the *femme fatale*'s

essence—and when that darkness is culturally placed upon her skin, her “doom” becomes even more necessary.

Contemporary connections between women of color and *femme fatale* identities is usually relegated to this same storyline—the *femme fatale* always meets her fate, but when the black *femme fatale* meets her fate, we do not truly know if it is because of her sexuality or her race. But the re-claimed *femme fatale* in my re-weaving of story and lore is allowed to embrace her racialization as a foundation of power, not perilousness. In 2010, Toronto based actor, burlesque performer, playwright, producer, and speaker Dainty Smith started the “Les *Femme Fatales*”—a burlesque troupe made of predominantly women of color and their allies. “Les *Femme Fatales*” considers themselves a group of women “who are fiercely sexy, defiantly glamorous, tender and brilliant, survivors who rock our war wounds with red lipstick, pasties, high heels and straight up attitude. Women without rules, living by our own rules” (“Les *Femme Fatales*”). Smith is an “ex-church girl” who grew up as a black, pastor’s daughter in a predominantly white town. Her love for burlesque and performing—as well as inspiration for “Les *Femme Fatales*”—came from her introduction to Joséphine Baker. Baker (like the character of Mérimée’s *Carmen*) is a renowned performance artists and dancer of the early 1900s, one of the iconic *femme fatales* of color: a black woman, a French nationalist, a civil rights activist. Baker was one of a kind, and Smith took notice of this. In most burlesque shows and popular sexual entertainment, any black woman featured was featured alone. She was separate even in an already sexually separate space. Smith created “Les *Femme Fatales*” to combat this—a group of women who were black and

queer and allies who could “be the blackest black” they wanted to be on stage because they were no longer an anomaly (“Empowering Women of Color Through Burlesque”). Smith believes that the *femme fatale* wasn’t necessarily a bad girl, but a survivor.

Black women and women of color have always been survivors within cultural sexualities, in part due to western placement of black female sexuality within a paradigm of black identity revolving around the “mammy” or the “matriarch” or the “jezebel and welfare queen” (Collins). Women like Dainty Smith have chosen to break the chains of black female and *femme* sexuality as aesthetically limited and, instead, posit black women as *femme fatales* through a survival mentality of agency, rather than a survival mentality of submission. The *femme fatale* has historically been read as a white body, albeit a ‘deviant’ white body. This is what made her character trope so shocking as an entertainment commodity—a white woman operating outside of “good” white femininity. The black woman has never been read within “good” femininity because of her race and therefore holds no shock value for the viewers’ gaze when performing the *femme fatale* in film or literature. *Of course* the woman of color is a ‘deviant’ figure of femininity—non-whiteness equals otherness in western standard; hers is a story of death or repentance by her race alone. I propose a rejection of those limited scopes of black sexuality and instead reclaim the black *femme fatale* as powerful because of her blackness *and* queerness, rather than making these characteristics into othering tropes.

Pamela Lightsey is a *femme fatale* in this right: queer, black, lesbian, Christian. Her body is marked as alternative in both the LGBTQ+ communities and the Methodist church because she has chosen to live a life fully authentic to each of her facets of

identity. She uses womanist text and theology to support her pursuit of a church space that prioritizes the LGBTQ+ community in its mission. She placed herself on the ground at Ferguson to fight against police brutality on black bodies and livestreamed her words to the world in hopes of change. She necessitates a reading of *imago Dei* through the queer body as sacred. She carries the burden of ‘outlaw’ within the United Methodist Church, identifying as queer clergy and simultaneously speaking out against the denomination’s anti-LGBTQ policies. Lightsey is a *femme fatale* of faith.

*Femme fatale: The Anti-Mother*

In 2008, metalcore band Norma Jean released their fourth studio album titled *The Anti-Mother*, or *Norma Jean vs. The Anti-Mother*. On the origin of the title, singer Cory Brandan stated that “The Anti Mother is a character we created which represents anything that is deceptive, and yet possesses an outwardly beautiful nature” (Brandan). Two of the tracks are titled “Birth of the Anti-Mother” and “Death of the Anti-Mother,” each a testament to the psychological and physical harm caused by a woman who failed at maternal performance due to her own selfish nature. The opening lines of “Birth of the Anti-Mother” sing thus: “From the bloodline of vicious serpents, a dreadful heart within a lovely shell/A demon’s heart, but with the face of God/I guess a liar's heart is still true even if her lips are not” (“Birth of the Anti-Mother”). The religious overtones are not so out-of-place in this metal ballad to the anti-mother—motherhood is steeped in religious mythologies of femininity and performance. In “Death of the Anti-Mother,” the lyrics continue the tragic-relationship between writer and the anti-mother: “Deception has been your right hand/Confusing the sight of my left/You won't leave the way you came/And

now no more blood will be shed/We will burn for this/We will both of us burn” (“Death of the Anti-Mother”). Dooming them both because of her errant ways, the anti-mother is the ultimate deceiver; she has chosen a path of destruction—fueled by selfish desire—and forfeited her motherly-duty of protection by damning her neglected children alongside her. The anti-mother is a warning to society of the dangerous potential awaiting any ‘deviant’ maternal performance. She is accused of deception, confusion, and duplicity in both her physical appearance and actions. As a particular variety of *femme fatale*, the woman who becomes an anti-mother is most often a figure rooted in Lacanian notions of desire through lack—those who can never be mothers abhor her negligence, while those who wish to abandon their maternal cage resent her brazenness. To prevent anti-mothers from existence, we are introduced to those “never-mothers”—women denied access to maternal affirmation because of their sexual and physical performances of femininity. Bringing it back to the literature, I turn back to Bolen’s *Goddesses in Everywoman* and the Goddess of Motherhood—Demeter. Demeter’s name contains the word “mother” (-*meter*) and her legacy revolves around her role as a mother denied her right and searching for her offspring, eventually devolving into destructive grief. Bolen believes that the modern-day woman cultivates her own “Demeter” self when she taps into the spiritual nourishment of others through a “maternal instinct” (Bolen 171). However, a natural progression of this embrace is “The Grieving Mother” which invites in “depression” and “destruction” (174-175). The “Grieving Mother” is that woman denied her right to motherhood, while the “Destructive Mother” is that same woman choosing to forfeit her role.

When the grieving Demeter stopped functioning, nothing would grow, and famine threatened to destroy humankind. Similarly, the destructive aspect of Demeter is expressed by withholding what another person needs (in contrast to Hera and Artemis who are actively destructive in their rage). [...] Failure to thrive results when a mother withholds emotional and physical contact from her [child] [...] She experiences her child's growing autonomy as an emotional loss for herself. She feels less needed and rejected, and as a result may be depressed and angry. (Bolen 175-176)

The Demeter archetype in the “everyday” woman is cultivated through the *possibility* of motherhood, which can lead to a damning proclivity in the woman when “the strength of the maternal instinct” (176) is not properly tested. The woman becomes a victim to her “nature”—her only choices being cultivation or destruction.

Paula Stone Williams is a victim of this “anti-mother/never-mother” trope. Unlike the postfeminist rallying cry of rejections of motherhood, Williams has never rejected motherhood as a possibility for herself. Rather, motherhood becomes an unattainable space for Paula—a consequence she embraces as someone who transitioned later in life. Paula is the “anti-mother” to those who see her transition as a betrayal of her children’s trust, and she is the “never-mother” to her son who cannot relinquish her as a “father.” She is the body *denied* access to maternal performance because of her transgender identity.

#### *Femme fatale: Sexual Excess*

Annie Lobert—a former sex worker and Vegas call girl—wanted to change her life and the lives of other women who were begin abused by the sex industry. After a near-death overdose in 2005, Lobert founded “Hookers for Jesus,” a 501c3 non-profit based out of Las Vegas that offered services to sex-traffic victims and distressed sex



workers. Lobert's mission seemed to be advocating for sexual stewardship in ways that aligned with a more traditional ministry standard. What was not traditional, however, was Lobert's aesthetic—curvy, platinum-blonde with black and purple highlights, and often found dressed at publicly endorsed events in tight, black camisoles that read “Hooker” in bright pink rhinestone letters across her chest. Lobert and her close friend and ministry peer, Heather Veitch (another Playboy-esque, platinum-blonde, ex-stripper and founder of “JC’s Girls”), fit right in at the Adult Entertainment Expo’s they frequent. “The girls can relate to who we are and how we look in a way that they can’t with some of the typical frumpy Christians who come here,” Lobert tells *The Telegraph* online, “We don’t preach to them and we’re not judgmental. We tell them that God loves them, even if they are hookers or strippers or porn stars. We offer help and advice—we do whatever we can for them” (Sherwell). Lobert is not ashamed of her overt sexual aesthetic. In fact, she believes it to be necessary to her style of ministry: “A lot of guys pose for photos with us and when they go home and look up what’s on our T-shirts, they learn what we’re about. We call it booby-trapping” (Sherwell).

Sexual excess has always been the easiest target for justifiers of woman’s public inferiority, particularly within the church. The religious *femme fatale* is canonically identified through this sexual excess. What Lobert and Veitch are promoting is a redefinition of the role of sexual excess within ministry—something that Nadia Bolz-Weber is also doing through her own theology. The *femme fatale* is characteristically marked by her excessive aesthetic (i.e. overtly sexual in dress and mannerism, heavily costumed in both clothes and makeup, devoid of traditional modesty, etc.). As a

popularized character in film and literature, her identity necessitates that these obvious tropes separate her from other women in her vicinity. She is not just ‘sexual,’ she is unashamed. Bolz-Weber has always been set apart from her pastoral peers by her ‘intimidating’ physical aesthetic (tall, muscular, “sexy”), but it is her rhetoric that marked her as a shameless woman within the Protestant tradition.

In her book, *Women Who Run With The Wolves*, Estès recounts the tale of “The Handmade in the Red Shoes”—a cautionary tale of women losing their true instincts and instead trying to live in the “abnormal” realm of “good,” which leads to desires of excess and destruction. One of the major themes of this folklore trope, Estès states, is the “normalizing of the abnormal” (262). Estès is not referring to the feminist rallying cry of decriminalization and deregulation of those behaviors deemed “abnormal” by society, but she is actually calling for women to stop “clos[ing] her eyes to everything obdurate, distorted, or damaging around her” and instead live authentically to their nature (262).

Trying to be good, orderly, or compliant in the face of inner or outer peril or in order to hide a critical psychic or real-life situation de-souls a woman. It cuts her from her knowing, from her ability to act. Like the child in the tale, who does not object out loud, who tries to hide her starvation, who tries to make it seem as though nothing is burning her, modern women have the same disorder, normalizing the abnormal. This disorder is rampant across cultures. Normalizing the abnormal causes the spirit, which would normally leap to correct the situation, instead to sink into ennui, complacency... (Estès 262-263)

Instead of adapting to the violent policing of women’s bodies being perpetuated by the church—instead of *normalizing* the consistent anti-sexuality rhetoric—Nadia decided to embrace her true instincts; she wore the “red shoes” and the dark clothing, she proudly displayed her tattoos, she confessed her history with addiction and skepticism, and she shamelessly let her sexual psyche take hold of her life. Nadia tells her readership and

audiences that she is living her most authentic sexual life in the present day—after traditional marriage, after divorce, in a relationship with a non-Christian. She not only professes this—she wrote a whole book on why church culture has inhibited so many others from accessing this “excess” that is deemed harmful by so many traditionalists.

## CHAPTER SIX

*These images of desire are not merely whimsical; rather, as concrete memories they queer me again and again as they imbed themselves in the possibility of desire now. Images and fragments: meeting in a doorway, a handshake, a kiss, seeing my features rearranged as I smile back at her. Desire for me is not a metaphor, it is a method of doing things, of getting places. — Elspeth Probyn,*

*“Queer Belongings”, *Sexy Bodies**

### **LIVING IN THE PROBLEMATICS: INVESTIGATION THROUGH STORY**

*I am seven. Walking down the hallway from my bedroom to the kitchen, I flounced and shimmied down an imaginary runway in my new hot-pink feather boa that was gifted to me for Christmas; donned in gaudy, costume jewelry I'd pulled from my mother's room. My Grannie was there, laughing and calling me a “little Jezebel.” I remember liking that name, reveling in the way it rolled off my Grandmother's tongue. It wasn't until much later, in a Sunday school scare-session, that I learned who Jezebel was – and the fate that accompanied her.*

*I am thirteen. I sit in back row of chairs at the weekly youth assembly held by a local church on Wednesday nights, hoping to not make eye-contact with the pastor giving his sermon. At the altar call, two girls I know from school rush up to the front of the church, crying and hugging each other as members of a pastoral, all-male prayer team hover over them with open hands. This happened every week. I had heard from my friend*

*that these girls had a history of letting their boyfriends to go to “all the way” on the weekends, only to plea for forgiveness on Wednesday nights. Funny, now – I don’t remember ever seeing their boyfriends on their knees those Wednesday nights.*

There are three pivotal, discursive challenges that cultivated this project. The first was the unclear yet present separation of “public” and “private” space and practice—and the gender dichotomy that accompanies this separation. Christianity and church-space has always held itself above any set of “rules” that exist to separate the public and private realms (i.e. the political pushback against church vs. state, prayer in schools, healthcare laws based on religious conviction, etc.). Christianity also, however, holds its own set of disciplines when it comes to how the public and the private are delegated and discussed *within* church theology and policy; theological public discourse could operate as an interrogation of private practices deemed sinful, but never could those practices be a source of dialogue within public space. This was especially true in regard to the heralded platform of the pulpit. The role of confession, therefore, was meant to be a *response* to public convictions of sin—a private practice relegated to booths and altars and offices. Written confession, particularly from the public space of the pulpit, was only appropriate when caveated with a story of “overcoming”—or a resignation. Pastors and priests were there to hear your confession of sin and to admonish wisdom and direction through sermons and counsel. Applied to religious public address (the sermon, the religious memoir, the keynote at a Christian conference, etc.), the once-private confession had the power to transform public address into something new: a queer performance of spiritual connection. What makes the act of confession a *queering* phenomenon is the

transformation of rhetoric from the traditional, autobiographical, detached prose into a rhetoric of thematic, interpretive storytelling. This deviation from the moral elitism that often defines religious leadership from congregational community is what marks the public confession as a radical act. It transforms problematic notions of pastoral identity and authenticity from agents of isolation and hierarchy into opportunities for connection and inclusion. I often wonder if the young men from my teenage youth groups had heard their male pastors share their own confessions of sexual shame, would they have run to the altar for atoning prayer with their girlfriends?

The second discursive challenge that fueled this project is the erasure and censorship of female sexuality within Western, Christian doctrine and practice. While the public/private dichotomy assigned female sexuality to the private realm in practice, it was relegated to the public realm in discipline and censorship. What has accompanied this policy is the creation of good/bad practices of femininity within the church—often supported by extreme instances of scripture interpretation and mythological adherence. The biblical character of Eve became a dangerous omen of unchecked feminine desire, as opposed to a necessary balance of masculine ineptitude. Truly, every biblical female character that was framed through the lens of ‘bad’ femininity was a product of a storyline warped around sexual deviancy. There was Gomer from the book of Hosea, who left her husband to pursue multiple lovers and ended up so deep in debt that she became a sexual slave until her ex-husband saved her. Potiphar’s Wife, left unnamed in Genesis, had only one storyline that revolved around wanting to sleep with her husband’s assistant Joséph—which got him thrown in jail after he refused her advances and she

scornfully told her husband that Joséph had raped her. Jael from the book of Judges, a female assassin who killed the army commander Sisera by seducing him to relaxation before driving a tent peg through his temple while he slept. Herodias and Salome, a mother-daughter duo who used their bodies in dance and performance as leverage to demand the execution of John the Baptist in Matthew 14. The list goes on and creates a clear picture of the spoils and fatality of over-sexualized femininity. ‘Good’ femininity was reserved for those women of the Bible that exuded subtlety in their actions, submissiveness to their husbands, and reverence to the law. Esther, Ruth, Tabitha, Mary, and Martha—these were the women who were exemplars of womanhood and strong role-models for the modern-day Christian woman. What mainstream Christianity has done with this biblical binary, however, is create a model of good/bad femininity within a context of heterosexual desire and aesthetic. The church could not begin to fathom the possibility for a queer femininity that broke the barriers between sexual power and reverent posture. The *femme* Christian was undefinable in nature and, therefore, not just censored—but erased.

The third prevalent challenge is the continuing vilification and silencing of those “deviant” or queer performances by women—particularly as they fall into the literary and stylistic trope of the traditional *femme fatale*. While the second problematic of censorship on the part of female sexuality created a binary of “good” vs. “bad” women within Christian history and practice, this challenge is focused on those “bad” women who do not fit within a hetero- and/or cis- and/or white framework of deviancy. As a traditional trope within biblical literature and religious mythology, the *femme fatale* has been limited

to primarily masculine portrayals of heterosexual desire and shallow archetypes of agency. Any redemption outside of death could only happen within a monogamous relationship with her (often) white, male savior. The *femme fatale* is capable of so much more *if* we allow her queer nature to take the helm in her narrative journey. “Good” and “bad” practices are indistinguishable within transformative spaces of sexual learning and vulnerable community—the realm of possibility for sexual truth is widened to include danger as knowledge and death as renewal. I find the *femme fatale* as a queer figure of power to be necessary if we are to move past Christianity’s antiquated understanding of body politics and instead embrace a holistic approach to womanhood and feminine agency.

*Personal Acknowledgments: A Brief Introduction of Purpose*

This project isn’t just about me. It’s even more than Pamela or Paula or Nadia. I started this project is for every girl, woman, and *femme* who is on a journey for spiritual redemption within a tainted religious institution that has erased her power—her heritage. We are the outlaws; the ones who have chosen to challenge the dominant discourses while simultaneously challenging one another (Ono and Sloop 22). We have moved continuously between the civic and vernacular rhetorics—back and forth, them and us, back and forth—in pursuit of harmony until our histories became intertwined with the very discourses we chose to fight against. The feminist could never be Christian—there are days where I still believe this. But then, I read a womanist’s queer theology of *imago Dei*, and watch a transwoman build a church, and hear a divorced pastor preach on the



importance of good sex; and I'm reminded of why I always come back to this work after every resurgence of trauma that convinces me to give up.

I grew up in a charismatic denomination of Christianity—Pentecostalism, to be exact. This meant that the traditional style of worship on Sundays involved loud and vocal praises, consistent body movement like hand raising or swaying, and—in those moments of true fervor—sometimes dancing, running, or speaking *in tongues*. It was a strange phenomenon every Sunday, seeing both men and women encouraged to use their whole bodies and voices in their worship while simultaneously hearing sermons that branded the body as a susceptible vessel for corruption and fleshly desire when used improperly. This paradox played out often; for example, a woman could be “slain in the Spirit” (an expression used to describe the moment a person collapses to the floor in worship), but one of the congregants would immediately come lay a coat or blanket over the woman's pantyhose-clad legs, less her form be distracting to other worshippers.

I have distanced myself from many aspects of the Church of God denomination that reared me. I am content with the faith-journey I have cultivated outside of my traditionalist understandings of Christianity. Much of this chasm between my upbringing and my present was fostered by my lack of reception within that “old” space; I so desperately wanted someone from my childhood church to tell me I wasn't on the “wrong” path. That I could be a “good” Christian and still speak out adamantly against the sexist and racist policies that still plague church culture. I wanted to know when I was told by others that my feminist and activist beliefs were detrimental to my faith, that *I*

wasn't wrong—they were. But I never received this—not from my youth pastors, not from my friends, and not even from my parents.

I eventually did see a shift in perspective and find affirmation in my beliefs—but it came from the margins. Women, people of color, queer folk, and LGBTQ+ allies are making their voices heard—becoming pastors, clergy, authors, and evangelists. They are protesting and writing and loving their way toward a more inclusive, *public* Christianity. As this project began to take form, I realized I wanted to be a part of this movement—even as a mere witness who could document her thoughts on the pages of a dissertation.

### **THEORIZING THE “WHY” BEHIND THE WRITING**

*I am fourteen. It's the last day of my week-long, stay-away church camp that I attend every summer with my youth group. There is a church service every night and tonight, during the altar call, my brother goes to the front to pray. I follow him, offering him a long hug in solidarity, leaving my arm around him as he prays quietly. A counselor I don't know comes up and taps me on the shoulder, quietly telling me I shouldn't be that close to a boy, especially here. That what I am doing is inappropriate. “But, he's my brother,” I say back to her incredulously. She gives me an uncertain look before walking away to a group of others who are praying. I feel relief that my brother hasn't seemed to notice that this happened, but I go back to my seat immediately. I sit through the rest of the service with my arms crossed, a creeping feeling of shame arising in my flushed cheeks. Feeling that somehow—even as I'm watching multiple male youth counselors pray over young girls while touching them—I am the one who did something wrong.*

I wrote at the beginning of this dissertation that gender and religion are inherently linked, and I believe it is worth re-stating here. Christianity has a very long and complicated history with its phenomenological and ideological roles for “good” and “bad” women. Much of this history has relied heavily on frameworks of abjection—including monstrosity and deviancy—to demonize any gender performance operating outside of traditional feminine space. What if we were to switch the roles, change the narrative? How might an alternative understanding of religious practice and aesthetic broaden the capabilities of women in the church?

*Merging Discourses: Burke, Felski, and Confessional Religious Rhetoric*

Burke knew the power of words—particularly the power of religious words. In my preparation for this dissertation, I studied Burke’s analogical analysis of “God-terms” that come rely upon a contractual nature between verbal and non-verbal realms. Religious rhetoric, it seems, transcends any one epistemological model of meaning or power through its continual movement between the supernatural and the secular. By Burke's very proposition of an analogous relationship between empirical words and those words for the supernatural, we as religious rhetoric scholars are forced to address how the supernatural must inherently be gendered. Empirical words—those verbal language systems by which we communicate—are broken down into masculine/feminine tenses of words, upon which we defer to the masculine. Even Burke does this in his insistence upon stating that “man” is a symbol-using animal. Burke also addresses the gender dichotomies of words in his explanations of the realms of “words,” referring to a both "matrimony" and "patrimony" (Burke 14) in relation to socio-political systems. If “God”

as a word is relegated to the supernatural realm—therefore equating itself with an ineffability of meaning—then it cannot go unaddressed that our other “borrowed” words for God as a power-figure also align themselves with masculine language (i.e. Lord, Father, Son of Man, etc.). Burke himself relies on this gendered hierarchy, for his analogies and narrative of “borrowing” only make sense in the empirical realm if we accept that the male body is physically superior to the non-male body—that the title of “Father” is superior to the title of “Mother” or “Other.” This applies to the non-verbal realm, as well. Scholars must pay attention to the ways in which the gendered nature of religious rhetoric restrains the potential for those bodies operating as outlaws within religious systems—within the church, yet outside of a heteronormative, cis-gendered understanding of body (male).

This is the juncture where Burke meets Felski in my theoretical mapping: the limits of gendered, religious rhetoric are fully apparent within the genre of feminist-religious confessional text—a space that places the non-male body on display through a rhetorical representation of the female-supernatural relationship.

At multiple points in this project, I emphasize the radicalness of feminist, confessional text—women authors sharing their stories *for* other women and not for the masculine-read public, the “explicit rhetorical foregrounding of the relationship between a female author and a female reader and an emphasis upon the referential and denotative dimension of textual communication” (Felski 88). The rhetorical foregrounding in this dissertation is two-fold—both feminist and religious. Lightsey, Williams, and Bolz-Weber are writing/speaking to their audience with an intention of truth that is fostered

through spiritual and inclusive rhetoric. Attention to this genre—the relationship it holds within feminist-religious communities, the relationship it holds to the supernatural realm of spirituality—can provide a better understanding of the limits and the possibilities present for women and queer folk within the church at large. While the queer, spiritual woman is by no means a new phenomenon, her story can be revised and placed within a scope of progressive politics relevant to modern-day Protestantism.

Looking at the bodies, rhetoric, and performances of historical and contemporary aesthetics of ‘dangerous’ women who have lived and resisted within the hegemonic spaces of religious mysticism, with particular emphasis on Christianity, this dissertation examined the ways in which a ‘monstrous’ (*femme fatale*) construction of feminine performance can be a cornerstone for conversations around queer religiosity as theological activism, heteronormative resistance, and the creation of a queer frontier within present-day Christianity.

In the past decade, the ideological shift happening within public sphere of Western Christianity has included more and more bodies that can be coded within these theories of monstrous performativity, i.e. women, people of color, queer folk and LGBTQ+ allies. By studying the bodily performances and rhetorics of these persons as they operate within a feminist-religious counterpublic, a new discursive framework can be built that allows for the coalitional building of queer spiritual foundations. This framework is necessary for fostering new conversations around/about/with women of faith—for the ones who feel left out because of their sex, silenced because of their gender, and unloved because of a heteronormative, white interpretation of man-made

histories. By embracing a public display of queer and non-normative female sexuality within the Church, the future narrative can begin to shift outside of hegemonic discourses of discipline and into a discourse of communal power. This brings me to the realm of *eros*.

*Eros as Performative, as Religious, as Pedagogical*

*I am twenty-one. I'm volunteering as a counselor at a week-long Church of God youth retreat. I'm in charge of the schedules of thirteen girls ranging between the ages of twelve and eighteen. Throughout the week, one of my fifteen-year-old girls is constantly being pulled aside by her adult, male youth pastor for "mentoring." I feel uneasy. I don't know why, but I can't shake it. I go to one of the pastors in charge of the retreat, sharing with him my uneasy feelings over the excessiveness of their meetings. My concerns are brushed off and I'm told explicitly not to say such things out loud to anyone—you can't just slander someone and potentially ruin their witness! I knew in that moment I would never participate in an organized Church of God event again. I put my head down for the rest of the week and left as fast as I could. One year later, going in to my senior year of college, I see this youth pastor's face plastered on social media for his arrest for allegations of over two years of sexual abuse against a now sixteen-year-old girl in his youth group. That was the day I had my first panic-attack.*

*I am twenty-three. I reconnect with a friend from my childhood, a girl who grew up in my church and went to the same Christian summer camps that I did. We haven't spoken in a few years and the conversation feels strained as we share memories and laughs over the phone, talking about old friends and crushes from our overlapping pasts.*

*“I can’t believe you slept with [him], you slut!” she says to me suddenly. My voice catches as I try to respond, “What are you talking about?” My friend proceeds to tell me how this boy—now a man, a prominent pastor’s son who became a cop—told many of our mutual friends that I had slept with him multiple times when I was a teenager. No one had asked or told me about this rumor until now. They just believed him. I felt sick. Even my friend didn’t believe me as I went on to try to tell her none of the rumors were true. She scoffed and reminded me that I wasn’t “exactly a prude.” What did I expect? My sexual history was no longer my own—not once a man in the church decided what he wanted me to be.*

While I was finishing up the last two chapters of this dissertation, a close friend of mine bought me a ticket to see *Anna Karenina* at the Denver Center for Performing Arts for my birthday. Because it is one of my favorite literary tales (coupled with the fact that I was hitting a writing block), this was a very special and timely gift. Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* was the first classic I picked up of my own accord as a teenager. I was a senior in high school and it took me six months to finish the entire book. I had no idea what Tolstoy was trying to say, but I still loved the story through the pieces I held. I have re-read *Anna Karenina* multiple times since then and, each time, I have wept. The characters are dimensional and emotive and the writing is beautiful. I had come to *know* Anna as well as I knew myself—her internal struggle between politics/religion and emotional need/desire, her fatal embrace of the erotic, her broken body on the train tracks. Tolstoy’s work was a pillar of textual embrace for my twenty-something self. I often would go back to Anna’s love affair with death and Lenin’s political existential crisis as I navigated my

own life questions surrounding love and education and fate. Watching the life of Anna play out on the stage was a surreal moment, for—unlike any of the movie renditions of *Anna Karenina*—this was a lived moment in which all of the words and themes buried in my head from the text were coming to life in real time before my eyes. Performance was the gateway to understanding the link between my own tears when reading the novel and the actress' tears as she delivered Anna's last train station monologue.

While I will always love the story that is *Anna Karenina*, the feminist critic in me has come to see Anna for what she truly is—a patriarchal symbol for the fate of unfettered, feminine sensuality. Tolstoy appears to write only two possibilities of agency for his women characters: marriage and motherhood (Kitty) or disgrace and death (Anna). While Tolstoy's writing highlights that this dichotomy is unjust, the stark contrast between Kitty and Anna in their plots is astoundingly telling of the long history of female subjection in both literature and life. If Kitty was the mother, then Anna was the *femme fatale*. Her story is tragic because she followed her heart and paid the price. And, yet, it is this tragedy that makes this novel a work of *art* because it is a critical exegesis of those universal themes of fate and desire and religion. But what if those themes could still be undertaken in an epic novel and—get this—the once-damned heroine prevails? What if both Kitty *and* Anna could emerge from the story with their own victories outside of marriage or death? Could that be a story worth telling?

I often think of Tolstoy's perspective on rhetorical criticism when I consider the ways in which these themes—fate and desire and religion—so often become tangled up in works of *art* meant for the heterosexual and oppressive gaze. In a letter to a friend,



Tolstoy once stated that the value of a work could never be determined by any kind of moral criticism or thematic element, but rather the possibility for connection and the capacity for connectedness that truly elevates a work of art:

People are needed for the criticism of art who can show the pointlessness of looking for ideas in a work of art and can steadfastly guide readers through that endless labyrinth of connections (labirint sceplenij) which is the essence of art, and towards those laws that serve as the basis of these connections. (Tolstoy)

If we were to assume Tolstoy's assertion of value or artistic endeavor to be dialectic in nature—particularly between the communities affected by the object in question—then perhaps I was right to pursue the case studies that I did in this project. The role of Pamela Lightsey's, Paula Stone Williams', and Nadia Bolz-Weber's texts and actions could *only* ever be considered paramount within religious-feminist discourse if the role of engagement is directly tied to value—whether the engagement was positive or negative. Like Tolstoy, I do believe that the discourse surrounding a work is where one will find a community's assertions of value and worth. But I must leave Tolstoy behind at this juncture and move into a rhetorical posture better suited to those feminist scholars who have theorized this discourse and genre through a contemporary lens, one that involves a queer approach to *eros*.

The value of the rhetoric and subjects highlighted in this project is found in the confessional project's capacity for connectedness; the feminist-religious counterpublic is a community rooted in practices of erotic renewal. The *femme fatale*, presented through confessional rhetoric, is a subject of *eros*—a political, social, and intellectual move toward projects of passion and pleasure as they manifest in the physical, textual, and cognitive realms. Audre Lorde eloquently reinforces this project's possibilities in her

theorizations of the erotic, stating that the erotic is a “conscious decision” for women to access a “well of replenishing and provocative force” (Lorde 54).

The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation. For this reason, we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic. [...] The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves. (Lorde 54)

Religious institutions are beginning to understand the importance of the erotic in knowledge-making. Traditionally, the Christian church has separated intellect from emotion. This was the belief that learning could only proceed if the “lower elements” of function—feeling and sensory response—were ignored in favor of reason and logical discourse. This is resonant of the Greco-Hellenistic Christian ideology of spiritual dualism: the human spirit is revered as eternal and good and the human body as temporal and corrupt. This notion is not only anti-queer and ableist in its disavowal of certain bodies, but also extremely gendered considering heteronormative understandings of sexual nature have never separated the feminine from sexuality. In his book, *Between Two Gardens*, James Nelson laments this lack of adaptation to *eros* as a primary school of thought amongst Christian thinkers.

Sadly, enough, this divorce between agape and eros has been affirmed in one way or another by numerous contemporary Christian thinkers, even folk of widely differing theological outlooks. The results have been several. . . . The manner in which our sexuality underlies and informs all of our loving has been left unappreciated and unclarified. The positive functions of both desire and self-love have been misunderstood and denigrated. (Nelson 110-111)

If Christianity cannot reconcile the possibilities of *eros* as a spiritual form of growth, then the realm of the sensual will remain a private and taboo process for religious public discourse. The feminist-religious counterpublic is combating this long-standing history—and they are doing so through *eros* as a prophetic discourse. *Eros* was always meant to be a way of teaching, learning, and growing with/through the other. If *eros* is separated from the sacred because of the binary of spiritual dualism, the rhetoric of Lightsey, Williams, and Bolz-Weber eradicate this binary. *Eros* allows the confessional genre to become sacred—it gives a voice to experience. This is done primarily through the visibility of women occupying sacred leadership roles while simultaneously prophesying their authentic selves in their sermons, memoirs, and rhetoric. In “Preaching, Sexuality, and Women Religious” by Browning and Reimar-Barry, this exploration of the role of the feminine prophetic is explained further:

[...] preaching and the prophetic are deeply linked to witness. The people who surround the prophetic speaker are those who shape the content of the speaker’s message. As we tie this argument to the work of women religious, we are reminded that prophetic voices come not only from the “pews” but are shaped in the margins, in places where the “least of these” live, where women religious often work. (Browning and Reimar-Barry 72)

Browning’s and Reimar-Barry’s sentiments are extremely resonant of Felski’s contractual nature present within feminist, confessional literature. It’s about engagement with the feminine—with the other—and holding space for stories that rely on spoken-truths. When these spoken-truths are expressed through a rhetoric connected to the body, sacred *eros* is enacted.

**DESIRE AS A RHETORIC OF BELONGING: THE FUTURE OF THE “FEMME FATALES OF FAITH”**

*I am twenty-six. Amidst already strained religious relations with my Mother, I tell her I want to move-in with my boyfriend. She sighs disappointedly before softly and scornfully telling me, “If you live together, you’ll end up having sex. You’re not married. It’s sinful.” I’m not sure what she thinks I’ve been doing the past ten years of my life, but I do know she thinks it’s not too late to save me from myself and my errant desires—even if my desire is sexual autonomy. I swiftly change the conversation to something that won’t end with me making my mother feel upset and making myself feel like a disappointment.*

*I am twenty-eight. I sit with that same boyfriend—now my husband—in the chapel of a church that finally feels like a safe space for my questions. We are listening attentively as a woman stands at the pulpit delivering the Sunday sermon. My throat tightens and my eyes begin to water as I watch this woman—a transwoman pastor—deliver a message on storms and grace. After everything I had seen go on in “the name of God” and “the church”, I shouldn’t still be here. I had every excuse to be done with religion. But standing in front of me was another woman who shouldn’t have been there: a woman ridiculed, persecuted, and called a heretic by her peers—yet still speaking to my own wounded soul on the power of love, inclusion, and stories.*

There are many avenues I believe this project can take post-dissertation. As I trace out each possibility, the common thread seems to always connect back to a theme of desire: a theological desire to enact social change within the policies and practices of the

Christian institution, a rhetorical desire for confessional texts and speeches to become a new form of religious canon, a feminist desire for queer inclusion in leadership, and the academic desire to *make desire* itself a valid and proper point of methodological and epistemological departure for communicative storytelling. Desire is this dissertation's origin story, wrapped up in confession, monstrosity, eros, and religion. Desire is a point of departure that becomes a queer method for creating discourse within the larger discipline of communication studies. My own desire to share my story is entrenched within each page, line, and word. The rhetorical subject, the *femme fatale*, is a woman of desire: she pushes beyond her behavioral and psychosomatic constructions in an attempt to fulfill her need for pleasure—pleasure of the mind, pleasure through the body, and pleasure in community.

But wherein lies the connection between the apparent desire on the page and the larger discourse of religious and feminist rhetoric within the communication discipline? In their chapter “Queer Belongings: The Politics of Departure” found in the edited collection of essays, *Sexy Bodies: the Strange Carnalities of Feminism*, Elspeth Probyn suggests that the possibility for desire as a point of departure for queer theory only becomes intelligible when the “object” of study is “followed” rather than “founded”.

In part, this is the difficulty encountered in any truly interdisciplinary work (of which there is, in fact, very little): the object is posed as evident (it's ‘about’ sexuality) but there is scant consideration about how we get from ‘here’ (our training as literary critics, sociologists, etc.) to ‘there’ (the object of study). [...] We need, therefore, to follow desire as we consider the aptness (*la justesse*) of our disciplinary belongings. (Grosz and Probyn 7)

I believe I have followed this project's pathways of desire to a critical intersection of interdisciplinary work—a ‘departure’ from communication studies that never truly leaves

the realm of rhetorical inquiry but invites in multiple epistemological and methodological approaches to better situate a project within its appropriate dimensions. There have been moments over the past four years of conceptualizing this project where I have hit intense walls of existential crisis in the search for a place of belonging for my writing. My work felt too testimonial for teaching, it was too queer for ministry, it was too non-linear to be taught, or it was too theoretical to become a memoir in its own right—I could not name the discourse that got me from “here” to “there,” as Probyn states. So, perhaps, my “disciplinary belonging” could be summed up in just that one concept: desire

Moving forward with these notions of “desire” and “belonging” in mind, I hope to take the connections I make in this dissertation and move into a deeper psychoanalytic exploration of the those conservative spaces and practices that allowed for women like Pamela Lightsey, Paula Stone Williams, and Nadia Bolz-Weber to become such prolific anti-heroines in the Protestant tradition. I believe I can build off of Joy Qualls recent publication, *God Forgive Us For Being Women: Rhetoric, Theology, and the Pentecostal Tradition*, to continue/create a conversation around the effects of charismatic religious traditions on the ideologies of sensuality and performance, as well as how a resurgence of mystical rhetoric within Protestantism may be the next step of embrace for the feminist-religious counterpublic. While the majority of this project revolved around textual critique, there is still much more to be said on the role of aesthetics within religious-rhetorical frameworks of the feminine. If an imaginative work—which I believe this dissertation to be—is rooted in the aesthetic, then language is the repository for aesthetic possibility. I see the future of the “*femme fatales* of faith” continuing as a rhetorical

project that is not only coded within imaginative epistemologies, but insistent upon the how our language shapes the physical and aesthetic realms. Thinking back on Burke's analogies, I want to continue this project in alternative mediums and formats to better ask the questions: what is the role of text in ascertaining the divine? Or, better yet, what is the role of text in *creating* the divine? Take, for instance, the rhetorical signifiers we use for traditional, heteronormative, sex/gender identifiers: man and woman. How do these words *affect* the bodily realm? What power is entrenched in these words as narratives of whole categories of body classifications and aesthetic?

In Catherine Palczewski's essay, "Take the helm, man the ship... and I forgot my bikini! Unraveling why woman is not considered a verb," she wrestles with this language phenomenon of gendered words and power. Palczewski is concerned with the ways in which *woman* as a word is used in much lesser-than and powerless terms as opposed to *man* as a word. She looks primarily at the roles in which each of these words performs as a verb:

*Man* is defined as both a noun and a verb. In its verb form, the form that interests me here, the OED offers:

1. trans. (Mil. and Naut.) To furnish (a fort, ship, etc.) with a force or company of men to serve or defend it... b. Naut. To place men at or on (a particular part of a ship), as at the capstan to heave anchor, or on the yards to salute a distinguished person... c. To equip and send (a boat, occas. an army) with its complement of men in a certain direction...
2. To supply with inhabitants, to people... b. To fill up with men... 3. To provide (a person) with followers or attendants

I initially thought that *woman* would not appear as a verb and was surprised when it did. However, the distinctions between the two verb forms, which ought to be parallel, is intriguing. *OED* offers the following for *woman*:

1. early nonce-uses. a. intr. To become woman-like; with *it* to behave as a woman, be womanly. b. trans. To make like a woman in weakness or subservience. c. pa. pple. Accompanied by a woman. d. To make ‘a woman’ of, deprive of virginity.
2. trans. To furnish or provide with women; to equip with a staff of women  
(Palczewski 3, from the *Oxford English Dictionary*)

Palczewski’s focus on the verb of these words—the physical engagement—is particularly relevant for the future of this project, as I have already begun to address the ways in which bodily processes are affected by the symbolic operations of words through Burke. If a verb is the action by which a thing operates, then the clear differences in *possible action* for *man* and for *woman* in the terms laid out in the *Oxford English Dictionary* references is strikingly different. The symbolic realm and the material realm are not the only relations having palpable qualitative differences—there is a qualitative difference amongst words themselves in terms of imbued power. If men *act*, women are *acted upon*. “To man” is to take control, “to woman” is to take *away* control. Palczewski emphasizes the ways in which the “woman” body needs to be addressed in terms of power through spatiality and modality, which is a crucial component in my own intersections into Burkean analogies of words and the non-verbal realm. As a rhetorical scholar devoted to incorporating performance aesthetic into my research, I must show thorough attention to the ways in which gendered-language restrains the potential for those bodies operating outside of a heteronormative, cis-gendered understanding of man.

Regardless of disciplinary belonging or aesthetics, I know this project will not end on these pages. It will continue in the words and actions of every woman working alongside one another in an effort to create institutional change within the Protestant tradition. It is my hope that the women and queer *femmes* who read this will find a



renewed strength to ultimately change the culture that reared her into a culture that should fear her.

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