

Queering Christianity:

Sexual and spiritual identity navigation in LGBTTQIA+ folks at Trinity Western
University and the implications for practitioners of psychotherapy

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Abstract

This thesis considers the lived experiences of LGBTTTQIA+ students who currently attend or have attended Trinity Western University (TWU), a private Christian university that requires all staff, students and faculty to sign a community covenant expressing marriage is between a man and a woman. Importantly, TWU is currently seeking to start a law school, which faces great opposition due to TWU's historical and current exclusion of queer folks. Subsequently, this thesis draws on data gathered from six qualitative interviews with current or past TWU students who also identify as LGBTTTQIA+, women and/or gender non binary with the hope of making space for those folks while also offering criticisms and recommendations for TWU to consider. Additionally, this thesis seeks to provide clinical recommendations for counsellors and psychotherapists as they work to support folks at the intersections of spiritual and sexual identity in an affirmative and supportive manner.

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Introduction

Trinity Western University (TWU) is a private, Christian, liberal arts university located in the lower mainland region of British Columbia. TWU was established as a liberal arts college in 1962—then called Trinity Junior College—and at its inception, operated as a two-year university transfer program (Trinity Western University, 2007, p.7). TWU is closely tied to the Evangelical Free Church, and began as a liberal arts college in 1962 (Trinity Western University, 2007, p.7). Throughout its history, TWU came to offer something relatively unique to incoming students: the combination of an evangelical Christian environment and four year Bachelor degrees. As of 2016, for example, of the 193 Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Eligible institutions in Canada, Trinity Western University is one of only seven institutions that is also affiliated with Christian Higher Education Canada (CHEC), a not-for profit organization comprised of “fully accredited, degree-granting, Christ-centred institutions” (Government of Canada, 2016; CHEC, n.d.). Individuals seeking both an academically rigorous and faith-oriented institution can find it in Trinity Western. Historically, many colleges in the United States, for example, were rooted in and supported by organized Christianity – including Harvard University (Woodrow, 2006, p.314). TWU—or any other Christian university—may appeal because its Christian environment offers “educational experiences that are focused on developing young Christian adults who will exhibit mature Christian character, not merely in their intellects, but also in their hearts and souls” (Ma, 2005, p. 323). Although secular universities may well foster learning and development beyond an academic context, Christian universities do this quite explicitly. Additionally, those institutions associated with the Council of Christian Colleges and

Universities (CCCU) – of which TWU is a member—operate with religion serving as “a partner in learning that pushes students and faculty beyond notions of mere church affiliation or historic beginnings within any particular denomination” (Bohus, Woods & Chan, 2005, p.20).

Nevertheless, TWU’s history is certainly not left unmarked by challenges. TWU faced significant contestation in the late 1990s and early 2000s regarding the validity of its’ programming, particularly regarding those students studying to be teachers (Glegg, 2002). At the time, TWU offered Education courses but was unable to confer a Bachelor of Education degree; subsequently, they had an agreement with nearby Simon Fraser University (SFU) wherein TWU Education students would proceed to SFU to complete their final year of an Education degree (Trinity Western University v. British Columbia College of Teachers, 2001). Up until 2002, TWU was unable to offer the Bachelor of Education degree. They had first applied for a fifth professional year program in 1987 prior to the inception of the British Columbia College of Teachers (BCCT), but the BCCT took an additional seven years to determine the criteria for new programs (Trinity Western University, 2002). TWU was subsequently turned down due to the university’s Community Covenant (Trinity Western University, 2002). TWU faced objections primarily based on the Community Covenant that all students, staff and faculty are required to sign. This Community Covenant includes limitations around sexual intimacy, such as the following:

In keeping with biblical and TWU ideals, community members voluntarily abstain from the following actions: sexual intimacy that violates the sacredness of marriage between a man and a woman ... Further, according to the Bible, sexual intimacy is reserved for marriage between one man and one woman...(Trinity Western University, n.d. a).

Although not explicitly stated, the above text implies that sexual intimacy outside of a marriage between a man and a woman is a violation—of both Biblical principles and the TWU Community Covenant—and thus individuals attending TWU who do not identify as heterosexual are left with the options of celibacy, asexual partnerships, or keeping their sexual partners a secret. Although the TWU Community Covenant does not specifically outline the consequences of having engaged in homosexual behaviour, we know from TWU alumni like Ashlee Davidson, Ren Lunicke, Alexandra Moore, Corben and “Jacob” that there are indeed consequences (Cameron, 2017; Lindsay, 2016; *Mars’ Hill*, 2016; Moore, 2016). A TWU representative stated that, in situations where TWU students were discovered to be engaging in homosexual relationships, there would be an “accountability process” that would be “determined on a case-by-case basis” (Cameron, 2017).

In May of 1996, the British Columbia College of Teachers rejected TWU’s application for a fifth professional year on the grounds that, “the proposed program follows discriminatory practices which are contrary to the public interest and public policy” (Trinity Western University & Donna Gail Lindquist v. British Columbia College of Teachers, 1997). Ultimately, the validity of TWU’s Community Covenant was contested and was fought all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada. The British Columbia College of Teachers (BCCT) “refused to approve the application because it was contrary to the public interest for the BCCT to approve a teacher education program offered by a private institution which appears to follow discriminatory practices” (Trinity Western University v. British Columbia College of Teachers, 2001). Finally,

On application for judicial review, the B. C. Supreme Court found that it was not within the BCCT's jurisdiction to consider whether the program follows discriminatory practices under the public interest component of the *Teaching Profession Act* and that there was no reasonable foundation to support the BCCT's decision with regard to discrimination (Trinity Western University v. British Columbia College of Teachers, 2001).

Eleven years after their success in the Supreme Court, TWU found (and still finds) itself back in frighteningly similar circumstances. After many years of almost radio silence regarding the Community Covenant, TWU found itself back in the spotlight since the start of the process to found a School of Law when it submitted its proposal for a school of law in June 2012 (Trinity Western University, 2012). In a relatively short period of time after announcing their bid to open a School of Law (Trinity Western University, 2014), there was an outpouring of responses (Ali, 2014; Craig, 2014; Epp Buckingham, 2014; Woo, 2014). Within less than a month, the Faculty Council from both the University of British Columbia Law Faculty and Osgoode Hall Law—among other groups and organizations—voiced their concerns (The University of British Columbia, 2014; Office of External Relations, 2014). Both argued that TWU's Community Covenant is in conflict with the legal obligation to non-discrimination. As of May 2017, the British Columbia Court of Appeal and Nova Scotia Court of Appeal have ruled in TWU's favour, but TWU awaits the Supreme Court hearing on the British Columbia and Ontario appeals (Trinity Western University, n.d. e).

In order to note the possibility of different experiences for TWU alumni, I'm now going to shift to using autoethnographic methods. As someone who now carefully identifies as an ally to LGBTTQIA+ individuals, sharing my personal experience at TWU – as both an 'acceptable' heterosexual woman, and later as a 'less acceptable' feminist – will offer additional context and detail to the complexity of TWU's community.

Interestingly, it was at least partially my experience at TWU that helped me unlearn my homophobia, and look at the history of Christianity and the text of the Bible using a more critical lens. Unfortunately, there is a distinct lack of research about the experience of being a student at Trinity Western University. The vast majority of my time at TWU (between the years of 2004 and 2009) was positive; I also finally had the opportunity to interact with folks who weren't the same as me: my peers weren't comprised of only folks from European descent who grew up in Canada. I went to concerts and plays in Vancouver, started interacting with a much more diverse group of people than I did growing up in a small, rural community in northern Saskatchewan. While at TWU, I had close friends, did reasonably well in courses, and was heavily involved in student leadership. Increasingly over time, however, I realized that the ways in which I experienced 'community' at TWU were not universal. Moreover, I realized that the 'TWU bubble', though referred to comically by myself and many peers, was a community virtually inaccessible to an entire group of TWU students: queer folks.

Because I am a cisgender, heterosexual woman, the fact that non-straight students at TWU felt out of place at best and oppressed to the point of suicidal ideation at worst never registered with me. Until my early twenties, I had never bothered to think about anyone who wasn't straight, namely because I had never met anyone who was openly LGBTTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, two-spirit, queer, intersex, asexual). The only instance in which I encountered anyone who I didn't assume was heterosexual was when a young woman—visiting our town from another community—announced loudly on the school bus that she was bisexual. At the time, I didn't even know what that meant. Interestingly, one study indicates that students in high schools in Saskatchewan—

where I grew up—experience high levels of homonegativity (Morrison, Jewell, McCutcheon, & Cochrane, 2014). In another study conducted by Swank, Frost and Fahs discovered that, “rural and small-town LGBs were more likely to endure a history of subtle discrimination and rural individuals encountered more lifetime discrimination” (2012, p.237). Additionally, they found that “rural LGBs not only reported greater stigma, but also were more isolated and disconnected from communities that may provide affirmation of their sexual identities” (p.237).

Although TWU is located in the greater Vancouver region of British Columbia, I argue that the insular, somewhat isolated community of the TWU campus replicates some aspects of what it is like to reside in a small, rural town. Langley itself is a smaller city that has strong ties to farming (Township of Langley, BC; n.d.); moreover, living on TWU’s campus was not dissimilar to being in an isolated community, especially if you were a student that did not own a car: at least at the time of my attendance, there was only one bus route running near TWU’s campus, and it stopped running at 7:00 pm on weekends. Mavhandu-Mudzusi and Sandy’s 2015 study provides a helpful parallel, describing a more extreme but similar experience of LGBT students in South Africa. Not only did their study indicate discriminatory practices as common in rural South African universities (p.1050), it also pointed out that in countries like South Africa—and, I’d argue, spaces with similar emphasis on the importance of religion—organized religion is a “powerful voice speaking out against the provision of equal rights to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people,” (p. 1050). This study in particular is relevant, as it was conducted in a rural South African university that is largely comprised of students from “an overtly Christian background” (Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Sandy, 2015, p.1050).

Admittedly, while I was a student, I lacked awareness regarding the existence and experience of queer folks at TWU. The only relationships I witnessed were between men and women; male dorms and female dorms would go on ‘dorm dates’, which further perpetuated a conservative, heteronormative culture on campus. Unbeknownst to me at the time, one of the women in my dorm would eventually come out as non-heterosexual; we were reasonably close friends and I had no idea that she was interested in women, while she for certain knew I was interested in men. Despite now realizing there are elements of TWU’s Community Covenant with which I disagree, I signed it without hesitation because it seemed like none of the things it forbade were things involving me. In retrospect, I was still a nascent feminist, and it seemed challenge enough for me to believe my voice as a woman was both important and valuable, let alone considering the experience of queer folks (whom I didn’t believe existed at TWU anyway). It wasn’t until the intersection of two events—the coming out of my childhood friend, and a group presentation on gay marriage for a philosophy class—that I began to re-evaluate my thoughts about and feelings toward queer folks. Although TWU as a whole did not encourage critical discussions around queerness, specific professors—all of whom are now, unsurprisingly, members of the Gender Studies Institute (Trinity Western University, n.d. d)—strongly supported critical thinking about privilege and encouraged my feminism. I’d been reading Jessica Valenti, choosing woman-centred research topics, and slowly edging my focus of study toward women’s equality in developing countries. Eventually, I’d write a paper on the rhetoric of the pro-choice and pro-life movements since *Roe. v. Wade*, and ended up reconsidering my position on the ‘issue’ of abortion.

Sometime during the summer of 2006, I was visiting family friends for the weekend; at this point, I had known these people for over fifteen years, as they attended the church I grew up in for nearly a decade. Late at night while I was visiting, in my friend's quiet, basement bedroom, she told me that her older brother was gay. I don't remember anything in particular that she said; only that she was upset with the news and had hesitated to tell me. Unfortunately, research indicates that this situation is common: queer folks coming out in the context of religious families are often left reeling as a result of their families' reactions (Baiocco et al, 2015; Kabakov, 2014; Maslowe & Yarhouse, 2015; VanderWaal, Sedlacek & Lane, 2017). Later, her brother called me on the phone, and I recall having the wisdom to mention that I loved him whether he was gay or not. We both wept. Even my fairly conservative mother was upset by the way which my friend's family handled his coming out; he was still the same person, wasn't he?

Earlier in the same year, I was enrolled in a second year philosophy class at TWU called Contemporary Ethical Issues (Morrissey, 2016), which was taught by a popular professor who had a reputation for being engaging, progressive and even controversial (Rate My Professors, 2007). I recall studying Brian McLaren in one of this professor's later classes—McLaren, a popular evangelical Christian author ruffles a lot of feathers amongst his evangelical peers (Hagerty, 2010; Challies, 2014). Shortly before the most recent election, however, McLaren wrote an op-ed on his break-up with evangelical Christianity (McLaren, 2016). That said, it is worth noting that this professor later went on to pastor a church called neXus, which describes itself as “a church that is on a journey of discovery and re-evaluation within our faith” (neXus Church, n.d.). The course required that we create a group presentation on a contemporary ethical issue, and I was in

a group presenting on homosexuality. I acknowledge that, in many ways, it is problematic to refer to homosexuality as a ‘contemporary ethical issue’. Though I have very little recollection about the context of the presentation, I do recall having a shift in my thinking because of my research: I could no longer say with complete confidence that the Bible was against being gay, nor could I say that the ways in which gay people have been treated by Christians was ethical.

By the time I’d arrived at Trinity Western, much of the hype around the Education program had faded away. Any comments I heard were from faculty and were part of our legacy of which I never considered the impact. I was then, as in many ways I am now, an all eggs in one basket sort of woman: I’d only applied to one school with the intention of doing one thing – teaching high school English. In my time at TWU, there at least seemed to me to be no issue finding placements for Education students; after graduation, I was immediately hired on to substitute teach in multiple public school districts. During this time, I recall having a conversation with one of my male grade 12 students explaining first, that it was not possible for ‘homework’ to have a sexual orientation, and moreover that it wasn’t appropriate to use the word ‘gay’ as an insult, since there is nothing wrong with being gay. It was clear that, since I first made my journey to TWU, my perspectives on homosexuality and the diversity of human experience had changed. In this season, I had already begun to reconsider the covenant at TWU, especially in light of my own spiritual convictions that the notion of a covenant is to be made with God rather than with an institution. I was working hard to learn to be a better ally to queer folks, and to open conversations about how the church as a larger body of individuals across the planet could support queer folks in a healthier way.

Upon starting my master's degree in 2014, I was writing a paper on the notion of virginity and discovered that there was virtually no research that included LGBTTQIA+ folks. This unfortunate discovery spurred my interest in better representing and supporting queer folks, especially in connection to Christian communities. Thus, I began to integrate my spiritual hopes with my academic interests; asking myself how I could better support the intersections of spiritual and sexual identity, especially knowing the recent and historical challenges faced by students at TWU. Thus, this thesis will demonstrate that queer folks in the context of spiritual communities experience great difficulties in integrating the various dimensions of their identities. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean queer folks will ultimately leave or dissociate themselves from Christian communities like TWU.

It is first important to establish the context and experiences of queer folks within spiritual communities. We know that, unfortunately, many lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, two-spirit, queer, intersex and/or asexual (LGBTTQIA+) individuals undergo negative experiences in the context of religious communities, especially within those communities that are Christian (Murr, 2013, p.349). Furthermore, "those who identify with a conservative religion continue to be among those who espouse negative attitudes toward lesbians and gay men" (Newman, 2002, p.89). Additionally, as highlighted by Rachel Murr, therapist and author of *Unnatural: Spiritual Resiliency in Queer Christian Women* (2014), it is evident that "despite a growing movement of Christian churches who've adopted policies of full inclusion and affirmation, Christianity is still strongly associated with negative attitudes toward gay people" (2013, p.349). The literature certainly indicates that individuals who do not identify as heterosexual may not

have particularly positive experiences in the context of church or communities comprised primarily of Christians, such as TWU (Dahl & Galliher, 2012; Miller & Stack, 2014; Sharma, 2008). Knowing that TWU is non-denominational in student attendance but evangelical free in formal history and association, will helpfully inform TWU's tendency toward conservatism. In my own years of attendance at TWU, for example, campus rules were changed to accommodate organized dances at the TWU campus (The Gateway, 2006). Later, the Community Covenant was updated to permit responsible consumption of alcohol off-campus, rather than expressly prohibiting alcohol consumption entirely (Armstrong, 2000). These dances were, of course, heteronormative and relatively sexually innocent at that. These examples help us remember that people, universities, and even church denominations can change their minds. Similarly, Andrea Smith writes of how white evangelicals were proponents of slavery and race segregation in the 1950s and 1960s but have significantly changed their perspectives (Smith, 2008, p.14).

Parallel to the experiences of the Biola Queer Underground (BQU) at Biola University in California—discussed at length in Deborah Jian Lee's important work *Rescuing Jesus: How People of Color, Women & Queer Christians are Reclaiming Evangelicalism* (2015)—I argue that informal, underground support networks of queers and allies can serve as a reconnecting site with the potential for re-association with a spiritual community like TWU. Underground communities like the BQU can provide a space for queers and allies to relate and feel connection (Lee, 2015, pp. 133-134); to feel safe and loved. The challenge, of course, lies in maintaining the anonymity of the group

participants and the privacy of the group itself: the pressure of maintaining that secrecy mounts daily when so much is at stake (Lee, 2015, p. 134). .

Sherry et al. found that “many LGB people have successfully negotiated the integration of these two aspects of [sexual and spiritual] identity in a way that allows them to feel congruent and free from identity conflict” (Sherry, Adelman, Whilde & Quick, 2010, p.117). This is relevant to my thesis because it indicates the possibility not only for sexual and spiritual identity navigation, but also for what may be considered adaptive or even successful navigation of these aspects of identity. Taylor and Snowdon (2014) also identify a number of studies that point out “how queer identified members of Christian churches have developed strategies of adaptation and resistance, re-working scripts of inclusion and exclusion, “coming out” (or not) and stretching heteronormative theologies of sexuality” (p.397). My thesis will not assume that adaptation and resistance or successful navigation of one’s sexual and spiritual identities are possible or even preferable, and thus will focus primarily on the experience of the individual research participants. My own life experiences and faith naturally lead me to hope for healthy sexual and spiritual lives for all people, but I acknowledge that some folks may need to leave their Christian community for the sake of their safety, not to mention for other reasons.

Members of religious communities often cause LGBTTTQIA+ individuals to feel excluded and alienated from those very communities: it has been found that “conflict between religious and sexual identities has been associated with distress, including shame, internalized homophobia, depression, and suicidal ideation” (Sherry, Adelman, Whilde & Quick, 2010, p.113). These exclusionary experiences may result in

LGBTQTQIA+ individuals feeling conflicted about or entirely rejecting religious affiliation; either by leaving their current community or choosing not to engage with a religious community or religious practices in the future (Foster, Bowland & Vosler, 2015; Heermann, Wiggins & Rutter, 2007; Murr, 2013; Ream & Savin-Williams, 2005). We know that there are a number of TWU alumni who originally identified as Christians that have since left the faith: this is true of some of my interview participants, and is also mentioned by Alexandra Moore, the author of the blog, *Mouth of Babel* (2016). Subsequently, LGBTQTQIA+ individuals may struggle to reconcile the spiritual and sexual facets of their respective identities if they are an active participant in a conservative Christian community (Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013, p.857), and perhaps even if they are no longer involved in that community but were involved in the past. Although some may perceive it to be a simple choice, the decision to leave one's church community is a significant one. Christian churches can provide not only spiritual support but also a group of people with largely similar values, and comfort in being known and supported by others (Levy & Reeves, 2011; Woodell, Kazyak & Compton, 2015, p. 866).

Beagan and Hattie (2015) additionally found that “lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender people and those who identify as queer (LGBTQ) almost inevitably have conflicted relationships to religion and spirituality. Condemnation by mainstream faith traditions has inflicted considerable harm on sexual and gender minorities” (p.92). An earlier study conducted by Hattie and Beagan (2013)—wherein self-identifying lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer women were interviewed regarding their spiritual and sexual/gender identity—provides support for my assertion that at least some LGBTQTQIA+ individuals desire to remain connected to or reconnect with their spiritual

practices and/or religious communities. It is worth noting that in recent years, and especially in light of the TWU Community Covenant controversy, those who would identify as Christians—liberal and conservative alike—are beginning to change their minds (Merritt, 2014; Rogers, 2016).

Objectives and Research Question

The primary objective of my thesis was to collect and analyze data from qualitative interviews in order to better understand the ways in which LGBTTQIA+ identified individuals from TWU experience spirituality, and how they navigate their spiritual and sexual identities. Ultimately, the research question this thesis attempts to answer is: what are the spiritual experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or queer women and gender non-binary individuals who have attended or are currently attending Trinity Western University? More specifically, this thesis will attempt to highlight the sites of support and reconnection, alongside the sites of isolation, as described by participants in this research study. Ultimately, this thesis will provide recommendations—both for allies within spiritual communities, and also for mental health practitioners—in order to more holistically and healthily support LGBTTQIA+ individuals who are navigating the often-murky waters of sexual and spiritual identity.

As an active, longtime member of a Christian church community, I recognize that there are ways in which my church/religion/pastor/teachings place me on the margins: because of my feminism, because of my femaleness, and perhaps even because of my work toward being a better ally to LGBTTQIA+ folks. I am, however, a cisgender, white, heterosexual woman and TWU alum, and thus I experience relative privilege and safety

within the context of both my Anabaptist Christian church community, and my memories of association with TWU. In her careful analysis of insider/outsider positioning specific to feminist qualitative research, Sandra Acker borrows James Banks' (1998) four-category typology of the insider-outsider dynamic (2001 p.158). More specifically, Banks' notion of the Indigenous Outsider (p.161) is useful for my research: I am, in some ways, on the margins in my community (i.e. being queer affirmative in the context of a Christian church community) yet I am also an alum of TWU. Thus, although inherently unstable (p.162), the role of the Indigenous Outsider may provide an effective location from which to critically examine the research findings. I do not wish to impose my own assumptions onto the experiences of LGBTTQIA+ individuals from TWU.

Conducting research involving insider-outsider dynamics can offer both benefits and detriments, and fundamentally impacts the knowledge created during the research process (Acker, 2001; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Griffith, 1998; Hayfield & Huxley, 2015; Levy, 2013). Dwyer and Buckle (2009) observe that an "insider role status frequently allows researchers more rapid and more complete acceptance by their participants. Therefore, participants are typically more open with researchers so that there may be a greater depth to the data gathered" (p. 58). Nevertheless, Dwyer and Buckle's examination also identified that "the researcher's perceptions might be clouded by his or her personal experience and that as a member of the group he or she will have difficulty separating it from that of the participants" (2009, p.58).

Importantly, I considered Naheed Islam's process of research in light of my own struggles as both an insider and an outsider while conducting my interviews. In Islam's work studying the experience of Bangladeshi immigrants, she conducts thorough work of

figuring out “who and what constitute belonging to a community,” as Islam finds that there are many “axes of difference and commonality” between her and her community (Islam, 2000, p.41). As Islam discovered in her research, I was careful to avoid assuming that I am on the ‘inside’ just because I am an ally to queer folks. I entered the process of interviewing participants knowing there was a possibility of being perceived especially as an outsider by my research participants because of my position, both as researcher and—more importantly—as a cisgender heterosexual woman who passed easily through the gates of TWU.

Another particularly helpful example of dealing with one’s perceived status as an insider or outsider is found in Onaje X. O. Woodbine’s recent publication *Black Gods of the Asphalt: Religion, Hip-Hop, and Street Basketball* (2016). Woodbine, a black man who grew up playing street ball and eventually left a promising career in college basketball to pursue studies in philosophy and religion, writes of his experience interviewing and interacting with inner city Boston street ballers: “My personal background as a Roxbury native and former streetball player also made it easier to avoid reducing players’ bodies to objects determined by fixed cultural narratives. While I did not ignore the cultural forces at play in my analysis, I became acutely aware of the ache for meaning and feeling expressed in the games. In this sense, our shared social proximity helped me to avoid stripping these young black men of their agency” (Woodbine, 2016, p.48). Although unlike Woodbine, my life doesn’t run strictly parallel to the lived experience of LGBTTQIA+ folks at Trinity Western University, I do possess an increased understanding of those folks’ social locations while at TWU.

Scope and Relevance

My thesis will contribute to feminist and gender studies, to theological studies, and also to the practice of psychotherapy. More specifically, my thesis will contribute to feminist theology and feminist studies of religion insofar as it will address the lack of communication regarding the both/and of feminism and Christianity. One particularly helpful theorist when considering the both/and of feminism and Christianity is Andrea Smith. Smith, a feminist and activist, provides support for my own both/and struggles in even the subheading of her book *Native Americans and the Christian Right: The Gendered Politics of Unlikely Alliances* (2008). Similar to the ways in which Andrea Smith points out and learns to find spaces of reconciliation between the initial contradictions between Native American and Christian Right activism, I am learning to better contend with the both/and experience of being a feminist and a Christian.

Smith writes that, “by bringing into conversation with each other two such seemingly disparate constituencies as conservative evangelicals and Native activists, [that she is] signaling that [*Native Americans and the Christian Right*] will disrupt some of the assigned notions we have about the logics of these organizing sites” (Smith, 2008, Preface xiv). This thesis follows from the work of Andrea Smith in that my experience indicates that it is common for people to disbelieve that I am able to reconcile my identity as a feminist with my identity as a Christian. Moreover, I believe that there is a need for a more holistic perception of human identity as informed by my Christian understanding of being made in the image of a divine creator, and thus this thesis will contribute to my personal practice as a Christian, as well as to my broader church community as I serve as an elder in the Anabaptist church. More specifically, the church I attend identifies with a “third way” approach regarding same-sex relationships (Cavey, 2013). Although I see

this way as a much gentler and accepting than the way of other Christian communities, I believe there is still space for me to help my church folks come to accept queer folks more. Admittedly, seeing my queer sisters and brothers in Christ be discouraged or disowned by their Christian communities is painful, not to mention theologically inconsistent according to many Christian church denominations (Bozard & Sanders, 2011; Kocet, Sanabria & Smith, 2011; Lease, Horne, & Noffsinger-Frazier, 2005; McQueeney, 2009; Schuck & Liddle, 2001).

Although there is plenty of literature regarding psychotherapeutic work with LGBTTQIA+ clients (APA Task Force, 2009; Bidell, 2016; Brown & Pantalone, 2011; Galarza, 2013; Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2013; Singh & Moss, 2016), research and therapeutic work with those folks from the perspective of a Christian practitioner is much less plentiful. More specifically, the historic work of the field of psychology to “cure” homosexuals of their homosexuality still lingers. A 2015 study conducted by McGeorge, Carlson and Toomey demonstrates not only that there are therapists who still practice (and thus support) conversion therapy, but that they (unsurprisingly) have lower levels of competence in working with lesbian, gay and bisexual clients (p. 42). The fact that this study did not include – or address the non-inclusion of – transgender folks is further proof that psychotherapists and others in the realm of counselling and psychology have work to do! Admittedly, this thesis cannot specifically contribute to the full spectrum of gender and sexual identities, but it will nonetheless contribute to the field of psychotherapy insofar as it seeks to better equip Christian therapists in counselling LGBTTQIA+ clients.

It becomes clear, then, that LGBTTQIA+ individuals may experience a great

degree of tension between their spiritual and sexual identities: “[Lesbian, bisexual and gay people] may find themselves not only unwelcome in church because of their sexual orientation, but they are also viewed as antithetical to the gay movement because they are religious” (Sherry, Adelman, Whilde & Quick, 2010, p.113). This is due primarily to the internalized homonegativity and heterosexism that LGBTTTQIA+ individuals experience. In this case, internalized homonegativity refers to the guilt and shame about one’s sexuality (Yip, 1997, p.3), especially if one has internalized traditional or conservative Christian ethics. Studies have also indicated that a large number—60 to 69%—of gay men and lesbians have left organized religion (Morrow, 2003; Sherry et al., 2010 in Murr, 2013, p.350).

Specific to the context of TWU, it is possible that queer folks at TWU who aren’t interested in making change (i.e. just want to get through their time at TWU, or are happy with their experiences at the institution) may be made to feel further outside of the community (Sandberg, 2014; Harris, 2014). In this field of research, not only are LGBTTTQIA+ individuals positioned outside of religious community for their queerness, but are additionally positioned outside the queer community by their religiosity. It seems safe to assume, based on the conservative culture of TWU’s campus and the Community Covenant’s restrictions around homosexual behaviour, that some queer TWU students would experience internalized homonegativity and homophobia. In a study conducted by Wilkerson et al, their finds suggested that “mental health providers and sexuality educators should be more concerned about the influenced of fundamentalist religious beliefs on internalized homonegativity and outness when their clients have a history of affiliation with Evangelical Protestant faiths more so than Catholic or Mainline Protestant

faiths” (2012, p. 127). Reading the stories recently published in TWU’s student newspaper—*Mars’ Hill*—can serve as an illustrative example (*Mars’ Hill Admin*, 2016). In this article, TWU alumni—public and anonymous—share their experiences of being queer or queer allies at TWU. Aimee Leduc writes “my cutting would have gotten much more serious. There may have been an attempt at suicide instead of just fantasizing about it” (*Mars’ Hill Admin*, 2016). Colin Janz writes that their time at TWU was “without a doubt one of the loneliest, hopeless and self-deprecating periods of my life. It was pure, terrifying isolation” (*Mars’ Hill Admin*, 2016). An Anonymous student or alum wrote, “I remember overdosing on pills and then being ferried away in an ambulance... I remember breaking up with my first boyfriend, and not being able to talk to many people about it, and needing to just pretend that I was okay when I was heartbroken” (*Mars’ Hill Admin*, 2016). Although this article did not survey all queer TWU alumni, it illuminates frightening themes: queer TWU students felt isolated at best, and depressed to the point of suicidal ideation at worst. Outside of the TWU context, Gibbs and Goldbach’s 2015 study of LGBT young adults demonstrates that “lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) young adults are at a disproportionate risk for experiencing distress and abuse” (p. 472).

In addition to causing LGBTTQIA+ individuals to feel as though they need to leave organized religion altogether, some LGBTTQIA+ individuals find that “the psychological dissonance that results from having a conservative religious identity and an LGB [lesbian, gay, bisexual] identity can be so profound as to lead some to enter therapy with the goal of altering their sexual orientation” (Dewey, Schlosser, Kinney & Burkard, 2014, p.299). Historically, the LGBTTQIA+ community has experienced a great degree

of negativity; more specifically, formal efforts to “cure” homosexuality—often referred to as SOCE (sexual orientation change efforts), ex-gay, conversation or reparative therapy—have been plentiful since the 1973 change to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) II. This, of course, is based on the premise that homosexuality is a mental illness and not a societal norm (McGeorge, Carlson, & Toomey, 2015). Justin Lee, founder of The Gay Christian Network, describes his desires to rid himself of his homosexual desires at length in his 2012 book *TORN*. Surely, anything that can cause someone to seek therapy to drastically alter their identity is worth examining further, one of many reasons for my research on the sexual and spiritual identity navigation among LGBTTQIA+ women. No empirical evidence exists that would suggest such therapy—often called ‘conversion therapy’ or ‘reparative therapy’—has any success in altering sexual orientation (Morrow, 2003, p.115). Furthermore, as the literature indicates, there is a dearth of research that focuses specifically on the experiences of individuals in Christian community that works to include transgender, two-spirit and intersex individuals. As previously stated, it may be the case that lesbians (and LGBTTQIA+ individuals) struggle to feel comfortable within their sexual or spiritual community: queer folks struggle to accept Christians, and Christians struggle to accept queer folks. The struggle must be particularly heightened for queer Christians at TWU.

Religion and Spirituality

It is particularly important to distinguish between ‘spirituality’ and ‘religion’ for the purposes of this paper, as there has been much change in the understanding of each word’s respective meaning throughout the past forty years (Pargament, 2011, p.30).

Canda and Furman (2010) provide a helpful distinction between these two terms for the practice of social work, which can be aptly applied for use in both psychotherapy and feminist and gender studies, the lenses through which I am viewing this project. Canda and Furman define spirituality as “a universal and fundamental human quality involving the search for a sense of meaning, purpose, morality, well-being, and profundity in relationships with ourselves, others, and ultimate reality, however understood” (2010, p.59). According to Canda and Furman, religion, on the other hand, is “an institutionalized (i.e. systematic) pattern of values, beliefs, symbols, behaviors, and experiences that are oriented toward spiritual concerns, shared by a community, and transmitted over time in traditions” (2010, p.59).

This thesis does not intend to refer to spirituality and religion in polarizing ways; rather, it seeks to examine the diverse ways that LGBTTTQIA+ women and gender non-binary folks experience spirituality, inside or outside of church walls. Kenneth Pargament’s understanding of religion and spirituality is also helpful, insofar as he acknowledges the polarization of the terms, when ultimately, “the most essential of all religious functions is the desire to form a relationship with something we consider sacred” (2011, p.31).

Working Definitions of LGBTTTQIA+

There is much contention regarding the use of the terms lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer, and various opinions and perspectives exist regarding their use. As Weston points out, “working definitions have the apparent advantage of precision and consistency in their application. Yet those virtues often prove illusory, because working definitions tend

to be at once rather arbitrary, on the one hand, and culture-bound on the other” (2009, p.140). Moreover, as a society, we are inclined to binary patterns of thought: I am right and you are wrong; she’s a woman and he’s a man. I would argue that there is no dimension of human experience that can less be pinpointed than that of sexuality (Bricknell, 2006; Diamond, 2008; Phelan, 1993; Sedgwick, 1990; Weston, 2009). Therefore, what is more important to consider for the purposes of this thesis is self-identification rather than concrete definitions (Weston, 2009, p.141). Helpfully, Alison Better offers that, “one’s queer identity should count just on the virtue of the fact that one defines themselves as such. Maintaining an identity outside of the dominant power structure has political and social reasons that may be known only to the individual” (2014, p.36). My thesis will also carefully consider the outward pressure LGBTTQIA+ individuals feel to identify or perform a certain way.

The participants interviewed for my thesis were recruited based on their self-identification as women or gender non-binary, and LGBTTQIA+. It is important to note here that none of the participants I actually interviewed identified as transgender, intersex or asexual. Nevertheless, I have and will continue to use the LGBTTQIA+ acronym, with the intention of avoiding further erasure of those folks. Additionally, throughout this thesis I will also substitute “queer” for LGBTTQIA+, since the word queer is “is often characterized as being more a critique of the concept of identity or definition than an identity or definition in its own right. It is almost impossible to give a neat breakdown of queer” (Cornwall, 2011, p.9). Additionally, “for some people, queer and LGBT are basically synonymous; for others, queer’s ability to question and resist various normativities is not just about sexuality, but about all kinds of dimensions of life and

theological concern” (Cornwall, 2011, p.11). These differences indicate that clear definitions thus cannot be determined beyond participant self-identification. In fact, some of the interview questions for this thesis inquired about sexual identification and any labels that participants may associate with themselves.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) will be of particular use to my research, insofar as she illustrates how bizarre it is that “the gender of object choice” is the singularly important dimension of genital activity; this dimension, of course, becoming what we know to be sexual orientation (p.8). Moreover, Sedgwick’s first axiom, *people are different from each other*, is hugely significant for my research. In the same spirit as Kimberle Crenshaw’s work, discussed later in this thesis, Sedgwick further highlights the need for conducting interviews with LGBTTTQIA+ folks: because, as Sedgwick writes, “some people, homo-, hetero-, and bisexual, experience their sexuality as deeply embedded in a matrix of gender meanings and gender differentials. Others of each sexuality do not” (1990, p.26). Throughout this thesis, I use the larger acronym of LGBTTTQIA+ while also acknowledging that most of my discussion, research and analysis focuses on sexuality rather than gender. Additionally, Sedgwick highlights the resilience of ‘the homosexual’ as a nominative category, being careful to point out that this is not solely because of how meaningful ‘the homosexual’ is, but due to the number of people who define themselves against it (1990, p.83).

Perhaps most importantly stated in Sedgwick’s 1990 work is her acknowledgement that removing an individual’s authority to sexually self-identify is an act of violence (p.26). Particularly in light of the fact that sexuality expresses both identity and knowledge, Sedgwick emphasizes the intimately violent nature of no longer

individuals to “describe and name their own sexual desire” (1990, p.26).

Identity Navigation

The notion that identity is fluid rather than static is a central element of my thesis. My thesis also purports that identity has many intersecting facets: “The postmodern positions depicts the self as a ‘fluid, evolving character that is in a continual process of becoming’ ”(Sherry, Adelman, Whilde & Quick, 2010, p.112). One of the possible alternatives for LGBTTQIA+ folks who leave the Protestant church is to, as suggested by Sherry et al. (2010), develop “a sense of spirituality separate from formal institutionalized religious experiences”, which can “mediate the effects of negative religious experiences on the psychological health of LGB individuals” (Sherry, Adelman, Whilde & Quick, 2010, p.113). As has been addressed earlier in this thesis, when some LGBTTQIA+ individuals experience conflict regarding their sexuality and their spirituality, they opt to reject one of those identity components as entirely as they are able. In light of my graduate work in counselling and spirituality, I do not believe it is either necessary or consistently helpful to reject one’s spiritual self.

Although it is certainly possible that folks experience religion and/or spirituality in negative ways, there is an increasing amount of research that indicates positive elements of religion and/or spirituality. For example, Lisa Miller’s 2015 book *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving* demonstrates a number of ways in which spirituality can serve as a helpful resource. Moreover, a literature review conducted by Abu-Raiya et al. shows that religiousness and spirituality offer a number of positive effects, not limited to: better mental health, an

enhanced sense of well-being, greater levels of meaning in life, attachment security, self-control, comfort, satisfaction with life, and lower levels of depression and anxiety (2015, p. 565). Specific to the experience of LGBTTTQIA+ women, Hagen, Arczynski and Hawxhurst (2011) found a number of positive influences associated with spirituality, not limited to reducing internalized homonegativity, increasing confidence in responding to oppression and trauma, and meaning making (pp.225-226).

Additionally, Sherry et al. found that “many LGB people have successfully negotiated the integration of these two aspects of [sexual and spiritual] identity in a way that allows them to feel congruent and free from identity conflict” (Sherry, Adelman, Whilde & Quick, 2010, p.117). This is relevant to my thesis because it indicates the possibility not only for sexual and spiritual identity navigation, but also for what may be considered adaptive or even successful navigation of these aspects of identity. Taylor and Snowdon (2014) also identify a number of studies that point out “how queer identified members of Christian churches have developed strategies of adaptation and resistance, re-working scripts of inclusion and exclusion, “coming out” (or not) and stretching heteronormative theologies of sexuality” (p.397). My thesis will not assume that adaptation and resistance or successful navigation of one’s sexual and spiritual identities are possible or even preferable, and thus will focus primarily on the experience of the individual research participants. My own life experiences and faith naturally lead me to hope for healthy sexual and spiritual lives for all people, but I acknowledge that some folks may need to leave their Christian community for the sake of their safety, not to mention for other reasons.

Methodological Framework

Before I discuss the methodological approaches I used in this thesis, I will first describe the practical methodological processes I undertook in order to collect data through participant interviews. To begin, I received ethics approval (Appendix 1) and began recruiting participants in November 2016. I recruited first by posting a copy of my request for participants (Appendix 2) on my personal Facebook page, as hundreds of my Facebook friends are folks who attended Trinity Western University. Later, I received permission to post my request for participants in a private, confidential Facebook group.

Each of the six participants was assigned a pseudonym in chronological order based on my first contact with them, and were selected based on the criteria included in the recruitment poster (Appendix 2) and then on a first-come, first-served basis. I used the names of the planets as pseudonyms, not only because they were easy for me to remember but also because they reminded me of my first exposure to a queer character in fiction. While growing up, I watched *Sailor Moon*, a Japanese manga series, and despite the straight washing of the characters Sailor Neptune and Sailor Uranus in the English version of the cartoon, I knew that they were lovers rather than cousins (Roncero-Menendez, 2014). It thus seemed appropriate to use the names of the planets and Sailor Scouts as pseudonyms. I arranged participant interview times via email, and provided them a copy of my consent form (Appendix 3), which they read, signed and returned via email. I also reviewed the consent verbally at the start of each interview.

Interviews were conducted privately in my home office via Skype or, in one case, by phone. Participants were at home in private for the interviews, with the exception of one participant who was in her private therapy office. I recorded the interviews on my cell phone (later transferring the files to my computer) and also on my personal

computer, which is password protected. I transcribed all of the interviews on my personal computer using Microsoft Word. Once I finished transcribing an interview, I sent it to the participant for review. Each transcript was password protected. After I received the transcript back, I coded it using IPA methods using Track Changes in Word, saving a separate copy of the transcript with the codes and comments.

Autoethnography

As has already been demonstrated earlier in the introduction, this thesis involves autoethnographic work, wherein I contextualize my experience and explicate my motivation for research. Much of the work on autoethnography can be attributed to Deborah Reed-Danahay, Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner (for example: Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2002; Ellis & Flaherty, 1992; Reed-Danahay, 1997). Autoethnography is a qualitative form of research that helps provide insight into the social and cultural context, but does so in a way that gives voice—and I would argue, validation—to personal experience (Haynes, 2011; Strong et al, 2008; Wall, 2008). The principles of autoethnography conflict with positivist notions of traditional research, wherein objectivity—a notion of which feminist researchers are skeptical—is not only believed to be achieved, but also lauded as the ideal position of the researcher (Hesse-Biber, Leavy & Yaiser, 2004; Wall, 2008). Consistent with feminist principles of research, the inclusion of autoethnographic content is to acknowledge the subjectivity of the researcher, and, in turn, to validate the lived experience of both the researcher and the participant. It is, however, important to note that, despite its attempt to validate lived experiences, this thesis lacks an examination of race and racialization, which is especially because that two of the six participants in this research are people of colour. Although this thesis is

intersectional in terms of its dual consideration of sexuality and spirituality, it unfortunately did not include interview questions about racial identity, a fact that is undoubtedly shaped by my own white privilege.

In an overview of autoethnography, Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) define autoethnography as “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*). . . . Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product” (p.1). As both as a researcher and as a psychotherapist, the product and process of autoethnographic work are important in order to work toward more collaborative and non-hierarchical relationships with research participants and clients of psychotherapy. Due to the imbalance of power inherent in the psychotherapeutic relationship, disentangling oneself from that imbalance can feel like a near-insurmountable task, especially as a graduate student in Counselling and Spirituality who is unsurprisingly seeking confirmation of competence. Autoethnography, then, can allow for authenticity within research but can also model the process of collaborative work necessary in feminist psychotherapy. Setting aside, for example, the distrust in my own authority (Behar, 1996, p.21) may allow a similar increase in each participant’s belief that their experience and what they have to say is important. Strong et al (2009) offer some particularly helpful parallels between autoethnography used in the context of research and autoethnography in the process of counselling (pp. 124-126).

Autoethnographic approaches are of additional use in my research as I negotiate concern about my positionality. It is common of feminist researchers to have anxiety about how the self is represented within research (Berger, 2001; Le Gallais, 2008; Levy

2013; Wall, 2008). This is likely due, at least in part, to the criticism of inserting personal stories into what are lauded as “impersonal social facts” (Behar, 1996, p.12). As such, I am committed to presenting as authentic a self as I am ethically able when communicating with research participants. Additionally, I believe it is important to refer to the research process using feminist language: for example, when contacting research participants and conducting interviews, I frequently referred to conducting research *with* folks rather than *on* or *about* them. Such language can further contribute to the deconstruction of hierarchical structures as used in research and the academy, and can support collaborative, community-oriented work.

One of the means by which I will work toward ensuring my research participants feel at ease in the process of research is to be open about my own positionality as researcher from the outset. As Leigh Berger (2001) writes, “when researchers are open about their own personal stories, participants feel more comfortable sharing information, and the hierarchical gap between researchers and respondents formerly embraced in ethnographic work is closed” (Berger, 2001, p.507). For example, when employing autoethnographic principles during my solicitation for research participants, anytime a participant was curious about my reasons for research or my background, I made clear my positionality as a cisgender, heterosexual, Christian feminist and queer ally.

Including the spiritual experiences of individuals in the process of research can be even more challenging. Leigh Berger (2001) cites Wuthnow when speaking of spirituality, as Wuthnow indicates that “writing about spiritual experience as a social scientist is difficult because spirituality is a highly personal, often hidden side of people” (Wuthnow in Berger, 2001, p.510). Basically, if it wasn’t already hard enough to make

talking about your own life “valid” in the academy, spirituality is even more difficult for folks to take seriously as academic work. This is a further argument for my doing autoethnographic work, as I attended Trinity Western University, which I experienced as academically rigorous and which deeply informed my feminism.

My research is motivated by my continued attempt to be a greater ally to LGBTTQIA+ individuals, especially because I identify as a Christian. Ultimately, my research is motivated by both my Christian and feminist politics, and my belief that each person is equally valuable and equally loved by the divine creator of the universe. I associate closely with the sentiments of Sarah Bessey, author of *Jesus Feminist*, wherein she proclaims: “I want to stand outside here in our Canadian wilds beside the water; banging my battered old pots and pans into the wind and the cold and the heavens, hollering, ‘There is more room! There is more room! There is room for all of us!’ ” (Bessey, 2013, p.4). I am arguing for how to make space for LGBTTQIA+ individuals within the Christian community so as to not have exclusionary space.

Additionally, autoethnographic work provides space for the researcher to be influenced and perhaps even transformed by the research process itself. Berger (2001) writes further, “narrative threads inform and are informed by [her] current work. Thinking, writing, and rewriting all lead [her] to new understandings of [her] experiences” (p.507). To further complicate and challenge the traditional understanding of research that there exists a fully objective researcher, autoethnography adheres to the notion that both researcher and participant will be impacted on some level by the work that is conducted.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and Reflexivity

In addition to the critical work of autoethnography, this thesis will involve the use of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a method of research. Consistent with the values and practices of psychotherapy, IPA works toward reflexivity, and also acknowledges the ‘bias’ of the researcher. One reason why IPA is of particular use for the subject of this thesis is IPA’s strong connection to the field of psychology, and thus psychotherapy. As J. A. Smith writes, “while mainstream cognitive psychology and social cognition are committed to quantitative and experimental methodology, IPA employs indepth qualitative analysis” (2004, p.41). This is not to decrease the value of quantitative data; however, for the purposes of this thesis, qualitative methods are of much greater use.

Additionally, because of IPA’s strong commitment to thorough analysis, it can be suggested that such a methodological approach will satisfy even those scholars more adherent to quantitative methods. Specific to this thesis, an exhaustive analysis of interviews will allow for the creation of thematic case studies, which will in turn provide readers with greater insight into the complexities of navigating spiritual and sexual identity. Furthermore, Smith and Osborn point out that “IPA is especially useful when one is concerned with complexity, process or novelty” (2003, p.55). Due to the complex nature of this thesis, I will consider both spiritual and sexual identity through the frameworks of queer theory and sexuality studies, IPA seems a sound methodological approach. As Brocki and Wearden explain, “the inductive nature of IPA allows authors to discuss their analysis in the light of varied existing psychological theories, models or approaches” (2006, p.96).

According to Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2006), there are two primary aims of interpretative phenomenological analysis. First, IPA works to ‘give voice’ and tries to “understand [the] participants’ world, and to describe ‘what it is like’ ”(p.104). The second aim of IPA is to ‘make sense’, which is done by “developing a more overtly interpretative analysis, which positions the initial ‘description’ in relation to a wider social, cultural and perhaps even theoretical, context” (p.104).

This second aim of IPA is of particular importance to this thesis, as it emphasizes and acknowledges that each individual person is situated within a specific context. Rather than simply taking a participant’s words at face value, each participant is understood as influenced by a host of other factors. As Daley points out, “a critical feminist approach... positions the research process in time, place, culture, and situation and promotes the use of researchers’ reflexivity and critical reflection to recognize and respond to power structures and relations in the research process” (Daley, 2010, p.68). IPA will, thus, allow for the maintained commitment to feminist approaches to research.

Upon my contact with potential participants, I began keeping a reflective research journal in order to process my experience of the research. This research journal will first exist as a result of my IPA and autoethnographic methods, and also in order to process my experience of the research. Additionally, keeping a research journal allowed me to add to the contextualization of the research process, and to increase the safety of the researchees and researcher in the research process. Maintaining a research journal also allowed me to more easily identify common themes or experiences among the different participants, which certainly assisted me in my analysis of the transcribed interviews.

According to Nadin and Cassell (2006), “reflexivity involves reflecting on the way in which research is carried out and understanding how the process of doing research shapes its outcomes” (p.208). There are thus two primary reasons for including reflexivity in research: first, to add to the contextualization of the research process; second, to increase the safety of the participants and researcher in the research process. Haynes (2011) notes the “ethical dilemma” of the researcher revealing (and thus making vulnerable) her or himself through autoethnographic writing (p.137). Many researchers, myself included, believe that autoethnographic content can more effectively engage the reader while maintaining a commitment to thorough and thoughtful research; however, revealing intimate details about oneself can certainly be categorized as a risk for the researcher.

Increasing the safety of the researcher, though often neglected, is deemed to be of particular importance to this author in light of her study of psychotherapy and the significant need for self-care. Nadin and Cassell (2006) refer to a particular study wherein Nadin implemented a reflexive journal, which provides a helpful sample of questions upon which the researcher would greatly benefit from employing: “Typically this included comments on: how well I felt the interview had gone and what I felt throughout the interview; what the dominant themes were; what the employer’s management style was like; any anomalies or contradictions, along with ideas about the methodological and theoretical implications these may have” (Nadin & Cassell, 2006, p.211). Nadin’s identification and reflection upon her own feelings provide space for her exist within the research, and acknowledge her own subjectivity while also ensuring her experience is both valid and significant.

Moreover, a research journal can increase the safety of participants, insofar as it ensures the researcher is aware of her positioning and how such a position may influence the experience of participants. For example, because I self-identify as cisgender and heterosexual, maintaining a research diary will allow for appropriate reflexivity about where privilege exists in light of participants self-identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer. As Daley writes, “reflexivity and critical reflection constitute an interrogation of the practices that construct knowledge, including the role of the researcher’s own subjectivities, such as gender, race, and sexuality among other social identities and locations” (2010, p.69).

Reflexivity, as Nadin and Cassell point out, “enables both in-depth thinking about the methods we use and the epistemological commitments that underlie them” (2006, p.209). Thus, not only will reflexivity allow for thoughtful analysis of the content of interviews, but also the messages that underlie that content.

Outline of Thesis

In this introduction, I have provided my research questions, objectives, and methodological approaches to research. Additionally, I’ve provided a brief history and contextualization of the experience of being a student at Trinity western University, and the subsequent reasons why LGBTTQIA+ individuals at TWU need to be heard and supported, especially in the present university climate. In Chapter 1, I’ll outline the theoretical frameworks for this paper, which will include literature reviews of Queer Theory, Queer Theology, and Sexuality Studies. In Chapters 2 and 3, I’ll provide thematic case studies constructed from the qualitative interviews I conducted with

women or gender non-binary folks who have attended or currently attend Trinity Western University that also identify as queer in some way. To conclude, I'll provide a chapter with recommendations for mental health practitioners—especially for those identifying as Christians who wish to support LGBTTTQIA+ clients—and also including a possible training presentation.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

This thesis is both interdisciplinary and intersectional in nature, drawing from queer theory, queer theology, and sexuality/LGBT/queer studies. It is important to note, however, that the intersectional nature of this thesis is distinctly limited by my white privilege, and my inability to unpack my invisible knapsack (McIntosh, 1989) sufficiently to acknowledge the intersections of racial identity with queerness or spirituality. For example, my interview questions did not include any questions that addressed racial identity, which resulted in a distinct loss of fruitful and important conversation around the non-white identities of two of my participants.

This thesis specifically contributes to the practice of counselling and psychotherapy that can be labeled an “affirmative approach,” which both affirms a client’s sexual orientation, and also supports and empathizes with other components of the client’s identity, such as religion (Ginicola & Smith, 2011, p.308). Helpfully, an affirmative approach can fit well within or alongside a variety of psychotherapeutic approaches; for example, one study demonstrates an “adaptation approach” which integrates the affirmative approach with cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) approaches (Austin & Craig, 2015). This thesis will be of use to all psychotherapists who work with LBTTQIA+ clients, especially if those psychotherapists or clients have a connection to or interest in religion or spirituality; even more so if the psychotherapist in question identifies as a Christian and their client identifies as LBTTQIA+ (as discussed in the introduction). An affirmative approach to psychotherapy will be addressed in the final chapter of this thesis, referring and also adding to recommendations for counselling and psychotherapy practitioners from Bowland, Foster and Vosler (2013); Bozard and

Sanders (2011); Ginicola and Smith (2011); Hagen, Arczynski, Morrow and Hawxhurst (2011); Marshall (2010); and Super and Jacobson (2011).

Queer Theory

The primary theoretical approaches this thesis employs are sexuality studies, queer theology and queer theory. Specifically, this thesis will engage with Judith Butler's notion of performative identity, especially in light of the ongoing performance Trinity Western students and alumni are a part of—unbeknownst to them or not. Additionally, as previously mentioned in the introduction, this thesis is committed to an intersectional approach to research, and thus will further engage with Jasbir Puar's notions of the queer subject and exceptionalism, as well as the possible connections to religion. Moreover, this thesis will employ José Esteban Muñoz's concept of disidentification, which allows for space between when considering which actions marginalized folks should or can take when experiencing marginalization. Each of these theorists, in addition to bringing their own particular nuances to the study of queerness, helps to carve out a space for examining the intersectional location and identity experienced by LGBTTTQIA+ folks associated with TWU.

Queer theory is appropriate for this thesis because it possesses a “radical focus on difference and on subverting the ‘normative’”; additionally, queer theory comes with the responsibility of questioning “the social power accorded to members of dominant groups” (Wilcox, 2006, p.93). Butler's notions of performativity and subjectification are of particular relevance to this thesis, as they both link to the ways that identity is understood. Certainly, considering the sexual orientation of folks associated with Trinity

Western University (TWU) will tie into conversations around non-normative identities. Butler's notion of performativity prioritizes gender not as that which can be considered stable; but rather as "an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts* (emphasis in text; Butler, 1990, p.8). Butler demonstrates that if what we do with our bodies is performative, "then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measure; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as regulatory fiction" (Butler, 1990, p.9). Examining the interviews of LGBTTQIA+ individuals through a queer theoretical lens that acknowledges sexual identity as a performance will be particularly helpful, especially in light of my consideration that LGBTTQIA+ individuals may need to perform differently depending on their location within a community, especially if they are an unwelcome member of that community. More specifically, one can discover through Butler's work that the actions of an individual *create* identity rather than simply just *representing* it. As Abes and Kasch write, "an individual's gender and sexuality do not exist before she or he performs them; they are not predetermined by physiological sex or attraction to a specific gender. Instead, the individual learns how to perform gender and sexual identity and socially constructs them into being through her or his behavior" (2007, p.621). It is difficult to know the degree to which LGBTTQIA+ folks who attend or attended TWU perform their respective sexual and/or gender identities, especially knowing the impressive influence of the cultural context of Trinity Western university, which is closely associated with evangelical Christianity, a distinct 'culture' in and of itself (Noble, 2014; Goldstein, 2016). Many of the participants in my research were also raised

in a Christian environment, thus their performance of gender would certainly be, as Butler describes, “culturally enmired” (1990, p. 143). As Butler suggests, these sorts of circumstances forces the subject—in this case, the queer and Christian TWU student—to negotiate constrictions, “even when those constrictions are the very predicates of its own identity” (1990, p. 143).

Butler’s work is additionally important to this thesis in light of the implications it has for the field of psychotherapy, and more specifically in the ways in which it affects folks like myself who are in the process of training to become psychotherapists (or other mental health professionals). Frequently, I have struggled in the quest to gain a thorough and ‘complete’ conceptualization of the clients with whom I work. Undoubtedly, there is a history of research emphasizing the individual being researched as a fully knowable object despite this being an impossible project. Bessel van der Kolk, in describing the early days of his psychiatry rotation, expresses a similar sentiment, thus validating my own struggle in the early days of my psychotherapy career:

I was struck by the contrast between the incredible complexity of the mind and the ways that we human beings are connected and attached to one another, and how little psychiatrists knew about the origins of the problems they were treating. Would it be possible one day to know as much about brains, minds, and love as we do about the other systems that make up our organism? (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 2).

van der Kolk, who is nothing short of a trauma expert, was aware of the complexity of human experience early on in his career, which provides some solace for folks like myself inclined towards clarity and having all the answers. As the back cover of Helen Humphrey’s 2015 book *The River* artfully elucidates, “How can we know anyone or anything?”. Warner (2004) helpfully suggests, however, a “queer-informed way of working in researching sexualities which includes a reflexive engagement with the way in

which we construct the ‘objects’ which we are investigating and the utilisation of approaches which develop a body of knowledge, on how categories of identity come to be produced and how they are lived in/through every day” (Warner in Nic Giolla Easpaig et al., 2013, p.119). Thus, by researching the sexual and spiritual identity navigation of LGBTTQIA+ individuals with the knowledge of Butler’s notion of objectification, it is my intention to minimize the ways in which LGBTTQIA+ individuals are further objectified or we as psychotherapists attempt to make them into fully knowable research objects.

In addition to Butler’s notions of gender as performance and subjectivity, my thesis will also consider the dialogue regarding Christian (religious) identity and queerness that exists in light of Jasbir Puar’s *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007). Puar writes that, traditionally, the queer subject and the religious subject are nothing but separate. However, in a photograph included in Puar’s text—of a person in traditional Muslim clothing holding a sign that reads, “I am a homo-sexual also”—she shows that queer and religious identity are conflated: “resolutely secular, unforgiving in its understanding of (irrational, illogical, senseless) religion, faith or spirituality as the downfall of politics. The queer agenital subject can only ever be fathomed outside the norming constrictions of religion, conflating agency and resistance” (Puar, 2007, p.13). In a special issue of *Culture and Religion* (2014), Melissa Wilcox and a number of other scholars consider the possible offerings Puar’s text may have for religious and queer studies, and the ways in which Puar’s perspective on religious identity can be challenged, since she writes that, “in the liberal-secular imaginary, religion is also *always already* pathological” (emphasis text: Puar, 2007, p.55). Thus, for

the purpose of my research, it is important to engage with Puar's text, in the attempt to have space for the possibility of non-pathological religion.

It is additionally important to consider the responsibility that scholars of religion have to pay attention to "multiple antagonisms" (Brintnall, 2013, p.54). Furthermore, Brintnall points out that, "sexuality can never meaningfully be separated from other facets of identity and the cultural discourses that give them meaning, [and thus that] this body of scholarship demands a broader interrogation of identity formation" (Brintnall, 2013, p.54). A particularly unique contribution Puar's work (and the resulting dialogue) is Melissa Wilcox's suggestion that perhaps Puar's concept of exceptionalism has roots in Protestant Christianity: "Queer liberal secularity may, in fact, be a kind of queer, liberal, cultural Protestantism that has developed into a suspicion of organised religion along with a neo-colonial embrace of all things deemed 'spiritual' " (Wilcox, 2014, p.156). Maia Kotrosits also offers some affinities between Puar's ideas regarding transgressive queerness and contemporary Christianity (2014). Furthermore, Puar's response acknowledges *Terrorist Assemblages* lack of engagement with religious studies, despite the sincere potential for that engagement (Puar, 2014, p.200). Additionally, Kotrosits' framing of Christian identity as an intersectional axis is of use to my research.

Ties can be drawn between *Gender Trouble* and José Esteban Muñoz's *Disidentifications*, especially as they each acknowledge the work of the resistance. In Butler's conclusion to *Gender Trouble* (1990), she writes

The critical task is ... to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constrictions to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them. (1990, p. 147)

Butler, in many ways, writes of a process of reclaiming performative identity, and using its repetitive nature to challenge gendered norms. Similarly, Muñoz describes the process of disidentification, which involves more than existing solely for or against, on one side or the other, but also active resistance against the dominant ideology (Muñoz, 1999, p.11). Moreover, this strategy seeks to make lasting ideological changes from within the system in which those ideological changes are required (Muñoz, 1999, p.12).

Importantly, Muñoz's disidentification "values the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance" (1999, p.12). Muñoz also speaks of disidentification as a means by which folks can 'read' themselves and the stories of their lives, acknowledging the "politically dubious or shameful" aspects and working to give the disidentifying subject new life (p.12). Specific to the experience of LGBTTTQIA+ folks who are associated with TWU, employing the strategy of disidentification may offer a 'compromise' of sorts when considering fleeing the community or aggressively standing up against it. A particular avenue of thought Muñoz provides that is impactful for TWU queers is acknowledging the possibility of disidentification as a "survival tactic" for minorities (Muñoz, 1999, p. 5) in hostile locations, of which TWU is arguably one for LGBTTTQIA+ folks.

Beyond Muñoz's obvious offerings toward the experience of LGBTTTQIA+ folks in general, Claudia Schippert identifies some important locations wherein Muñoz is able to influence religious studies: "Paying careful attention to queer practices and rituals from the perspective of religious studies can point those studying religion and gender in important directions of rethinking identity, agency, and resistance" (Schippert, 2011, p.72). Schippert describes Melissa Wilcox's consideration of the Sisters of Perpetual

Indulgence, an Order of queer nuns who devote themselves “to community service, ministry and outreach to those on the edges” (The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, n.d.). The Sisters as a group, granted, aren’t a religious organization, but according to Wilcox, they nonetheless “offer a rich site to rethink existing categories of ‘religious’, ‘spiritual’, and ‘secular’” (Schipper, 2011, p. 72). As such, although Trinity Western University is a Christian institution, it is also an academic institution and thus merits reconsideration of what its primary goals are, and if there are ways in which TWU challenges what it means to be religious or spiritual. In the following section of this chapter, I’ll examine queer theology as a way in which to problematize the traditional theological understandings, and thus a possible means by which to make space for LGBTTTQIA+ Christians in the context of Trinity Western.

Queer Theology

Queer theology serves as one of the primary theoretical lenses through which to examine the experiences of LGBTTTQIA+ individuals involved in Christian communities such as Trinity Western University. Although theology is certainly different from theory, queer theology is deeply influenced by queer theory and thus provides a helpful intersection between sexual and spiritual concerns. Although my thesis examines the experiences of LGBTTTQIA+ individuals within the context of an evangelical Christian university, it does not make the consideration of queer theology inapplicable. Rather, queer theology helpfully problematizes the traditional notions of theology. As Melissa Wilcox (2006) points out, the overall “goal of LGBT-focused theological and sacred text studies has been to reclaim or create religious traditions for lesbians, gay men, and (only more recently) bisexuals and transgender people” (p.78). Applying queer theology to my

research is of relevance because of its potential for reclaiming space for LGBTTTQIA+ individuals who historically and presently feel as if they do not have space at TWU. Moreover, queer theology can serve as the intersectional axis where TWU's queer students and alumni are treated with respect for their commitment to sound theological study while also acknowledging and making space for their non-heterosexual identities.

Marcella Althaus-Reid, one of the pioneers of queer theology (Goss, 2003; Schippert, 2011), defines queer theology as “the result of a broad alliance of methods and historical praxis of liberation which come from people outside hetero-patriarchy” (Althaus-Reid, 2001, p.57). Additionally, she presents queer theology as, “an example of high theological doubting or queering, irreverent in the sense that it tends to desacralize what has been made sacred for the sake of ideological interests” (Althaus-Reid, 2001, p.58). One of Althaus-Reid's major theoretical contributions to queer theology is the making ‘queer’ of what is commonly or traditionally understood about Christianity and Jesus Christ: “Basically, what we need to ask is what makes ‘queer’, queer. And one of the answers is that things are queer when powerful clashes occur in expected gender and sexual codes of behaviour, such as the ones expected from Christ” (Althaus-Reid, 2001, p.59). Conducting a project about students at TWU is strongly tied to Christ-like expectations. Althaus-Reid's work challenges not only what following Jesus means but also asks the question how queer is the means by which you are following? This is an important consideration, especially knowing TWU's emphasis on being a ‘servant leader’ and following Jesus (Trinity Western University, 2000). Queer theology, then, is not just a theology for individuals who identify as queer; queer theology can serve the additional purpose of complicating the typically anticipated beliefs or behaviours regarding an

understanding of divinity.

Althaus-Reid offers a revolutionary perspective for theology, which has historically provided for and been steered by white, cisgender, heterosexual males (Robinson, 2010; Sharma, 2008). Althaus-Reid has also been perceived as controversial and with contention by other theologians (Cornwall, 2011, p.193). What Susannah Cornwall, another prominent queer theologian, mostly importantly points out of Althaus-Reid's work is that Althaus-Reid acknowledges that LGBTTTQIA+ individuals being freed from the metaphorical bonds of traditional theology does not necessitate complete abandonment of spirituality. Cornwall writes of this idea, saying, "indeed, a queer theologian who continues to identify as Christian is likely to present *more* of a challenge to the Church – and, conceivably, to make the Church more uncomfortable – than one who comes to identify as a complete outsider and perhaps can be more easily dismissed as a heretic or backslider, because they no longer stand in an obvious ongoing relationship with other Christians and the tradition" (emphasis text; Cornwall, 2011, p.194).

Cornwall's work, much of which helpfully focuses on the greater inclusion of intersex individuals in the study of religion and theology (Cornwall 2008; 2010; 2014; 2015b; 2015c), is relevant to the experience of queer folks at Trinity Western University. Drawing on the legacy of Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick, Cornwall goes further regarding the notion of paranoia as it relates to queer theology: "Whilst it has been important and necessary for queer theologies to do the work of 'paranoid' separatism and providing safe spaces such as explicitly LGBT congregations, continual resistance and criticism can be so exhausting as to be unsustainable" (Cornwall, 2015a, p.21). The

emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983, p.7) required of TWU queers to continually push back against an academic institution—in addition to surviving the general stresses of university life—would be challenging to say the very least. Hochschild defines emotional labour as, “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labor is sold for a wage and therefore has *exchange value*” (emphasis text; 1983, p.7). Where Cornwall’s perspective becomes particularly relevant to the TWU community is wherein she describes the potential and perhaps even tendency of queer folks regarding Christian community: “Some queer Christians have pre-empted their own oppression and outsiderhood, assuming because of past showing that they are unlikely to be welcomed and embraced in mainstream churches” (Cornwall, 2015a, p.21). Although the evidence I’ve gathered through interviews and by reading the stories of other LGBTTTQIA+ folks from TWU lends itself to the notion that TWU queers are unwelcome at TWU, some exceptions – like that of Bryan Sandberg (Sandberg, 2014; Harris, 2014) – leave me wondering how much preempting has actually occurred.

Cornwall also writes of the many reasons why queer Christians continue to engage with the communities that have historically enacted violence or hurt upon them: “This is part of what is going on when queer Christians continue to seek what is good and life-affirming in the Christian tradition; when people appeal to the positive and generative power of liturgical practice, of catholicity, of belonging to one Church, despite the real hurts and exclusions they have experienced (and may continue to experience) in that Church and elsewhere” (Cornwall, 2015a, p.22). Despite experiencing spiritual abuse (Ward, 2011) in my Christian church during my late teens, I was nonetheless drawn to and optimistic toward the Christian church as a whole. Although some folks would be

quick to ascribe this to further entrapment in the patterns of abuse, I was willing to risk being hurt again by the church in order to attempt to reconcile my relationship with the church. As someone who now studies and works in the field of psychotherapy, Cornwall's statements about human experience ring true: "After all, as humans we hold onto damaging relationships and emotional baggage not only or always because we are *afraid* to try out life without them, but also because we are irresistibly drawn to redemption and hope" (Cornwall, 2015a, p.26). When sometimes the response of the queer community has been to flee when faced with challenges and exclusion from religious communities, queer theology offers an amazing location for hope to grow. Importantly, Andrew K. T. Yip's early examination of the experience of lesbian, gay and bisexual Christians points out the real possibility of non-heterosexual Christians 'sticking it out'. Yip writes that, "While it is undeniable that a lot of self-identified gay, lesbian, and bisexual Christians do distance themselves from churches because of their sexualities, many remain in this potentially stigmatizing environment and persist in their spiritual journey, which seems to be at odds with what the religious authority structures prescribe" (Yip, 2002, p. 201).

Returning to the work of Susannah Cornwall, and acknowledging the risk of reducing Cornwall's insights to such a statement as the benefits outweigh the detriments, it is clear that, in many ways, many queer Christians are unwilling to yet give up on their communities. These precise words were shared by one of my interview participants:

Mercury: I think especially LGBT Christians, you know, the Christians, there's no place for them in Christianity but there's no place for them in the secular world either. ... and I'm sitting here trying to take the best of both worlds. I'm not ready to give up on Trinity yet, you know?

Despite the fact that, earlier in the interview, this participant shared much of their

frustration with and pain from being a student at Trinity Western University, they nonetheless maintain a level of commitment to the community, and transforming that community to be something better. Much of what Cornwall addresses in her 2015 publication, “ ‘Something there is that doesn’t love a wall’: Queer theologies and reparative readings” are the ways in which queer folks end up doing themselves a disservice if they focus primarily on the wrongs of the past without considering the possibility of hopeful change for the future. Subsequently, she asks: “How may queer Christians engage with the past, with their history of exclusion from mainstream Christianity, without being destroyed by it – without either internalizing the oppression, or identifying so solely as rejected that they thereby repeat and reinforce their own abjection?” (Cornwall, 2015a, p.22). This is certainly a question that bears asking of those folks connected to TWU, and is further confirms why queer theology is both an informative theoretical approach to use for this thesis.

One particularly illustrative example that Cornwall provides is that of the Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC). It should be noted that, despite being founded in 1968, there is a relatively little academic research about MCC as a church and organization (Kane, 2013, p.138). MCC was founded on the basis of being a church for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer individuals, and is one of the largest and oldest organizations for gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Metropolitan Community Churches, 2013). That said, Susannah Cornwall shows that MCC “is an example of a community of queer Christians working out how to be faithful to their ‘dead’ (those shared theological forebears whose positions have come to inform both the mainstream Christian tradition and the proactively queer-oriented

churches which still in some sense stand slightly apart from it) whilst still holding them accountable for their positions” (Cornwall, 2015a, p.31). Thus, if there were any worries that Cornwall was suggesting tolerating exclusion and hurt for the sake of the ‘greater good’, they are unfounded: Cornwall demonstrates the knowledge that humans are fundamentally likely to hurt each other, and that we must also take steps to acknowledge the need for change in behaviour and ideology.

Sexuality/LGBT/Queer Studies

In addition to using queer theory and queer theology as theoretical frameworks, this thesis utilizes ideas from sexuality studies. It is worth noting that, in the history of sexuality studies, the 1970s and 1980s heralded a closer focus on sexual diversity, and involved a “re-focus [of] research attention on the symbolic dimensions of sexual experience and on the inter-subjective cultural forms that shape and structure the experience of sexual life in different social settings (Parker 1991 in Parker, 2009, p.254). More than thirty years later, sexual diversity is unsurprisingly a prominent research subject in sexuality studies, and—as I’ve discovered through my own research process—also in the study of counselling and psychotherapy.

My own confusion in sorting out the difference between queer theory and queer studies highlights the importance of distinguishing between the two. As the Wikipedia entry for Queer Studies reads, “Not to be confused with Queer Theory” (too late). First, it is useful to consider the “chronological continuity” Melissa Wilcox sets forth between gay studies, lesbian/gay studies, lesbian/gay/bisexual studies, and LGBT studies (2012, p.76). This continuity displays an increasing intent to be sensitive toward sexual and

gender diversity (Wilcox, 2012, p.76). Furthermore, Lovaas, Elia and Yep (2006) suggest that LGBT studies “emphasize the stability of gay and lesbian identities” while queer theory’s primary aim is to “continuously destabilize and deconstruct the notion of fixed sexual and gender identities” (2006, p.6). Thus, although a thorough examination of LGBTTTQIA+ identity is significant to this thesis, the inherent instability of queerness is of equal importance, lest we believe that we can fully know the LGBTTTQIA+ subject and end up essentializing queer identity.

In order to have a firm grounding in the history of sexuality studies, it is important to consider Gayle Rubin’s foundational work, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality” (originally published 1984; cited here from 2011). Rubin writes of the prominent Western ideology that relegates sexuality to negative connotations only, which is particularly informed by the history of the Christian, Protestant church: “Western cultures generally consider sex to be a dangerous, destructive, negative force. Most Christian tradition, following Paul, holds that sex is inherently sinful. It may be redeemed if performed within marriage for procreative purposes and if the pleasurable aspects are not enjoyed too much. ... Such notions by now have acquired a life of their own and no longer depend solely on religion for their perseverance” (Rubin, 2011, p. 148). Rubin, referring to the Biblical letters written by the apostle Paul to various churches, points out the prevalent influence of Christianity upon the modern Western world. Specifically, the letters written by the apostle Paul suggest that woman should not only not teach in the church, but also that women should be silent in the church: “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet” (1 Timothy 2:11,

New International Version). Thankfully, a number of scholars—including evangelical feminists Sarah Bessey and Rachel Held Evans—suggest other interpretations (Bessey, 2013; Custis James, 2011; Held Evans, 2012).

One of ideas Rubin writes of that is, unfortunately relevant even more than twenty five years later is that churches put pressure on marginalized communities to get out and go where they can't be seen: "Once in the cities, erotic populations tend to nucleate and to occupy some regular, visible territory. Churches and other anti-vice forces constantly put pressure on local authorities to contain such areas, reduce their visibility, or drive their inhabitants out of town" (Rubin, 2011, p. 167). This is what many LGBTTQIA+ alumni of TWU have experienced: the fear of expulsion from the university was so strong that they removed themselves from the community before such a dramatic upheaval could occur. Although none of the individuals I interviewed for the purpose of my research were expelled (or threatened with expulsion) from TWU, Ashlee Davidson's experience may serve as an example as to what happens when a Christian decides that members of such an "erotic population" (Rubin, 2011, p.167) need to be less visible. (Lindsay, 2016). Davidson also wasn't expelled; she did, however, lose her scholarship, was on "behavioural probation", and was temporarily barred from playing on the TWU soccer that she had helped bring so much success (Lindsey, 2016).

Stephen Seely's analysis of the parallels between religion and queerness in the public sphere are interesting and informative when considering how to discuss and navigate the experience of current and past LGBTTQIA+ students attending TWU (Seely, 2013). Seely suggests an alliance of sorts between queer and religious politics (2013, p.231): "performances of both religion and queerness have the power to disrupt

the everyday functions of the public sphere, functions that work to exclude or marginalize such subjects” (p.231). Seely identifies that the Christian features of confession and conversion can be likened to the queer features of ‘coming out of the closet’, and that the feeling of not having access to that which you so desperately want access to can serve as a unifying location for LGBTTQIA+ and religious individuals. Although many students attending TWU identify as Christians (and thus many LGBTTQIA+ students attending TWU are likely to also identify as such), Seely’s research is nonetheless helpful: Perhaps it can assist in building bridges between LGBTTQIA+ communities and Christian communities (like TWU).

Richard Parker, a medial anthropologist based out of Columbia University whose research focuses on the social and cultural construction of gender and sexuality (Columbia University, n.d.), refers prominently to a number of concepts that are of great importance to this thesis. First of all, Parker’s 2009 publication notes the importance of context when considering sexuality: “understanding individual behavior is less important than understanding the *context of sexual interactions* [emphasis text]—interactions which are necessarily social and which involve complex negotiations between different individuals” (Parker, 2009, p.255). Although my own research will heavily consider individual sexual (and spiritual) experiences, the context in which those experiences occur is tantamount to understanding how the individual LGBTTQIA+ individual has constructed their identity. Thus, the context of queer sexual interactions at TWU is very important, especially since these interactions ‘don’t exist’, and/or aren’t even allowed. One of my research participants spoke at length regarding their abusive relationship with a former partner, and the lack of support they felt as a result of needing to hide their non-

heterosexual relationship while attending Trinity Western:

Neptune: ...then on the other side of it, my very private, internal life and my relationship with my ex-girlfriend and all of that was really isolating ... and it was, um... yeah really difficult to go through at the same time and to be alone and not having anybody that I could talk to was, yeah, really isolating.

Although it is certainly possible that Neptune would have lacked support regardless of the location—as is common for folks experiencing intimate partner violence (Graham-Bermann & Miller, 2013; Levendosky, Lannert & Yalch, 2012; Lord, 2008; Olson, 2004)—the fact that they attended TWU only exacerbated their isolation and lack of a strong support network. Furthermore, Drumm et al.'s 2006 study merits consideration, as it focuses specifically on the presence of intimate partner violence with the context of a conservative Christian church denomination. Parallels can certainly be drawn between the evangelical (and thus conservative) Christian environment of Trinity Western. Their study, which had over 1,400 responses from individuals attending Seventh Day Adventists churches, found that 65% of respondents experienced “controlling and demeaning behavior” (Drumm et al, 2006, p.233).

Richard Parker also borrows from Weeks and Holland (1996), emphasizing the importance of the organization of distinct sexual communities. Although Parker's research does not specifically refer to spiritual communities (i.e., Trinity Western University), the characteristics of a distinct sexual community can be aptly applied to the spiritual spaces occupied by LGBTTQIA+ individuals. Questions regarding “who one is permitted to have sex with, in what ways, under what circumstances and with what specific outcomes” (Parker, 2009, p.258) are of particular importance to my thesis, in light of the diverse and often constricting ways in which the Christian faith and Christian communities like TWU frame sexuality (Cadge & Wildeman, 2008; Dennis, 2003;

Dewey, Schlosser, Kinney & Burkard, 2014; Kapinus, Kraus & Flowers, 2010; and Olson, Cadge & Harrison, 2006). Moreover, the aforementioned sexual ‘scripts’ or confines aren’t developed in a random way; they are “defined through the implicit and explicit rules and regulations imposed by the sexual cultures of specific communities” (Parker, 2009, p.258). Although I experienced TWU’s culture as a heterosexual woman, the sexual culture of TWU was something I nonetheless felt strongly imposed upon me. I recall our all-female residence building having an annual Q&A with the campus nurse, who—radically!—suggested that if sexual activity was rated on a scale of one to ten (and ten referring to heterosexual, penis-penetrates-vagina intercourse), there was space in a premarital relationship for everything from one to nine on the scale. As I’m sure is clear, this being the ‘radical’ version of sex education that university students were receiving at TWU was wildly problematic. Perhaps more than ten years later, things have changed, although TWU’s lack of a comprehensive sexual assault policy leads me to believe otherwise (Tuffin, 2017).

Laura Carpenter’s research regarding first sexual experiences and the conceptualization of virginity is also of particular importance to this thesis, especially in light of conducting interviews with LGBTTQIA+ individuals who have attended or currently attend TWU. We know from research that it is common for folks associated with a Christian community to have conservative views on sexuality, and that those views may often be sex-negative ones (Bessey, 2013; Cruz, 2015; Dent & Maloney, 2017; Green, 2015). It should be noted that when I conducted qualitative interviews, I explored their relationships and their respective sexual experiences (please see Appendix 4 – Interview Guide). One of the facets of Carpenter’s research that is central to my research

is her understanding of the centrality of sexuality as part of one's identity: "In the contemporary West, sexuality constitutes a central feature of identity; individuals are to a great degree defined by themselves and others, both socially and morally, in terms of their sexuality" (Carpenter, 2001, p.128). For the purpose of this thesis, Carpenter also makes a helpful distinction between the social and personal spheres of identity: the former referring to that which is attributed by or applied to others; the latter referring to the meanings that people claim for themselves (2001, p.128). I acknowledge here that Carpenter's centering of sexual identity may be problematic for folks who find themselves on the asexual end of the spectrum. This is one of the major limitations of this thesis, and of the literature in general; although the literature regarding asexuality has developed in the last decade (Bogaert, 2015; Cerankowski & Milks, 2010; Chasin, 2013; Chasin, 2015; Van Houdenhove et al., 2014), there is virtually no academic research regarding the intersections of asexuality and religion, let alone asexuality and Christianity. I was able to find a handful of resources from blog posts (Anderson, 2014; Aydan, 2014; Delavan, n.d.; Harris, 2015). This is particularly important to consider, since celibacy is an important component in the history of Christianity, and is still a valid option for many queer Christians (A Queer Calling, 2014; Hill, 2016; Tushnet, 2016).

At the time of Carpenter's study in the late 1990s and early 2000s, "anecdotal evidence suggest[ed] that young lesbians and gay men [had] recently begun to reframe virginity loss as including sex between same-sex partners, rather than deeming virginity loss as irrelevant to their own experiences as was common in the past" (2001, p.129). The most significant point that Carpenter's study identified for the purpose of my research was acknowledging the ways in which traditional notions of first sexual experiences

exclude and silence LGBTTTQIA+ individuals. Carpenter writes that, “the traditional equation of virginity loss with first coitus effectively denies nonvirgin identity and sexual adulthood to people who do not wish to engaged in vaginal intercourse. Conversely, defining virginity loss as possible through oral or anal sex with same-sex partners extends the status passage of virginity loss to gay, bisexual, and heterosexual people alike” (Carpenter, 2001, p.136). The broader framework for and purpose of this thesis is to work towards greater support for and care of LGBTTTQIA+ individuals who wish to participate in Christian communities. Because I believe that both sexuality and spirituality are important aspects of human identity, understanding the initial and thus perhaps primary sexual experiences of LGBTTTQIA+ individuals will be of great benefit.

Chapter 2: Seeking Support, Being Seen and Heard

LGBTQIA+ students attending Trinity Western University (TWU) are living in and interacting with a community that is, in many ways, a microcosm of the broader evangelical Christian church, especially knowing the diversity in evangelicalism and the challenge in quantifying it (Lee, 2015, p.10). This said, although evangelical Christianity is not as monolithic as some people would believe, some folks may find it easy to make assumptions about evangelical Christians, since 81% of white, born-again/evangelical Christians voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 American presidential election (Smith & Martinez, 2016). True (or perceived) diversity or not, queer TWU Christians are, as Judith Butler writes, enmeshed (1990, p. 143) in a particular culture at TWU, and that they thus are bound into performing their identities in the ways dictated by that culture.

Subsequently, this chapter examines excerpts from the interviews conducted with the six participants in this study, and considers these individuals' felt sense of being heard, having space and getting support within the Christian community at an evangelical Christian university, Trinity Western. Reflecting on these individuals' experiences and feelings at TWU will further illuminate how their identities—specifically around sexual orientation—are performed and to what extent. One of the primary objectives of this thesis is to understand how to ultimately better support LGBTQIA+ individuals in the context of Christian Trinity Western University (TWU), regardless of where they are at in their respective spiritual journeys. As such, it is important to consider how LGBTQIA+ individuals at Trinity Western perceive their recent or current experience within the context of the TWU community in order to better inform strategies of inclusion.

Moreover, this chapter will consider the impact of groups that support the intersections of

queerness and Christian spirituality, especially as those groups serve as disidentifying locations.

As discussed in the introduction of this thesis, all TWU students, staff and faculty are required to sign and adhere to a community covenant, which precludes same-sex relationships (Trinity Western University, n.d. a). As such, TWU's community covenant leads folks to assume there is one perspective on homosexual relationships: "According to the Bible, sexual intimacy is reserved for marriage between one man and one woman" (Trinity Western University, n. d. a). In reality, perspectives on what the Bible says (or doesn't say) about homosexuality are diverse (McAuliffe, 2015; Cadge et al., 2012). Some queer folks come to the conclusion that they are called to a life of celibacy; others feel free to pursue same-sex partnerships (for example, Rachel Held Evans, 2011; 2014). It should be noted that Christian considerations of homosexuality are often defined as "side A" or "side B"; respectively, these sides refer to either the belief that God blesses same-sex marriages, or that the belief that God calls gay Christians to celibacy (The Gay Christian Network, n.d.). This is where queer theology can be particularly informative for this project: It not only engages with scripture in a sometimes wildly different way than traditional communities, but also subsequently makes space for folks like queer Christians at TWU. For example, Patrick S. Cheng points out that, during the time of Jesus' ministry, he "constantly dissolved the religious and social boundaries of his time...[he] dissolved the 'holy' boundaries of clean and unclean, holy and profane, and saint and sinner" (Cheng, 2011 March 29). If one of TWU's primary objectives is to develop godly Christian leaders, or "[p]eople of high competence and exemplary character who distinguish themselves as leaders in the marketplaces of life" (Trinity

Western University, n.d. a)—perhaps the leader TWU queers should follow is the Jesus that Patrick Cheng (and other queer theologians) describes. Interestingly, the above objective is one that I’m citing from TWU’s website and also remember from my days as a student, as it was emblazoned on banners hanging around campus, and we were required to memorize it during our student leadership orientation week. There are likely folks who find Patrick Cheng’s suggestions about Jesus off base, but having a personal relationship with God is a goal that most evangelical Christians pursue and highly prioritize (Lee, 2015, p.11), and thus queer theology and its “self-disclosing, autobiographical” ways (Althaus-Reid, 2003, p.8) merit strong consideration. Thus, queer theology provides space for making one’s Christianity a truly personal relationship, even if one identifies as queer.

Having already employed one of my methodological approaches in this chapter, it bears reminding that autoethnographic approaches to research will support more collaboration with and less hierarchy over research participants (Berger, 2001). I will also provide examples from my own experience as a student at TWU to either contrast or support the experiences of my research participants. Additionally, before beginning to examine and learn from the words of my participants, it is worth recalling in brief in the tactics of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) When coding and analyzing my interviews using IPA, which is more thoroughly explored in the introduction of this thesis, having space within the context of TWU came up, in one way or another, quite frequently, despite my interview questions never specifically asking a question that would prompt a discussion of space. IPA requires thorough, thoughtful, and repeated analysis of the interview transcript with the intention of both preserving the integrity of

the participant's words while also delving deeply into the greater meaning of what the participant has said (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006).

The historical experience of non-heterosexual individuals has been far from positive, which is particularly informed by the fact that homosexuality was categorized as a mental disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychological Disorders (DSM) up until 1973 (Howsepian, 2004; Sedgwick, 1991; Walker, 2013). The negative experiences of non-heterosexual individuals are, unfortunately, especially prevalent within the context of Christian community, because non-heterosexual Christians experience internalized guilt and shame due to the common and yet not universal conflict between Christian theology and their sexual identity (Yip, 1997; Bowland, Foster & Vosler, 2013). Because this thesis considers the experience of LGBTTQIA+ folks while they were attending Trinity Western University, and thus it is reasonable to assume the age at which each participant began at TWU was not long after they ended their adolescence, it is worth considering the school-context experiences of young adults and adolescents. Research indicates that sexual minority youth (SMY):

Are significantly more likely than their heterosexual peers to have missed school because of fear, to have been threatened with a weapon at school, to have had property damaged at school, and to have been forced to have sexual contact against their will ... SMY may feel especially isolated and unable to seek help. (Wolff & Himes, 2010, p. 448)

Beyond the challenge of queer folks, and queer folks in a Christian context, students attending TWU face a third dimension of barriers, since they are likely to be in the midst of generally figuring out who they are as they transition to adulthood.

Individuals who identify as LGBTTQIA+ are more likely to experience isolation and the associated emotional distress; LGBTTQIA+ individuals, and especially

LGBTQTQIA+ youth, are more likely to experience suicidal ideation and even attempt suicide (Bryan & Mayock, 2017; Craig et al., 2017; Halady, 2013; Kravolec et al., 2014; Mullaney, 2016; Sanders & Chalk, 2016). Although suicidal ideation and attempts are undoubtedly worth mentioning no matter the context, it is particularly relevant based on being mentioned by the participants in this research project. Three of the six participants mentioned the gravity of caring for queer folks in light of their likelihood of experiencing depression and suicidality, some mentioning because they personally knew a queer person who struggled with depression and suicidal thoughts. The world in which we live has not been a favourable place for LGBTQTQIA+ folks to exist, and it continues to isolate those folks in unhealthy and unhelpful ways.

Below, I examine the interviews of the participants in my research, specifically referring to the ways in which they garnered (or failed to receive) support for both their LGBTQTQIA+ identity and their spirituality before and/or after coming out. I'll begin by considering the isolation experienced by participants, then the perceived lack of critical dialogue on the TWU campus (and the resulting feelings of not being heard). Following, I will address the lack of space for queer folks in general in Christian community but also specifically within the TWU community, and lastly, I'll consider some participants' experiences of participating in a support group and how that social support can serve as a site of possible reunification and reconnection with the TWU community.

Isolation

Research indicates that the experience of isolation and having no one to talk to or confide in is unfortunately common for LGBTQTQIA+ individuals, particularly when

considering youth and youth adults (PREVNet, n.d.; Johnson & Amella, 2014; Robinson, 2012). These feelings of isolation may be further exacerbated in the context of Christian community, wherein the ability to determine the supportiveness of peers and other community members is a precarious challenge (Hagen et al., 2011, p. 221). In their 2010 study of the purposeful exclusion of sexual minority youth in the context of Christian higher education, Wolff and Himes determined:

In light of the overwhelmingly large amount of evidence regarding the psychiatric, health, and educational discrepancies and ongoing discrimination toward sexual minority individuals, it is no wonder they continue to feel alone, inferior, and rejected by their peers, families, schools, and religious communities. Hence, it is even less surprising that SMY in religious environments may be at greatest risk for mental health problems and social isolation. (p. 454)

Feeling as though you and your values—or at least the values of everyone around you—aren't congruent would certainly cause some emotional distress, and—in turn—perhaps further isolate you from the rest of your community. Moreover, those individuals who participate in more conservative communities—such as the Evangelical Free church with which Trinity Western University is affiliated (Trinity Western University, 2007, p.7), are likely to experience challenges in “telic congruence”, which is the desire to “live their lives in a manner consistent with their values” (APA Task Force, 2009, p.4). Feeling as though you aren't living a life consistent with your values and beliefs would certainly be a confusing if not frustrating experience, and with few safe people to talk to, it would be little surprise that TWU queers would feel forced into isolation.

Experiencing isolation can be particularly problematic for queer folks because isolation is “one of the most effective and common tactics that batterers resort to in heterosexual relationships” and it is “often easy to use against LGBT victims because they may not be open about their sexuality and therefore are socially isolated” (Potter,

Fountain & Stapleton, 2012, pp. 202-203). One of the participants, Neptune, spoke at length in her interview about the assault that she experienced at the hands of her female partner, and how she was unable to talk to anyone about it:

Um, at one point, um, she did sexually assault me in our normal relationship. . . . And there was nothing I could talk, like, I couldn't, there was nothing I could do about it. And that... 'cause again, I was, I had external pressures, I had internal pressures, and all of these things led up to me being not able to talk even about the relationship.

Knowing from my own experience counselling woman survivors of sexual violence during my student placement of my master's program, a common refrain is feeling as though you are entirely alone, and no one else has the same experience as you do. When co-facilitating a counselling group, I discovered that every woman who was participated was hoping to decrease her feeling of isolation. It is thus, of very little surprise to me that Neptune told no one about her sexual assault. Moreover, by virtue of not being out on campus and being very involved with the TWU community, the stakes were too high for Neptune to risk telling anyone about the sexual violence she'd experienced. This fits with the notions of Giovannelli and Jackson (2013), who determined that "Christian college students, especially those from more conservative traditions, are more likely to endorse traditional beliefs about the genders. These beliefs may affect how Christians respond to individuals who have been sexually victimized" (p. 257). TWU is closely affiliated with the Evangelical Church, and although—as stated earlier in this chapter—evangelicalism is not a conservative monolith (Chamberlain, 2009), it is easy to assume that evangelical individuals are conservative in their beliefs. Much of the data collected regarding the beliefs of evangelical Christians suggests they adhere to conservative beliefs including: the inherent sinfulness of homosexuality, disagreement with both premarital sex and abortion, and supporting 'traditional' gender roles wherein men are leaders and women

submit to men (Edger, 2012; Smith & Johnson, 2010; Smith, 2008). It is thus understandable that Neptune may have been sceptical of what her peers would think of her non-heterosexual relationship. Perhaps as a note of encouragement, however, that many evangelicals, especially those who are younger, are no longer closely identifying with the conservative values of older evangelicals (Lee, 2015; Smith & Johnson, 2010).

Moreover, many studies indicate that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals—especially students—experience a higher risk of sexual and relationship violence than their heterosexual peers (Button, O’Connell & Gealt, 2012; Edwards & Sylaska, 2013; Langenderfer-Magruder et al., 2016; Potter, Fountain & Stapleton, 2012). Furthermore, sexual minorities are more likely to report experiencing social isolation than their heterosexual counterparts (Button, O’Connell & Gealt, 2012, p.37). Some studies indicate that anywhere from 18 to 57 percent of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) women had experienced sexual violence at the hands of a female perpetrator (Wang, 2011, p. 167). In the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), it was found that “44% of lesbian women, 61% of bisexual women and 35% of heterosexual women experienced rape, physical violence and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010). As Neptune’s experience makes clear, due to the layers of secrecy around her sexual identity and thus her relationship with her female partner, she was unable to do anything—including admitting to herself that she had been assaulted—or tell anyone about her sexual assault. Knowing that sexual assault is a particularly isolating experience, and that sexual minorities are more likely to experience social isolation than heterosexual folks, Neptune’s experience demonstrates the

seemingly-unending barriers to feeling safe and connected when one identifies as LGBTTTQIA+ in general, let alone at a Christian university.

Saturn's story demonstrates isolation experienced in a different way. Saturn, who now identifies as gay and non-religious but was raised in a Christian home and whose father is a pastor, commented that she and her sisters had to be "model children" as a result of her father's role in the church. Saturn experienced a degree of internalized homophobia early on in her life, stating during her interview that she has "often wondered if it was possible to 'pray the gay' away". Saturn expressed that she is no longer a Christian, partially because she believes the Bible does not support being homosexual, referring to her being gay as a "complete contradiction to Christianity" and thus she cannot reconcile that faith and her sexual identity, which is not necessarily the most likely outcome for folks in this situation (Mahaffy, 1996), but is an option that some queer folks choose to pursue (Woodell, Kazyak & Compton, 2015; Levy & Lo, 2013). Separate from the context of experiencing sexual violence like Neptune, Saturn, who lived on campus during at least some of her time at Trinity Western, mentioned how challenging it was to live in an all-female dorm:

... how do you, like, put up with dorm life? It's, like, 16 women all in, like, one enclosed space, and it's, like, I know, especially in the summer and people are running around in bikinis or whatever, it's just... (laughter). Yeah, put some clothes on.

In addition to feeling overwhelmed by the presence of women in her dorm and feeling uncomfortable with her attraction toward women, Saturn also identified struggling with not having anyone in whom she could confide:

... Yeah, it's hard, and it's just, like, I just keep my head down and try not to look there. Yeah, so. It's hard. It's always just constant, uh, struggling with yourself about that, and then not being able to talk to anyone because it's, like, I don't want anyone to know.

Saturn's experience leaves me wondering if I encountered any non-heterosexual folks and unknowingly enacted lesbophobia—a dimension of homophobia specifically oriented toward lesbians—upon them. Unlike some Trinity Western students—myself included—who developed close, life-long friendships with the people they met in their dorms and classes, it seems as though Saturn was unable to make close connections with the women in her dorm and thus felt further isolated and challenged by the experience of living on campus as a lesbian woman.

Although not outwardly expressed, something about Saturn's lesbianism kept her separate from her peers. Lesbophobia is under-researched still in 2017, despite homophobia as a term having been used since the mid 1960s (Grimes, 2017). Arguably, the ways in which lesbians experience oppression are different than that of gay men, at least partially due to the intersecting axes of homophobia and oppression (Herek, 2004; Smith, 1999; Fraise & Bamentos, 2016). Moreover, homophobia directed toward women is enacted differently than homophobia toward men (Hamilton, 2007, p.149): It often hinges on social distance and causing lesbians to feel isolated or excluded. Interestingly, Stone and Gorga's 2014 study of hegemonic femininity in the context of college sororities is helpful in theorizing Saturn's experience while living in TWU dorms, especially since dormitories at TWU are segregated by gender for lowerclassmen housing and thus the living circumstances would somewhat replicate the experience of women in a sorority. My recollection of dorm life at TWU can certainly be tied to performative identities, and as Stone and Gorga reference Butler, I can imagine that an out lesbian in our dormitory may have faced challenges for not performing her gender correctly (Butler in Stone & Gorga, 2014, p.350). Our dorm arranged 'dorm dates' with male dorms,

whispered quietly about the young men we had crushes on, thus performing a stylized repetition of acts and clarifying our gender (Butler, 1990).

As such, we must consider the importance of forging friendships during childhood, the adolescent and young adult years, which is a crucial component of adult development (Berndt, 1992; Gillespie, Frederick, Harari & Grov, 2015; Waldrip, Malcolm & Jensen-Campbell, 2008), thus made more challenging for someone like Saturn due to the context of Trinity Western University and her sexual orientation. These friendships are so crucial because they bolster happiness, satisfaction and psychological well-being (Demin & Davidson, 2013; Gillespie, Frederick, Harari & Grov, 2015; Roe, 2015; Snapp et al., 2015). Furthermore, LGBTTQIA+ individuals who are friends with folks who particularly support their queer identity may experience a ‘buffer’ against the negative impacts of minority stress, which include but are not limited to depression, anxiety, various physical health outcomes (i.e. asthma), and even suicide (Meyer, 2015, p.210; Velez et al., 2016).

A queer-identified participant, Jupiter, although not identifying specific struggles, spoke of a general sense of not feeling a part of the ‘normal’ TWU community:

Interviewer: So knowing you are still a student at Trinity, what has your experience of being a queer Christian at Trinity been like thus far?

Jupiter: ... this fall I was... definitely a little bit nervous, um, in the beginning of kind of, like, coming, like, recognizing my sexuality as a queer Christian. Um... but I, my... I’ve always kind of felt out of the, the norm or the community at Trinity, right from first year. And I, I look back and I was like, hm, I wonder if it’s, like, like... I wouldn’t attribute it all to my queerness, but I’m like, I wonder if that is a component that kind of made me feel distant from people right from the get go.

Jupiter makes an interesting observation here, wondering if she felt ‘out of the norm’ at TWU the entire time she attended because of her queer sexual identity, which she had yet

to admit to herself. Feeling as though you are different from your peers can certainly create feelings of isolation, and although Jupiter did not provide any specific examples of what she was nervous about, it is safe to speculate that it included at least some degree of being concerned with peoples' perception of her.

Neptune, a queer, gender non-binary participant, also spoke of “testing the waters” in conversations with folks at Trinity Western, attempting to discern if they were safe to talk to about her experiences, let alone safe enough to come out to. She explained that every time she spoke to someone on campus, she thought to herself, “oh I should not talk about this, I should not, like, I should not say anything.” Even though Neptune describes herself as being very involved in student leadership at TWU, there was an entire dimension of who she is that she felt obligated to keep to herself.

Lack of Dialogue and Not Being Heard

Despite Trinity Western's self-reported priority of challenging and stretching students (Trinity Western University, 1999), some of my participants mentioned struggling with the inability to be heard or listened to, and struggling to engage in critical dialogue while at the university. Interestingly, many TWU alumni speak highly of their experience at TWU in reference to learning to think critically (Lang, 2015; Schlecker, 2014; Trinity Western University, n.d. f). In many ways, I would be among these people, since—as discussed in the introduction of this thesis—much of my own unlearning of homophobia was through challenging discussions during my classes and building relationships with open-minded professors.

Beyond the appeal of attending TWU for its Christian community, it also emphasizes “whole person development”: “We guide, encourage, challenge and stretch students, sometimes even making them feel uncomfortable. We help them apply knowledge with insight, and to act discerningly in their lives. We help them be and become responsible disciples of Christ, not just satisfied customers” (Trinity Western University, 1999). Despite TWU’s emphasis on ensuring that students receive a holistic education experience, it seems that was not the case for all students. Mercury, a bisexual genderqueer participant, describes his experience at TWU regarding critical, thoughtful dialogue as a scenario which creates intense pressure to have everything completely figured out:

Mercury: ... emphasis on theology is so significant that if you have, if there’s a single crack in your foundation biblical beliefs or anything like that, you have to rework everything. Because, I don’t know, I guess we’re just training to really pick apart every single line of reasoning and if there’s a flaw then your beliefs can’t be true because true things aren’t, you know, logically fallacious, and therefore, and you know, so I think there was an additional pressure in that context to, to go back to basics and start from scratch or something like that.

Although perhaps the training Mercury speaks of may be helpful to some extent, it seems to align somewhat with the principals of Christian fundamentalism, which is a conservative Christian movement that focuses on biblical inerrancy and upholding traditional Christian beliefs (Patheos, 2008-2017). Interestingly, at a different point in my interview with Mercury, he mentioned that his parents are “borderline biblical literalists as well, so for them there is only way/truth the Bible and if you’ve read it a different way that’s not the right way.” Although I hesitate to categorize anyone as anything they don’t self-identify with, it seems as such that Mercury’s parents have a faith that is at least tied to fundamentalist principles: “Most fundamentalists would claim to have no need for hermeneutics; the Bible is plain and they read it for what it says; epistemologically, that

is, they adopt a naïve realist approach to reading the Bible instead of a critical realist approach” (Badley, 2002, p. 139). Deborah Jian Lee’s book, *Rescuing Jesus* (2015), certainly complicates the experience, beliefs and practices of evangelical Christians, though it seems as though Mercury’s parents—who shut him down when playing dress-up, and wouldn’t allow non-Christian music or movies in their home—trend toward a more fundamentalist, or at least conservative branch of evangelicalism. Interestingly, in a study conducted among college undergrads attending a conservative Christian university by Lafave, Helm and Gomez (2014), they discovered that “the more religious fundamentalism a participant reported the more negative their attitudes were toward homosexuality” (p. 290). This may explain some of the challenges Mercury faces in his relationship with his parents, and Mercury’s being “quite verbally homophobic” whilst thinking he was heterosexual while attending Trinity Western University.

It should be noted that, in light of her career in counselling queer- and trans-identified individuals, Megan—the only participant to whom I refer using her real name—both consented and requested non-confidentiality. Megan has been out as a queer woman for approximately a decade, and thus has had a significant amount of experience in dialoguing with people holding a variety of opinions and perspectives about her queerness. When I asked Megan a question about people in her life that may not be supportive of her queerness, she spoke about some people she loves dearly, but with whom she does not see eye to eye.

And I think that these, these relationships are very important because we have already established, you know, some of these friends I’ve literally had for 36 years and we’ve established, um, a mutual respect and a mutual admiration. And there’s a lot of room for productive conversation there, and I think that that’s, that’s a, what’s where we can, um, really communicate and that’s where really, we can really impact change is, is through those relationships.

This example can serve to inform the ways in which Christian communities can do better to dialogue with queer folks, specifically at TWU. Productive conversations, as Megan is now able to have, can be life changing for queer folks entrenched in Christian communities (or desperately hoping to be ‘let back in’). Conversations like those can allow for an unlearning of homophobia (which is what I experienced through the life of my good friend and his coming out), can alleviate the pressure and make space for safely coming out, can embolden and support radical change. Deborah Jian Lee gives a great example of this in *Rescuing Jesus* when sharing the experience of Danny Cortez, pastor of a southern Baptist church, who spoke at the 2014 Gay Christian Network conference, apologizing to queer folks after his son came out as gay (Lee, 2015, p.255). Interestingly, in the weeks following that conference, Danny’s son Drew released a coming out video, and Danny’s church subsequently split, losing nearly half of their congregation (Lee, 2015, p. 259). Although Danny and Drew’s story involved a drastic shift in their church community, it also made space for Drew and other queer folks to engage with the church. And yet, previous research (Garvey, Taylor & Rankin, 2014; Rankin, 2005; Rockenbach, Lo & Mayhew, 2017; Tetreault et al., 2013; Waldo, 1998; Woodford, & Kulick, 2015; Woodford, Kulick & Sinco, 2014), as well my own project, continue to indicate that college campuses are a particularly inhospitable place for LGBT students, wherein they experience “harassment, isolation, ostracization, and physical violence” (Potter, Fountain & Stapleton, 2012, p. 202). Moreover, Christian college campuses—although founded on Christian principles—may be even more problematic. Later in the interview, Megan shared regarding what she thinks the queer community can do to better engage with Christian folks, whilst being very mindful of the fact that it is not the responsibility of the

person who has been hurt to seek out reconciliation. Megan shared the importance of developing “a healthy communication and bridges and really hear, hear people and their stories. It would be not placing judgment or passing judgment on that individual because of their personal faith and their personal beliefs.” Having one’s story heard is fundamental to feeling valued and a part of a community.

Further to the example that Megan provided about engaging in conversation with long-time friends with whom she does not agree, she hopes that queer folks and Christian folks can operate from a place of listening first rather than primarily considering someone’s beliefs. Interestingly, though Megan no longer identifies as a Christian, she nonetheless made mention of the person of Christ as a model for how to engage in kind and supportive conversations. Making reference to the character and behaviour of Jesus Christ, she shared: “Jesus Christ was a caring, caring, caring person, and listened. You know? ... It wasn’t an agenda, you know?” Megan’s example, thus, may be able to serve to support those folks in the Christian community struggling to understand and communicate with LGBTTQIA+ folks.

Lack of Space

One of the greatest inspirations for this thesis was discovering the lack of space for queer folks who also identify as Christians. Although strides have been made in terms of LGBTTQIA+ inclusion in spiritual communities in recent years (Believe Out Loud, n.d.; Heermann, Wiggins & Rutter, 2007; Kane, 2013; McQueeney, 2009; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000), much work is still required on the part of those who are already ‘inside’ Christianity in order to make space available for those queers who would like a seat at the

table. This was made even clearer when one of my participants, Mercury, shared:

“Because most, I think especially LGBT Christians, you know, the Christians, there’s no place for them in Christianity but there’s no place for them in the secular world either.”

Beyond the fact that queer Christians generally feel like there’s no space for them, specifically, there is no space for sexual identity exploration, especially in the context of Trinity Western University. Mercury made reference to this notion, identifying that, “there’s no room for ‘I don’t know, I’m gay for now, maybe I’ll be celibate for the rest of my life but I need to figure this out.’ It’s you have to have that figured out right away.”

Besides the fact of experiencing such a lack of space or room to explore being frustrating for Mercury, it is actually inconsistent with the experience of being a university-age student:

Late adolescence and early adulthood ... can be especially challenging for GLB [gay, lesbian, bisexual] young people because they are dealing not only with coming out to themselves, peers, and family, but also with planning for their careers and future lives, and developing their adult identities as gay, lesbian, or bisexual individuals. (Browning, 1987 in Dietz & Dettlaff, 1997, p.58)

In addition, then, to the challenges of navigating sexual identity, young adults like Mercury are also working through a variety of developmental challenges. Although more traditional notions of adolescent and young adult development, such as Erikson (1950), would see development as a reasonably clear, linear process, Lisa Diamond’s comprehensive study of lesbian, bisexual and ‘unlabeled’ women over a ten-year period ultimately suggested that rather than remaining stable over time, some dimensions of sexual orientation may be more fluid (Diamond, 2008). Although this study specifically examined women, the notion of sexual fluidity is nonetheless relevant to Mercury’s experience, as he identifies as both bisexual and gender queer. That said, however,

Mercury describes his experience of being in the closet and referring to himself as heterosexual:

For a long time, I called myself heterosexual still because I didn't feel like there was room for me anywhere else, and then eventually I made the jump to that community because I realized, you know, it was more reflective of who I was, but you shouldn't have to jump; you should be able to slide.

Mercury's ability to come out and feel at ease in his sexual and gender identity was inhibited by the lack of opportunity for exploration while attending TWU. Research indicates that keeping one's sexual orientation (and thus a major part of oneself) a secret—as Mercury shared above—is an extremely stressful experience (Bing, 2004; Uwujaren, 2013). Moreover, some research indicates that there are many positive effects associated with coming out and being open about one's sexual orientation, not least of which are fewer symptoms associated with anxiety and depression (Juster, et al., 2013).

At one point in her time at TWU, Jupiter reached a breaking point of sorts, wherein she refused to believe that she was the only person feeling the way she felt:

Jupiter: Because it's, like, there's no fucking way that I'm the only person sitting here, around feeling like this.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Jupiter: Like, feeling like there's no space for them, that they don't have any, like, that everyone's too, too clean cut for them.

Jupiter: So, so it's a part of my character, really, that I am, I'm wanting the misfits or even the people that just don't feel like there's a space to feel like there is a space for them. So, um, I think I kind of, like, made my own community and just found my individual people throughout the years.

Ultimately, Jupiter was able to find supportive, like-minded people to surround her, but this is certainly not always the case. Mars shared that she “didn't feel overly connected to the community”, and Mercury shared that, “the longer I attended, the more I felt disconnected because the less I felt like my spirituality resembled theirs.” Moreover,

Mercury shared that he graduated from Trinity Western with “the least amount of friends at any point in time throughout [his] time there”. Evidently, although some students found support while at TWU, others did not feel connected to the overall community for a variety of reasons. I will specifically address social support and support groups later in this chapter.

Jupiter made reference to the writing and approach of self-proclaimed “Jesus feminist” Sarah Bessey. For context, Bessey writes in her 2013 book *Jesus Feminist* that she wants, “to be outside with the misfits, with the rebels, the dreamers, second-chance givers, the radical grace lavishers, the ones with arms wide open, the courageously vulnerable, and among even—or maybe especially—the ones rejected by the Table as not worthy enough or right enough” (p.4). On her website, Bessey writes that she is:

[P]ostmodern, liberal to the conservative and conservative to the liberal in both matters of both religion *and* politics (not an easy task, I assure you), a social justice wanna-be trying to do some good, and a nondenominational charismatic recovering know-it-all who has unexpectedly fallen back in love with the Church. (Bessey, n.d)

In terms of resources and readings that were helpful, Jupiter highlighted Sarah Bessey as a positive influence. Jupiter then explained how Bessey’s approach has impacted her perception and understanding of Christian community:

Jupiter: ...what she [Sarah Bessey] has so beautifully illustrated, um, and, this has been so helpful for me is that, like, she’s, like, I’m a charismatic Christian who practices liturgical things... like, she’s just, like, shows that she’s loving God and she’s got this, like, massive amount of space and differentiation in what she believes. ... And it is, like, the space and the differentiation in it [the church] is huge. And to understand that, like, we as different people with different, like, brain chemistries, make-ups and then experiences and perceptions, things are gonna look different. So don’t expect it all to look the same.

In my thorough consideration of TWU’s current climate, I believe this is one of the primary challenges, and perhaps opportunities, faced by TWU: Continuing to prohibit students in same-sex partnerships from feeling welcome does not represent the diversity

of belief in Christian denominations. In terms of practical visibility, one of Mercury's hopes was to have members of the queer and Christian communities standing in a line to indicate a spectrum of either homosexual to heterosexual or conservative to liberal. His expressed intent, which may be a helpful means by which to create space, is to normalize grey areas, to "[create] space where it's okay to not fall within the black or the white polarity but somewhere in the middle." Ultimately, beyond the fact that all students deserve to feel as though they have space and belong to the TWU community, LGBTTQIA+ students in particular deserve to have that space to feel safe to explore their respective identities, whether directly related to sexuality or not.

Social Support and Support Groups

When considering ways to ensure that the voices and concerns of queer TWU students and alumni are heard, a primary consideration should be social support in a general sense, and more specifically support groups. It should come as no surprise that insufficient social support impacts the mental health of LGBTTQIA+ individuals (Robinson, 20012; Button, O'Connell & Gealt, 2012). Beyond the experience of feeling disconnected from family members and friends—either prior to or after coming out—queer folks may particularly lack support in light of their connection to a Christian community. TWU's alleged close-knit community (Trinity Western University, n.d. g; Thiessen, 2014; Schlecker, 2016) thus may further exacerbate the lack of support felt by TWU queers. A growing avenue of support, however, offers potential. As of July 2014, there is a Facebook page called OneTWU, which describes itself as "Affirming the Diversity of Faith, Sexuality, and Gender in the Community of Trinity Western University" (OneTWU, n.d.). Although an online point of connection may seem

unhelpful or insignificant—especially to those folks still sceptical of friendships forged online—research shows that online groups and connections may actually help youth and young adults compensate for support and relationships not found offline (DeHaan, 2012; Hillier, Mitchell & Ybarra, 2012; Ybarra et al., 2015). Moreover, online communities can even aid LGBTTQIA+ youth and young adults in identity development and the process of coming out (Craig & McInroy, 2013). Although my time as a student at TWU ended over eight years ago—and I can keenly recall getting a Facebook account in late 2006—social media and online ways of connecting were extremely important to my young adult life.

It should be noted that although students attending Trinity Western are likely be nearing the end of their adolescence, the implications of social support for adolescent development can still helpfully inform the experience of young adulthood. Stuart Roe’s 2015 study is particularly informative, as it addresses the importance of peer relationships for LGBT adolescents, which includes a desire to have friendships with both heterosexual and LGBT peers (Roe, 2015, p.121). An additional element of adolescence contexts that may be of use for LGBTTQIA+ students at TWU is the idea of a gay-straight alliance. Beemyn (2003) notes that the importance of LGBT groups on college campuses is often overlooked, and can offer more than just support for LGBT individuals and their allies: in the early days after the Stonewall riots, these groups expressed pride in LGBT identity, created alliances, and even made gay rights an important concern for non-gay individuals (Beemyn, 2003, p. 206). In a study of 1,751 postsecondary institutions in the United States, Leigh Fine discovered that none of the religiously affiliated private institutions had an LGBT resource centre (2012, p. 297). Although Trinity Western was not included

in Fine's study due to being located in Canada, it bears remarkable similarities to many of the institutions Fine examined. Fine's study indicated that this might be influenced by the political climate on campus, as well as the resources available (as compared to that of larger, public institutions) (2012, p.296). Moreover, the 2015 report from the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) reported a decrease in homophobic remarks, as well as a lower amount of verbal and physical harassment than all prior years (GLSEN, 2015, p. 10). Interestingly, in her consideration of the impact of gay straight alliances in schools, Jennie Hanna observes of this study that the above positive impacts cannot be coincidental in light of the increased access students had to gay straight alliances groups (Hanna, 2017, p.98).

One of the participants, Mercury, believed that there are perhaps some things that Christian communities are unable to accomplish:

Its hard, I'm not sure; I think there's some things that need to happen that just can't take place in the church. The church isn't able to achieve those things. Um, but there's a lot they could do. Having a designated, you know, LGBT representative just to devoting human resources to increasing visibility of those people I think could mean a lot.

Although it is my hope that churches and a variety of Christian communities (including Trinity Western University) can do much better to support LGBTTTQIA+ individuals, perhaps there are other sites in which this support can be more easily found. Interestingly, a few of the participants spoke about groups that operate at the intersections of Christian and queer identity, operated by Generous Space Ministries, and two of my participants mentioned the Generous Space groups that meet in Fraser Valley and Vancouver.

Generous Space was originally called New Beginnings and started out as an ex-gay ministry (Generous Space, n.d. a). Generous Space groups are described as:

[C]ommunities of LGBTQ+ Christians (and some of their friends and family) who meet regularly for conversation, fellowship and prayer. They provide opportunities for people

with different sexual orientations, gender identities, and theological views to build friendships and practice loving and understanding each other in postures of generous spaciousness. (Generous Space, n.d. b)

These groups offer great potential that likely cannot be achieved independently by a church or a queer group. Worthy of note is the description found in the Community section of the Generous Space Ministries website, which mentions so many of the key issues that have been addressed in this chapter:

A significant issue that many LGBTQ+ Christians face is their sense of disconnection and isolation. ... It's lonely to be marginalized or excluded in the places where you seek belonging, especially when you're navigating the confusion of reconciling your sexuality/gender identity with your faith, coming out to yourself, coming out to others, and wrestling with Scripture, sexual ethics, and life-defining decisions. (Generous Space, n.d. b)

When considering ways in which LGBTTQIA+ folks can find support and thus be heard, decrease their isolation and feel as though they are welcome in a space, the purpose and values that Generous Space Ministries describes seem like precisely the right fit.

Interestingly, more than one of the participants in my research mentioned a private, confidential support group when I asked about resources they'd found helpful. Specifically, Jupiter and Neptune note two important, different purposes served by the group: It is fun and exciting, and that it offers healing and connection (both socially and spiritually). In describing her first time going to the group, it is clear Jupiter could barely contain her excitement:

Because [my queerness] helped me, like, find people who... what I've said to people is that ... when I, like, walked into that group, I remember, like, the first and second and meeting particularly... I think it was the first meeting particularly, I came home and my best friend happened to be here because she lives on Galliano – she was visiting my place – I think you'd have to peel me off the ceiling. I was just so freaking excited!

Jupiter continues, explaining that this group filled a gap in support that TWU's community was unable to fill:

Jupiter: ... like, I was just, like, like, the people and the depth and the, like, I was just so full. ... what I felt like I had been looking for from Trinity all along, which was I came with this advertisement of community as a, like, Christian who was, like, just getting, like, growing up in a

Christian faith but still new in their faith in my early 20s. Like, genuine faith. Um... I... was... I was finally getting that, like, space, where, like, I walked in and was, like, 'well, these people may not know me and I may not know them but I just feel such an intense love for them and I know that they love and care for me and respect me also, and this is unreal.'

Interviewer: Yeah.

Jupiter: So, um, so I've actually, it's helped me find people that, um, I can truly care for and that I can get the sense truly care for me.

Jupiter thus found the community that TWU had advertised itself as elsewhere in the context of this support group. Beyond identifying that the support group was fun and healing, Neptune also described it as her faith community during this season of her life:

Neptune: Um, I mean, I think [NAME OF SUPPORT GROUP] is probably...

Interviewer: Mm. Mhm.

Neptune: ... the extent of my faith community right now. And it's, yeah. In a lot of ways, like, it labels itself as a support group but in a lot of ways its definitely been reconnecting me back to the parts of my faith that I... had thought I had lost access to.

Interviewer: Mm. Yeah.

Neptune: Yeah. Just, like, a community of people who believe strongly that they should work towards making the world a better place, um, people who think very deeply about what their place in the world is, and how, um, a higher power or a, like, how a, having a faith would fit into that.

Even though perhaps this group isn't a church and doesn't advertise itself as a spiritual group, Neptune has nonetheless experienced this group as a faith community.

In addition to receiving support from peers and groups, it is also important to consider the impact of faculty support and connections for TWU students, especially in light of TWU's small class sizes and thus theoretical greater connection for students with faculty. The average class size at TWU is 15 students (Trinity Western University, n.d. h). Linley et al.'s 2016 study demonstrates the impact of supportive faculty on the lives and academic experience of LGBTQ college students. Knowing this project is far from exhaustive, as it only includes approximately one-hour interviews with six participants, further study is required in order to make any conclusions about TWU students'

impression of TWU faculty. That said, despite it not being a part of the interview, the experience with a TWU professor nonetheless came up in my interview with Mars, and also briefly with Jupiter. Saturn and Mercury also mentioned experiences with TWU faculty, albeit they were either neutral or negative experiences. Most significantly, however, Mars spoke of a moment in one of her classes that deeply impacted her acceptance of her gay identity in the long term:

Um, but then I also had, it was finally [NAME OF TWU PROF] was the first one that told me that he, he had kids that were, well he told the whole class but, if he had kids that were gay, he would love them anyway and, it would, he would still be Christian and they would still be Christians and I was like, (gasp of surprise)!

Despite TWU's covenant, at least one of TWU's professors provided a supportive space for students like Mars to begin to at least consider that they might not be straight. Mars later shared that this professor helped her—albeit, indirectly—in accepting her identity as a gay Christian.

Conclusion

Based on the comments of my participants, it is abundantly clear that LGBTTQIA+ individuals feeling welcome and safe to share about and explore their sexual identities is the exception rather than the rule. Although none of the participants described explicit homophobic harassment from their peers at Trinity Western, many of them expressed feeling extreme pressure to hide their sexual identity for fear of unknown repercussions. Megan and Neptune both shared there was so much at stake for them while attending TWU, that they were unable to risk coming out to the wrong person. Knowing the history and current experiences of LGBTTQIA+ individuals are often riddled with negative impacts upon their mental health and general sense of comfort in

their environment, it is fundamentally important that folks who hold positions of privilege associated with TWU take steps to create better systems of support for LGBTTQIA+ students at TWU.

Chapter 3: Spiritual and Sexual Identity Intersections

Introduction

In both historical and contemporary contexts, homosexuality and Christianity have been and still are often considered mutually exclusive because homosexuality has been condemned as sinful by many Christians (Rodriguez, 2009; Trammel, 2015). This condemnation, of course, causes great confusion and pain for LGBTTQIA+ Christians, since theologically conservative religion has been found to be a predictor of homophobia (Rosik, Griffith & Cruz, 2007; Schwartz & Lindley, 2005; Plugge-Foust & Strickland, 2000; Standing, 2004). In addition to knowing that there are plenty of committed followers of Christ who are not heterosexual (Barnes & Meyer, 2012; Foster, Bowland & Vosler, 2015; Yip, 1996), we also know that there are plenty of non-heterosexual Christians who either currently attend or have attended Trinity Western University (TWU), despite its community covenant precluding same-sex partnerships (Trinity Western University, n. d. a). Some of these Christian LGBTTQIA+ folks, some of whom attended TWU and others who did not, are folks that I know personally. Because of the risk associated with being a queer Christian—let alone a queer Christian attending TWU—it is impossible to accurately quantify the number of LGBTTQIA+ individuals who have attended or are attending TWU. That said, although we certainly cannot assume that folks who like the queer-affirmative One TWU Facebook page are all queer themselves, it is worth noting and being encouraged by the existence of a page like this and thus the existence of queer folks and their allies associated with TWU. As of July 1, 2017, the One TWU Facebook page had 463 likes (One TWU, n.d.).

One of the greatest challenges I have experienced in being a TWU alum and a Christian, queer ally is TWU's inability to acknowledge that there are, as Bruxy Cavey, the teaching pastor of The Meeting House, often shares, "good and godly Christians who come to different interpretations of scripture" (B. Cavey, personal communication, July 1, 2017). There are LGBTTTQIA+ welcoming church communities in nearly every province in Canada across a variety of denominations (The Institute for Welcoming Resources, 2004), and thus it is certainly possible that folks attending TWU would come from one of those denominations or communities. Interestingly, TWU's seminary—ACTS, or Associated Canadian Theological Schools—states prominently on its "About Us" webpage "unity through diversity" (ACTS of TWU, n.d.). Moreover, two of the four values held by ACTS can be directly applied to the possible perspective TWU could take toward its LGBTTTQIA+ students: inter-denominationalism and open-mindedness (ACTS of TWU, n.d.).

Knowing the recent upset regarding prominent Christian figures and organizations who have 'changed their minds' about queer Christian folks but then changed them back again, i.e., World Vision in 2014 and Eugene Peterson in July 2017, it is crucial to maintain a focus on the fact that LGBTTTQIA+ folks aren't issues to be tossed around lightly (Gracey & Weber, 2014; Phillips, 2016; Vines, 2017). Adam Phillips' blog post, which speaks of the "wreckage" left by World Vision's waffling on their support of LGBTQ folks, highlights the impact and the subsequent exclusion that World Vision continues to foster. Noting these examples, then, it is frankly not enough that TWU acknowledge diversity of theological belief (and thus diversity of the acceptance of LGBTTTQIA+ individuals): TWU needs to take active steps in not only apologizing to the

man queer folks it has harmed, but also in better supporting the queer folks that currently attend the university. As such, the purpose of this chapter is to further consider the interviews from the six participants in my research, specifically focusing on the intersections in their sexual and spiritual identities, especially their experiences in coming out and the process of variously identifying as non-heterosexual. This consideration will allow for a better understanding of the experience of LGBTTQIA+ students attending TWU, and the kinds of challenges they may experience in coming out as queer or choosing to remain in the closet.

Research indicates, as one would assume, there are a variety of options for LGBTTQIA+ folks to pursue in light of ‘discovering’ their being both queer in some way and Christian. It is important, however, to first note that the discovery or coming out process for queer folks is not necessarily something that happens overnight, as if one day you’re straight, and the next day you’re gay. Many people—including a number of my participants—describe their coming out as a long, complex process (Perrin-Wallqvist & Lindblom, 2015; Rust, 1993; Seely, 2013). For example, Neptune shared that after being in a secret relationship with a woman while on living on the TWU campus, it took her a while to be ‘out’ in the way that made the most sense to her:

Neptune: And then I graduated and then I came out as bisexual, and then a year later I was pretty much out as gay.

Interviewer: Mm. Yeah. So it’s like a little step-by-step sort of process for you.

Neptune: Yes, exactly.

In the same way that personalities change and develop over time—I, for example, have become increasingly introverted as I’ve gotten older—Neptune began first identifying as bisexual, and then later identifying as gay. Admittedly, although coming out to oneself

may happen over a long period of time, there are specific moments in which folks come out to the people in their lives, such as their parents, siblings or close friends. These moments can be particularly challenging for folks who grew up in Christian environments.

Whether an individual decides to come out publicly about their sexual orientation or not, they will nonetheless have to consider the impact of their queerness on their spiritual life, particularly if they identify as a Christian. Some of the choices that folks make when considering their spiritual life in light of their sexual identity are: leaving their current church for a more affirming community or denomination, leaving the faith entirely, reconciling their sexual identity with their spiritual identity, compartmentalizing the aspects of their identity, or living with the conflict (Beagan & Hattie, 2015; Ganzevoort, van der Laan & Olsman, 2011; Hattie & Beagan, 2013; Levy, 2012; Levy & Reeves, 2011; Love et al., 2005; Sherry et al., 2010). While some folks may assume that the choices left for queer-identified Christian folks are set up in a binary of either being queer or Christian, this is not necessarily the case. As first introduced in chapter 1, José Esteban Muñoz's theory of disidentification is particularly informative for these circumstances, as it "negotiates strategies of resistance within the flux of discourse and power" (Muñoz, 1999, p.19). Disidentification is, in Muñoz's words, a form of building (p.200), and that "disidentificatory performance offers a utopian blueprint for a possible future, while, at the same time, staging a new political formation in the present" (Muñoz, 1999, p.200). Many participants in this project shared that the stakes were high for them in considering their queerness while at TWU; I think the stakes are high in a broader

sense as the TWU administration moves forward and makes choices on how to support or not support queer TWU students and alumni.

Coming Out as Christian or Queer

There are interesting parallels between the process of coming out and the process of developing as a spiritual person or becoming a Christian. Frequently, these processes are thought to be singular events that can easily be marked on a calendar as to when things were different; in reality, we know that both coming out as LGBTTQIA+ and identifying as a Christian may be particularly long and complex paths. Furthermore, both coming out as queer and choosing to follow Christ are important identifying practices within their respective communities, and—as Stephen Seely discusses at length—the “contemporary practice of ‘coming out of the closet’ shares features with Christianity (Seely, 2013, p. 220). Additionally, in McGlasson and Rubel’s 2015 study of the coming out experiences of gay men influenced by conservative Christianity, they discovered commonalities in their participant’s disclosures: realization, reckoning, rejection and reorientation (p.22). It should be noted, however, one of the major limitations of this thesis is that I did not specifically explore the process participants went through to choose to identify as a Christian, despite asking a similar question about their queer identity and choosing to come out. Moreover, we know that the process of coming out—especially when both queer and Christian (Bowland, Foster & Vosler, 2013)—can be particularly anxiety-provoking, and thus social workers and other helping professionals like psychotherapists can be significant assets in navigating this process (Cole & Harris, 2017). Recommendations for helping professionals will be discussed at length in the conclusion.

A few of the participants in my research project identify explicitly as queer.

Megan, for example, shared about her “arduous” coming out process, and how had felt put in a box—as a straight white female—for such a long time only to be put in another box:

[O]ne of my anxieties when I was going through my long arduous process of coming out... was about being put in another box. Being put in a box as a, as a gay person, as a, as a lesbian. Um, I don't identify as a lesbian. ... I identify as queer because I can breathe, I can breathe there.

Megan expressed a lot of comfort around identifying as queer rather than as gay, lesbian or bisexual because being queer provides her fluidity; there are a lot of ways to identify, and “a lot of ways to connect with others” within being queer. Other participants, such as Saturn and Mars, identify explicitly as lesbian or gay, knowing that they are only attracted to other women. Saturn also referred to her coming out as a “long discovering process”, which she indicated was partially due to her family’s strong religious background. Saturn, however, also stated that she “probably always knew that [she] was different... but, um, didn’t really actually fully come to acknowledge it till [she] started on Trinity.” Interestingly, Saturn shared that her sisters knew she wasn’t straight, but had never “confronted” her about it, and thus it was primarily her parents that Saturn needed to come out to.

Mars, whom I’ve already described as someone who has been quite well supported by her friends and church since coming out, also gave credit to TWU for playing a part in her coming out process:

... I’ve always been looking for community to help me vet God’s word and grow closer to God. I really did get this at trinity. Even if they did... do still make me sign something that says I can’t marry another woman... they really encouraged us to look at everything from every angle and to argue amongst ourselves. This was really important to my

journey and I truly believe that Trinity set me on my path to coming out. It was just a really long path.

Although many of the participants in this project shared that being queer at TWU was predominantly a challenge, Mars' experience challenges this 'norm' and indicates that some of the skills Mars developed while at TWU directly connected to her feeling more comfortable in her queer identity. As I've stated earlier in this thesis, my own experience at TWU—granted, as a cisgender, heterosexual woman—was strongly informed by developing the ability to think critically and, as Mars shared, look at everything from every angle. TWU did not teach me to blindly accept what church leaders or university administrators were saying; rather, I felt encouraged to puzzle my way through various 'ethical conundrums' in conversation with peers and professors, while prayerfully and thoroughly considering the teachings of the Bible.

For some of the participants, the process of choosing to identify as queer in some way happened step-by-step. Mercury, for example, was first comfortable identifying as someone who was able to dress more effeminately while still being heterosexual. Admittedly, Mercury also described that he believed he was heterosexual while at the same time, having on-camera sex with hundreds of men. Clearly, the process of coming out as a bisexual, genderqueer individual was not something that came promptly for Mercury. Moreover, as may be true for many LGBTTQIA+ individuals, Mercury, who primarily identifies as bisexual and genderqueer, commented that he identifies in different ways depending on the context:

[A]ll my life I've straight passed and I still straight pass a lot of the time so I would say sometimes I would call myself heteroflexible... because I'm in a heterosexual marriage its easy for me to just label myself as a heterosexual that's effeminate or in some ways its easier for me to identify as genderqueer, a genderqueer heterosexual than it is to identify as a masculine bisexual.

Thus, Mercury demonstrates that even ‘once’ folks have come to some sort of reasonable conclusion about their sexual and/or gender identity, there may still be circumstances in which they choose to identify differently.

Early in her interview, Neptune shared that she identifies “variously” as queer, gender non-binary, two-spirit, and gay. Like many of the other participants, she stated that she initially believed that homosexuality and Christianity were mutually exclusive. Moreover, Neptune shared that it is “strange to be Christian or have that kind of faith tradition” in queer spaces. She, Jupiter and Mercury all shared, to some extent, the challenge that exists in being both queer and Christian. Whether that is, in Neptune’s case, going on dates and dealing with the awkwardness of people’s perceptions of what it means to attend TWU: “It’s harder to be, like, oh I went to Trinity but don’t worry, like, I’m not, I’m not weird, or, like homophobic... it’s, it’s fine; I’m good.” Interestingly, as Neptune mentioned earlier in the conversation, no one is liable to ask about religion on the first date, but they are likely to ask where you went to school or what you do for work. Speaking of which, Mercury believes that he struggled to find work based on the fact that he attended TWU:

I mean the career field sucks out here, like, I went through interview after interview; I don’t know if those applications got thrown out ‘cause Trinity was in the news about the law school or not, but I was very aware, I’m always still aware of when people say, ‘oh where’d you go to school?’; that’s the first thing people ask when they’re in business and you’re a young person. Uh, and it’s a huge liability.

This particular intersection—being someone who is queer but also attended TWU—is particularly complicated, as many people assume all TWU students are straight, conservative Christians, and perhaps may further assume that queer folks wouldn’t be interested in attending a Christian university. A particularly illuminating example of not

meeting other peoples' expectations comes from Jupiter, and a story she shared about being at a drag show with friends. She was having a conversation with her friends, and was at one point discussing TWU, when some other folks they didn't know joined the conversation:

[I]mmediately these two women, like, jumped down my throat and they start being, like, just, like, mocking me a little bit for being at Trinity, but then the one pipes up and is actually, like, 'I'm a Christian too'. ... and then the third one was, like, 'what the hell are you guys doing? Like, are, y'all trying to, like, convert me or something?' (Laughter)

All this was to suggest that there is, in Jupiter's words, "space for differentiation", and that there is work to be done in terms of the queer community judging all Christian folks to be the same. Knowing the ways in which queer folks maintain connections to church communities (Toft, 2014; Wilcox, 2002; Yip, 2002), surprise around queer folks being participants in religious communities or having a relationship with God should decrease. It is crucial to avoid endorsing sexuality stereotypes (i.e. all gay men are effeminate), and is thus also important to avoid endorsing stereotypes around Christianity (i.e. all Christians are conservative). I certainly want to take care, however, to mention that stereotypes toward Christians have inflicted less pain and violence than those toward queer folks. Although plenty of folks might assume things about me because I am a Christian, I've never experienced the everyday microaggressions (McCabe, Dragowski & Rubinson, 2013) let alone grander forms of violence that I know Christians have perpetrated against queer folks: I had no trouble getting someone to provide baked goods for my heterosexual wedding (S.M., 2017), and I've never wondered if my family would have to someday fend off protestors at my funeral (Dehaas, 2016).

Growing Up Christian: Beliefs Now and Then

Of the six participants I interviewed, all of them grew up in Christian environments, although not all of the participants still identified as Christians. It is important to consider the environment in which the participants grew up, particularly because none of them came out until late in their university career or after they had graduated from university and (presumably) moved out of their family homes. I presume because TWU requires that its students live on campus during their first and second years, “unless they are living with their immediate family or spouse, are 21, or have at least 57 credits completed” (Trinity Western University, n.d. i). As written in the 2016-2017 TWU Student Handbook, these students are required to live on campus to “enhance the accomplishment of its mission ‘to develop godly Christian leaders’, and also because:

Trinity Western University is committed to providing on campus residence that assists students in personal growth. The University believes that residential living significantly contributes to the development of the total person and his/her persistence in post-secondary studies. (Trinity Western University, 2016-2017).

I did not specifically ask participants whether they lived at home at all or partially during their time attending TWU, which would have provided greater clarity about their comfort or discomfort in coming out to family. Nonetheless, participants all spoke about their support—or lack thereof—from family. Interestingly, two of the six participants, Saturn and Neptune, have fathers who are pastors of churches. Based on the brief descriptions Saturn and Neptune gave, I don’t imagine their fathers are the type to share public, queer-affirmative promises (Pavlovitz, 2014). Mars was the only participant who both identified as a Christian and felt minimal discomfort in attaching that label to herself. This is likely due largely in part to her experience of supportive community through her church; she describes having come out to her pastor: “I think the third person I told was my pastor

and he was super helpful”. This makes sense, as later in the interview, Mars describes her church as affirming.

Jupiter and Neptune both identified as Christians to a certain extent, but acknowledging some significant difficulties with other folks with whom they’d share the label. Interestingly, since the interviews were all conducted shortly after the 2016 American presidential election, many participants made—implicit or explicit—references to their dislike of Donald Trump, which may be associated with the large number of Christians who voted for Donald Trump (Smith & Martinez, 2016). Mercury identifies as a Christian universalist, which, in light of a question about God’s character, he described as focusing on “not believing in eternal condemnation, I think that’s one of the strongest, strongest aspects for me I think is that a parent would never permanently condemn their child, and a creator would never permanently condemn their creation.” Universalism became more widely known in Christian circles with the publication of Rob Bell’s 2011 book, *Love Wins* (Galli, 2011; Loveless, 2011). Megan described herself as “spiritual”, and as “still maintain[ing] some of the beautiful beliefs that [she] was raised with.” Moreover, Megan made reference to the “fluidity” of spirituality—important to note since she described her queerness in a similar way earlier in the interview—and that she feels connected, “to creation, or to the universe, or to the energy that is undeniable all around [her]”. Saturn was the only participant who did not identify as Christian, spiritual or religious. Thus, even in this small sample of folks who both identify as queer and attended TWU, there is a great degree of diversity in their spiritual perspectives, and in their strategies around navigating the perhaps murky waters around spiritual and sexual identity.

For many LGBTTQIA+ individuals, it may seem that the simplest way to alleviate tension between being a Christian and being queer is to leave the church. One of the major challenges folks experience in pursuing this option, however, is the subsequent loss of community, perhaps even including their family members. When one of my childhood friends came out to his family in his early twenties, in addition to experiencing a great degree of emotional pain as a result of his family's reaction, felt as though he could no longer attend any church in the city—let alone the church his father pastored—because of his father's connection to the broader church community. Although perhaps not to this degree, research indicates that feeling excluded from Christian community is unfortunately common for folks who do not fit the sexual or gender identity norm (Cheng, 2011; Cole & Harris, 2017; McQueeney, 2009). The reasons for these feelings of exclusion, based on the experiences of my participants, are not necessarily due to upfront rejection or dismissal from the community. Rather, some of the folks who participated in my research felt as though they didn't have enough information about their church community to determine whether or not they would be accepted once it was discovered they were queer. Mercury shared that “even in Vancouver and Langley, its hard to find an affirming church. You have to go to every church and read down their list until you find a deal breaker and then, um, so it's hard to navigate that.” As mentioned previously in this thesis, when considering the experiences of marginalized folks, it should not be the responsibility of those who are marginalized to expend energy towards being accepted into a community. Mercury's hesitancy with engaging in a church community is valid and important. For myself, as someone who is now a staff member at a church, I can only imagine what it would be like to be constantly wondering

if the folks in my community truly welcomed me or not. It conjures up feelings of being in high school, and wanting to know if and where I belonged in a climate where it can feel as if your very survival is at stake.

Interestingly, Neptune reported extremely similar feelings about the choice to engage with a church community or not. She commented on not wanting to invest in a community when she wasn't sure where they stood regarding affirming queer folks or not:

And the more that I came out, the more, the less welcome I felt in churches. Not because of anything that anybody specifically did necessarily, but not wanting to invest into communities where I didn't know how they felt, or in communities that felt wrong for my faith tradition, um. Like, even if they were affirming.

So in addition to the regular challenge folks experience in trying to find a church that fits comfortably with their faith tradition, Neptune, and other queer folks like Mercury, at least, have to expend energy in figuring out how churches perceive queer folks. As discussed in the second chapter of this thesis, Neptune was able to find spiritual support from a non-church group, wherein she did not have to expend as much energy being concerned about other folks' perception of her queerness. The same sentiments could be found in church-affiliated communities, such as the Metropolitan Community Church as mentioned earlier in this thesis.

One of the interesting observations I made note of when analyzing my participant interviews was the incongruent nature of the participants' perception of who God is or what Christian community should look like and what is actually present and manifest in Christian churches. Although much of the historical life of Jesus Christ centred around ministering to and caring for isolated people and people on the margins (Gilliard, 2014),

many church communities, both historically and presently, do not feel a call to supporting the oft' very marginalized community of LGBTTQIA+ folks. Megan provided some spectacular examples of how churches can support queer folks well, sharing about a pastor of a church in Seattle who apologized to one of Megan's gay friends:

[He] apologized on behalf of the church ... in front of the congregation, um, asserted that they are supportive of queer people and that queer people are welcome, *actively* queer people are welcome. It's none of this bullshit around you're, you're queer and you're always welcome in our church as long as you're not... as long as you're celibate.

And, unfortunately not dissimilar to the story via *Rescuing Jesus* that I quoted in chapter 2, the pastor to which Megan was referring lost a large percentage of his congregation after the proclamation. This, however, is an important risk that church leaders and privileged folks in Christianity need to take: Taking the first step and apologizing for the hurt that the church and Christians have caused to queer folks (and other marginalized groups) throughout history is worth losing people who aren't willing to concede their beliefs for the sake of someone's acceptance.

A small example of this sort of approach is the video, entitled "LGBTQ Discrimination – Confessions of a Christian Nation", featuring four well-known male pastors who apologize for the church's historical and present treatment of queer folks (Harsin, 2017). Granted, there has been considerable pushback toward this video and similar approaches (Barnett, 2017; Miller, 2017), but perhaps that pushback means this approach is a step in the right direction. As the creator of the video—and the rest in the series—shared, he chose a group of white, straight men specifically because folks with privilege *should* feel uncomfortable while watching these videos (Miller, 2017).

Jupiter's experience of church was a bit out of the ordinary to begin with; she describes her family as the "black sheep" of their church community because they "took dance lessons and listened to rock n'roll music and [they] were crazy." Thus, at least in some ways, feeling like she doesn't fit in to a community is a bit of an old hat experience for Jupiter (which was, unfortunately, replicated when she arrived at TWU).

Interestingly, Jupiter spoke of picking up the habit of smoking when she went to TWU, as a subversive act to distinguish herself from others:

[F]unny enough, like, I quit smoking before I went to Trinity and literally picked it back up at school because, because I was, like, I needed some level of, like, 'you guys are too squeaky clean and I need to prove a point to you that you can still love Jesus and not look like that'.

Jupiter thus demonstrates the notion that you don't need to have all of your ducks in a row to love and follow Jesus. Such a principle is well connected to the approach of queer theology, specifically, Patrick S. Cheng's notion of Christianity being queer by definition: "I believe Christianity is queer because radical love lies at the heart of *both* Christianity *and* the queer experience. Radical love, I contend, is a *love so extreme that it dissolves our existing boundaries*, whether they are boundaries that separate us from other people, that separate us from preconceived notions of sexuality and gender identity, or that separate us from God" (emphasis text: Cheng, 2011). Jupiter perhaps learned from her family's approach to 'fitting in' to a church community that being a Christian isn't contingent upon looking or behaving in a certain way, and even further, that 'queering' Christianity is a helpful method for better connecting with a personal God. Granted, Jupiter expressed that she nonetheless struggles in her spiritual life to remain close with God, that even at the time of the interview, "a solid interaction and relationship and closeness to God is really hard. And I don't particularly feel much of it." Jupiter's

experience, although some folks might be quick to ascribe it to her queerness, is a common one for young adults: there are various changes taking place in the late teens and early twenties, some of which may involve religious beliefs (Chan, Tsai & Fuligni, 2014). Thus, in a season wherein it is normal to explore and question what you've grown up with, Jupiter's exploration and struggles with her Christian faith are not surprising.

A particularly nuanced comment that Jupiter made during her interview was that she isn't "some giant theological argument"; she is still a person whether folks she's in conversation with agree with her perspectives or not. Admittedly, if more individuals took this approach to *any* contentious issue, in the context of a spiritual community or not, perhaps productive conversations would be a lot more frequent! That said, however, possessing open-mindedness does not eliminate bigotry: whether we are aware of it or not, heterosexual folks experience a great degree of privilege—sometimes referred to as heterosexism—in contrast to our queer counterparts. Heterosexism is, according to Rocco and Gallagher (2006), "a system of oppression that reduces the experience of sexual minorities to medical or criminal causes while victimizing people who are seen as sexual minorities through violence or diminished opportunity" (p.30). As mentioned earlier, there are a number of worries that I do not face simply because I am a cisgender, heterosexual woman. Beyond experiencing an overall greater sense of safety and security, heterosexual folks even benefit financially from their straightness (Danby, 2007): I won't risk being fired from my job because of my heterosexuality, and I'm able to participate in the benefit program from my husband's workplace. Jupiter's refusal to be diminished into an argument highlights heterosexism; I cannot think of any conversations or arguments I've engaged in as a result of my identifying as heterosexual.

Despite some folks' tendency to reduce queer folks into theological arguments, both Jupiter and Mars were nonetheless able to find comfort and feel confident in their sexuality, particularly as informed by their respective relationships with God. For example, Jupiter's perception of who God is makes space for her to be herself, including her sexual identity, and still engage in a relationship with God. She described her experience of doing some spiritual seeking in regards to her sexual identity, and eventually felt peace from God with her sexual attractions:

[W]hen I had a moment where I felt like I was trying to seek out what God was saying about sexuality and him, and it, I just had, I remember having this moment of being like, 'oh, oh *that's* it? Like, *that's* what I was making a fuss about?' and being, like, 'oh my god, *that's nothing.*' And then just, like, completely, letting go, and then, and from that point out, I've been, like, super at peace with it, super at peace with my own sexuality.

Interestingly, something similar happened to Mars:

So then I finally, um, I was really praying about it and was really, it was really God but I definitely felt him saying, 'you know what? I made you this way so I can accept you this way. You need to accept yourself'.

After having been part of a Christian community, whether that is attending a church or attending TWU, working at TWU, or even working at a church, for the vast majority of my life, one of the things I've learned is to tread very lightly and with respect when folks sincerely believe that they've heard from God. Interestingly, anthropologist T. M.

Luhrmann highlights the unique experience of evangelical Christians hearing God's voice in her 2012 publication *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*. Luhrmann notes that, specifically in a Vineyard church (Vineyard USA, 2017), "people practice experiencing God as a therapist" (Luhrmann in NPR's *Fresh Air*, 2012). As prayer is a central element to Christianity (not to mention other religions), I also think it is crucial to have trust that folks like Mars and Jupiter *did*

receive peace from God about their sexual identity, rather than challenging that as some homophobic Christians are wont to do (Miller & Stack, 2014; Honeywell, 2016).

As Nicola Slee highlights, prayer can be particularly instrumental for queer folks, since it may serve as a site to integrate one's sexuality, gender and faith (2014). Drawing on Susannah Cornwall, Slee explains what the role of prayer may be for queer folks:

If prayer is the outworking of our relationship with self, other and God, it requires an honesty and transparency about the reality of our lives, including our sexuality, in all their alienated, fragmented, diffused and confused states, as well as what is joyous and ecstatic (2014, p. 229).

The experiences Mars and Jupiter had in being affirmed in their sexuality by communicating with God—presumably through prayer—certainly involved honesty and transparency about their respective sexual identities. Believing in a personal relationship with God—a central belief of evangelical Christianity (Lee, 2015, p.11) and thus of TWU—logically presumes to trust that what folks say God has said to them is accurate. The belief in God speaking through prayer, however, may turn into an ethical conundrum if a non-heterosexual client in the therapeutic context believes that God has told them to pursue sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE), because research largely suggests that SOCE can be harmful (APA, 2009, p. v). In that case, however, clinicians can refer to Walker's (2013) recommendations, including: using person centred affirmative therapy practices, assessing the positive and negative perceptions of LGBQ individuals, assessing the therapist's perceived competency in working with LGBQ individuals, and helping clients to develop a *quest* (flexible and pliable) orientation toward religion (pp.125-128). Ultimately, however, the fact that both Jupiter and Mars were affirmed in their sexual identities by God bodes well for their future religious/spiritual lives. One of the primary

ways in which queer Christian folks get stuck is in feeling as though they are unloved or unacceptable in God's eyes (Ream & Savin-Williams, 2005; Wood & Conley, 2014).

If we consider the spiritual experiences of the six participants I interviewed on a scale of not connected to a spiritual community at all and extremely well connected to a spiritual community, the examples of Saturn and Mars make for an interesting juxtaposition. Both Saturn and Mars grew up in Christian homes, attended TWU, and eventually came out as lesbians; Saturn, however, no longer participates in any sort of spiritual or religious community in an active way while Mars is both involved with and supported by a Christian church community that is one of her primary reasons for remaining in the city in which she lives. Considering the small sample size of this research project combined with the diversity of spiritual experience and connection, it would be easy to assume that similar diversity exists in a larger sample size of the entire TWU student population.

Even for folks like Megan who ultimately decided to leave the Christian faith after a number of years, there are elements of Christianity that are nonetheless appealing. Megan, for example, shared that she maintains some of the "beautiful beliefs" that she learned growing up as a Christian. Megan, granted, speaks very openly about needing to "unlearn" much of what she'd grown up with in a Christian environment, especially in light of being queer:

Megan: And I, I "knew" that I was going to hell. And that was a source of great, uh, existential despair and anxiety for me.

Interviewer: Of course it was.

Megan: So that circumstantially, that held me back on my journey to self-identify as queer. And over the process of that decade of my 20s, I slowly had to unlearn all of that.

... And that meant, it meant unlearning heaven, it meant unlearning hell, it meant unlearning this place that I was certain that I was going that terrified me, and it meant unlearning this place where everyone who I had ever loved who had died, that's where I put them all.

As Megan later commented, this was all a “big process” for her, understandably so. Of course, it makes sense that Megan would choose to leave the Christian faith that she had long been a part of; it not only felt like somewhat of a betrayal by virtue of how she felt while at TWU, but also would be the reason for her eternal damnation. Logic indicates that the belief that you are going to hell would cause an extreme amount of distress.

Saturn similarly left the Christian faith, and maintains some positive associations with the character of God:

[F]rom how I understood [God], I just think he's kind of someone who, uh, has a lot of love for what he creates ... Something is bigger out there that you don't know but I just sort of picture as someone who's, likes variety and difference and loves and respects what he creates.

Although Saturn mentioned that she isn't a very spiritual person any longer, she still believes that the above-described God exists. Nevertheless, Saturn and Megan are in wildly different spiritual locations: Megan described herself as spiritual, and that she still maintains, “some of the beautiful beliefs [she] was raised with,” whereas Saturn said she isn't “overly spiritual anyway,” which she mentioned was because she was “forced” into a Christian faith. Considering the interviews conducted were each only approximately an hour, it is impossible to know the precise reasons why and story about why folks like Megan and Saturn have left the Christian church. This research of this thesis, however, would purport that this is significantly connected to their respective queer identities and the interpreted conflict between their sexual and spiritual identities.

Even for folks like Mars who now are strongly and closely connected to a Christian church whilst also being queer, there were moments wherein she felt as though her queerness precluded her from participating in the Christian faith that she believed was so important. Mars, who grew up in a Christian household and attended a Christian school during much of her primary and secondary education, spent a lot of time early in her life knowing, as she said, that being gay was wrong. She also expressed what I think, as a counsellor, can be called grief: ... “then [I] chose being a Christian and that sent me down a very confusing... I mean, I’m glad that I chose Jesus but I wish that I’d known that I didn’t have to.” Mars, who is now well supported in her church community, nonetheless expressed some sadness around having gone through the significant internal struggle.

Conclusion

After hearing stories from only six participants who attended Trinity Western University and grew up in Christian households, it is easy to see that the process of coming out and more generally navigating one’s sexual and spiritual life is wildly complex. For many folks I talked to, there were plenty of mixed feelings, along with dynamic processes of sexual identity discovery. As has already been addressed in earlier chapters of this thesis, I have a strong bias toward folks remaining engaged or reconnecting with Christian communities, as I am both an active participant and a staff person at an Anabaptist church. Although the participants I spoke with aren’t all wholly connected and well supported by spiritual communities, they’ve each made—to varying degrees—strides toward reconciling what they make of their sexual and spiritual lives.

Conclusion

Throughout the course of the three years I spent formally working on this thesis, I was met with varying responses when I shared my research subject with people. Many people indicated genuine interest and support; one person, when reminding me that she is excited to read my thesis upon completion, jokingly referred to me as her “token interesting friend”. When sharing my research with some other folks, I’ve been met with perplexed expressions from people attempting to recover from what are evidently feelings of surprise and confusion. In the midst of this project, I’ve been reflecting on the complicated experience of being an ally to queer folks, and whether or not it is appropriate for me to even identify myself as such. Further, the reaction of some people regarding my research makes me wonder how they consider my sexual or gender orientation. As I’ve mentioned earlier in this thesis, much of my teenage and young adult years were focused on unlearning homophobia; in those seasons, the possibility of folks wondering if I was less than straight would be entirely uncomfortable and quite anxiety-provoking. Now, likely as a combined result of being much older and thus caring less about what people think, having internalized that there is nothing wrong or shameful about being queer, and having developed into a more comfortable, more informed feminist, I am comfortable with whatever perceptions people have of my sexual orientation, whether that is a truthful assessment of my heterosexuality or otherwise. bell hooks writes of feminist pedagogy in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994), highlighting much of what I experienced as an undergraduate student at TWU: “there is a degree of pain involved in learning to think critically, in giving up old ways of thinking” (hooks, 1994, p.43). As I unlearned my homophobia, I also

experienced a felt sense of estrangement with some folks at TWU. My best friend was a no-nonsense supporter of queer folks, whereas I got into arguments with other students about their conservative and narrow-minded approach to education, thus assuming their reactions to my early attempts at ally-ship would be hostile. Thus, as part of feminist pedagogy, it is crucial that folks like me who are counsellors and psychotherapists actively pursue training and strive to be affirmative allies to their clients (Lamantia, Wagner & Bohecker, 2015).

The earlier chapters of this thesis make reference to my experience in seeing a good friend come out as gay to his Christian family and being deeply hurt and confused by their reactions. This, along with further experience chatting with queer folks and the deeply politicized nature of conversations around Trinity Western University (TWU) starting a law school, were and are the motivations for this project. As such, they informed the research questions originally stated in the introduction: What are the spiritual experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or queer women and gender non-binary individuals who have attended or are currently attending TWU? More specifically—and perhaps more importantly—my intention in this thesis is to highlight sites of support and isolation in the context of TWU to ultimately provide recommendations for best practice in supporting LGBTTTQIA+ individuals navigating sexual and spiritual identity concerns. Due to the fact that LGBTTTQIA+ folks disproportionately seek counselling (Estrada & Rutter, 2006; Nystrom, 1997), it is safe to assume that all counsellors and therapists will come across queer clients with relative frequency. Because of my own role as a nascent psychotherapist, the recommendations made in this conclusion will draw from research in a variety of helping professions and provide autoethnographic reflections from my own

work. Further, this conclusion marks the first steps in my commitment to personally better supporting queer folks in Christian contexts, especially like TWU. Part of the preparation for my thesis defence will be crafting a presentation that can be delivered to helping professionals, especially counsellors and psychotherapists, wanting to better understanding how to support queer folks. The PowerPoint slides for this presentation are included as an appendix to this thesis (Appendix 5 – Training Presentation).

Ultimately, the practical purpose of this project was to conduct interviews with the six participants and to provide an interpretive account of their experiences being queer at TWU: their felt senses of being seen or heard, experiencing isolation and getting support, and their experiences of being at the intersections of queer and Christian. Each of the chapters featured selections from these interviews with the intent of both interpreting and discussing what the participants shared, and to challenge the perhaps narrow understanding of who attends TWU alongside illuminating the diverse theological beliefs of those (queer) Christians who choose to attend a Christian university.

In the second chapter of this thesis, I considered the experiences of the participants in feeling isolated, unseen and unheard, and as if there was no space for them at TWU. Moreover, chapter 2 considered the various forms of social support that the participants engaged with, including a few different support groups. Chapter 3 then considered the intersections of queer and Christian identity, specifically considering the process of coming out and the dynamic nature of sexual identity. Furthermore, chapter 3 examines the experiences with Christianity that the participants had while growing up, what their connection to Christianity is presently. This final chapter, drawing on the stories shared from participants during the interviews, and from my own experiences as a

psychotherapist trainee and/or as a student and then alumni of TWU, now offers recommendations for psychotherapists and for the TWU administration.

Recommendations for counsellors and psychotherapists

Counselling and psychotherapy are well established as “effective frontline treatments for mental health problems” (Green & Latchford, 2012, p.2). Additionally well-established are the negative impacts of feeling conflicted around one’s sexual identity, especially when dually identifying as a Christian (Levy & Edmiston, 2014; Super & Jacobson, 2011; Gibbs & Goldbach, 2015; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). More than one of the participants in this research project mentioned experiencing distress as a result of withholding their true sexual identity from family or peers; Mars even shared that after coming out, she was able to experience more emotion, and her anxiety significantly decreased.

At the most basic level, psychotherapists seeing LGBTTTQIA+ clients, thus all psychotherapists who are practicing according to the College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario (CRPO) code of ethics (CRPO, 2011), need to adopt an affirmative approach (Ginicola & Smith, 2011). This does not preclude the use of other therapeutic approaches or practices. An affirmative approach is an essential attitude toward queer folks that parallels the attitude of non-judgment essential to psychotherapy as a practice, as it focuses on both affirming their sexual identity but also empathizing with other identity categories (Ginicola & Smith, 2011, p. 308). All practitioners would do well to review the APA Task Force’s report on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation (2009). It is a 138-page document and it provides an exhaustive and

thorough analysis of the history of licensed mental health practitioners' treatment of sexual minorities, particularly focusing on sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE). The report helpfully identifies that there are "serious methodological problems" in the research about SOCE; that it is predominantly from prior to 1978, that it didn't meet the "minimum standards for evaluating whether psychological treatments are ... effective", and that "none of the recent research (1999-2007) meets methodological standards that permit conclusions regarding the efficacy of safety" (APA, 2009, p. viii). Furthermore, the report determined that the "negative side effects of SOCE included loss of sexual feeling, depression, suicidality, and anxiety" (APA, 2009, p. ix). Any other form of therapy that resulted in these side effects would be promptly dismissed, since the CRPO code of ethics states that practitioners are to "strive to practice safely, effectively and ethically," which includes "to work in the best interest of my clients," and "to openly inform clients about ... potential risks and benefits" (CRPO, 2011). Fundamentally, this report recommends an affirmative approach, especially after identifying that SOCE are unlikely to be successful in changing an individual's sexual orientation, and also involve a significant risk of harm (APA, 2009, p. v).

After a thorough review of the literature, the APA Task Force "developed a framework for the appropriate application of affirmative therapeutic interventions for adults" (2009, p. 86). This framework includes five components: acceptance and support, comprehensive assessment, active coping, social support, and identity exploration and development. (APA, 2009, p.86). One of the key elements addressed by the Task Force that relates to this thesis and the interviews I conducted is identity exploration, which is, "an active process of exploring and assessing one's identity and establishing a

commitment to an integrated identity that addresses identity conflicts without an a priori treatment goal for how clients identify or live out their sexual orientation” (APA, 2009, p. 86). More important to note regarding identity exploration is the knowledge that this is a “*developmental process*” (emphasis mine), which may involve “periods of crisis, mourning, reevaluation, identity deconstruction, and growth” (APA, 2009, p.86). In layman’s terms, exploring one’s identity might be a bit messy. Unsurprisingly to those of us who support the dignity of queer folks, the ways in which psychotherapists can come alongside sexual minority clients are strikingly similar to the ways we come alongside any other client.

Considerations for Christian counsellors and psychotherapists

Knowing that Christians may have more theologically conservative views than their non-Christian counterparts (and that, using myself as evidence, this is not the rule about Christians), I also want to explore specific concerns for helping professionals who identify as Christians and also work with LGBTTQIA+ clients. Although some of the fundamental skills that psychotherapists are taught are to operate from a place of non-judgment, and that therapy is not about them but rather their clients (Eriksen, Marston & Korte, 2002), this is not necessarily an easy skill to develop. Megan, one of the participants in this research project who is now a practicing therapist, reminded me that it is important for counsellors and therapists to maintain a perspective of non-judgment even if they don’t agree with their clients. Moreover, when Christians therapists believe that the stakes are high for their LGBTTQIA+ clients—that perhaps they will go to hell for their sinful behaviour—it is somewhat understandable that the therapist might, knowingly or unknowingly, steer the client toward sexual orientation change (though, as

demonstrated earlier in this chapter, sexual orientation change efforts are at best, unhelpful, and at worst, lethally risky). That said, and based on the above recommendations from the APA Task Force, there are a variety of ways to mitigate the impacts of psychotherapist bias, which is helpful for Christians and non-Christians alike. It should be noted, however, that the person of the psychotherapist cannot be erased from a counselling relationship. Thus, in order to be “culturally competent”, the therapist needs to recognize that their biases are not wholly eliminated but instead minimized and well managed in the therapeutic context (Brown, 2009; Mohr et al., 2009). One of the primary means by which therapists can become more culturally competent is through self-awareness, which can be defined as “being cognizant of one’s culturally informed attitudes, beliefs, and values regarding race/ethnicity and culture, along with an awareness of the socio-political relevance of cultural privilege, discrimination, and oppression” (Constantine et al, 2007 in Vargas & Wilson, 2011). Interestingly, in Morrison and Borgen’s 2010 qualitative study of elements of counsellor Christianity that help and hinder clients, in addition to discovering a long list of positive contributions that a counsellor’s Christian faith could make to the therapeutic relationship, they also discovered that a few categories of hindrance existed: the client’s actions being contrary to the belief system of the counsellor, the counsellor possessing limited empathy as a result of their personal biases or blind spots, and having different expectations but a shared religious belief (Morrison & Borgen, 2010, pp. 36-37). Psychotherapists, then, can rest in the fact that their personally spirituality can serve as a helpful element in the therapeutic relationship, but that they must also be extremely mindful of bringing that spirituality into the room with a client. Because things like empathy and clarity of

expectations are crucial elements to a safe and successful therapeutic relationship, ensuring that counsellors and therapists are intentionally working towards greater self-awareness is key, especially when working with marginalized folks like LGBTTTQIA+ individuals.

Additionally, it is important for psychotherapists to recognize the limits of their role in the therapeutic relationship. Although there are some folks in helping professions who blur the lines of their role as therapist with another role, in the case of LGBTTTQIA+ individuals seeking therapy from Christian practitioners, it is particularly important to distinguish between therapy and ministry (Harris & Yancey, 2017, p.132). In my own experience as a psychotherapist trainee, I encountered a client who had a religious background and also identified as gay. Despite my involvement in a church community and my role as an elder, I ensured that my time with the client focused on therapeutic skills rather than theological views. If I explored spirituality with the client, I asked questions such as “how would you describe the character of God?” to find more information about her possible internalized homophobia, rather than directly affirming to her—from a spiritual leadership perspective—that God loves her regardless of her sexual orientation. Although this situation demonstrates what I would think is managing my own positive biases toward including queer folks within spiritual communities, it was nonetheless crucial for me to ensure that my own belief system was not imposed on the client. As Harris and Yancey point out, therapeutic practice begins from a place of the client identifying their problem or distress, and then working with the client’s values to negotiate that stress (2017, p.132). They offer from Alan Keith-Lucas’ philosophical framing in his 1985 book *So You Want to Be a Social Worker: A Primer for the Christian*

Student, which I think—despite being over thirty years old and aimed at social workers—is of particular relevance to the intention of this thesis. This philosophical framing merits lengthier consideration, but for the purposes of length, I’ll just include a highlight that I think well-summarizes the role of the Christian (or spiritual) psychotherapist:

As a Christian committed to the dissemination of what I believe to be the truth, my task as a social worker is not so much to convince others of this truth, as to provide them with the experience of being loved, forgiven and cared for so that the Good News I believe in may be a credible option for them. (Keith-Lucas in Harris & Yancey, 2017, pp. 136-137)
If you substitute “psychotherapist” for “social worker” in this text, written originally more than thirty years ago, still rings true and relevant for Christian folks working therapeutically with LGBTTQIA+ clients.

When considering the ways in which Christian psychotherapists can use their faith as a means to aid their LGBTTQIA+ clients, rather than employing the use of sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE), we can consider the therapist’s Christian spirituality as a means by which to attend well to self-care. One of the oft-forgotten elements of being a psychotherapist or other helping professional is caring for the person of the therapist in order to avoid compassion fatigue (Dorian & Killebrew, 2014; Brucato & Neimeyer, 2009; Carroll, Gilroy & Murra, 1999). I know in my own time as a psychotherapist trainee, I felt that I had to constantly ring the self-care bell. Perhaps this is a good reminder that self-care is particularly challenging for women (Carroll, Gilroy & Murra, 1999). Because research has shown that the most important element in counselling is the relationship between the therapist and the client, also referred to as the therapeutic alliance (Cabaniss, 2012; Fluckiger et al., 2012), ensuring that the psychotherapist is feeling at their best will only better support their ability to build rapport and create safety with the client.

In my own experience of doing a student placement at the local rape crisis centre and thus spending most of my counselling time working with survivors of sexual trauma, self-care and boundaries were crucial. And, when dealing with hearing extremely painful and sometimes frightening stories from clients, one of the ways in which I took care of myself was through prayer and connection to my spiritual community. As such, my identifying as a Christian was, although indirectly so, an asset to my clients: I was able to hold space for clients with extremely challenging and traumatic histories while avoiding vicarious trauma (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Moreover, connecting to my spiritual community and prayer were ways in which I can engage authentically with the spiritual side of my identity while ensuring that any clients I interact with are not unhelpfully influenced by my personal beliefs.

Recommendations for Trinity Western University (TWU)

In addition to providing psychotherapeutic recommendations, it is important—in light of interviewing students and alumni of TWU—to address their interests and thus make recommendations to the TWU administration. First and foremost, in order to better make space for TWU queers, is to recognize—based on the media coverage regarding TWU’s desire to start a law school combined with my research—that indeed, queer students have attended and currently attend TWU. Moreover, it is also important to examine how these issues have played out at similar institutions. For the purpose of this thesis, I will focus specifically on the parallels, and thus the heightened concern for TWU queers, between Biola University and TWU.

Biola University, located in California, isn’t quite twice TWU’s population and is also a private Christian school with an evangelical basis (Biola University Inc, n.d.).

Moreover, Biola has had challenges with its contract, which bears many similarities to the community covenant at TWU and the subsequent exclusion of queer students. Most notably, Biola's student handbook states, "Biola University affirms that sexual relationships are designed by God to be expressed solely within a marriage between husband and wife" (Biola University, 2017). Arguably, Biola's contract is even more problematic than TWU's, since the Biola University student handbook expressly prohibits a variety of specific practices, i.e., wearing a halter top because it may be perceived as "sexually provocative", or "lying in bed together clothed" because it promotes sexual relations outside the confines of marriage. These are not outlined in TWU's community covenant (Biola University, 2017). Biola also mandates chapel attendance, prohibits organized dances on campus, a practice which TWU approved in the mid-2000s (The Gateway, 2006), and "abhor[s] the destruction of innocent life through abortion-on-demand" (Biola University, 2017).

As a result of the abovementioned policies, a handful of queer-identified students at Biola started the Biola Queer Underground (BQU), which Deborah Jian Lee describes at length in *Rescuing Jesus: How People of Color, Women and Queer Christians are Reclaiming Evangelicalism* (2015). Lee spent a considerable amount of time alongside the founders of the BQU, Tasha Magness and William Haggerty (Sallie, 2013; Lee, 2015) while they determined the best course of action for making space for Biola queers. BQU strategies varied from distributing flyers on campus, starting a blog, and eventually creating a BQU yearbook, in which 15 queer Biola students came out as members of the BQU, to "stand in the gap" on behalf of those queer Biola students who are unable to come out for fear of expulsion (Love, 2013; Sallie, 2013). News around the public

proclamation of the BQU was prominent and divisive. An article published by The Chimes, the student newspaper at Biola, has over 250 comments (Amaya & Sallie, 2012). And unlike the somewhat murky outcome of being out on TWU's campus, out Biola students in relationships can assume—based on the words of Chris Grace, Biola's vice president of Student Development and University Planning—that they will be expelled (Seed, 2011). Although Grace was careful to state that, “it is rare, or not all that common, that the university has to ask a student to leave because of their struggle with sexual behavioral sins,” it is clear that this has taken place, and that Biola queers felt threatened regardless of the frequency of expulsion (Lee, 2015, pp.59-61).

Unfortunately, despite the great risks undertaken by queer students at Biola, the “startling conclusion” those students came to expect was far from achieved (Lee, 2015, p.260). Deborah Jian Lee reports that BQU was contacted by Biola University's lawyers who insisted that they stop using the Biola name (2015, p. 260); their Facebook page is now called “Biolans' Equal Ground – BQU” (n.d.). Even if there has been progress in the campus climate, it is hard to quantify because their policies in their student handbook have not changed to date, they remain on Campus Pride's “Shame List” (Campus Pride, 2017), and—only a few months ago—a pride flag was stolen off a Lent memorial on the Biola campus intended to recognize the lost lives of marginalized students (Eller, 2017).

Based on what I heard from the TWU students and alumni I interviewed, TWU has created—inadvertently, I would hope, but created nonetheless—a culture of fear for queer TWU students. To varying degrees, participants in my research shared that they hesitated in coming out at TWU for fear of the repercussions: They feared losing friends and/or being generally excluded from the TWU community, losing their student

leadership positions, losing their scholarships, or ultimately being expelled from the university. Whether TWU has gone so far as to expel all of the queer students they've discovered or not is not actually the point: Feeling afraid because of who you are at your university is incontrovertibly problematic. Though I've looked for information regarding how many students have been expelled from the university for non-academic reasons, I have had no luck. TWU's website describes the accountability process which students will undergo if their actions are in conflict with the community covenant, but the likelihood of this process occurring is not clear. Although TWU's accountability process is outlined for "minor incidents" and "more serious incidents", it is unclear which incidents are considered minor or major (Trinity Western University, n.d. i). Later in the accountability process, the action precedent describes "likely consequences for first offences", and gives some examples of what would constitute each of these consequences (Trinity Western University, n.d. i). Although the overall accountability process may seem to hinge primarily on love, respect and reconciliation toward the community, it is understandable why many of my participants and other queer TWU alumni and students experience such fear: "each case is considered on an individual basis" (Trinity Western University, n.d. i).

A friend of mine who also attended TWU was caught doing what is likely considered a minor incident (climbing on the roof of a campus residence building), and was subsequently required to meet with a Resident Director—which he described as "awkward and useless"—and pay a small fine. He figured, however, that if a different Resident Director had caught him, the outcome might have been different. This is a small example to demonstrate how the case-by-case nature of the accountability process may

serve to privilege some students over others. Thus, it is difficult to know if a queer student caught in a prohibited relationship would experience short-term suspension for “sexual misconduct” or fall on the good graces of the (hopefully increasingly less rare) ally on TWU’s campus.

The small number of participants in my research project may lead some people to take a “not all queer TWU students” position, suggesting that perhaps my research project only attracted those queer students who experienced the greatest negativity while attending TWU. First of all, one of the participants in my research described her time at TWU as largely positive. Second, this is an important opportunity to note that there are many additional queer TWU alumni who have spoken out in various media outlets about their experiences at TWU (Moore, 2016; Anonymous, 2016; Lindsay, 2016; Cameron, 2017; Woo, 2014; Harris, 2014), not to mention the long list of folks who’ve contributed to the “Breaking the Silence Together: TWU Alumni on the LGBTQI Experience” article published in *Mars’ Hill*, TWU’s campus newspaper (*Mars’ Hill Admin*, 2016, November 2). Unfortunately, most of these alumni describe much more grim experiences while attending TWU than that of the participants in my research.

As discussed earlier in this thesis, Ashlee Davidson, who was a star soccer player while at TWU, lost her scholarship, was put on “behavioural probation” and was temporarily suspended from the soccer team when she was discovered to be in a relationship with a woman (Lindsay, 2016; Moore, 2016, November 3). Davidson highlights an important point that many folks don’t seem to consider: She didn’t show up at Trinity knowing she wasn’t straight. As such, attending a different institution as a result of knowing she couldn’t honestly adhere to the community covenant was never an

option for Ashlee. When meeting with the then Director of Student Life, Davidson said that she was “caught off guard by the relationship”, “still figuring things out”, and ultimately feeling deep confusion and self-loathing (Moore, 2016, November 3). Davidson thankfully received some support from faculty allies, whom she names as hero and heroine of her story (Moore, 2016, November 3). Interestingly, three of my participants spoke highly of their interactions with a handful of TWU professors.

Alexandra Moore, who shared Ashlee Davidson’s story on her blog, *Mouth of Babel*, is also a queer TWU alumnus who speaks openly about what she experienced at TWU. Moore describes nearly losing her paid position working for the TWU English department when she wrote a piece for the student newspaper in support of the legalization of same sex marriage (Moore, 2016, November 2). Furthermore, Moore explains that she was tied to attending TWU because her parents refused to financially support her education if she attended elsewhere. They made this clear to her when she came out as an atheist, which further confirmed that the same would be true if she came out as queer (Moore, 2016, November 2). Moore, like Davidson, is another TWU alum who began attending TWU believing she was straight only to discover while at TWU that she was queer, further cementing the importance of making space for the queer folks that do or may later exist at TWU. As highlighted in the previous chapter, coming out is nothing if not a process that occurs over time.

Similarly, Ren Lunicke began zir time at TWU identifying as straight and having a boyfriend, which later changed when ze fell in love with a woman (Cameron, 2017). This resulted in Lunicke signing an ‘amended’ version of the community covenant, wherein ze crossed out the parts ze didn’t agree with (Cameron, 2017). This resulted in the TWU

administration suggesting that ze seek counselling on campus. Years later, Lunicke has created a one-person, autobiographical production called “ze”: queer as fuck!, which is described on zir website as “a riotous romp about sex, gender, and one queer’s parade of identities on the way to pride” (Lunicke, 2016a). According to an interview Lunicke gave to *Mars’ Hill*, the TWU student newspaper, in late 2016, much of the performance takes place at TWU and describes Lunicke’s coming out processes; first identifying as a lesbian and then later as trans/genderqueer (Bouwman, 2016). More importantly, however, Lunicke expressed the same sentiments that I gleaned from the participants in my interviews: that ze was *afraid* while attending TWU as a result of zir sexual orientation and/or gender identity. In Layla Cameron’s powerful article for the Daily Xtra, Lunicke is quoted as describing zir experience at TWU thusly:

I was terrified while I was attending the school that at any point I could be found out. Nearly all of us had a reverberating effect for years after finishing at Trinity that made it difficult for us to get away from the shame. (Cameron, 2017)

Thankfully for other queer folks still attending TWU, Lunicke has created a story bank on zir website where LGBTQI TWU students and alumni can share—publicly or anonymously—about their experiences at TWU, with the intention of ensuring that folks know their stories matter (Lunicke, 2016b).

A few of my participants mentioned getting counselling through the Master’s in Counselling Psychology program at TWU; they shared mixed reviews. One of the participants, Neptune, said that it was not helpful, since both she and the counsellor were aware of the implications of her sexual identity for her leadership positions, and thus Neptune felt a space or a disconnect between her and the counsellor. Granted, all counsellors and psychotherapists make commitments to confidentiality, but that does not

change Neptune's perception of the risk of coming out to her counsellor. Moreover, because TWU's counselling centre is located virtually in the middle of campus (Trinity Western University, n.d. j), there is an additional risk to students if they don't want their TWU peers to know they are seeking counselling. Although the stigma around seeking help and support via counselling is quite likely lower than it was in the past, this stigma nonetheless still exists (Prior, 2012; Vogel & Armstrong, 2010; Vogel, Wester & Larson, 2007; Zartaloudi & Madianos, 2010) and may increase the discomfort of LGBTTTQIA+ students seeking counselling at TWU. Stating that you are going to counselling may very well lead to a conversation about why, which would potentially jeopardize queer TWU students' safety if they are not yet out. And although he didn't specifically refer to TWU when making this suggestion, Mercury mentioned as a recommendation that there should be greater access to free counselling services for queer folks. Therapy can be prohibitively expensive, and free counselling often involves a lengthy waitlist; I know the latter to be true from my own experience doing counselling at a rape crisis centre.

Additionally, as discussed previously in this thesis, there exists a diversity of theological perspectives within Christianity, and thus I recommend that TWU conduct a comprehensive review of the denominations with which TWU students are affiliated, whether they were a part of those denominations while they were growing up, or while attending TWU. Were the TWU administration able to have a broader picture of the theological diversity at TWU—which may be more or less diverse than I assume—they would thus have a more informed understanding upon which to base any updates or changes to the community covenant. If, for example, a large percentage (perhaps an increasing percentage) of TWU students were affiliated with those Christian church

denominations that affirm same-sex marriage, perhaps TWU would consider a change to their definition of marriage.

Moreover, TWU would do well to review the importance and efficacy of the community covenant, either with a focus group of diverse TWU alumni, or with as much of the alumni community as possible (since asking current TWU students to comment on how well they follow or don't follow the TWU covenant would be a precarious question at best). In my own experience as a TWU student, I signed the covenant every year, yet I'm confident I did not follow all the guidelines outlined in the community covenant; I did not voluntarily abstain from gossip, or from using vulgar or obscene language (Trinity Western University, n. d. a.), to which my best friend and dorm mates could certainly attest.

Additionally, the administration of TWU would be well served by bringing in consultants to offer their feedback on TWU's responses to its LGBTTTQIA+ students and alumni. An outside consultant, with relative objectivity, could offer well-informed recommendations without getting bogged down by individual conversations with students or other university stakeholders. Lastly, TWU could continue the good work of hosting LGBTTTQIA+ speakers and engaging the TWU campus in critical discussions about TWU's approach to the treatment of LGBTTTQIA+ individuals: the 2015 event *Building Bridges: A Conversation on LGBT Christians and the Church* hosted by TWU's Gender Studies Institute boasted attendance over 1,000 people (Trinity Western University, 2015).

Wolff and Himes (2010) conducted an important study of Christian higher education institutions and what they refer to as the “purposeful exclusion” of sexual minority youth. This study is particularly revelatory regarding the circumstances at TWU, because the study considers institutions that are members of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), of which TWU is also a member. Wolff and Himes celebrate a 2001 report released by the CCCU, which addressed various perspectives on sexual minority youth in the context of Christian college communities (2010, p. 444); they also carefully identify that it has some major limitations, and thus offer further suggestions for how campus administration can foster a climate of grace (p. 455). TWU would do well to consider these suggestions, which include: “(a) eliminate discriminatory admission and disciplinary policies; (b) provide protective policies; (c) provide safe social support networks; and (d) provide safe and adequate health care” (Wolff & Himes, 2010, p. 455). Most notable in these recommendations is eliminating discriminatory admission and disciplinary policies, more specifically because Wolff and Himes note that,

If it is truly a desire to limit behavior and not a desire to exclude all SMY that motivates such policies, then community standards that limit sexual experiences outside of marriage are sufficient for SMY and their heterosexual peers. (2010, p. 455).

Although such a recommendation may still prove too challenging for the TWU administration to adopt, as it could be interpreted as changing TWU’s understanding of the definition of marriage, it does provide a possible opportunity for putting heterosexual and non-heterosexual TWU students on more equal ground as the community covenant is concerned. Because fundamentally, a major challenge experienced by LGBTTQIA+ students attending TWU is feeling as though they are less than in comparison to

heterosexual students. Unfortunately, the likelihood of TWU making such dramatic changes may not be high. If we consider what TWU has to risk, despite the fundamental need to risk it for queer students, it is difficult to state with confidence that changes such as the above will come quickly, if at all. To adapt Andrea Smith's words from *Native Americans and the Christian Right: The Gendered Politics of Unlikely Alliances* (2008) specifically to the experience of LGBTTTQIA+ folks at TWU, this project points to possibilities for political intervention that may mobilize and create new alliances for social change. Whether or not more progressive folks at TWU will seize on these opportunities to better support TWU queers, and if they do whether or not these interventions will work, remains to be seen (adapted from Smith, 2008, p. 272).

There are a wide array of barriers to change at TWU, include the possible loss of many or major donors—perhaps sounding the death knell for a privately-funded university—who hold more conservative views of marriage and sexuality; the maintenance of previously discussed straight privilege since the majority of staff, students and faculty at TWU are likely straight. It is important to reflect on the fact that there is no data around how many queer students, staff and faculty are present at TWU since by virtue of the covenant—unless they're all celibate, which some queer Christians are—they're espoused to not exist at TWU. As I write this thesis, and as the list of TWU students and alumni who have experienced isolation and fear and have been silenced by the TWU administration grows ever longer, I am plagued by the question: When will it be enough? As many folks have asked about different situations of marginalization, how many TWU students will have to go through these experiences before changes can be made?

Consideration for Future Research

Fundamentally, what this thesis demonstrates is that LGBTTQIA+ individuals who attend Trinity Western University require more space to voice their concerns along with greater support for the challenges of navigating sexual identity concerns in young adulthood while in a Christian environment. Although there were limited instances in my interviews of participants describing open hostility toward queer folks at TWU, there nonetheless exists a felt sense of isolation and exclusion for TWU students who do not identify as straight. Therefore, future research would continue to consider the experience of LGBTTQIA+ students attending TWU, with the aim of better understanding the day-to-day challenges that these students face, and what can be done to better support them at the intersections of the sexual and spiritual identities. Future research would also greatly benefit from a thorough examination of racial identity and the ways in which it interacts with sexual, gender and spiritual identity.

File Number: 08-16-30

Date (mm/dd/yyyy): 11/25/2016



Université d'Ottawa **University of Ottawa**
Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

Certificate of Ethics Approval

Social Science and Humanities REB

Principal Investigator / Supervisor / Co-investigator(s) / Student(s)

<u>First Name</u>	<u>Last Name</u>	<u>Affiliation</u>	<u>Role</u>
Shoshana	Magnet	Social Sciences / Women's Studies	Supervisor
Christie	Esau	Social Sciences / Women's Studies	Student Researcher

File Number: 08-16-30

Type of Project: Master's Thesis

Title: Queering Christianity: Sexual and spiritual identity navigation in queer Christian women and the implications for practitioners of psychotherapy

Approval Date (mm/dd/yyyy)

11/25/2016

Expiry Date (mm/dd/yyyy)

11/24/2017

Special Conditions / Comments:



Université d'Ottawa **University of Ottawa**
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This is to confirm that the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board identified above, which operates in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement and other applicable laws and regulations in Ontario, has examined and approved the application for ethical approval for the above named research project as of the Ethics Approval Date indicated for the period above and subject to the conditions listed the section above entitled "Special Conditions / Comments".

During the course of the study the protocol may not be modified without prior written approval from the REB except when necessary to remove participants from immediate endangerment or when the modification(s) pertain to only administrative or logistical components of the study (e.g. change of telephone number). Investigators must also promptly alert the REB of any changes which increase the risk to participant(s), any changes which considerably affect the conduct of the project, all unanticipated and harmful events that occur, and new information that may negatively affect the conduct of the project and safety of the participant(s). Modifications to the project, information/consent documentation, and/or recruitment documentation, should be submitted to this office for approval using the "Modification to research project" form available at: <http://recherche.uottawa.ca/deontologie/submissions-and-reviews>.

Please submit an annual status report to the Protocol Officer 4 weeks before the above-referenced expiry date to either close the file or request a renewal of ethics approval. This document can be found at: <http://recherche.uottawa.ca/deontologie/submissions-and-reviews>.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the Ethics Office at extension 5387 or by e-mail at: ethics@uOttawa.ca.

Germain Zongo
Protocol Officer for Research Ethics
For Dr. Barbara Graves, Chair of the Social Sciences and Humanities REB

Seeking
Queer Christian Women
to participate in research

Participate in ***Queering Christianity: Sexual and spiritual identity navigation in LGBTQIA+ folks at Trinity Western University and the implications for practitioners of psychotherapy***, a research study about what it means to be a queer, Christian person in the context of a Christian university.

As part of this study, you will participate in a 60 minute, semi-structured interview. Participation is both voluntary and confidential. Six candidates will be selected to participate, and will be contacted to arrange an interview.

** Permission for this research has been granted by both the University of Ottawa and Trinity Western University.*

Eligibility

1. Identify as a woman and/or gender queer
2. Identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or queer
3. Identify as a Christian during attendance at Trinity Western University (TWU)
4. Be between 18 and 30 years of age
5. Be sufficiently fluent in English
6. Have attended and/or are currently attending TWU

People with disabilities, people of colour, Aboriginal people, and people from other marginalized groups are encouraged to participate.

Interested?

Contact **Christie Esau**





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Appendix 3: Consent Form

Consent Form

Queering Christianity: Sexual and spiritual identity navigation in LGBTQIA+ folks at Trinity Western University and the implications for practitioners of psychotherapy

Principal Researcher: Christie Esau
University of Ottawa – Institute of Feminist and Gender Studies
120 University, Room 11002, Social Sciences Building, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5

Thesis Supervisor: Shoshana Magnet
University of Ottawa – Institute of Feminist and Gender Studies
120 University, Room 11002, Social Sciences Building, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this project is to gather information directly from lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or queer Christian folks in order to make recommendations to psychotherapists so that they may better support their clients in the intersection of what it means to be a woman or gender non-binary person who is both queer and Christian. Additionally, this project hopes to provide resources that will also be of use to members of Christian churches, as well as queer allies.

Participation

Selected participants will be asked to complete a 60-minute interview conducted by the principal researcher. The interview will be audio recorded, and then later transcribed. During the interview, the principal researcher will ask questions in four different thematic areas:

- Identity
- Support and resources
- Romantic and sexual history/involvement
- Religion, spirituality and Christian community

Interviews will be conducted electronically through Skype. Participants can select any private, quiet location to conduct their interview; the principal researcher will conduct interviews either from her home office or from a private room at the University of Ottawa.

In addition to participating in the interview itself, participants will be asked after the interview has been transcribed to review their transcript and to add comments if they feel there is anything they would like to add. Participants requesting an electronic copy of their transcript for review will receive the password by arranging a phone call with the principal researcher. If the participant is unable to speak over the phone, the principal researcher will use an email-encrypting program that allows a message to self-destruct after it has been read. After the completion of the interview and the transcript review, the responsibilities of the participant will be complete.

Confidentiality

Pièce 11002 / Room 11002
11^e étage / 11th floor
120, rue Université / University Pvt.
Ottawa ON K1N 6N5



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In order to protect the identity and anonymity of the participants in the publications, each participant will be given a pseudonym. The list of true names and pseudonyms will be kept in a password-protected document on the principal researcher's computer. Additionally, publications will not refer to any identifying information of participants, beyond their identification as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or queer and their having attended or currently attending Trinity Western University.

Benefits and Drawbacks of Research

Spiritual and sexual identity are very personal subjects, thus the questions during the interview may cause some discomfort for participants. More specifically, the questions regarding the participant's sexual history and experience of coming out may be particularly uncomfortable for participants to share. Participants who have experienced or are currently experiencing difficult situations due to their identity may experience psychological or emotional discomfort for talking about it.

In order to mitigate the risk, participants will be provided a list of resources in the lower mainland region of British Columbia (where Trinity Western University is located) should they wish to seek support. If participants do not reside in lower mainland BC, the principal researcher will conduct additional research regarding similar supportive resources in the participant's region. Additionally, participants will be assured prior to agreeing to participate—during the consent process and during actual participation—that they are able to refrain from answering a question or questions, or can discontinue their participation at any time.

Although there is certainly some risk of discomfort during the interview process, it is also possible that the interview process will result in helpful reflection for participants. Additionally, participants may find that the end results of the research project represent their experience well, and that they have contributed to the process of getting better support for queer Christians.

Rights of the Participant

As a participant, you have the following rights:

- 1) The right to withdraw from the project at any time;
- 2) The right to request your data after withdrawing from the project;
- 3) The right to refuse to answer questions without fear of reprisal or ill treatment;
- 4) The right to be informed of how your identity will be protected in the publication of the data; and
- 5) The right to be informed of the limits of confidentiality.

Ethics Office and Filing Complaints

Should you wish to file a complaint, please contact the Office of Research Ethics and Integrity at the information provided below:

Office of Research Ethics and Integrity
Tabaret Hall – 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154
Ottawa, ON Canada K1N 6N5
Phone: (613) 562-5387 | Email: ethics@uottawa.ca



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Signature of Participant and Principal Researcher

Your signature does not mean that you have given up any right, but rather that you have been informed of the requirements of the proposed research and that you agree to take part in this research project.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Principal Researcher

Date

Resource List

Qmunity: BC's Queer Resource Centre

- <http://qmunity.ca/get-support/counselling/>
- (604) 684-5307, extension 100
- reception@qmunity.ca
- Free, short-term (maximum of 12 session) counselling
- Free, peer-lead support group for questioning women interested in exploring queer women's identities, relationships and communities

Mental Matters

- mentalmatters@yahoo.ca
- Vancouver-based support group for LGBT people with mental health issues.
- Meets first and third Monday of each month.

Prideline BC

- 1-800-566-1170 toll-free in BC / (604) 684-6869 in Lower Mainland
- Peer support, info and refers for anyone in BC
- Available weeknights (Monday to Friday) from 7:00 pm to 10:00 pm

SFU Surrey Counselling Centre

- <http://www.sfu.ca/education/centres-offices/sfu-surrey-counselling-centre.html>
- (604) 587-7320
- Free counselling services

New Westminster Counselling Centre

- <http://ecps.educ.ubc.ca/counselling-centres/new-westminster-ubc-counselling-centre/>
- (604) 525-6651
- Free counselling services



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The Adler Centre Counselling Clinic

- <http://adlercentre.ca/counselling-clinic/>
- (604) 742-1818
- apabc@adler.bc.ca
- \$50 per session for individual counselling with a Master's intern; \$80 per session for Associates
- NB: Sliding scale available

Oak Counselling Service Society

- <http://oakcounselling.org/>
- (604) 266-5611
- Reduced fee counselling at Vancouver Unitarian Centre

Family Services of Greater Vancouver

- <http://www.fsgv.ca/find-the-support-you-need/counselling/>
- (604) 874-2938
- Sliding scale based on household income.

Crisis Centre - Chat

- <http://crisiscentrechat.ca/>
- Available noon to 1:00 am in BC and Yukon only
Crisis Centre – Distress Phone Services
- <https://crisiscentre.bc.ca/distress-phone-services/>
- Greater Vancouver: (604) 872-3311
- BC wide: 1-800-784-2433

Dragonstone Counselling

- <http://www.dragonstonecounselling.ca>
- (604) 738-7557
- info@dragonstonecounselling.ca
- Lower cost counselling available to LGBTQ people



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Interview Questions and Prompts

* Prompts are indicated after the initial question in *italics*.

1) Identity

Describe yourself in a few sentences. (*Whatever comes to mind first!*)

Are there any 'categories' that you feel you fit into with particular comfort? (*Perhaps your gender identity, role in the workplace...*)

How do you self-identify? (*As a gay woman, bisexual, lesbian, queer...*)

Are there any other labels that you use to identify yourself? (*If, for example, you identify as a lesbian, do you ever refer to yourself as a gay woman, queer, etc...*)

What does it mean to you to identify as [self identification]?

Describe the circumstances surrounding your choosing to identify as you did. (*How were you feeling, what helped you decide, and how did others react?*)

What are your thoughts about 'coming out' as a queer woman? (*Was the process of 'coming out', if you've done it, important to you?*)

To what degree did things change for you when you 'came out'? (*This can range from 'not at all' to 'it changed my entire life'!*)

Are there times/places/circumstances wherein you are, intentionally or unintentionally, 'in the closet'?

Have you felt as though you had to choose between being queer and being spiritual or religious? (*What were the circumstances? What prompted this feeling?*)

2) Support and Resources

Who in your life is the most/least supportive of your being queer? (*How did you know that they were/were not supportive?*)

Who in your life is the most/least supportive of your being spiritual? (*How did you know that they were/were not supportive?*)

Have you ever been to see a counsellor, therapist, psychologist? If so, what was that experience like for you? If not, what are your thoughts/feelings about counselling?

Would you say that you are a part of a community? (*What's that community like/who is a part of it?*)

Are there any books, magazines, websites, podcasts that you've found to be particularly encouraging or helpful? (*For either your sexual or spiritual identity, or both!*)

3) Romantic and Sexual History

What is your current relationship status? *(If you are comfortable disclosing that information.)*

Tell me a bit about your past romantic relationships. *(I.e. how did these relationships end? What 5 words would you use to describe them?)*

Can you remember the first time you realized you were attracted to someone? *(What was that like for you?)*

What sorts of messages did you get about sex when you were growing up? *(This can be from family, friends, media, school, church...)*

If you could go back in time, what would you like to say to your preteen self about sex and sexual identity? *(Perhaps in contrast to the messages you received and may have internalized, for better or for worse.)*

How would you describe the idea of virginity? *(This may or may not have to relate to your own sexual experiences.)*

What meaning has virginity had/does virginity have in your relationships?

Has virginity ever come up in conversation with friends or partners? *(If so, what were those conversations like? What feelings did they evoke?)*

4) Religion, Spirituality and Christian Community

Do you distinguish between religion and spirituality? How so? *(Maybe you prefer identifying as one over the other, maybe you think they're one and the same...)*

What does it mean to you to be spiritual or religious? *(I.e. church attendance, connection to a higher power, self-awareness, etc. What purpose does spirituality serve in your life?)*

At what point in your life would you have first felt a connection to something spiritual? What about a time when you felt spiritually disconnected? *(Based on your own interpretation of what it means to be spiritual and what connection looks like for you specifically.)*

How much do the people in your life know about your spirituality? How do the people in your life feel about your spirituality? *(You can include if their perception or understanding of your spirituality has changed over time.)*

What has your experience of/with church been like? *(This can be directly or indirectly, depending on your level of involvement.)*

(If you believe in God...) How would you describe God's character? What do you think God thinks of you?

What draws you to Christianity in particular? *(What was involved in connecting with your*

specific church?)

What is (or was) it like to be a queer Christian at Trinity Western University? *(If you were out on campus, how did your peers react when they found out you were queer?)*

Were there times when you felt particularly connected or disconnected to the community at Trinity Western?

With what elements of Christianity do you find yourself most comfortable? Most uncomfortable?

Have you been involved in other types of churches or spiritual communities? *(I.e. Buddhist, Catholic, etc.)*

How do you think your identification as queer shapes your spiritual life? Or vice versa?

What are the best things the church can do to support you? What about the queer community in general? *(If you're not currently connected to a church, what things would draw you back toward it or push you away?)*

5) Concluding Questions

Is there anything else that you wanted to share that you feel is important or that may be relevant to this research project?

Do you have any additional questions for me?

Supporting LGBTTOIA+ Clients at the Intersections of Sexual and Spiritual Identity

Introduction

My name is Christie Esau and my pronouns are she/her. I am a qualifying registered psychotherapist, and I work at the Ottawa Rape Crisis Centre doing short term counselling with survivors of sexual trauma. After completing a BA in English and a Bachelor of Education at Trinity Western University, I started my career as a high school teacher, then spent four years working in university administration before returning to school to study Counselling and Spirituality at Saint Paul University. I'm also an elder at The Meeting House Ottawa, which is an Anabaptist church focused on the irreligious teachings of Jesus.

If at any point during this presentation you have a question, please raise your hand and feel free to ask. Also, if you need to leave the room for whatever reason, feel free to do so; there is no need to police your bodies on behalf of this presentation.

My Research

I conducted qualitative interviews with six LGBTTOIA+ individuals who were either women or gender non-binary who also currently attend Trinity Western University (TWU) or have attended in the past. Since TWU is a private Christian university with a community covenant that states marriage is between a man and a woman, and that sex outside of marriage is prohibited, I wanted to hear from queer TWU students about their experiences living at the intersections of Christian community and being queer.

Besides making recommendations to TWU as to how the university administration could better support LGBTTOIA+ students, the purpose of my research was also to develop recommendations for psychotherapists (and other helping professionals) for ways in which they can support clients who fall in those same (or similar) intersections.

Learning from Queer Folks

One of the methodological approaches I used in my research was autoethnography, which is essentially including snippets of one's own life story as part of the research. As such, much of my research process and my writing involved an awareness of my own privilege: I am a cisgender, heterosexual, Christian married woman, so I have no first-hand knowledge of what it is like to experience harassment, homophobia, and overall distress as a result of being a queer person.

In addition to the interviews I conducted, I also am intentional about listening to what queer folks have to say about their experiences, in both my personal and professional life. To demonstrate an example of adapting this listening posture, then, I'm including a brief video clip: [Can You Be A Queer Christian? - In The Closet](#)

Self-Educate

Although much of the work of counselling and psychotherapy is listening to the stories of your clients and meeting them where they are at, it is crucial that psychotherapists do not rely on their queer clients for their education about queer experiences. As part of professional practice, therapists should be aware of the different acronyms and ways of self-identifying that queer folks use:

- Lesbian
- Gay
- Bisexual
- Transgender
- Two-Spirit
- Queer
- Intersex
- Asexual

It is crucial, also, that psychotherapists understand where their professional gaps exist; this is part of good practice and being self-aware!

First Impressions

Accessibility Concerns

Because seeking therapy is a vulnerable experience, it is fundamental that psychotherapists provide a safe environment (not to mention safety in the therapeutic alliance) for their clients. Some elements of comfort and safety that are specifically important for queer folks include having all-gender washroom signs (which may be available for free from <http://www.mydoorsign.com/all-gender-restroom-signs>), and providing information on websites and print material to indicate your queer-affirmative stance. It is reasonably common knowledge, but this is often indicated by a rainbow flag, or is described explicitly.

A good example of making an office or space accessible for queer folks is demonstrated on the website for the Sexual Assault Support Centre (SASC) in Ottawa: <https://sascottwa.com/> The description on their home page reads thusly: “We support all womyn: immigrant, indigenous, lgbtq+, diversely abled, womyn of colour, trans womyn, survivors of war & torture”. It also includes a wheelchair symbol, a rainbow flag, and a trans* flag.

Messages such as this on a counselling centre (or private practice psychotherapists)’s website can make a significant difference in queer client’s safety (or even considering seeking out services).

Intake process

Whether it is on the phone, via email or in person, it is important to ensure that the intake process is also inclusive. First and foremost, this means asking for preferred pronouns (i.e. he/him, she/her, they/them, ze/zir) which can include stating your own first.

Additionally, psychotherapists working with queer clients should wait for the client to share his/her/their/zir self-identification in terms of their sexual orientation or gender identity; making assumptions that, for example, women attracted to women prefer to be called lesbians is limiting at best.

Risks and Relevant Statistics

Lesbian and gay people (and, I'd argue, BTTQIA+ folks as well) are at an increased risk for “major depression, eating disorders, generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, poor self-esteem, alcohol dependency, drug dependency, and comorbid diagnoses” (Sherry, Adelman, Wihle, & Quick, 2010). Moreover, LBTTQIA+ youth are more likely to experience suicidal ideation and even attempt suicide (Bryan & Mayock, 2017; Craig et al., 2017; Halady, 2013; Kravolec et al., 2014; Mullaney, 2016; Sanders & Chalk, 2016) than their heterosexual counterparts.

Additionally, there are particular and specific impacts on bisexual, lesbian and transgender folks (beyond the overall experience of homophobia); a few examples of this include:

- fear of partner cheating with friends because of bisexual attraction,
- fear of physical violence from lesbian folks because of belief in a particular stereotype of lesbians, or
- fear of sexual assault by trans* folks using particularly gendered washrooms.

Moreover, LBTTQIA+ folks may experience internalized homophobia/homonegativity, which is guilt and shame about one's sexual identity (Yip, 1997). Thus, even if LBTTQIA+ folks are surrounded by a fully supportive community of people, they may still experience significant internal struggles. This may be especially true for queer folks from religious (and more specifically Christian) backgrounds, as many Christians condemn homosexuality as a sin (Rodriguez, 2009; Trammel, 2015). Moreover, queer folks in religious communities may be particularly prone to religious abuse, which would exacerbate any distress they're feeling as a result of their queerness (Super & Jacobson).

It is important to note that although some coping strategies may be less healthy or adaptive than others, they are likely the best the client can do at that moment. It is crucial that when hearing from queer folks (or clients in general) that psychotherapists ensure their clients feel safe and also experience unconditional positive regard, even if their current choices and behaviours aren't the healthiest or most adaptive.

Clinical Approaches, esp. SOCE

Up until 1973, homosexuality was considered a psychological disorder, and thus the lingering impacts of this perception persist. Christians who are also LBTTQIA+ may believe that sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE) are a reasonable option in order to achieve “telic congruence”, which refers to the desire to “live their lives in a manner consistent with their values” (APA Task Force, 2009, p.4).

Although this desire is understandable, pursuing SOCE was determined by the APA Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation to offer no clear

benefit, and that it is, if anything, harmful. Moreover, the Task Force determined that it was inappropriate for practitioners to support their clients in believing in the possible success of SOCE (p.66).

Affirmative Therapeutic Interventions

APA Task Force (2009) determined 5 central elements:

- Acceptance and support (based on Carl Rogers, who was the founder of person-centred therapy, unconditional positive regard)
- Assessment
- Active coping
- Social support
- Identity exploration and development (p.55)

LGBTTQIA+ Concerns

- Possible concerns brought to therapy (Walker 2013):
 - Processing sexual/gender identity,
 - Coming out,
 - Relationship concerns (intimate or familial),
 - Alleviating mental health concerns (i.e. depression),
 - Reconciling or strengthening religious convictions.

Clinical Approaches for Supporting LGBTTQIA+ Clients

- Clients may be seeking support for reasons that are *not* connected to their sexual or gender identity (same for cis/het folks).
- Clients may not want to reconcile spiritual and sexual identity; rather, focus should be on resolution of conflict in whatever way best supports the client.
- This presentation focuses on individual therapy, as that is my particular training. Helpful resources I've come across (at least in an academic context) for doing psychotherapy with couples, families or groups include:
 - Yarhouse & Beckstead (2011)
 - Vespone (2016)

Clinical Approaches for Supporting LGBTTQIA+ Clients

First and foremost, therapists need to acknowledge that queer and Christian clients likely have mixed feelings about their spiritual and sexual identities; they may feel strongly positive or negative toward either identity dimension, and therapists need to hold space for that. The primary 'approach' that practitioners should employ is "affirmative", which is an approach to working with clients that both affirm their sexual orientation and also support and empathize with other components of the client's identity, such as religion (Ginicola & Smith, 2011).

Helpfully, an affirmative approach can fit well within or alongside a variety of psychotherapeutic approaches; for example, one study demonstrates an "adaption approach" which integrates the affirmative approach with cognitive-behavioural therapy

(CBT) approaches (Austin & Craig, 2015). CBT can be used to address cognitive distortions or catastrophic thinking; I provide clinical examples below:

- Gay female client who held a particular belief about God and yet saw themselves as an exception to that belief – I first asked her how she would describe the character or the nature of God, and then asking what she believed God thought of her. When she made disparaging comments about God’s perception of her, I gently challenged the negative exception she’d made for herself: she stated believing that God loves everyone equally... except her?
- Bisexual female client who assumed her partner would break up with her after she informed him that a co-worker had ‘made a move’ on her that she didn’t immediately rebuff

GRACE Model

This model, created by Bozard and Sanders (2011) is used specifically to address religious concerns for lesbian, gay and bisexual clients who are connected to a religious or spiritual community or practices.

- **Goals:** Involves considering: religious history, affect, identification of client goals, and assessment of client readiness (Bozard & Sanders, 2011, p.53)
- **Renewal:** Possibility of affirming churches (p. 56).
- **Action:** “Bridge” stage to move forward; can include coming out (p.56)
- **Connection:** With God/with community (pp.57-59)
- **Empowerment:** In light of barriers for LGBTTQIA+ folks in general, let alone with negative (frequently truthful) perception of religion (p.60)

Relational-cultural theory (RCT)

A RCT approach to therapy incorporates “multiculturalism, intersectionality, resilience, and strengths-based foci into counseling practice” (Jordan, 2010 in Singh & Moss, 2016, p. 398).

RCT was originally developed “to address how societal oppression increases disconnections for people from historically marginalized backgrounds ... through internalized oppression and by creating obstacles to individual and community resilience and thriving (Miller, 1976 in Singh & Moss, 2016, p.398).

RCT Tenets Useful for Therapy

- Cultural complexity
- Condemned isolation
- Shame
- Growth-fostering relationships
- Mutual empathy and authenticity
- Power-over relationships

RCT Vignette

[See Appendix 5b]

Small Group Discussion

Get into small groups (3-4 people), review the details in the vignette and reflect on the questions provided. We'll come back together in a large group in 10-15 minutes to discuss.

Questions to Consider:

- What things can the therapist have done in advance of this client contacting her in order to best support the client?
 - NB: Programs should have adequate affirmative training for working with LGBTTQIA+ clients! I know from my own experience, we spent a portion of one of our practicum classes (approximately 45 minutes at maximum) discussing multicultural counselling and counselling for diverse populations.
 - Read important documents:
 - American Psychological Association (APA) guidelines for practice with LGB clients:
<http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/guidelines.aspx>
 - World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) standards of care:
http://www.wpath.org/site_page.cfm?pk_association_webpage_menu=1351
 - Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Issues in Counseling (ALGBTIC) standards of care:
<http://www.algbtic.org/standards-of-care.html>
 - Paperwork and website are affirming.
 - No assumptions about pronouns, gender, or sexual orientation.
- What are some possible conflicts or challenges that may come up?
 - Therapist perception of client, client perception of therapist (based on different race/ethnicity, power differential)
- What kinds of questions could the therapist ask (or 'posture' could the therapist hold) during the intake session?
 - Asking questions during intake about other important identity categories (i.e. race/ethnicity, religion/spirituality)
 - Coping and well-being as a lesbian woman?
 - Intersections of aboriginal and religious identity? Along with sexual identity?
 - Experience of being at church? Messages received there about identities?
 - Past/present relationship with parents?
 - Acknowledge possible shame, isolation, etc. experienced.
 - Provide, from a strengths-based approach, local resources that affirm LGBTTQIA+, aboriginal folks
 - Identify goals for counselling

Resources

Whether using these resources for your own self-education, or to point clients toward, Patheos' Modern Kinship blog (which is written by a gay Christian couple) has a comprehensive resource list for books, blogs, organizations and even therapists that work at the intersections of queerness and spirituality.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/modernkinship/2017/04/lgbtq-christian-resource-guide/>

Interestingly, even in this fairly comprehensive guide, there are only 3 resources for faith-based, queer-affirmative counselors. All of these resources, however, provide web-based therapy, which increases their accessibility to a wider variety of people (although those based in the US may pose a problem for folks needing counselling and wanting to use health insurance coverage to cover/offset the cost).

- The Christian Closet: <http://www.thechristiancloset.com/>
- Evans-Carlson Counselling: <http://www.evans-carlsoncounselling.com/default.html> *
- iAmClinic: <http://www.iamclinic.org/>

Unfortunately, searching for therapists or agencies that specifically focus on supporting folks at the intersections of Christianity and queerness in Canada is relatively fruitless. You can search for "lgbt" (or other terms) in the Psychology Today database of practitioners, but anyone can list a reported specialty as "lgbt" without meeting any criteria. Generous Space Ministries (which I discussed briefly at the end of chapter 2 of my thesis) offers one-on-one connections of a pastoral nature, and also mentions that they maintain a list of therapists to whom they will refer (<http://www.newdirection.ca/community/one-on-one-connection/>).

Recommended Reading

These are a few of the non-clinical (and thus more accessible) books I've used for my research that are helpful for considering the experiences of LGBTTQIA+ folks who are also a part of Christian communities.

- Torn – Justin Lee
- Rescuing Jesus – Deborah Jian Lee
- God and the Gay Christian – Matthew Vines
- Does Jesus Really Love Me? – Jeff Chu
- Changing Our Mind – David Gushee
- Rainbow Theology – Patrick S. Cheng

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Sample Case Vignette

Adapted from:

Singh, A. A., & Moss, L. (2016). Using relational-cultural theory in LGBTQQ Counseling: Addressing heterosexism and enhancing relational competencies. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 94, pp. 398-404.

Therapist – 46-year-old, white, straight, cisgender woman; graduated from MA in Counselling program 10 years ago. Did not receive specific training in LGBTQQ-affirmative counselling. Has professional membership with CCPA and CRPO.

Client – 32-year-old Aboriginal cisgender woman; recently came out as a lesbian and ended her first relationship with a woman after 6 months of dating. Raised attending a Catholic church by adoptive white parents; connected to aboriginal community in adult life.

Questions to Consider:

- What things can the therapist have done in advance of this client contacting her in order to best support the client?
- What are some possible conflicts or challenges that may come up?
- What kinds of questions could the therapist ask during the intake session?
- What kind of ‘posture’ can the therapist hold during the intake session, and throughout the counselling relationship?

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