

# “Queer Eye” in Theology and Biblical Studies: “Do you have to be queer to do this?”

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## ABSTRACT

This article addresses the question of whether one needs to be LGBTQ+ or queer-identifying in order to engage in queer studies in theology and biblical studies. In surveying the popularity of queer as cultural currency in the media and the academy, I express concern with queer studies being undertaken as if it were one approach among others, arguing that it is an “anti-approach”. In directly responding to the question, “do you have to be queer to do this?” I argue that one does not need to be queer identified to engage with queer theologies or queer biblical studies. Four points are made about the engagement of heterosexual identifying intellectuals in queer studies: i) queer theory reveals how all identities are unstable, including heterosexuality; ii) heterosexuality is not the site of disruption for queer studies—it is patriarchy, cisnormativity and heteronormativity that require dismantling; iii) queer is about the production of antinormative knowledge, a practice that anyone can engage in; iv) where queer studies are also done in conjunction with nonnormative gender and sexualities, researchers must incorporate voices from those individuals or communities. The article concludes that there should be no concern about straight-identifying individuals doing queer studies, but we should be careful that queer theologies and queer biblical studies do not become “straight” and normative.

## KEYWORDS

heterosexuality, queer, theology, biblical studies, straight, identity

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“Let us remember here that the Genderfucker may also be straight.”<sup>1</sup>

“I never want people to feel like they aren’t gay enough or straight enough. It’s about what’s in your heart. And what’s in your heart is like [kissing sounds].”<sup>2</sup>

There has been a rise in the visibility of queer identifications in popular culture, with numerous TV shows and popular media articles covering drag, gender, sexuality and LGBTQ+<sup>3</sup> lives. There is equally a rising popularity in queer studies within arts and humanities, including religion, and this means that it is often taught by people who do not identify as “queer” or LGBTQ+. As a gay and queer identifying academic, there is always a prominent response from my colleagues and students to my work on queer theologies and queer biblical studies—“do you have to be queer to do this?” The aim of this article is to provide a thoroughgoing response to this question. First, the article considers the popularity of queer studies in theology and biblical studies, and I contest its position as another approach among many. I argue how queer is the anti-approach that resists categorization and normativity, rather than being one critical postmodern approach among others. In locating heterosexual identifying individuals who engage with queer projects, I examine ventures from men in feminist theology and biblical studies to draw out comparisons, principles and ethical considerations. Queer

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<sup>3</sup> LGBTQ+ = lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer. The “plus” indicates inclusivity for all other gender and sexual identifications that are non-normative.

studies work in two ways: the first as a critical theory concerned with 'undoing' stable concepts; and the second relates to its concern for LGBTQ+ identifications. Four points are then made about the engagement of heterosexual identifying intellectuals with queer: i) queer theory reveals how all identities are unstable, including heterosexuality; ii) heterosexuality is not the site of disruption for queer studies, it is patriarchy, cisnormativity and heteronormativity that require dismantling; iii) queer is about the production of antinormative knowledge, a practice that anyone can engage in; iv) where queer studies are also done in conjunction with nonnormative gender and sexualities, researchers must incorporate voices from those individuals or communities. The article concludes with an expression of concern, not about straight identifying individuals doing queer studies, but that queer theologies and queer biblical studies risk becoming "straight" and normative.

### Queer Studies: En Vogue, Valid and Victorious?

From my location as an academic in the UK, I observe how queer theory, queer theologies and queer biblical studies are en vogue; they are a valid source of currency in the academy, especially in academic settings in Canada, USA, UK and Australia. The discussion in this article does not assume queer studies as solely taking place in Western, liberal spaces, nor is this context intended to be seen as universal. Indeed, the experiences of queer studies in contexts outside of these settings can be quite different.<sup>4</sup> Yet, within the Western world, the popularity of queer studies is incontestable, especially given how the volume of journal articles, textbooks and university modules exploring queer studies in theology and biblical studies is ever expanding.

Reflecting on the mainstreaming of queer theologies in the academy, Susannah Cornwall proposes that queer theology is no longer a marginal area.<sup>5</sup> Cornwall uses the idea of queer theology being "at home" to point to its credibility and location within university setting and seminaries. In fact, this idea of queer finding its home is not all that recent. Deryn Guest pointed to the popularity of queer theory within the academy back in 2005, noting how queer has appeal to become trendy and en vogue, and to shake up dusty curriculum content.<sup>6</sup> Guest makes the following astute observations:

queer theory finds a home within the academy because it simultaneously (and ironically) conforms to important establishment needs: it revitalizes flagging courses on interpretive methods by opening up a new category of analysis; its practitioners bring in research funding; it serves the needs of publishing houses by

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<sup>4</sup> See Chris Greenough, *Queer Theologies: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2019), 62-94 for a discussion of queer theologies and biblical approaches in non-Western contexts.

<sup>5</sup> Susannah Cornwall, "Home and Hiddenness: Queer Theology, Domestication and Institutions," *Theology & Sexuality* 23:1-2 (2017), 31-47. Cornwall notes: "It is no longer true, if it ever was, that, as Althaus-Reid claimed in 2008, 'queer theologians by definition belong to the margins of theology ... They work in a theology which is not part of the theological establishment'" (42).

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, though, Jacqueline Foertsch reflects on how she once speculated on "queer theory as a 'hot topic'" but recognised that "queer theory is a marginalized and persecuted cultural field that rewards no effort to establish oneself therein" (Jacqueline Foertsch, "In Theory If Not In Practice: Straight Feminism's Lesbian Experience" in *Straight With a Twist* (Calvin Thomas, ed; Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 55.

opening a new subject area; it is conducive to the poststructuralist climate in which we work; and it conforms to the high standards of critical theorizing expected of academic discourse.<sup>7</sup>

The idea of queer, with its agenda of disruption and anti-normative knowledge production, being “at home” is almost paradoxical. The boom in queer studies must be recognized within the context that approaches and methodologies come in and out of fashion, and such popularity is usually temporal. Moreover, the current interest and popularity does not mean that the unholy partnership of queer and religion is without its critics and resisters. This is played out in the media where confessional allegiances bolster biases and where church positional statements about issues relating to LGBTQ+ lives are allowed to be debated in the public sphere. In this way, prejudiced views are permitted to be aired and the existence of LGBTQ+ people is put up for scrutiny, revealing that religion is the protected characteristic which trumps others, particularly gender and sexuality. It is therefore erroneous to read this trend and popularity as universal acceptance. In this vein, I agree with Cornwall who notes, “It would be naïve to think that we have arrived at some queer utopia where scholars and teachers never face the opposition or suspicion of their institutions by introducing queer theologies and critical methods into their syllabi.”<sup>8</sup> Moreover, as queer theory enters its thirtieth year, it would be overly optimistic to think that the popularity in queer studies has managed to rupture hegemonic repetitions and undo dominant powers at play in the production of theology and interpretations of the biblical canon. Much more work is needed to balance the critical and theoretical undoing of the structures of patriarchy, cisnormativity and heteronormativity which have become the cement of Jewish and Christian studies for over two-thousand years.

Yet, I urge for the exercise of caution when queer is placed as one approach among others in post-modern critical thought and methodologies. Queer is the anti-approach. Queer therefore cannot be neatly boxed among others, to be selected and tried out, precisely because queer actually contests and subverts the very nature of the other approaches. It reveals the critical cracks in how theology and biblical studies have gone before and views the instability of knowledge-production from this lens. One of the definitions of “queer” is to ruin or to spoil. Queer is the rotten apple in the curriculum crate, ready to disrupt and ruin all others.<sup>9</sup>

Despite its popularity, queer studies continue to be viewed with suspicion, particularly by those who hold allegiances to more traditional, established and structured approaches. Queer resists and is met with resistance. If it no longer resists, it achieves a normative status of its own. And that just will not do. Guest states how “queer theory requires an independent roving brief and flexibility to shape-shift.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, to position queer as an off-the-shelf product ready to be investigated

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7 Deryn Guest, *When Deborah Met Jael: Lesbian Biblical Hermeneutics* (London: SCM Press, 2005), 236.

8 Cornwall, “Homes and Hiddenness,” 33.

9 Here I use the example of a “rotten apple” and later “polluted air” to refer to anti-normative knowledge. I am fully aware that these are unappealing metaphors and may, in some way, serve to make queer studies less sexy or trendy. Importantly, they are metaphors used to describe the deconstructive force of queer theory. Metaphors are tools to imagine, and within queer studies, the idea of deconstruction rather than construction is more accurate.

10 Deryn Guest, *Beyond Feminist Biblical Studies*. (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2012), 55.

and applied as a scholar does with other methods would begin to put queer in a category. It would elide the fact that queer resists definition and does not operate with one unifying agenda. Queer therefore dethrones the other approaches. In noting the independent nature of "queer" and its countenance to other approaches, Suzanna Danuta Walters notes how "*queer* is many things to many people, irreducible, undefinable, enigmatic, winking at us as it flouts convention: the perfect postmodern trope, a term for the times, the epitome of knowing ambiguity."<sup>11</sup> Precisely due to its "definitional indeterminacy"<sup>12</sup> queer theory can be picked up and shaped to suit academic arguments and agendas.

The rise in the popularity of queer theory has been with sharp elbows, as its destabilizing agenda nudged gay and lesbian theories and feminist critiques out of focus. The idea of wrestling with questions of identity, including gender and sexuality, is surpassed by the theoretical positioning of queer as beyond-identity. Regarding this, Walters notes how queer ruptures gender, highlighting that for those who engage with gender and identity find that it

was all a game anyway, all about words and images, all about mimicry and imitation, all a cacophony of signs leading back to nowhere. To have politics around gender was silly, they were told, because gender was just a performance anyway, a costume one put on and, in drag performance, wore backward.<sup>13</sup>

This anti-identitarian stance of queer actually points to the fact that you do not need to be LGBTQ+ to "do" queer studies. According to Walters, "One of the interesting aspects of this phenomenon of queer theory in the academy is that you do not have to be gay to do it... *Queer* (as opposed to *gay* or *lesbian*) lets you off the identity hook."<sup>14</sup>

### The Example of Men in Feminism

There was a time when the position of men in feminist studies in theology and biblical hermeneutics was seen as impossible, or, at least, problematic.<sup>15</sup> Attention therefore should be paid to the potential principles that emerge from men foraying into feminist areas perceived to offer space to evade dominant, patriarchal, hegemonic ideologies. Esther Fuchs' essay "Men in Biblical Feminist Scholarship"<sup>16</sup> demonstrates several critiques of men who seem to have ventured into the feminist space with disregard for the previous scholarship in the area. The critiques are also levied at other women who advocate men entering feminist scholarship indiscriminately, without considering the ethical and

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11 Suzanna Danuta Walters, "From Here to Queer: Radical Feminism, Postmodernism, and the Lesbian Menace (Or, Why Can't a Woman Be More like a Fag?)" *Signs* 21:4 (1996), 837.

12 Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996), 1.

13 Walters, "From Here to Queer," 844.

14 Walters, "From Here to Queer," 840.

15 See the collection of essays on the position of men in feminism by Alice Jardine and Paul Smith, *Men in Feminism* (London: Routledge, 1987).

16 Esther Fuchs, "Men in Biblical Feminist Scholarship" *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 19: 2 (2003), 93–114.

epistemological concerns about their presence in feminism. Fuchs states how the field was created to evade male hegemony and that men must be acutely aware of their own positions: “Male scholars in biblical feminism must...understand their own positions as interlopers in a field that was created specifically so as to evade male judgement, authority and hegemony.”<sup>17</sup> Fuchs recommends certain principles for men entering biblical feminist studies:

male feminists ought to think through their position as men in feminism, to take stock of their social location as part of a privileged hegemony...they cannot afford to ignore history, nor the politics that continues to define the terms of their feminist discourse. They must ponder the political implications of their writing as feminist critics rather than present this writing as natural or neutral. They ought to make explicit their intentions and purpose.<sup>18</sup>

One further principle of Fuchs is that “men should not engage in evaluating, mediating, moderating, anthologizing, criticizing feminist work”<sup>19</sup> without due diligence given to their position. In assessing how Fuchs’ principles are relevant to queer studies, there has been a successful and important tradition of writers in gender and sexuality disclosing their own position as part of their work. This practice allows the reader to see what potential influences, biases and omissions are at play. In queer studies, Fuchs’ principles are therefore effective in showing allegiances and agendas. The game is fairly played as the cards of representation and position are laid bare. Privilege is, in some way, renegotiated. In adopting a similar practice in queer studies, Sarah Cooper gives warning to straight-identified scholars who do not play this game. If those identifying as straight do not disclose their personal positions, they “place themselves in a more difficult relation to queer theory than if they were to classify their erotic investments as lesbian, gay or queer.”<sup>20</sup> Cooper continues “the issue of who can use the term ‘queer’, and how they use it, and in what context, is by no means clear-cut.”<sup>21</sup>

Tackling a similar theme in an essay entitled “Sexing the Author: Can a Man Write Feminist Theology?”<sup>22</sup> Mark Godin observes how there is a tendency to view theology as a discipline concerned with the thoughts of great thinkers, like one would approach philosophy for instance, rather than viewing the theology as existing “in a community of readers, so that imagination functions as a multi-dimensional field, where differences live in tension, and that very tension provides life.”<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, Godin leaves the evaluation of whether theology is considered feminist to others. Without engaging directly with Fuchs, he responds to his own question with the line that “a man can never define his theology as feminist; can never judge his writing to be so.”<sup>24</sup> Ultimately, Fuchs acknowledges that “the

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17 Fuchs, “Men in Biblical Feminist Scholarship,” 110.

18 Fuchs, “Men in Biblical Feminist Scholarship,” 112.

19 Fuchs, “Men in Biblical Feminist Scholarship,” 112

20 Sarah Cooper, *Relating to Queer Theory* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 12n4.

21 Cooper, *Relating to Queer Theory*, 24.

22 Mark Godin, “Sexing the Author: Can a Man Write Feminist Theology” *Practical Theology* 2:1 (2009), 103–114.

23 Godin, “Sexing the Author,” 113.

24 Godin, “Sexing the Author,” 113.



male intervention in feminist theory is a welcome one that to the extent that it articulates its fundamental impossibility."<sup>25</sup> I return to this notion later in my discussion on queer as failure.

The tensions that play out between traditional theological thoughts and biblical interpretations largely from dead white men (assumed to be cisgender and heterosexual) and living theologies from fabulous diverse living people are also at play in queer studies in religion. The contrast I make here is intentionally subversive and playful. It serves as a response to the hegemonic voices who belittle the hard graft and emotional engagement of those engaging in queer research as not serious or credible enough. Therefore, I follow Siân Taylder, who operates a "theology of *quid pro quo*, and I don't see why I should be expected to tolerate those who refuse to tolerate me."<sup>26</sup> Guest notes how research on lesbian and gay issues are often dismissed in the academy as a "'faddish, transitory' enterprise, not quite part of the intellectual pursuit, a soft project rather than a good, solid, recognized field of research."<sup>27</sup> Any reduction of queer research actually demonstrates the insecurity of those who deride the queer project, exactly because the foundations of their own approaches have been destabilized through queer theory.

### "Do you Have to be Queer to do This?"

In the formative collection exploring the relationship between queer theory and heterosexuality, *Straight With A Twist*,<sup>28</sup> the authors offer fresh insights on what it means to be heterosexual identifying when engaging with queer theory and queer studies. Calvin Thomas asks, "to what extent could an otherwise 'straight subject' elaborate a queer criticism?"<sup>29</sup> In the essay considering straight expeditions into queer criticism from Jacqueline Foertsch, she adopts the metaphor of being a squatter, a queer trope which points to the nomad position of the queer researcher. Foertsch considers the impact of those identifying as heterosexual involved in the queer project, noting how this raises suspicions of "the likes of upstart 'squatters' like myself whose motives were highly suspect."<sup>30</sup> Foertsch recognizes the ambiguity of her own position, continuing, "as a 'straight feminist' I am an oxymoron, an ontological impossibility—a position I find both supremely threatening and thrillingly liberating."<sup>31</sup> For Michael O'Rourke, straights working in queer studies are "radical, progressive, nomadic, queer-affiliated, queerly positioned, antihomophobic, antinormative."<sup>32</sup>

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25 FUchs, "Men in Biblical Feminist Scholarship," 113.

26 Siân Taylder, "Shot from both Sides: Theology and the Woman Who Isn't Quite What She Seems" in *Trans/formations* (Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, eds.; London: SCM Press, 2009), 72.

27 Guest, *When Deborah Met Jael*, 236

28 Calvin Thomas, ed. *Straight With A Twist* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

29 Calvin Thomas, "Queer Theory and the Subject of Heterosexuality" in *Straight With A Twist* (Calvin Thomas, ed.; Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 11.

30 Foertsch, "In Theory," 50.

31 Foertsch "In Theory," 52.

32 Michael O'Rourke, "On the Eve of a Queer-Straight Future: Notes Toward an Antinormative Heteroerotic," *Feminism & Psychology* 15:1 (2005), 111.

One of the conclusions drawn from the example of men in feminism is a binary formulation between theory and practice. Theoretically men can be feminists, but practically, perhaps not. Godin explores the tension in asking if men can produce feminist theology, saying how “these dilemmas could paralyze the questioner between a technical yes and a practical no.”<sup>33</sup> Conversely, as queer theory ruptures binary positions, the straight intellectual is able to engage in queer projects both theoretically and practically. In addressing the question that is the focus of this article, one does not need to be queer identified to engage with queer theologies or biblical studies. I now offer four points about the engagement of heterosexual identifying intellectuals in queer studies: i) queer reveals how all identities are unstable, including heterosexuality; ii) heterosexuality is not the site of disruption for queer studies; it is patriarchy, cisnormativity and heteronormativity that require dismantling; iii) queer is about the production of antinormative knowledge, a practice that anyone can engage in; iv) where queer studies are also done in conjunction to nonnormative gender and sexualities, they must incorporate voices from those individuals or communities.

i. *All Identities are Unstable, Including Heterosexuality.*

“Queer” as a theory and “queer” as a catch-all term for LGBTQ+ identities or gender-fluid identities work in different ways. The latter attempts to denote identity categories, and the former serve to rupture all identity categories. There is therefore some confusion about the word “queer” when picked up by those approaching the subject area for the first time, especially where it is presumed to denote a correlation between LGBTQ+ identities and issues. But queer reveals how all identities are unstable and are simply seen as stable because they have been socially constructed through repetitions.

Queer theory exposes in the instability of all identities. Heterosexuality is therefore revealed as unstable too. Judith Butler highlights this in the idea of repetitions to give something the illusion of being stable. Butler states, “if heterosexuality is compelled to *repeat itself*, in order to establish the illusion of its own uniformity and identity, then this is an identity permanently at risk.”<sup>34</sup> Foertsch agrees, “Heterosexuality, however, is not only performative but *compulsory*, thus illusory, a tightrope act that is really a magic act, ultimately impossible to sustain.”<sup>35</sup> As heterosexuality is revealed as being unstable, it raises the question of one’s sexuality having any sort of significant role in the knowledge one produces. According to Butler, sexuality is, in some way, hidden. She notes how “part of what constitutes sexuality is precisely that which does not appear and that which, to some degree, can never appear. This is perhaps the most fundamental reason why sexuality is to some degree always closeted.”<sup>36</sup> Following Butler, Thomas shows the impossibility of heterosexual stability; he asserts,

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33 Godin, “Sexing the Author,” 110.

34 Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” in *Inside/Out. Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (Diana Fuss, ed.; London: Routledge, 1991), 21.

35 Foertsch, “In Theory,” 47.

36 Butler, “Imitation,” 25.

"because there is no final proof of heterosexuality, heterosexuality must constantly set about trying to prove itself, assert itself, insist on itself."<sup>37</sup> Those identifying as "straight with a twist" therefore cease the activity of proving, asserting and insisting on their own heterosexuality. These are radical acts of resistance and rupture, both part of the queer agenda.

Engaging in queer projects mean that straight intellectuals refuse to conform, and instead put their own privileges on the line. The implications of this move imply risk or loss, as those who engage in the queer project renounce some of their own privilege. Straights doing queer projects are therefore viewed with suspicion from straights and non-straight. Annette Schlichter notes how "[queer straights] are coming out as queer in theory at a time when queer theory has become a form of cultural capital in the academy."<sup>38</sup> Schlichter discusses how straight people engaging in queer projects participate in "the critique that dismantles their own normative status."<sup>39</sup> She examines the work of Calvin Thomas and observes how the queer intellectual betrays heterosexuality, demonstrating a "disloyalty to heteronormativity, which in turn inscribes his status as a critical queer."<sup>40</sup> Straight-identified scholars engaging in queer theory rupture the repetitions of heterosexuality, and these ruptures place heterosexuality more at risk. Similarly, Louisa Allen states "the straight who attempts to deconstruct and decenter their own sexual identity might be considered such an aberration."<sup>41</sup> In many ways, to borrow Audre Lorde's famous assertion that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house,"<sup>42</sup> the heterosexual working in queer theologies and queer biblical studies agitates and disturbs the structure from within: the bricks and cement begin to weaken and crumble. O'Rourke sees the transformative potential in this, as he states, "theorizing antinormative heteroeroticism and thinking about the means to change the phallographic and heterosexist orders is potentially the most exciting current adventure in gender studies."<sup>43</sup>

## ii. *Heterosexuality is Not the Site of Disruption for Queer Studies*

Queer theory, as noted above, has highlighted the instability of sexuality, including heterosexuality. Yet queer seeks to disrupt what is considered "normal" / "normativity". Michael Warner puts this plainly, as he states, "queer defines itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual."<sup>44</sup> The agenda of queer is to disrupt *the normative category of heterosexuality*, not heterosexuality per

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37 Thomas, "Queer Theory," 14.

38 Annette Schlichter, "Queer at Last? Straight Intellectuals and the Desire for Transgression" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 10:4 (2004), 557.

39 Schlichter, "Queer at Last," 544.

40 Schlichter, "Queer at Last," 552.

41 Louisa Allen, "Queer(y)ing the Straight Researcher: The Relationship(?) between Researcher Identity and Anti-Normative Knowledge" *Feminism & Psychology*, 20: 2 (2010), 157.

42 Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007), 110-114.

43 O'Rourke, "On the Eve," 112.

44 Michael Warner, *Fear of a Queer Planet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xxvi.



se. Queer theory dismantles the power regimes of heteronormativity, cisnormativity and patriarchy. Heterosexuality may appear to be “normal” and compulsory, as Adrienne Rich put it,<sup>45</sup> but it is the powerful policing of this status which needs resistance. Moreover, Schlichter notes how “the denaturalization of straight identity is not sufficient for an unsettling of heteronorms.”<sup>46</sup> Of course, heterosexuals may be said to benefit from the privileges of heteronormativity, but a straight scholar working in queer studies renounces this privilege in some way. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner observe how “Heteronormativity is thus a concept distinct from heterosexuality”. They continue, “by heteronormativity we mean the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is, organized as a sexuality—but also privileged.”<sup>47</sup> Queer theorists often differentiate between heterosexuality as an identity, and heteronormativity as a producer and perpetuator of power. Allen describes how heteronormativity “constitutes the ‘social air we breathe.’”<sup>48</sup> In the spirit of contamination, used as a metaphor earlier, queer studies begin to pollute this air. Allen’s position is helpful here as she notes, “what mediates the production of (hetero)normative knowledge is heteronormativity and that this is not bound to particular identity categories.”<sup>49</sup> In contrasting the position of the heterosexual-identified individual working in queer studies, Allen illuminates how “gay, lesbian and bisexual identities are potentially just as able to produce heteronormative knowledge.”<sup>50</sup> For Allen, to attempt to correlate identity with the production of normative or antinormative knowledge is illogic. Following Butler and Warner, Allen claims that if “heteronormativity is not implied by heterosexuality, then it should be possible (at least theoretically) for straights to produce anti-(hetero)normative knowledge.”<sup>51</sup>

### iii. *Queer is About the Production of Antinormative Knowledge*

Godin refers to the contested nature of theology as the problem, rather than the author. He states, “Perhaps the problem when asking if a man can write feminist theology is not with the ‘man’ (or the implied ‘woman’) and not with what is or is not feminist theology, but with what is meant by ‘theology’ itself.”<sup>52</sup> The same question can therefore be posed here: what is meant by queer studies in theology and biblical studies? Queer theologies and queer biblical studies are marked, not by their production by queer or straight-identified people, but by those who actively seek to disrupt normative, hegemonic theologies and biblical interpretations. Queer is about the production of anti-normative knowledge.

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45 Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” *Signs*, 5:4 (1980), 631–660.

46 Schlichter, “Queer at Last,” 557.

47 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry*, 24:2 (1998): 547–566, 548n2.

48 Allen, “Queer(y)ing the Straight Researcher,” 158.

49 Allen, “Queer(y)ing the Straight Researcher,” 149.

50 Allen, “Queer(y)ing the Straight Researcher,” 159.

51 Allen, “Queer(y)ing the Straight Researcher,” 159.

52 Godin, “Sexing the Author,” 112.

There is therefore a false connection between how one identifies and the knowledge one produces. Allen spotlights this false assumption, rightfully asserting that "sexual identity does not determine the production of anti-normative knowledge"<sup>53</sup> It is therefore not who you are, but what you do that determines the researcher's "queer eye". In genderqueer biblical studies, Guest notes "the gender-queer hermeneut is identifiable not by who one *is*, but what one *does* with biblical texts."<sup>54</sup>

In producing antinormative knowledge or engaging in antinormative activities, there are inherent risks: risks of disciplinary exclusion or exclusion from one's faith organizations; risk that queer research is not considered theological or biblical or credible enough; risk of failure. Yet this impossibility, or failure, is inherent in the queer project too. Judith Halberstam celebrates the art of not winning or not knowing in *The Queer Art of Failure*.<sup>55</sup> The straight-identified queerist may take comfort in the fact that queer is characterized by its own impossibility or failure. Halberstam asserts that "Failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well; for queers failure can be a style, to cite Quentin Crisp, or a way of life, to cite Foucault."<sup>56</sup> Halberstam grounds this idea of failure in feminism, noting how success has often been assessed according to male standards: "gender failure often means being relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideals, not succeeding at womanhood can offer unexpected pleasures."<sup>57</sup>

The production of antinormative knowledge allows the researcher to escape the lethal repetition of conventional knowledge production. In queer studies, the straight scholar does not use normative theories, modes of analysis or tools, but they wriggle out of the tightly fitted straight-jacket, bursting at the seams.

iv. *Where Queer Studies are Also Done in Conjunction with Nonnormative Gender and Sexualities, They Must Incorporate Voices from those Individuals or Communities.*

The presence of queer in the mainstream media is seen in the popularity of TV shows such as *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Queer Eye*.<sup>58</sup> Yet part of the success of these shows is that behind the glitz, glamour, camp and humour, deeply personal heartfelt stories are shared by those on screen. The viewer encounters emotive stories that detail deeply personal life-story experiences, where nonnormative gender or sexuality and hard-worn identifications are only reached through personal and so-

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<sup>53</sup> Allen, "Queer(y)ing the Straight Researcher," 147.

<sup>54</sup> Guest, *Beyond Feminist Biblical Studies*, 162. Guest uses the term "genderqueer criticism" to denote a wider, more inclusive space than feminist studies and gender studies. Guest observes: "'genderqueer' works because it is a name that carries punch. Feminists in the 1980s were right to argue that 'Gender Studies' sounds so neutral, quite inoffensive – not at all in the face, like the F-word [feminism]. But tack queer onto gender and we return to a more subversive terminology that I believe has potential to ruffle feathers as did the F-word" (151).

<sup>55</sup> Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>56</sup> Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 3.

<sup>57</sup> Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 4.

<sup>58</sup> *Queer Eye* (2018), Netflix, February 7 and *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009-), Logo TV.

cial struggles. In these shows, the narratives offered demonstrate the working out of non-normative identities and social commentaries on queer communities, amidst a backdrop of fabulosity.

Given how queer relates both to theory and to people, therefore, queer theologies and queer biblical studies may seek to engage with the living realities of individual experiences, to see, for example, how gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex and genderqueer identities speak about God and engage with biblical texts. This article so far has set out the reasons why one does not need to be queer identified to engage with queer theologies or queer biblical studies. In this sense, queer studies are not marked in the same way that categories of LGBTQ+ identities are marked. Identities are not ideologies; there needs to be universal engagement with queer theologies or biblical studies. Nonetheless, when engaging with LGBTQ+ identities, one risks providing a ventriloquist voice when attempting to write from an identity category that one has not experienced nor inhabits. Again, this was one of issues raised about men in feminist biblical studies; Guest notes how this raises “the question of who has permission or the credentials to write”, which in turn could lead to “appropriating a voice to which one has no right.”<sup>59</sup>

Scholars should seek to engage with specific nonnormative identities in such a way that they actively engage and speak with those who have experiences that they do not. Issues of appropriation, assumptions, credentials and ventriloquism are avoided when the voices from people who have those experiences are prominent in the knowledge produced, despite the position or identification of the author. This, of course, raises the possibility that the straight scholar is able to speak from the place of privilege, a place perhaps that minoritized individuals cannot access. One example of this is found in the emerging focus on transgender in theology and biblical studies. Mercia McMahon points to the fact that there are so few people speaking from this position, so positive engagement from non-trans people must work with trans people in the production of theologies:

The ideal trans theology is one that is written by members of trans communities, but with so few trans identified theologians this is a long way from becoming reality. Due to this situation those who engage in trans positive theology as outsiders need to be careful that they are fully engaging with the community and not making assumptions about what trans people experience.<sup>60</sup>

In identifying as a cisgender woman, Cornwall notes her work on transgender theologies is part of human experience: “There are good reasons for maintaining (for example) that transgender people know things about transgender experience that I do not: of course, that is indubitably true.”<sup>61</sup> Cornwall is an example of a heterosexual identifying scholar who has worked with non-normative individuals in theologizing from their experiences, as well as producing rather radical theology.<sup>62</sup> Cornwall

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59 Guest, 153.

60 Mercia McMahon, “Trans Liberating Feminist and Queer Theologies” in *This is My Body. Hearing the Theology of Transgender Christian* (Christina Beardsley and Michelle O’Brien, eds.; London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2016), 61.

61 Cornwall, “Homes and Hiddenness,” 41.

62 See, for example, Susannah Cornwall, *Un/familiar Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017). Cornwall interrogates the norm of monogamy within Christianity and explores polyamory as an alternative practice.

acknowledges that, from a personal perspective, there may be additional factors or motivations for the researcher working with LGBTQ+ people that may include career development, reputation or the attraction of exceptionality:

Of course, there is a broader set of questions about speaking with, for and on behalf of others. I have been acutely aware of them in many areas of my work: as a non-intersex person who writes about intersex; as a cisgender person who writes about transgender; as an able person who writes about disability; as a straight married person who writes about queer theology. What is my motivation? Am I unwilling to turn my attention to my own context, and unable to be critical about it? Am I a careerist, seeking to feed off the experiences and subjectivities of others whose perspectives I cannot hope to understand for the advancement of my own reputation? Am I a big game hunter, identifying and preying on exceptionality because it stands out so readily against the backdrop of a dusty theological landscape? Perhaps there are elements of all these despite my intentions otherwise.<sup>63</sup>

The consideration of these elements, despite the researcher's intentions, are ethical questions all scholars should consider when working with non-normative groups. The debate continues outside of theology and biblical studies too; one example is Judith Butler, who has come under criticism for her theorization of transgender people without paying specific attention to their bodies, identities and experiences. Viviane Namaste is concerned with Butler's speculation on transgender experiences and theorizing from such speculative spaces. I concur with Namaste who states how Butler's theory "would be well served by actually speaking with everyday women about their lives."<sup>64</sup> Namaste is concerned by the lack of voice from the people who are centralized in Butler's work on gender and feminism and insists "people about whom one writes have an equal say and an equal voice."<sup>65</sup> Elsewhere is a humorous vignette which makes this point clearly. C. J. Pascoe entitles their essay "What to Do with Actual People?"<sup>66</sup> and narrates a public discussion they attended at an event where Butler was speaking. Pascoe reflects on being "seduced, totally thrilled by her heady deconstructive discourse about performativity and abject identities." Yet these feelings were abruptly interrupted, as Butler's interlocutor, psychoanalyst Ken Corbett, responded "Well, of course *you* can say that, Jude, *because you don't have to deal with actual people.*"<sup>67</sup> Pascoe elaborates in a footnote: "This may not be the direct quote, as I've been telling this story for years. But, I promise, he did say 'Jude!'"<sup>68</sup>

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63 Cornwall, "Homes and Hiddenness," 41.

64 Viviane Namaste, "Undoing Theory: The "Transgender Question" and the Epistemic Violence of Anglo-American Feminist Theory," *Hypatia* 24:3 (2009), 25.

65 Namaste, "Undoing Theory," 25.

66 C. J. Pascoe, "What to Do with Actual People? Thinking Through a Queer Social Science Method" in *Other, Please Specify. Queer Methods in Sociology* (D'Lane Compton, Tey Meadow and Kristen Schilt, eds.; California: University of California Press, 2018), 291-303.

67 Pascoe, "What to Do with Actual People," 291.

68 Pascoe, "What to Do with Actual People," 302.

## Conclusion

This article set out to examine the position of straight-identified individuals engaging in queer projects in theology and biblical studies. Having observed the popularity of queer as a trendy, en vogue and almost valid approach, and compared forays from men into feminism, I have detailed how queer theory destabilizes heterosexuality and that queer studies dismantle heteronormativity rather than heterosexuality. These points combined affirm the need for universal inclusion in the queer project. In fact, the question posed by colleagues and students which downed the gauntlet for this article, about the involvement of straight-identifying folk in queer studies, is misplaced. It should not be about straight people in queer studies, but the concern should be about queer theologies and queer biblical studies becoming straight. By straight, I refer to it becoming normalized and normative. When queer theory first emerged, David Halperin expressed concern with queer as normative: “a determinate subfield of academic practice, respectable enough to appear in advertisements for academic jobs and in labels on the shelves of bookstores... the more it verges on becoming a normative academic discipline, the less queer ‘queer theory’ can plausibly claim to be.”<sup>69</sup>

I am therefore less concerned with queer theologies or biblical studies done by “straight” people than I am with queer studies acting “straight”, normative, and inscribing its own rules and hegemony. As an intellectual project, queer has been a helpful approach for constructive scholars sympathizing and working within faith traditions, but queer is a catalyst that agitates the discipline. Melissa Wilcox suggests that the relationship between queer theory and religious studies should be one of outlaws rather than in-laws, as she wonders, “Both religious studies and queer theory revel (at least theoretically) in their ability to break down methodological and disciplinary boundaries. But do they really do this?”<sup>70</sup>

Queer is non-conformist; it is unruly and does not behave. We see brilliant examples of indecency, parody, play, unexpectedness, camp and frivolity that delights and shocks in *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*,<sup>71</sup> *The Queer Bible Commentary*<sup>72</sup> and the Marcella Althaus-Reid corpus.<sup>73</sup> Queer refuses to pass through a back door rather than making a bold, extravagant entrance.<sup>74</sup> To return to

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69 David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 113.

70 Melissa M. Wilcox, “Outlaws or In-Laws?” *Journal of Homosexuality* 52:1-2 (2006), 93.

71 Ken Stone (ed), *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

72 Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache (eds) *The Queer Bible Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 2006).

73 Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology* (London: Routledge, 2000); Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (London: Routledge, 2003); Marcella Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist to Indecent Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2004); Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood (eds), *The Sexual Theologian* (London: Continuum, 2004).

74 Indeed, I am aware of the inherent irony in that these critiques can be equally levied at the discussion in this article. Those familiar with my scholarship will know that this is not usually the case. In attempting to wriggle out of falling on my own sword, I suggest that my rather well-behaved approach here is a deliberate ruse, exposing how if the experienced reader in queer studies has only become aware of the lack of ingredients that smack “queer” in this text by reading this footnote, then it highlights how normative and domesticated queer has become by playing by the rules of straight scholarship! Equally, I follow Jennifer Koosed in noting “I see the inconsistencies of my own identity” (Jennifer L. Koosed, “Ecclesiastes/Qohelet” in *The Queer Bible Commentary* (Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, and



the opening discussion of the location of queer within the academy, Kent Brintnall raises a number of questions relating to this:

Should a work of queer theology fit easily into the curriculum? Should it look like other systematic theology texts? Should "fit," "usability," and "marketability" be queer values? If a work on queer theology fails to disrupt the ways we teach, talk about, and organize theological inquiry, then how queer is it?<sup>75</sup>

Brintnall suggests that those working in queer theology and queer biblical studies refrain from putting "queer" in front of normative ways of producing theology and biblical criticism, but instead look at theologizing and exploring references from queer culture. He suggests a number of methodological, theoretical and political opportunities in relocating to queer contexts rather than traditional theological and biblical contexts:

What about the wide array of AIDS memoirs, coming-out narratives, pornographic novels, and pulp romances that make no explicit mention of religion? Isn't any queer work of art part of the queer tradition, testimony to queer experience—a candidate for inclusion in queer scripture? Why must the source in question engage religion in a fairly obvious way to merit consideration as a source for theological reflection? [...] Don't queers have scriptures and traditions—songs, plays, novels, movies, images, rituals, snippets of gossip—that inform queer reason about and queer experience of the world? What kind of theology might arise from these sources?<sup>76</sup>

Of course, Brintnall is right, queer theologies and queer biblical studies still have much to do in using queer sources and experiences as its starting point. In many cases, Althaus-Reid made this call when suggesting queer theologies emerge from spaces such as "the salsa bar"<sup>77</sup> rather than the ivory towers, where they are playful, parodic and emotive. From such a space, queer theologians and biblical scholar experience a "perverse pleasure, gaiety if you will, in writing in ways a biblical scholar is not supposed to write"<sup>78</sup> as Jennifer Koosed so brilliantly put it. Radical rage and risk must not give way to reason and politeness. We need to ask, following David Halperin, has queer lost some of "its capacity to startle, to surprise, to help us think what has not been thought"?<sup>79</sup>

Oh, how I long for indecency. I long for queer theologies and queer biblical studies that you don't want to show your parents.

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Thomas Bohache, eds.; London: SCM Press, 2006), 342.

75 Kent Brintnall, "Review of Cheng, P. S. *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology*. (New York: Seabury Press, 2011) and Cornwall, S. *Controversies in Queer Theology*. (London: SCM Press, 2011)" *Theology & Sexuality* 16:3 (2010), 309.

76 Brintnall, "Review," 309–310.

77 Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 3.

78 Koosed, "Ecclesiastes/Qohelet," 343.

79 David M. Halperin, "The Normalization of Queer Theory," *Journal of Homosexuality* 45:2-4 (2003), 243.

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