

I wonder how a framework that similarly cycles through doing, undoing, and redoing might open up a spiritual life for more queer people?

F-Word Fun Home

Kim Cosier

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Growing up fundamentalist can be challenging for any child, but when you do not fit within the confines of traditional gender norms, when you are masculine, female-bodied or feminine, male-bodied, navigating identity can make you feel like a foreigner within your own family. Certain forms of feminism, too, can feel alienating. In this article, I share personal experiences with both social constructions of feminism and fundamentalism. Borrowing from queer theories, I wrestle with ways of doing, undoing, and redoing religion and gender that may have implications for teaching in a more inclusive and expansive manner.

Correspondence regarding this article may be sent to the author: kcosier@uwm.edu



**F-word
Fun Home!**

Introduction

In 2006, Allison Bechdel published a landmark graphic novel called *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. In it, she told a coming of age story that was informed and deformed by her father's struggles with his closeted homosexual identity. Eventually identifying as a butch lesbian herself, Bechdel poignantly examines how she came to understand herself in relation to her father's journey. The graphic novel became a Tony Award winning musical that brought Bechdel's story to a much wider audience than a more traditional scholarly treatment of the subject could have ever done. Inspired by her work, I humbly present this autobiographical tragicomic.



In this graphic article, I examine my own queer coming of age story relative to the fundamentalist and feminist subcultural systems in which I grew up. Using aspects of my autobiography, I pursue an expanded understanding of the complex interconnections within these two social spheres that may impact identity, agency, and mental health in individuals that do not fit neatly within either system. According to Zevallos (2014) gender and sexual identities are both personal and deeply social. Avishai (2016) and others have shown that (non)religious identities are similarly rooted in the self and in interactions with others. Explorations of the intersections of gender identity and religious/spiritual identity are only recently coming out in the scholarly record and it seems as though we are poised to enter a time of robust dialogue.

I am butch/gender queer (Eves, 2004) and spiritually conflicted. As my story reveals, it has taken a long time for me to own this gender identity and I am still working on my religious/spiritual self. In my formative years, evangelical Christian fundamentalism and second-wave feminism both had a considerable impact on the development of my identity as a masculine female-bodied person. In my second coming of age, after many years of struggle and a prolonged quest to understand my queer gender identity, I am now finally at peace with who I am as a gendered person and hoping to find my home in the spiritual realm. I feel I am finally becoming a person my five-year-old self would recognize. I would really like to make that kid proud.

Religious life is fraught for most queer people I know. You may have heard people who grew up in strict religious environments, refer to being a “recovering (fill in name of religious affiliation).” For example, someone might say “I am a recovering Catholic.” The first time I heard that phrase, I was taken aback by its power and the implication that one might be able to step away from a past that had done physical and emotional damage, as one might step away from the harm of addiction. In my first coming of age, I felt the need to retreat from religion in order to become a whole person. Thus, I have used that phrase myself in the past, yet like others I know and love, I find myself longing for a spiritual life that fits me in the here and now.

One result of my struggle with this paradox has been *Big Gay Church*, a performance project that represents a collective effort among art education scholars to address that longing as we also critically interrogate religion in relation to queer identities (Rhoades, Davenport, Wolfgang, Cosier, & Sanders, 2013). My character, Miss Jeanette, is a Sunday School teacher who calls out hypocrisy and honors queer spiritual leaders in her lessons. This article is another chapter in my quest for understanding the complexities of queer identity. Though personal, I believe there are critical questions I am trying to pursue with this particular project that might have a wider impact. These include:



In what ways did feminism and fundamentalism inform and deform my sense of self as I came of age in the 1970s and 80s and (how) have things changed?

How might sampling/remix be employed to do/undo/redo gender and religious identities?

What can be learned from my particular chronologically, culturally, and socially bounded coming of age stories that can be applicable for young people today and the art educators who work with them?

In order to pursue possible answers to these questions, I first situate this inquiry within theoretical frameworks that draw from feminist, queer, and religious scholarship. Refining a theory of identity development that works across gender and religion is an ongoing project among scholars today (Avishai, 2016; Kelly, 2014) and my intent is to contribute to that important dialogue through an arts education lens. Setting the stage for my personal story and its implications for students, I end the first section with a proposed theoretical framework that uses remix as a strategy (Derecho, 2008). For students who are questioning their gender and religious identities and seeking self-determination, self-reflection in relation to social and cultural norms is crucial. Creating spaces in arts classrooms for such investigations, which allow students to sample/remix possibilities for newly imagined identities would be highly beneficial.

Social Theoretical Frames related to Fundamentalism, Gender Identity, and Feminism

Doing Gender/Doing Religion

According to Kelly (2014) and Avishai (2008, 2016), subcultural identity theory (Smith, Emerson, Gallagher, Kennedy, & Sikkink, 1998; Smith, 2000) is the theoretical framework most often applied to the sociological study of religious fundamentalism, even today. According to the tenets of subcultural identity theory, people's identities and subsequent actions can be explained by the strictures of a particular group. This framing of identity has caused scholars of religion to challenge subcultural identity theory because they believe that it limits our understanding of individuals within such groups, and precludes agency. Perhaps not coincidentally, a review of the literature reveals that studies of homosexuality were once a staple within the literature in subcultural identity theory as well (Wellman, 1999), but queer theory moved scholars into new, more productive directions. I believe a queer lens and the concept of remix may prove fruitful moving forward.

Additionally, some argue that there is a disconnect in the study of religious fundamentalism when it comes to feminist scholarship within this theoretical framework (Avishai, 2008, 2016; Kelly, 2014; Mahmood, 2004). According to Avishai (2016), there exists a persistent "feminist dilemma" (p. 262) among scholars who work within subcultural identity theory who she accuses of being inherently biased toward a view that women in fundamentalist religious life are necessarily and inevitably oppressed. I join religious scholars who call for a rethinking of the relationship of feminism to religious cases so that identity relative to gender and religion may become more understood expansively.

Making a case for the inclusion of religious cases in sociological research, Avishai (2008) suggests an alternative theoretical frame she calls "doing religion," which builds upon "doing gender," a highly influential theoretical framework posited by West and Zimmerman (1987). Doing gender was framed as an alternative to subcultural identity theory. It sees gender identity as "a routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interaction" (p. 31), giving primacy to performance over rules. Avishai sees this as a potent conceptual framework to apply to religious cases. In doing religion, agency is not only possible for women in religious life but it is action within a group that shapes identity. Avishai argues that women can do religion, even in those groups that are seen as oppressive by outsiders, in ways that empower them and provide a space to exercise agency.

Although I agree with these scholars that women in religious settings are not necessarily victims, I see doing religion as unhelpful when it comes to queer people who may be outsiders from within religious frameworks. The framing of Other in such research ironically mirrors the framing of Other in fundamentalist cultures. Kelly, like others, (Smith et al., 1998; Williams, 2009), asserts that insiders in religious groups frame identity in opposition to the secular world, which often includes queer people. This opens up an interesting paradox for queer folk coming up in fundamentalist communities, as identity in the doing religion framework is predicated on identifying oneself with a circle of other insiders. Being on the outside from within a social milieu, as queer people most often are, therefore presents a challenge to doing religion.

My experience coming of age in the time of second wave feminism made me feel similarly an outsider from within as a masculine lesbian.

Doing, Undoing, and/or Redoing Gender and Religion?



In a review of the literature on gender identity development, I have found the work of Connell (2010), Deutsch (2007), and newer work by West and Zimmerman (2009) to be helpful in framing this inquiry. As West and Zimmerman (2009), point out, Judith Butler (2004) first theorized “undoing gender” in her book of that name, without referencing their original theory. In 2007, Duetsch challenged doing gender, calling for a theory that allows gender to be undone if social progress is ever to be made. West and Zimmerman (2009) countered with an argument that gender can never be undone because power imbalances will never be completely made right, but allowed that it may be possible for gender to be redone. Connell (2010) tested the do-undo-redo debate in an empirical study of transgender individuals’ experiences in the workplace. She found that her subjects actually experienced a cycle of doing, undoing and redoing gender, which she dubbed “doing transgender” (p. 51)

I have become convinced that a theoretical model that allows for a remix of doing, undoing *and* redoing gender and religion would be most helpful for understanding identity development among gender queers who have experiences in fundamentalist religions. I agree with West and Zimmerman that undoing gender (and religion) completely is probably not in the cards, there is just too much at stake for those in power (while working on this project, people across the globe have taken to the streets to fight back against the deplorable behavior and threatening actions of a regressive and repressive new president), but remix could be key to moving religion progressively into the future. A continuous cycle of doing, undoing and redoing is probably the best we can hope for. I know it sounds exhausting, but there you have it.



Our story begins with...well...I guess where everyone's story begins—on the first day!

The doctor declared the firstborn Cosier baby to be female!
(based on the usual evidence)



I was the apple of my father's eye, as they say.
A real firecracker!





My poor, fancy mother
tried her best to make
me frilly and feminine,
but it just wasn't in the
cards for her.

Nope, by my father's side, I saw what a good deal boys had in the 60s and I wanted to have it all!



Fearlessness!

Fame!

Fast bikes!

Flexed muscles!

& a future full of possibilities!



That was the life
for me,
YessireeBob! and
all was going
well until...

The Crisis of 5th Grade



...in which Father finds God
and ruins our lives.

After nine years of happiness, my life was forever changed when my father experienced a religious conversion. (We thought my mother was the driver of this transformation until decades later when she self-published a book called: Things I Learned Along "The Way")

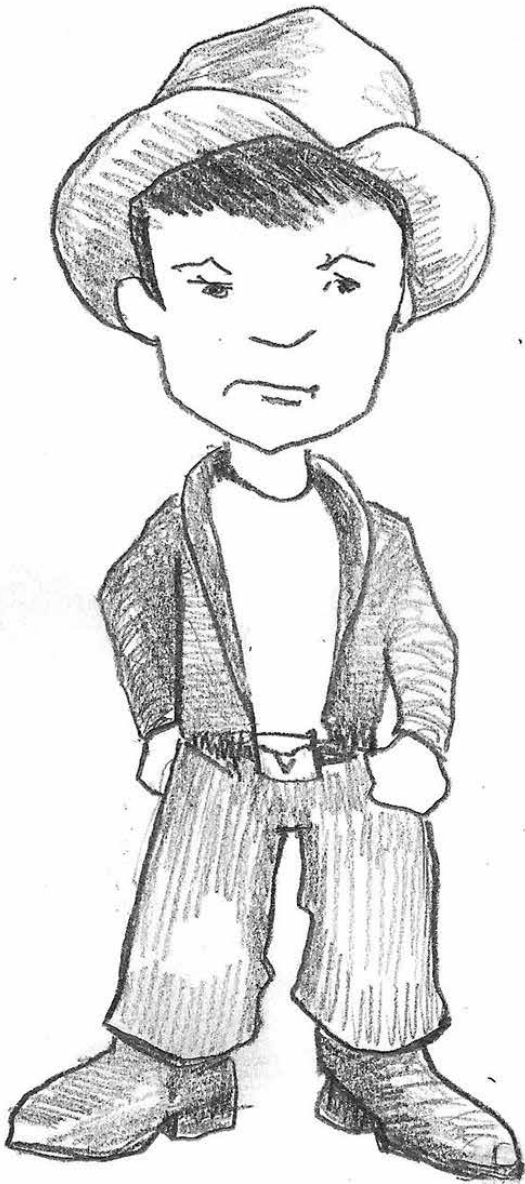
The Way began in my beloved hometown, Spring Lake, Michigan and led us to a warehouse in downtown Grand Rapids-only 50 miles, but light years apart.

To help fund a dream created within a passionate bromance between the pastor and my father, we sold nearly everything we owned to donate as much as possible to "The Church at Grand Rapids."

There, we started (and lived in) a homeless mission. It took me many years of therapy and self-reflection to realize that I had personally experienced homelessness in that place.



Just before we moved to the church I had my first experience of questioning the existence of God. I was sitting in a park in my soon-to-be-abandoned hometown, eating Kentucky Fried Chicken with my family. Though I had no idea how hard my new life would be, I knew it was not my choice and I was furious!



My little sister jumped off of one of those playground bouncy horses and it rocked by itself for just a second or two. Just then, as I watched that horse rock in silence it occurred to me that maybe there was no God, and that my father and mother were ruining our lives for a fool's errand.

I already knew that this kind of thinking was not going to fly in the church. The answer to every question was now "God" or "Satan." So I kept this skepticism to myself as we entered into what to me seemed to be hell on earth.



faith???,
feeling,
fate,
filth,
fags,
fail,
flight?!
fight!,
fear,
family
felons,
freshfood
fury
fumbling
fantasy
freedom



Laying on hands and healing



Holy Spirit Baptism

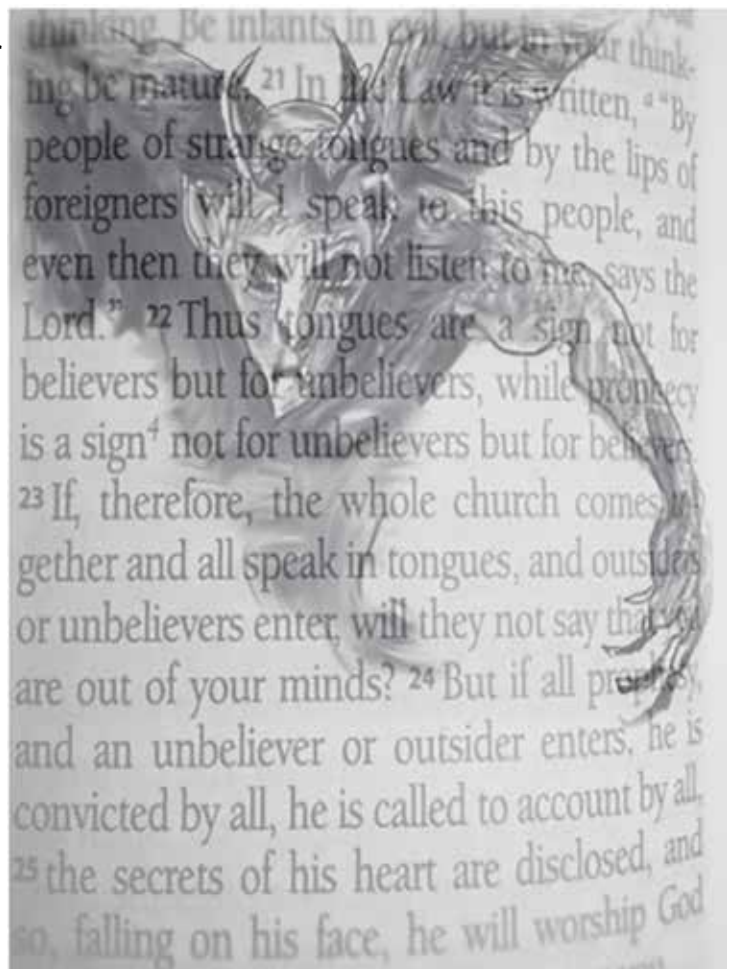
FACING DEMONS:

On God's Gifts and Faltering/Faking Faith

A bonus of being "Baptized in the Holy Spirit" are what are called, "the gifts." My father received the "Gift of Prophecy," which I viewed with suspicion due to his obvious lack of prescience or foreknowledge on matters that were having rather dire consequences on our lives.

My mom received the "gift of Discerning Spirits," which would come as no surprise if you knew her. Quite early in the game she received word from God that I had the Demon of Rebellion in me...no surprise there either, I suppose. I was diagnosed with that pesky demon again and again.

This is what I figured it probably looked like. It became a companion of sorts.



Even though we lived with many people at the homeless mission, I felt increasingly alone, frustrated, and forlorn. While my parents were ministering to the downtrodden, I withdrew into a fantasy life they knew nothing about.

I was only happy when I drew and read books and retreated into my own world, which was always strikingly similar to my old home.



I had to wear DRESSES!!
Furious, my will to live began to falter.

The first coming of Age



Lots of other really, really crappy stuff happened in the years that followed, which intensified my thoughts of dying, but I prefer to keep those stories to myself for now. In the early 80s, I took a huge step in coming out as a lesbian. This was no simple matter given my background. I made a lot of mistakes during the latter half of my first coming of age. Let's just say I tried a lot of ways to grow up or die trying. I didn't stay anywhere for too long. I always wanted to be in a relationship but always "stepped out," on them. Maybe it was that ol' Demon of Rebellion? In any case, I think I had internalized a feeling that I was made to be bad.



Feminism in that particular era did not much appeal to me. As I saw it, feminism didn't have a place for a butch like me. I favored partying with other working class butches at Club 67, a local gay bar, telling dumb jokes and talking about motorcycles and the ladies. The feminists in my life made me feel like an outsider all over again, which I had no appetite for after all those years in the church.

As far as I was concerned, "processing," which feminists seemed to do a lot of in the Second Wave, was too much like the "Love Sessions" we had at the church. The felt both dangerous and tedious; attacks poorly disguised as support. My experiences in the church had wired me to retreat into silence; according to Adrienne Rich (1977; 1995), Tillie Olsen (2003) and my first girlfriend's friends, silence was akin to lying... what????????? Of course, I lied too, my life in the church had taught me to do that all too well! Frankly, I didn't know how to live a life above board. So, I was pretty much doomed with that relationship and second wave feminism in general. And so life continued for some time.

Feminism and fundamentalism seemed too similar to me—rigid in their expectations and humorless in their approach to life. And that is what I knew until...

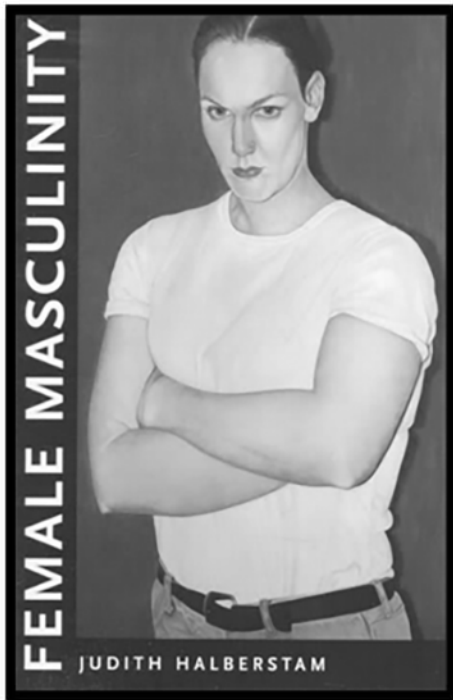


the 3rd Wave washed over us!

The 2nd Coming (of age)

I got a second chance to grow up rather unexpectedly as I was riding on the 3rd wave of feminism, which I knew initially only from the riot grrrl/popular culture side of things. I was still very unsettled and not really grown then. I had moved out to Seattle with another girlfriend and things ended badly but, at least this time it was not my fault it didn't work out!

Consequently, with little more than a suggestion by a person I barely knew, I applied to graduate school where I discovered that feminism was not just what I had understood it to be.



I was introduced to feminist scholarship for the first time and it began to turn my life around. One of the features of the 3rd wave that spoke most loudly to me was intersectionality. Where 2nd wave feminism felt exclusive, 3rd wave scholars were open to all of us! Queer theory and post-colonialism helped shape and inform difficult but necessary dialogues. I found queer theorists such as Judith Butler (2004), and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990, 2008), to be enormously exciting! Their work was eye opening, provocative, and fascinating to me. But it was Judith/Jack Halberstam (1998), who shocked me into recognizing the full extent of the work I needed to do personally. Halberstam's forays into female masculinities shook the ground I walked on in the late 1990s. I realized I still had a ways to go before I was grown.

Leslie Feinberg's novel *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) was also fiercely influential. The story of life as a butch in the 1950s is at once devastating and inspiring. It taught me how courageous butches AND femmes were before the Stonewall uprising! We certainly have broad shoulders to stand on!!

Feinberg's other book *Transliberation* (1998), and a general warming to the idea of trans-identity in both academia and the broader society, brought on a period of gender identity uncertainty for me. After all these years, I began to think about my own place on the gender spectrum. When I was a kid, before life handed me a f*ckin' firestorm, hadn't I wanted desperately to be a boy?????



NosireeBob, "female" did not fit your image of me, but what about you, old timer?



This kid really started getting under my skin (or was it back IN my skin?) Now that transitioning from female to male (F to M) was a real possibility, would I go down that path? Or would I forge a different path?

Fortunately, my life experiences had prepared me well for delayed gratification, so I quietly studied and sat with my thoughts for a few years. I met more transgender and gender queer folks and kept working, all the while mulling over this question-would I go from F to M now that I could? How did I identify in this brave, new world of transgender revolution?

Female Masculinities

Ultimately, I have come to understand that for me, gender transition is not the path I will take. I have become comfortable in my butch skin.

It seems that those of us who don't transition and remain female bodied, yet masculine, or male bodied and feminine, have some work to do. We are under-theorized. My final project is to work on myself-and our society-to expand what is possible. To know that wives can wear feminine frocks and/or dream of getting hitched in a bespoke suit and a fedora!

My wife Josie has become my new Demon of Rebellion and my forever home. I once was lost, but now I'm found!



Painting by Fred Stonehouse

Fourth Wave Feminists!

We have embarked on the 4th wave (the historic Women's March on Washington has left no doubt!) and this is really the Feminism for me-badass activism and lots of FUN!!!!

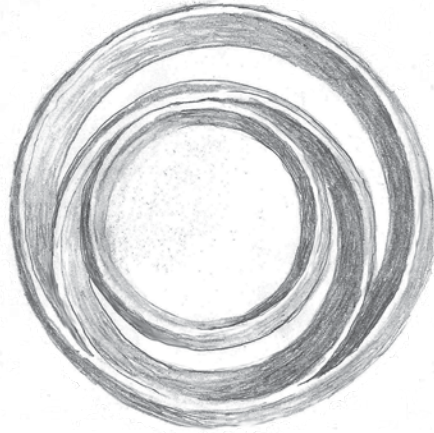
I've even begun to think about being a religious person again, in earnest. I am not sure what that means yet, but I think it is part of a story that is yet to be written. Exploration of remix here will be key to expansive potential. There will be more to explore but this is my story so far.

Conclusion

As I look to the future, I find that reflecting on my experiences through remix, or a process of doing, undoing, *and* redoing gender and religion, rather than focusing on just one of those possibilities is most helpful. Feminism and fundamentalism informed and deformed my sense of self as I came of age in the 1970s and 80s in ways that were strikingly similar. As a person who questioned the tenets of our religion, and resisted proper, “Godly” gender performance, I was an outsider on the inside of the fundamentalist, Evangelical Charismatic Christian community. Although I kept quiet about my God questions, it was harder to repress my masculine gender traits. There was constant gender policing in the church, and in the religious school we went to where my elders and peers tried to maintain a very proscribed masculine/feminine gender binary. I learned to play along when people were looking.

Second wave feminism made me feel the same sense of not belonging. As a masculine woman in the early 80s, I did not fit in the Women’s Movement. Butch and femme roles were seen as replicating oppressive patriarchal structures and railed against by the feminists I knew at the time. For that reason, feminism and fundamentalism felt the same to me. Rather than hide who I was as I had earlier in the church, however, I rebelled against the strictures of second wave feminism as I also finally dared to define myself in opposition to the religion in which I was brought up. In other words, I tried to undo gender and religion in the period of my first coming of age. Thankfully, newer incarnations of feminism are more inclusive.

Though much has changed, I believe there are still lessons to be learned from my particular, chronologically, culturally, and socially bounded coming of age story that can be applicable for young people today. Even with the progress made for LGBT+ people, students today are at risk of much danger. According to a report by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (n.d.), “While many sexual minority youth cope with the transition from childhood to adulthood successfully and become healthy and productive adults, others struggle as a result of challenges such as stigma, discrimination, family disapproval, social rejection, and violence” (para. 1). I believe queer and questioning youth need stories that will allow them to learn from those who have come before them and made it through dark times. Such stories can give students in peril a guiding light. I further believe that having a background in fundamentalism and a challenging history with feminism, makes me a better, more empathetic teacher educator than I may have been without such a history. One way I hope to make a broader contribution will be to make the seed planted here into a comic book that can be shared more widely with young people. I invite others to join me as I believe in story building as future building.



Undoing and Redoing Gender and Religion

Engagement with my own story relative to the questions of doing, undoing, and redoing gender (Connell, 2010; Deutsch, 2007; West & Zimmerman, 2009) and religion (Avishai, 2016) has led me to understand that a theory that may help to explain my story, and perhaps the stories of others who are neither transgender nor traditionally gendered, is one that conceives of doing, undoing and redoing gender as a remixing cycle that may repeat many times over one's lifetime. Connell argues that "doing transgender" could be a way of thinking about that cycle. I'd like to suggest "gender remix" as a more inclusive and expansive framework that makes space for non-transgender gender expansive folk.

I am moved by an idea that disruptive queer femininities and masculinities may be productive in terms of expanding possibilities for gender identity. And as I grow older and more settled in my own skin I am finding, to my surprise, that an ever more urgent call to do religion is making itself known to me. I wonder, how a framework that similarly cycles through doing, undoing and redoing might open up a spiritual life for more queer people? I am coming to understand Miss Jeanette as an experiment in that vein. She represents the feminine virtue of loving kindness that I value in my own teaching, as she also subversively radicalizes Sunday School.

As artists and educators, we have a drive to make work and do work that helps others imagine the world as if it could be otherwise, as Maxine Greene (1995) has inspired us to do. I invite you to engage in queering theories of doing gender and doing religion. Disruptive queer readings of spiritual texts, such as those we do in Big Gay Church (Rhoades, Davenport, Wolfgang, Cosier, & Sanders, 2013) are one way of insisting on change. How might we as art educators move on with more expansive remix projects? There is much more to understand about the experiences of LGBT+ youth coming of age in a society that is becoming more, not less, divisive. I hope that this story spurs others to engage with me in narrative projects and other work that explores the interconnections of identity and helps address the challenges of coming of age as a queer person in this society.

Notes

For my wife, Josie

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