

Envisioning Care: Responses to the Traumas of “Truth” in an Online Queer Christian Community

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ABSTRACT

In light of the antagonistic histories of Christianity and the LGBTQ+ community in the U.S., a common hardship experienced by queer Christians is the shame of isolation. Many queer Christians are steeped in queerphobic faith communities, lacking resources to help themselves. Digital spaces have become an innovative way to forge connections around this distinct point of tension between faith and lived experience. In this digital ethnography of an online queer Christian community, care is witnessed to be formative for many, and vital for some. Community members adapt approaches to care in the online domain of Reddit to produce support, belonging, and solidarity for those like themselves who are suffering. Yet this care is also bound by social and political norms, which limit its scope to address the entrenched problems queer Christians face. Central to this experience is the role of “Truth” and how it has been wielded against queer Christians, used to marginalize populations, and exploited to shape American culture.

Keywords: Christianity; queer communities; LGBTQ+; digital ethnography; care

observation. I then engage points of convergence between hegemonic American Christianity and queerness, homing in on the resulting experiences of queer Christians. I articulate the contours of care witnessed throughout my fieldwork, and, finally, evaluate this care in relation to outside realities. As such, this ethnography is an occasion to consider the “suffering subject,” involving my speaking for and from that role, and with an “anthropology of the good” (Robbins 2013, 457).

Becoming a Member

Outside the window, the evening sky was dark—typical for a mid-February evening. I sat at a small table inside a small coffee shop in my small, rural college town of Manhattan, Kansas. It was a frequent haunt of mine, usually on Sunday nights. With the checkered tile flooring, the dark wood furnishings, the indie art, and the music from their eccentric playlists mingling with sparse conversations, the space was casual, unconcerned. But tonight was Monday night, and the atmosphere radiated the stress and frenzy of a new week—chairs scraping, the assorted grunting and whirring of an espresso machine, loud conversations and exasperated laughs, the comings and goings of people studying, writing, preparing a presentation, downing caffeine.

As I placed my things on the table before me, the concentration of Christian groups struck me. I noticed that at the table beside mine there were two guys talking with one another while poring over their bibles. Not far away from us, there was a table overcrowded with college girls gathered for a bible study. Other tables scattered throughout the place housed bible study groups as well. And occupying the back corner, I sat alone. I became self-conscious, somewhat uneasy. Familiar accusations filled my mind. What would they think if they saw? I opened my laptop to plug into my own group of Christians, connecting with thousands of its members spanning beliefs, cultures, time, and continents, though none of whom I actually knew.

From attending conferences, making my way into different online groups, and scouting various organizations and online resources, I

Many queer Christians spend years in shame and isolation, afraid of their bodies, their lived experiences, and the threats these might pose to relationships with their communities and with the divine. A key motivation for my ethnographic research has been exploring how queer Christians find community and support in online settings. Online communities can be an escape for solace, a nucleus for distanced connections, a pathway for hopeful imaginings. This piece is an account of individual and communal interactions with “Truth”—subjective beliefs accepted as moral absolutes. More specifically, it is an exploration of circulations of care emanating from these embodied, relational, and cultural encounters with “Truth” inside an online queer Christian community.

My work builds upon existing studies of American Christianity and the LGBTQ+ community (Griffith 2017; White 2015). Much research has been devoted to homophobic Christian ministries (Erzin 2006; Wolkomir 2006; Harris 2014) and the underpinning of Christian theologies surrounding homosexuality (Brownson 2013; Gagnon 2001; Siker 1994; Web 2001). There is also a burgeoning trove of writing from Christians with queer lived experiences wrestling with biblical interpretations and the Christian church (Hill 2010; Lee 2012; Perry 2018; Vines 2014). Yet queer activist and seminarian student Rachel Ward condemns instincts to consult the “biblical case” for inclusion, calling it “un-loving and violent” to queer people’s embodied traumas (Ward 2020). Little has been dedicated to the experience of queer Christians and the intentional communities of solidarity formed around tending to these traumas.

In this piece, I trace the self, constituted with and projected as the ‘other,’ in my participant

have discovered that there are many private online forums and groups where one can find LGBTQ+ Christians congregating. The point of conflict I find with these groups, however, is that they remain out of reach for vulnerable Christians still grappling with their queerness, those who have not yet claimed membership in the LGBTQ+ community. They remain out of reach for the person I used to be, even considering the access of my social positioning as a middle-class, White, cisgender man.

During my teenage years I tried to keep a firm grasp on my Southern Baptist faith while secretly “struggling” with same-sex attraction. I firmly believed that it was impossible for a person to be queer *and* Christian; I thought I was the only one in the world “suffering” in this particular way. It was a period of my life steeped in fear, isolation, and self-hatred. Only at twenty years old, when I found Matthias Roberts’ podcast, “Queerology”—a podcast centered around conversations of faith and queerness by a real, proud gay Christian—did things begin to change. At first, it was terrifying to listen to “Queerology.” I thought I was subjecting myself to false teaching. But I had also never heard anyone discuss an experience like mine, especially out of a place of acceptance and confidence. Such fear, paranoia, and uncertainty I later came to realize were not unique to me.

In discussing “halfie anthropologists,” Lila Abu-Lughod asks, “What happens when the ‘other’ that the anthropologist is studying is simultaneously constructed as, at least partially, a self?” (1991, 140). Due to the fact that I myself identify as a queer Christian, I write my research from the “uneasi[ness]” of “speaking ‘for’ and speaking ‘from’” (1991, 143). Before my ethnographic research, I had never engaged with an actual online community of LGBTQ+ Christians as a member. This fieldwork thrust me into a liminal state, holding the tension of my faith and sexual orientation, germinating into research of a familiar topic in an unfamiliar setting.

My past experiences in queerphobic Christian environments have given me a certain frame through which I engage this topic. In fact, as I began conducting this research, I experienced an affective kinship with others’

stress and trauma. After my first night of fieldwork, I wrote in my notes: “I have a flurry of emotions as I have been processing what I read. Visceral feelings of pain and empathy.” As I reflect, I can recognize the gradual ways I had become emotionally immersed in my field site, how it affected me and the feelings I came to associate with it: uncertainty forming a pit in my stomach, anxiety subtly pressing behind my sternum, anger radiating in my chest, disappointment and hopelessness sinking through my body. Some nights I would log on to Reddit and look at the latest post, only to become overwhelmed. I quickly learned to gauge what and how much I could handle.

There was a tension in my vulnerability, and that tension persists as I write with the uneasiness Abu-Lughod named. I do not claim that such feelings are absent in this product of my research. Ruth Behar in *The Vulnerable Observer* discusses tensions surrounding participant observation. She professes, “The exposure of the self who is also a specter has to take us somewhere we couldn’t otherwise get to” (Behar 1996, 14). In this venturing to be a vulnerable observer, as a queer Christian with a perspective oriented by experience, I expose myself out of a striving to carry this research somewhere it might not otherwise go.

The light of my computer screen arranged into colors and shapes. Opening Reddit was the entrance into my ethnographic fieldsite, the home page of the LGBChristians subreddit (r/LGBChristians, a pseudonym). I found myself virtually among a multitude of queer Christians. A subreddit is a user-created group on the Reddit website that is devoted to a specific topic. The name of this subreddit unambiguously designates the space for Christians discussing lesbian, gay, and bisexual experiences, though it exceeds this boundary, as many members identified with other queer sexualities and genders. Scrolling through the subreddit shows a variety of posts and conversations that all revolve around being queer and Christian: emotional accounts where people provide support to one another, intellectual exchanges for discussing theology and biblical interpretations, and sharing helpful resources or amusing memes. Under the

header painted in a band of rainbow colors, big black letters announce, “LGB Christians,” and centered underneath: “There is a place for us.”

Every person’s participation on Reddit is veiled with a username, which allows individuals to remain pseudonymous and their participation to be apart from their “actual” lives and identities (Boellstorff 2015). This is crucial for r/LGBChristians, as discussing queer matters can be taboo in Christian communities, especially when one personally claims this experience. Throughout this piece, I employ “queer” as a term to encompass lived experiences outside of merely identifying as LGBTQ+, which, I contend, more accurately depicts my fieldsite. I use LGBTQ+ to refer to a category/community/population specific to those identities. The nuance in naming and separation between online and in-person identities are significant. Consequently, being attuned to the ethical complexities of this research was of utmost concern.

To obtain permission for conducting ethnographic research within r/LGBChristians, I contacted the moderator, and explained my intention for the research. Upon receiving their approval, I made a post in the subreddit to introduce myself, shared my proposal to do research with the group, and provided a document with more in-depth information about the research for people that were interested: details about me as a student, ethical considerations, practices regarding data collection, and information about my approval from Kansas State University’s Institutional Review Board. The post ended with an invitation for people to contact me with concerns or questions. I offered this information again to members I contacted for interviews. Two interviews were conducted over the phone, one was through direct messages, and the six others were conducted by video calls. Additionally, my username was “cjj_ethnographer” to mark myself as a researcher.

Names and usernames are all pseudonyms for privacy purposes. Quotations from posts and comments in the subreddit have not been edited for punctuation, grammar, or typos. I use they/them/their pronouns for members in an effort to avoid making assumptions of gender

and defaulting into binary gender categories. Accounting for the fact that Reddit is an online space open to the public—all of the posts and comments are visible for anyone’s engagement—and that I had received permission from the moderator as well as introduced myself and my research to the group, I endeavored to conduct my digital ethnography without breaching individuals’ privacy or acting under false pretenses.

For an idea of the activity in the LGBChristians subreddit, I quantified every engagement for a one-month period. Within the month of March 2020, there were 64 new posts created, 772 comments made, and the scores (positive and negative points to indicate support or dissent) of these 64 posts numbered to 2,310. I recorded these measurements a month after they were originally posted, hoping the lapse in time would prevent numbers from changing dramatically after documentation. In addition, self-proclaimed “lurkers” frequently observe the subreddit, gleaning from the discussions yet never interacting (albeit some eventually choose to participate, often writing their posts with disclaimers noting how long they have followed the subreddit without contributing). The bulk of my fieldwork—over 130 hours of research—took place between February and April of 2020, during which I took notes and analyzed data from all of the posts and comments made. (Numbers of interactions and membership gradually increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically between April and May.) Throughout these three months, the number of members in the subreddit climbed from 5,800 to over 6,300, and there was an average of 13 members online while I was performing fieldwork. Such data allow for the general idea of people’s engagement within the subreddit.

Living Deaths: Convergences of Christianity and Queerness

Severe statistics on suicide, houselessness, queerphobic violence, and self-harm are the classic metrics for judging the quality of queer folks’ experiences. Among LGBTQ+ youth, rates of suicide, houselessness, even “change attempts,” remain high, more so for transgender and nonbinary youth (The Trevor

Project 2020). Systemic forces are a persistent specter, an example being how queer Black and Native American youth are disproportionately affected by issues such as homelessness (Youth.gov). These situations only compound disparate traumas and injustices faced by people of color, as reflected by incarceration rates, institutionalizations, and other forms of state violence. Meanwhile, a 2018 study revealed that among LGB individuals, “religious importance”—that is, religion being important to the respondent—was associated with a 38% increase in the odds of recent suicidal ideation (Lytle 2018, 646), and according to a Pew Research Center report, about 70% of Americans “describe themselves as Christian” (2015). These realities are historically connected. It is likely that a majority of LGBTQ+ folks in the U.S. grew up with a background determined or influenced by Christianity. As the tacit state religion of the settler-colonial U.S., Christianity merits being at the forefront of any discussion on the state of the LGBTQ+ community in this country.

Traditional Christianity—a term I use to demarcate the often conservative, queerphobic Christianity that has been central in the formation of settler-colonial American society—is pivotal in this country’s history of oppressions: cis-heteronormativity; White supremacist knowledge productions, social abuses, and structural exploitation; ableism tied to capitalist production (witnessed broadly in the Protestant work ethic and the prosperity gospel, for example); and settler-colonialism’s “civilizing mission” and its continual colonial violence against Indigenous people and cultures. Historian and religious scholar R. Marie Griffith traces the merging of traditional Christianity and cis-heteronormativity, with Christianity portraying women, queer folks, immigrants, racial Others, and other Others as representing the “enemy within [...] a God-blessed nation” (2017, xi). Looking at cis-heteronormativity specifically, what/who is Other blends into what/who is queer. Cis-heteronormativity began taking shape more concretely in the late 1800s when White, “monogamous hetero couple-hood and the privatized single-family household” became state-sanctioned “national ideals” (Rifkin 2006, 28). It has become entrenched in American life

since then as the American dream, and in many ways, “the family” can be seen as metaphoric to morality (Burack 2015, 3). Thus, national and Christian ideals have noticeably been braided together.

As the Other blends into the queer, nonheteronormativity is racialized. Productions of African Americans as “nonheteronormative” have been enacted since times of slavery through “material practices of state and civil society” (Ferguson 2009, 420). Often White-enforced, “African-American racial and sexual formations”—including “lack of common law marriages, out-of-wedlock births, lodgers, single-headed families, non monogamous sexual relationships, unmarried persons, and homosexual persons and relationships”—were condemned as immoral (Ferguson 2009, 423). Cathy Cohen fleshed out how only privileged (rich, White) expressions of heterosexuality are accepted and empowered, rendering Black women, and women of color more generally, deviant (1997, 454). Mark Rifkin followed Cohen, maintaining that missions to “civilize” Native folks heavily involved institutionalizing heterosexuality, enacting a colonial “network of interlocking state-sanctioned policies and ideologies” (2006, 28). Just in these glimpses, the forces of anti-Black racism and White supremacy, citizenship, and colonialism stand out in the development of cis-heteronormativity.

A generative force for traditional Christianity’s investment in cis-heteronormativity as a colonial, White supremacist, national enterprise was pathologization. Starting in the early 1900s, Christian pathologization of LGBTQ+ folks involved developing therapeutic discourse and informing pastoral counseling to “treat” homosexuality, which then shaped biblical interpretations surrounding homosexuality (White 2015, 27). In the 1940s, emotionalism in Black churches—namely Holiness, Pentecostal, and Apostolic denominations with worship styles connected to traditional African religions—was labelled as a pathological condition, indicative of “unregulated nonheteronormativity” (Ferguson 2009, 426-427). In a more recent case of pathologizing, Southern Baptist pastor Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority damned queer folks during the AIDS epidemic in the US, projecting AIDS and the multitudes of deaths as

“God’s wrath” (Shilts 1987, 348). Considering the disproportionate effects on communities of color, queerphobia was not the only force at play. This overview is context for traditional Christianity’s involvement in interlocking and overlapping American regimes of oppression. While these oppressions are imposed upon communities, they are also inscribed on individual bodies.

Christianity in the Queer Body: Disgust, Divine Disapproval, and Disablement

From within, Christian communities can intensify the cis-heteronormativity circulating in broader culture. Stephen, a member of the subreddit I interviewed, confessed over the phone his anger for and distress from buying into the life trajectory of a Christian family and the American dream set before him. In two different subreddit posts, he shared: “I want to live and believe I’m not going to hell, guys. I want God to love me. I want to love myself” and “I’m not happy that I have to now settle in a life that I never wanted.” A commenter aptly replied that when one has only been presented the heteronormative, “It’s hard to even envision a different script.” Traditional Christianity’s cis-heteronormative script constrains people’s lives but can constrict to the point of strangling for queer folks.

Prejudice is projected onto collective and individual mind-bodies. While talking about the mistreatment they endured because people suspected they were gay, u/komo-journey1376 elucidated, “The truth is that a lot of Christians aren’t just against gay sex, they really don’t like lgbt people and wish we didn’t exist.” Burack situates “disgust”—signifying “moral wickedness”—as the root of Christian homophobia (2014, 23). Yet in sociologist Kelsey Burke’s digital ethnography of evangelical men’s online groups for non-normative sex practices, sexual acts (such as “pegging [the anal penetration of a man by a woman]” [2014, 4]) are justified because both God and their wives are assured of (and ensure) their “masculine status” (2014, 17). Disgust then resides in queer bodies specifically, in the desires, expressions, experiences, relationships, and lifeways implied in these mind-bodies do not align with cis-heteronormative scripts. SueAnn Shiah’s presentation, “Theology of the Body,” at the

2020 Q Christian Fellowship conference affirmed this: even if LGBTQ+ Christians try to convince people they are one of the “good ones”—meaning they believe the “right” thing—“History has shown they will judge you by your body” (2020, 40:33-40:45). Violating cis-heteronormative scripts in a queer mind-body supposedly invites divine disapproval, justifying human prejudice.

Following this shift towards individual bodies, there are theologies in Christianity that consider queer sexualities and gender identities to be disabilities, reifying their locus in a judged mind-body through the lenses of queerphobia and ableism. This began with early 1900s’ therapeutic discourses positing that homosexuality, rather than being a problem of morality, manifests from a “psychic conflict” (White 2015, 29). Wesley Hill’s *Washed and Waiting* tells of his experience as a gay Christian, presenting his sexual orientation as akin to Paul of the New Testament’s “thorn in the flesh,” a bodily affliction given by the divine through which suffering becomes a transformative aspect of grace (2010). Disability studies scholars commonly explain disability as a social construction, but through the “ignorance, stereotyping, and stigmatization” of disability in our broader culture, disablement is often attributed solely to biology, which eludes the recognition of the disabling structures of our world and our subsequent “social responsibilities” (Wendell 1996, 57, 67). Theologies positing queer sexualities and genders as disabilities do not recognize that one’s (cis-heteronormative) environment can create the “disability,” and so people are judged by their mind-bodies.

Due to this perspective, conversion therapy efforts geared towards “healing” still exist. Devastatingly, many queer Christians consent to and even seek out these practices for themselves, betraying the pervasive ways Christians can internalize queerphobia, being subject to the affects and embodiments of convictions manipulated (Jarrard 2020). Such “reparative” methods, even queerphobic religious rhetoric, can be disabling of the mind-body. Brett Trap speaks of having a stroke in his intense moments in the closet (2017), and Christian singer Vicky Beeching was diagnosed with fibromyalgia and myalgia

encephalomyelitis after the onslaught of homophobic Christian condemnation during her coming out (2018). In r/LGBChristians, one member posted, “I pray every night, and have for the past 6 years, to be straight. I beg and cry out to God to change me, but I’m still here.” When cis-heteronormative scripts are all one knows, the vitriol becomes embodied.

“Truth” Traumas

Queer Christians too often embody spiritual and religious traumas. These traumas result from lived experiences where “Truth”—a religious belief held to be the absolute, universal standard of morality—threatened a severing of connections with communities, themselves, and even with the divine. Underlying the focus of care in my ethnography is a phenomenon I call “Truth” trauma. I use this concept to explain how “Truth” has been weaponized, used directly and indirectly to condemn, oppress, or Other another human being. Obviously, there are multitudes of Christian sects, denominations, traditions, and interpretations that distinguish what each branch, congregation, and individual respectively considers “Truth.” I am unconcerned with what exactly may be considered “Truth.” Rather, I am emphasizing how people, acting under the auspices that their belief is the real “Truth,” can cause harm.

Many members of the LGBChristians subreddit reiterate messages like that articulated by u/ComanderPaaanther: “I can’t live a life knowing that i’m sinning just by being alive, [...] The worst part is that I can’t change it, I’ve tried and I’ve prayed and God hasn’t changed me.” How does one cope with the belief, and the embodiment of the belief, that living is essentially sin? In what ways can life be tenable against this shadow of spiritual and physical death? Traumatic experiences—“experiences that radically sever [...] basic human connection and relationship,” a feeling of “ontological aloneness” (Lester 2013, 754)—arise with the brandishing of Othering beliefs as an absolute moral “Truth.” Rachel Ward brings forth the concept “living death” in which queer people embody an experience of loss (at the fault of their own body) for which they cannot return to cis-heteronormative faiths, families, communities: “it’s a death, and we’re still here

[living]” (Roberts 2021). Throughout this piece, “Truth” trauma iterates the significance of community for queer Christians. Circulations of care in these relations are vital.

The Culture of Care

I had my notebook at the ready when our Skype call connected and u/thatqueergirl’s face materialized on my screen. Hannah is a queer White woman with blonde hair and bushy bangs. She is in her mid-twenties and studying to be a nurse. We started talking about her coming out and faith journey. Since coming out, she plugged into networks of queer Christians on Facebook and Twitter and attended queer Christian conferences. When joining Reddit, Hannah purposefully sought out the queer Christians. Under her username, u/thatqueergirl, she swiftly, consistently, and thoughtfully responds to despairing posts. Despite how sad it is to read these posts and open up to other people’s hardships, she views this emotional labor as suicide prevention. It is through the care of members like Hannah that r/LGBChristians becomes a space of belonging, support, and solidarity.

Care contains constellations of meaning. I aspire to avoid associations of care with wholeness—an ableist endeavor (Sins 2019, 24)—and also uses of care as a means for “saviorist storying” (Weaver 2021). Weaver uses “saviorist storying” in the context of adopting rescues from shelters, but also extends its missions of (White) saviorism, colonialism, neoliberalism, and other(ing) forces. Critiques of these forces can and have been leveraged toward anthropology and its dynamic with the Other. While I do not want to conflate these situations, I want to point out the underlying forces enabling these.

I am compelled by scholar of feminist science and technology studies Maria Puig de la Bellacasa’s consideration of care to encompass “an affective state, a material vital doing, and an ethico-political obligation” (2011, 90). Care presents as inherently social and political, permeating affective relations and material realizations. But care can also involve alienations. “Care eschews easy categorization: a way of caring over here could kill over there” (Puig de la Bellacasa 2011, 100).

Consulting with this lineage, I employ care here as a framework operating as knowledge production and consequential practices—it provokes a process of bringing awareness, cultivating empathy, and an ethic of responding.

In *Life Beside Itself*, an ethnography of care in an Inuit community, Lisa Stevenson conceives of care—involving knowledge productions and the response to it—as “the way someone comes to matter and the corresponding ethics of attending to the other who matters” (2014, 3). Looking at efforts of the state and other institutions, Stevenson unravels “anonymous care” in suicide hotlines: “One comes to experience oneself as a caring person, caring such that it matters not for whom” (2014, 84). But mediated through this generalization, the *who*, the self of the person caring, “became irrelevant”—what matters is not *who* the person is but *what* they are (Stevenson 2014, 89, 107). Inspired by Stevenson, I characterize the efforts within r/LGBChristians as pseudonymous care, where the object of one’s care is not always as important as experiencing oneself as a caring person. Meanwhile, the caring self only comes to matter through their shared social and spiritual body as a queer Christian. As well, I seek to add to ways Stevenson evinced for how “anonymity actually comes to structure our very definition of what it is to care” (Stevenson 2014, 85).

Pseudonymity is simply the nature of many online settings, yet it can still allow—even aid—LGBTQ+ individuals to support one another, especially if privacy and geography are barriers for community (Dym et al 2019, 12). With this remote aspect, the sentiment is usually, “I want to give people what I needed.” Care shapes itself according to the landscape of its home. Pseudonymous care takes root within structural boundaries of engagement, and in r/LGBChristians, it is bound to the design of Reddit: its pseudonymous requisite, the subreddit interface, the established structure of posting, commenting, adding positive or negative points, and messaging.

Hannah said she hardly ever looks at usernames; Reddit has a “fire and forget nature,” according to Nathan, another interviewee. Like hotlines, Hannah’s suicide prevention creates no “lasting

bonds” (Stevenson 2014, 84). Rather than care and concern in r/LGBChristians being directed at particular individuals’ on-going lives, members focus on providing care to the *community* of LGBTQ+ Christians. Aligning with Stevenson’s anonymous care—concentrating on the idea of caring for the community rather than a certain person (2014, 84)—acts of care in r/LGBChristians are motivated by an intent to help any one, in contrast to continually investing in particular individuals’ on-going lives.

This surfaces throughout the subreddit in how commenters frequently respond to posts focused on what they believe is the true problem, not what the OP (Original Poster) is asking for help with. When a post conveyed the OP’s ambivalence about having a romantic partner who did not share their Christian faith, asking, “How do I go about introducing her to Christianity in this situation?” most did not address the question. Member u/GimMeTac0s advised, “Well, OP i think what you actually need to decide is if you are okay with being with someone long term who doesn’t share your faith.” Others also added what they believed the OP should be more concerned with. The piece of advice most relevant to the original question was from u/NeverNotInfinity: “Really I think that if she goes to church with you and sees your faith in your life, it might move something inside of them.” Since there is no concern for follow-up, members diagnose what they believe is the OP’s true problem and then impart their solution. This practice is presented as helping others, but it is meaningful to the commenters, allowing them to interact with other queer Christians in ways they can experience themselves as caring.

Careful not to invalidate these attempts to care, I want to return once again to broader contexts of traditional sects of Christianity. Malachi, the first member I interviewed, was from Hong Kong and identified as a gay man. When speaking with me, he contrasted the care of this subreddit with what he had experienced from his physical Christian community. He told me that when he shared with his church about being a victim of sexual assault, “The care was like, ‘Did you have sex with that boy?’ [...] And when they heard ‘Yes,’ they were like abhorrent, astonished.” Malachi recounted this with what

appeared to be a smile, but his words quivered with pain. Although Malachi's account was unique in my research, others expressed similar religious reasonings for harm, similar "Truth" traumas. The subreddit's movements toward care undeniably stand out against this backdrop.

After the reductive attempts of care many members of the subreddit experienced in their religious communities, r/LGBChristians' expressions to care are meaningful. This is largely because of the sense of solidarity. Olivia, a White, Catholic college-age girl, spoke of the fundamental bond within the subreddit. "There's this really hard internal struggle that comes with being gay and Christian, and because of that, we have this community," she said. "People are trying to reach out" and share "how they're feeling and their experiences." The foundation for this care reminds me of SueAnn Shiah's term "embodied solidarity," meaning a kinship in suffering: "My body was experiencing the same pain, the same trauma they were" (2020, 38:26-38:45). In these terms, perceived shared experiences of being a queer Christian solidify the bond through which care responses flow. But the affective relations streaming from embodied solidarity complicate the distance of anonymous care, and so I propose pseudonymous care—a slightly closer association—to account for this unique intimacy, where feelings become more important than selves. Structures of what it means to care and perceptions of an embodied solidarity forge a dynamic relationship. Out of these complicated flows, more a/effective productions of care take form.

Methods of Care

I contend there are three broad approaches in r/LGBChristians to producing care, knowledge, support, and belonging: advice, story sharing, and offering perspective. Complimentary affirmations are sprinkled generously throughout. Often, people braid the three approaches together. Looking back at when I was compelled to share as a participant observer, I can see how I regularly intermingled story sharing and perspective offering. These three intuited approaches are invested in the production of care, enlivening its externally structured framework through affective

relatings. Affinities sharpen across these efforts to address traumas.

Advice

Many people come to the LGBChristians subreddit just for the purpose of seeking advice from other queer Christians, eliciting thoughtful guidance or instruction. The range of topics is extensive. People sought advice for bible passages to read, how to sit through homophobic sermons, whether it is okay to wear a cross symbol in an LGBTQ+ safe space, even design ideas for how a closeted teenager can decorate their room with bisexual colors. The varying degrees of seriousness allow people to receive support and a sense of belonging for whatever situations they feel comfortable disclosing. There is a welcoming community on the other end of the screen.

One user asked the subreddit for advice on how to stay closeted, as they suspected their homophobic family members might be questioning their sexual orientation. Commenters cast a wide net of advice, addressing what they diagnosed as the true problem. Something within this net had the possibility to resonate. The first commenter began with an affirmation: "First, know that you are loved. I know you'll get comments to not hide but I know from my own experience that isn't always possible." Following, u/Mrhappenada divulged their own past efforts to eliminate suspicion, even claiming to have once "left a google search on my dad's computer for 'girl master-bates while saying Jacob.'" Yet in their conclusion, u/Mrhappenada shared:

For me staying closeted was a poison that was ruining my life I got deeper and deeper into my lies and created even further strained real auto ships [relationships] with my family. I hope you get to a place where you can be free to be the perfect child of god that you were born to be.

Story Sharing

The practice of story sharing, recounting personal experiences to foster a sense of solidarity, is another integral approach to care among queer Christians, especially as many seek this subreddit specifically because of isolation. Stories provide a pervasive comfort

through “embodied solidarity,” and sharing them also pushes boundaries, challenging “Truths” against a narrative of first-hand experience.

“Have you ever been so far back in the closet that you wondered if you were fooling yourself?” began the post. The author proceeded to describe their situation as a recent college graduate who moved back in with their parents to save money. “I’ve just been questioning things recently,” they continued, “because I’ve had to step back farther into the closet. [...] There’s been a part of my mind ever since I came out that always tries to interject when I think about love, dates, sexuality, romance, etc.” A list of accusatory and shaming questions followed, indictments that constantly resided in their mind. Two people answered the post to share their own stories of similar struggles.

“Here’s my two cents for what it’s worth,” the first commenter said. “I’m 27, and I’ve never experienced sexual attraction at all (aka I’m asexual). I’ve had many of the same doubts your having due to my lack of sexual experiences and that fact that it hard to know what you don’t feel if that makes sense.” Adding to their own personal account, they encourage the OP to find an LGBTQ+ affirming church that could help in processing their pain and finding out who they “really are.” Others echoed similar stories of their own experiences, sometimes even capping it off with the common trope, “it gets better.”

Offering Perspective

This last approach is not instructive, nor does it rely on anecdotes or experiences. Offering perspective simply entails sharing different viewpoints believed to be edifying for the receiver. Importantly, there can be a liberatory (and dangerous) undertow here. Differing ideas, beliefs, and imaginings may threaten traditional Christian establishments. Relatedly, this can be the most prevalent means for members to diagnose what they believe to be the actual problem and share their view, with or without regard for the OP’s needs.

In the beginning of my research, I considered offering perspectives to have an almost competitive nature through which people were challenging others about what is right. Over

time, I have come to recognize it as an attempt to offer as many viewpoints as possible in hopes to allow the receiver to choose the one that best applies to them. Todd, whose voice on the phone was sure with age and experience, said of the significance of ideological diversity:

None of us truly, truly know what God wants from us. [...] I think this particular subreddit does a very good job of saying, ‘This is how I live my life. This is how I see it,’ and then someone else will come along and say, ‘Well, that’s not how I see it.’ [...] It gives someone a chance to see many different perspectives.

While potentially less personal than other approaches, inclinations to offer varying perspectives can provide a gentle space for appraising damaging “Truths.” When one user consulted the subreddit for their anxiety about going to hell, the ten comments each proffered different perspectives, like how Paul’s “thorn in his side” allowed him to better serve God, an assurance that repentance will always lead to salvation, even how new scientific advances may conquer death. The final comment expressed, “Pick the path that makes the most sense to you. If you have faith in the Lord I’m sure he will have faith in you to navigate your life according to his will.”

Productions of care within the LGBChristians subreddit reveal, at least in part, the bonds tying this community together and meanings associated. Pulsing within r/LGBChristians, anonymous and pseudonymous care dissolve the self on both sides of the interaction. But members come to matter through their social and spiritual bodies, their experiences as queer Christians. And care is the means through which this meaning is assigned—against the backdrop of a coalescence of history, culture, and spirituality. Caring for another queer Christian can be caring for one’s self, blurring boundaries of space and time. This provides a space of support for queer Christians while providing the community in which it takes place. Care here is a framework: it opens the possibility for knowledge, support, and belonging; it affectively connects the members it draws; and it produces approaches through which these possibilities and connections can be realized. However, Puig de la Bellacasa forewarned care as an Othering and

alienating power. Peering outside the subreddit once more, I feel it necessary to destabilize r/LGBChristians' care.

Destabilizing Care

While the support queer Christians show one another in this subreddit is valuable and much needed to all involved, it does little to intervene against the foundational problem: the oppressive hegemony of Christianity, particularly within the United States. Vincent Duclos and Tomás Sánchez Criado's troubling of care cautions, "Care, to put it bluntly, is at risk of calcification—of becoming a placeholder for a shared desire for comfort and protection" (2019, 1-2). Might exhibitions of care in r/LGBChristians merely be a "placeholder" for comforting people in their pain and trauma? Confronting the mechanisms of Christianity that perpetuate "Truth" trauma may be outside the scope of this subreddit, for it was founded to be a community for queer Christians. But problematizing these care responses may also be essential. Care, even inside the subreddit, is inherently social and political in the knowledge it produces, the ignorances it perpetuates, and the support and belonging it extends.

In what ways might the subreddit be overlooking more penetrating forms of care due to limitations within a (hegemonic) Christianity imaginary? W. C. Harris critiques the hegemony of Christianity, remarking that improvements in regards to LGBTQ+ inclusion cannot truly address the "rhetorical, political, and cultural entrenchment of religiously endorsed homophobia" (2014, 87-88). Sociologist Michelle Wolkomir writes of how gay Christian men in support groups carved out niches in which to exist but remained connected to dominant, oppressive ideologies. Wolkomir explains, "their revisions were necessarily selective, allowing the larger, legitimating structure of Christian ideology to remain intact" (2006, 199). Similar to Harris' and Wolkomir's interventions, and despite how generously members of r/LGBChristians care for one another, the sentiments and stories shared in posts, comments, and interviews betray a lack of action taken towards the systemic issues that have determined queer Christians' traumatic experiences.

Such selective revisions dim against hegemonic Christianity's role in oppressive regimes. Venturing further into the social and political ramifications of the group, I want to be skeptical of normativities produced and sustained in r/LGBChristians. In spite of the variety of nationalities represented in the subreddit—I witnessed people in r/LGBChristians claim to be from the Philippines, Jordan, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Hong Kong, and the United Kingdom—the centrality of the U.S. seems to be understood. One member even criticized the rhetoric of Christian queerphobia to be stemming from "fff'ing weird (american) religious weirdos." In *The New York Times* bestseller, *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness*, Austin Channing Brown describes a White supremacist expectation of assimilation in Christian organizations: "The prayers are that I would become who *they* want me to be. 'Lord, make this Black person just like us'" (2018, 79). Might this be a haunting interpolation hidden in affirmations of being a queer Christian? Perhaps because such normativities exist so pervasively, social and political impacts appear to go unnoticed.

The only time I saw race mentioned in the subreddit during the months of my fieldwork was when u/contemplate_er posted about praying away their "same-sex attraction" because of their race, saying, "I'm black *and* bi, that's two strikes against me already." Out of the 19 comments, only one commenter—self-identified as a gay Catholic Latino man in their 30s—approached the topic of race, saying God would not change their attraction "any more than He would make you white to escape racist prejudices [...] Prejudice is the sin and the problem, not the way you were fearfully and wonderfully made: a black and bi child of God." These statements convey a complexity of identity and lived experience in the terms of sexual orientation, race, and faith, but the social and political intricacies of this intersection were never explored.

One of the only (markedly) political posts I observed in the subreddit was when a member shared a newly published article about how then presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg was normalizing being gay and Christian. A great number of the post's 17 comments shared an

appreciation for LGBTQ+ Christians being recognized “on a national stage.” Three comments dissented; one merely complained, “Why did the first gay Christian candidate have to be so bland and so imperialistic?” A separate post inquired about whether a person of color would be willing to discuss their perspective of Buttigieg: “It’s curious to me that a minority group can have a strong bias against another minority group, even when aligning with the same faith and the same political party.” The only comment on this post was from a self-identified Latino/a/x member, who explained that communities of color “are driven by faith and tradition,” but proclaimed Buttigieg is “our hope for unity.” Placing Buttigieg’s identity as a (White) gay Christian center stage superseded his politics—stances that were heavily criticized by broader LGBTQ+ communities in regards to systemic racism, health care, imperialism, and neoliberalism among others.

These scant instances were the extent to which I witnessed social issues and politics being touched upon. Evoking Duggan’s concept “homonormativity”—the depoliticizing of LGBTQ+ communities where ideals like “equality” and “freedom” provide lesbian and gay folks the promise to access and sustain institutions and regimes of oppression—sheds a sobering light (2002). Homonormativity (Pete Buttigieg being a beacon of its arrangements) is certainly relevant, constituted with regimes of oppression, and can be advantageous to the nation and national ideals through deployments of “homonationalism” (Puar 2007). Scrutinizing Christianity’s investment in dominant, oppressive culture spotlights how even seemingly radical acts—liberation from traumatic beliefs about one’s queer sexuality and/or gender—can still keep folks upholding ongoing structures of oppression. For many queer Christians in the subreddit, the telos for their life is still the state-sanctioned cis-heteronormative Christian script: faith, marriage, children, “equality” and “freedom.” Selective revisions do not confront or even name the overarching hegemonies pertinent to queer Christians’ pain, which are also tied up with the injustice perpetrated against so many others. Taking on the landscape of its home, care meets its end here.

What would it look like to strive for a community of “thick solidarity,” which Liu and Shange describe as “Layer[ing] interpersonal empathy with historical analysis, political acumen, and a willingness to be led by those most directly impacted” (2018, 196)? Engaging such would require disentanglement with hegemonic Christianity. This could look like the discussions and actions inspired by people like Kevin Garcia, a prominent voice for LGBTQ+ Christians using an intersectional lens in their exegesis of practical theology; Dr. Robyn Henderson-Espinoza, queer activist theologian; Grace Semler Baldrige, the first openly queer artist to top the Christian music charts, speaking against capitalism; or Jo Luehmann, working to decolonize Christian theology. Thick solidarity can be a challenge birthed from care as a social and political act. It can address White supremacy, which impedes u/contemplate_er from accepting their sexual orientation. It can provoke people to divest from cis-heteronormative constructs, opening an acceptance for queer kinships and even confront incorporations of legal status, race, indigeneity, and disability into who can be a family—the separations of families at the U.S. and Mexico border, families with an incarcerated member, families split due to the racist, classist, ableist child welfare system and medical industrial complex. It can inspire a divestment from punitive, capitalist practices. It can back the “abolition of land as property,” the eradication of “settler sovereignty,” the pursuit for Native sovereignty (Tuck and Yang 2012, 26). These can combat the “Truth” trauma inflicted outside of queer Christians’ experiences as well as forge an entry point to reimagine our culture.

Conclusion: Visionary Care?

Articulating care requires nuance, but materializing forms of care in one’s life and especially in community is a significantly greater undertaking. Along those lines, I need to acknowledge the privilege in my ability to step back, analyze, and depict the care within r/LGBChristians. I was not one to regularly comment on posts as a form of suicide prevention like Hannah, to repeatedly offer perspectives in hope that they might help like Todd, to show my internal struggles in order to

build solidarity like Olivia spoke about. I strove for empirical data collection, and that set me apart.

But in my months of fieldwork, I sensed currents of care pulling people toward one another, pulling me towards what could have been my community. I was vulnerable to this subject, this community, these people. I was vulnerable in a way that affected me deeply. Seeing posts and comments where people shared experiences or circumstances like mine forced me to hold space for my own hurt. Memories surfaced. Old wounds became sensitive once more. Yet the support shown for others also resonated with me. That the subreddit could help me like others professed it had helped them reveals my kinship with this community, and more importantly, in my position speaking for and from, it shows the impact of its productions of care.

Within r/LGBChristians, I maintain expressions of care are most integral in association with “Truth” trauma, the weaponization of beliefs which Other, condemn, and traumatize. The heart of this concerns “Truth” and how people interact with it. Recognizing how “Truth” trauma exists and is perpetuated throughout our culture can allow for more precise interventions in suffering. The issues spoken of throughout—pathologizations, dehumanization, punishments related to rights and citizenship, inflictions of “Truth” traumas—do not exist in silos. All inherently connect in interwoven regimes of oppression, and “Truth” is implicated in this. Reconciling queer identities and lived experiences with faith is innately a social and political act. Care within the LGBChristians subreddit can ripple outside of the community; however, if expressions within this framework of care do not confront Christianity’s hegemony, it can seamlessly perpetuate it.

As an online queer community of solidarity, my hope would be that r/LGBChristians and its practices of care become more expansive. Looking at queer Christians’ interactions to help each other in the subreddit, perhaps something can be made of these interventions of “Truth” trauma. Perhaps care can blossom into a true “transformative ethos” (Puig de la Bellacasa 2011, 100). Might communities like r/

LGBChristians be able to offer a perspective of visionary care outside of religion, if it were open to the social and political as it is to the spiritual? In closing, I offer Kevin Garcia’s blessing (and challenge): “Jesus said that he chose the weak things of this world to shame the strong, foolish things to shame the wise, and I think he chose queer folks, in this world, to shame the system” (Semlar, 2021).

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