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Alpha, Omega, and the Letters in Between: LGBTQI Conservative Christians Undoing Gender

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Abstract

Sociologists studying gender have debated West and Zimmerman’s premise that “doing gender is unavoidable,” seeking to ascertain whether people can “undo” or only “redo” gender. While sociologists have been correct to focus on the interactional accomplishment of gender, they have neglected one of Garfinkel’s key insights about interaction: that people hold each other accountable to particular narratives. Neglecting the narrative aspect of doing—and undoing—gender impedes our ability to recognize processes of social change. Based on a qualitative study, we show how the movement for LGBTQI acceptance within U.S. conservative Protestant churches works

to make gender not “omnirelevant” by challenging conservative “complementarity” narratives that posit two complementary, opposite sexes as a commandment preceding the Ten Commandments in time and importance. We explore this movement’s ambivalent relationship with homonormativity, highlight three ways this movement resists projecting binary gender narratives into scripture, and examine how some in this movement see the pursuit of social justice as a Christian mandate. The efforts of LGBTQI conservative Christians exemplify how reshaping sex/gender/sexual narratives can create possibilities for undoing gender.

Keywords gender, Evangelical, ethnomethodology, LGBTQ, narrative

A movement of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI) and allied conservative Christians is working toward more inclusive evangelical and fundamentalist churches.¹ Examining this movement, we show how their efforts help clarify the crucial role narratives play in interactional processes of “doing gender”—and undoing it ([West and Zimmerman 1987](#)). This movement was made possible by decades of *homonormativity*, a strategy cultivated by the mainstream lesbian/gay movement since the 1990s to promote assimilation into dominant society by holding people accountable to binary and static sex/gender/sexual narratives ([Duggan 2002](#); [Seidman 1995](#); [Stryker 2008](#)). Paradoxically, this movement’s participants work to expose the social construction of these narratives, creating room in conservative Protestantism for more diverse expressions of gender and sexuality. Doing so, they remind us of a crucial implication of feminist ethnomethodology: We can interrupt the social production of inequality by uncovering the taken-for-granted narratives that justify it. They make clear that doing and undoing gender are not *simply* interactional; they result from interactions where people hold each other accountable to particular sex/gender/sexual narratives.

[West and Zimmerman \(1987\)](#) showed how people produce gender in interactions by holding each other accountable to binary sex/gender stereotypes in virtually every interaction, such that gender comes to feel real and timeless. Maintaining there is no way out of doing gender, they referred to sex categorization as “omnirelevant,” remarking, “Insofar as a society is partitioned by ‘essential’ differences between women and men and placement in a sex category is both relevant and enforced, doing gender is unavoidable” ([1987](#), 136-37). In this tradition, most studies focus on how gender is reproduced in face-to-face interactions, and in spite of challenges such as a husband’s job loss ([Rao 2017](#)) or a coworker’s gender transition ([Schilt and Westbrook 2009](#)).

Others posit gender can be “undone,” arguing we foreclose change if theories cannot account for it ([Deutsch 2007](#)). However, they differ as to what “undoing” looks like. Deutsch characterized “undoing gender” as varying from traditional scripts, suggesting gender is susceptible to individual choices. [Lorber \(2005\)](#) argued that institutions, such as work, family, and law, must stop institutionally categorizing people by gender. [Connell \(2010\)](#) and [Pfeffer \(2014\)](#) showed how transpeople and their romantic partners disrupt gendered assumptions in interactions. [Risman \(2009\)](#) argued we might call it “undoing” gender when people challenge “the essentialism of binary distinctions . . . based on sex category” (83). She argued that “a just world would be one where sex category matters not at all beyond reproduction” (84). [West and Zimmerman \(2009\)](#), however, saw her exception as proof there is no way out of doing gender, and the best we can hope is to “redo” it, causing a “*shift* in accountability” (117-18 [emphasis in original]).

These arguments open important questions. What counts as “undoing,” what counts as “redoing,” and what counts as simply “doing” gender? Utilizing the case of LGBTQI conservative Christians, we argue that scholars may resolve this conundrum by recognizing that accountability, the linchpin of doing gender, is always *accountability* to some standard, norm, or narrative existing outside the interaction itself. Attending to the narratives ([Loseke 2007](#)) people hold each other *accountable to* helps move us beyond the categorical impasse and allows us to witness possibilities for change. To do this, we must return to the foundational observations of gender as something people do.

[Garfinkel's \(\[1967\] 2006\)](#) ethnomethodology posited that social life depends on people taking certain premises for granted, and in doing so, making them seem natural and timeless. He spells out a series of taken-for-granted assumptions that form a moral sex/gender narrative “from the standpoint of those who regard themselves as normally sexed,” who assume their environment to be “rigorously dichotomized into the ‘natural,’ i.e. *moral*, entities of male and female” (59, 62-65 [emphasis in original]). West and Zimmerman built on this sex/gender narrative, and the above studies all find people navigating some version of it. We should not, however, assume a specific narrative defines sex/gender at all times, as if what is taken for granted by white middle-class culture is as timeless and universal as it claims to be ([Collins 1990](#); [Crenshaw 1992](#); [Fausto-Sterling 2000](#)).

Ethnomethodology posits that social life depends on people holding each other accountable to behave in all sorts of ways we consider to be good, civil, and right. The questions are *what* we hold each other accountable *to*, and to what extent these narratives promote inequality within and between groups. Focusing on the narratives to which people hold each other accountable helps us theorize and identify liberatory moves in social life. Specifically, inequalities will persist if people do not change the narratives that legitimate it, and to which people hold each other accountable in interactions.

U.S. conservative Christians are an ideal case for unpacking these dynamics. One reason is that they explicitly draw narratives from one authoritative source, the Bible, and hold each other accountable to the versions of those narratives they affirm, finding guidance in them for who people should be and how they should act. They thereby call attention to less overt narratives in other contexts. Furthermore, in the United States, conservative Protestantism has been one of the main institutional sources of accountability to binary sex/gender/sexual narratives for at least half a century ([Duggan 2002](#); [Fetner 2008](#)). If conservative Christians shift narratives away from projecting hierarchical conceptions of sex/gender/sexuality into God’s plan for humanity, they could have profound effects on anyone affected by the institutions they influence, including but not limited to schools, legislation, and health care.

When churches, friends, and families hold people accountable to the binary sex/gender/sexual narratives grounding most conservative Christianity, they can impose extreme spiritual, psychological, and sometimes physical violence, interpreting a handful of scriptures to mean LGBTQI people have willfully rejected God and “exchanged natural sexual passions for unnatural ones” (Rom. 1:24-27). Holding conservative theological (and sometimes political) views themselves, most LGBTQI conservative Christians in the movement we examine did not set out to disrupt anything; they wished only to be themselves in Christian communities. Their experiences of relentless and toxic shaming ([Moon and Tobin 2018](#)), often to the point of destructiveness, however, told them their churches got the narrative wrong ([Wilcox 2009](#)).

This conservative Christian LGBTQI movement has two main parts, which participants call Side A and Side B (originally to avoid value judgments). While Side B advocates celibacy for gay and lesbian Christians, we focus here on the much larger part, Side A, whose advocates believe same-sex marriage is compatible with Christianity. As they work to communicate their experiences, they (sometimes inadvertently) refute the claim that sex category is “omnirelevant” to the Creator ([West and Zimmerman 1987](#), 136). They maintain that Christians should treat sex/gender/sexual binaries not as God’s intention for Creation but as some of the many spectra God created and calls good. They insist that Christians must hold each other accountable to essential Christian teachings, but not to humanly-created sex/gender/sexual norms. As such, they provide a case that makes clear how the narratives people hold each other accountable to are a crucial piece of the interactional processes that produce gender.

We utilize this case to examine how people shift sex/gender/sexual narratives of gender. First, we detail our methods, and then historicize complementarity as the primary gender narrative with which the LGBTQI evangelical movement contends. We then discuss the recent interplay of complementarity and

homonormativity that have facilitated the current gender politics within this movement. Next, we show how this movement benefits from homonormativity but also goes beyond it, working to undo gender by undoing the complementarity narrative. In conclusion, we highlight how these efforts reveal that questions of undoing gender cannot be pursued in isolation from the specific gender narratives that are being undone.

Methods

This analysis emerges from an ethnographic study of the LGBTQI-affirming conservative Christian movement. Moon began gathering qualitative data in February 2014, and Tobin joined the study later that year. Together, they conducted approximately 485 hours of participant observation, attending local discussion groups and national conferences and informing discussion participants about the research and their rights as human subjects. They participated in discussions as invited, contributing their own experiences and questions, and hand-jotting notes for later elaboration. They also invited individuals to be interviewed.

Moon and Tobin conducted 72 intensive, semistructured interviews with people in this movement. Both being white, they hired Alicia T. Crosby, a black, queer justice educator in the movement, to recruit and interview 41 LGBTQI people of color who did not know the authors, bringing the total to 113 interviews, averaging 93 minutes. Interviews were semistructured, intended to elicit participants' own stories to best capture their systems of meaning ([Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995](#)). Participants began with a choice either to tell their story about faith, gender, and sexuality as it unfolded or to share how they came to participate in whatever group(s) they did, with follow-up questions asked regarding specific points. Recordings were transcribed, verified for accuracy, and maintained in an NVivo database, along with articles referred/referring to or written by participants, fieldnotes, and public speech transcripts. Moon and Tobin coded these documents to find recurring themes, but, rather than produce grounded theory inductively ([Charmaz 2006](#)), we extend gender theory by putting it into conversation with a new case for which it cannot fully account ([Wilcox 2009](#)). To this end, Sumerau was brought into the project to help with analyses and theorization.

The organizations include: The Marin Foundation, which fosters reconciliation and discussion between conservative heterosexual/cisgender Christians and LGBT people and apologizes for harm caused by the church; the Center for Inclusivity,² an affirming organization founded by two evangelical Christians to create "a place of peace at the intersection of faith and sexuality"; The Reformation Project, a national organization founded to equip conservative Christians to lead churches to affirm LGBT identities, same-sex marriage, and alternative gender expressions; and the Gay Christian Network (now Q Christian Fellowship), the oldest of these, an organization fostering online chats, local meetups, and an annual national conference to support LGBTQIA Christians. In different ways, each organization has tried, with varying levels of success, to acknowledge diverse experiences of gender, race, sexuality, and religion.

We call this movement conservative Christian to indicate most participants experience a personal relationship with Jesus, hold a "high view" of Scripture, adhere to other characteristics of evangelicalism or fundamentalism, and identify with conservative Christian culture, including styles of prayer and music ([Moon and Tobin 2018](#)). Some Catholics, Orthodox, and liberal and fundamentalist Protestants participate, but the movement overwhelmingly consists of evangelical Protestants, who themselves have highly diverse doctrines, politics, ethnicities, and racial and class backgrounds.

In line with much of U.S. evangelical culture, this movement grows by sharing its message and fostering leadership among members, so there is not a clear separation between the perspectives of "leaders" and "followers." For example, we witnessed newcomers grow to be workshop leaders, board members, and authors. The Reformation Project explicitly trained people to make the scriptural case for same-sex marriage in their daily lives, and Gay Christian Network provided instructions for members to ask others for help reconciling faith and

sexuality or navigating relationships with Christians who did not affirm them. We saw participants routinely refer each other to the books discussed here, referring even to national leaders by first name, as in, “I actually found Justin’s book more helpful on this.” We saw workshops led by relative newcomers, eager to share their stories and help others. We cite mostly published authors, workshop leaders, and keynote speakers because they stated most succinctly what other participants routinely relayed to us and each other. As such, we highlight the narrative revision occurring throughout the movement with examples that illustrate participants’ regular framings.³

Gender Accountability in Conservative Christianity

This movement grapples with narratives whose historical roots lie in the same European sex/gender/sexual narratives that helped justify colonization, genocide, and enslavement by making people with different customs regarding clothing and sleeping arrangements, third and fourth sex roles, and/or sex apart from monogamous marriage seem evil or subhuman. These narratives vary by time and place but hold certain hierarchies constant. For example, women were not seen as men’s opposite until the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution ([Laqueur 1990](#)), but they were seen as inferior in both moments. Historians trace today’s binary sex/gender/sexual narratives to the Victorian era’s growth of capitalism and the ensuing separation of spheres ([D’Emilio and Freedman 1988](#)). That era’s *de facto* dominance of white women in religion threatened to drive white men out of religion ([Nelson 1996](#)), so white male fundamentalist leaders in the early twentieth century refined theologies to interpret scripture in ways that challenged women’s increasing authority ([Bendroth 1993](#)). LGBTQI and allied conservative Christians contend with the narrative, solidified since World War II, that creation rests on a binary and often hierarchical distinction between male and female.

Conservative Protestant leaders marshal sexual stigmas to reinforce such narratives. For instance, they preserved Victorian stories about men’s uncontrollable sexual urges and women’s role in safeguarding sexual morality ([Bush 2010](#)). The “purity culture” that evolved continues to hold women responsible for curtailing men’s urges while also directing women to submit to men. The same narratives stigmatize people of color partly due to supposed sexual and gender differences from white ideals ([Douglas 1999](#)). In the mid-twentieth century, the moral narrative that sex/gender/sexuality *should be* binary was further bolstered by doctors claiming sex/gender/sexuality binaries occur naturally, and routinely altering the bodies of intersex infants, trying to curb nonheterosexual desires, and defining sex transition as a disorder ([Davis 2015](#)).

Adjusting to the historical moment where the economy no longer mandates binary sex/gender/sexuality and marriage ([D’Emilio and Freedman 1988](#)), conservative Protestants bolstered binary sex/gender/sexual narratives with the doctrine of *complementarity*. Complementarity guides proponents to interpret Scripture to define sex/gender/sexual binaries as a commandment from God, preceding the Ten Commandments in time and importance. It posits God created male and female as incomplete opposites—with different roles in reproduction, and possibly different personalities—to complete each other in marriage, as proponents see evidenced in the creation stories in Genesis. But even before the Religious Right worked to mobilize previously apolitical conservative Christians by inflaming their fears of feminist and gay/lesbian challenges to the complementarian narrative, conservative Christians interpreted a handful of Bible passages about rape and other religions’ sexual practices (Genesis 19) to construct narratives about contemporary “homosexuals” as unnatural “abominations” (Leviticus 20:13) or having been “given over to shameful lusts” (Rom. 1:24-27).

Some of complementarity’s most respected proponents explicitly narrate it as “common sense,” or, as [Gagnon \(2001\)](#) said, “obvious” to “even pagans” because of “not only the glove-like fit of the penis and vagina but also clues to complementarity provided by procreative capacity and the capacity for mutual and pleasurable stimulation” (254-57). [Hamilton \(2014\)](#) described complementarity as akin to gravity in a story about a plane crash, the obvious but usually unspoken factor necessary for anything else to happen (or even exist). In

conventionally conservative Christianity, having “same-sex attractions” is defined as it was by doctors at the turn of the twentieth century, as sex/gender variance itself, a violation of God’s intention for creation. Some LGBTQI respondents noted growing up simply knowing murder was forgivable, but being gay was not. This narrative construction of “nature” takes interactional and institutional work to produce, such as sanctioning or exiling those who vary from it ([Sumerau, Cragun, and Mathers 2016](#)).

Other conservative Christians challenge complementarity. For instance, New Testament scholar [Brownson \(2013\)](#) pointed out “complementarity” does not appear in the Bible and has multiple definitions in contemporary usage, allowing people with different interpretations to feel united in their certainty that God does not want anyone to be LGBTQI.⁴ [DeFranza \(2015\)](#) showed scripture actually discusses intersex people, attesting to an earlier knowledge that creation is not strictly binary. They suggest the binary narrative many attribute to scripture results from people projecting socially constructed “common sense” into it. It is this narrative construction LGBTQI conservative Christians work to undo throughout their movement activities.

The LGBT Movement and Binary Gender

In recent decades, complementarity doctrine has shaped secular LGBT movements in ways that inform the LGBTQI evangelical movement. Starting in the late 1970s, political conservatives in alliance with the Religious Right staged political attacks on feminism’s and the lesbian/gay movement’s supposed assaults on complementarity ([Dowland 2015](#)). As the Religious Right rose in the 1980s, it attacked people with AIDS and same-sex parents. By the mid-1990s, the lesbian/gay movement responded to these attacks by holding gays and lesbians accountable to a complementarity-based sex/gender/sexual narrative focused on access to monogamous marriage, religion, and military participation ([Fetner 2008](#); [Mathers, Sumerau, and Cragun 2018](#)). At the same time, unthreatening images of white middle-class gays and lesbians began to appear in mass media: in advertisements, on the cover of *Newsweek*, and eventually as major characters on television programs like *Ellen* and *Will and Grace*.

Trans, bi+, and queer critics named these tactics *homonormativity*, denoting a lesbian/gay movement strategy emphasizing gay and lesbian conformity to white middle-class values and binary sex/gender/sexuality—thus leaving anyone who appears less “normal” outside the realm of human rights and dignity—and in Christian terms, outside of God’s love ([Duggan 2002](#); [Eisner 2013](#); [Stryker 2008](#); [Warner 1999](#)). To disrupt narratives casting “homosexuals” as demonic or having repudiated God, homonormativity paradoxically held LGBTQI people accountable to a narrative that posited men and women as distinct and opposite categories.

Scholars generally emphasize institutional religion’s role in reinforcing accountability to normative gender narratives ([Avishai 2008](#)). Even studies of LGBT congregations stress the reproduction of sex, gendered, and heteronormative hierarchies ([McQueeney 2009](#); [Sumerau 2012](#); [Sumerau, Padavic, and Schrock 2015](#)).⁵ In this light, homonormativity helped some “reconcile” faith and LGBTQI identities, but with costs. [Stryker \(2008\)](#) argued the lesbian/gay movement sacrificed solidarity among sex, gender, sexual, racial, and economic outlaws to produce security for the most privileged (and conforming) gays and lesbians, and [Ward \(2008\)](#) found homonormativity exacerbates the disadvantages confronting LGBTQI people of color when their needs are seen as irrelevant to “LGBT” causes. The collective enforcement of binaries Stryker noted continues now when “LGBT” movements distance themselves from bisexual ([Mathers, Sumerau, and Cragun 2018](#)), transgender ([Sumerau, Cragun, and Mathers 2016](#)), nonmonogamous ([Moss 2012](#)), and intersex ([Davis 2015](#)) people, whose existence disrupts complementarity. The LGBTQI people at the heart of this study wrestle with these tensions. Homonormativity has in some ways made this movement possible, but participants also have expanded the scope of resistance, challenging the specific gender narrative homonormativity relies upon.

Homonormativity and the LGBTQI Evangelical Movement

U.S. evangelical leadership has done its best to maintain a central message that God intends cisgender heterosexuality ([Thomas and Olson 2012](#)); however, recent surveys show support for sex/gender-conforming lesbian/gay people and same-sex marriage among the evangelical laity. [Bean and Martinez \(2014\)](#) found 59 percent of evangelicals supported same-sex civil unions. Others find some change happening within cohorts, indicating changing minds ([Andersen and Fetner 2008](#)). However, attitudes toward people whose desires and/or identities disrupt binary sex/gender/sexual narratives are as unfavorable as ever, tending to posit these groups as diseased, immature, and untrustworthy—much as “homosexuals” once were ([Mathers, Sumerau, and Cragun 2018](#)).

By disrupting sex/gender/sexual narratives, homonormativity made it possible for some conservative Christians whose sex was not assigned correctly at birth, or who found themselves attracted to people of the same or multiple sexes, to understand themselves as LGBTQI Christians, to reframe their situation as being not monsters hated by God but God’s children toward whom others were mistakenly hostile. Movement participants know complementarity does not define reality, and many have worked to save their own and others’ lives from the toxic shame often heaped on those whose existence threatens to disprove it ([Moon and Tobin 2018](#)). They challenge the assertions that they have “turned their backs on God” and the message that they alone are unfit to love and serve God and others.

However, this movement would not be possible without the friendly, clean-cut images of gay people who conform to complementarity and whose very “normalcy” counters the images of predatory monsters depicted in Religious Right media. For example, a white heterosexual ally of about 30 years old remembered watching sitcoms like *Will and Grace* after his parents were asleep, acquiring an alternative to anti-gay narratives he learned while being homeschooled by fundamentalists. Undoubtedly, such images similarly helped (mostly white) conservative Christians who were attracted to people of their same sex to name what they felt, and provided relatable images of gay people with whom to identify.

In some ways, this movement perpetuates the image of gays as compatible with conservative values. Its most visible leaders are either middle-aged heterosexual parent-types, or clean-cut, white, middle-class or affluent, cisgender, Christian men—the very kind of people conservative Christians in white churches are most accustomed to listening to, apart from being gay. The Gay Christian Network’s founder, [Justin Lee \(2012\)](#), wrote of having been called “God Boy” in high school because of his emphatic Southern Baptist convictions. The Reformation Project’s founder, Matthew Vines, does not speak for everyone in this movement, but his high visibility and respect among conservative Christian leaders is undoubtedly facilitated by his support for abstinence until marriage, with complicated effects. This view diminishes the potential for resistance to marriage and mononormativity ([Moss 2012](#)), but it also helps conservative Christians to identify as LGBTQI, and cisgender/heterosexual churchmates to see them as fellow Christians. We next show how LGBTQI conservative Christians utilize this complicated social location to further create space for more inclusive notions of sex/gender/sexuality.

Expanding the Scope of Resistance

[Stryker \(2008\)](#) argued gay/lesbian assimilation politics “diminished the scope of potential resistance to oppression” (147-48), and if this were the end of the story, it would simply be another about the triumph of homonormativity holding people accountable to narratives of sex/gender/sexuality as fixed and binary. Yet this movement also has *expanded* the scope of resistance, arguing Christian scriptures portray a vision of personhood more capacious than complementarity and bringing these interpretations to participants’ home churches. In doing so, it calls attention to the crucial role of narrative in sex/gender/sexual accountability.

It expands the scope of resistance by embracing the evangelical “high view” of scripture, both showing complementarity to be a human creation rather than God’s, and emphasizing Jesus’s and early church founders’ disruptions of such binaries as clean/unclean and male/female. Its organizations train participants to bring these interpretations to their home communities. The movement also speaks the language of conservative Christianity with regard to personal encounters with God and the language of love, forgiveness, and siblinghood. These moves assume people understand better the nature of God and creation when they take seriously marginalized standpoints.

Denaturalizing Complementarity

For decades, some theologians have argued the Bible cannot be understood apart from the contexts where it was written, so the passages that seem to prohibit “homosexuality” cannot be understood to refer to modern same-sex love relationships ([Scanzoni and Mollenkott 1994](#)). Some of this scholarship does not pass muster with conservative methods of interpretation; however, some of it does and is echoed in more recent works conveying these messages in language accessible to evangelicals and fundamentalists ([Brownson 2013](#); [Lee 2012](#); [Vines 2014](#)). These arguments rest on Biblical and historical scholarship showing, for instance, the “sin of Sodom” was inhospitality, not gayness; Levitical prohibitions served to distinguish the ancient Israelites from their neighbors and were replaced for Christians by the New Covenant in Jesus; and Paul’s New Testament letters referred to specific “idolatrous” practices of the ancient Greeks and others, not today’s same-sex marriages or LGBTQI identities.

But sex/gender/sexual binary narratives draw on more than this handful of passages. Complementarity proponents often interpret the creation stories in Genesis to mean God created humans (and possibly other animals) in two kinds, male and female, fixing social roles in biology (Gen. 1:27: “So God created mankind in his own image ... male and female he created them”). However, critics note this chapter includes a number of binaries no one considers either exhaustive or normative, including night/day, sea/dry land, creatures of air and sea. For example, [DeFranza \(2015\)](#) noted amphibians are not mentioned in Genesis, but no one thinks frogs are ungodly. Similarly, at The Reformation Project’s 2015 conference, Eliel Cruz, a Puerto Rican, bisexual Seventh-Day Adventist, led a workshop on bisexuality. He characterized creation as a spectrum, not a set of dichotomies, invoking beautiful seaside images of in-between-ness and quoting queer theologian [Alan Hooker \(2013\)](#), saying God’s “I am the Alpha and the Omega” (Rev. 1:8) invokes endpoints to mark a whole alphabet between them—no one thinks God was saying the rest were ungodly letters.

Complementarity proponents also point to the second chapter of Genesis (18-24), when God creates Adam and Eve, to mean God ordained heterosexual marriage as the only valid form of union, as that of two complementary opposites (for some fully realized only in reproduction). Critics argue the Bible does not actually specify that marriage is for reproduction, and unlike Catholic doctrine, most Protestant churches allow birth control, accepting that sex serves other purposes ([Brownson 2013](#); [Vines 2014](#)). They argue the key to the story is that the original person was alone; God’s other creatures were not *similar* enough to provide companionship.

Others point out that the original human was genderless, referred to as *adam* (pronounced /aw-dawm’/ in Hebrew), and not gendered until the one became two and became *ish* (man) and *ishshah* (woman). For instance, in the YouTube series *Trans and Christian*, white, bisexual, trans Hebrew Bible scholar [Austen Hartke \(2015a\)](#) said:

This word *adam* is very close to the Hebrew word *adamah* which means earth or ground. So basically, this first person is named “Thing Made Out of Ground,” or “Earth Creature,” or “Human.” The . . . original human is androgynous, it’s genderless, it’s sexless, it’s just *adam*, it’s a human, made out of ground and breathed into with the spirit of God. In fact, lots of people have seen *adam* or, “Adam,” as a great example of a gender-neutral or intersex person in the Bible. And

the cool thing about it is that God is totally fine with it. God loves this first human so much that God surrounds them with animals and tries to find some partner for them, simply because, “It is not good for the human to be alone.” God isn’t concerned about Adam’s gender or sex; God is concerned with Adam’s need for love and community.

Likewise, at The Reformation Project’s 2017 conference, a transgender, Catholic, Mexican-American theater artist led a workshop called “God Created *aw-dawm*’ in Their Image.” After distinguishing the original human *adam* from *ish* and *ishshaa*, who appear later in Genesis, he split the audience into two, and had one group observe while others were instructed to mill about slowly without falling into a circle. He instructed participants to “walk like a man,” “walk like a woman,” and finally, “walk like *adam*.” The spectators observed that walking like a man or like a woman inspired more self-consciousness and exaggeration; people seemed uncomfortable and had difficulty not walking in a circular pattern. When walking as *adam*, they looked more comfortable and were able to walk in a less rote, follow-the-leaderish pattern. In [West and Zimmerman’s \(1987, 2009\)](#) conceptualization, the first two iterations held them accountable to acting out the narratives for men and women. The third provided no such narrative, holding them accountable only not to form a ring or crash. The lesson was that not being held accountable to a specific sex/gender/sexuality narrative frees people to wander, able to feel loved and accepted just as they are. Throughout the workshop, participants uttered things like, “I have to remember that when I go back to my home church!” and “That makes so much sense!”

Disrupting Dichotomy with the New Testament

This movement draws from the New Testament as well, disrupting complementarian narration by pointing out that Jesus’s teachings repeatedly disrupt Hebrew Bible binaries such as pure/impure, clean/unclean, included/excluded. Giving a keynote address at the 2016 Gay Christian Network conference, for example, the Reverend Allyson Robinson, a white, transgender Baptist pastor, spoke of being reviled early in her transition, saying she wouldn’t wish that treatment on her worst enemy. Invoking the Hebrew Bible’s distinctions, she read from the gospel of Mark (5:21ff) to show how Jesus “scorns boundaries” and “dances across the lines that divide clean from unclean . . . Always to gather in the stigmatized, the unwelcome, the outcast.”

One of the most frequently cited passages in this movement appears in Galatians (3:28): “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” One of the founders of the Center for Inclusivity had it tattooed on his forearm, and it’s often referenced in Bible studies and conversations with those who are unsure God wanted them to affirm LGBTQI identities, same-sex marriage, or gender transition. [Hartke \(2015b\)](#) explained:

[Galatians 3:28 is] saying that as far as God is concerned, our little human classification system has nothing to do with whether or not we are loved or whether or not we can participate in the community of the Kingdom. . . . Through faith and through God’s work in the world and in us, our primary identity no longer has anything to do with gender. Our primary identity has to do with being beloved children of God.

In a community defined by holding people accountable to the Bible, there is power in showing complementarity narratives are neither rooted in the Bible nor idealized by it.

Speaking Evangelical Language

The language of conservative Protestantism does not only include rules for interpreting Scripture. It also includes styles of prayer and worship, which give all of the gatherings in this movement their shape and flavor, and ways of narrating experiences of Christ’s love and the work of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, in some charismatic and/or apostolic contexts, lectures about ancient languages and history can seem too far removed from God’s work to be trusted ([Douglas 1999](#)). Participants are encouraged to reveal their connection to God by sharing

their testimonies (i.e., narratives about their experience). At The Reformation Project's 2015 conference, for example, after two long mornings of lessons on the Scriptural case for affirming same-sex marriage and gay identity, Robinson remarked, "The joke among those of us who are preachers is that nobody ever remembers our [scriptural] exposition, they remember the stories. It's the *stories* that change the world" ([Gushee, Robinson, and Vines 2015](#)). Similarly, a workshop leader encouraged those who could safely stay in nonaffirming churches to be active in them, saying "Let them see your love for the Lord."

Others focus on direct communications with God, the prayerful conversations evangelicals, particularly from more charismatic traditions, often share to witness how God has changed their lives. For instance, at the Reformation Project conference in 2016, a black, gay Christian man with cerebral palsy shared his story of what God had done in his life, enabling him to teach himself to read while his teachers ignored him and eventually to earn a master's degree. He told the story of praying one day saying, "Lord, I worship you with all I am." He heard God say to him, "No you don't." He said they argued back and forth a bit until God said, "You are *not* worshipping me with all I made you to be, not until you admit you're gay." A Christian, queer, black woman shared a similar testimony, and at a different conference, a white woman spoke about her identity as bisexual, addressing why, if she could be attracted to a man, she didn't marry one. She said (as reconstructed from notes):

If I were seeking Man's approval, that would be easier. But God says, "Follow *me*." When I was driving around, confused, praying to God for guidance, he told me "Find a woman." Within seven days, I met my wife and we have been together since 1999. He showed me the one.

As conservative Christians, participants are better positioned than outsiders to deliver affirming LGBTQI narratives to other conservative Christians and be believed. We repeatedly saw participants revise sex/gender/sexual narratives for others to consider, pray about, and share with loved ones.

The Pull Toward Solidarity

Of course, some people have an easier time being heard than others, and experiences of oppression led many participants to empathize with those oppressed in different ways. Event organizers strove to work intersectionally ([Crenshaw 1992](#)), and those who were more easily heard due to their race, class, abilities, and gender shared the stage with those whose experiences were not so easily read as God's truth. At The Reformation Project's 2015 conference, after someone referred to white, cisgender, gay male founder Matthew Vines as a "voice of the marginalized," he responded by saying that was true "in exactly one way," and noted how unlikely it would have been for his initial video to have gone viral had he been female, trans, and/or a person of color. When he began the project, he hired racial justice organizers, mostly people of color, to build an intersectional movement.

Rather than downplaying their privilege, leaders with positions of relative privilege used them to amplify the voices of those who were more marginalized. For example, Vines made public remarks in light of debates on Christian campuses after North Carolina passed House Bill 2 in 2016, requiring people to use public restrooms that matched the sex named on their birth certificates and provoking national debate about including trans people in public. Echoing [Cruz \(2015\)](#) and [Hartke \(2015a, 2015b\)](#), Vines remarked in a Facebook post (3/30/2016):

[Y]es, God made male and female. But God also made night and day—and that doesn't mean God didn't make dawn and dusk, too. And ironically, it's typically dawn and dusk that people think are the most beautiful times of day! Literally no one looks at a sunset and says, "How tragic that the lines between night and day have been blurred in our broken world." Even though night and day are creational categories listed in Genesis 1, just like male and female, with no exceptions mentioned! No, we

intuitively understand that God's creation is bursting forth with diversity, with blurred boundaries, and with all the beauty that brings. . . . So my view: If you think trans and non-binary gender identities are broken, then you should think sunsets are broken, too. And if you aren't willing to say the latter, then perhaps you should rethink the former.

Similarly, addressing the 2016 Gay Christian Network conference, Lee noted how being gay allowed him to see what the church looked like from the position of the marginalized, which allowed him to see how racism, sexism, ableism, and other forms of exclusion ran counter to Christianity. In an address focusing on the parable of the Good Samaritan, he pointed out that unlike the story's "socially respectable" religious leaders who hurried past the beaten man lying on the road, it was the marginalized Samaritan who cared for him and saved his life. When Lee urged his mostly white, lesbian/gay audience to be like that Christian exemplar when people of color were bleeding today, he received loud applause.

No one we spoke to actively opposed his perspective, but in this predominantly white movement, speakers addressed resistance to the idea that racism, for instance, was white LGBTQI people's problem. They often pointed out many LGBTQI people are also people of color, women, poor, and otherwise marginalized, so justice must be intersectional. Messages cited above were often followed with messages of the wider struggle. For example, [Hartke's \(2015b\)](#) discussion of Galatians ends with the following:

We have to remember that just because these categories don't keep us from God, it doesn't mean that they don't matter to the rest of the world. . . . If we say, for instance, that we can't see color, that means that we don't see the unjust violence being done to people of color in the United States. If we can't see gender anymore, then we won't fight for equal pay for women. If we pretend that classism isn't a thing, we start ignoring the families that are trying to live on minimum wage, and God calls us to always work for justice. Galatians 3:28 ends with the phrase, "For you are all one in Christ Jesus" and that is both a statement of great love and a rallying cry for solidarity.

Likewise, [Robinson \(2016\)](#) remarked,

[Many whites here wonder if solidarity with blacks is really our fight.] . . . Justice is not justice until it is justice for all. . . . If you walk away now, or allow yourself to be distracted by your own dearly won gains [because the Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage], you will not have been fighting for justice, you will have been fighting for yourself.

Such remarks showed the contingency sex/gender/sexuality narratives in light of God's eternal love, while recognizing that no single-issue effort would bring about the transcendent Kingdom of God they saw the apostle John envisioning in the book of Revelations (7:9). As heterosexual/cisgender Latinx organizer AnaYelsi Velasco-Sanchez ([Velasco-Sanchez and Washington 2015](#)) of The Reformation Project described it in a conference plenary address,

The kingdom in its fullness and all of God's people worshiping at the heavenly throne, and they're not this homogenized, one-image group of people. . . . It's different languages, dialects, the color of their skin, their ethnicities. Everything is as God made it when they were on earth. That's how precious our design is to him.

For these people, Christian love demands work to undo injustice.

This movement trained those who joined it to distinguish socially constructed sex/gender/sexual and racial narratives from God's eternal truth. As they did so, they diminished the stakes of accountability in conservative Christian communities. Now, instead of thinking God holds people accountable to racialized binary

sex/gender/sexual narratives with their eternal souls at stake, they create space for conservative Christians to understand accountability narratives as malleable creations of fallible humans.

Conclusion

Throughout this article, we utilized the case of LGBTQI-identified conservative Christians to illustrate the place of narratives in the process of doing gender, as well as the ways people may shift sex/gender/sexual norms by revising the narratives they hold themselves and others accountable to. To be sure, this movement faces a difficult road toward changing conservative Christianity. A study by Church Clarity found the 100 largest conservative congregations in 2017 in the United States were not affirming and 35 were expressly condemning ([Duffy 2018](#)). When big churches affirm LGBT people and same-sex marriage, they often shrink precipitously ([Dias 2015](#)). It is not easy to challenge the notion that complementarity is God's sacred sex/gender/sexual narrative.

On the other hand, the movement is making headway, welcoming prominent evangelical theologians and pastors (David Gushee, Steve Chalke, Tony Campolo) and churches, and fostering the closure of the ex-gay movement's umbrella organization, Exodus, and a public apology from its executive director ([Dias 2015](#)). Conversations now happen that were recently unthinkable ([Marin 2010](#)). And participants, LGBTQI and cisgender/heterosexual, routinely reflect on the enormity of the change this movement makes in their lives, allowing them to move forward, loving and helping others while sharing more expansive religious narratives.

As such, this movement's significance to gender theory lies not in its size but in its methods. These actors have experienced the heights of narrative's power to enrich life, and the depths of its ability to destroy it. Coming from a community that makes explicit the narratives members hold each other accountable to, they make clear what often goes unnoticed: When we hold each other accountable, it is to particular narratives. [Garfinkel \(\[1967\] 2006\)](#) made visible the assumptions facilitating communication in a particular culture, and if we, his heirs, lose sight of the particularity of those narratives—if we take them for granted—we risk perpetuating the very inequalities we seek to undo.

A generation ago, the scholarly modifier *queer* promised to expose how people produced inequalities by accepting the common sense that heterosexuality, and the sex/gender binary on which it depends, are natural and given ([Warner 1993](#)). A decade later, [Duggan \(2002\)](#) used the term *homonormativity* to refer to the strategy among gays and lesbians to advocate for social acceptance on the basis of normalcy, indicating that those who emphasized their conformity to white, middle-class, heteronormative standards accepted conformity as the basis for social and legal acceptance. However, some assert that it is unethical to issue human rights (and for monotheists, affirmation of God's love) on the basis of conformity ([Warner 1999](#)).

In a very queer shift, this movement, made possible by homonormativity, spreads the "good news" that binary sex/gender/sexuality is not a commandment from the Creator but a flawed narrative of accountability. Participants are well-practiced in using their sacred text to create narratives about God and God's intent for humans, and they are experienced in the trauma of being held accountable to harmful narratives. They use their credibility to amplify the message that such narratives come from flawed people, not God. Simply put, they are undoing the narratives that define sex/gender/sexuality in ways that cause harm.

Doing gender is a crucial framework for understanding sex/gender/sexuality. [West and Zimmerman \(1987, 2009\)](#) rightly called our attention to the interactional production of inequality, but in emphasizing the ways people naturalize hierarchy in interactions, they—and many who have drawn so productively from their framework—have inadvertently overlooked the contingency of the narratives people hold each other accountable to, and that make any "doing" possible. Our case illustrates the usefulness of identifying the specific narratives that underpin interactional processes of doing/redoing/undoing gender within and across settings.

When we focus on the specific sex/gender/sexual narratives people hold each other accountable to, we also gain more clarity about how different intersectional positions are understood through different narratives ([Collins 1990](#); [Crenshaw 1992](#)). Focusing on specific narratives is crucial to decolonizing feminism and fostering equality because then we can uncover the ways sex/gender/sexual narratives combine with other narratives regarding race, class, and other social locations to shape people's lives. Allowing those narratives to remain invisible holds steady the roots of their power. When people change those narratives, like the participants in this article, they transform interactions, the norms people internalize, and the shape and navigability of institutions.

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Notes

1. "LGBT" and "LGBTQI" are abbreviations for long lists of groups with sometimes overlapping, sometimes divergent experiences, so we cannot always use the same abbreviation. For instance, some organizations work to serve Queer and Intersex people, and others do not even acknowledge their existence. Not every organization includes bi+, trans, intersex, or queer people in their work, and some use terms like "LGBT" or "LGBTQIA2S+." Some asexuals participate in the movement, but we have not observed much inclusion of them, so we do not include them here.
2. As a result of this research, Moon served on the Center for Inclusivity's board from 2015 to 2017.
3. Rather than note what number or percentage of participants said x statement, here we only utilize messaging endorsed repeatedly by leaders and lay people alike.
4. [Brownson \(2013\)](#) argued some use "complementarity" to mean reproductive capacity (though few conservative Protestant denominations have issues with birth control, much less infertile marriages), others the apparent fit of penis and vagina, and still others the notion that male and female are incomplete halves—none of which appears in the Bible.
5. Those who experience no conflict between religion and sexual/gender identity or who resolve that conflict tend to be found in mainline, affirming ([Moon 2004](#)), progressive-leaning LGBT-affirming ([McQueeney 2009](#)), or seeker ([Wilcox 2009](#)) faiths.

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