

SURVIVALIST SEXUALITY-FAITH STRATEGIES IN BIBLICAL MEANING-MAKINGS: NON-HETERONORMATIVE MALAYSIAN CHRISTIAN MEN AND NEGOTIATIONS OF SEXUAL SELF-AFFIRMATION

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ABSTRACT

This article is a socio-theological investigation into the diverse ways in which non-heteronormative Christian men in Malaysia negotiate with biblical passages to affirm their sexual identifyings, sexual expressions and sense of faith. Such a socio-theological investigation also acts as a critical questioning of official and unofficial attitudes towards non-heteronormative men—and perhaps even towards other non-heteronormative subjects—by Christian communities and churches in and beyond Malaysia. As a qualitative research paper, this article deploys a Constructivist Grounded Theory Methodology to analyse the selected narratives of four non-heteronormative Christian men. Various sociological, sexuality, religious and theological studies, particularly Archie C. C. Lee’s concept of cross-textual biblical hermeneutics, are also conscripted to frame, articulate and fortify the narrative analyses. Findings indicate that negotiations of the scriptures for self-affirmation among non-heteronormative men are manifested from three perspectives: (i) substituted affirmation; (ii) conditional affirmation; and (iii) ambiguous affirmation.

This article aims at understanding the diverse ways in which non-heteronormative Malaysian Christian men negotiate and make sense of biblical passages for sexual self-affirmation. The *survivalist sexuality faith strategies* of these men who continue to adhere to the Christian faith, including strategies which draw on the scriptures, are personal methods devised to allow their sexual identifying,¹ sexual expressions and sense of faith to co-exist meaningfully.

I use the term “non-heteronormative” as an overarching term for subjects, including gay and bisexual men, whose gender and sexual identifyings and expressions defy normative prescriptions. My article neither focuses on queer biblical hermeneutics, nor engages in a reappraisal of biblical passages that are commonly used to condemn same-sex expressions. Instead, it is a socio-theological investigation which concentrates on the actual lived experiences of non-heteronormative men who continue to look to the bible for spiritual nourishment, despite being embroiled in difficult negotiations of sexuality and faith.

Such a socio-theological investigation also acts as a critical questioning of official and unofficial attitudes towards non-heteronormative men—and perhaps even towards other non-

¹ I use “identifying” and “identifyings” instead of “identity” and “identities” to denote the evolutionary, unstable and contingent processes of identity construction.

heteronormative subjects—by Christian communities and churches in and beyond Malaysia. To this end, my article embarks on a queer analysis of the narratives of those who owe their joys and struggles as non-heteronormative men to a faithful, undivided adherence to both their sexual and spiritual identifyings. A queer analysis is a critical strategy which “creates an intellectual space whereby what is otherwise taken for granted as stable is challenged, interrogated, and explored” (Gedro 2010, 354), particularly in issues relating to gender and sexuality. Thus, my deployment of a queer analysis allows for a reconsideration of essentialized issues of gender, sexuality and faith from alternative and broader perspectives.

Studies, Strategies and Signposts

Queer approaches to biblical scholarship which strive to restore the forgotten, overlooked and dismissed voices of non-heteronormative subjects in biblical scholarship have increased over the years (Guest et al. 2006; Hornsby and Stone 2011; R. Goss and West 2000; Stone 2001). There have also been impressive studies on the difficult relationships between Church hierarchies, popular Christian perceptions and non-heteronormative subjects (Bong 2009; Goh 2015; Rodriguez 2010; Wu 2000; A. K. T. Yip 1997; A. K. T. Yip 2007; L. Yip 2012). Additionally, Asian and Asian-American biblical studies, which focus on a gamut of Asian and Asian-American contextual realities, continue to proliferate (Cheon 2001; deSilva 2013; Goh 2014; A. C. C. Lee 2004b; Setyawan 2007; Sugirtharajah 2005; Tran 2010). My article thus contributes to these diverse studies on the complex relationships between actual human realities and the Christian faith.

In this article, I select narratives from four non-heteronormative Christian men in Malaysia: Rainbowboy, Artisan and Henri who identify as gay men, and Skidiver, who describes himself as a bisexual man. All four men are educated, middle-class urban dwellers. This article draws on a larger research project in which I conducted in-depth interviews with thirty non-heteronormative men in Malaysia on their sexual identifyings, sexual expressions and sacred sensibilities. I use pseudonyms to protect the privacy and confidentiality of these research participants. Their narratives, which are derived from interviews in English, display specific snapshots, rather than overarching nationwide representations of non-heteronormative men in Malaysia.

I analyze the narratives of these four men using the methodology of a Constructivist Grounded Theory. This particular analytical approach provides for a careful understanding and interpretation of narratives which are based on actual, lived experiences. A Constructivist Grounded theoretical method appreciates epistemological co-constructions between researcher and research participant. It resists the idea that knowledge from the research participant is “discovered” by the researcher. It advocates a “middle ground” approach of openness to “grounded” findings among human subjects, while pursuing familiarity with extant academic resources in a field of study (Bryant and Charmaz 2010, 1-28; Charmaz 2000, 509-535). Fundamentally, this approach allows me to construct theories that are grounded in the lived realities of non-heteronormative men themselves, rather than impose grand theories on their lived realities.

My theorizing is assisted primarily by a re-reading of biblical scholar Archie C. C. Lee’s concept of cross-textual hermeneutics, which accords equal importance to the bible and Asian “cultures.” This re-reading is a queer strategy which appreciates, foregrounds and includes the lived experiences, circumstances and insights of non-heteronormative subjects. Queer theologian Patrick S. Cheng (2011) posits that such a strategy reveals how non-heteronormative subjects have “‘taken back’ or ‘reclaimed’ the Bible by interpreting it positively and constructively from their own perspectives” (12).

Thus, my queer re-reading challenges assumptions surrounding the faith and biblical experiences of non-heteronormative men. It reveals and emphasizes the ways in which these men

engage in sexual self-affirmation by utilizing the bible. I concentrate on the manner in which the scriptures speak to subjects who have been and continue to be marginalized through singular, myopic theological interpretations of the bible. I also draw on various sociological, religious, theological and sexuality studies to further articulate and fortify my theorizing.

I first present a brief overview of political and religious attitudes towards non-heteronormative subjects in Malaysia before discussing Lee's strategy of cross-textual hermeneutics through queer lenses. Thereafter, I analyze the ways in which non-heteronormative men who encounter a myriad of confrontational views, yet actively adhere to their Christian faith, adopt diverse strategies for understanding biblical affirmation in relation to their sexual identifying and expressions.

Political and Religious Attitudes towards Non-Heteronormative Subjects in Malaysia

Malaysia is home to 28.3 million inhabitants, comprising 61.3 percent Muslims, 19.8 percent Buddhists, 9.2 percent Christians, 6.3 percent Hindus and 3.4 percent of those who constitute the other-religious, non-religious, unknown and practitioners of "traditional" beliefs (Department of Statistics, Malaysia 2010). In this predominantly Muslim country, which harbors "conservative Islamic sensibility" (J. C. H. Lee 2011, 56) and in which "sex and sexuality are taboo subjects" (Tan 2007), issues of gender and sexuality are extensively monitored by the State (J. C. H. Lee 2011, 97-108). Non-heteronormative subjects are increasingly vilified by some religio-political quadrants of institutional Islam, chiefly for political mileage (Goh 2013, 15-30). Such subjects, who are popularly and succinctly termed by the Malaysian media as "LGBT" (Hafidz 2012), have often been subjected to various forms of exclusion, stigmatization and even violence in certain political, religious and social circles.

The criminalization of oral and anal penetrative sex in the Penal Code applies to all Malaysians, but bears particular salience for sex between men, due to sodomy charges which were brought against erstwhile Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim (Shah 2013, 261-263). Moreover, various *Syariah* (Islamic) laws and *fatwas* (Islamic legal opinions) exacerbate the vulnerability of non-heteronormative subjects by decrying "'*liwat*' [or] sexual relations between male persons" and "'*musahaqah*' [or] sexual relations between female persons" (The Commissioner of Law Revision, Malaysia 2006, sec. 2), "male person[s] posing as [women]" (The Commissioner of Law Revision, Malaysia 2006, sec. 28) and "tomboy[s], women whose appearance, behaviour and sexual inclination are like men" (Jawatankuasa Fatwa Majlis Kebangsaan 2008).

Nonetheless, it is not only Malaysian institutional Islam that demonstrates a strong denunciation of non-heteronormative subjectivities. Many Malaysian Christian churches unequivocally express their disapproval of such subjects and advocate celibacy, counseling and conversion from "abnormal," "deviant" and "sinful" ways (Goh 2011, 279-295; Goh 2014b, 150-151; Goh 2015; Teh 2002, 112-117).

Although numerous initiatives have been taken to advocate gender and sexuality rights for all Malaysians in recent years (Joint Action Group for Gender Equality [JAG] 2010; Gender Equality Initiative [GEI] 2016; Justice for Sisters 2014), including efforts by open and affirming Christian churches (Good Samaritan Kuala Lumpur 2013; Yubong 2013), these have yet to gain substantial traction. Non-heteronormative subjects continue to be religiously and theologically invalidated on multiple levels (Goh 2012). Having explained the political and religious ethos in Malaysia in which non-heteronormative subjects find themselves, I now discuss Archie C. C. Lee's concept of cross-textual hermeneutics and how I intend to utilize it from a queer perspective.

Reading Cross-Textual Hermeneutics with Queer Lenses

Archie C. C. Lee (1996) describes the process of cross-textual hermeneutics as recognition “that both the Christian text and the cultural text are equally significant and valid when they independently pose the same religious quest and address the similar human religious dimension of life” (46). For Lee (2004a), “texts” do not merely refer to “written texts—such as religious classics, literary traditions, and historical documents, but also to non-written texts—such as orally transmitted scriptural traditions as well as social contexts, economic and political experiences, and life experiences” (250) of Asian peoples. He sees Asian peoples as inhabiting two realms and living out two life-stories that straddle the “texts” of Christianity and “Asian cultural and religious heritage” (2004a, 249).

Lee calls for a strategy of reading, understanding and interpreting the bible through the prism of Asian “culture,” and Asian “culture” through the bible. He refers to this process as a way “to understand the biblical text in relation to the cultural-religious texts of Asians [in order] to achieve *inter-penetration and integration* of the two texts” (1993, 35; emphasis added). Similarly, the exploration and sense-making of human existence will be wanting if they exclude the rich interventions of biblical testimonies. Lee (2004a) describes this notion as “crossing,” or “*the illumination of one text by the other*, one point of view by the other [in which] new meanings can be discovered, meanings which might never be found by reading only one text” (251; emphasis added).

In other words, the construction of theological and human meanings from the scriptures suffers a sort of deficit for Christians if they overlook Asian “cultures.” By the same token, Asian “cultures” would benefit immensely from Christian insights. Cross-textual hermeneutics thus foster a “transformation of one’s whole life, a process of self-discovery” (A. C. C. Lee 2004a, 251) in which Christian lives are enriched through an oscillating process of drawing on scripture and such “cultures.”

Despite agreeing with Lee on the significance of cross-textual hermeneutics and the broad perimeters of culture, which encompass social and religious dimensions, I find Lee’s conceptualization of Asian “culture” rather problematic. For instance, he provides an example of “Chinese cultural identity” as constituted of and circumscribed by material artifacts such as “ancestral tablets, family altars and art, literature, and household items including furniture, beddings, bowls and chopsticks that bore the dragon image” (1996, 39). While such objects may indeed be cultural markers for some, the centralization of such artifacts as “culture” hearkens to a nostalgic, essentialized and reductionist portrayal of the complexities of human-spiritual existence among Asian peoples.

In an intensely globalized and migratory world, notions of “Asian” and “culture” constantly unfetter themselves from the boundaries of more traditional symbols as they embrace and interiorize diverse incarnations of unstable ethnic, nationalistic and geographical belongings, popular entertainment, media, fashion, technology, “new” spiritualities and *self-understandings of gender and sexuality* in a postmodern, neo-liberal world. There are no identifiably monolithic forms of identity that are known as Asian “cultures”—only shifting, permeable and contingent representations and performances of *human lives* that are conveniently taxonomized as “cultures” (see Dervin 2011; Machart and Lim 2013).

Second, I feel that Lee (1993) draws too facile a division between “the biblical text” and “cultural-religious texts” (35). Christian scriptures and “orally transmitted scriptural traditions” (A. C. C. Lee 2004a, 250) in Asian cultures appear in this binary as polarizing—even inimical—categories that “need” to be brought to some kind of “integration” within a seamless, harmonic blend. There is a seeming construction of both Christianity and Asianness as *independent*, rather than *interdependent* realities. For many Asian Christians in contemporary societies, such an

integration is already an existing, ongoing, negotiated, inter-penetrating and transformative reality.

As expressed by John C. England (2007), an expert in Asian theologies, “Asian Christians have long possessed different models—of insight and wisdom, discernment and truth-seeing, of heart-knowledge and life-shaping—by which they ‘do theology,’ reflecting upon and living the faith” (245). In other words, many Asian Christians are already “putting two and two together” in making sense of their lives as Asians and Christians in hybridized forms and tension-riddled negotiations. Such processes are well in motion, even if they occur without a demonstrable labeling of religion and/or spirituality, and continue to be characterized by ambiguity and uncertainty.

Third, Lee elides categories of gender and sexuality in his notion of Asian cultural texts. This elision is noteworthy, as Asian feminist theologians constantly emphasize the important contributions of such categories in negotiating with biblical understanding and interpretation (Yong 2009; Kwok 1995; Kwok 1996). Asian “cultures,” as such, must encompass the ways in which Asian peoples understand, represent and perform their gendered and sexual lives in relation to their faith, including their understanding of the scriptures.

Nevertheless, the cross-textual hermeneutical engagement of which Lee speaks provides a valuable lens for understanding how non-heteronormative Christian men negotiate the affirmation of their sexuality based on the bible. In this particular article, I re-read Lee’s (1996) notion of cross-textual readings between “the Christian text and the cultural text” (46) as contextual readings between *Christian texts* and *non-heteronormative sexuality texts*—or specifically, between biblical texts and life texts of sexualities. My re-reading acts as a queer analytical framework in examining the narratives of four non-heteronormative men in their pursuit of the meaning-making of human-divine interrelatedness in relation to their sexuality.

First, a queer analytical framework means that my re-reading, which listens to the testimonies of non-heteronormative men, challenges metanarratives that pronounce the bible as overarchingly condemnatory of non-heteronormative sexualities. Second, such a framework teases out the nuances in biblical self-affirmation among non-heteronormative men. Hence, this re-reading acts as a cross-textual hermeneutical trajectory that enlightens the ways in which the scriptures and non-heteronormative sexualities are brought in conversation with each other, based on the lived realities of non-heteronormative men themselves.

Diverse Negotiations of the Bible for Sexual Self-Affirmation

In this section, I showcase diverse negotiations of the scriptures for self-affirmation among non-heteronormative men that are manifested from three perspectives of meaning-making: (i) substituted affirmation; (ii) conditional affirmation; and (iii) ambiguous affirmation.

Substituted Affirmation

Some non-heteronormative Christian men express their belief in a “substituted affirmation” in biblical interpretation. In other words, they deploy a strategy which eclipses and replaces homo-negative biblical interpretations with more affirming and inclusive alternatives. Rainbowboy is a twenty-two year old Cantonese-Hakka Chinese Malaysian who professes to be Lutheran. In this first narrative, which I reproduce here, he shares his insights on what he understands as destructive interpretations of the bible, based on his own life circumstances:

...people...are using God’s name...religious teaching, and some of these teaching have led several people to, I mean like especially my community someone went to suicide...which is a very sad thing, and it also drives people to hate us, because they misinterpreted the meaning, and they misuse it and, they just think that oh...the bible

says this, the bible says that, you can't be gay. It's like a weapon for them, a reason for them to hate us. So, all in all it comes down to people who actually preaches it, they did not actually preach the correct meaning. So yeah, actually, for me, religion isn't wrong but people who...misuse it and they turn it into something else...²

Rainbowboy's reference to "people" who are "using God's name [and] religious teaching" is ambiguous. Nevertheless, informed by the context of my conversation with him, I suggest that "people" alludes to both church hierarchy and fellow Christians who are intolerant of non-heteronormative subjects. He underscores a "misuse" and "misinterpret[ation of] the meaning" of the bible among "people" whose antagonism towards non-heteronormative subjects is premised on how "the bible says this, the bible says that." He exposes how the arbitrary misrepresentation of the bible is deployed to deny the actualization of sexuality among non-heteronormative subjects, in which, according to lesbian feminist theologian Elizabeth Stuart (1996), the bible can "create brokenness rather than wholeness, inequality rather than mutuality, injustice rather than justice" (302).

Rainbowboy interprets the distortion of the scriptures from two primary perspectives. First, the bible is brandished as "a weapon" and "a reason" to direct hatred towards non-heteronormative subjects. Second, a "misuse" of the bible has "led several people to [commit] suicide" in "[his] community." Akin to "people," it is unclear if "community" is a reference to the church that Rainbowboy belongs to, or to non-heteronormative subjects in general, or to both. Whichever the case, what is noteworthy is his perception of the ability of biblical hermeneutical malformation to incite hatred and even death, a situation whereby the bible contradictorily becomes not just a source of oppression, but also a *sacralized mechanism of suffering and death*.

In stating that "religion isn't wrong," Rainbowboy demonstrates personal *survivalist strategic differentiation* between God, religion, the bible, and interpretations of the bible. He does not assign a totalizing view of destructiveness to the scriptures. Rather, the bible mutates into "something else"—a source of struggle, an incitement towards homonegativity and condemnation, and an implement of ruination when "people [do not] actually preach the correct meaning." Queer liberation theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid (2008) asserts that "the Other, by reason of ... sexuality not only brings a criticism to theology but also incarnates a living criticism" (88). By virtue of his lived realities and first-hand experience of the destruction of another non-heteronormative subject, Rainbowboy becomes a "living criticism," an embodiment of reproof towards homonegative biblico-theological interpretations.

In his eyes, an antagonistic attitude towards non-heteronormative sexuality constitutes an "incorrect meaning," wherein the bible is wielded as a tool of power to exact subservience from those who do not conform to heteronormative expectations. Despite—and because of—such destructive experiences, Rainbowboy adopts a contradictory interpretation of the bible that challenges the hierarchical and popular grasp of scriptural interpretation in relation to non-heteronormative sexuality. As seen in this second narrative, he grounds biblical affirmation of non-heteronormative subjects in the imagery of a loving God within the scriptures:

...of course there's a God for me...a God who's all about love, who won't judge other people, and 'cause actually there's a phrase in the bible where people often overlook that words, which was er God, or Jesus actually said that let the sinners come to him, come to the church, let them come. Instead of being judgmental, instead of discriminating them, we should just let them come and join the church. 'Cause we are

² While certain words have been deleted from these narratives for the sake of coherence and intelligibility, these narratives have otherwise not been edited, manipulated or distorted for any self-serving agendas. The narratives demonstrate the varying levels of proficiency in the English language among my research participants.

humans, we are not in the place to judge other people, we are not to judge that, you're homosexual, you're gay, it's wrong, you can't be Christian or whatever...so yeah, I believe in the God who believes in love.

Rainbowboy imagines God, whom he interprets as one “who won’t judge other people,” as being “all about love.” The concept of a non-judgmental deity is crucial for him, as it lies in stark contrast with his own experiences of church hierarchy and fellow Christians who are discriminatory towards non-heteronormative men. Rainbowboy’s conceptualization of a loving, non-condemnatory God is based on “a phrase in the bible” in which “Jesus actually said ... let the sinners come to him, come to church.” The precise location of this biblical verse is uncertain. It may be a fusion of several verses, including Matthew 11:28, Mark 10:14 and Mark 2:17.

Despite this ambiguity, what is clear is that Rainbowboy draws on his interpretation of biblical texts that showcase the inclusiveness of Christ in word and deed. In using God or Jesus interchangeably, I suggest that Rainbowboy sees Jesus as the embodiment of God’s non-judgment and non-discrimination, in which case he is able “to recognize the radicality of God’s passion as expressed in Jesus’ earthly ministry” (Wu 2000, 87). This embodiment also extends to church hierarchies and communities.

Based on a personal interpretation and image of “a phrase in the bible,” Rainbowboy turns destructive, exclusive and condemnatory interpretations of the bible on their heads. He substitutes them with constructive, inclusive and affirming visions that insist on full inclusion for non-heteronormative men by “let[ting] them come and join the church,” instead of “being judgmental [or] discriminating [against] them.” For Rainbowboy, it is “not in the place” of human subjects “to judge other people” on their sexuality, their faith, and the nexus between their sexuality and faith. The final authority rests in a non-judgmental God who is “all about love,” rather than judgmental and discriminatory “humans.” His affirmation in assigning authority to God instead of human subjects is a “strategy of talking back” (Goh 2014b, 153), which disputes the notion of God and human representations of God as “unproblematically conflated” (Goh 2014b, 154).

Love, as Rainbowboy understands it, is the antithesis of judgment and discrimination, and the “doing” of acceptance and inclusivity. Rainbowboy’s conceptualization of “the God who believes in love” denotes an increasing “inter-penetration and integration” (A. C. C. Lee 1993, 35) of his sexuality, his understanding of biblical interpretation and his sense of God from a carefully selected perspective. Rainbowboy engages in an “illumination of one text by the other” (A. C. C. Lee 2004a, 251) in which his conviction in and experience of divine love within and outside the scriptures clarifies his insights of God within and outside the scriptures.

The imaging of a God who believes in love is a particularly salient theological perspective. It hails an imperative for human subjects to demonstrate love, acceptance and inclusivity towards non-heteronormative men in ways that are not merely premised on the conviction in a loving God. This imperative is grounded in a belief that touches the personhood of God’s own self—that God is personally convinced that the qualities of love, acceptance and inclusivity reside in all human subjects, including non-heteronormative subjects. If God is thus convinced, it follows logically that human subjects must be similarly convinced. As Christ is the embodiment of God for Rainbowboy, to interiorize the traits of God is to emulate the example of Christ, and vice versa.

Artisan is a Cantonese Chinese Malaysian and Pentecostal Christian in his late forties. He also develops a personal interpretation and image of scripture to affirm his sexuality in the face of antagonism. In response to my enquiry about the relationship between his sexuality and religious beliefs, he intimates a particular prism through which he understands a biblical passage and applies it to his own life:

Interviewer: Your sexuality, and your religious beliefs, your spiritual beliefs. Do you see them related to each other, or not related to each other, and can you say something about them?

Artisan: Ya ... you know that being a gay man is sinful in the mainline church context. And to me, is not, because on the bible, on John 3, 16 that for God so loved the world, and to me the world is inclusive of gay men, and not just straight men, certain sector of the society, is the world ... every human being, is loved by God and I don't think, and I strongly believe that I'm not excluded at all.

Akin to Rainbowboy, Artisan makes mention of antagonism towards non-heteronormative men within Christianity, but specifically refers to “mainline church” as its source. Although he does not specify the perimeters of “mainline church,” my conversation with him informs me that Artisan is most probably alluding both to church hierarchy and fellow Christians. He unequivocally rejects hierarchical accusations of non-heteronormative sexualities among men as “sinful.” Artisan’s erstwhile experiences of “being a gay man” and thus “sinful” demonstrate how the insights and experiences of non-heteronormative men have been excluded from the diversity of biblical interpretation in hierarchical and popular Christianity. As such men are “*spoken about* and *spoken at*” (Goh 2014a, 44; emphasis in the original) rather than *spoken with*, they are excluded from participation as equal dialogue partners in biblico-theological ventures.

Artisan deploys the strategy of talking back by railing against the idea of a heteronormalized “world,” or the presumption that every human subject adheres to a specific manner of heterosexual existence that is popularly accepted as “normal.” He also talks back by insisting on the “[inclusion] of gay men.” He bases this strategy “on the bible” by citing an excerpt from chapter 3 of the gospel of John, which captures a discussion between Christ and Nicodemus, a Pharisee and Sanhedrin member. He singles out a phrase which begins, “God so loved the world” (John 3:16). While Rainbowboy bases his notion of God’s love for non-heteronormative men on God’s own traits, which are to be embodied in human performances of non-judgment, non-discrimination, acceptance and inclusivity, Artisan locates God’s love in an expansive, inclusive notion of “the world” that is not merely constituted by a “certain sector of society.”

That “every human being ... is loved by God” also manifests Artisan’s imagining of God as lovingly inclusive. Here I wish to provide an extended discussion of Artisan’s notion of a loving God by appealing to queer theologian Robert E. Goss’s interpretation of John 3:16 within the context of this entire Johannine chapter. Goss (2006, 552) understands this chapter as the failure of Nicodemus to heed divine grace, and who thus remains in fear and withdrawal instead of boldly declaring his discipleship of Christ.

By conceptualizing God as approving, in contrast with Christian hierarchies and communities that are depicted as disapproving, I see Artisan as performing a type of *desirous discipleship of love*. This is a discipleship through which one follows God through one’s embodied, sexual body. It is a discipleship premised on the affirmation of divinely-sanctioned non-heteronormative sexuality. As Artisan gradually learns to annex his non-heteronormative sexuality to divine love as “two life-stories” (A. C. C. Lee 2004a, 249) within a larger framework of Christian living, he begins to see how he is an indispensable component, rather than a “sinful” breach in the greater scheme of God’s love for the world.

To extend this discussion even further, I propose that Artisan demonstrates an *agentic participation in godly grace*. This is a conscious, deliberate orientation towards a personal mindset that affirms one’s personal worth as a non-heteronormative man in God’s eyes. Consequently, this mindset provides the trajectory for attitudes and actions that amplify God’s dynamic presence in one’s life as a non-heteronormative man. Therefore, this loving inclusion, which convinces Artisan that “being a gay man” is not sinful, takes on a personal assertion as he “strongly believe[s] that [he’s] not excluded at all.” Akin to Rainbowboy, Artisan engages in an “illumination of one text by the other” (A. C. C. Lee 2004a, 251). His imaging of God within and outside the bible is enlightened by his firm faith in and experience of godly love within and outside the bible.

Although scriptural interpretations can be destructively deployed in the lives of non-heteronormative men, the bible can also be reconstituted as a source of substituted affirmation. Non-heteronormative Christian men engage in agentic strategies of selectively foregrounding biblical passages which they interpret as explicit manifestations of divine love and inclusivity. At the same time, they disavow homonegative and death-dealing scriptural interpretations. They also make strategic distinctions between biblical interpretations, ecclesiastical hierarchies and Jesus and/or God.

Thus, in selecting biblical imageries, these men invert biblical condemnations by conceptualizing God as convinced of love, and unconditionally affirming, non-judgmental, inclusive and accepting towards them. They perform a sort of embodied discipleship which acknowledges that they participate in divine grace and love as non-heteronormative men.

Conditional Affirmation

Not all non-heteronormative men adhere to a perspective on the bible as a source of substituted affirmation. Skidiver is an elderly, married, white Anglican Christian who has been residing in Malaysia for many years. He understands the bible as both condemnatory and affirming of sexual expressions between men:

...the concern that I have is, where in the passage in Leviticus which speaks about a man should not lay with another man as laying with a woman....Anal sex is lying with a man, as with a woman....I don't like the idea that a man should treat another man as though she's a woman. Man to man, fine. But man treating a man as though he's a woman... what is known as top, would be the man, and the bottom is a woman. And he isn't behaving as a real man, you see, so it's not a matter of affection, of mutual masturbation, this sort of thing. That to me, I don't think is included in that. I don't see therefore, as Leviticus forbidding same-sex relationship, but do I see specifically it speaks about treating another man as a woman. On the other hand, we see in contrast, is David and Jonathan relationship, where they embrace, and they kiss each other. Man to man.

Skidiver is alluding to a single line from the book of Leviticus which stipulates that one “shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination” (Leviticus 18:22). For him, the engagement of men in anal intercourse constitutes “lying with a man, as with a woman”—a practice of which he disapproves. The source of Skidiver’s sense of dis-ease, and thus his formulation of the idea of scriptural disapproval of sex between men, lies in his perception of gender role transgression. Just as performing sexually “as top” is to act as man, to participate as a receptive partner in anal penetrative sex is to behave as “a woman” and not “as a real man.”

I propose that Skidiver displays a patriarchal mentality, which adheres to a strict dichotomy between anally penetrating another as the prerogative of “man,” and being anally penetrated by another as the distinctive role of women as “non-man.” To passively submit to another in sexual activity is to succumb to an admission of weakness and self-degradation as “man.” It is an attitude which not only holds that “the receptive person [is] more vulnerable than the insertive partner” (Kippax and Smith 2001, 428), but also underscores a less desirable position of weakness.

Skidiver perceives anal intercourse as a potential avenue of gender and sexual inequality between men, through which men disrespect and objectify each other. With this in mind, he regards anal penetrative sex as the act which is prohibited by Leviticus 18:22, in which “a man should not lay with another man as laying with a woman.” Conversely, Skidiver identifies the legitimacy of sex between men as “a matter of affection.”

For him, such affection is mediated through sexual deeds such as “mutual masturbation” in which equality, respect and personal subjectivity among men are preserved. I argue that that the

term “mutual masturbation” holds additional importance for Skidiver’s notion of legitimacy, as it emphasizes the notion of mutuality, and distinguishes it from self-seeking, objectivizing sexual gratification. Skidiver thus deems the proscription of sexual relations between men in Leviticus as contextualized within distinctive gender and sexual roles. The bible “forbid[s] same-sex relationship” insofar as sexual acts between men diminish societal norms of role and behavior for men, and when they glorify the sexual objectification of men by other men.

At the same time, Skidiver holds that the bible does not denounce sexual acts between men when they are performed within what he deems an atmosphere of affection, mutuality and respect. It is only in such instances, when a man treats another man as a sexual equal by desisting from “treating another man as a woman” that Leviticus can be understood as other than “forbidding same-sex relationship.”

To buttress his argument, Skidiver enlists imagery of the relationship between David and Jonathan from another book in the Hebrew Scriptures, in which “the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David,” as Jonathan loved David “as his own soul” (1 Sam. 18:3). David and Jonathan are depicted as embracing each other in some translations, while others mention that both men “kissed each other, and wept with each other” (1 Sam. 20:41).

Skidiver’s portrayal of these two men’s relationships is purposeful, as it bolsters his opinion that that “man to man” sexual acts and affections do not automatically fall under biblical censure. In drawing up his notion of legitimate sex between men, Skidiver concedes to a “prescribed gender scripting that ontologically essentializes a man and differentiates him from a woman” (Bong 2011, 654). Nevertheless, his delineation of legitimate and illegitimate sexual deeds between men allows him to make sense of the many contestations that exist in biblical interpretations of “same-sex relationship[s].”

This delineation reflects how “meaning is produced as one encounters and interprets the text” (Lowe 2009, 57) in the scriptures, and which in turn enables Skidiver to carve a space in which it is possible for him to experience and express sexual attraction towards men as a Christian. Unlike substituted affirmation, which denounces homonegative biblical interpretations by replacing them with affirming perspectives, conditional affirmation is marked by an interpretation of the bible as both affirming and condemnatory according to particular sexual roles and circumstances.

Ambiguous Affirmation

For some non-heteronormative men, biblical affirmation remains ambiguous. In such cases, the scriptures are perceived as offering support, yet remaining tethered to condemnatory notions of non-heteronormative sexual identifications and expressions. Thirty-year-old Henri describes himself as a “liberal Anglican” and Tamil-Indian Malaysian who works in a non-governmental organization. Henri intimates his struggles with the bible in relation to his sexuality in the following narrative:

...over time...I realized...I am who I am because I was created in God's image...my sexuality is not necessarily a flawed image of God, but it is what God intended for me to be and for me to live my life, fulfill whatever vocation I have in this way. But then I also struggle with it at the same time, because...you constantly hear this...how homosexuals are not...ordained by God and it's, seems like you know, when you're talking about gay marriage...the standard arguments come in...even Jesus said that man would leave his father and mother and cling forever to his wife....I confess that the longer I'm here the more I struggle with that because I suddenly think, oh well, is there any truth to that....To me I do believe that the bible is...it's inspired word of God, but at the same time it is also a reflection and an account of ancient Jewish culture, and subsequent, in the New Testament, in a way it is a cultural document as well as a spiritual one...

Henri's growing realization "over time" that "[he is] who [he is]"—an allusion to his desire—stems from his belief that "[he is] created in God's image," and thereby a consequence of purposeful divine involvement. While he does not mention it explicitly, Henri's assertion of the belief in a divine origin for his createdness echoes a specific verse in the book of Genesis, in which "God created humankind in [God's] image" (Gen. 1:27). In extending this statement by saying that "[his] sexuality is not necessarily a flawed image of God," Henri provides several critical insights. First, he makes the choice to believe that he is divinely created as a gay-identifying man. Second, Henri recruits the role of a creator in the meaning-making of his existence, a creator whom he mirrors in his life.

Third, Henri's assertion that his gay-identifying is not "a flawed image of God" implies that he conceives of God as flawless. Lastly, Henri's statement also reveals a consideration that his gay-identifying is not a perversion of this divine flawlessness. Rather than a perversion, his gay-identifying reveals how "God intended for [him] to be and for [him] to live [his] life [and] fulfill whatever vocation [he has] in this way."

As such, Henri's "ontogeneric" (A. K. T. Yip 1999, 55) approach to God—that he is who he is because of divine creation—in relation to his sexuality "de-regulate[s ...] representations of God" (Althaus-Reid and Isherwood 2007, 306) that are heteronormatively architected. In other words, he destabilizes and deconstructs heteronormative and heterosexist imaginings of God by offering alternative, inclusive perspectives.

Henri's statement that he "[is] who [he is] because [he is] created in God's image" also provides sexually-survivalist perspectives which birth a divine mandate or "vocation" for Henri in relation to his gay-identifying. By ascribing his desire to God as a "God[-]intended" plan, Henri maintains the survival of his sexual subjectivity as flawless because it radiates from God's own self as flawless personhood.

Nevertheless, Henri's confidence in his desire due to divine involvement is destabilized by how he "also struggle[s] with [his desire] at the same time." In referring to the popular rhetoric in which he "constantly hear[s about] how homosexuals are not ... ordained by God," Henri questions his own mis/understandings of gay-identifying in relation to God as in/valid conclusions.

The "standard arguments" that continue to unsettle his convictions include a scriptural quotation, in which "Jesus said that man would leave his father and mother and cling forever to his wife." Here, Henri paraphrases Mark 10:7-8, which states that "a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." Henri finds himself unable to dispute this scriptural passage which seems to arbitrarily but explicitly condemn him as a gay-identifying man, and which I see as retaining his sense of internalized homo-conflictedness.

In straddling the firm belief that he is "created in God's image" and wondering if "there [is] truth to" claims that gay-identifying is "not something ... ordained by God," Henri confesses that "[he] struggle[s]" with a lack of manifest certainty. For Henri, there is no indisputable and unequivocal assurance of the validity of sex between men in the bible. He believes implicitly in the bible as the "inspired word of God," yet he acknowledges that it is "also a reflection and an account of ancient Jewish culture."

For him, the scriptures are simultaneously "cultural" and "spiritual" artifacts. They harbor both human and divine elements, including in matters pertaining to sexuality. While there are some passages in the bible that can be interpreted as affirming, there are other passages that can be construed as condemnatory of non-heteronormative sexualities at the same time. I suggest that Henri's experiences of ambiguities in biblical interpretation also destabilize his seemingly unflinching and resolute imagining of createdness in God's image.

Therefore, Henri's choice to believe that he is divinely created as a gay-identifying man as based on scripture does not eradicate conflict or ambiguity, as he persistently asks himself if there is "any truth" to a biblical invalidation of his sexuality. Henri craves for a safe haven in the bible, yet finds himself unable to luxuriate in such unequivocal clarity.

“The illumination of one text by the other” (A. C. C. Lee 2004a, 251), is in his case not without a considerable measure of doubt and obscurity. His sexually-survivalist perspectives are marked by ambiguity, imprecision and impermanence. Henri’s conceptualization of desire both as “what God intended for [him] to be” and as not “ordained by God” remain as unresolved, peculiar bedfellows. Unlike conditional affirmation, ambiguous affirmation does not bear the absolute certainty of either scriptural endorsement or scriptural disavowal of non-heteronormative sexualities.

Epilogue

The narratives of Rainbowboy, Artisan, Skidiver and Henri reveal how the transformative potency of the scriptures has yet to be uninhibitedly unleashed in their lives, due to a prevailing notion of non-heteronormative sexualities as iniquitous. I am not suggesting that biblical affirmation exists in an absolutely unproblematic manner for non-heteronormative men if theological and ecclesiastical sanctions are removed. The complexities of human lives will ensure that religions continue to be sites of contestation for religious adherents *ad infinitum*.

Nevertheless, in this article, I have showcased socio-theological analyses and theories based on the narratives of non-heteronormative Christian men in Malaysia. These analyses and theories are researcher-research participant collaborative ventures which aim to give voice to those who are often rendered voiceless in religious and theological circles. Hence, this article provides insights into the struggles and dilemmas that non-heteronormative Christian men encounter when they allow their sexuality and biblically-inspired faith to share common spaces of meaning-making. I am hopeful that these insights can provide critical reflections for Christian communities and churches in their official and unofficial attitudes to non-heteronormative men, and perhaps even to non-heteronormative subjects in general. The following questions are aimed at stimulating such reflections.

First, in what ways can the insights of non-heteronormative subjects, particularly their notions of God and the bible, evoke deeper, critical thinking about ways biblical hermeneutics can support a greater celebration of diversity and inclusivity for non-heteronormative subjects within their Christian communities and beyond? Second, in what ways can such insights engender a consideration of the way the bible can be more holistically life-giving for all Christians, particularly those who, within their own specific geographical and socio-cultural locations, are currently beyond the margins of theological and ecclesiastical acceptability?

Christian communities and churches need to realize how important it is to confront, challenge and transform traditional *interpretations* of the bible that support the disapproval of non-heteronormative sexualities with other forms of scholarship that understand the ambiguous, time-specific and socio-cultural contexts of the bible. This is crucial in order to address biblical interpretations that continue to deliver conflicting, “mixed” messages and “half-measure” affirmations to non-heteronormative subjects.

Third, in what ways can such insights spur further conversations on whether or not the struggles and dilemmas of non-heteronormative Christian subjects need to be prolonged due to unyielding proclamations of non-heteronormative sexual expressions as sin? Christian communities and churches must reconsider their present stance on non-heteronormative identifyings and expressions, particularly those modes of perception that advocate a mentality of *loving the sinner while hating the sin*. This reconsideration is imperative, as the ways in which human subjects understand themselves are often deeply intertwined with the ways in which they act, and vice versa.

Queer theologian Rose Wu (2000) writes that “the Church must be willing to engage in a dialogue between biblical authority and contemporary human experience” (87). Taking her poignant insight to heart, I believe that all levels of Church—hierarchical or otherwise—and non-

heteronormative Christians in Malaysia must assume the responsibility and risk of engaging as equal partners in honest and humble dialogue. My final point therefore, and perhaps the most important one, is that such a dialogue must be accompanied by a willingness by all parties involved to listen from the heart and the mind as mutually-respectful peers, without antagonism, defensiveness, pre-conceived ideas, arrogance and condescension. It is only then that the bible can become an unconditional source of life, empowerment and transformation for all human, sexual subjects.

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