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Editors’ Introduction

At the beginning of this academic year, the leadership of the Journal began preparing for the annual cycle of well-timed tasks, or rituals as liturgically minded peers might be inclined to label them, that culminates in the publication of a new edition. As fall semester turned to spring and the final submissions trickled in, the naïve certainty with which we began this publication cycle quickly slipped away as campus shut down and Zoom screens replaced classrooms. The COVID-19 pandemic introduced profound changes and deep uncertainty with great speed to our campus community. In light of the confusion, disconnect, and grief sown by this pandemic, we felt the Journal’s platform might be better served as a place for people who like to think about religion to reflect and connect. In light of this goal, we made the decision to scrap our annual publication for a special edition centered on the unfolding crisis facing our world.

We expanded our call for submissions to include poetry, letters, prose, and narrative in addition to the academic research, reviews, and interviews usually found in the pages of the Journal but also the poetry, letters, prose, and narrative that you will find in the pages of this edition of the Journal. We hope this Journal stands by itself, marking this particular moment while also laying a wider foundation to create more space for voices and approaches this Journal has often left unexplored. We hope this distinctiveness created by the wonderful diversity of genre inside will set this edition apart, not as something better or worse, but as a container to hold some of the reflections, concerns, thoughts, and worries of the community of writers and readers who come to this special edition.

As we prepared to release the final version of this Journal, the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and George Floyd—four devastating deaths in a centuries-long history of state-sanctioned violence against Black people—sparked a national and global movement for racial justice. Within the microcosm of this Journal, these events brought into focus our present and historical failures to work towards dismantling the structures of white supremacy. These failures speak to the leadership and systems that operate this Journal. With this said, the editorial board joins in action and solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement and commits to greater responsiveness in the fight against anti-Blackness. Systems of white supremacy, including Harvard University, continue to enrich themselves at the expense of Black life and Black freedom. We are part of this system as an all-white managing editor board.

From here on out, we are taking explicit action to orient the Journal as a platform for challenging the practices of white supremacy at Harvard Divinity School and in the study of religion as a whole. Among the first steps towards long-term change, we will launch a blog, which will allow this Journal to represent a wider range of concerns and perspectives and to amplify social justice-oriented voices more frequently. We believe that without pursuing social and institutional justice, our long-held concerns for academic integrity and ethical formation remain unfulfilled. As we work to form a more effective journal, we have decided to move completely to an online format and use our funding for printing in more responsible ways.

Before we leave you to scroll through these powerful submissions, we want to remember one voice missing from this year’s edition. Beginning in 2015, Professor Anne Monius served as the Faculty Advisor for The Graduate Journal of Harvard Divinity School, and she found time to advise this student group along with her competing, and more important, priorities as a teacher, researcher, doctoral advisor, and mentor to both undergraduate and graduate students. The loss of Professor Monius left the Harvard Divinity School reeling from the loss of one of its most intelligent, generous, and compassionate members. We ask our readers to join us in remembering the life and spirit of Professor Monius, and we humbly dedicate this special edition to her memory.
We welcome you to this special edition of *The Graduate Journal of Harvard Divinity School* with the intention that you will find something in these pages that will inspire you to make change, make you think, or, at the very least, make a long day of quarantine seem shorter and less lonely. With great humility for the chance to share such wonderful pieces, we hope you enjoy this issue of *The Graduate Journal of Harvard Divinity School*.

David Streed, *Editor-in-Chief*
Olivia Finster, *Managing Editor*
Kate Hoeting, *Managing Editor*
William Scruggs, *Managing Editor*
Annotated Letter to Accompany *Beloved King: A Queer Bible Musical* for Harvard Divinity School in a Time of Plague

Jade Sylvan  
Harvard Divinity School  
Master of Divinity

Beloved Reader,

This is a queer letter from a queer person for a queer project in a queer time. *Beloved King* is a full-length, two-act musical based on a queer reading of the story of young King David in the Bible. It is also my thesis project for my Master of Divinity degree, which I hope to receive next month, inshallah, May of 2020, Common Era of Our Lord. We were set to have two elaborately staged readings of *Beloved King* at Oberon Theatre in Harvard Square in the middle of March to sold-out crowds and much excitement, but these were postponed indefinitely the night before due to the sudden impact of the coronavirus pandemic. I’m now self-isolating in my apartment in Cambridge contemplating the value and meaning of a work of art intended to be experienced in person in a world where in-person experience has been cancelled for the foreseeable future.

But enough about that, Beloved Reader. Let us move on to the point of this letter: an explanation and positioning of *Beloved King* as a thesis project for Harvard Divinity School, as a work of art in general, and as a personal labor of love. Allow me first to position myself. I grew up in a politically conservative family in Indiana in the 80s and 90s, when “God Hates Fags” was a present and consistent sentiment in faith dialogues and social discourse. Among the communities I had access to, it was assumed that being religious and being queer were fundamentally mutually exclusive. It was also assumed by many in both of these presumed-mutually-exclusive groups that the Bible was, at least in part, a weapon to be used against anyone or anything queer. Consequently, as we got older, I and many queer people I knew intentionally steered away from the Bible and communities that held it in esteem. In my case, this distancing came with a certain amount of pain, as I’ve also experienced a perpetual longing for the spiritual and the sacred—a longing I often relieved by making and engaging with art.

Though I never read most of the Bible itself as a young person, biblical stories were the narrative wellsprings of the cultural sea that I swam in, and I consistently found special connection with what I now call “biblical fan-art,” such as John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Martin Scorsese’s *The Last

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1 Meaning mostly “unusual.”
2 Meaning both “unusual” and “not cis/heterosexual” relatively equally.
3 Meaning both “unusual” and “not cis/heterosexual” relatively equally.
4 Meaning mostly “unusual.”
5 For the rest of this letter, (and somewhat problematically, I’m sure) I will use the word “queer” to mean anyone or anything in the LGBTQIA+ family, and I’ll try to use “gay” to refer specifically to romantic and/or erotic and/or sexual relationships between men or mannish personifications.
6 Alas, I do not have a citation for this fact, only my own memory and years of therapy receipts.
Temptation of Christ, Stephen Schwartz’s Godspell, and Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah.” The stories and characters of the Bible, as well as people’s earnest and longing engagement with them, filled me with inspiration, though I continued to avoid relationship with the [b/B]ook itself.

Then, three years ago, when I decided to answer “הִנֵּן יִנֵּן” to Whatever stoked my longing by pursuing some form of ordination, I also decided to engage directly with this notorious [b/B]ook. I read the Bible, and much to my surprise, annoyance, and eventual delight, I discovered that I loved it. It was art. It was good art. And at its core I recognized a longing for the sacred and the divine that made me feel connected to these people in ages past, which in turn made me feel more connected to the present, to myself, and perhaps to something even greater.

I delved into the Bible, and early on in my biblical delving I noticed similarities to another artform that had grown close to my heart over the years: fanfiction. I wrote about it. In “What the Gospels Share with Fanfiction,” I suggested that both fanfiction and scriptural writing are dialogical processes in which the writer is necessarily a lover (or “fan”) of the existing work, and engages in rewriting both as a labor of love and as an expression of the longing for the beloved work to meet the needs of a particular time, place, or community.8 I realized also that those works I had connected to so deeply in my young adulthood—the Paradise Losts, the “Hallelujah”s—were, in a sense, fan-art continuing the dialogue of the biblical authors.

Suddenly I wanted, no, longed to make biblical fan-art too! Inspired in part by Michael Jackson’s insights that “[f]or every story that sees the light of day, untold others remain in the shadows, censored or suppressed,” 9 and “storytelling is a strategy for transforming private into public meanings,” 10 and a way of “channeling our experience of events that have befallen us by symbolically restructuring them,” 11 and inspired in part by Whatever inspires, I decided that I would write a full-length musical based on a queer interpretation of young King David and his relationships, as chronicled roughly from 1 Samuel 14–2 Samuel 9. And I did! And I still am!

Now it is time for me to graduate, and to appease the requirements of the Harvard Divinity School minor deities (who “support” artistic expression as much as they are confused by it), I must present a good old-fashioned apology in the tradition of Christian Apologetics.12 Only this is an Artistic Apology.13 Below, Beloved Reader, please find some thoughts on my curiosities, obsessions, and intentions during the creation of this project in conversation with some of the writers I’ve read while writing. At the end of this discussion, I will try to tie it all together and leave you with some big-picture conception of the work, what it means to me, and why connecting with one another and creating art matters, even in the most frightening of times.

On Gayness and Eroticism

First of all, you should know that I am super uninterested in “proving” that the “real” David and Jonathan were “gay” in the modern sense of the word. I feel that terms and concepts such as

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7 Meaning inspiration of the artistic and spiritual senses relatively equally. Also noting that inspiration means etymologically “to breath into” or “to fill with spirit/breath,” which feels especially poignant during a time of respiratory pandemic.
10 Jackson, The Politics of Storytelling, 14.
11 Jackson, The Politics of Storytelling, 16.
12 Meaning a defense of one’s religion against critics.
13 Did I just imply that art is my religion? Well, then.
“gay” and “straight” are modern categories that don’t make sense to graft onto scant ancient narratives such as the Hebrew Bible. That said, I find in conversation that traditionalistic interpreters, scholarly and theological, tend to use the “gay is a construct” argument to support their own assumptions that a “straight” reading is the most likely. A paraphrase of a common argument goes like this: “Well, David and Jonathan feel gay to us, because we are conditioned to organize all emotions in terms of categories of ‘straight’ and ‘gay,’ but actually since ‘gay’ was not a thing in ancient Israel, logic dictates they are not in love.” This line of reasoning still assumes that heteronormativity is somehow a natural default that exists when our “modern constructs” are peeled back. This is clearly not what I’m saying either. My feelings on the “actual” “gayness” or “straightness” of biblical characters align more-or-less with Ken Stone’s statement: “[T]erms such as ‘love,’ which modern readers are often inclined to give fixed, universal and often heteronormative meanings, are actually used in very diverse ways under the changing conditions of history and culture.” He concludes, “Rather than insisting only upon a sexual interpretation of David’s lament for Jonathan, a queer reading might call attention to multiple ways of understanding the text and use those multiple interpretations to raise questions about the reasons why particular readers tend to be drawn to certain conclusions rather than others.” In fact, if I were pressed, I would say that love itself is an amorphous thing that continues to defy our attempts to craft comfortable boxes around it, and categories of interpersonal love say much more about the mechanics of a society than the nature of the love itself.

All that is to say, in Beloved King, David and Jonathan are definitely in love in a gay way and boning. I made this choice not only for the aforementioned fanfiction reasons of presenting a beloved work to a beloved community and vice-versa, but I also chose to make David and Jonathan’s relationship explicitly gay to attempt to bring the notion of queer reading of the Bible into the popular sphere. While these interpretations may be old news in queer biblical scholarship circles, they have yet to reach the popular narrative imagination in significant ways. Because “traditional” interpretations of biblical narrative have remained so firm for so long, I believe strong statements are necessary at first in order to shake the foundation loose. (And, of course, statements are stronger with catchy songs!) In the show, David and Jonathan’s emotional, romantic, and sexual love, though humanly imperfect, is portrayed as positive, even holy, just as it is in the [b/B]ook. In part, my hope is that exposing how silly it is to clutch your pearls over the idea of two biblical men fucking each other will pop the bubble of tension that surrounds the “question” of religiosity and queer sex, allowing for a more purely erotic experience of the sacred. I believe it is that bubble, and not at all the sex itself, that further distances us from the sacred and the divine.

However, I do not particularly care to make specific pronouncements about what David and Jonathan did or didn’t do with their genitals and orifices. Among modern scholars who accept or assume a sexual relationship between David and Jonathan, many seem to want to know “who was the top.” In When Heroes Love, Susan Ackerman sees Jonathan as portrayed “womanly,” and she takes that to mean that he must be the bottom. This assertion creeps into problematic assumptions about sexual and gender roles, activity and passivity, and modern misconceptions about “gay couples” in general (“So which one of you two is the woman?”). On the other hand, Theodore Jennings makes much of David being in the passive “beloved” role, both in his relationship with

14 I have not discovered how to cite in-person conversations, and unlike therapy, they usually provide no receipts (aside from the occasional bar tab).
Jonathan and also in his relationship with YHWH. Jennings even goes so far as to suggest David’s passiveness, or his *bottomness*, is a crucial aspect of his role as the beloved king of Israel. After all, bound to his kingship is his continued relationship with YHWH, the Cosmic Top, and he is the recipient of the only divine covenant that promises eternal love.

My interpretation, on the other hand, is that one of the reasons the David/Jonathan relationship appears to be one of the most consistently positively portrayed in the Hebrew Bible is precisely because the power dynamic between them is uniquely undefined and/or protean. Jonathan is the prince, yet David is chosen by God to be Saul’s successor. Both young men seem to navigate their relationship with these power dynamics in mind. For instance, when Jonathan first interacts with David in 1 Sam 18:4, he immediately gives the shepherd his weapons and clothes, symbolically transferring his princely status and power to David. When the couple says goodbye in 1 Sam 20:41, however, it is David who falls with his face to the ground and bows before Jonathan. In *Beloved King*, I’ve interpreted this power play as a type of intentional, even kinky meta-awareness and mastery of their own positionalsities, even as they negotiate a sexual relationship. This is part of what I intend to get across in the meet-cute* song “Adoni,” in which they negotiate their desires with awareness of the power dynamics involved. There are definitely suggestive moments (the proposal that David “bear” Jonathan’s “sword,” Jonathan getting on his knees, and the “go slowly” line, for instance); however, the lights go down before anyone gets “on top.” Indeed, later Jonathan whispers to David, “I’ll be your armor-bearer this time,” implying a switch element to their relationship. In other words, it is none of our business who was the top or if anyone was “on top” in the way we think of it. And, in defiance of what so many scholars seem to think about ancient Israel, in this relationship it doesn’t matter.

Additionally, while *Beloved King* shows emotional, romantic, and sexual intimacy between men in positive ways, I do not at all intend for that to be taken as the “point” of the show. The underlying eroticism is hopefully similar to that described by Audre Lorde, who argues that the erotic should not be “relegated to the bedroom alone,” but instead can be the practice of “feel[ing] deeply all the aspects of our lives.” The inclusion of the three pivotal stripping scenes—David at the battle with Goliath, Saul with the Prophets, and David before the Ark—are, among other things, points of the characters’ connection with the erotic divine, as well as points of (sometimes confusing or complicated) erotic connection with the audience and/or the other characters, blurring the lines between divine and human eroticism.

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18 Jennings compares David’s role as armor-bearer to both Saul and Jonathan to similar relationships in Greek and Japanese culture, in which Jennings notes there is an older active/penetrating warrior “lover” and a younger passive/receiving armor-bearing “beloved.” See Theodore W. Jennings Jr., *Jacob’s Wound: Homoerotic Narrative in the Literature of Ancient Israel* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 3–12.


20 Though the language is onerous, see: Jean-Fabrice Nardelli, *Homosexuality and Liminality in the Gilgamesh and Samuel* (Classical and Byzantine Monographs 64; Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 2007).


22 What even is “sex,” anyway? Humans are creative. It’s possible “gay sex” as we narrowly define it wasn’t even on their menu!


24 Jonathan is attracted to David for his connection with God as much as he’s attracted to David the person, perhaps, but maybe that connection is just part of David’s personhood after all.
On the Work’s (and the Bible’s) Failure of the Bechdel Test, and Other Gender Stuff

I have been highly aware that *Beloved King* does not center women or other non-male genders. While the focus of the work is not to upend the biblical gender systems within the story, I do attempt to look at Michal’s role in this relationship web in a way that is satisfying to a modern audience while not glossing over the patriarchal construction of the world the characters are living in. From the information that is given in the [b/B]ook, it seems that the marriage of Michal to David is primarily about making David part of the royal family. How might Michal have felt about being used as a symbol of the affection (or jealousy) of her male family members? I try at least to touch on this point of view throughout the work.

Rhiannon Graybill and Laurel C. Schneider note that often times queer or gay biblical readings fall back into old interpretive tropes of male-supremacy. Though I’m primarily exploring relationships between men in an androcentric and patriarchally constructed world, I wanted to do my best not to, as Graybill puts it, “reintroduce old misogyny.” (The line, “your love surpassed the love of women,” a favorite of queer biblical interpreters, is absent from the song “ Fallen.”) I wound up using Michal’s confrontation of David after the Ark parade as an opportunity to allow Michal to voice some of the frustrations modern audiences might feel at watching her be used by the men in the story. (I drew heavily here on the long speech by the Michal-analogue character, Hella, in James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*.) The song “Kind of King” also serves as a pivotal wakeup call to David, who is at risk at that point in the musical of falling into some of Saul’s dangerous patterns. This is not the function of Michal’s speech in the [b/B]ook, but it is the function of a speech by another of David’s early wives Abigail, so, as I did with several other characters in this adaptation (such as Joab and Eliab), I applied some poetic combination. It was also important to me to keep some of the shitty slut-shaming from Michal’s biblical speech in the song, so that Michal (unlike, say, the [b/B]ook’s Abigail) is not some perfect all-knowing saint. I wanted both David and Michal to have a point, if you will, and to be human.

Additionally, many have asked me why I (mostly) stick with the (mostly) bi-gender system of the Hebrew Bible, I suspect because they assume that as a nonbinary-identified playwright my particular axes must be grounded in particular ways. I don’t have much to say about this other than that the constructed universe of the Hebrew Bible rests heavily on its gender systems—they are some of the load-bearing beams. To shatter these beams (and the universe of the Hebrew Bible in general) is an interesting project, but not what I’m doing here. I’m exploring the characters in the world as I see it presented. (I do address the male-pronouns of God in a scene between David and Jonathan in the second act after David has heard the voice of God, and after this scene no one uses male pronouns for God again. That’s all you’ll get from me in the text of the show.) Also, as written and staged so far, many of the characters are or can be played by actors of another gender.

27 2 Sam 1:26.
28 2 Sam 6:20.
30 1 Sam 25:24-32
In fact, four characters are specifically doubled across gender (Joab/Witch is played by the same actor, as is Michal/Shammah). This is an important piece of my conception of the show and a way to play with gender outside of the text of the show. I have decided, however, that it is important for David, Jonathan, Saul, and possibly Samuel to be played by men (cis or trans, doesn’t matter) or masc-leaning actors, to keep the gayness strong.

On Methods of Storying

To me, one of the queerest things about the Bible from a modern perspective is that it allows conflicting narratives to exist simultaneously. Because of this, I am interested in exploring the doubled stories in the Bible and uninterested in trying to synchronize them into a modern idea of a proper linear narrative, at least in the context of the [b/B]ook itself. This feature is something I’ve never seen a modern interpretation highlight. This is due in part to the fact that expectations of many forms of modern narrative differ considerably from that of biblical narrative. Left unexamined, this can lead us to a dismissal of biblical narrative art or to a sloppy grafting of biblical narrative onto our own notions of narrative. These reactions arise out of an ignorance of the fact that our idea of “narrative,” like our idea of “straightness,” is a constructed autopoiesis and not a pre-existing “natural” structure.32 That is, we tend to think that a story should flow in a straight line, with one version of every event in a chronological order and that multiple disparate versions of the same event must be a mistake or an inconsistency. The biblical text, however, appears to make no such assumptions.

For instance, there are two David and Saul introduction stories in the Hebrew Bible, and in both it is clear that Saul has never met David before. In Beloved King, I’ve chosen to keep this doubling by interpreting it through a modern trope that audiences will be familiar with: character perspectives. In the show, it’s suggested that the first meeting of David and Saul is a fantasy (or at least a one-sided interpretation) on the part of Saul.33 When Samuel’s narration highlights the discrepancy between the two different meetings of Saul and David, he calls into question the reliability of what we just saw and, by doing so, shines a light on the nature of narrative itself. The fact that Saul is also mentally unstable, controlling, and obsessive helps this presentation, as his point of view can be called into question even more by the audience. While this choice does smooth out the biblical narrative and make it more palatable to a modern audience, I hope that it may also let the audience in on the poetic, many-truths-at-the-same-time nature of biblical narrative.

I hope this approach itself is queer in the “tolerance for ambiguity” sense that Gloria Anzaldúa described: “In perceiving conflicting information and points of view, [la mestiza] is subjected to a swamping of her psychological borders. She has discovered that she can’t hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries. The borders and walls that are supposed to keep the undesirable ideas out are entrenched habits and patterns of behavior; these habits and patterns of behavior are the enemy within.”34 I feel that some of the most harmful manifestations of biblical interpretation have come from this “enemy within”: this idea that there must be one narrative, one truth, one objective point-of-view, and that it must exist in a rigid boundary. The mindset that says there must have been “one correct” version of the Saul-meets-David story is aligned with the

32 For more on the autopoietic nature of stories and story-types that create our sense of humanness, see the perhaps-not-precisely-related (they were certainly not talking about the Bible) set of conversations between Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick: “Unparalleled Catastrophe for our Species? Or to Give Humanness a Different Future,” in Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 9–89.
33 1 Sam 14–23.
mindset that says there must be “one correct” way to interpret the Bible (and often it is these “one correct” interpretations that justify harm). I have tried not to fall into that trap in this work, and in fact I hope to help open the audience’s minds to the many-layered, many-authored nature of biblical narrative and, in doing so, to let them realize that it’s in holding this multiplicity that we might approach the divine. Therefore, I attempt to lift up some of these aspects of the narrative that go against our notions of “story” instead of trying to smooth them out. More than just lifting up doubled narratives, however, I hope that offering this work as an “alternative” but still faithful interpretation of the biblical story can help increase “tolerance for ambiguity” in biblical interpretation as well.

However, it’s important to note that while the inclusion of the doubled stories is intended, in part, to point the audience toward the different narrative style of the Bible, inside the story of Beloved King itself a carte blanche acceptance of all “multiple truths” would be highly problematic and is not what I intend. In creating the show, I took Saul’s mounting obsession with power and control, as well as this obsession’s frequent explosion into violent tendencies (often directed at loved ones), as an opportunity to discuss familial and intimate abuse. His “alternate version” of how he and David met, read in this context, is an obsessive personal narrative that, while it might have some basis in reality, is non-consensual and enacted upon others in harmful ways. I feel this interpretation, while certainly an adaptation for modern audiences, is consistent with the Saul in the [b/B]ook, as he shows us what happens when a person clings too vehemently to power, control, and one’s own desire without perspective, humility, or compassion. This, incidentally, fits well into the notion of storying. For Saul, his version of events is the “one correct” version, and he forces this perspective onto others he claims to care about. Saul’s attachment to his own story—and lack of empathy for the stories of others—contributes to his character’s fall from sympathetic to sinister in the eyes of the audience.

I do incorporate some inspirations from historical criticism of the Hebrew Bible into my work, but merely as another flavor of constructed narrative system. In general, I see historical-critical reading of the Hebrew Bible as another overlaid, constructed story system, but one that is convinced it is a pre-existing “natural” structure and is troublingly unaware of its own storyness. I agree with Dale B. Martin, who says that viewing historical reconstruction as somehow more valid than other interpretations is a fallacy, since all reconstructions of ancient documents are inherently imaginative. Martin envisions a

…nonfoundationalist (postmodern?) world of biblical criticism as one in which many different interpretive methods will vie with one another for our attentions, and in which students will not be considered well trained until they demonstrate an ability to negotiate the labyrinth of the text (or the hypertext of the text) using several different reading strategies and different hermeneutical theories. In other words, I’m not in favor of putting “narrative” criticism or “canonical” criticism or any other one approach command center stage. In the nonfoundational approach, there is not center stage.35

However, like all story systems, historical criticism offers certain insights that are useful. As an example of how I bring the historical-critical voice into the conversation, Jacob L. Wright suggests that it might be an historical David’s position as the eighth son that lead him to become a mercenary

chief, since that birth positioned him as somewhat of an underdog.\(^\text{36}\) (We also see David’s brothers treating him harshly in 1 Sam 17:28.) Inspired by this, I thought it would be interesting to a modern audience to show David coming from a neglectful home and being bullied by his brothers. This may help audiences make meaning around his relationship with the controlling Saul, his self-preservation drive, and his guardedness with Jonathan.

**Wrapping Up and Moving Forward**

What I’m attempting to do at the core, Beloved Reader, is the adaptation of an ancient scriptural story for a modern audience. This is done often (and sometimes unwittingly) but in my opinion not often done well. With *Beloved King*, I want to show people the beauty, pathos, and longing that I sense in this ancient story through a lens that feels relevant and timely. This musical is about love and power—how they both can change us, and how we are challenged to rise to the occasion of being in power just as we are challenged to rise to the occasion of being loved. I want to show people who love the Bible that one can interpret positive portrayals of queerness in the stories as they are and that doing so might open up some new salience and insight. I also want to show people who thought the Bible had nothing for them, or that the Bible was there to hurt them, that it also holds beauty and that they may have a window into this foundational spiritual text if they want it.\(^\text{37}\) It follows, then, that I’m also trying to give groups of people who may have thought they had no common ground a little glimpse of the possibility that the circles of their Venn diagram could overlap after all.

These are lofty and perhaps pretentious goals. I do not know if the show, where it is now, accomplishes them. It needs work in its theology. It needs work in the nuances of its characters’ motivations. It needs to be seen on a fucking stage by breathing people. Plays and musicals take years to “complete,” even with every resource in times when theatres (and everything else) are not shut down because of a deadly plague. *Beloved King* is still a work in progress, just as everything is, as I am, as, hopefully, you are too.

I also have concerns (and have since I began) about whether these goals are worth realizing. Schneider raises questions about the value of engaging with the Bible, even queerly, when it has been used and interpreted for so long as a justification for harm.\(^\text{38}\) Graybill raises the possibility that harmonizing queerness with the Bible could be part of a mainstreaming of queerness that could strip it of its radical and political position, drive, and power.\(^\text{39}\) While I will continue to work to address these and other concerns as they relate to this project, there remain always shadows of doubt around whether or not the work I’m doing will create net good. In a way, this is the case with everything we do.

There is a graphic novel one of my best friends sent me just yesterday (virtually of course—we still can’t visit or touch each other). He said I especially need to read it right now, so I did. It’s called *Why Art?* by Eleanor Davis. In it, a group of visual artists puts together an important gallery show, but the world literally falls apart around it. Apocalypse stuff: broken buildings, violent storms, the earth opening below them. There are even huge, deity-like creatures that show up and smash


\(^{37}\) For more words about my thoughts, emotional processes, and personal narratives leading up to the interrupted March first-look version of the show, feel free to read these interviews:

https://www.wbur.org/artery/2020/03/09/jade-sylvan-beloved-king-queer-biblical-stories,

http://www.cambridgeday.com/2020/03/03/insylvans-biblical-musical-beloved-king-david-gets-his-due-and-a-fanfic-meet-cute/

\(^{38}\) Schneider, “Yahwist Desires,” 221–24.

houses between their fingers. The artists flee and miraculously find a place to hide. They seek emotional refuge by making tiny art versions of themselves and of their world before it was broken. Everything is like it was, only a little more perfect. Watching the tiny perfected versions of themselves makes them feel better, makes them forget that their own world is gone. Then one artist (the best artist?) reaches into the tiny world. She starts breaking it, smashing houses between her fingers. “What are you doing?” ask the others. The best artist ignores them, speaks to the tiny art versions of themselves. “Show us how to save ourselves,” she says. “Show us how to be brave.”

In *Why Art?* the deity-like beings crushing our own world are mirrored by the artist herself crushing the tiny world she created in order to learn how to be better. The implication is that there is some sort of divine, self-referential loop in the creative process. This loop is inherently flawed and human. In fact, it exists in part in order to help us (and, by extension, whatever the deities are) to become better, to get closer and closer to something ideal. As Schneider says as she ends her essay on queer divinity:

> The Bible is a record of human imagining, memory and desire for the divine in relation to us. There is also the possibility, unfounded except through the lens of faith, that it is also a record of sorts of divine imagining, memory and desire for us. We are not at liberty, given the uses of the text in historical attempts to eliminate us, and our own weary awareness of the historical productions of all things symbolic, to read onto the Bible an uninterpreted revelatory content—a direct view into divine existence as it were. But neither are we at liberty to presume that divinity cannot breathe/aspirate/inspirit a heartbeat of recognition and revolution in these ancient tales, nor to deny the possibility of divine eros that casts a tissue of connection to us through a thing so thoroughly produced in all-too-human history.

I still long for that tissue of connection, not only to divinity, but also to other people. This is true especially now, when the connections I didn’t realize I took for granted have been so abruptly complicated and disembodied, and when we are forced to hide from plague alone in our houses in a way that feels, well, biblical. It is a terrible time to make art. It is the perfect time to make art.

The stories of the Bible do not show us an idealized world. They show us a world in which everything is always falling apart. Maybe that’s part of the reason they’ve lasted so long, and why so many artists have tried to fan-art them to fresh meaning for thousands of years. I will take what I’ve learned and what I’m learning and use this time of isolation and contemplation to continue to work on *Beloved King* so that when the theatres reopen and we can breathe with one another again, it can connect with people in its best possible form. I hope it will inspire them. People will need art through this and after this. They always do.

Love,

Jade Sylvan

April 5th, 2020, Cambridge

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42 A plague of breath, no less—to be inspired (literally) by this virus can be deadly.
43 And in the unlikely but I suppose possible event that they never open again, I will find another medium for the work to grow into.
Works Cited


“La misión era sólo rogar por una sanación para el planeta”: Social Media and Reparative Mobilizations in Regla de Ocha-Ifá during COVID-19

An Interview Series With Emilio Hernández González, Frank Bell, and Oludaré.

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‘Estamos en Osogbo Este Año.’ This is a fact to practitioners of the AfroCuban spiritual-religious tradition Regla de Ocha-Ifá. Every year, days leading up to the New Year of January 1st, Babalawos from across the globe convene at La Asociación Cultural Yoruba de Cuba at Old Havana to ‘sacar la letra de año,’ to conduct a series of extensive Ifá divination to find out the year’s religious sign and which principal Orishas would govern the year along with an accompanying governing Orisha. This year, it is Oshún who governs the year along with Obatalá. This year’s sign is Ogunda Biode in Osogbo, meaning ‘misfortune(s).’ Osogbo is ruled by the Earth element; therefore, Osogbo constantly surrounds us. Osogbo is unbalanced, challenging, hot, chaotic, irrational, and frequently violent. Osogbo manifests in many forms that include death, unexpected death, sickness, litigations,

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1 All interviews and translations have been edited for clarity and brevity.
2 Emilio Hernández González is the choreographer of the AfroCuban Folklore dance company, Raíces Profundas in Havana, Cuba, and is a Babalocha of the Regla de Ocha-Ifá practice.
3 Frank Bell is a renowned Oba from Havana, Cuba, and long-time facilitator with the Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute (CCCADI). Frank Bell is both an Omo Aña and a Dance performer of the AfroCuban dance traditions.
4 Oludaré is the founder of KÌIRE WELLNESS, Babalocha of the Regla de Ocha-Ifá practice, Omo Aña and Akpwón.
5 Also known as and referred to as Ocha, Lucumí, Lukumi, and Santería, Regla de Ocha-Ifá is an AfroCuban religious practice that is initiation-based and a coming together of three religions, which are Yoruba, Espiritismo (Spiritism), and Catholicism.
6 Initiated priests in the Ifá tradition.
7 The Yoruba Cultural Association of Cuba.
8 Orishas are the deities of Regla de Ocha-Ifá who represent and dwell in different locations in nature. Thus, Ocha is a nature-based religious practice.
9 Oshún is the Orisha who owns the sweet waters (the rivers). Oshún represents femininity. Oshún is the youngest Orisha, yet one of the most powerful Orishas.
10 Obatalá is one of the eldest Orishas, owner of white cloth and represents calmness and purity. Obatalá is the creator of human bodies and owner of the Ori (heads).
arguments, war, obstacles, loss, brujeria,11 paralysis, crimes, curses, and imprisonment. As a global community, we could all expect any manifestations of Osogbo. Talking to my Ahijado12 on the night of Saturday, March 28th, 2020, it suddenly hit me. What are the possible impacts of the quarantine and social distancing measures on the Regla de Ocha-Ifá practice itself? Are ceremonies and initiations still being organized and practiced? Regla de Ocha-Ifá is community oriented. Physical touch is involved, and being in close distances is common because we practice in our own homes—that could mean from spacious houses to tiny apartments, but we make it work. What does this quarantine mean for the Iyawóses13 already in their week of Kari Ocha/Leri Ocha14 or just about to enter their Trono?15 The Botanica that my ahijado goes to, Botanica Osican in Florida, closed on Friday, March 27th, 2020. As an Iyalocha16 myself, dance practitioner, and scholar I find myself trying to stabilize what has been destabilized. I am currently teaching online AfroCuban Yoruba Folklore Orisha Dance Theory and Technique classes, engaging in rituals, and writing this journal submission after talking to three Regla de Ocha-Ifá practitioners in my community. We spoke about the current mobilizing work that they are doing in the current global COVID-19 pandemic. In an article from The Atlantic titled “Our Pandemic Summer” by Ed Yong highlighting the possible realities of COVID-19’s lasting impacts in our lives, he writes,

The virus is disproportionately killing people in low-income jobs who don’t have the privilege of working from home, but who will nonetheless be shamed for not distancing themselves. The virus is disproportionately killing black people, whose health had already been impoverished through centuries of structural racism, but who will nonetheless be personally blamed for their fate.17

Another related article from The Atlantic, titled “Stop Blaming Black People for Dying of the Coronavirus: New data from 29 states confirm the extent of the racial disparities” by Ibram X. Kendi, Director of the Antiracist Research and Policy Center at American University, especially sheds light on racial disparities during COVID-19. Kendi writes,

But we were indeed in the wilderness. On April 1, hardly any states, counties, hospitals, or private labs had released the racial demographics of the people who had been tested for, infected with, hospitalized with, or killed by COVID-19. Five days later, citing racial disparities in infection or death rates from five states or counties and the racial demographics of the worst coronavirus hot spots, I speculated that America was facing a racial pandemic within the viral pandemic. But we needed more racial data to know for sure . . . And the picture keeps looking worse by the day. In New York City’s ground zero, Latinos make up 34 percent of the known deaths from the coronavirus, higher than their 29.1 percent share of the city’s

11 Using divination and religious actions for negative and malicious purposes.
12 Godchild in the Regla de Ocha-Ifá spiritual-religious practice.
13 An Iyawó is a new initiate in the initiation ceremony Kari Ocha or Leri Ocha in the Regla de Ocha-Ifá practice, where they receive their guardian Orisha. Iyawó means “bride to the Orisha” in Lukumí (a mix of Yoruba and Spanish), where they are considered a newborn and a baby for the year and seven-day period of the initiation.
14 The major initiation into priesthood in Ocha.
15 The room in which the initiate stays for seven consecutive days during the Kari Ocha/Leri Ocha initiation ceremony as it represents the womb of the initiate’s Madrina (godmother) or Padrino (godfather).
16 A Priestess in Ocha, also known as Santeras in the Catholic syncretic term.
population. Two small Native American pueblos in New Mexico had higher infection rates than any U.S. county as of Friday. 18

While Black and Latinx folx disproportionately suffer the most critical conditions and die by COVID-19, we are also the ones who are most pulling from our tool kits to heal ourselves and our surrounding beings right now. Ourselves, Egún19, Orishas, Orixás20, Lwa21, and our Cuadro Espiritual22 are the most living. The rituals of Regla de Ocha-Ifá, like other Black Diasporic spiritual-religious traditions, are forms of direct action that offer a broad range of roles that call in practitioners wanting to contribute to building a better world by offering healing services and aligning themselves with their spiritual caminos.23 I connected with Emilio Hernández González, a renowned professional AfroCuban Folklore Dancer from Havana, Cuba, and Choreographer of the AfroCuban Folklore dance company Raíces Profundas in Havana, Cuba, and Babalocha24 of the Regla de Ocha-Ifá practice, after witnessing and participating in his very recent “Reto de Yemayá” Facebook challenge. I was third to participate in the challenge, a challenge that Emilio offered to absolutely anyone interested in filming a short clip dancing the Orisha Yemayá. I watched Emilio receive over twenty-one submissions from folx across the world, from Perú, Russia, Chile, and México to name a few. I found myself emotionally watching the video submissions, witnessing folx dance with such grief, frustration, hope, and love.

What led you to start your "Yemayá Challenge"?

Emilio Hernández González: Social media is currently saturated with chaos, grief, suffering, and bad news. We are going through a critical global moment. I thought that a new form of motivation was needed to take a little of this fear and uncertainty that will happen in the future. The challenge of dancing to Yemayá was a way to unite us all in the same essence and harmony, to face the situation we are currently experiencing with the pandemic in a different and more positive way.

Why Yemayá to dance in this time of confronting the global pandemic COVID-19?

EHG: Yemaya is known as the universal mother, the owner of the world, the progenitor of all Orishas and therefore of all human beings. The planet is currently in a precarious situation and the existence of the human race is in danger. Who is better than Yemayá, the owner of life, to intercede for us?

Emilio, as a dancer, I received this challenge with great joy and I could realize that it was open not only to dancers, but to anyone who wants to be part of this sacred moment. Why on this occasion did you leave the opportunity open for anyone, whether or not a dancer, practicing or not, to be part of this challenge?

19 Ancestors in Yoruba.
20 Orixás are the deities of Candomblé, an Afro-Brazilian religious practice.
21 Spirits of the Vodou religious practice.
22 A set of spirits that guide us since our birth.
23 Paths.
24 Priest in Ocha, also known as Santeros in the Catholic syncretic term.
EHG: Dancing to Yemayá is not a matter of one type of person or another. It is not a matter of being professional or not. It does not even refer to a type of faith-based belief. At this time, it is more of a message to the universe of good energy and positivity. Anyone capable of breaking free from taboos, limitations, shame, and fear could participate in this challenge. The aim of the challenge was not to assess the dance skills of those who dared to participate. The mission was just to beg for healing for the planet.

How do you feel about the responses and reactions that you have gotten thus far?

EHG: For me, seeing the acceptance of my challenge across the whole world has been very flattering. I did not expect to receive videos from so many latitudes of the planet, different races, creeds, points of views, versions of the same Orisha. It is nice to see that so many people have taken two minutes of their time to do this, in a small and symbolic way, but at the same time, sublime, to intercede and put our grain of sand and save humanity. The fact that so many people have been in one way or another, aware of the current situation that we are living, is beautiful. I would like to thank each and every one of those who agreed to participate.

I then connected with Frank Bell, a renowned Oba for over twenty-six years from Havana, Cuba, and long-time facilitator with the Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute (CCCADI) based in New York. Bell's broad knowledge of song interpretations dedicated to the Orishas, Patakis, and divination systems is well known and respected throughout the Orisha community, a traditional knowledge keeper. Frank Bell is both anan Omo Aña and a Dance performer of the AfroCuban dance traditions. Currently, he is facilitating a session titled “Integral Plants & Herbs in Afro-Cuban Religion: Orisha & Palo Webinar Series” offered by the Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute (CCCADI). The webinar opened with a recap of the first session, “The Use of Plants in Santeria/Osain for Healing and Cleansing,” leading to the second session, “Working with plants and herbs in Palo,” that I participated in and appreciated the vast knowledge of Ocha and Palo cleansing rituals being accessible in the free and donation-based web series.

You frequently record live videos on Facebook, in front of your Asojuano altar, giving advice from Oba's point of view. Why is it important to work with Asojuano and Olokún at this time?

Frank Bell: It is important because Asojuano is the Orisha of miracles in epidemics and diseases, since he suffered it in his own flesh. Asojuano is the Orisha that got sick and he was infected. He was also humiliated by the Lukumí community. That is why he had to move to the Arará country, because the Lukumí disposed of him. Asojuano suffered by himself. He suffered by the humiliation and suffered from the forced immigration he had to go through to the Arará country, where he became king. So, now it is important. Because he suffered, he is the Orisha we receive when we have issues with our health. Even though some people receive him because it is marked in Itá and it is time to receive him, but San Lázaro, Babalú Ayé is the Orisha specifically of health. Even right now

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25 Master of Ceremonies of the Regla de Ocha-Ifá practice.
26 Yoruba tales, sacred stories of what each Orisha experienced. Patakis help practitioners understand each Orisha, how they came to be (their origin), their interpersonal relationships, and why certain rituals are done.
27 Batá drummer. The Batá and the musician to whom it belongs undergo a week-long intense initiation where the drums are consecrated with Orisha Aña through the guidance of a Babalawo, a Osayinmista (priest who received and works with Orisha Osayin/herbalist), and an Omo Aña (one who received Aña and has deep knowledge of the Batá), to become what is called a fundamento Batá.
in the Lukumí tradition, we crown Babalú Ayé, yet around thirty years ago, they did not crown a lot of Babalú Ayé children. It was only done in Matanzas, Cuba, a part of the Arará practice that originated there. Now we crown Babalú Ayé in Arará and in Lukumí also. So, it is important to work with San Lázaro now, to clean yourself in front of San Lázaro, to pray to San Lázaro because there is a current global pandemic. He helps. Olokún is a saint of great spiritual strength. In fact, Olokún must be received before becoming a saint because Olokún was the first in this world. Everything was water before the continents formed. Olokún is the one who will open the doors to the saint, who gives great health and prosperity. Almost all of us received Olokún before receiving San Lázaro Babalu Ayé. We are supposed to receive Olokún before we get crowned. Olokún is the Orisha that opens the way to crown in Ocha.

**Discuss your “Integral Plants & Herbs in Afro-Cuban Religion: Orisha & Palo Webinar Series” with the Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute (CCCADI).**

**FB:** This series’ purpose is to develop cultural awareness and general education about the Ocha religion. We started this series of classes at the center from seven to eight thirty, which was a big surprise because we had thirty students, and I told them no more than thirty for class. Then, the next class we had forty-five students signed up. They spoke with me to get my opinion, and I said ‘Ok, accept them.’ So, we had to put out more chairs and it was great. This was the first week of March. I also brought herbs with me to show participants the herbs, to touch it, to smell it. The next week, I brought the herbs with me again, but they could not touch it because the social distancing measures started that second week of classes. They still were able to take class that day, but it was announced that it would be the last in-person class at the center because of COVID-19. Then, a few weeks later, Melody Capote calls me and tells me that they are thinking about reopening the classes online, my opinions regarding the class going online, and if I could teach it. I said, ‘You know what, I am a man of challenge’ and accepted the offer. I worked with PowerPoint before, which is so helpful for class because I want people to *see* what I am presenting about. So, I started working with my PowerPoint presentation to add more slides, studied, and prepared myself. They told me that we had around forty students signed up, and I said, ‘That is great!’ Then they told me we had eighty students signed up, and I was like ‘ok!’ It was a big surprise that there were three hundred and ninety-five students at the first class. The second class around had three hundred and twenty-seven. I am not sure about how many will join the next class, but it is good that people are learning. I feel successful because of that. It is a great response from the community. I could do classes in Spanish, but I do not think that I will live in Cuba ever again, so English is my challenge. And I will continue working and studying in English. I try my best. I would like to help English speaking students, because teachings of the Ocha and Palo religions is in Spanish. So, I would like to help the English-speaking community by teaching in English. I am going to begin my own one-hour classes for those who are interested by June.

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28 Frank Bell is referring to the Regla de Ocha-Ifá religion.
I was in the sessions and saw that you create an opportunity for the Aleyos and people with Ocha to learn the healing methods of our religion. Why is it important for uninitiated people to learn from you?

**FB:** The Aleyos are the Santeros of tomorrow, so they must begin to obtain and develop their knowledge about herbs, as this is fundamental in all of our ceremonies.

Lastly, I connected with Oludaré, founder of KÌIRE WELLNESS, Babalocha of the Regla de Ocha-Ifá practice, Omo Aña, and Akpwón.30

Can you talk to me about KÌIRE WELLNESS and your journey to initiating it?

**Oludaré:** My journey to KÌIRE WELLNESS, first of all I have to acknowledge my ancestors and my Orisha because I followed their lead. I had ideas about what to do with all of the blessings that they gave me. I’ve been an actor. I’ve toured, but something about performance always struck me the wrong way because I would be looking at the health of my community, within my own family, within myself, dealing with the anxieties, the stresses, the traumas, the depression that I never claimed. I never claimed depression because of the way Orisha has led me. They [the Orishas] always told me, ‘You can’t be in despair, that whole thing that they try to tell Black people all the time. You can’t live there. You have to work through that.’ So, I was working through it every day and I realized that it is through the movement, through the breath, through the singing, through all of this ritual that I am coming to this place of being ok, and coming to a place of being able to thrive and be able to live through all of these changes. So, by the time COVID-19 came around, I really wasn’t even shook because I had been working so hard on listening to my Orisha and to my ancestors and following the guidelines that they have left me. Many of those guidelines do have to deal with being home, being centered, minding your business, focusing and putting a certain level of good energy out into the world. The definition of KÌIRE means ‘to fill one’s self with the blessings of life.’ ‘KÌ’ is like to stuff. You got to think about a tobacco pipe and stuffing tobacco into the pipe until it’s full before you get a good hit. It’s that. You fill yourself with this goodness, with Ìrẹ. For me, that talks about the breath and understanding that I don’t breathe deep enough, and I need to learn how to breathe into my gut and breathe all the way down. I don’t exhale enough, and that’s a part of why I can’t inhale enough because I am not getting rid of what isn’t good for me anymore. That’s on a breath level, but I always see things interconnected, so I am looking at the breath and understanding how me not letting go of my breath is really connected to all of my traumas, [in] this generation and intergenerationally. This work is about cleansing. KÌIRE WELLNESS is about cleansing and working through those traumas, through racial traumas, depression. The best thing that we have for that really is the breath and movement. We can move in any way, but to align ourselves with Orisha is an intelligent thing to do because the Orisha and their journeys already give us the guidance that we need, the language that we need, the prescriptions that we need for issues that have already happened. There is no need to reinvent the wheel. The practice of Respiratory Ritual and specifically Orisha ancestral Respiratory Ritual is already holistic. The whole activation of the breath is already holistic. It doesn’t need to break down the chakras so to say, because the movement is a holistic practice from head to toe. The whole practice is about aligning everything,

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29 Priest in Regla de Ocha-Ifá. Babalocha is the Lukumi term for priest and Santero is the Catholic syncretic term for Babalocha.

30 Ceremonial singers of Wemileres or Tambores, which are ceremonial ritual festive of Regla de Ocha-Ifá, where the Akpwón leads call and response chants.
and we don’t take care of the head without taking care of the feet. It all goes together. It was really just about listening to my ancestors, listening to Orisha and being brave enough to say, ‘I’m not looking at movement, song, drum as performance anymore. I’m using this as a healing modality and I’m going to stand in that and stand strong in that,’ and although there isn’t a school for Orisha, maybe not yet, that is the path that we need to walk as practitioners and put our healing out there in a way that everybody can benefit from, especially Black folk. A lot of Black folk get scared and say, ‘What is that? We don’t really know much about our ancestors.’ I believe that it is up to me and other priests to put our practices out there in a way that makes it accessible to other Black folk. I understand that they don’t get it, but I also know that we are from the same place, and I know that this can help them. Without putting any beads on them or trying to get them initiated or make them pay for a ceremony, I think about what I can do and what practices do we have that exists without them having to change their religion. I offer free classes every weekend for folk to practice movement, Respiratory Ritual, Orisha movement as Respiratory Ritual, Orisha prayer and singing as Respiratory Ritual, aligning them with ancestral lessons. I also offer weekly sliding-scale classes to make them affordable because there are a lot of people who already couldn’t afford class because of racial and economic disparity and now because of COVID-19. A lot of folk are jobless. Some people can’t even pay a dollar for my class, so instead some people offer to promote me. It’s really about understanding how to work with my community and make my services available, so I offer weekly classes, one-on-one sessions, breath work, and daily meditation. Now, I am teaching five days a week on Facebook and Zoom to make it available for folk because some people can pay, and I have to pay my bills too, but no matter what, money is not going to make me turn somebody away.

Your work of Respiratory Ritual Practice and Respiratory Activism is truly revolutionary. While taking your Obatalá class on Saturday April 18, 2020, that was a part of the Wind and Fire Conference organized by the African and Diasporic Religious Studies Association (ADRSA), I felt an opening in my body. I was yawning numerous times, releasing through exhale to inhaling new breath. What is the work of Respiratory Ritual Practice and Respiratory Activism?

O: Respiratory Activism is making sure that people reclaim their breath, reclaim their space, reclaim their health and reclaim making noise when they grieve, and other noises like humming, moaning, yelling, and screaming. I facilitate and hold space for people to breathe deeply. I hold space for people to moan, for people to yell, for people to cry, for people to sigh, for them to yawn, for them to really feel the pain that they’ve been holding onto and give themselves a moment to release that.

31 Oludaré is referring to Ilekes. Each Orisha has an Ileke (eleke) or collar that represents them, specific beaded necklaces that each Orisha and their color and number is shown in the patterning. Ilekes are received during the ceremony called Medio Asiento, the receiving of the Ilekes or collares. The Ilekes received in this ceremony are Elegguá, Obatalá, Shangó, Yemayá, and Oshún. Each of the Ilekes are consecrated, meaning each are fed with the animal that each of the Orishas eat. Ilekes serve as protection as they have the aché of the Orishas. Other Ilekes are received through other ceremonies, such as receiving Orisha Olokún, the profundness of the Ocean. Receiving other Ilekes are determined through divination, ceremonies and initiations and in Kari Ocha/Leri Ocha.
How do you find Respiratory Ritual Practice and Respiratory Activism especially crucial in this moment of the COVID-19 pandemic?

O: It is especially crucial right now during COVID-19 because people are literally fighting to breathe. Literally fighting to breathe. For people who are already sick, breathing is a privilege that people are losing day in and day out right now. For the folx who aren’t sick, but have to be quarantined, they are even more isolated. Folx are dealing with even more of their own things without outlets because that’s usually how our society runs. ‘How are we going to cope with all of this stuff?’ Alright we can go to the bar, we can drink, we can do this, we can do that. Being home really makes people face what they really feel, and a lot of times we run from what we feel because it hurts. The truth is that real healing doesn’t happen from running from feelings. We hold space for people to release because it is only through working through pain that you actually release it. Anything that is recorded in the body, in the corporeal experience, any pain that is locked, any tension and trauma that is locked in the body, through the breath we are allowing that space to be stretched, to be massaged, to get attention and then have some freedom after to celebrate the new space that people create in their bodies. The more space we have to breathe, the more space we have to yell, to scream, to sigh, to stretch. It’s very important.

I profoundly resonated when you said, “Breath work is a direct rebuttal to all of that [trauma, anxiety and stress].” In my research, as well as in my movement and spiritual practices, I talk about 'Colonial Pollutants' where I refer to the ways in which Black folx experience and navigate climate violence. Where climate is beyond ecological, and violence is embedded in the body that has undergone colonial environments. Colonial environments commit detrimental treatment that tirelessly traumatize Black people physically, academically, mentally, sexually, emotionally, psychologically, etc. I imagine these colonial pollutants trespassing the body, harm and festering corporally, in connection to generational trauma felt and in the body. Can you talk more about the role of the breath when confronting and navigating harm as Black folx from and in the Diaspora?

O: Understanding just how trauma locks the body, how it creates tension in the body, and how that tension and that trauma creates further harm because the more we hold tight in spaces, it causes damage to us. It causes blockages spiritually, it causes blockages physically, pains, aches, headaches, heart attacks, stroke. There are real physical consequences to trauma, to being over triggered and there are plenty of studies out there that talk about the role of racial trauma and how that over triggers Black people, how Black people are constantly triggered by the society we live in because the whole society is built off of racism. It’s built off of racism, so we constantly face these triggers that make us feel small, and I feel that breath really plays the role of allowing me to recognize that this moment is happening and not running from it, giving it space, acknowledging the pain. That is the basis of how we heal. Acknowledging it. The biggest problem is not the pain, one, it is the assault happening, but then after the assault has happened or during the assault, acting as if nothing is happening. Or acting as if ‘This is not painful’ or ‘This is just supposed to happen. This is normal.’ And I am saying no. We use the breath to acknowledge that this is painful, this does hurt, and I need to breathe right now. Matter of fact I need to breathe deeper right now because it is my breath that’s going to save me and going to move my body through these moments.
How do you feel about the responses and reactions that you have gotten so far in regard to your classes and KÎIRE WELLNESS specific corporeal theory and praxis?

O: I appreciate the response, and it has not been easy to stand on this platform and stick to it because Orisha movement has been seen and boxed into performance, so I understand that many folx who even think about coming to class may be thinking that they are coming to a dance class and training to perform or just to lose some weight. All of that happens, and you can go onstage and perform with what we do because it is movement, and it is beautiful. But to really lock in and say that this is for healing is a big step, and it’s hard because when people come in with one expectation, they’re like ‘Why are we still breathing? Why are we still just doing one movement? Why isn’t it moving faster? It needs to be more fun!’ and I’m like no, we actually need to slow down, so I received backlash from that, specifically from folx who need to slow down the most, professional dancers and performers. The thing is, coming from the performance world, I understand that when we dance, specifically Orisha dances, we’re dancing with our bodies. We’re not dancing for our bodies. So, you can very well leave that stage broken. It’s happened to me before. I also come from ceremony though, so I also understand these dances from that space, from that spiritually healing space, and it’s supposed to be healing. On the other side, I have also received a lot of positive feedback, and a lot of folx who are like ‘Yes. This is exactly what I need, where I need to be. This is the space I need to release. Thank you! Yemayá’s aché worked. I have space now. It worked. Obatalá’s aché works!’ People are really tapping into it and taking the time. There’s a lot of folx who are responding with positive feedback and telling me how the movement is helping them to work through the anxiety, stress, traumas, and that’s the most beautiful part for me, especially working with kids and knowing that they’re starting early, they’re learning to breathe early, they’re learning to move, and they’re learning about Orisha and their stories and knowing that whatever they’re going through is not the first time that this has ever happened. It’s really working.
New Horizons: Enacting Our Utopic Imaginary for the Alternatives

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The release of the new Nintendo Switch game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, coincided with the first wave of social distancing measures implemented across the United States. With extra time on my hands in between the never-ending Zoom classes, I found myself playing my Nintendo Switch to check up on my island paradise, which I named “gay,” to talk to my animal neighbors, pick fruit, and water my flowers. My obsession with *Animal Crossing* has gotten to the point where it is the first thing I do when I wake up and the last thing I do until I fall asleep.

*New Horizons* is the fifth installment of Nintendo’s social-simulation game where you move to a deserted island “paradise” and essentially work to pay off your debt to Tom Nook, a raccoon businessman who helps you move to your new home. As I like to call him, Tom “Crook” is the main point of contact to buy houses, furniture, clothes, and supplies. As you progress in the game, you invite new animals to come and live on your island, upgrade your home (which creates even more debt), and obtain the ability to manipulate the land through shoveling rivers, building valleys, putting down pathways, cutting down trees, and plotting new homes. While you become addicted to creating the perfect paradise, when taking a step back to think about the purpose of *Animal Crossing*, you, the player, come to quickly realize that everything about the game is transactional: from your move to paradise, your point of contact for supplies, and your relationships with other islanders. Unsurprisingly, there are many articles, including my favorite from *Vice* titled “I Calculated How Much Tom Nook Is Ripping You Off in Animal Crossing” by Ricardo Contreras, which critique *Animal Crossing’s* and Tom Nook’s capitalistic tendencies: the main narrative of the game is to constantly do labor to earn bells—*Animal Crossing’s* form of currency—to pay off your never-ending debt to Tom Nook. But, despite the looming structure of capitalism that not even a deserted island paradise called “gay” can escape, it is true that *New Horizons* has taken over my time (and the millions of other players around the world) in quarantine, and I think for a good reason. In a time where all of us are stuck at home, uninspired, unproductive, collectively traumatized, experiencing death, and quite frankly unhopeful, *Animal Crossing* provides an outlet to channel our utopic imaginaries, our ability to imagine the alternatives, through the game’s ability to create, destroy, build, and imagine our surroundings and our characters at will. Using queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz’s definition of queer as a horizon imbued with potentiality in their text *Cruising Utopias*, I will be using the game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* to illustrate the potential for everyone to enact utopic imaginaries within oppressive structures, times of crises, and the heartbreaks of the everyday to have faith that we can create new alternatives.

What I find so interesting about *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* is that despite it being identical to the previous four versions, other than its improved graphics, Nintendo chose to title it *New Horizons*. As a queer scholar of religion, I am instantly reminded of queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz’s chapter “Queerness as Horizon” in their text *Cruising Utopia*. Muñoz’s first move in *Cruising Utopia* is to step away from queer theorist Lee Edelman’s *No Future*, which just by Edelman’s title reveals that queers have no future when viewing queerness through reproductive politics. Muñoz’s central argument is that at the very core of queerness is a utopic futurity illustrated through their definition of “queer,” which they define as “the rejection of the here and now for a there and then.” This definition of “queer” is also the basis of my faith as a queer atheist. Muñoz continues that to be queer is to know that our present, which is ridden with oppression, crisis, and heartbreak, is not enough, and so we must work for a better future. Yet, Muñoz writes that the challenge of queerness

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is that we have never known it and will never know it. Instead, we can only feel queerness as “the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.” Using German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch’s “not-yet-conscious,” our innate ability to imagine something new, found in *The Principles of Hope*, Muñoz proposes that queerness is a horizon, a “not-yet-conscious,” that can only be reached when enacting our utopic imaginaries. The “not-yet-conscious” inspires queers to take action and to create the “then and there” or new alternatives even when stuck within the crisis of the “here and now.”

As Muñoz’s definition of “queer” reveals, the very discipline of queer theory and my faith tradition explore the question of how queers are to survive in a world that was not created for them. Many queer theorists, including Muñoz, start with the basic understanding that our world as we know it centers around the idea of heteronormativity, or the idea that heterosexuality is the privileged and accepted way of living in the world. Queer theorist Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant in "Sex in Public" argue that the privilege of heterosexuality is that our everyday gets strategically created with heterosexuality in mind (i.e. taxes, concepts of love, marriage, media representation, etc.). Queer theorists then write within the intersections of other oppressions such as capitalism, racism, ableism, neo-liberalism, etc., to help us understand the different forms of violence that make living the everyday difficult. The heartbreak of the everyday, as Muñoz calls it, is the shattering experience that those who do not abide by the dominant way of living or are not part of the privileged power structures are in fact punished: “the present is not enough. It is impoverished and toxic for queers and other people who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian longing, normative tastes, and ‘rational’ expectations.” Because our world is constructed around ways that punish those who choose to live differently, Muñoz and many queer theorists write theories to provide toolkits for us to survive the heartbreak of the everyday.

As a pastor’s kid who grew up in a conservative Korean Presbyterian tradition, my punishment for being gay has been my continual rejection from Christian spaces that do not believe the same queer theologies that I do. Being told day after day since I was 12 that people like me deserved eternal damnation, I have converted my faith to one of “queer,” specifically the queerness that Muñoz proposes as the rejection of the here and now for a there and then. In Paul Tillich’s *Dynamics of Faith*, the theologian defines faith as the “ultimate concern.” Queerness, in all of its beauty, is my ultimate concern as it allows me to connect with phenomena that are outside myself. Teachers like Muñoz have provided me with care instructions on how I can express my faith, replacing the function that my past Christian faith had once filled. The utopic imaginary allows me to activate my faith in queer and believe that there are alternatives to my present. It allows me to work towards a utopic futurity, my own heaven on earth.

During times of crisis, many people like myself turn to their faith to find meaning. Faith provides us with relief when each day becomes harder than the last as it helps us imagine the alternatives. The idea of queerness as a horizon has become especially crucial for me during this devastating public health crisis: it provides me with a clear view of what an alternative to my current present needs to look like. I think that for the first time, almost everyone in the world can understand what Muñoz meant when they describe the everyday to be “a heartbreak,” as every one of us has suffered in some capacity due to this pandemic. COVID-19 brought out the worst in the structures of racism, classism, capitalism, government, and medical industry found in the United States.

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4 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 1.
5 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 19.
7 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 27.
States and around the world. COVID-19 has also amplified homophobia through the continual rejection of queer people to donate blood,
 through the triggering of PTSD for those who survived the AIDS crisis in the 80s, and through the many reporting that members of the LGBTQ+ community were more at risk for COVID-19 than their heterosexual counterparts. COVID-19 has disrupted the “normal” everyday life for everyone around the world, and we collectively, as a global community, suffer in the present.

Muñoz’s instructions, found in Cruising Utopias, are for queers, minoritarians, and people living in crisis, to use their utopian imagination, our “not-yet-conscious,” to strive for horizons of potentiality when confronted with structures of oppression. Queer theorists Ann Pellegrini, Joshua Chambers-Letson, and Tavia Nyong’o in their foreword for Cruising Utopia’s tenth-anniversary book write that the utopic imaginary is “a queer angle of vision, a queer ethics for living through the gaps between what we need and what we get, what we allow ourselves to want and what we can survive and transform in the now.” If queerness’s call is for us to build a utopic future, Muñoz writes that queers enact their utopian imaginary to transform ourselves and our surroundings. The purpose of enacting a utopic imaginary is for transformation. Since queers, minoritarians, and people in crisis know that the world, as we know it, is just not enough, they must believe that they possess the faith to create change. The utopian imagination helps those living in the heartbreak strive for queerness, the horizon imbedded with potentiality, as our utopic imaginary allows us to see the horizon and feel its warmth.

If queerness allows me to enact my utopian imagination to see horizons imbued with potentiality, the title Animal Crossing: New Horizons signals a new alternative that I must explore. Why I am so obsessed with New Horizons, now more than ever, is that it allows me to practice my utopian imagination through the game’s ability to create, destroy, reimagine, build, design, and transform at will even when I am forced to live within structures of oppression: Tom Nook’s capitalism and COVID-19.

The point of Animal Crossing is to build your dream paradise. The first thing that you do in the game is build a character that takes on a human form. While you are the only human in the game (unless you connect with other players), you possess the ability to continually transform yourself through changing your gender, facial features, hair, and clothing at will. You also possess the ability to plant fruit trees and flowers, build homes and shops, go fishing, wish on shooting stars, furnish your home, and make friends with your animal neighbors. What I find so useful about New Horizons is that even when thrown into a system of oppression, the game teaches me how to enact a queer vision of utopic imagination and transform the current present of debt into a paradise called “gay” on which I want to live. New Horizons’ ability to transform yourself and your surroundings at will allows players to create alternatives. As you invest more time into the game and work more to transform your island however you want, you soon realize that Tom Nook and his capitalism have no place on “gay,” and instead, you get to decide how you want to create meaning, alternatives, potentials, and horizons for your island paradise.

While it may seem as though New Horizons is stuck within the confines of the Nintendo Switch console, the game provides hints of what Muñoz meant when they wrote that queerness is

the “not-yet-conscious.” Despite different looming structures of oppression penetrating every aspect of our everyday lives through COVID-19, I believe that *New Horizons* became so popular in the past month because it allowed its players to enact their utopian imagination. It gives us an outlet to transform ourselves through our characters and our island paradise. *New Horizons* helps each player realize that they all possess the potential to imagine the alternatives in both the game and their real lives. Even when stuck within periods of crisis or systems of oppression, we all possess the ability to reject our current present and have faith for a new utopic futurity and to make new meanings for ourselves.

Muñoz writes that “moments of queer relational bliss—ecstasies—are viewed as having the ability to rewrite a larger map of everyday life.” I want to argue that the utopian imaginary I enact on “gay” spills over into my everyday. The example I can give is my own utopic imaginary on my own island of “gay” where I have nine neighbors, two stores, a recreation center, a couple gardens, and even a makeshift “church.” Every single day, I work to try to make “gay” queerer either through putting up rainbow flags, making my roommate’s character marry his chicken neighbor, planting hundreds of flowers, preaching at my makeshift church in front of my animal neighbors, and even playing dress-up with my gamer friends when they visit my paradise. On “gay,” anything goes, and anything is possible. But, my utopic imaginary, my ability to have faith in a utopic future, does not stop on “gay” but in fact influences how I live my real life outside of the gaming world. In playing the game, I have been working to create a queerer alternative than the one found in quarantine through collaborating with my friends (by visiting my friends’ islands to sell fruit), connecting with new communities (by reconnecting with past friends and joining communities on Facebook and Reddit where players share their creations with thousands of other players), finding joy through the endless *Animal Crossing* memes found across all social media platforms (tackling the grief found in the everyday due to COVID-19), and inspiring creativity and transformation at my own home in Cambridge and my physical self (by rearranging my room, gardening, and giving myself mini makeovers). But even for players who do not see *Animal Crossing* the same way I do—as a horizon imbued with potentiality—I think it is fair to say that *New Horizons* gives us traces of a world we need to build together when our “here and now” is just not enough. We desire the freedom to live out our everyday however we want, including being able to go outside without fear and guilt. We desire to build our own paradises, surroundings, and identities the way we can imagine it. We desire to be in community with people (animals, objects, our environment) who are different from us. We desire to create our own meanings in our lives despite the oppression, crisis, and heartbreak. We all desire to live on “gay” where anything and everything is possible. In our current present, we aren’t given the freedom to do any of this.

The utopian imaginary gives us glimpses of a world—the alternative—that we need to all build in our present as we work towards our horizon. I believe that the horizon of our current public health crisis is the elimination of COVID-19. Yet, it is unclear when or how this will happen. Every single day, the penetration of bad news makes living our everyday life even less bearable. But, we must be inspired by *New Horizons* and enact our utopian imaginary because we must believe there is an alternative future outside of our crisis. Enacting a utopic imaginary can look as simple as finally finishing that last paper for that Divinity class we may not like. It can look like writing an essay on *Animal Crossing* to subtly explain your queer theologies and to find faith among the violence found in the everyday. Utopic imaginations can look like volunteering as medical assistants or chaplains at hospitals, homeless shelters, clinics, and organizations to help fight the pandemic. It can look like going on a run around the Charles River. It can look like doing worship sessions on Zoom and being in communion with people that you love. Or it can also look like creating collaborative

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resources such as the “HDS Corona Care” Facebook group to help care for one another. The utopic imaginary is our innate ability to transform our everyday life and declare that there are new and exciting ways we can live in our world.

Many religious traditions provide hope for people during times of crisis. It allows us to believe that things will get better. My faith is found in the belief that queerness is a horizon colored with the alternatives, and Animal Crossing: New Horizons is one outlet for me to experience my faith in harsh times. Now more than ever, I believe that we must listen to Muñoz’s call to use our utopic imaginary to look for the alternatives, especially when our present is unbearable. Our utopic imaginary helps us to see that our present reality, the one that kills, hurts, traumatizes, violates, and cheats millions of people day by day during our public health crisis and beyond is just not enough. We must not give up, but have faith that there are alternatives to the present we are currently living in. Muñoz proposes that “the field of utopian possibility is one in which multiple forms of belonging in difference adhere to a belonging in collectivity.” 13 I can feel the warmth of our horizon every time I see people coming together to do their part to tackle COVID-19 together. It is in enacting our utopic imaginary, together, that we will come up with new alternatives to overcome the challenges we collectively all find ourselves in.

13 Muñoz, Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity, 20.
Bibliography


A Flute of Forgotten Weather
Jason Adam Sheets

After *Dat Rosa Mel Apibus*
*(The Rose Gives the Bees Honey)*

My ghost recites a fly-in-honeyed prayer
to the shadow of a bear in a flooding cave.

If time is a key slipped under a sleeping door
I keep my key wrapped in silk under a bowl

in the kitchen:

an echo, a long truth sighing
as the sea inside pockets its waves.

Outside, a forgetful river carries a leaf
on its sky and remembers
that a tan ochre papery shrug of a thing
dissolves best in slow motion.

I find a place to overflow *sub rosa*. I call on
my bees and sight a flute of forgotten weather.
Milkstone
Jason Adam Sheets

You breathe through a body of many bodies.

Reborn the hunted or the trickster
you hold milkstone to a clear flame
and stay drunk on the magic water of music.

Your aged rose in cricketsong meets one of two
gardens, the song of yourself foaming along:

*If we don’t sing the words, we’ll stop hearing them.*

Inhale the images.
Do not speak them from a homesick throat.

For what it’s worth, we have both become
that which again we will leave behind

so tell me a sparkle lucky, in the opaque metronome
of moondusted fog reaching for your reaching hand—
Oranging
Jason Adam Sheets

Of what
belongs
most
to the
orange
promise
of air

Of what
we wear
for one
another
kindly
or
frayed.

A
fold.
A
hand.
A
mockery

of a
dead
carnival
of
night’s
shine:

a weaving,
familiar.
A Psalm in Prose

Joe Welker
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During the first semester of divinity school, they tell you that nearly everyone will experience imposter syndrome, the disconnect between the gravitas of the institution and our mistrust that we're good enough among impressive peers. “There’s been a mistake, and nobody knows but me.”

I’m used to the imposter role. I often felt it growing up as a preacher’s kid who liked music and standup comedy I wasn’t supposed to. I had to hide. Later, I had to hide my doubts and disillusionment with Christianity. Eventually, I stopped hiding; I just left. Now that I’m back to calling myself a Christian again, I sometimes struggle with feeling like I can bring my whole self to my community, much less as someone who wants to be a minister. The imposter syndrome lives.

Lucky for me, these are times for imposters to thrive. It’s easier than ever to hide from you, beloved reader. But it’s harder than ever to hide from me.

I roll out of bed. Getting ready for class no longer requires showering. It means putting on a black beanie, adorned with the Celtic triquetra, covering my growing, gnarling hair.

I click the link. Behind me, a clean canvas. A cross of nails. A shawl from Guatemala. I hope to show this morning’s colleagues that this 2D slice of Joe symbolizes an attractive interior of its host: humble, yet interesting. But in front of me, behind the camera’s eye, I see an unmade bed, the sheet pulled off the corner for days, pillows askance like some unruly vandals trashed Stonehenge. My shelves of so-called organizing cubes pulled ajar—those hypocrites. To my left, stained tupperware stacks up without the dignity of forming a sculpture. I passed the exit for body shame 10 exits ago. We've long passed all exits. But I only need to show 1280x960 pixels of my life at a time.

I listen, smile, and nod along to the "comforting" words offered; God bless my fellow students and teachers, but their words are drowned by my inner cynic, drunk on power and yelling on my mind's street corner. I make a few contributions to prove I did the reading I didn't do. I stare intently into the camera—excuse me, intently into the puzzle game on my screen. I tell myself it helps me focus. It rings half-true, plausible enough, like a detuned E chord from the guitar on my wall.

To a friend's joke I type "lol," instead of the subtly more honest "haha," instead of what would have been truly honest silence. To another I say the wise, spiritual thing that feels too obvious and so mundane that I can't believe I thought it was worth uttering. I record it, gloss it up, and slap it on a podcast.

It’s easier than ever to hide from you. It's harder than ever to hide from me.
My summer chaplaincy program has been cancelled, and my ambivalence has never been more ambivalent. I have never felt less Either Or and never felt more Both And towards all my choices and emotions.

Why should I have to choose? It's nice to have alone time and it's so fucking lonely. Class work feels pointless and it's the only thing keeping me consistently engaged. It's a time of clarifying priorities and it's a time where I have no idea what's the right thing to do.

Ecclesiastes (Hebrew: קֹהֶלֶת, kohelet) resonates so deeply with this moment for its utter sense of futility, even though it's famous for a passage that says there is a time and season for everything that people often want to read as comforting. Personally, I think it's badass that we have scripture for nihilists too.

In it, the author questions all of our possible responses to the long-suffering drama known as humanity. The author even questions the point of wisdom itself. If they were in divinity school or seminary, no doubt they would be wondering why we bother walking spiritual paths, much less study them. They would see social media words clanging empty, desperate cries of "I promise it's going to be okay! I swear!" But the smirking "You fools, it's not going to be okay" rings just as empty. Nihilism itself does not survive the gaze of nihilism ripped into its own undertow.

Turning that gaze on myself, what do I hope to get out of writing this? Why am I here in divinity school? To learn to be of "spiritual service," or because I just want someone to pay me to seek? Am I here to try to become a salaried wise person, to feel professionally holier than thou? Am I called to leadership, or did I just think I could call myself?

There is a pressure I feel as an aspiring spiritual caregiver to seep everything with comfort and care, to rip open four packs of verbal Splenda to make the bitter drink of life go down with beautiful words. I don't know if this is what people actually need or what spirituality culture demands, if it's what sage clergy intrinsically offer or if it's all that feels safe to.

In this breath, all I can offer are neurotic time capsules and hope they make someone think, no, feel, "Oh, thank fucking God, same here." I'm taking a leap of faith that what Rev. Ed Bacon says is true, that we are asked in spiritual life to show up, pay attention, speak the truth, and not care about the results. Today, the hardest part is not caring about the results enough to hit "send."

The pressing spiritual question Ram Dass once asked himself became the title of a book: "How can I help?" In it, he explores the call of service and the ways we resist it through our subtle ego games. Later, after a stroke left him physically immobilized, he would describe the strong internal resistance he faced to accept his newfound dependence on others. His new spiritual question became, "How can I let you help me?"

I do want to help. But first—right now—I ask you, the reader, and I ask the living god that is the ground of all being: how can I let you help me?

Can I let you witness me? All of me? Will you?

Back to Ecclesiastes. It's clear when our choices are "a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing" which time we're in. But for far more of these binaries offered, "a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance," the weirdest part of right now is that all those times are the same time. Keep it and throw it away; push yourself through it and surrender to it; laugh and laugh and fall apart.

Maybe all of ourselves, the walking enigmas that we are, was always meant to belong at the same time. Maybe it can all be witnessed.
In my return to Christianity, I have come back to appreciating the Psalms deeply, because they are flush with what I need: a sacred "fuck all this."

. . . for the waters have come up to my neck.
I sink in the miry depths,
where there is no foothold.
I have come into the deep waters;
the floods engulf me.
I am worn out calling for help;
my throat is parched.
My eyes fail,
looking for my God.
Those who hate me without reason
outrun
outnumber the hairs of my head.

There are, of course, countless other passages in this collection of human emotion describing the hellish inner landscape of its authors. It’s easy to see now, in our shared March, April, and Who The Hell Knows How Much Longer, why these passages are scripture. It all belongs. It can, no, must all be witnessed.

These are the passages that are easier for me to digest in the budding renewal of my faith. It has been harder for me to digest the Psalms and the other parts in the Bible that speak to the righteousness of "fearing" God. I have enough fears, especially now. Do I really need to add fear of the Love that Made Everything?

There was a time when I would easily discard such passages that challenged my sensibilities and my theology. But I remember the words Rev. Brian Baker once told me, that he likes having scripture that he doesn’t immediately agree with, challenging him to keep wrestling with concepts that someone spiritually wise believed, believing there might be something true underneath.

When I keep wrestling with “fearing God,” I discover Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi explaining that in the Hebrew Bible, when it says we "fear" (Hebrew: יִרְאָה, yir'ah) the Almighty, the Hebrew root of the word “fear” in these passages means the sense of being seen.

Yir'ah is the sense that you are being seen, being scrutinized. Every nook and cranny of your personality is open for inspection. Yir'ah is what we experience in our relationship with God. Many people would like to have only that sweet, nurturing relationship with God, but there is also the great awe of being seen from all sides.

To be seen from all sides. That's how I can let you help me, oh Sacred beyond “sacred,” living god beyond “God,” Word beyond words.

As Schachter-Shalomi continues, we see that “being seen” is not an endpoint in our relationship with the transcendent. In being seen, we are asked to do what’s right, whatever that may be.

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1 Psalm 69, NRSV.
It is both reassuring and threatening. The reassurance comes from knowing God is here. The threat comes from knowing God is here. Psalm 23 reads, "Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me." The rod is that with which God hits you; in other words, the pangs of your conscience. If you're seen doing something that you shouldn't be doing, then you feel the rod of God, the rod of reproof. Thy staff is a lot more like the crutch, the support. I get comfort out of that and, at the same time, I have the feeling that I'm not the boss of this universe.3

In this way, in my darkest hour, I can enter into a relationship with the divine that nourishes me and challenges me. In my darkest hour, the wisdom of God is that I don't only need soothing of my despair, but I can act beyond my despair. The paradoxical comfort of the rod is in being respected enough to do more, even when I don't respect myself.

To be clear, the rod does not strike against us for our limitations. We are not called to do more than we can, beyond our true capacities or real mental and physical health challenges, but merely what is right in our hearts, moving beyond ourselves into the world, beyond what cynicism thinks is possible. And one thing I believe I'm capable of is holding these together: I am imperfect, which is seen, which is held . . . and I am called to move myself through that imperfection out into the world the best I can. Both And.

My faith tells me that as terrible as this all is, as consuming as I feel it, it is not all that is. Yes, that despair is true. It all belongs, and it's all seen. But there is still yet more truth: I am asked to live in a way that serves the whole from the wholeness I come from. Because when I remember I am seen in the sight of love, I am nourished in the riptide and challenged to swim up and out from the undertow. And even if I fail that challenge today, that nourishing, challenging relationship isn't going anywhere. I'm still seen.

It's easier than ever to hide from you, beloved reader. It's harder than ever to hide from me. But it's impossible to hide from You, the Source, the Re-Source, and the Resource. Thank God I can't hide.

3 Ibid. NurrieStearns, “Fear, Courage & Sage-ing.”
Introduction: COVID-19 and Higher Education

The sense of community created among students and colleagues determines the effectiveness of campus leadership. Amidst these difficult times, hearing from our campus leaders, whether chaplains or faculty chairs, student leaders, or administrators, can be beneficial to not only our own campuses, but also to higher education as an aggregate. The impact of COVID-19 will continue to be a financial, psychological, and operational burden for many universities. While many in higher education are focused on how COVID-19 will transform online learning, or debating how its impact will negatively affect small liberal-arts colleges, we cannot forget to focus on the most pressing issue facing us: the well-being of our students. We know that mental health among students is already a major concern in higher education. Across the country, students’ lives have been disrupted abruptly, leaving their campus dorms, apartments, friends, counselors, chaplains, favorite professors, campus organizations, and mentors. It is important that we remember these types of issues. Being away from home and at school provided particular levels of comfort for some students. When on campus, they have access to laptops, stable Wi-Fi, the privacy of a dorm room, or the quietness of a library to do their work. Despite these concerns, several higher education leaders initially stated they planned to continue to be as stringent on student expectations as they were prior to the pandemic. As I reflected upon that notion, I was set back by the lack of empathy. If there are leaders who feel this way, to whom can students turn for support? I immediately began to think about the role and importance of a university chaplain. Chaplains and other Religious and Spiritual Life leaders are the individuals we should be seeking to help us push through during these challenging times. Reflecting on the prior sentence is what inspired me to interview campus leaders amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

Chaplains, religious and spiritual life administrators, faculty and student leaders from eleven institutions of higher education were surveyed and interviewed. The institutions represented include Stanford University, Harvard University, Yale University, the University of Southern California (USC), Azusa Pacific University, Life Pacific University, Emory University, Wellesley College,
Southeastern University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and Pepperdine University. In early April, I designed a survey via Qualtrics and distributed the survey link to campus leaders from multiple universities. While some universities and leaders were selected due to personal acquaintances or professional recommendations, others were selected randomly. The survey instrument was designed to gather campus leaders’ perceptions regarding several aspects involving COVID-19 and higher education. Using a Likert scale, campus leaders selected options that inquired about their shift to remote learning and its impact on their ability to mentor students. Leaders were also asked if the pandemic had caused them to ponder the future of their positions in higher education. Additionally, open-ended questions offered campus leaders the opportunity to share (1) how the pandemic has affected them personally, (2) how they have communicated with colleagues, and (3) advice they would offer to other campus leaders across the country. The survey also included a demographic questionnaire that asked campus leaders to provide their stakeholder group: chaplain, administrator, student or faculty leader.

Results

Results indicated that 41% of the campus leaders believed it was too soon to report whether the transition to online was negative or positive. However, 29% believed it negatively impacted their ability to mentor students. Nearly all campus leaders have transitioned to working from home, and nearly 60% have pondered how the pandemic will affect their future position in higher education.

Individual Responses from Chaplains on how this pandemic has affected them personally:

Response #1
Working from home, while also home schooling my child, has been difficult and stressful. It’s also been challenging to move my class online, which was really designed for in-person experiences, field trips, guest lectures, and group presentations.

Response #2
Our program is fairly new and was just building momentum, so we lost the chance to develop a really cohesive core that would have been able to withstand the transition online.

Response #3
It has been very hard to hold the grief that the world is experiencing while also balancing my personal sense of loss and insecurity. It has been particularly challenging to see some people treating this as an extended vacation or a minor inconvenience.

Response #4
I worry about the well-being of others, even more than usual, and this has increased my moments of anxiety. Many people are suffering and unable to make basic purchases for food and shelter. I’m deeply concerned for the most vulnerable in our society.

Response #5
I am working many hours at a computer, and this has taken a toll on my physical health, my back specifically. I am making myself present and supportive of others but have had little support myself.
Response #6
Covid-19 has disrupted a rhythm that I took advantage of—the rhythm of navigating space freely and without many constraints. What a privilege! It has also forced me to re-imagine how to channel my extroverted energy in productive and pastoral ways. I am basically re-learning how to be a faithful presence and leader remotely.

Response #7
I remember when I was twenty years old in college when 9/11 occurred. I experienced firsthand how it affected my family and those around me. I believe that experience has prepared me to help those in times of anxiety/stress during these times.

Individual Responses from Chaplains
On supportive communication to colleagues and team members

Response #1
Take care of yourself!

Response #2
Normalizing the full range of emotions; recalibrating expectations for themselves and others; creating a routine and getting sunshine and fresh air while social distancing.

Response #3
I’ve asked them to continue to support students by providing regular/weekly online opportunities for connection. But I have also said that we are redefining what success and productivity mean during these times. Higher Ed. is a high-pressure environment to work in, and their constant drive to assess everything needs to be reined in and rightsized for this unprecedented time.

Response #4
I remind them that they are experiencing a form of trauma that they will need to process and work through recovery.

Response #5
I have communicated to our team as well as students to continue to inspire, encourage, help, and be PRESENT with people. Do not allow this physical distancing to disrupt how you care and show up for people. I am reminded of the Apostle Paul and his writings to the followers of Jesus in the NT. For a majority of Paul's letters, he was physically distant from those to whom he wrote. Nonetheless, the people who received his letters still felt joy and love. We, too, can be there and show people the love and comfort amid the pandemic.

Response #6
I am trying very hard to communicate the importance of showing up in the midst of uncertainty. Creating avenues for students to communicate even though they are not on campus. Trying to be present with students scattered-combating the notion of "out of sight, out of mind" . . . basically we are no longer preachers . . . we are pastors! Keeping in touch through every medium possible is our goal.
Response #7
For employees with children at home, I have been as flexible as possible in my expectations while still expecting them to contribute. For students, I have leaned on the words of the Psalmists as examples in times of fear and crisis. On our spiritual life blog and podcast, I have addressed justice issues that are affecting Asian and African-American members of our community. I have highlighted the hope of the resurrection this week in particular. I have hosted podcasts to help get student voices out there so we know what they are going through.

Campus Leaders
On advice they would offer to other campus leaders in the U.S.

Selected Chaplain Responses

Response #1
Help students feel heard. Give students invitations to pastoral care but also give them space. We have a spiritual mentoring program, and many students are still meeting with mentors virtually. This has been the most effective ongoing method that has translated well into a new situation.

Response #2
I think all campus leaders need to recognize that their approach to work will need to evolve. There is no "normal" anymore. This is an opportunity to grow significantly in how campus leaders relate to one another.

Response #3
Learning to sit and identify grief will be so important. There is "ambiguous loss," with the cancelation of commencement, internships, study abroad, or even not being able to return home. . . . These are losses that students don't have an opportunity to grieve over. As a campus leader fostering a space for grief and loss that does not make much room for closure will be vital.

A Graduate Student Leader (Cambridge, MA)
I would advise (leaders) to check-in and to let students know that campus leaders care for them. We have to find a way to balance communication and expressing care.

A Provost at a Faith-based Small Liberal Arts College in Florida

On message to faculty:
Show more grace to students due to WI-FI and technology issues, to students who went home before the semester was over, to students who had to find jobs because their parents might be out of work.

On advice to leaders:
Be patient, make every effort to connect with students-especially those who are falling behind. Show more grace to students in these trying times.
A Religious and Spiritual Life Leader in Southern California

Be openhearted and not just open-minded, and be aware that this impacts different students in different ways. It is especially difficult for students who are in a different country, or students who don't have supportive home environments, or appropriate resources, to focus on coursework.

An Administrator at a Faith-based Research University in California

We're planning to call all students eligible for summer enrollment to have a "check-in," as well as provide academic advising. Concerns are high about completing state and national exams for credential clearance, so we are active in state meetings and report out to students with frequency so they know we are advocates on their behalf. In addition, student affairs has recently assumed duties for supporting graduate students and they are providing info for those with food insecurity, limited internet connectivity (providing hot spots), etc.

A Faculty Chair at a Faith-based University in California

Over-communicate. Students are also craving face-to-face contact, and zoom meetings have helped in that way. Keep a similar flow of course work that you had before. Just make it a bit more flexible.

An Administrator at a Research University in Atlanta, GA

Offer the support you would want to receive as a student and/or that you would want your child to receive from a college.

A Religious and Spiritual Life leader in Northern California

I encourage campus leaders to stay connected. It is tempting as this becomes normative to stop reaching out. I think the more we can provide connections, the easier it will be now and when the time comes for recovery. I also encourage campus leaders to begin assessing who they are and want to become as departments and as institutions. What are the guiding values? Are these values evident in the crisis or have they somehow atrophied over the years? How can those values be reactivated in crisis? Are the values once articulated no longer the right ones for this new era in higher education? If we have to re-build higher ed, how do we want to re-build it? Can we use the un-doing of COVID to re-imagine or re-structure higher ed in a more equitable fashion? Can we re-create who we are and want to be out of this crisis?

Conclusion

This project has allowed me to view both student experiences and educational leadership in a broader context. Results from the interview responses provide evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic has been a significant challenge for both campus leaders and the communities they support. Two chaplains informed me that this has been one of the busiest moments in their professional careers. Remarkably, these spiritual leaders continue to lead and offer support to many
individuals. Their compassion, thoughtfulness, and willingness to lead are the reasons these individuals and the departments they represent are vital components for human development, both spiritually and socially in higher education.

As I reflected upon the interview and survey responses, two prevalent constructs emerged: presence and empathy. Campus leaders display empathy by keeping students’ needs in mind by altering curricular expectations. Many schools have shifted their grading system to pass/fail. As an example of presence, leaders have encouraged members of their campus communities to attend online student graduation celebrations. A graduate student leader offered another example of being present, “I would advise (leaders) to check-in and to let students know that campus leaders care for them.” A Religious and Spiritual Life leader encapsulated empathy when they suggested, “Be openhearted and not just open-minded, and be aware that this impacts different students in different ways.” This advice further demonstrates how being present and showing empathy requires a multifaceted approach amidst this global pandemic. A chaplain’s response epitomized what it means to show empathy, be present, and provide comfort to colleagues:

Do not allow this physical distancing to disrupt how you care and show up for people. I am reminded of the Apostle Paul and his writings to the followers of Jesus in the NT [sic]. For a majority of Paul's letters, he was physically distant from those to whom he wrote. Nonetheless, the people who received his letters still felt joy and love. We, too, can be there and show people the love and comfort amid the pandemic.

Undoubtedly, some will look back and question the removal of students, faculty, and staff from their campuses. Others will question the grading scale changes or critique decisions that have yet to be made. For the time being, we need not focus on future debates and challenges. At this moment, it is important to be present for students. Be present for colleagues. Be present for family and others close to you. COVID-19 has shifted many of us away from our schools, jobs, social organizations, and religious communities. Therefore, anything that conveys to students or colleagues that you understand their challenges will be essential in providing a sense of community.

I conclude by thanking the chaplains, spiritual life leaders, and other campus leaders who participated in this project. Thank you for all that you do for your campus and the higher education community. In addition, I want to thank the spiritual life leaders whose work, both research and practice, inspired me to complete this project. Your dedication to your role as a spiritual leader will continue to shape me as a scholar and advocate for students. The complexity of higher education stems from its plethora of stakeholders with varied ambitions. However, a vital component of campus leadership remains to provide a sense of community via empathy and presence.
Appendix A:

Demographics

Twenty-five surveys were administered to campus leaders from multiple institutions, with 17 completed for a response rate of 68%. The following sections include gender, race, and leadership demographics of the campus leaders who participated.

Gender demographics are shown in Table 1.1. Of the 17 campus leaders who responded, nearly 70% identified as female and nearly 30% as male.

Table 1.1 Gender Demographics

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<th>%</th>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>70.59%</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>29.41%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Racial and ethnic demographics are shown in Table 2.1. Of the 17 campus leaders who responded, nearly 40% identified as white and nearly 60% as persons of color.

Table 2.1 Race/Ethnicity Demographics

<table>
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<th>Answer</th>
<th>%</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>African-American/ Black</td>
<td>11.76%</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>17.65%</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Hispanic or Latino (of any race)</td>
<td>29.41%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>41.18%</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>17</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Campus leadership demographics are shown in Table 3.1. Of the 17 campus leaders who responded, nearly 40% identified as a chaplain, 35% as an administrator, and nearly 23% as a faculty or student leader.

Table 3.1 Campus Leader Demographics

<table>
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<th>#</th>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Chaplain</td>
<td>41.17%</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Faculty Chair/Coordinator</td>
<td>11.76%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Student Leader</td>
<td>11.76%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>35.29%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>100%</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Whenever someone asks me to describe my religious practice, I stumble. I find it difficult to describe my faith as anything other than a place. I grew up learning and exercising my religion in the enclave of a Ukrainian Greek Catholic church, surrounded by physical sensations that feel like home: the visual attention of Byzantine icons fashioned from jewel-toned mosaic tiles, a wafting incense curling around hard oak pews, the low hum of Slavic chanting. While I abstractly believe that I can find God anywhere, I have always started my search inside a Ukrainian Greek Catholic church.

In March 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the United States, I returned home to the Ukrainian community of Cleveland, Ohio, and came looking for God in my childhood church. I wasn’t the only one looking. The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) had just entered its most introspective season—Lent, a 40-day period of self-reflection leading up to Easter—before learning that three out of its ten bishops nationwide had contracted the coronavirus, and one was fighting for his life. Several Ukrainian Greek Catholic parishioners were infected, while others fell into vulnerable demographics as indicated by their age or prior health conditions. Parishioners needed God but were increasingly scared to go to church.

My second week at home coincided with the issuance of a memorandum by the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Bishops of the United States formally urging worshippers to stay at home, avoid churches, and adapt their liturgical practices for live streamed viewing online. As well as social distancing allowed, I spent the month of April 2020 studying how the Ukrainian Greek Catholic community in Cleveland, Ohio, adapted their highly ritualized, aesthetic, and traditional forms of practice to live within the virtual corridors of YouTube, Zoom, and Facebook Live. Supported by interviews with family members, friends, and local clergy, as well as observational research of digital

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3 Due to social distancing restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, my ethnographic interviews were conducted over the phone. Seven individuals were interviewed multiple times between April 1–28, 2020. One interview with my mother (Maria Krasniansky) was conducted in person and included observational research.
worship, this paper proposes that the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church’s digital adjustment during the COVID-19 pandemic (as exemplified by the UGCC community in Cleveland, Ohio) has reawakened a congregational anxiety toward forced change and inspired a reconnection to the Church’s history of adaptation. This paper also suggests that digital prayer has exposed Ukrainian Greek Catholics in the United States to their own reliance on religious practice as a vehicle for social identity and cultural expression.

A Religion of the Margins

When discussed in religious studies, Ukrainian Greek Catholicism is usually defined by its positionality, situated in between two more common Christian traditions: Eastern Christian Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. The UGCC was founded by members of the Eastern Orthodox faith situated in the western half of Ukraine, who united with the Roman Catholic church in the Union of Brest (1595) as an act of socio-political alliance. Ukrainian Greek Catholics are theologically aligned with the Roman Catholic Church and fall under the jurisdiction of the Vatican, but retain aesthetics and rituals associated with the Eastern Orthodox Church. During four centuries of geopolitical struggle in Ukraine and over 150 years of Ukrainian emigration (or, in many cases, forced resettlement) to the United Kingdom, Australia, Argentina, and the United States, Ukrainian Greek Catholics have navigated occupational fluctuations and internal transformations to such a degree that scholar Natalia Boyko referred to the Church as a “religion of the margins” ("une religion des confins").

While historical observers identify the Church by its ambiguity, Ukrainian Greek Catholic worshippers find their faith to be well defined and worthy of fierce protection. Given Ukraine’s legacy of Russian and Polish national occupations, differentiating the UGCC from Russian-influenced Eastern Orthodox communities or historically Polish Roman Catholic parishes served religious as well as nationalistic motivations. For example, the first Ukrainian Greek Catholic immigrants to the United States (sometimes called “Ruthenians,” referencing a common name for Western Ukrainians in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) made explicit the differences between their traditional liturgical practices and those of nearby Polish Catholic communities:

Ruthenians saw that their church venerated saints, followed the Julian (or “Ruthenian”) calendar as opposed to the Gregorian (or “Polish”) calendar, and celebrated the divine liturgy in a language different from the language of the Polish churches. Like the Orthodox, Greek Catholics called the divine liturgy a ‘god’s service’ (Sluzhba Bozha) rather than a mass; they bowed rather than genuflected; they stood during the service; and they made the sign of the cross with the thumb and first two fingers from right to left. Ruthenians use leavened bread for the altar (as had been done for centuries in the West), received communion under two species (observed in the West till the twelfth century), were baptized by immersion or

partial immersion, and were confirmed immediately following the baptism. Organs and
statues had no place in the Ruthenian church, only icons, wall paintings, and mosaics.

Despite its strong sense of identity, the UGCC has faced moments where acquiescence to ambiguity was necessary for survival. In the early years of U.S. immigration (c. 1880s), Ukrainian Greek Catholic immigrants were required to beg for space to hold weekly liturgies in non-UGCC churches and negotiate for burial rites in (usually Protestant) cemeteries. During the Stalinist occupation of Ukraine, the UGCC was outlawed altogether, its clergy arrested, killed, or exiled, and its remaining congregants forced to practice in secret at penalty of death. Religious rituals were performed under the cover of night in makeshift stables, treehouses, and even catacombs. Carrying the ancestral trauma of high-stress oppressive circumstances, the faithful of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church have developed a preoccupation with affirming their existence through the display of public ritual—a deep-rooted anxiety to follow their “tradition.” Recently, Metropolitan-Archbishop Borys Gudziak, a leader of UGCC congregants in the United States, referenced this shared trauma when calling Church members to weather another challenge: the COVID-19 lockdowns.

UGCC Decisions Amid COVID-19

Of 10 bishops (five retired) three have evidently had the virus, and one has succumbed to it . . . Our priests generally have been spared, but among the dead are a number of parishioners. It came upon us—all of us—suddenly. Clearly, it is hardly over. A Lent and Holy Week like no other.

—UGCC Metropolitan-Archbishop Borys Gudziak, April 13, 2020

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, the UGCC community in Cleveland, Ohio, remained stubbornly analog, particularly at the parochial level. Churches established websites and uploaded their addresses to Google Maps, but webpages were often poorly configured and their content outdated. Church bulletins were sometimes uploaded as PDFs, but services were not live streamed. Parishioners were more likely to organize carpools for elderly non-driving seniors than to petition for liturgies to be live streamed or otherwise broadcasted.

As governors nationwide began to implement stay-at-home orders in March 2020, discussions of how the Church would respond to the COVID-19 threat, particularly in light of upcoming Holy Week services, grew constant among UGCC members. Ukrainian Greek Catholic Holy Week traditions include a ritual washing of feet during the Last Supper liturgy; the laying out of the Plashchanitsa, an embroidered tapestry depicting Christ’s crucified body, which parishioners kiss; and the blessing of traditional Easter baskets at ceremonies that attract up to 2,500 people at a time. Holy Week is an intimate period of mourning and celebration, uniting UGCC parishioners in shared words, actions, and spaces—powerful for spiritual communion, but dangerous for social distancing.

Bishop Bohdan Danylo and Father Ihor Kasiyan—both clergy members within the Cleveland UGCC community who participated in phone interviews for this paper—stressed that the administrative decisions to close the local churches, cancel public rituals, and move liturgies online did not come easily. But early COVID-19 cases among UGCC parishioners and clergy along the U.S. East Coast had awoken the Church to the real dangers of the pandemic. Bishop Danlyo and Father Kasiyan both emphasized that their roles as Ukrainian clergy carried a historical legacy of

7 Kuropas, The Ukrainian Americans.
8 Kuropas, The Ukrainian Americans.
9 Gudziak et al., “Memorandum of the Bishops.”
physically protecting congregants: first from military occupations in Soviet-occupied Ukraine and now from an invisible virus. An ecumenical history of trauma had instilled in them the necessary flexibility to balance the spiritual health of their congregations with physical and material safety. Quoting an earlier statement by a Major Archbishop, Bishop Danylo said, “Right now, it’s not about the faith, it’s about the faithful . . . we need to protect our faithful.” UGCC clerical roles had evolved to encompass spiritual healing and physical protection, and the burden to balance those two was heavy.

In their COVID-19 communications to parishioners, UGCC clergy made explicit references to the Church’s history of nimbleness in the face of danger, and they called upon congregants to adapt again.11 While the faithful understood the physiological dangers of the virus, many felt a disconnect between the severity of the situation and their call to sacrifice. Taking the Church underground was one thing; congregants understood their role within that trauma and thus could incorporate it into their personal religious narratives. However, during the COVID-19 lockdown, most UGCC parishioners made their spiritual sacrifices within environments of material comfort, and they were called to adapt by succumbing to the very digital modernization practices that they had rebuked. The suffering was unplaced and thus adaptation felt sacrilegious. In a phone interview, Dr. Irena Stolar—a parishioner of the Saint Josaphat UGCC Cathedral in nearby Parma, Ohio, and an immigrant who had lived through the displacements following WWII—explained, “Not long ago, our Church had to go underground and people had to practice their faith secretly.” In contrast, she and other parishioners who were adapting amid COVID-19 were “lucky”; later in the interview, she said that she could not help but feel somewhat “lazy” in her COVID-19 religious practice.

11 Gudziak et al., “Memorandum of the Bishops.”
“The ____ Family is Watching!”

Given Ohio’s stay-at-home orders and social distancing rules, my interactions with UGCC clergy and worshippers were severely restricted, and almost all of the ethnographic research presented in this paper was gleaned from in-depth phone calls. However, I could observe one congregant as she prepared for and engaged with her faith, my mother.

Maria Krasniansky is a retired human resources professional and a lifelong UGCC member who is active in the Saint Andrew Church parish in Parma, Ohio. In her words, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic faith has been a source of comfort, calmness, and security, and she has relied on her faith to carry her through life challenges including career changes, cancer battles, family illnesses, and others. It did not surprise me that she, like Dr. Stolar, felt anxious about being “lazy” during live streamed liturgies. On Palm Sunday (April 5, 2020, the first Sunday when local liturgies were to be live streamed), my mother and I sat down in our living room, pulled up a wicker side table, opened her 2011 MacBook laptop, and logged into her Facebook account to watch 12:00 p.m. liturgy online. My mother had read the eparchy’s guidelines for attending virtual liturgies, and following these guidelines, she dressed in business casual attire, sat upright, and silenced her phone. Streamed live to Saint Andrew’s Facebook page, a tripod camera captured the priest, Father Kasiyan, dressed in his royal purple and gold vestments, standing in front of the gold-rimmed icons decorating the church’s Royal Doors. When the liturgy started, Father Kasiyan opened the Royal Doors and entered the sanctuary to the altar table. My mother and I followed Father Kasiyan’s words and responded on cue from memory, led by the single onsite cantor—one of the only other individuals in the church
During the live stream. While the melodies and ritual motions (crossing, bowing) came naturally, the experience was markedly different. Missing were the booming responses of the church’s Sunday choir, the wafts of incense that designate the start of the liturgy and its climax at consecration, or the gaze of larger-than-life icons peering from all sides of the nave of the church.

While we looked into the sanctuary from our MacBook window, my mother and I could not help but to watch the steady stream of notifications, comments, and floating heart emojis on the right side of the browser window. At first we tried to ignore the distractions, but eventually we began to read the names of family members, friends, and acquaintances joining the live stream, many of whom posted comments such as, “Happy Palm Sunday from the ____ family!” or “The ____ family is watching!” At one point, my mother inquired out loud as to whether we should comment to the community to let them know we were in attendance.

My mother overlaps with the most popular age demographic within the Cleveland UGCC (ages 45–70) and the second most popular demographic on Facebook (55–65), and she is an active social participant within both networks. Regular congregants at Saint Andrew parish and other UGCC churches in Cleveland share not only an hour together on Sundays, but they also share family, cultural, and community bonds that extend beyond the church: they participate in the same folk dance groups, support the same local Ukrainian butcher, and follow the same Ukrainian recipe Facebook groups, for example. Liturgical attendance offers spiritual connection as well as social recognition—acknowledging a family’s continued participation within the Cleveland Ukrainian community. During the COVID-19 pandemic, parishioners were unable to interact through subtle nods, waves, or even judgmental glances in church. In response, families proclaimed their presence at the Facebook liturgy and demonstrated their participation through comments, emojis, and “likes.”
While we watched, my aunt Anna Barrett, a retired nonprofit CEO and another historical member of the UGCC, who was following the same liturgy from her house, texted my mother to ask what the eyeball graphic and number in the upper righthand corner of the screen signified: 47 people were watching. On a follow-up phone call, my mother and aunt discussed who had attended and how they had commented. “Yes, it was a distraction,” my mother said when I asked her about the Facebook interactions during liturgy, “but it’s the same level of distraction as when someone walks into the church late, or when you check out someone’s new hairdo. I like knowing that other people are watching with me.” When I asked my aunt about the experience, she also noted the pressure of social presence, made even more explicit on Facebook. “It’s very similar to going to church, in that there’s a little bit of peer pressure because you know the people around you. When Facebook tells me ‘Maria is watching with you’ I’m not going to log off until it’s finished.” In a meta-example of social sharing, both women discussed how their friends had posted Facebook photos of their home liturgy live stream setups, broadcasting their virtual involvement in the Church community while also commiserating in the vast difference of the 2020 Easter season.

“I Don’t Know How to Pray in English”

In their COVID-19 memorandum, the U.S. UGCC Council of Bishops had encouraged their faithful not only to attend live streamed liturgies, but also to pray individually and as a family, together forming a network of “domestic churches.”12 Like other Christian traditions and Catholic rites, the UGCC promotes private prayer as a daily duty for congregants. However, as a Ukrainian Greek Catholic, my upbringing had so rigorously focused on protection and promotion of the public Church that I had little concept of what it meant to pray earnestly, in my tradition, in private. I spoke to my friend Julian Hayda, a UGCC subdeacon, for his perspective. “In our Church, there is absolutely an emphasis on outward prayer,” Julian said, “today, Ukrainian Catholics are not taught private prayer in the same way that other Christians are.”

When I asked my mother and Dr. Stolar if they prayed in private, they said that they did; however, both women explained that their private prayers were usually snippets of prayers from the liturgy. Of the diverse relationships to God that the UGCC offers, it seems that the spiritual channel

12 Gudziak et al., “Memorandum of the Bishops.”
of liturgy is the most highly valued and broadly enforced. Conceivably, this relates back to
generational trauma: public gatherings of UGCC prayer are spiritual petitions as well as political
protests, thus warranting more ecumenical significance and temporal urgency than private practice.
Alternatively, perhaps the UGCC’s preference for liturgy speaks to the religion’s significant overlap
with Ukrainian cultural practice; our prayers, however personal, seem more effective when
channeled, aggregated, and amplified through the filters of Ukrainian sociality and tradition.

At one point in my interviews, I asked both my mother and Dr. Stolar if they had thought
about attending Roman Catholic masses via live stream, should the UGCC run into broadcasting
issues during the COVID-19 pandemic. Both women sighed and said they would consider it, though
it would not be the same. Dr. Stolar added another reason she avoided Roman Catholic services—
language. “I don’t know how to pray in English. If I had a book, I could read along. I only know
how to pray in Ukrainian.” I was struck by Dr. Stolar’s comment. As a cardiologist who had
practiced for over 40 years in the U.S. healthcare system, she exhibited a clear mastery of English,
and I was sure that she could functionally memorize blessings and petitions. What about prayer
made it so difficult for her to complete in a fluent language?

I called back to Father Kasiyan and asked if he could hypothesize a reason behind the
women’s responses. Surely, some form of Catholic liturgy or prayer, even in English or from the
Roman Catholic rite, should be more comforting than nothing. Father Kasiyan, who was raised and
ordained in Ukraine before immigrating to the United States in 2002, pondered the question. “In the
Ukrainian diaspora, the immigrant narrative intertwines Ukrainian nationalism, Ukrainian culture,
and Ukrainian spiritual faith,” he replied. “This is not necessarily how it is in Ukraine.” Separately,
my friend Julian echoed Father Kasiyan’s sentiments: “In Ukraine, the Ukrainian culture and
language operates as a default. Thus, in Ukraine, the Church really facilitates spiritual service,
whereas here, the UGCC lives as a cultural institution.” For UGCC faithful in the United States, the
comfort of liturgy is not only spiritual. It involves hearing one’s ancestral language,
meditating on
folk icons and mosaics, and enacting ritual performances loaded with cultural significance. The
liturgy connects parishioners to a distant part of their identity that is regularly inaccessible. The
Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church stands as a beautiful and familiar enclave, securely fixed in time
and culture and inexplicable to the outside world. Practicing one’s faith represents so much more
than religious communion—it incorporates expression of national identity, acknowledgement of
historical suffering, and ultimately commitment to its future.

Resurrection is Not Restoration

When I asked Bishop Danylo if the liturgical live stream initiative had been successful, he
responded that it had been, but offered a moment of humility.

We had Easter Sunday services broadcast from the Saint Josaphat Cathedral, and
theoretically over 6,000 people tuned in. But somebody reminded me to be a little bit
humble. You know, people have put a banana in a balloon, launched it into space,
and put up a video on YouTube. You know how many people watched that video? 4
million. So we must keep perspective.

As ecumenical decisionmakers, both he and Father Kasiyan suggested that live streamed liturgies
would likely continue after stay-at-home orders were lifted, but primarily as resources for aging
individuals or those with disabilities. Both clergymen stressed the importance of shepherding
parishioners back to the churches once it was safe to do so. “In communal prayer, we take on the
responsibilities of the community and the hopes of the community,” Father Kasiyan said. “It’s better to do this together, as these are prayers that we might forget individually.”

Father Francis Xavier Clooney, a Jesuit Roman Catholic priest and Harvard Divinity School professor, wrote a blog post this season with the message that “resurrected life is not a restoration.” Echoing Clooney’s sentiment, UGCC leaders stress that church life will not return to normal after the 2020 Easter season and COVID-19 pandemic. While Bishop Danylo looks forward to having parishioners back inside the churches, he expects to use this moment to sit with his ecumenical colleagues and parish committees and rethink what is really needed to grow the Ukrainian Greek Catholic faith.

This moment will help us put the future in perspective. We focus a great deal on the physical—organizing programs and initiatives to maintain our beautiful buildings and pay physical bills. But for the past 40 days, a camera and Wi-Fi were all I needed to connect with the faithful. While we shouldn’t swing in one direction or the other . . . this has made me reconsider which resources are really important to our faith.

Bibliography


Every so often, Jesus almost concusses me

Vivian Trutzl

so I was in Bethlehem,
down in the cave (where the
little baby Jesus didn’t cry) & it was
sinfully hot: the Franciscans,
chanting, burned most of the
oxygen & the incense swallowed
the rest. The brothers sucked laughter
through their teeth when a piece
of rock ceiling broke free and
bruised my shoulder & I
whispered, I have to get the Hell
out of here between thick Latin verse

& now I can look back at the
omens: narrowly evaded shattered wine
glasses that were warnings, bruises
from beds not meant for my body; the soft thud
of lane-corrective steering, lost lipgloss cracking
into sidewalk concrete, meat-mallet heartbeats
pressed against my well-ground cheek —

but on Good Friday, wood clothed in
seaweed washed up in an unmistakable
cross. People were sick, churches
estranged from their bodies — you
know, & when I stood up after screwing
it into the tide-safe sand, the horizon
beam wedged itself into my ear
canal — like I wasn’t doing it right, as if I hadn’t
been listening the whole time — like He was trying
to crack a joke, something about me
rising up, head high, before
He got the chance
On the 13th day of quarantine
  Vivian Trutzl

it becomes clear that my
boyfriend of six months
does not
know
my birthday:
I know you’re a
Gemini, straining,
I just don’t
know
the day.

He is
so,

so sorry.
We are
twisted,
apologetic limbs &
for a moment
I think

I’ve broken.
My hands shake &
cheeks
hurt so bad that

my laughter
wakes the dog.
Each side
of my ribcage
cracks open. A car
alarm goes off
outside. The TV
screen flickers.
The tide
checks the situation
& decides
to go out.

I stay right there.
I mean, I have
to stay
right
there.
My body won't stop howling &

he is concerned —
very

concerned.
I'd prefer it if
you yelled. His eyes are
anxious — but who
isn't

a maniac, an uncontrolled
deep-belly laugh from a
tight container

these days? I am
so,

so mad,
I promise him,
and thank

God
for this soft-
pitch lob, this
mendable rend,
laid down &
done by morning
I want to write about the wind
How it roared and tore past my window all day
Dressed in sheets of rain
Comfortingly, yet, disappointingly
Kept from coming my way

I want to write about the wind,

but tonight—

I think the elements of this life

Were a bit wilder inside.
As early as February, I was struck by the doomsday, zombie-apocalypse narratives about coronavirus in the media, and I was inspired by this connection between disease and apocalypse. As the COVID-19 situation intensified towards the end of March, I found myself finishing up finals under quarantine and wondering how my role as a student of religion shaped my understanding of coronavirus as a global pandemic that has socio-religious significance for all of us. Like many others, I have been deeply troubled by the racism that COVID-19 has unjustly instigated, and this paper identifies some parallel phenomena of scapegoating, alienation, and violence during global pandemics. In part, examining apocalypticism as a primary religious response to pandemic outbreaks has helped me decipher the competing discourses surrounding coronavirus. On a simpler level, though, coronavirus—in just a matter of months—has pushed our world to deal with loss and social change on an unprecedented global scale, raising age-old questions about human suffering, healing, the body, and theodicy that we constantly grapple with in religious studies.

Apocalyptic terror surrounding disease is not a rare phenomenon. Apocalyptic beliefs often coalesce around experiences of acute crisis, promising a better world to come for the righteous and an avenue of liberation from oppressive entities. In Christian thought, illness is inextricably tied to the problem of evil, at once a way of distinguishing the damned from the saved and an instance of divine judgement. By their very nature, apocalyptic eschatologies synthesize crises into a coherent historical narrative, and interpretations of disease similarly grant assurance that plague is part of God’s plan, indicative of humanity’s place within cosmic time.

Pandemics have been studied from a number of perspectives, spanning epidemiology and scientific research to historical investigations. Scholars and theorists of religion have also approached the topic of disease. Religious scholarship on disease has often noted that plague is a densely apocalyptic symbol, hearkening back to the very roots of biblical apocalypticism in the books of Matthew and Revelation.

I will explore the connections between disease and apocalypticism with three case studies: the Black Death, the U.S. AIDS epidemic, and pandemic fiction. The first two cases investigate historical pandemics, and analyze outbreaks and apocalyptic responses in their specific temporal, cultural, and religious contexts. Next, I argue that the pandemic narrative, prolific in science fiction and popular culture, is yet another salient example of the apocalyptic response to pandemics. Taken as a whole, these case studies illuminate that the pandemic apocalypse is a naturalized concept in our collective imagination which actively informs our responses to disease as a global community.
The Black Death

The Black Death refers to the devastating Bubonic plague in Europe, central Asia, and north Africa between 1348–1350. The plague spread across trade routes, killing approximately half the world's population at the time. Transmitted through contact with infected fleas, the pestilence was highly contagious, causing painful lymphatic swelling, sores, internal bleeding, along with lethal lung damage. Medieval doctors advised treatments such as bloodletting and medical compounds, and they urged the public to avoid contact with contaminated air and persons. Scholars have documented an expansive collection of medieval plague prophecies that predicted the plague's arrival, geographical spread, and alignment with other cataclysms and astrological predictions. These prophecies, which survive in written and visual accounts, widely identified the coming plague as Revelation's fourth horseman.

John Aberth's *The Black Death* boasts an expansive and varied collection of primary documentation of the plague. In Part I, Aberth summarizes the origins and spread of the pestilence along with the plague's historical context. Part II organizes documents into key categories: medical responses, the societal and economic impact, religious responses, the flagellant movement and anti-Jew pogroms provoked by the plague, and artistic responses. Aberth uses these categories to demonstrate the “extremely varied” effects of the Black Death, guiding readers through the complexities and breadth of plague chronicles, and allows us to draw comparisons between different medieval perspectives. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on medical and scientific responses, summarizing early debates regarding symptoms and transmission and also revealing how medical discourses espoused essentially religious views as well: “epidemic always proceeds from divine will,” and “God alone heals the sick.” Chapter 6 surveys Jewish pogroms and the flagellant movement. These radical responses to the Black Death emphasize that plague was deeply connected to the idea of imminent judgement, salvation for the elect, and the problem of human evil in medieval worldviews.

Robert E. Lerner's article titled “The Black Death and Western European Eschatological Mentalities” contrasts the different eschatologies operating in medieval plague prophecies. Chialism, which Lerner defines as “the expectation of imminent, supernaturally inspired, radical betterment on earth before the Last Judgment,” had two varieties: post-Antichrist and pre-Antichrist strains. Pre-Antichrist thought was a more popular form but lacked the biblicism of the post-Antichrist variety which espoused that the Kingdom on Earth would be established only after the Antichrist's arrival. He concludes that pre- and post-Antichrist chialisms were based on shared prophetic traditions and

redemptive outlooks, “designed to provide comfort” by promising otherworldly perfection and by presenting the Black Death in the coherent logic of divinely ordered history. Finally, Laura Smoller’s chapter from Last Things: Death and Apocalypse in the Middle Ages explores how plague writing presented the Black Death as both an “apocalyptic sign and a natural event.” While the plague was explained in terms of natural phenomena and was to be revealed according to signs such as earthquakes and other omens, Smoller examines these events in light of apocalyptic biblical prophecies of “rains of fire, hail, snakes and toads” and other symbols from the book of Revelation. In this chapter, Smoller analyzes how the causes, geography, and timing of the Black Death can only be understood in light of their eschatological significance as “key signs” indicating “the nearness of the apocalypse,” which grants plague writings their authority to “effect change.” Thus, Smoller reveals how eschatological narratives imbue current events with symbolic meaning in order to solidify their own internal logic, an important aspect of this legitimization entails the use of biblical imagery.

These sources touch on several themes that are integral to the study of apocalypticism. Firstly, redemptive views of the Black Death expand upon Adela Collins’s idea that apocalypse by definition offers catharsis by promising otherworldly perfection for the elect. Scholars of Christian apocalypticism such as Susan Harding discuss the problem of human action within premillennial dispensationalism, and as we have seen, Black Death scholarship often underscores this very tension between enduring current suffering, which is both fixed, divinely ordained, and impermanent, and interfering in present affairs. Smoller and Lerner investigate the role of prophetic authority within medieval eschatologies. Ultimately, these plague prophecies typify the contention that apocalypse entails revelation of hidden knowledge. The plague prophecies from the Black Death also bring to mind public health as an essentially prophetic discourse through its various claims to authority, and I will also consider this concept in light of historical and technological change as we turn to the U.S. AIDS crisis.

The U.S AIDS Epidemic

AIDS, or acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, refers to the advanced stage of the viral HIV infection, which is transmitted through sexual contact and progressively weakens the immune system, disrupting the body’s ability to fight off disease. This causes recurrent infections, fatigue, and eventually death. The advent of AIDS in the U.S. haunted both medical professionals and the American public. Homosexuals, drug users, low-income communities of color, and some countries in the global south were labeled as risk groups and targeted with the global spread of AIDS. In America, AIDS framed human sexuality as an essentially public problem; from public health standpoints, policing safe sex was the key to preventing transmission. Religious paradigms

interpreted illness in light of Christian notions of morality, sin, and evil, and stressed the imminence of America’s coming judgement, arguing that AIDS was God’s moral judgment on society, punishing the sin of homosexuality.22

Susan Sontag’s *AIDS and Its Metaphors* unpacks the tropes surrounding the virus. This highly influential work of critical theory argues that AIDS has been constructed through metaphoric thinking about the illness, medicine, and the body. Compared with cancer and other sexually transmitted infections, “AIDS marks a turning point in current attitudes towards illness and medicine,”23 explained by the images of catastrophe in “public discourse about AIDS.”24 Sontag examines certain military metaphors, which she claims are pervasive in our thinking on AIDS. This includes the “military campaigns”25 of public health and the infectious-agent tropes in virology models of AIDS. Chapters 5 and 6 examine plague metaphors in AIDS discourses. Rooted in a history of equating historical pestilence with moral culpability, the plague metaphor sees AIDS as a “punishment for, moral laxity.”26 Sontag insists that these naturalized metaphors “constitute unparalleled violence”27 and must be abandoned, as they stigmatize certain illnesses28 and “those who are ill.”29 Thus, AIDS is both a pivotal moment and historical continuity in our attitudes towards disease, demanding critical reflection upon modern conceptual understandings of illness in light of apocalypticism.

Peter Dickinson’s book chapter titled “Go-go Dancing on the Brink of the Apocalypse” in *Postmodern Apocalypse* explores apocalyptic AIDS discourses in their multiplicity. Analyzing influential statements from the 1970s and 1980s, Dickinson explores the implications of apocalyptic AIDS rhetoric in its representation of minority groups and specifies the “various modes of apocalypse at work in the discursive production of AIDS.”30 Discourses include biomedicine, the sensationalizing of AIDS in the media, queer activist campaigns and art, the right-wing political agenda, and abstract theorizing about AIDS. Equating evil with certain human categories, the prophetic authority of modern science, the theme of alienation, along with widespread anxiety characterize these AIDS apocalypticism(s). Finally he argues that, in its multiplicity, apocalyptic thinking “opens up spaces for . . . marginalized voices,” can serve “reactionary” agendas, or just “uphold the status-quo.”

AIDS apocalypticism in the U.S. touches on the idea of resistance offered by apocalyptic literature. The form of apocalypse is anti-imperial, promising a reversal of the current order for the disempowered. Dickinson allows for deep, critical engagement with this theme, emphasizing how apocalyptic rhetoric served both revolutionary and reactionary purposes. The AIDS epidemic also uncovers the implications of the “use” and “abuse” of apocalyptic rhetoric, suggesting connections to Tina Pippin’s investigation of gender and interpretive violence in Revelation31 by highlighting some enduring consequences of the gendered, sexual, and racial biases at play in AIDS discourses. Finally, the works of Sontag and Dickinson invite us to think about scientific knowledge and contemporary public health bodies in light of religious prophecy and eschatological systems, as both

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24 Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, 82.
26 Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, 57.
27 Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors*.
30 Dickinson, “Go-go Dancing on the Brink of the Apocalypse,” 221.
are rooted in the revelation of hidden truths and command oracular authority from their respective followers. The U.S. AIDS epidemic thus emphasizes how apocalypticism can be applied to analyze contemporary disease discourses and to assess their implications.

Pandemics in Apocalyptic Fiction and Plague Inc.

The final topic that I have selected to conclude our investigation of disease and apocalypticism is the pandemic-apocalypse narrative in science-fiction literature and popular culture. The examples I have selected focus on the representation of plague across sci-fi literature and in the mobile video game Plague Inc. The genre of scientific fiction encompasses a wide range of often dystopian, apocalyptic scenarios; popular scenes include zombies, nuclear destruction, and outer space. In pandemic fiction, plague is the final source of human annihilation. Many scholars have argued that this contemporary genre is colored by the pervasiveness of apocalyptic thinking about illness in our culture. This underscores the enduring relevance of disease as an object of study within apocalypticism and religious studies more broadly, as pandemics exist at this crucial intersection between cultural paradigms and illness.

In “The Plague of Utopias: Pestilence and the Apocalyptic Body,” 32 Elana Gomel presents a critical, literary analysis of what she terms the “contagious body” as constructed in the genre of post-apocalypse fiction. She explores the implications of these pestilence narratives on the contagious body, drawing connections across science-fiction novels such as The Plague by Robert Camus, Doomsday Book by Connie Willis, and Defoe’s A Journal of the Plague Year. Gomel argues that the “contagious body is the most characteristic modality of apocalyptic corporeality” and also the locus of political struggle in post-apocalyptic scenarios. Disease is also a uniquely ambivalent modality of representing the body in the end times because it simultaneously is a “technique of separating the damned from the saved” 33 while somehow insisting that everyone is a potential victim, thus also containing “counterapocalyptic potential.” 34 This article nods to the fact that the genre of pandemic fiction is ripe with contradictions and ambivalence due to the essential multivalence of apocalyptic dualism, underscoring similar ground that Peter Dickinson covers with respect to AIDS apocalypticism.

Pandemic video-game culture even allows the average cell-phone user to author their own pandemic apocalypse. These pandemic subcultures function similarly to eschatological beliefs as their narratives about the infectable body assert that the apocalypse event is imminent and can be predicted by gamers. Mitchell and Hamilton’s “Playing at Apocalypse: Reading Plague Inc. in Pandemic Culture” analyzes the video game Plague Inc., a popular mobile game that asks users to create a disease that will lead to human extinction. 35 Pandemic culture, represented in games, cinema, literature, and public anxiety surrounding disease, espouses a view of the body as a diseasable subject that is perpetually “vulnerable to disease.” 36 They argue that the act of playing Plague Inc. both reproduces and is shaped by the containment narratives of our time. According to Mitchell and Hamilton, plague narratives are inherently apocalyptic rather than redemptive because we see diseases as something to be “managed and endured rather than overcome.” 37 This reading connects

the pandemic narrative of *Plague Inc.* to broader tensions between science and apocalyptic discourse, underscoring the tensions between the grim prospects of pandemic culture and the “heroic” containment narratives of disease experts. These two pieces raise important questions about the human body in relation to the apocalypse. Across a range of apocalyptic traditions, views of the human body play a crucial role in the timing of eschatological systems and our perceived vulnerability to cataclysmic events. In pandemic culture, the body is seen as perpetually vulnerable to contagion. This view of the body is manifested in contagion narratives across pandemic culture in the form of perpetual and futile battles against infectious disease. These imagined narratives of contagion, infectability and the pandemic apocalypse connect with the idea that apocalyptic thinking is usually visualized in a specific timeline or called upon in periods of crisis. Finally, the concept of post-apocalypse as a distinct modality in contemporary apocalyptic culture, entailing a fixed or constant anticipation of the apocalypse, has also naturalized doomsday fears about disease. But, when these narratives become naturalized, we begin to accept imagined images as our reality; as a result, we confront actual pandemics with intensified anxieties.

**Conclusion**

Plagues reinforce the authority of eschatological timelines, and apocalypse in turn imbues disease with deeply symbolic meaning. When plagues have been a source of mass suffering and confusion, apocalypse has responded with a plan of action and a message of hope. As this literature suggests, apocalypticism is a particularly salient religious reaction to pandemic events because this genre offers a map to a better future, a route which can be reinterpreted in light of ever-changing contexts. From medieval plague prophecies to AIDS discourses and all the pandemic fiction in between, we have seen how the conflation of plague with public morality, military metaphors, us vs. them dualism, and the idea of imminent salvation in responses to disease are vestiges of the Christian apocalyptic tradition. And, while these case studies explore the apocalyptic responses to disease in specific historical moments and religious worldviews, they also gesture towards larger patterns in the ways that human civilizations have historically interacted with global pandemics.

The Black Death explores the apocalyptic response to disease in light of medieval Christian eschatologies, reinforcing the idea that disease is intimately connected with the imminence of end times in apocalyptic traditions. Various plague prophecies were thought to predict the coming of the pestilence, while the flagellant movement and anti-Jew polemics hastened by the plague underscore how acute experience of crisis spawned enemy scapegoating and spiritual preparation for imminent judgment. The AIDS crisis also mobilized its own apocalyptic themes and rhetoric. These were typified by U.S. public health discourse on AIDS, queer resistance rhetoric, the Evangelical paradigm, and the media. These discourses also have the potential to stigmatize certain populations, while presenting some compelling similarities between prophecy and scientific authority. Finally, in popular culture and apocalyptic fiction, the pandemic narrative has been a common modality of the apocalypse in our imaginative history, where apocalyptic beliefs are (re)produced in secular eschatologies both past, present, and future.

Not only do these cases explore concepts that are central to the study of apocalypticism, the material I have presented ultimately demonstrates how religious studies can be a useful tool to analyze the enduring concerns of humankind. That novel outbreaks and global spreads of disease continue to evoke apocalyptic, end-times terror suggests that the apocalypse, as a rhetorical form, fictional genre, eschatology, and assertion of an imminent end, is ever-present in the modern world.

Bibliography


God in the Gold Coast: Traditional Leadership in Ghana Respond to COVID-19

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Ghana is known as one of the most pleasing, serene countries belonging to the African continent. It was just last year that the country launched its prosperous Year of Return 2019 Initiative, which commemorated the Africans who were kidnapped from their homeland during the transatlantic slave trade. The initiative was incredibly successful, pumping 1.9 billion into Ghana’s economy. However, after such a triumphant year, Ghana faces a devasting blow from the Covid-19 pandemic. With many poor and vulnerable groups without clean water and proper sanitation, protection against the virus and the implementation of social distancing has become a towering challenge. However, as Ghanaian President Nana Akufo-Addo continues pushing safety guidelines to protect citizens, others have appealed to traditional leaders and priests to aid in the fight against Covid-19. It may come as a surprise that so many would rely on local traditional leaders who typically have no formal political positions in government whatsoever. Yet, a survey conducted by Afrobarometer, a pan-African research institution, revealed that 41% percent of Ghanaian people place their trust in the government, while 55% percent place their trust in traditional leaders. This is because of the longstanding presence of traditional leadership that predates any structured government in Ghana. The influence of traditional leaders is ingrained into the DNA of Ghana’s culture.

Flagbearer hopeful of the People’s National Convention (PNC), Asaki Awingobit, advocated for the need of traditional leadership during the pandemic stating, “With the role that traditional leaders, queen mothers, priests, and priestesses play in our national discourse, I believe their prayers and ideas are much needed in times like this.”

Traditional leaders have already begun to respond boldly to the rapid spread of Covid-19. In the town of Aflao, located along the southeastern border of Ghana and Togo, the traditional priest of the area performed rituals to expel the “evil spirits” believed to be responsible for Covid-19. The priests of Aflao offered an animal sacrifice to the town’s sacred deity “dulegba” to prevent the virus from entering the area and cleanse Ghana of the impurities, which had invited the disease. In the Ada Foah area located in the Greater Accra Region, the traditional priest declared ‘spiritual war’ against Covid-19. According to the priests, the deities belonging to the area have demanded the

closure of the entire Ada Township for special traditional rites to be performed in hopes to block the virus from entering the community.\(^4\)

These immemorial customs maintained by traditional leaders and priests have occurred for hundreds of years, well before the country had orthodox medicine and hospitals. While Ghana competes to obtain adequate resources for its citizens, many Ghanaians remain invested in the sacral beliefs and practices of their forefathers. The response to the spread and severity of Covid-19 by traditional leaders invites policy makers to examine the effectiveness of traditional leaders and their ideas as a primary resource in the fight against the virus.

In countries like the United States, it is believed that separation between church and state is obligatory. Yet Ghana reveals how state and spiritual institutions are contingent upon each other, especially in the midst of a global crisis. Because traditional leaders hold such magnifying influence within local villages, policymakers must find ways to place these leaders at the forefront of the Covid-19 battle. Besides spiritual practices performed in the wake of the pandemic, traditional leaders need to be properly educated on the safety guidelines necessary to protect their communities. Policymakers should respect the tribal responses to the virus and find ways to mobilize with traditional leaders on the grounds of sustaining the lives of fellow Ghanaians. The government must include traditional leaders in forthcoming decisions regarding the health of its people, given the relationship that the leaders have with the community.

This is not the easiest task, to say the least, as conflict between existing tribes and tension between tribes and the government is certainly a palpable issue. However, the fate of all Ghanaian lives is at stake, and this must be realized. A unified fight against the virus just may spark the rise of true harmony between traditional leaders, the Ghanaian government, and the Ghanaian people. If proper education on Covid-19 and adequate resources provided by the government are given to traditional leaders, Ghana could strengthen their fight against the virus. At the same time, traditional leaders must also be willing to work with the government as well as each other to fight the disease. Without the two bodies working together, Ghanaians, especially in rural areas, may suffer terribly.


Making Meaning in a Pandemic: An Interview with Reverend Andy Pakula

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COVID-19 has forced religious and spiritual communities across the world to move their services and spaces of worship into the digital sphere. Already, some of the most important holidays in the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim calendars such as Passover, Easter Sunday, and the beginning of Ramadan have been observed over Zoom and other video conferencing platforms.

The familial and communal bonds that are traditionally recognized around the Seder meal, Easter lunch, and iftars once a year have now become key features of how many individuals are maintaining their spiritual, emotional, and mental well-being during the pandemic. However, in this time of social isolation, religious communities are not the only ones exploring connectivity and the questions of life online. The disruption of the daily rhythm and routine brought by COVID-19 has led many individuals and communities to reassess their needs and motivations and focus less on material things. Questions of what the world to come will look like are no longer reserved for scholars of eschatology but are the anxieties occupying the minds of everyone concerned about what life on earth will look like environmentally, economically, and ethically once the pandemic ends.

Religious services and religious traditions passed down through generations face new challenges as communities ponder these questions in physical, spiritual, and now virtual spaces. However, this raises the question: How can individuals shape the world around them? How can they build community with little to no physical contact?

New Unity is a self-described non-religious church and one of England’s oldest Unitarian churches. The product of a twenty-first century merger between two long-lived congregations, its roots date back to the seventeenth century English Dissenters. One of its most notable congregants was the advocate for women’s rights, Mary Wollstonecraft. Although still under the umbrella of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches in the United Kingdom, New Unity continues its tradition of radicalism by sitting on what it describes as the “far fringe of the Unitarian spectrum” in the U.K., as a “radically inclusive community of love and justice,” loosely based on the best teaching and practices of Unitarian Universalism. New Unity is also one of the founding institutions of the Newington Green Alliance (NGA), which aims to improve life in Newington Green, Islington, and Hackney in the Greater London area by helping people to develop strong community relationships. NGA’s first public meeting took place in February 2020, just one month before the U.K. went into lockdown. As Sunday gatherings move online, I spoke with Reverend Andy Pakula, the current minister at New Unity, via email about community building, community resilience, and the role of non-religious spaces in making meaning in a pandemic.

As a non-religious church, what role does New Unity usually play in its community?

**Andy Pakula:** New Unity has evolved considerably while I’ve been minister. My predecessor got very involved personally in anti-war efforts when the U.K. was considering becoming involved in the U.S. war against Iraq. This provided some sense of New Unity as an activist, left-leaning institution and attracted people with similar perspectives.

Early in my ministry, when we were still quite a small congregation, we took a strong stance in support of same-sex marriage rights. This further built our activist-left role. A week-long celebration of Mary Wollstonecraft’s 300th birthday further extended that image.

Some very clear demonstrations that we are non-religious further erased the image of New Unity as religious ‘do-gooders’ to even more of a positively subversive force.

As we grew larger, we became more involved in the community through community organizing, support of local charities, and our Unity Project (since spun off as a separate charity), which provides legal support to indigent migrants with no recourse to public funds (NRPF). Increasing connection in the community through our leadership in Newington Green Alliance and our heritage programs supported by a National Lottery Heritage Fund grant have enhanced this image.

So, our role has been as well thought of. We are a left-leaning activist organization and a curiosity as a non-religious church that takes good positions and works collaboratively and in relatively small ways to benefit its members and the larger community.

And how has this role changed in the midst of COVID-19?

**AP:** Thus far, we have assisted others as volunteers and through communications channels built up by the Newington Green Alliance, and increasingly, as a voice of hope and possibility in the crisis. Our plans, however, extend further, including: direct support of a young people group and one-to-one interactions, one-to-one support of adults, community building, and addressing the now-critical challenge of digital exclusion.

What role do you believe a non-religious church has in the spiritual life of its congregants?

**AP:** If by ‘spiritual’ we mean the ability to focus on, live into, and act upon the most truly important and meaningful aspects of life, then New Unity has a huge role to play. Community connection, mutuality, inspiration, love, and action are available at New Unity. These change people’s lives, as I have heard them testify to again and again.

Do you personally believe that this pandemic has led to a greater sense of community cohesion and search for meaning or identity? Has this pandemic helped build the resilience of communities?

**AP:** Yes and yes. I think this has been evidenced in many ways. The challenge will be to sustain and build on these promising signs of change in the face of more widespread economic pain and social disruption. I hope that we (New Unity and the Newington Green Alliance) will be able to play a big role in sustaining and growing these impulses in the months and years to come.
And finally, I know that one of your favorite quotes is from Professor Cornel West, “Justice is what love looks like in public.” What role do you believe spiritual, non-religious, and religious communities have in ensuring this justice in a post-pandemic world? What responsibility do you see New Unity having?

AP: NU certainly stands in many ways in opposition to the status quo. It has a strong emphasis on addressing social problems and injustice, which are more visible than ever in this time of crisis.

Plenty of organizations and powers speak out for justice. Those voices are important, and we need to join in and amplify those impulses. But what is too often lacking is the love part. I have a sense that love and justice are inextricably tied. Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke eloquently about this. Love is the only way to drive out hate, and it is an essential aspect of building a just world!
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Adriana Kransiansky is a Ukrainian-American from Cleveland, Ohio pursuing her M.T.S. at Harvard Divinity School. Prior to her enrollment, Adriana worked in the technology industry, helping companies develop new digital tools and platforms. At HDS, Adriana studies how technology can be reconfigured as a tool for health, social justice, equity, and community service—and how institutions such as faith communities, mutual aid networks, and nonprofit groups can use technology to amplify their efforts.

Nadia Milad Issa identifies as a First-Generation Afro-Dominicanx and Lebanese, Queer Artist-Academic. They earned their BA from Hampshire College in an individualized major in Dance, African(a) Studies, and Anthropology. Nadia is a Master of Theological Studies degree candidate in the Religions of the Americas concentration at Harvard Divinity School starting Fall Semester of 2020. Their ethnographic and dance-focused research is on Spiritual Reparations in the Regla de Ocha-Ifá spiritual-religious tradition. Nadia spent over three years in Cuba and México pursuing fieldwork and dance study for their continued project titled, *To’ Iban Echu: Spiritual Reparations in Regla de Ocha-Ifá and other Black Caribbean Diasporic Traditions*, an Auto-Ethnography expanding Reparation politics and making their case for Spiritual Reparations. They are an Iyalochá (initiated priestess) in the Regla de Ocha-Ifá practice.
**Dani Rader** is a junior Religion major and South Asian Studies minor at Carleton College. Her research interests include women's and gender studies, the anthropology of reproduction, post-colonial theory, and faith-based activism. Dani is an abortion doula and advocate, a Writing Assistant at the Carleton College Writing Center, and is captain of the Women's Club Lacrosse team.

**Jade Sylvan** is a bag of mostly water and feelings who has written things in many genres to varying degrees of success, including a novelized memoir, *Kissing Oscar Wilde*, and a respectable amount of poetry. *Beloved King* is their second full-length musical. They're currently a candidate for ordination in the Unitarian Universalist Church, and will serve as intern minister at First Parish Concord for the 2020–21 year. They live in Cambridge with their wife and dachshund.

**Vivian Trutzl** is a poet from mid-Michigan. She's studying Religion, Ethics, and Politics at Harvard Divinity School. Her work has appeared in *Passages North*, *Leaping Clear*, *Silver Needle Press*, and elsewhere.

**Kevin Weaver** is a graduate of the University of Southern California and a postgraduate at Stanford University. His research on higher education law was recently published by the American Educational Research Association. He is involved with several education-based initiatives, including HDS's Religious Literacy Institute for Educators and the Southeastern Higher Education Policy program.

**Joe Welker** is a podcaster, storyteller, and recovering standup comic discerning ordained ministry. He is a member of the United Church of Christ and hosts the podcast *Choose Your Own Religion* on interfaith spirituality.