ALPHA, OMEGA, AND THE LETTERS IN BETWEEN:

LGBTQI Conservative Christians Undoing Gender

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Sociologists studying gender have debated West and Zimmerman's premise that "doing gender is unavoidable," seeking to ascertain whether people can "undo" or only "redo" gender. While sociologists have been correct to focus on the interactional accomplishment of gender, they have neglected one of Garfinkel's key insights about interaction: that people hold each other accountable to particular narratives. Neglecting the narrative aspect of doing—and undoing—gender impedes our ability to recognize processes of social change. Based on a qualitative study, we show how the movement for LGBTQI acceptance within U.S. conservative Protestant churches works to make gender not "omnirelevant" by challenging conservative "complementarity" narratives that posit two complementary, opposite sexes as a commandment preceding the Ten Commandments in time and impor

mandate. The efforts of LGBTQI conservative Christians exemplify how reshaping sex/gender/sexual narratives can create possibilities for undoing gender.

A movement of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI) and allied conservative Christians is working toward more inclusive evangelical and fundamentalist churches. Examining this movement, we show how their efforts help clarify the crucial role narratives play in interactional processes of "doing gender"—and undoing it

and law, must stop institutionally categorizing people by gender. Connell (2010) and Pfeffer (2014) showed how transpeople and their romantic partners disrupt gendered assumptions in interactions. Risman (2009) argued we might call it "undoing" gender when people challenge "the essentialism of binary distinctions . . . based on sex category" (83). She argued that "a just world would be one where sex category matters not at all beyond reproduction" (84). West and Zimmerman (2009), however, saw her exception as proof there is no way out of doing gender, and the best we can hope is to "redo" it, causing a "shift in accountability" (117-18 [emphasis in original]).

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

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

Ethnomethodology posits that social life depends on people holding each other accountable to behave in all sorts of ways we consider to be good, civil, and right. The questions are what we hold each other accountable to, and to what extent these narratives promote inequality within and between groups. Focusing on the narratives to which people hold each other accountable helps us theorize and identify liberatory moves in social life. Specifically, inequalities will persist if people do

not change the narratives that legitimate it, and to which people hold each other accountable in interactions.

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

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

This conservative Christian LGBTQI movement has two main parts, which participants call Side A and Side B (originally to avoid value judgments). While Side B advocates celibacy for gay and lesbian Christians, we focus here on the much larger part, Side A, whose advocates believe same-sex marriage is compatible with Christianity. As they work to communicate their experiences, they (sometimes inadvertently) refute the claim that sex category is "omnirelevant" to the Creator (West and Zimmerman 1987, 136). They maintain that Christians should treat sex/gender/sexual binaries not as God's intention for Creation but as some of the many spectra God created and calls good. They insist that Christians

We utilize this case to examine how people shift sex/gender/sexual

To this end, Sumerau was brought into the project to help with analyses and theorization.

The organizations include: The Marin Foundation, which fosters reconciliation and discussion between conservative heterosexual/cisgender Christians and LGBT people and apologizes for harm caused by the church; the Center for Inclusivity,[5] an affirming organization founded by two evangelical Christians to create "a place of peace at the intersection of faith and sexuality"; The Reformation Project, a national organization founded to equip conservative Christians to lead churches to affirm LGBT identities, same-sex marriage, and alternative gender expressions; and the Gay Christian Network (now Q Christian Fellowship), the oldest of these, an organization fostering online chats, local meetups, and an annual national conference to support LGBTQIA Christians. In different ways, each organization has tried, with varying levels of success, to acknowledge diverse experiences of gender, race, sexuality, and religion.

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

In line with much of U.S. evangelical culture, this movement grows by sharing its message and fostering leadership among members, so there is not a clear separation between the perspectives of "leaders" and "followers." For example, we witnessed newcomers grow to be workshop leaders, board members, and authors. The Reformation Project explicitly trained people to make the scriptural case for same-sex marriage in their daily lives, and Gay Christian Network provided instructions for members to ask others for help reconciling faith and sexuality or navigating relationships with Christians who did not affirm them. We saw participants routinely refer each other to the books discussed here, referring even to national leaders by first name, as in, "I actually found Justin's book more helpful on this." We saw workshops led by relative newcomers, eager to share their stories and help others. We cite mostly published authors, workshop leaders, and keynote speakers because they stated most succinctly what other participants routinely relayed to us and each other. As such, we highlight the narrative revision occurring throughout the movement with examples that illustrate participants' regular framings.[6]

GENDER ACCOUNTABILITY   IN CONSERVATIVE
CHRISTIANITY

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

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

Adjusting to the historical moment where the economy no longer mandates binary sex/gender/sexuality and marriage (D'Emilio and Freedman 1988), conservative Protestants bolstered binary sex/gender/sexual narratives with the doctrine of complementarity. Complementarity guides proponents to interpret Scripture to define sex/gender/sexual binaries as a commandment from God, preceding the Ten Commandments in time and importance. It posits God created male and female as incomplete opposites—with different roles in reproduction, and possibly different

Starting in the late 1970s, political conservatives in alliance with the Religious Right staged political attacks on feminism's and the lesbian/gay movement's supposed assaults on complementarity (Dowland 2015). As the Religious Right rose in the 1980s, it attacked people with AIDS and same-sex parents. By the mid-1990s, the lesbian/gay movement responded to these attacks by holding gays and lesbians accountable to a comple-mentarity-based sex/gender/sexual narrative focused on access to monog-amous marriage, religion, and military participation (Fetner 2008; Mathers, Sumerau, and Cragun 2018). At the same time, unthreatening images of white middle-class gays and lesbians began to appear in mass media: in advertisements, on the cover of Newsweek, and eventually as major char acters on television programs like Ellen and Will and Grace.

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

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

HOMONORMATIVITY   AND THE LGBTQI EV ANGELICAL MOVEMENT

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

By disrupting sex/gender/sexual narratives, homonormativity made it possible for some conservative Christians whose sex was not assigned correctly at birth, or who found themselves attracted to people of the same or multiple sexes, to understand themselves as LGBTQI Christians, to reframe their situation as being not monsters hated by God but God's children toward whom others were mistakenly hostile. Movement par tici IaytRkn 11Tj EMC 8exeparTHE0en 22cdmm h1refra27mkople osTj ituat

from being gay. The Gay Christian Network's founder, Justin Lee (2012), wrote of having been called "God Boy" in high school because of his emphatic Southern Baptist convictions. The Reformation Project's founder, Matthew Vines, does not speak for everyone in this movement, but his high visibility and respect among conservative Christian leaders is undoubtedly facilitated by his support for abstinence until marriage, with complicated effects. This view diminishes the potential for resistance to marriage and mononormativity (Moss 2012), but it also helps conservative Christians to identify as LGBTQI, and cisgender/heterosexual churchmates to see them as fellow Christians. We next show how LGBTQI conservative Christians utilize this complicated social location to further create space for more inclusive notions of sex/gender/sexuality.

EXPANDING THE SCOPE OF RESISTANCE

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

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

Denaturalizing Complementarity

For decades, some theologians have argued the Bible cannot be understood apart from the contexts where it was written, so the passages that seem to prohibit "homosexuality" cannot be understood to

one became two and became ish (man) and ishshah (woman). For instance, in the YouTube series Trans and Christian, white, bisexual, trans Hebrew Bible scholar Austen Hartke (2015a) said:

> This word adam is very close to the Hebrew word adamah which means earth or ground. So basically, this first person is named "Thing Made Out of Ground," or "Earth Creature," or "Human." The . . . original human is androgynous, it's genderless, it's sexless, it's just adam, it's a human, made out of ground and breathed into with the spirit of God. In fact, lots of people have seen adam or, "Adam," as a great example of a gender-neutral-or inter sex person in the Bible. And the cool thing about it is that God is totally fine with it. God loves this first human so much that God surrounds them with animals and tries to find some partner for them, simply because, "It is not good for the human to be alone." God isn't concerned about Adam's gender or sex; God is concerned with Adam's need for love and community.

Likewise, at The Reformation Project's 2017 conference, a transgender, Catholic, Mexican-American theater artist led a workshop called "God Created aw-dawm' in Their Image." After distinguishing the original human adam from ish and ishshaa, who appear later in Genesis, he split the audience into two, and had one group observe while others were instructed to mill about slowly without falling into a circle. He instructed participants to "walk like a man," "walk like a woman," and finally, "walk like adam." The spectators observed that walking like a man or like a woman inspired more self-consciousness and exaggeration; people seemed uncomfortable and had difficulty not walking in a circular pattern. When walking as adam, they looked more comfortable and were able to walk in a less rote, follow-the-leaderish pattern. In West and Zimmerman's (1987, 2009) conceptualization, the first two iterations held them accountable to acting out the narratives for men and women. The third provided no such narrative, holding them accountable only not to form a ring or crash. The lesson was that not being held accountable to a specific sex/gender/sexuality narrative frees people to wander, able to feel loved and accepted just as they are. Through(The sppteTat Go les; poeriss obst nsa man becausted j

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

One of the most frequently cited passages in this movement appears in Galatians (3:28): "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free,

remarked, "The joke among those of us who are preachers is that nobody ever remembers our [scriptural] exposition, they remember the stories. It's the stories that change the world" (Gushee, Robinson, and Vines 2015). Similarly, a workshop leader encouraged those who could safely stay in nonaffirming churches to be active in them, saying "Let them see your love for the Lord."

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

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

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

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

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

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

This movement trained those who joined it to distinguish socially constructed sex/gender/sexual and racial narratives from God's eternal truth. As they did so, they diminished the stakes of accountability in conservative Christian communities. Now, instead of thinking God holds people accountable to racialized binary sex/gender/sexual narratives with their eternal souls at stake, they create space for conservative Christians to understand accountability narratives as malleable creations of fallible humans.

CONCLUSION

culture, and if we, his heirs, lose sight of the particularity of those narratives—if we take them for granted—we risk perpetuating the very inequalities we seek to undo.

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

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

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

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

in this article, they transform interactions, the norms people internalize,

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