Introduction

Numerous ethicists and theologians associated with non-dominant communities and identity markers question the ways in which identity is often deployed in the service of liberative efforts. As we understand identities to be shaped within a socio-cultural matrix that is heteropatriarchal, ableist, and white supremacist, they ask what benefit our use of those identity categories serve when they were invented for the purpose of economic and political exploitation. Queer theory is at the forefront, interrogating the binaries and concomitant impulse toward classification, division, and valuation typical of Western thought and foundational to constructed identity categories. Queer theology joins an expanding discourse working to more radically challenge these accepted categories—feminist, Crip, Asian American, and Black liberation theologians and ethicists among them. J. Kameron Carter, for example, argues that blackness is a category created by whiteness, and so he proposes exiting these categories altogether as we forge new identities through the covenant into which we are grafted through the Jewish flesh of Jesus (Carter 2008). Jonathan Tran challenges the preoccupation with identity in much antiracist work, which he says reinforces racialization by drawing from the categories of racial identity that were originally determined by white supremacy, which also explains its inability to adequately account for race outside the white/black binary (Tran 2022). And Sharon Betcher utilizes Crip Theory to develop a theological anthropology that resists static identity categories designed by an ableist culture and proposes “fluidity of selfhood” that includes our embodiment in our ongoing journey of becoming (Betcher 2016, p. 102).

This emphasis on the role of embodiment—exemplified in the Crip theology of Betcher—is another commonly shared feature in theological work from historically marginalized communities, including queer theology. Those whose bodies are scrutinized, surveilled, devalued, and targeted for violence, have contributed most significantly to contemporary understandings of the role our bodies have in the formation of our identities. Of course, the Christian tradition has long insisted that our bodies are integral to our personhood, so much so that resurrected life includes our bodies, and our souls cannot be perfected without them. The continuity of the body granted assurance for a continuity of identity in the ancient church. Jesus kept his body, so we are assured he was truly himself in his resurrection appearances. But how do we account for identities forged within a sociocultural matrix that rewards and punishes based on one’s particular embodiment, identities shaped at least in part by social pressures and norms that cast persons against structures of power that bruise or embrace, depending
on one’s body, affect, gait, or embodied performance? To what extent are our bodies given meaning, informing our identity-shaping experiences, by the forces of heteropatriarchal, ableist white supremacy? And what do we make of these body identities as they are understood to persist eternally through the resurrection?

In what follows, I will consider what Jesus’ resurrected body has meant in queer theology for our understanding of resurrected embodiment and what the model of his embodiment may mean for our eschatological future with God. Notions from queer and trans theory wrest Christian discourse away from inherited normativities, valuations of embodiments, and fixed identities. A queer eschatology will not abide a static embodiment or identity but will advance an openness, a fluidity of being, that resists fixity and closure. Drawing from the work of the theological ethicist, Robyn Henderson-Espinoza, I will argue for a resurrected life of becoming that includes the ongoing unfolding of being, not only as the ever increasing “perfection” of the soul, but an ongoing movement of the body in the eternal journey into God.

**Jesus’ Queer Resurrected Body**

Jesus’ resurrected body, which grounds Christian affirmation of an embodied resurrected life, has proven a fruitful site for some queer theologies. In particular, the witness of the Gospel of John, in which Jesus not only has pierced hands and feet, but retains a gash in his side, has inspired the theological and spiritual imaginations of many. We see this, for example, in the work of gay theologian Robert Goss, who describes Christ thus as one “penetrated by a Roman centurion” (Goss 2002, p. 138). Christ is the God-man to whom the gay man can relate, much as people of oppressed identities have long identified with Christ as one in solidarity with them, as one of the marginalized. Here for Goss and other gay Christians, Christ may be viewed as “a bottom violating the masculine code of penetration and phallic domination” (Goss 2002, p. 138). Goss thus illuminates the complicated entanglement of the homoerotic and spiritual longing of gay Christians who are drawn to such images of Christ.

Others identify the side-wound of Christ as distinctively female. Church historians, for example, offer an abundance of examples in literature and art which feminize the pierced body of Christ through figuring the side wound both as a vulva and as a nurturing breast at which the mystic suckles (See Bynum 1982, 1992). Thus, some suggest the devotion of women mystics to the side wound demonstrates a homoerotic longing, while that of the male mystics exhibits a hetero-attraction, all complicated, of course, by the male genitals presumed of one circumcised according to Jewish tradition in the book of Luke (Lochrie 1997, pp. 190–191). Still others, taking this into account, consider the resurrected body of Christ, as both male and female, to be a queer body. Historian Amy Hollywood examines this queering of devotion, saying “when women mystics write about eagerly kissing the sacred wound, then, their relationship with Christ is queered, for the body they desire and with which they identify is both male and female” (Hollywood 2007, p. 163).

Offering one of the most extended considerations of what the resurrected body of Christ may mean theologically in terms of the sexed nature of human bodies, Graham Ward similarly describes the embodiment of Christ after the resurrection as one that, though not initially defying the sex binary altogether, assumes a form that is both male and female. Of particular importance to Ward’s account is the feminization of the side wound of Jesus in his reading of John, taking inspiration from Caravaggio’s painting of doubting Thomas, *The Incredulity of St. Thomas* (1601–1602), a painting that imagines
not only Jesus offering up his wounds to Thomas but depicts Thomas opening the wound with his finger as if “parting vaginal lips” (Ward 2007, p. 81). Ward emphasizes Jesus’ command of Thomas to “penetrate (phero)” and “thrust (balo) himself into the body of Christ,” making the sexual connotations all the more explicit (2007, p. 78).

Ward is in good company eliciting the sexed and potentially sexual nature of the side wound that remains in Jesus’ resurrected form. Medieval mystics who devoted themselves to the side wound also saw that opening as a place of intimacy through which they could enter Jesus’ body. Through her confessor and biographer, Catherine of Siena recounts “putting on the nuptial garment,” and says that Christ “put his right hand on her neck and drew her towards the wound on his side. ‘Drink, daughter…’. She fastened her lips upon that sacred wound” (Quoted by Bynum 1987, p. 172). And she likewise urged her confessor to make Christ’s wound his “home.” Angela of Foligno also describes her soul’s ecstatic entry into Christ’s side wound, where she “walks … with delight” (Cited in Bynum 1992, p. 194).

Amy Hollywood explains, “Instructed in religious literature to taste, touch, suck, kiss, and enter into Christ’s side wound, those who saw and held these images seem to have made them the object of intense affective response, both imaginatively and physically” (Hollywood 2004, p. 113). In fact, the evidence of this devotion is worn into the artworks themselves, with the ink of the vulvic rendering of the wound rubbed away, or as Hollywood puts it, “some manuscripts represent the side wound solely with a slit in the parchment” which has been “so often touched, handled, and kissed as to render the manuscript itself fragile, worn, and opaque” (Hollywood 2004, p. 117). Based on this evidence, one may conclude that “these images and physical remnants suggest a homoerotic relationship between the female reader and a feminized representation of Christ’s wound” (Hollywood 2004, p. 117).

For Ward, however, the wound in Christ’s side is not only feminized through the sexualized probing touch of Thomas, but the wound also becomes the birth canal through which Christ gives life to the church. Here Ward interprets the rush of water and blood from the gash in Jesus’ side (John 19:34) as symbolic within John’s gospel “of the vaginal opening through which the community of Christ’s body is born” (Ward 2005, p. 78). Ward is not alone in this association with Jesus’ issue of fluids; medieval art, even further, depicts Christ both as birthing mother and his own midwife, presenting the resurrected Christ pulling a person out of the side wound of the crucified Christ (Bynum 1992, p. 99). In response to Ward’s account queer theologian Linn Tonstad writes,

Christ then outdoes Mary by birthing the church from his side without external divine insemination, while remaining the head of the church as man is the head of woman. Masculinity, interrupted by femininity, takes femininity into itself, outdoes it, and subordinates it.

(Tonstad 2016, p. 67)

According to Ward, following the resurrection, Jesus’ body bears “the marks in his flesh of both the male and female sex—without his being androgynous” (Ward 2005, p. 150). He thus asserts that Jesus is resurrected “as a hermaphrodite” (Ward 2007, p. 78). Thus, Ward describes a resurrected Jesus who is both male and female based upon the presumed visibly discernable male and female genitalia on his resurrected body. From this perspective Ward’s proposal, though startling, does not break with heteronormative binaries that queer and feminist theologies reject. On Ward’s account, the female
is identified with Jesus because of vaginal lips that Thomas can probe with his finger, which perhaps isn’t any more radical than the medieval devotional literature that feminized Jesus through his side-wound figured as a nurturing breast or vagina which births the church, neither of which, strictly speaking, challenge heteropatriarchal associations with femininity: birthing and nurturing. Jesus is female because of his penetrability, which likewise ignores readings like that of Goss, which credits penetrability as a human capacity, not exclusive to female embodiment and sexuality. Ward’s hermaphroditic rendering also fails in its strict identification of gender and sex with visible and classifiable genitals, which queer theory and queer experience reject.

Linn Tonstad, though appreciative of Ward’s intention, is highly critical of his adoption of the womb-wound in his attempt to construct a theology inclusive of queer bodies. Following Irigaray, Tonstad rejects images of the wound as a womb as beneficial for women; Christ feminized through his wounding and suffering perpetuates heteropatriarchal patterns of abuse and reinscribes the ubiquitous symbolics of female penetrable receptivity and male phallic agency. Further, Tonstad takes issue not only with the explicit association of women with receptivity and wounding but also with all theologies that make virtuous one’s retraction of oneself for the sake of the other. Such forms of self-emptying are often associated with kenotic Christologies, which Tonstad rejects, but can also be seen in proposals like Moltmann’s account of God’s zimzum, by which God must retract Godself in order to make space for God’s creation to exist. We see it also in Ward’s description of the ascension: “The withdrawal of the body of Jesus must be understood in terms of the Logos creating a space within himself, a womb, within which (en Christo) the church will expand and creation be recreated” (Ward 1999, p. 176). Here model relationships require one to retract to make room for the other, or for one to have room within oneself for the penetrating presence of the other.

Though Ward certainly does not ignore the extension of Jesus’ body into non-gendered (bread and wine) and multigendered forms (the corporate church), his account requires a withdrawal that Tonstad identifies with the heterologics behind the feminine womb as a space for the other (penetrating phallus). Instead for Tonstad, Jesus’ body as bread and church demonstrates the colocality of his body with other bodies: not only is his body changed—unrecognizable one minute, passing through locked doors, disappearing from sight, transported to various locations—but more importantly for Tonstad:

His body no longer competes with other bodies for the same place at the same time without crashing into each other or shattering each other, yet his body has not become ethereal or vaporous—he eats and drinks, he can be touched.

(Tonstad 2016, p. 243)

Jesus is still materially embodied, but his body does not exclude other bodies from that same space, nor does his presence require the withdrawal or retraction of other bodies. Drawing from the resurrected Christ embodied in bread and church, Tonstad rejects the compulsory retraction of self found in much theology, and develops an image of eschatological life built from abundance. There is room; all are at the table, coming alongside one another and not displacing each other. Thus, we don’t need to figure Jesus’ resurrected body as both male and female in order to figure resurrected life as space for all. Instead, the resurrected body reveals abundance of room at the banquet table to come alongside one another in close and intimate contact, without a submissive recipient of the other’s imposing presence. This leads to Tonstad’s suggestion that the
clitoris is a more fitting metaphor, as it signals surface touch and stands outside of the phallic-penetrative frame of reproductive heterologics.

Tonstad is surely inspired by what Judith Butler calls Irigaray’s “rigorous anti-penetrative eros of surfaces” (Butler 1993, p. 19). Tonstad explains,

> Clitoral pleasure becomes a sign of resurrection. The figure of the clitoris represents the nonbounded self that resurrection promises to transform without destroying. … The uselessness of the clitoris in reproduction signals the possibility of nonreproductive sexuality beyond the pleasures of submission, penetration, and (self-)shattering. The clitoris symbolizes the economy of surface touch in which intensification and copresence permit ever-greater intimacy between those who remain different in their particularity

(Tonstad 2016, pp. 275–276)

Her critique of the heteropatriarchal legacy in theology is stunning, and her offer of the clitoris as an alternative signifier of proper relations certainly pushes the imagination away from the stranglehold of heteropatriarchal thinking, but its rejection of all receptivity (or penetrability) has other consequences and leaves her vulnerable to the critique Butler levies against Irigaray as she “forecloses the possibility of female-to-female [female-to-male, and male-to-male] penetrative and interpenetrative eroticism” (Hollywood 2004, p.120; See Butler 1993, pp. 50–51). Penetration is always figured as male and penetrability as female, staying within a heterosexual matrix that never shakes the stability of the assumed and assigned gendered positions. Additionally, her rejection of receptivity as an eschatological value disallows a future of interdependence, of interpenetrability, and receptivity of giving and receiving in resurrected life, which not only has potential implications for the appraisal of sexuality but also other forms of embodiment and care.2

**Apocalyptic Eschatology**

Tonstad’s refusal of the side-wound as womb is also a rejection of the reproductive logic of straight-time, associated with the specific chronology of heteronormative adult life: one gets married to someone of the opposite sex, has children within the respectable time frame, and in the raising of those children adopts the early to bed, early to rise schedule deemed appropriate for family life. One then works to accumulate an inheritance for one’s progeny to continue the patrilinear legacy for generations to come. Queerness defies the compulsion to reproduce vertically (descendants), but expands relationships horizontally, in the present.

On some accounts, Jesus “might be said to inhabit queer time,” as his life described in the gospels was “apparently unscripted by the ancient Mediterranean institutions of marriage, biological progeny, conventional labor, or material inheritance” (Moore, Brintnall, and Marchall 2018, p. 13). Further, Jesus presents resurrected life outside of this heteronormative framing of our bodies with his declaration that there will be no marriage or giving in marriage (Matthew 22), and his own identification as a eunuch for the kingdom of God (Matthew 19), both placing himself among the sexual minorities of his day and signaling a different logic to the reign of God—one outside of the teleologies of straightness. If our embodiment is not directed toward reproduction, which is assumed by heterologics and straight time, our sexed bodies manifest differently and mean differently, no longer configured within the matrix of heteronormativity. Our
resurrected bodies certainly should not be imagined within that frame, and yet our theologies largely remain caught in what queer theorist José Muñoz calls, “the stranglehold” of straight time (Muñoz 2009, p. 32). Too often theology fails to envision eschatological bodies as other than the perfected static ideals reflective of our cultural values and norms.

Theological development around the resurrected body has assumed Jesus’ body as the model, the first fruits, and so some said we are raised at age 30 (see City of God XXII.15). Others even claimed we are all raised as men. Some debate persisted over questions of impairments attained during one’s life, whether severed limbs would be re-attached and scars erased, for example. Jesus kept his wounds, of course, but this example from his resurrected body drew few to conclude we retain bodily impairments beyond those like Augustine, who argued that martyrs would retain beautified scars as signs of their virtue, or Gregory of Nyssa, who claimed that his sister Macrina would keep the scar from a tumor miraculously healed to demonstrate God’s power (City of God XXII.19 and Gregory of Nyssa, The Life of Macrina). Most assumed our bodies are raised aesthetically beautiful based on the cultural ideas of the author’s context. Augustine even claimed that all men will have beards in heaven because they must rise as handsome as possible (Bynum 1995, p. 99). Scholarship abounds detailing the ways in which aesthetic values have shaped eschatological imaginations.

The projection of sociocultural values into the resurrected life is an unfortunate feature of much early theological thought around the resurrection and our expected embodiment. Though some Christian communities took Jesus’ statement that we are neither married nor given in marriage because we will be like the angels in heaven to mean that we will not animate sexed bodies in the resurrection, many influential theologians insisted with great specificity that humanity retains observably sexed bodies. Their reason for arguing such, surely relates to the belief that our bodies are important to our personhood and identity. Affirmation of material continuity of the body was a safeguard to the continuity of identity, between who we understand ourselves to be in this world and that to come. For example, Bynum argues persuasively that even those debates most trivial and obscure to modern readers, such as whether every inch of hair and nails cut in the course of one’s life are returned to your body at the resurrection, are rooted in anxiety around identity in the resurrected life (Bynum 1992, pp. 266–297). However, Bynum has also well documented that the insistence among some theologians that our bodies retain identifying physical features serves their underlying commitment to the preservation of social hierarchies in heaven, especially the ordering of the sexes. For example, Jerome, Tertullian, and Augustine, among others, explicitly assert there will be “rank and hierarchy in heaven,” and for some at least, one’s sex must be identifiable in order to facilitate such an ordering (Bynum 1995, p. 100. Augustine, Sermon 132, chpt. 3 parag. 3).

Surely some of this insistence is a reaction to those communities that asserted women become men in the resurrected life, following The Gospel of Thomas. Such a resurrection would dissolve the hierarchy altogether. Though erasing woman in favor of man, it strips men of their ultimate authority over a vast portion of humanity; perhaps this did not sound like paradise to the patriarchs shaping early Christian doctrine. Nonetheless, Gregory of Nyssa proposed an androgynous resurrected body for all, like angels, that is, without genitals, as he imagined humanity to be before sin. Both of these perspectives on the resurrected body have received favorable attention from feminist and queer scholars as they suggest that sexual hierarchy is not the destiny of humanity and that
it exists outside of God’s ultimate plan for human flourishing (see Pagels 1979; Burris 2007, pp. 147–162).

Yet, those who insisted we retain identifiable sexes for the purpose of rank, still struggled to make sense of genitals for resurrected bodies. Tertullian, for example asks: “What purpose are the loins, conscious of semen, and the other genitals in both sexes, as well as the enclosures of conception and the fountains of the breast, when sexual intercourse, pregnancy, and the nurturing of infants shall cease” (Res 60.3. Quoted by Petrey 2019, p. 666). And Augustine, suggests that some “adaptation” occurs in the female “members” associated with intercourse and childbirth so that these will no longer elicit lust.³ Jerome mocks those women who would think that we are resurrected akin to angels, without sexed bodies, and insists every sex organ must be resurrected, not only to preserve gender inequality and sexual hierarchy, but additionally to retain a hierarchy based on perceived virtue; he mused that if we don’t retain our genitals, then the chaste and the married, and the virgin and the repentant prostitute would all appear as equals, an unacceptable everlasting arrangement (Bynum 1995, pp. 90–91).

Thus, early theological development around the resurrected body was in part an investment in maintaining social status and certain sociocultural structures, and Christians did not abandon such ideas with the rise of modernity. In the U.S. context, White preachers made clear to slaves that though they were promised heaven, their hope was not for equality. Freed man Frank Roberson recounted the sermon of a typical White preacher:

You slaves will go to heaven if you are good, but don’t ever think that you will be close to your mistress and master. No! No! there will be a wall between you; but there will be holes in it that will permit you to look out and see your mistress when she passes by. If you want to sit behind this wall, you must do the language of the text: ‘Obey your masters’.

(Cade 1935, quoted by Raboteau 2004, p. 213)

Another popular view at the time was that “slaves would occupy the ‘kitchen’ of heaven and would continue to serve their white masters as on earth” (Raboteau 2004, p. 372). One can intuit the assumption among many White Christians that resurrected bodies retain racial identifiers, otherwise heaven would be the manifestation of the White fear of miscegenation, making it impossible to distinguish White from Black, and thus empty the racial hierarchy of the divine ordination they assumed justified its existence.

Most contemporary theologians would agree that our discourse around the resurrected life should not be shaped by a pre-commitment to social hierarchies and should not be based on cultural and social valuations of differing embodiments, be it a ranking of value based on race, sex, ability, etc. However, theology still projects resurrected life as a sort of perfected domesticity represented by a body resurrected to a beauty that mirrors the dominant cultural norms of the era, with a fixture of stable identity categories forged within this sociocultural matrix. This is found in countless arguments around the general resurrection in the West, but most often identified with Augustine and a static perfection that would forestall all chance of sin and a recurrent fall. Though the traditions’ obsession with real material continuity grows out of a belief that the material of Jesus’ earthly body was resurrected (signified by the wounds and the empty tomb), the vehemence with which it was stressed stems from the conviction that our bodies are integral to our identities. I do not want to deny the vital relationship between body and
identity, quite the contrary, but we have good reason to interrogate a strict continuity of identity because first, Christian insistence on this matter belies an allegiance to sociocultural hierarchies and second, these contemporary identities are shaped in part by the meaning given to our bodies by a sociocultural system that is white supremacist and heteropatriarchal.

Eschatological assumptions of completed and static perfection are rooted in a narrative structure that queerness explicitly rejects. Queer theology wrests the imagination away from inherited beliefs that cling to persisting stable identities, for not only is that commitment to stable identity entangled with desires for preserving social structures that both reward and punish bodies for economic gain and social power, but also because queer theory challenges the stability of identity as a value altogether. Queerness itself inherently destabilizes identity categories, resists binaries, and rejects the tidy labels used to classify and organize humanity into heteropatriarchal, white supremacist sociocultural systems. Or as Muñoz puts it, to theorize with queerness is to critique “ontological certitude” (Muñoz 2009, p. 11).

At least as early as Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* in 1990, queer theory included clear calls for the deconstruction of categories of identity and the binaries that hold them in place, as well as incisive analyses of their historically constructed and oppressive nature. Following Sedgwick, Judith Butler persuasively argued that our “gendered, sexed, and sexual identities are not fixed essences but formed and performed,” and our “identities are shaped by the power of language and categories” (Daniels 2016, p. 296). Brandy Daniels summarizes the foundational understanding of identity that emerged from these two pioneers and beyond when she writes, “queer theory challenges the fixed nature of identity, recognizing identity as historically and socially shaped by various forces of power—and that freedom (political, social, or otherwise) lies in challenging and resisting the notion of fixed identity” (Daniels 2016, p. 296). Queer theory insists that the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality are neither binary nor natural; they are neither necessary nor given; they are forged in history. Queer theory is not interested in setting up new, alternative identity categories, such that now there are a few more options for classification—gay, straight, or bi; trans, cis, or intersex—but rejects this impulse altogether in an effort to forge openings for the fluidity of human embodiments, expressions, and sexualities as it embraces the multiplicities of becoming.

A queer eschatology inherently resists the binary by which heterolinear thought seeks to classify and restrict, as it throws into question preconceived notions of sex, gender, and sexuality and how these inhere with our identities. Eschatology requires our apocalyptic imagination, as resurrection inaugurates a new logic, radically beyond the structures that currently reward and punish bodies based on norms constructed for economic and political exploitation. Thus, in what follows, I will argue for ongoing transformation of body-identity as one’s eternal eschatological journey of becoming.

**Identity and Theological Ethics**

The work of theological ethicist, Robyn Henderson-Espinoza, is particularly helpful here, in their development of an ontology of becoming, drawing from trans methodologies to illustrate the movement inherent in this conception of being. They levy a powerful critique against the heterologics that permeate Christian thought, taking aim at the “overwhelming impulse to neatly categorize identities into recognizable classifications” (Henderson-Espinoza 2018, p. 88). They argue that most Christian theology...
since the Enlightenment has a “concrete and stable orientation to the supremacy of the
logic of the (hetero)norm of binaries,” which is “devoid of a generous imagination”
because such “fixity does not allow for becoming” (Henderson-Espinoza 2018, p. 88). In contrast, they propose “an ontology of becoming—one framed by excavating a logic of motion—that will illustrate a move beyond the logic of … binaries” (Henderson-Espinoza 2018, p. 90).

This motion that undergirds their proposal for being as becoming finds an analogous movement in “transing.” As queer theorist Jasbir Puar puts it: trans can be understood “as a motion, a continuum of intensity that may or may not inform identity” (Puar 2017, pp. 51–52). Speaking specifically of transsexuality, Puar explains that trans moves us outside of the linearity bound to the binary. Trans does not refer to an entity that would “simply hybridize or add to the designations of male and female sex through a third configuration” that is then called “trans,” but much more radically it “transcends sex itself, … and goes beyond the demarcations that make up sex, and more crucially dissembles sex as a master sign, as a taxonomic chain of signifiers” (Puar 2017, p. 52). Thus when Henderson-Espinoza speaks of trans as illustrative of this movement of becoming they are specifically referring to trans as a movement outside the heteronormative logic of binaries altogether. Trans “is not tied to the linearity of M[ale] to F[emale] or F[emale] to M[ale]” (Henderson-Espinoza 2018, p. 90). Even more, trans defies the Enlightenment impulse toward fixity and classification that restricts the unfolding of becoming. Trans methodology destabilizes “dominant forms of theological imagination whose doctrine reproduces contours of violence against those who enflesh a difference relative to gender and sexuality,” all the while, trans is also a “constructive creativity that embodies a force of becoming” (Henderson-Espinoza 2018, p. 91).

Though not explicitly referencing the resurrected life in their proposal, Henderson-Espinoza targets the “telos of perfection and stability” associated with Enlightenment ideologies, but which we have also seen proclaimed in eschatologies and doctrines of the resurrected body from antiquity. Henderson-Espinoza’s transing of ontology, the understanding of one’s being as open to possibility, not closed in fixed identity or static embodiment, works to support an understanding of the human that resists the supposition that fulfillment results in a static identity or a perfected and unchanging embodiment. Trans approaches to theological discourse provide a vocabulary and an imaginary to break with the teleologies of typical Western conceptions of resurrection and the tendency to assume resurrection as a static perfection of one’s current self, projected into a future.

Importantly, Henderson-Espinoza proposes an ontology of becoming that includes not only gender in this open movement but our bodies themselves, which are likewise not static or fixed. They call on theology and ethics to “move … into a more creative and generative expression of the materiality of the body,” emphasizing that the body “is always becoming and always becoming different from itself.” Skin, as our largest organ, “is in a state of constant movement, a motion that abides in the frame of becoming” (Henderson-Espinoza 2018, pp. 90, 91). Thus if we are to understand our being as always in becoming, then so too are our bodies, which the Christian tradition has long insisted is integral to our personhood. “This ontology of ‘intra-active’ becoming is always involving bodily materiality as difference and multiplicity” (Henderson-Espinoza 2016, p. 286). And if we insist that the resurrected body is important to personhood, part of the eschatological life with God, then the body too continues in that movement of becoming as part of Christian hope.
Crucial here is not only the challenge to stable identity categories shaped in and by heteropatriarchal and white supremacist contexts, but also the attention to the ongoing becoming of the fully embodied person. To free the theological imagination from this bondage to the heteropatriarchal ordering of, not only our present world, but also the resurrected life, we must realize that the identities to which we cling in our hope for continuity of person (realized in our bodily integrity) is forged in a matrix of socio-cultural power contrary to life in Christ. Thus the “discontinuous life narratives of trans folk” provide ground to imagine the radical discontinuity of resurrected life outside this matrix, that is: the embodied resistance to binding binaries, teleologies of straightness, and the fixity of tidy identity categories (Moore, Brintnall, and Marchall 2018, p. 14). The non-linear transing of identities and bodies in motion is analogous of the apocalyptic rupture and eternal transformation that must accompany our resurrection hope.

**Conclusion: Eschatological Bodies of Becoming**

The stability of identity has been an expected outcome of the resurrection in most Christian theologies in the West, but these identities are forged within a sinful heteropatriarchal structure, and this insistence on strict material continuity is at least in part tied to conservative efforts to protect power. Surely for many on the underside of this system, the hoped-for kingdom includes a radical discontinuity from the socio-cultural world we currently inhabit, including the identities it assigns. Jesus’ teaching on the reign of God and his own resurrected body give ground to an understanding of our resurrected body-identities to be not only changed in an instant, a flash like Paul describes, but a transformation of continual movement and ongoing variation, open to a multiplicity of eternal becoming. Jesus’ multigendered, non-gendered, and multiplicity of embodiment suggest not a final static, easily recognizable final product of being, but a continual movement of becoming for the sake of relationship. It is not a stretch to claim Jesus’ resurrected body is queer because of the life he lived as one outside the norms of his day or as a eunuch by choice, which is then extended to eternity, or as queer because he sprouted a vagina, or because he transmutes to bread, wine, and the collective body of the church. But his resurrected body may more rightly be a model because of the discontinuity exhibited; his body resists the linear narrative inclined to a fixed subsistence. Instead, his body tells of a person who is not finished, static, or completed.

Though Graham Ward’s elevation of the side-wound as a feminine mark on the body of Christ is neither helpful nor radical from a feminist or queer perspective, he does ultimately offer an image of resurrected bodies that allows for multiplicity and a becoming that could work with Henderson-Espinoza’s proposal. He finds within the displacements of Jesus’ mysterious resurrected body an expectation of embodiment beyond what we can conceive, an unknowing deepened through our encounters with other mysterious bodies. Thus, Jesus’ resurrected body also reveals a dynamic of discontinuity of human embodiment entering the resurrected life. His body is changed, even unrecognizable: on the road to Emmaus where neither his appearance nor his voice gave away his identity; to Mary at the tomb in the gospel of John, who spoke with him as if he were the gardener; and to the disciples who did not recognize him speaking to them from the beach until their miraculous catch of fish. According to Ward, “the misidentifications are part of the unfolding logic of displaced bodies, which defer or conceal their final identity; bodies which maintain their mystery” (Ward 1999, p. 173). Nor does Ward ignore the significance of Jesus’ body made manifest in bread and wine, and in the
church as a whole. He writes, “The body of the gendered Jew expands to embrace the whole of creation. That body continues to expand by our continual giving and receiving of signs” (Ward 1999, p. 177). So too, then, we understand that the nature of human bodies in the resurrected life remain mysterious despite glimpses into the transformed body of Jesus those 40 days before ascension.

Building from these insights and in step with a queer disruption of identities, queer theologian Elizabeth Stuart argues that through the sacraments we leave behind identities formed outside the church and enter into Jesus’ body, where we receive a new identity. She foretells an absolute end to these previous identities, saying “gender, race, sexual orientation, family, nationality, and all other culturally constructed identities will not survive the grave” (Stewart 2007, p. 74). Because Jesus’ body takes multiple forms: gender neutral in the bread and “multi-gendered” in the church, she figures his body as queer, saying “sacramental flesh is queer flesh” (Stewart 2007, p. 75). It is that queer body into which Christians are incorporated, and by which we are constituted through the sacraments. Baptism calls us to cast aside all other “ordinary identities in favor of an identity as a member of the body of Christ” (Stewart 2007, p. 66). She asserts that “in Christ maleness and femaleness and gay and straight are categories that dissolve before the throne of grace where only the garment of baptism remains” (Stewart 2007, p. 75). Stewart rightly challenges the privileging of our “culturally negotiated identities” in our visions of resurrected life, and I agree that we must reject the reflex to project current construals of identity into God’s future, yet I worry her proposal works within a frame of static perfection typical of much Western eschatology: we receive a fixed identity. Though her conclusion that sexed bodies and sexualities disappear under the identities we are given in baptism is compelling, I sense that the imagination still seeks to lift the hem of that garment, to peek the circumcised flesh assumed in our putting on of Christ. Is the patriarchal reflex in theology too strong to erase the phallus there altogether (and do we want to)? Is this new identity we put on an assumed stable, universal maleness rather than an embodied fluidity of personhood moving ever deeper in relation to God and each other, or the multiplicity of becoming Henderson-Espinoza envisions?

Ward, at least, recognizes the movement of bodies in the resurrected life, which is essential to this ontology of becoming:

A body is always in transit, always exceeding its significance or transgressing the limits of what appears. The body is constantly in movement and in a movement…. Embodiment maintains its excess, maintains its transcorporeality in and through its congress with the mysteries of other bodies.

(Ward 2007, p. 84)
systematic theology. This eschatological movement of becoming may well be described as our pilgrimage into the being of Christ, to the heart of God, a framing that requires some element of our penetration and God’s receptivity of our quest into God’s being.

The anti-teleology of queerness does not accept a final culmination of being, but advances an ongoing movement, a perfection closer to that proposed by Gregory of Nyssa as a perpetual journey, ever growing in Christ because complete likeness to Christ can never be achieved and full comprehension of the infinite God can never be attained. I intentionally avoid the word “progress” here, because this journey does not have to continue by way of our preconceived notions of improvement as an ascent to a pinnacle, but a journey of ever deepening relationality. This movement is unending because one’s passion does not wane; one’s yearning is not slaked but yet is somehow satisfied, a sustained and perpetual ecstasy.

Gregory of Nyssa suggests that we yearn eternally toward knowing and being-with God, but not because our yearning is every unsatisfied. Rather, the satisfaction feeds the striving. God is infinite: there is always more…. The pleasures of desire are perfectly sustainable

*(MacKendrick 2004, p. 41)*

This journey may best be described as a “wanderlust,” or with Mary Daly’s neologism “wonderlust,” illustrative of this combination of desire, pleasure, longing, and movement without ceasing or final culmination.

Marcella Althaus-Reid recounts the coming out story of a gay man in her church in Latin America, which included him changing his name to “Retano” (reborn) because coming out in a loving community was a “moment of resurrection from death” *(Althaus-Reid 2000, p. 123)*. She likens it to Daly’s definition of lust as “an intense longing: craving…. Eagerness and enthusiasm” for life” *(Daly 1984, pp. 2–3)*. Althaus-Reid explains,

the resurrection of Christ can only be understood as part of Christ’s unsettledness, this ‘wonderlust’ which cannot be confined to the tomb, not even the tombs/tomes of heterosexual Systematic Theology. Christ’s resurrected presence can only be seen then as a craving, an enthusiastic passion for life and justice, in the diversity and unfenced identity which is searching for that land called Basileia … in which we are all called to be co-workers.

*(Althaus-Reid 2000, p. 123)*

So too does the resurrected life we anticipate following Christ’s resurrection feature an “unsettledness” in the ongoing quest for life in God together. It is a journey into God that is foretold by the mystical ecstatic journey into the side of Christ, a movement of embodied selves, drawn and compelled by desire that is satisfied but perpetual, a movement of ecstasy and intimacy. Though those like St. Bonaventure would describe this movement as the “soul’s journey into God,” this is an embodied pilgrimage, and so the materiality of the mystic’s description of entering into Jesus’ body is appropriately corporeal, walking around within his side wound, making it a home, nestling within it, like a baby in a cradle. It is an embodied journey we enter together, without a set destination of final bodies or completed identity, but steps into an open movement of transformation of body and self, moving deeper into the being of God.
Resurrection and Queer Identity

Notes

1 Althaus-Reid has provided some of the most insightful consideration of what circumcision may or may not mean for the nature of Jesus’ sex and gender identity and sexuality (Althaus-Reid 2000, pp. 112–120).


3 *City of God* 22.17. Rosemary Radford Ruether has interpreted this passage as suggesting women remain women but lose those distinguishing features in female embodiment pertaining to sex and childbirth, so that their bodies then would be thus “fitted to glory rather than shame” (Ruether 2007, pp. 63–64).

4 Here Henderson-Espinoza draws specifically from the work of Max Strassfeld.

5 Lutgarde of Aywieres felt that she “rested in the wounded side of Jesus like a baby in her cradle” (See MacKendrick 2004, p. 126).

Bibliography


