Queer(y)ing Pentecostal Conversion and Lesbian Feminist Coming Out Narratives: A Redescription of Religion and Sexuality

by

Em Kianka
Class of 2013

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors in English and Religion

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2013
Queer(y)ing
Pentecostal Conversion
and Lesbian Feminist Coming Out
Narratives:
A Redescription
of Religion and Sexuality

by Em Kianka
"In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God. She was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Her, and without Her nothing was made that was made. In Her was life, and the life was the light of people. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it."

- John 1, pronouns queered
Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................................................... v
Introduction ......................................................................................................................................................... 1
Chapter 1: Embodied Narratives .......................................................................................................................... 18
Chapter 2: Remembering and Retelling Queer Desire in Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* ................................. 30
Chapter 3: Continuous Conversion: Queering Pentecostal Subjectivity ......................................................... 56
Conclusion: And Without Her Nothing was Made that was Made ............................................................... 81
Appendix .......................................................................................................................................................... 91
Works Cited ..................................................................................................................................................... 104
Works Consulted ............................................................................................................................................. 108
Acknowledgements

(Many, many) Special thanks and feelings:

To Christina Crosby. I do not know what my education would have been like if it wasn’t for your teaching and mentorship. You have opened my eyes to the world as I now see it. To Liza McAlister and Mary-Jane Rubenstein. I could not have asked for three more profoundly wonderful, inspiring, rigorous, resourceful, and supportive thesis advisors and mentors. I am deeply grateful to the ways in which you have inspired and challenged me throughout all my years at Wesleyan.

To Stephanie Kudak Weiner, for your support and dedication as my English major advisor. Our long conversations and your wisdom and mentorship have been invaluable.

To Matthew Garrett, for sparking my interest in narrative during my sophomore year. Thank you for your resourcefulness and willingness to help me process my ideas.

To Dr. Larry Antosz, Rev. Megan Lloyd Joiner, and Rev. Tracy Mehr-Muska for giving me unconditional support and love when I needed it most.

To the Wesleyan University Unitarian Universalist Campus Ministry: Amy Davis, Maris Hubbard, Kayla Reiman, Caroline Shadle, Amelia Tatarian, Haley Weaver, Ben Zucker. You are beautiful people.

To my friends and thesis allies who have both listened to me talk myself through my writing and provided much-needed recreational diversion. To Saumya Chatrath, Zach Goldberg—my chosen brother—Lina Mamut, Samantha Melvin—I don’t think I would have ever gotten through this year without your constant gchat support, our Netflix marathons, and shiraz bota boxes—Katie McConnell, friends on Home Ave, and the shenanigans of 142 Cross.

To my friends and family who have known me the longest and who have never stopped supporting me. To my Mother, my Father, and sister, Miranda. To Thea Lange, Alex Talamo, Camille Tinder—sometimes I really don’t understand how we are still this close, but I love the three of you more than I can say. To Nico Vitti, my wonderful soul friend. Your unconditional love is invaluable.

And finally, to Logan Rimel, my fellow religious queer, my friend, my partner, the love of my life--this is for both of us.
Introduction

In popular American discourse, religion and sexuality are often presented and understood as incompatible—even oppositional. This is arguably for good reason. Roman Catholic and Evangelical condemnation of birth control and comprehensive sex education, Mormon campaigns supporting Proposition 8 in California, and the Westboro Baptist Church’s explicit hostility towards queer sexuality, epitomized by their slogan “God Hates Fags,” are all well-known examples of what appears to be a natural antagonism between religion and sexuality. These examples continue to define not only dominant conceptions of the relationship between religion and sexuality, but also the categories themselves. If you are queer, the assumption goes, then you must not be religious. If you are religious, then you must not support women’s health or queer sexuality. These hegemonic understandings ultimately define both categories as not only in tension, but also as fundamentally oppositional.

At the same time, this dominant understanding of the antipathy between religion and sexuality misrepresents the actual lives and positions of many sexual and religious communities and individuals, thus engendering consequences of its own. Ann Pellegrini, who writes extensively about religion and sexuality, argues, “Secularists, queer and otherwise, are not wrong to distrust public religious language or worry about the role of religion in United States public life. It is just that the story is far more complicated than usually supposed.”

---

Popular assumptions that religion and sexuality are incompatible undergird dominant definitions of what it means to be religious and what it means to be queer that, in turn, reinforce their purported incompatibility. This cycle consequently renders invisible the co-constitution of religious and sexual identities, including religious queers and religious progressives. From the standpoint of people invested in progressive politics, proclaiming the incompatibility of religion and sexuality ironically undermines the causes they support by closing down potential allegiances—for example, with religious communities that advocate for sexual health and promote the best interests of queer people.

In addition to marginalizing religious progressives and people who are both queer and religious, assuming a natural incompatibility between religion and sexuality also reinforces the problematic notion that people who are religious are somehow held back by their traditions from becoming fully liberated selves—politically, intellectually, and sexually speaking. In response to my question about why we would want to marginalize the voices of religious people on “our” side, there are doubtless those in the queer activist community who would question the validity of religion in general. Perhaps they would argue that, even if there are people who are both progressive and religious, religion is a relic of the past: a way of understanding the world that is outdated, that condones prejudice and violence, and should thus be abandoned. Following this line of logic, one might ask: even if there are religious people who hold positive perceptions of queer sexuality and sexual health, what is the point of holding onto “religion” when it is the very institution inhibiting social and economic progress? Arguably, this way of thinking characterizes the views of many
non-religious progressives who are frustrated with the conservative policies and values that are most popularly associated with religion and supported by many people who self-identify as religious. According to many non-religious progressives, their politics, such as those that promote sexual health and affirm queer sexuality, are not compatible with religion because religion is not compatible with modernity. The assumption goes that religion is regressive, while secularism is progressive.

In an edited volume entitled *Secularisms*, Ann Pellegrini and Janet Jakobsen, who also researches sexuality, gender, and religion in the U.S., explore why this point of view is problematic. As Jakobsen and Pellegrini argue, the notion that religion is incompatible with “secular” modernity obscures the ways in which American secularism is itself inflected with Protestantism. The traditional secularization narrative “separates secularism from religion and through this separation claims that secularism, like reason, is universal (in contrast to the particularism of religion).”\(^2\)

This narrative, however, originates in Enlightenment thought, and thus emerges from a particular locative context: European Christianity. Beginning with the Renaissance and continuing through the Protestant Reformation, the advance of “reason” challenged the traditional religious authority of the Roman Catholic Church. According to the logic of this narrative, “Religion could remain a force of personal commitment, but reason was needed to create political and legal authority.”\(^3\)

Moreover, the narrative continues, “These moves away from religion and toward the secular reached full flower in the European Enlightenment and in the formation of


\(^3\) Ibid., 4
modern nation-states.” Thus, American secularism is firmly rooted in the Protestant Reformation and the dominant conceptions of “reason” and “universality” that we inherit from Enlightenment thought.

Furthermore, as Jakobsen and Pellegrini argue, since American secularism is particular to these historical events, it itself is inflected with Protestantism. This means that the “unstated religious assumptions of U.S. secularism are specifically Protestant.” In particular, the privileging of the interior over the exterior, the individual over the social, the private over the public, and personal belief over works are Protestant ideals that are foundational to “nonreligious, secular” discourse in America. These ideals are explicit in the theological writings of Martin Luther, whose 95 Theses launched the Protestant Reformation. In *The Freedom of a Christian Man*, Luther proclaims, “In this world we are bound by the needs of our bodily life, but we are not righteous because of them.” Rather, as Luther argues, “…as the soul needs only the word of God for its life and righteousness, so it is justified by faith alone and not any works.” Firstly, Luther’s declaration that Christian righteousness has little to do with the body or with works defines religion as a matter of private, personal belief. This definition of religion, distinctly Protestant, is a definition that holds true in “secular” discourse in the U.S. As Jakobsen and Pellegrini argue, according to the traditional secularization narrative, “In the modern, secular, and enlightened world, religion is contained in the private sphere of personal belief;” this allows for a

---

4 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 7
“political and legal” authority governed by “universal” reason. Secondly, Luther’s insistence on soul over body signifies a clear union between Protestant and Enlightenment thought. This abstract conception of the human subject disavows the body and renders him (for it is indeed a him) an autonomous, disembodied, thinking individual. Needless to say, the attacks on women’s bodies and on queer sexuality in both contemporary “secular” and “religious” discourses in the U.S. demonstrate the constant disavowing of the body and the perpetuation of the “universal” human subject as a disembodied individual. Overall, as Jakobsen and Pellegrini demonstrate, “religion versus secularism” is a binary that not only does not hold up, but also has significant ethical consequences. Namely, “religion versus secularism” reinforces the category of “religion” as antithetical to progressive policy while simultaneously obscuring the ways in which “secular” discourses are entrenched in the very Protestant values purported to undermine progressive ideas.

In this essay, I will argue that the hegemonic narrative that posits sexuality as incompatible with religion and vice versa fundamentally misrepresents the actual lives and positions of sexual and religious communities and individuals. In order to work towards what is a more accurate, yet more complicated, understanding of the relations between religion and sexuality in contemporary America, I will offer a critical comparison of pentecostal conversion narratives and lesbian feminist coming out stories. I will show that these two genres of storytelling work according to similar epistemological logic and use similar narratological decisions in order to reorient the subject in time and space. Although lesbian feminist coming out stories and pentecostal conversion narratives have their clear differences, my comparison

---

8 Secularisms, 5
between the two will elucidate a number of structural similarities in the ways they produce human identities. Moreover, by comparing these two genres of narrative, I will help to demonstrate how and why the popular opposition between religion and sexuality is fundamentally limiting and even violent. In so doing, I will offer a redescription of these categories that, as Pellegrini says, allows for a more complicated story. This more complicated story both honors the actual realities of religious and sexual identities and offers the possibility of healthier relationships between religious and sexual communities.

This project of redescription is both an academic and personal undertaking. As a queer Unitarian Universalist, I have always understood my sexuality and religion in co-constitutive terms. Perhaps it is queer that I am so religious, and that somebody as religious as myself is so queer, but these are not bounded parts of myself. My own coming out story is nearly inextricable from the beginnings of my Unitarian Universalist religiosity. I found my way to a local congregation only a few months before I began recognizing my queer desires; consequently, my own reorientation in time and space, the ways in which I began to make meaning of my childhood and my early adolescence as I was coming out, became bound up in my emerging commitment to Unitarian Universalist values. My religious identity and my sexual identity are significant markers of my selfhood that have quite literally co-constructed each other. Thus, as somebody who does often feel marginalized by dominant understandings of “religion” and “sexuality,” this paper is much more than just a theoretical undertaking.
My central argument takes as its point of departure Pellegrini’s “Testimonial Sexuality; or, Queer Structures of Religious Feeling: Notes Towards an Investigation.” There is, she points out, a growing body of scholarship that suggests there “may be shared structures of feeling between religious and sexual ‘identity.’”\(^9\) Drawing on this scholarship, Pellegrini proposes that there are similarities between the ways in which religious and sexual identities are performed. The stakes of this claim are high; in jointly examining these identities, Pellegrini asks, “…how might tracing the cross-hatching of religious and sexual identities as structures of feeling help to interrupt some of the usual ways of telling the story of sexuality versus religion and ‘being’ secular versus ‘having’ values?”\(^10\) In other words, Pellegrini argues that an examination of the performative similarities between sexual and religious identities would effectively challenge the legitimacy of the hegemonic binary opposition between both categories and consequently offer a rearticulation of the ways in which religious and sexual identities work. Thus, following Pellegrini’s lead, I will be examining the ways in which both religious and sexual identities are performed—that is, the ways in which *stories performatively produce identity* and more fundamentally, the “true self” behind or beneath that identity.

There are critical similarities between the ways in which lesbian sexuality and pentecostal identity are performed. To be sure, lesbian and pentecostal Americans often find themselves on opposite ends of the political spectrum; nevertheless, there are striking narrative and even ontological connections between them. For example, both pentecostal philosophy and queer theory emphasize the importance of

---

\(^9\) Pellegrini, 96
\(^10\) Ibid., 100
embodiment, calling into question the abstract notion of the autonomous, disembodied subject that we inherit from the Enlightenment. As charismatic philosopher James K. A. Smith argues, one of the elements crucial to pentecostal worldview is “a nondualistic affirmation of embodiment and materiality.” Smith contends that:

…the pentecostal understanding of the gospel tracks closely that of Jesus for whom the message of salvation was primarily a message of liberation from sin and its effects, including the material effects of illness and disease, as well as oppression and poverty (Luke 4:18-19). Deliverance and liberation, then, are not just ‘spiritual’; the gospel is not just a tonic for souls. Implicit in this affirmation of bodily healing is a broader affirmation, namely, a sense that the full gospel values the whole person. In other words, inchoately embedded in this central affirmation that God cares about our bodies is a radical affirmation of the goodness of bodies and materiality as such.

The pentecostal emphasis on bodily healing—in addition to other bodily practices such as one’s raising arms in the air, placing hands on another congregant’s shoulders or forehead during prayer, and glossolalia (i.e. speaking in tongues)—is a sign of the nondualistic affirmation of embodiment that characterizes the pentecostal worldview. Strikingly, this nondualistic approach to understanding the bodily subject resonates with queer and feminist theory, specifically with the work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, who also call into question the disembodied, abstract notion of the autonomous individual, as I will explore in Chapter 1. The importance of the body in both queer theory and pentecostal religiosity—i.e. its significance to queer subjectivity and to experiencing, as pentecostals would articulate it, the power of the

---

11 On page xvii of *Thinking in Tongues*, James K.A. Smith clarifies that he uses “small-p” pentecostalism to generally refer to the diversity of beliefs that he believes classical Pentecostals and charismatics (including charismatic Catholics and Anglicans) share. I am using “small-p” pentecostalism in this essay because I am specifically focusing on the diversity of beliefs and practices that charismatics share.


13 Ibid., 42
Holy Ghost—suggests that on a very fundamental level, religious, pentecostal identity and queer identity\textsuperscript{14} have more in common than many would think.

In his essay “Tongues United: Memoirs of a Pentecostal Boyhood,” Michael Warner explores connections between his present queer, atheist, academic self and his past Pentecostal, adolescent self in order to imagine what kind of relationship exists between them. For many reasons, this is a difficult project; as Warner argues, “It would be hard to imagine a more complete revolution of personality” than the transformation of the former into the latter.\textsuperscript{15} “From the religious vantage of my childhood and adolescence,” Warner claims, “I am one of Satan’s agents.” And yet, he continues, “from my current vantage, that former self was exotically superstitious.”\textsuperscript{16} While keeping those fundamental oppositional points in mind, Warner nevertheless argues that there are significant connections between the ways in which pentecostalism and queer sexuality work. He argues:

The bliss of Pentecostalism is, among other things, a radical downward revaluing of the world that despises Pentecostalists. Like all religions, Pentecostalism has a world-canceling moment; but its world-canceling gestures can also be a kind of social affirmation, in this case of a frequently despised minority. I suspect that the world-canceling rhetorics of queer sexuality work in a similar way. If you lick my nipple, the world suddenly seems comparatively insignificant.\textsuperscript{17}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{14}Although I am specifically focusing on lesbian feminist identity and coming out stories, for reasons I will explore later in this introduction, I expand my comparison to “queer identity” for the sake of articulating a broader argument about comparing religious identity and queer sexuality. Although “queer” and “lesbian” are two different identities, contemporary queer theory is still relevant to aspects of lesbian experience and identity because it is responding to and in dialogue with gay and lesbian studies.}


\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{16}Ibid.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., 230}
In other words, pentecostal religiosity and queer sexuality both involve similar processes of world-canceling, social affirmation, and the consequent pleasure that the self experiences, in terms of both personal bliss and the pleasure of feeling a sense of deep belonging to a specific community with shared desires and challenges.

Moreover, as Warner concludes, both his Pentecostal and queer identities “have had to be performed as minority identities.”¹⁸ Many progressives, queer and otherwise, often forget that pentecostalism departs from mainstream Protestantism (including Lutherans, Anglicans, Presbyterians, etc.) and thus pentecostals, too, consider themselves an oppressed minority. ¹⁹ Regardless of the differences between pentecostalism and queer sexuality, Warner argues that there are critical similarities between the ways in which pentecostal and queer identities are performed.

Specifically, Warner makes a comparison between coming out and the fundamentalist practice of “witnessing.” Witnessing, which often means telling a conversion narrative or a story about a miracle, is a way of declaring identity that Warner argues, “…is the fundamentalist version of coming out, and explained to the budding Pentecostalist in much the same language of necessity, shame and pride, stigma and cultural change.”²⁰ In this essay, I will explore Warner’s claim at length by comparing pentecostal conversion narratives and lesbian feminist coming out stories. How is one perhaps a “version” of the other? In what ways do both kinds of stories share language, narrative conventions, and literary devices, and what does that say about the ways in which we articulate our identities and our selves? How does such a comparison help us articulate a more ultimate argument about the similarities

¹⁸ Ibid.
¹⁹ Ibid.
²⁰ Ibid.
between the ways in which these religious and sexual identities performatively produce embodied selves? And finally, how do these similarities help us understand the violence that a binary opposition between religion and sexuality engenders? Specifically, the obscuring of the co-constitution of religious and sexual identities and the reinforcing of the two categories’ supposed incompatibility, which precludes and denies the possibility that religious people can and do support progressive policy and ideas.

This comparison is feasible not only because of a shared pentecostal and queer emphasis on embodiment, but also because the production of both kinds of identity happens chiefly through narrative. For pentecostals, as James Smith argues, witnessing or giving one’s testimony is “central to pentecostal spirituality because it captures the dynamic sense that God is active and present in our world and in our personal experience while also emphasizing the narrativity of pentecostal spirituality.”21 Moreover, he argues, “Pentecostals enact an identity by writing themselves into the larger story of God’s redemption.”22 Here, Smith contends that pentecostals perform their identity through narrative; telling stories brings pentecostal identity into being. And furthermore, personal narratives are told as part of a larger, collective narrative that ties together what pentecostals hold to be ancient and eternal and what is contemporary and temporal. In this case, “Narrative is not just a decorative form, a creative medium, a jazzier vehicle for truths that can be distilled and known otherwise;” rather, for practicing pentecostals, “the truth is the story; the

---

21 J. K. A. Smith, xxii
22 Ibid., 51
narrative is the knowledge.”23 Witnessing, and specifically, telling conversion narratives, performatively produces identity and enacts the “truth” of one’s self.

Arguably, telling coming out stories performatively brings queer identity into being in largely the same way. In Homoplot, Esther Saxey, who researches the intersection of sexuality and narrative, argues:

The story I have just given suggests that sexual identities come first (both chronologically and causally). The existence of a lesbian, gay, or bisexual individual creates a story; such stories are recollected and recorded, and they become a literary genre. The influence is all in one direction, flowing from identities to texts, from the inner self to the outer depiction of that self. However, the flow of influence is far more complex, passing in every direction at once between personal experience, recollection, identity, text, genre, and society. A genre can influence how a single text is shaped, an identity can determine what experience is recollected by an individual, and ultimately, a coming out story can create an identity.24

Coming out stories do not describe, but in fact produce queer identity. We do not tell stories about a pre-existing inner self because there is no self behind the story. Rather, the story makes the self and performatively brings sexual identity into being. As Saxey continues to argue, these “discourses of sexual identity help to create what they purport to describe.”25 Recognizing that narrative creates identity challenges the legitimacy of a preexisting self that exists outside of discourse. Thus, similar to James Smith’s argument, telling coming out stories results in the creation of identity and is the production of “truth” itself. Narrative is not just a vehicle for truth, but is the truth that constitutes both queer and pentecostal identities. Moreover, this shared importance of narrative is precisely what renders queer sexuality and pentecostal religiosity nondualistic, as narrative not only literally produces identity, but also

---

23 Ibid., 64
25 Ibid., 5
produces the body as sexed and engaging in particular sex acts, and as an instrument of worship and the Holy Spirit. As I will explore more thoroughly in Chapter One, it is in this way that narratives are embodied, that our stories make our bodies; we, as complex beings with various identifications, do not exist outside the stories we tell.

I will only be focusing on lesbian feminist coming out stories in this essay, as opposed to exploring various narratives written by gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans* identified people. Although I am also arguing that there are broad similarities between queer and pentecostal identity, I focus primarily on lesbian feminist identity for a few reasons. First, lesbian autobiographies “are far less engaged in the project of producing a stable identity than their male counterparts,” which Saxey attributes to “the influence of feminist politics and philosophy.” According to Saxey, lesbian coming out stories, “…interrogate whether identity can be conveyed in a single neat narrative; they question the plots and genres they use; they cast doubt on the reliability of memory and recollection; they even explicitly question the status of experience or the narrator’s control over language.” Lesbian feminist coming out narratives, compared to other autobiographies written by gay men, are more conscious of the ways in which the narrative is performatively producing the very identity it claims to describe. Moreover, as Bonnie Zimmerman has argued, “Lesbian feminist conceptions of same-sex desire often stress choice rather than innate compulsion—in the words of Zimmerman, these are stories not of ‘born lesbians’ but of ‘born again lesbians.’” Not only do lesbian coming out stories seem to narratively reflect on the ways in which they produce the very “truth” they are

26 Ibid., 79
27 Ibid..
28 Cited in Saxey, 80
supposed to describe, but also, as both Zimmerman and Saxey contend, they do not necessarily lay claim to “born-this-way” logic. Rather, Saxey argues, “In many lesbian feminist texts, even as the protagonist finds herself, she acknowledges that she also creates herself.”\(^{29}\) At least in the stories I am focusing on, lesbian feminist coming out narratives emphasize the processes that involve coming out, including developing different kinds of relationships, reading particular books, wearing different kinds of clothes, etc., rather than narrating the moment in which a realization of a supposedly fixed nature happens. Similarly, pentecostals do not utilize “born-this-way” logic in telling conversion stories. Conversion narratives also involve narrating the different kinds of processes—meeting new people, reading the Gospel, attending worship and prayer meetings, experiencing the infilling of the Holy Ghost—through which the protagonist of the story ultimately escapes the natural condition of sinfulness to find God and become born again in the Holy Ghost.

In comparing lesbian feminist coming out stories and pentecostal conversion narratives, I am not merely exploring the stories themselves, but also examining the similar ways these stories bring identities and bodies into being. I will do this by using religious studies scholar Jonathon Z. Smith’s methodology of comparison and redescription. In “Sacred Persistence: Toward a Redescription of Canon,” J.Z. Smith argues that not only should categories be applied to data, but also that data should modulate the categories themselves. For example, “Judaism should look different when interpreted from the perspective of the history of religions; the history of

\(^{29}\) Saxey, 81
religions should be altered by the act of interpreting Jewish data.”30 Smith demonstrates the ways in which this mutual modulation works by comparing bizarrely paired things, such as canon (i.e. a collection of texts culturally understood as sacred) and food, in order to redescribe popular categories essential to the study of religion. According to Smith, “comparison does not necessarily tell us how things ‘are’…like models and metaphors, comparison tells us how things might be conceived, how they might be ‘redescribed.’”31 In other words, we use comparison not to find out about intrinsic properties, but rather to find out about relationality; comparison is a heuristic tool for ultimately reimagining and rearticulating categories. This process of redescription, as Smith argues, “is neither a procedure of substitution nor of synonymy; it is the result of comparison across difference, taking cognitive advantage of the resultant mutual distortion.”32 The purpose of my comparison is not to prove that my own bizarre pairing of lesbians and pentecostals, presupposed antagonists of each other, have all along been employing the same rhetorical and narrative conventions to tell their separate stories. Rather, the purpose of my project is to use comparison to unsettle and modulate our dominant understandings of religion and sexuality, to trouble their imagined relations in order to create categories that pay better attention to the realities of these identities and communities. Such a comparison will ultimately result in the redescription and rectification of more complicated, yet much healthier, understandings of religion and sexuality.

In Chapter One, “Embodied Narratives,” I will establish and explicate the theoretical foundations of my argument using the work of Foucault and Butler. I will first show how identities are performative, how they are produced through discourse, and ultimately the ways that narratives make the embodied selves they purportedly describe. In this way, I will establish that narrative performatively produces what we deem to be the “true self” that exists underneath the discourse that in fact brings it into being. In Chapter Two, “Remembering and Retelling Queer Desire in Alison Bechdel’s Fun Home,” I explore the ways that Bechdel’s autobiographical graphic novel emphasizes acts of storytelling such as remembering, reassessing, and retelling and how these narratological decisions performatively bring into being lesbian feminist identity, exposing the ways that narrative discourse constructs the self it supposedly describes. Undergirding these specific narratological decisions is an epistemological logic that attempts to account for what is unknowable—i.e. the origins of queer desire—and, as I will show, that also ultimately troubles the notion of the autobiographical “I” and the abstract autonomous individual that we inherit from the Enlightenment. In Chapter Three, “Continuous Conversion: Queering Pentecostal Subjectivity,” I examine two YouTube videos of pentecostals sharing their respective conversion narratives. I argue that the logic at work in these narratives takes for granted that the conversion event is past, but the narratological decisions made by the speaker (whether she makes them consciously or not) emphasizes similar acts of remembering and reconstructing. Like lesbian feminist narratives, these acts of storytelling performatively constitute the “truth” of the narrative and consequently bring into being a pentecostal body who is thus continuously converting and
becoming the true self to which she aspires. Ultimately, as I will discuss in my Conclusion, “And Without Her Nothing was Made that was Made,” through my comparison between these two genres of narrative, I hope to help modulate the categories of religion and sexuality and offer a redescription that both honors the realities of sexual and religious identities and communities and holds hope for a future that values freedom and ethics of embodiment.
Chapter 1: Embodied Narratives

In this chapter, I will establish and elaborate on the theoretical foundations for my main argument, which is that both pentecostal conversion narratives and lesbian feminist coming out stories performatively produce the “true self” they purportedly “describe.” They do this through similar narratological decisions and an implicit epistemological logic that accounts for a truth that is unknowable, whether that truth is that she has always had queer desires or that God has always had a plan for the subject in question. Both kinds of narrative performatively constitute identities and thus, produce embodied subjects. These narratives do not merely produce selves but produce bodies; pentecostal conversion narratives and lesbian feminist coming out stories are quite literally embodied narratives. In the next ten or so pages, I will explicate step-by-step the theoretical logic at work in my argument using the work of Butler and Foucault.

Before addressing how a given narrative performatively constitutes an identity or a body, I will first show how identities themselves are performative. By this I mean that identities only come into being through doing; that is, an identity is produced through the effects of doing rather than innately belonging to “a doer behind the deed.” As Friedrich Nietzsche has famously argued in On the Genealogy of Morality, “…for just as there is no ‘being’ behind the doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is simply fabricated into the doing—the doing is everything.”33 In her essay “Imitation

and Gender Insubordination,” Judith Butler takes Nietzsche’s ideas as her point of departure and explicates “gender” as performatively constituted by the effects of doing. She argues:

> The ‘being’ of the subject is no more self-identical than the ‘being’ of any gender; in fact, coherent gender, achieved through an apparent repetition of the same, produces as its effect the illusion of a prior and volitional subject. In this sense, gender is not a performance that a prior subject elects to do, but gender is performative in the sense that it constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express.34

Butler clarifies the difference between performance and performativity by arguing that the act of “performance” necessitates the illusion of a prior subject, a doer behind the deed. On the other hand, as she explains, the concept of “performativity” recognizes that there is no doer behind the deed. She argues that repetition brings into being a given effect that purportedly describes a subject who exists outside of those actions but is in fact being produced through them. In this way, “The ‘coherence’ and ‘continuity’ of ‘the person’ are not logical or analytic features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility.”35 Moreover, gender and other socially constructed categories of identity may be performative, and there may be no doer behind the deed, but it is through this doing that we become legible subjects. That is to say, just because identities are performative does not mean they are not deeply felt; rather, they are critical to the ways in which we make ourselves intelligible. As Butler explains, “To say that I ‘play’ at being [a lesbian] is not to say that I am not one ‘really’…this is not a performance from which I can take radical

---

35 Ibid., 313
distance, for this is deep-seated play, psychically entrenched play.”

Thus, the “self” or the “I” that is constituted through repetition is nevertheless a very real construction through which we, as subjects, become intelligible to both ourselves and to others.

If identities are performative, the ‘self’ that is the constituted effect of repetition comes into being through discourse. As Butler explains, before leaving to speak at a conference on homosexuality, “I found myself telling my friends beforehand that I was off to Yale to be a lesbian, which of course didn’t mean that I wasn’t one before, but that somehow then, as I spoke in that context, I was one in some more thorough and totalizing way.” Here, Butler describes experiencing a certain kind of “redoubling” of the self; even though she identifies as a lesbian as she’s speaking, saying that she’s leaving to go play the role of a lesbian draws attention to the way in which identities and the “self” are discursively produced through repetitive acts. Similarly, in The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1, Foucault challenges the Western notion that “sex” is a repressed category that exists outside of discourse and exposes how naturalized categories are in fact entirely discursive. He argues, “What is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it ad infinitum, while exploiting it as the secret.” He demonstrates how sex has been socially constructed through a massive proliferation of discourses throughout history, from Christian confession to 19th century pseudoscience to contemporary cultural discourses and self-narratives. Moreover, Foucault argues, “By creating the imaginary

---

36 Ibid., 311
37 Ibid., 310
element that is ‘sex’, the deployment of sexuality established…the desire to have
[sex], to have access to it, to discover it, to liberate it, to articulate it in discourse, to
formulate it as truth.”39 “Sex,” like gender, is a discursive category that does not
stand outside of language; furthermore, it results in the production of other related
discourses having to do with desire, access, liberation, and truth. The subject and her
notion of her own “self” performatively and discursively comes into being through
participation in these kinds of discourses, whether about sex, gender, or other socially
constructed categories.

And yet, the discourse that constitutes the self depicts it as a truth that is prior
to the very discourse in which it is, in fact, bound up. Butler argues in Gender
Trouble:

This narrative of gender acquisition requires a certain temporal ordering of
events, which assumes that the narrator is in some position to ‘know’ both,
what is before and after the law. And yet the narration takes place within a
language which, strictly speaking, is after the law, the consequence of the law,
and so proceeds from a belated and retrospective point of view. If this
language is structured by the law, and the law is exemplified, indeed, enacted
in the language, then the description, the narration, not only cannot know what
is outside itself—that is, prior to the law, but its description of that ‘before’
will always be in the service of the ‘after’.40

Here, Butler explicates how narrative about identity represents that truth (of identity,
of the self) as prior to the discourse that “describes” it. As she argues, telling a
chronological narrative about the acquisition of gender identity takes for granted a
purported volitional subject that exists prediscursively. Although the subject is
“enacted in the language,” and what was “‘before’ will always be in the service of the

39 Ibid., 157
40 Butler, Judith. Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. New York: Routledge,
1999. 95. Print.
‘after,’” narrative—and although Butler is talking specifically about gender, I extend this argument here to narrative about identity in general—depicts and represents this self as prior, as lying underneath the discourse that seems to be merely describing it. As Butler argues, it is difficult to accept that gender and other kinds of identity are enacted through language because we have “a predisposition to think of sexuality and gender as ‘expressing’ in some indirect or direct way a psychic reality that precedes it.”

Extrapolating from this, we have a predisposition in Western culture to think of the self as a psychic reality that precedes all discourse and self-narratives. We inherit this predisposition from the Enlightenment—specifically, its valorization of thinking over the body, the privileging of reason and rationalism over affect, and the long-standing, Cartesian notion that the individual is a “thinking thing” who thinks and therefore is. By locating the truth of the self in thought, we assume that by means of thinking so, there is a self that exists outside of and prior to simple acts of speech, self-narratives, and institutional discourses such as medical discourses, legal discourses, etc., abstracted from the body. This culturally engrained Enlightenment thinking constitutes a particular production of the nature of subjectivity that naturalizes the existence of the self as the core of the subject, an underlying truth outside of and prior to discourse.

Thus, this Enlightenment project, i.e. the production of the self’s nature, is also the production of truth. Foucault argues that the confession—originally religious, then taken up in scientific discourse, and now common to all kinds of everyday discourse—is “one of the West’s most highly valued techniques for producing

---

41 Ibid., 315
According to Foucault, “[The confession] plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life…one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell.” The act of confessing “whatever is most difficult to tell” imagines self-awareness as only attainable through telling. In other words, if a subject does not confess, it is impossible for her to know herself—and consequently for others to know her—because she has not articulated the “truth” of herself. The logic undergirding penance, a Christian sacrament and the origin of the confessional form, takes for granted that the subject must continuously confess in order to both absolve guilt and aspire to be her true self. Thus, before the confessing subject even speaks, she is always already guilty, and the incitement to confess is intimately linked to the subject’s notion of her “true self”. By locating the subject’s “truth” in some underlying nature, the subject becomes obligated to extract and speak her truth in order to access her “true nature” and become a legible subject to others. Beginning with the nineteenth century, and the emergence of scientific discourses, “[Confession] tended no longer to be concerned solely with what the subject wished to hide, but with what was hidden from himself, being incapable of coming to light except gradually and through the labor of a confession.” The subject can only discover whatever is true about herself and her “nature” through telling. Foucault argues that as the confession became increasingly central to the West throughout the past few centuries, we also witness a “metamorphosis” in literature: “we have passed from a pleasure to be recounted…to a literature ordered according to the infinite task of

---

42 Foucault, 59
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid., 66
extracting from the depths of oneself…a truth which the very form of the confession holds out like a shimmering image.”\textsuperscript{45} Confession, i.e. the “infinite task” that each individual must take upon herself, is thus the performative production of truth. Not only must the subject confess to extract her “truth,” but also her “truth” does not exist outside of this telling. It is through telling that we, in the West, produce our own “nature” and performatively produce what we deeply feel is our true self.

Moreover, these same confessional discourses bring into being not just a “true nature,” but also the \textit{embodied} self. Imagining that discourse merely produces a self—and that the body stands outside of discourse—divorces the mind from the body and naturalizes the body as a prior truth. Importantly, this understanding of the body as a prior truth is powerfully taken up by pentecostal and lesbian feminist memoir, where the body itself testifies through glossolalia and Bechdel’s drawings of her and Jill’s bodies entwined in bed illustrate her lesbian desire. As both Foucault and Butler argue, however, discourse also \textit{makes} bodies (Thus, discursively producing the body as a prior truth.) because language shapes our social understanding of what bodies look like and can do. Butler explains, “For Foucault, the body is not ‘sexed’ in any significant sense prior to its determination within a discourse through which it becomes invested with the ‘idea’ of natural or essential sex…”\textsuperscript{46} The sex of a given body only comes into being through the discourse that decides or takes for granted that bodies in fact have an essential sex. We naturalize bodies through language; it is impossible to disentangle materiality and language because bodies only become intelligible through discourse. Just as there is no self that comes before the law, for

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 59
\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Gender Trouble}, 117
Butler, there is no body that exists prior to the law—bodies too, are made in relation to the law. Butler ultimately uses Foucault’s line of reasoning to argue that the category of sex is just as culturally constructed as the category of gender. She explains, “If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender…”\textsuperscript{47} In other words, if we recognize “gender” as socially constructed and yet bodies as naturally sexed, what does it mean to say that gender is socially inscribed? Unless we challenge the naturalized category of sex and recognize the ways in which our ideas about gender have shaped our understanding of sex and bodies—thought to be biological, natural, and freestanding—we further naturalize and normalize gender. Butler argues, “Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pregiven sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established.”\textsuperscript{48}

Discourses of and about gender produce what we perceive and have long understood as pregiven sex that stands before the law, outside of language. And yet, truly challenging gender means recognizing that bodies, and all that we imagine and perceive as material, natural, or biological, are in fact made by discourses.

Butler’s argument is building off of Foucault’s thesis in \textit{The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1.}, which is that the very category of sex has been established and naturalized through the discourse that contains it. He argues,

\begin{quote}
It is through sex—in fact, an imaginary point determined by the deployment of sexuality—that each individual has to pass in order to have access to his own intelligibility (seeing that it is both the hidden aspect and the generative principle of meaning), to the whole of his body (since it is a real and
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 10-11
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid..
threatened part of it, while symbolically constituting the whole), to his identity (since it joins the force of a drive to the singularity of a history). 49

Sex renders the subject intelligible to both herself and others, and is necessary to the subject’s understanding of her identity and the “truth” of herself. And yet, sex is an “imaginary point” that comes into being through the “deployment of sexuality,” the deployment of discourses that performatively produce identity and the subject’s “true nature.” This “true nature” that becomes intelligible through discourse is not just a true self to which the subject aspires—imagining so would naturalize and render the body prediscursive—but is the subject’s embodied self. As Butler and Foucault have proven, the production of truth taken up by Western discourse that occurs through telling not only performatively produces identity, but also makes bodies. And yet, as I will show in later chapters, these pentecostal and lesbian feminist self-narratives performatively produce bodies that are powerful sites of truth and identity.

If discourse makes embodied selves, then selves and bodies are performatively produced through all different kinds of discourses, including self-narrative and memoir. Stories about identity—particularly about the arrival at an identity, such as coming out and conversion narratives—do not describe the self, but rather bring into being the subject’s body. In this way, the narratives we tell about ourselves are embodied narratives. The narratological decisions that we make in order to communicate what we perceive as the “truth” of the story and the truth of ourselves are not rhetorical mechanisms that merely help us articulate identity and life history. Rather, narrative constitutes truth itself because it does not exist outside the discourse in which it is bound up. When we tell stories “about” our bodies, what they desire,

49 Foucault, 155
and how we use them, whether it’s speaking in tongues, laying hands over another person for healing, a woman’s desire for sex with another woman, we make our bodies through telling. Butler argues, “Paradoxically, the reconceptualization of identity as an effect, that is, as produced or generated, opens up possibilities of ‘agency’ that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed.”

Recognizing the ways in which we discursively bring into being selves and bodies through the stories we tell both politicizes language and accounts for the ways in which we, as agents, construct our own deeply felt self-discoveries. Butler goes on, “Construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible.” The subject telling her story through a particular set of narratological decisions is exercising her agency to bring the true self to which she aspires into being and ultimately embody that particular identity.

The ways in which a subject can and does construct her true identity through narrative constitutes a particular agency that is certainly creative, but also represents a great deal of suffering and psychic pain. Butler, explicating Freud’s ideas, explains how mourning and melancholy are central to character formation. According to Butler, “The self only becomes a self on the condition that it has suffered a separation…a loss which is suspended and provisionally resolved through a melancholic incorporation of some ‘Other.’” Loss, suffering, and melancholy create and bring into being the self, which incorporates the loss that has been experienced into its very formation. She explains, “In the experience of losing another human

---

50 Gender Trouble, 187  
51 Ibid.  
52 “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 316
being whom one has loved, Freud argues, the ego is said to incorporate that other into
the very structure of the ego, taking on attributes of the other and ‘sustaining’ the
other through magical acts of imitation.”\textsuperscript{53} The result of this incorporation is that the
self is not only inseparable from the loss it has suffered, but is fundamentally made
through suffering, and through the ego’s imitation of the other. Butler goes on, citing
Freud, “This identification is not simply momentary or occasional, but becomes a
new structure of identity...”\textsuperscript{54} Our identities, and the permanency we attribute to
them, are produced through identification with loss. Although Freud is speaking
specifically of the loss of a person, Butler is extending this argument to also include
loss that occurs in the realm of the symbolic. Claiming an particular identity does not
mandate that the individual in question must first experience the death of a loved one,
but rather that she experience suffering or a symbolic loss that becomes foundational
to her sense of self. Thus, the process through which we self-construct our self-
discoveries through storytelling is also one deeply characterized by melancholy and
suffering inseparable from that self-construction. As I will show, in \textit{Fun Home}
Alison Bechdel creatively reassembles her childhood memories of her queer desires,
but her project of self-construction is also a process through which she mourns the
death of her father, for which, at least on one level, she takes responsibility. Pastor
John Russell, in his sermon about his conversion, spends the majority of his narrative
describing his past suffering in graphic detail, emphasizing the importance of the
relationship between who he is now and what traumatic hardships he \textit{necessarily}
endured before becoming, finally, the true self to which he aspires. The stories we tell

\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Gender Trouble}, 73
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 74
that produce our bodies are thus characterized by agency and suffering, loss and hope, death and creative possibility. In the next two chapters, I will explore the ways in which lesbian feminist coming out stories and pentecostal conversion narratives performatively produce the embodied selves that they purportedly describe through similar narratological decisions and guiding epistemological logic, and how these stories navigate both creativity and suffering.
Chapter Two: Remembering and Retelling Queer Desire in Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*

“Memoir, for me, is like my religion in that it requires a certain leap of faith.”
- Alison Bechdel

The coming out narrative is not just an account of how the protagonist comes to understand her sexuality, but also performatively brings into being her lesbian identity. As Foucault and Butler have shown us, discourse constitutes the embodied self and thus we do not exist outside the stories we tell. Consequently, these stories about identity—whether coming out stories or conversion narratives—actually produce the “true self” they supposedly describe. Saxey argues in *Homoplot*, “Rather than simply reflecting pre-existing sexual identities, [coming out] stories work to construct identities.” Movements such as Gay Liberation have established important political and ideological frameworks that are deeply influential of the ways in which we tell our stories; consequently, an individual’s coming out narrative is also a story about the cultural ideas and norms, politics, and history that surround the author. We tell our stories in relation to our friends and lovers, to genre, to culture and society, to politics, and to the history that we inherit. Narrative, as a performative production of an individual’s embodied self, is inextricable from the larger context in which it is bound up.

Thus, the author’s imagined audience is significant to the ways in which her coming out story takes shape. Foucault explicates how the production of truth in the

---

55 Bechdel, Alison. Presentation and Q&A with Alison Bechdel. Wesleyan University, Middletown. 19 Sept. 2012. Reading.
56 Saxey, 2
57 Ibid., 3
West is deeply shaped by the ways in which the confessional narrative is formed by a specific power dynamic between the confessor and her audience. According to Foucault:

```
The confession…is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile…58
```

We cannot isolate the subject speaking and her story from her real or imagined audience. Rather, the subject narrates her story in relation to the power and authority of her audience. Zimmerman addresses the role of audience in lesbian coming out stories. She argues, “Lesbians recreate our past histories to conform to our current identities, which we construct in the face of extreme social condemnation.”59 She maintains that this often results in “conformity with a sometimes rigid community image.”60 Moreover, she continues, it is precisely through this conformity that “a woman knows she is a lesbian.”61 While I believe this is certainly an important point, I argue that Zimmerman’s insistence on the rigid conformity apparently pervasive in lesbian coming out stories obscures significant tensions between elements of diversity and uniformity: namely, the ways in which the lesbian subject self-consciously navigates her identity in relation to dominant notions of what being a lesbian is supposed to feel like, and how her coming out story elaborates on and subsequently exposes those dynamics. Thus, although the power dynamics that exist between the

---

58 Foucault, 61
60 Ibid..
61 Ibid..
individual speaking and the audience prescribing are very real, they also allow for significant agency on behalf of the subject.

Saxey, unlike Zimmerman, focuses on the importance of audience but also challenges the idea that lesbian autobiography is primarily a project that takes up the production of stable, uniform identity. To quite the contrary, Saxey argues, if we must broadly characterize lesbian coming out stories, they are bound together by their “questioning, destabilizing nature.” In other words, lesbian autobiography troubles some of the foundational elements we often presume to inherently belong to an autobiographical, confessional narrative about identity. As Saxey goes on to argue, “Lesbian autobiography questions some of autobiography’s most basic foundations: the veracity of memory, the linear progress of self-development, and one’s awareness of one’s own desires;” in doing so, lesbian memoir challenges the notion of a “unified autobiographical ‘I’” and exposes the ways in which discourse constructs the self it purports to describe. Saxey attributes this pattern in lesbian autobiography to the influence of feminist politics in the 1970s, specifically the rise of “lesbian feminism.” Citing some lesbian feminist texts from the women’s movement that “re-position same-sex desire as a feminist act in itself,” Saxey argues that the movement frames lesbian sexuality as the practice of feminism, “a start-point to interrogate and politicize all interactions between women, and all women’s sexual lives.” In other words, lesbian feminist coming out stories self-consciously explore the ways in which the female subject must recreate herself in relation to her political situation in a patriarchal, heterosexist society.

---

62 Saxey, 79
63 Ibid., 84
64 Ibid., 80
As a result, lesbian feminist coming out stories generally tend to emphasize and elaborate on the processes involved in coming out. As Saxey argues:

The overall shape of the narrative is also transformed. The standard coming out story, for males in particular, often depicts a gradual progress toward self-awareness and public declaration. There may be setbacks (school bullying leads to more months in the closet) or sudden leaps forward (an affair makes a boy more confident in his identity). But the protagonist shows a consistently expanding self-knowledge and has an accurate recall of events. The plot of the lesbian feminist coming out story tends toward a less linear model.65

Following Saxey’s lead, I argue that the lesbian feminist coming out story is not “a linear progression of events but a progressive re-assessment of the past.”66 These lesbian feminist accounts from the 1970s share an emphasis on the processes of remembering, reassessing, and retelling personal histories, all part of the deliberate construction of a new sexual identity. Thus, lesbian feminist coming out narratives consist of intricate acts of retrospective intervention, ultimately narrating the subject’s reorientation in time and space in ways that do not conform to a linear model of progress. While discussing Joanna Russ’ narrative in The Coming Out Stories, Saxey argues, “So, Russ’ story records not a consistent movement towards lesbian identity but a back and forth motion of successes and reversals. Desires come and go…memory of having had these desires is lost and then reassembled.”67 Although Saxey is describing one particular coming out story, I argue that her analysis more broadly illustrates the complex narrative discourse that characterizes lesbian feminist autobiography.

In this chapter, I will explore Saxey’s claims at length by offering a close reading of Alison Bechdel’s graphic novel Fun Home (2006), which unfolds during

65 Ibid.
66 Ibid., 81
67 Ibid., 82
the 1960s, 70s, and early 80s. Bechdel’s memoir chronicles her complicated
relationship with her father, who committed suicide shortly after she came out to her
parents. To be sure, *Fun Home* is much more than just a coming out story—it is also a
life narrative, a childhood memoir, a family “tragicomic,” and a story that grapples
with and ultimately charts significant parts of Bechdel’s father’s own personal
history. I argue that Bechdel’s coming out story in *Fun Home* constitutes what Saxey
calls a progressive reassessment of the past, a self-conscious revision of personal
history that actively makes meaning of her childhood and adolescence. Julia Watson,
a theorist of autobiography, argues, “A memoir about memoirs, memory, and acts of
storytelling, *Fun Home* is at all times an ironic and self-conscious life narrative.”

Taking Watson’s lead, I argue that Bechdel’s narrative emphasizes acts of
remembering, reassessing, and retelling and explores the ways that these acts
performatively construct lesbian identity, in ways that represent both her creative
agency and her deep suffering. If coming out consists of the subject’s reorientation in
time and space—in that the subject discovers what she believes is her true self and
consequently adopts a new identity, bringing that “true self” into being—Bechdel’s
coming out narrative does not conform to a linear model of self-growth and progress.
Her adoption of lesbian identity is not the excavation of a hidden, dormant self.
Rather, her narrative performatively brings the “self” purported to be beneath her
identity into being through acts of retrospective intervention, through the reinvention
of personal history. In this way, *Fun Home* effectively troubles the notion of the

---

68 Watson, Julia. "Autographic Disclosures and Genealogies of Desire in Alison Bechdel’s Fun
unified autobiographical ‘I’” and exposes the ways in which narrative discourse performatively constructs the embodied self it supposedly describes.

I will first examine the ways in which particular narratological decisions bring into being Bechdel’s lesbian feminist identity through a progressive reevaluation of the past, as opposed to a linear narrative that chronicles the realization of a preexisting self. As Jane Tolmie, who researches autobiography and queer theory, argues, “Fun Home’s structure is recursive, returning again and again to the same sites of emotional pain: the author’s coming out, her father’s suicide, the pressures of compulsory heterosexuality and the always-impossible search for lost time.”

Next, I will demonstrate how Bechdel’s coming out narrative emphasizes the social processes involved in coming out—e.g., reading books, meeting different people and forming new relationships, etc.—and the ways in which they shape and consequently bring into being Bechdel’s lesbian body through narrative. Lastly, I will bring these two critical explorations together by investigating Bechdel’s discovery of the “I,” and what her childhood memories of her prepubescent, epistemological anxiety have to do with her coming out story. How do her acts of retrospective introspection and intervention—which, because of Fun Home’s recursive structure, happens again and again and again—performatively discover and unearth an “I”? Moreover, how does this narratively happen in a medium such as a graphic novel—that is, how does the medium of Fun Home complicate or at least add nuance to the dominant lesbian feminist coming out story that Saxey and Zimmerman describe? And lastly, how does Bechdel’s story both employ and unsettle traditional narrative conventions that

---

characterize the confessional model (i.e., as described by Foucault) that has historically shaped the structure of identity narratives?

Bechdel first comes out to the reader in the text when she announces her new sexual identity to her parents in a letter. She depicts this in a panel, where, “I am a lesbian,” in large, typewriter font floats above Bechdel sitting at her typewriter. Arguably, this event in the text sets up the relationship between her queerness, her father’s queerness, and his death. The few panels prior to her announcement depict Bechdel as a young adolescent reading the definition of “queer” in the dictionary (see fig. 1). The first panel, which takes up more than half the page, shows an open page of the dictionary, the relevant definitions of “queer” highlighted; her commentary on the panel explicitly draws on the dictionary entry and describes the ways in which her “father’s death was a queer business—queer in every sense of that multivalent word.” Despite the dictionary’s exhaustive list of definitions, and the abundance of connections Bechdel makes between each definition and her father’s death, the dictionary still queerly fails her. As she includes in text above the last panel on the page, “But most compellingly at the time, his death was bound up for me with the one definition conspicuously missing from our mammoth Webster’s:” specifically, “queer” as denoting homosexuality. She uses this failure to narratively connect her coming out story to her father’s suicide, which occurs only four months after her announcement to her parents. A few panels after she comes out to both the reader and her parents, she receives a call from her mother, who reveals to Bechdel that her father has had affairs with men. Bechdel writes above the next panel, “I had been

---

71 Ibid., 57
72 Ibid..
upstaged, demoted from protagonist in my own drama to comic relief in my parents’
tragedy.”73 From the very beginning, her coming out story is intricately bound up
with her relationship with her father and his own queerness. As a result, Bechdel’s
coming out narrative unfolds recursively, simultaneously remembering, reevaluating,
reconstructing, and ultimately making meaning of memories of her father, his
queerness, and their queer relationship.

In the same chapter of *Fun Home*, Bechdel’s coming out recurs, this time
arising from her remembrances of her family’s three-week tour of Europe, a vacation
taken during her early childhood (see fig. 2). She speculates, “Perhaps this was when
I cemented the unspoken compact with them that I would never get married, that I
would carry on to live the artist’s life they had each abdicated;” on the next page,
above a panel depicting her realization, she continues, “That is in fact what came to
pass, but not in the way any of us had expected.”74 Bechdel’s coming out story
narratively emerges from and is consequently bound up in her memories of her
family’s vacation in Europe. Her reassessment of these memories, as the pivotal
“perhaps” signifies in the tentative connection she draws between her experiences and
her later recognition of her sexuality, is an act that exemplifies what Saxey refers to
as a “progressive reassessment of the past.” Saxey argues, “In lesbian feminist
accounts, remembering, reassessing and renaming memories become deliberate
efforts and an active part of adopting an identity.”75 In this particular set of panels
depicting the vacation, Bechdel remembers and shares with the reader particular

73 Ibid., 58
74 Ibid., 73, 74
75 Saxey, 81
memories of enjoying what she calls “freedom from convention.” Specifically, she illustrates herself convincing her parents to purchase hiking boots for her because “girls wear them too,” and wearing shorts to the beach instead of conventional girl’s swim attire. One panel depicts Bechdel and her brother building sandcastles on the beach, wearing identical shorts and completely indistinguishable from each other (see fig. 2). Arguably, this powerful panel illustrates her own process of “remembering, reassessing, and renaming” her memories in constructing a lesbian identity that accounts for the difference she experiences as a child. The acts of revisiting and retelling these memories from her childhood are narratological decisions that attach new significance to these experiences, ultimately constructing an identity narrative that makes meaning of these memories. Through these particular acts of storytelling, Bechdel’s narrative performatively brings into being the “true self” purported to exist all along; her narrative discourse, rather than just describing her lesbian identity, exposes the ways in which she constructs it.

Throughout her narrative, Bechdel recounts childhood memory after childhood memory that she retrospectively ties into her construction of a lesbian identity. One of the most compelling and narratively complex memories is an early exchange between Bechdel and her father while they are sitting in a luncheonette (see fig. 9 through fig. 11). While she is a very young child, she watches as a woman with a man’s haircut and wearing men’s clothes enters the restaurant in which she and her father are sitting. The text accompanying the panel that depicts Bechdel staring at the woman reads, “…like a traveler in a foreign country who runs into someone from

---

76 Bechdel, 73
77 Ibid.
home—someone they’ve never spoken to but know by sight—I recognized her with a surge of joy.”78 Her father, noticing the shift in his daughter’s attention, asks her if she wants to look like the woman, and she answers—without a real choice—that she does not. Watson argues that for Bechdel, this scene is a “pivotal childhood moment of recognizing her lesbian identity.”79 Moreover, in retelling this experience, “The young Alison contrasts her own identification, presented as innate and ‘hard-wired,’ with her father’s ongoing disapproval of her rejection of femininity.”80 I take issue with Watson’s argument that Bechdel, at the age of four or five, recognizes her lesbian identity, and that she consequently represents this identification as “innate and ‘hard-wired.’” Rather, Bechdel is constructing this narrative after she comes out at age nineteen, and as a consequence, this particular scene is in complete service of her later identity. This scene does not try to prove that she has “always” been a lesbian, but instead exemplifies how her later adoption of her lesbian identity enables her to retrospectively intervene in her own memories of the past, and creatively make meaning of her childhood. She even prefaces her own account of this experience by confessing, “I’d been lying too, for a long time. Since I was four or five.”81 The difficulty of this scene—her early desire to look like the butch woman, the added complication of her father’s disapproval and his own hidden desires, unknown to her at the time—is something she can only see and explore retrospectively. As Saxey argues, “Common motifs [of lesbian feminist coming out narratives] include amnesia

78 Ibid., 118
79 Watson, 42
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid., 117
and the difficult excavation of past experiences to be seen in a new light.”

Bechdel does not recognize when she is a small child that she is a lesbian; her coming out narrative cannot and does not swiftly swing from ignorance to complete self-understanding in this one moment she has with her father in the luncheonette. Rather, she is excavating and reassembling what she now perceives as memories of desires that have been otherwise lost to conscious memory, thoroughly explicating their complications in light of now knowing the truth about her father’s sexual desires and her own sexuality.

Moreover, as the “too” in “I’d been lying too, for a long time” evokes, Bechdel retrospectively complicates this event by connecting her father’s disapproval of her continuous rejection of femininity to his own rejection of his queer desires. She recognizes the ways in which her father’s policing of her gender is bound up in his policing of his own gender and sexuality, to the point where they become inextricable. In this way, just as “the vision of the truck-driving buldyke sustained [Bechdel] through the years…perhaps it haunted [her] father” as an ongoing reminder of his own repressed desires. Similar to the panels depicting Bechdel’s experiences in Europe, she is self-consciously reassembling her early experiences with queerness and attaching new significance to her memories, effectively exposing the ways in which she performatively brings her lesbian identity into being through narrative discourse. Bechdel is also retrospectively intervening in the retelling of these events in light of her father’s queerness and the ways in which their relationship later develops throughout her childhood. In other words, her knowledge of what will come

82 Saxey, 81
83 Bechdel, 119
to pass enriches the complexity of the narrative discourse in this particular scene. Overall, Bechdel investigates this event not as the concrete moment in which she recognizes her lesbian identity and holds onto this understanding—as Watson argues—but rather, uses her memory of this experience to meditate self-consciously on the ways in which her reassessment and retelling of this moment in light of later events produces her lesbian identity, specifically in relationship to her father’s queerness.

Bechdel is able to narratively explore the intricacies of her queer relationship with her father through the medium of the graphic novel in such a way that complicates lesbian autobiography and opens up the tradition to new visual and textual ways of telling stories about identity. Arguably, the most striking example of the way in which Bechdel accomplishes this is a panel that depicts her younger self and her father getting dressed for a wedding while standing in front of a mirror, Bechdel’s mother standing besides them (see fig. 8). Hands on her hips, Bechdel is looking wearily up at her father as he simultaneously criticizes her appearance and adjusts his tie. The complexity of the panel—the multiple speech bubbles emitting from all three characters, the multiple insertions of commentary, the textual clarifications of what she and her father are wearing, as well as the mirror itself, which doubles the drawings of both young Bechdel and her father—enables her to create a narratively compressed scene that accounts for the chief complexity of their queer relationship: not only were both Bechdel and her father queer “inverts” but, as she writes in the text accompanying the panel, they were “inversions of one
another.” The illustration of them both standing before a mirror exemplifies this main complexity because they are standing in relationship to one another, their reflections quite literally constituting inversions of each other. As she writes near the top of the panel, “While I was trying to compensate for something unmanly in him...he was attempting to express something feminine through me.” Her illustration of this specific incident grounds her generalized characterization of the queer and complex relationship between the respective gender expressions of Bechdel and her father. In other words, the panel’s illustration clearly shows the ways in which Mr. Bechdel routinely polices his daughter’s gender while she, perhaps unconsciously, grapples with and responds to her father’s femininity through her gender expression, as her mother explicitly brings her husband’s queerness into the open when she remarks, “You’re going to upstage the bride in that suit.” The juxtaposition between her father’s velvet suit and a decidedly ungirly dress, as Bechdel’s captions pointing to their respective outfits clarify, exemplifies their inversion. Arguably, this complex exploration of the queer relationship between Bechdel and her father is made possible through the medium of the graphic novel. She depicts a scene from her childhood and is able to overlay her commentary—her clear retrospective interventions and present analysis of their past queer relationship—over a memory that she is actively remembering and reinterpreting through illustration. In this way, the mode of the graphic novel allows her, through combining text and illustration, to expose and then further complicate the ways in

84 Bechdel, 98
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
which Saxey’s notion of the progressive reassessment of the past fundamentally works.

Additionally, another significant part of Bechdel’s focus on acts of storytelling is her emphasis on rereading. After she begins dating her first girlfriend, Joan, she simultaneously starts exploring sex and the political dimensions of her sexuality through rereading and reinterpreting books from her childhood while in bed with Joan (see fig. 6 and fig. 7). As she includes in text above a series of panels depicting Joan and herself both naked and reading together, “Some of our favorite childhood stories were revealed as propaganda…others as pornography. In the harsh light of my dawning feminism, everything looked different.”87 Here, Bechdel’s rereadings of *The World of Pooh* and *James and the Giant Peach* exemplify the larger processes of reevaluation that are critical to the construction of her lesbian feminist identity. This becomes clear through the explicit sexualization of the scene; as she explicates the relationship between rereading and her lesbian sexuality, Joan is shown naked and lying in between Bechdel’s legs, reading from *James and the Giant Peach* as Bechdel laughs at the description of the inside of a peach. The sexualization of these panels graphically represents what Bechdel calls an “entwined political and sexual awakening,” and also exemplifies the relational production of the embodied self in that she’s making herself in relation to others, like Joan.88 Moreover, through these acts of rereading, she comes to understand the difference she experienced as a child in terms of her new realization of her own political situation. As Saxey argues, “Rather than seeing only a small minority of unusual women as affected by the social

87 Ibid., 81
88 Ibid..
treatment of same-sex desire, lesbian feminism emphasizes that all women in a patriarchal society have their sexuality policed.”\textsuperscript{89} Lesbian feminist coming out stories arguably emphasize the protagonist’s rereading and subsequent interrogation of cultural products and norms (including literary texts once presumed to be innocuous), which ultimately reveal the effects of a patriarchal, sexist society that actively upholds a norm of compulsory heterosexuality. Thus, Bechdel’s depiction of her rereading *James and the Giant Peach* in bed with Joan is both humorous and deeply indicative of a process central to the construction of lesbian feminist identity.

Tolmie argues that in their rereading, “The dripping peach represents the lusciousness of the female sex parts in a manner both hilarious and transgressive, so that we read and indeed see with new eyes that: ‘the walls were wet and sticky, and peach juice was dripping from the ceiling.’”\textsuperscript{90} As Tolmie suggests, Bechdel’s recollection of her and Joan’s sexy rereading invites the reader to also take part in the same critical reevaluation of the cultural norms and texts once presumed to be innocent.

Additionally, as Tolmie argues, large sections of *Fun Home* narratively constitute rereadings and retellings of some canonical books. In this way, Tolmie contends, “[Bechdel] cheerfully queers the canon and politicizes the autobiographical, while participating comfortably in an elitist literary universe of referentiality, name-dropping and prior texts.”\textsuperscript{91} Bechdel references Proust, Joyce, and Shakespeare to both frame and enrich the complexity of her narrative discourse and also create a memoir that is not only in conversation with these texts, but deeply involves them in the performative production of her “I.” As Saxey argues, lesbian feminist narrative

\textsuperscript{89} Saxey, 79
\textsuperscript{90} Tolmie 87, Fun Home 81
\textsuperscript{91} Tolmie, 87
challenges the authority of a “unified autobiographical ‘I’” in that it exposes the ways in which narrative discourse produces the self it supposedly describes. I would like to add that the considerable narrative emphasis on rereading in *Fun Home* also calls into question the abstract notion of a unified and autonomous self that we inherit from the Enlightenment in that it successfully exposes the ways in which the self is both social and constructed intertextually through referential narrative discourse. This not only occurs in acts of rereading books, but also in Bechdel’s rereadings of personal documents, such as photographs found in her family’s possession. As Watson argues,

> *Fun Home* incorporates photographs in several ways: as the chapter head image for each chapter, and at key moments throughout the narrative, where the act of rereading them—some only discovered after her father’s death—is the impetus to her own acts of recognition and autobiographical identification with her father’s desire…

Watson emphasizes the relationship between acts of rereading and “acts of recognition” and identification; not only do acts of rereading—whether Bechdel is rereading canonical texts or personal documents—enrich the complexity of Bechdel’s narrative discourse, but the act itself becomes the “impetus” for autobiographical identification. Acts of rereading and retelling bring her “true self,” her autobiographical “I,” into being in such a way that simultaneously challenges the authority of that “I.”

Just as Bechdel’s narrative is largely told through acts of remembering, retelling, and rereading, the story events—of which there are few, but they are recursively encountered—also emphasize the social processes involved in her coming out process. Accompanying a panel that depicts Bechdel standing in her campus bookstore holding a book, she writes, “My realization at nineteen that I was a lesbian

---

92 Watson, 38
came about in a manner consistent with my bookish upbringing.” In this way, Bechdel’s “realization” is not so much a recognition of an “innate” or “hardwired” truth, but rather the making-real of something; the realization does what it real-izes. This “real-ization,” which she visually depicts as a large, bold exclamation mark inside a speech bubble emitting from her mouth, comes about while she reads a book of interviews with self-identified lesbians about their identities (see fig. 3). This initial act of reading prompts her real-ization, which soon turns into longer process of self-discovery. According to Bechdel, “That first volume led quickly to others, ” a process which the six panel spread on the same page depicts quite thoroughly (see fig. 4). Looking through other books prompts Bechdel, a few days later, to purchase her own copy of another book she finds. As she writes above the next panel, “This book referred to other books, which I sought out in the library.” Soon after, she looks up “homosexuality” in the school library’s card catalogue and even begins searching through the collection in the public library. Thus, in this series of panels, she emphasizes the progression from a single book she picks up in the campus bookstore to a full-blown public exploration in the town library.

Bechdel’s initial revelation is significant in that she claims a particular moment as pivotal, a concrete experience through which she claims to recognize the truth about herself, but her lesbian identity is ultimately shaped and brought into being in distinctly embodied ways through her relationship with the books she is reading after her initial real-ization. One panel shows Bechdel masturbating as she reads the books she has taken out from the library, which represents an inextricable

---

93 Bechdel, 74
94 Ibid., 75
95 Ibid.
intertwining of the social processes allowing Bechdel to simultaneously explore her newfound lesbian identity, its political dimensions, and sexual desire itself (see fig. 5). Her own processes of self-creation and the ways in which she embodies her lesbian desire necessarily happen in relation to others. Bechdel self-consciously shows the reader through her illustration how her own coming out story, the lesbian feminist identity she takes up, and her sexual desire are all in conversation with other texts, the stories of other people and books about lesbian desire and political movements and subcultures like Gay Liberation and the women’s movement. As Saxey argues, in reference to the creation of coming out stories, “That [process of selecting significant events, and arranging and interpreting them] will always be affected by the culture and politics that surround the author, including the coming out stories that already exist.” ⁹⁶ Exposing and elaborating on the dynamics of this process, as Bechdel does, further demonstrates that narrative is not only significant to the construction of lesbian identity, but literally produces embodied desire.

Bechdel’s narrative also emphasizes her experiences of forming new relationships and their significance within her coming out story. As much as she finds her “solitary” exploration of her newfound sexual identity pleasurable, it becomes increasingly clear to Bechdel that she would eventually have to “leave this academic plane and enter the human fray.” ⁹⁷ The next two panels illustrate attending a meeting of the “Gay Union” at her college (see fig. 5). As she explains in text above one of the panels, her attendance constituted a “public declaration” that left her feeling

---
⁹⁶ Saxey, 3
⁹⁷ Bechdel, 76
“exhilarated.””98 Much later on in Fun Home, when Bechdel retells this experience partly as a revision of Ulysses, she argues, “Odysseus sailing to Hades could not have felt more trepidation than I did entering that room…nor could he have been more transformed by the initiation that befell him there. My quest shifted abruptly outward.”99 The first half of this text appears above a panel depicting Bechdel entering a room of students, alone and nervous, and then the second half remains below a series of panels in which she is sharing a beer with the very same students, telling her roommate she is a lesbian, and then typing and mailing the letter to her parents (see fig. 15). These social processes are all integral to what she refers to as the shift of her “quest” outward, a stage in her coming out that seems public and somewhat final. Lastly, imperative to Bechdel’s coming out is her involvement with Joan, her first girlfriend. After attending the Gay Union meeting and other social events, including a gay dance, she writes, “The notion that my sordid personal life had some sort of larger import was strange, but seductive.”100 In the next panel, she is naked, in bed with Joan, and the text above them reads, “And by midterm I had been seduced completely,” resulting in a “fusion of word and deed,” as epitomized by Bechdel’s illustration of the various books strewn on their shared bed (see fig. 6).101 Her description of the fusion of “word and deed” suggests that before sleeping with Joan, her lesbian sexuality was contained to the realm of the hypothetical, the untested, until Joan’s bed becomes a site where what Bechdel describes as the “academic plane” and her sexual desires are united in such a way that literally

98 Ibid.
99 Ibid., 210
100 Ibid., 80
101 Bechdel, 80
produces her lesbian body. Overall, although throughout the course of *Fun Home* Bechdel narrates several times the moment in which she, alone in her campus bookstore, realizes that she is a lesbian, her narrative places significant emphasis on the social processes—such as reading and rereading, entering a different social scene, forming new relationships and exploring sexual desires, both by herself and with Joan—involved in coming out, which ultimately produce not just an “identity,” but her embodied self.

Bechdel’s focus on acts of storytelling, including acts of remembering, retelling, and rereading, and her narrative’s emphasis on the social processes essential to her coming out story all “discover” and “unearth” an “I” that her story performatively brings into being. As Butler argues, “the professionalization of gayness requires a certain performance and production of a ‘self’ which is the constituted effect of a discourse that claims to ‘represent’ that self as a prior truth.”102 As I have shown, Bechdel’s acts of retrospective insight and intervention are all narratological decisions that are self-conscious forms of meaning-making that creatively navigate the suffering and joy she has experienced and continues to experience. These decisions are ways of revising her personal history that ultimately produce the “self” as an effect of the story that purports to merely describe that self. In this way, her “I” comes into being through the complexity of her recursive narrative discourse and her progressive reevaluation of the past, as opposed to a linear narrative that represents Bechdel’s self as fully formed from the very beginning. As Saxey argues, “Portraying constant self-knowledge means the protagonist keeps a firm hold on the authority to tell her own story. But depicting amnesia and false

102 “Imitation and Gender Subordination,” 310
consciousness…can also carry a powerful message—that oppression is so strong as to warp even one’s sense of self.103 Bechdel’s efforts to reassemble desires that have been otherwise lost to conscious memory—such as the incident with her father in the luncheonette—bring into being her lesbian identity but also simultaneously challenge her authority to tell her own story; they introduce epistemological anxieties and also call into question the notion of an “I,” a “true self” that lies beneath the story.

Bechdel first challenges her own authority as an autobiographer in Fun Home when she is only a pre-adolescent. A few months after she begins her first diary, she remembers how “the minutely-lettered phrase I think begins to crop up between [her] comments” (see fig. 12).104 Above the next panel, Bechdel writes, “It was a sort of epistemological crisis. How did I know that the things I was writing were absolutely, objectively true?” Bechdel’s depictions of her prepubescent anxiety, concerned with her reliability as a narrator—even when it came to her own self-perceptions and observations—exemplifies Saxey’s argument that lesbian feminist autobiography effectively challenges the notion of the “unified autobiographical ‘I,’” the idea that the self is autonomous and primarily a thinking thing. In fact, Bechdel’s compulsion to preface her declarative statements with “I think” and thus question their validity constitutes a stunning reversal of the traditional Cartesian notion that thinking is complete and sole validation of the truth of existence. Her epistemological crisis worsens when, as she writes, “To save time I created a shorthand version of I think, a curvy circumflex.”106 The panel below this text consists of a close up of a diary entry,

103 Saxey, 88
104 Bechdel, 141
105 Ibid..
106 Ibid., 142
the circumflex symbol for “I think” drawn before each sentence (see fig. 13). Soon after, she begins drawing the symbol over whole entries in her diary, eventually nearly obscuring the content of the entries altogether (see fig. 14). As Watson argues, “The preteen notes she dutifully jots down are gradually engulfed by the emergence and persistence of a circumflex, an upside-down “V” that makes moments of subjective doubt…”\(^{107}\) Though later on, with puberty, Bechdel’s diary “becomes a site to encode discoveries about her lesbian identity, aided by library books on coming out that open a new world to her.”\(^{108}\) Thus, Bechdel’s diary is a site that both troubles the validity of an autobiographical “I” but also partially enables her to later discover the true self to which she aspires and real-ize her lesbian sexuality. To return briefly to Saxey’s argument, Bechdel’s depiction of the ways in which her preteen self questioned the validity of her own self-perceptions exemplifies her epistemological anxieties about both her ability to maintain “a firm hold on the authority to tell her own story” and to account for knowledge that is fundamentally unknowable, i.e., the origins of her queerness. When describing the process of writing a memoir, Bechdel claims, “I hope to experience a revelation about what this meaning is,” and refers to her own self-doubt and consequent reliance on external sources such as her own journal entries.\(^{109}\) Her self-doubt, her hope that through writing she will able to become a narrator who tells a coherent, meaningful story, confirms that her prepubescent epistemological crisis, in some form, continues to persist in her writing process.

\(^{107}\) Watson, 30
\(^{108}\) Ibid.
\(^{109}\) Presentation and Q&A with Alison Bechdel
Saxey acknowledges the risk a narrator runs when she openly questions the veracity of her memory and her own reliability as an autobiographer. She argues, “The stories [lesbian authors] produce risk appearing incoherent when measured against more traditional, linear coming out stories, and their narrators risk seeming lacking in authority when compared to more apparently self-assured speakers.” In other words, when a lesbian feminist writer depicts experiences of self-doubt, her narration may seem to lack authority, or even appear incoherent when read next to other coming out stories. This epistemological anxiety is at least partially due to the tradition of lesbian autobiography and its relationship to confession and case history. As Marylynne Diggs argues, “Despite differences of rhetorical context and purpose, the language of confession and case history has left unmistakable traces on contemporary lesbian autobiographies.” Saxey takes this point and astutely remarks that this relationship inevitably “leads us back to questioning why the identity narrative is again adopted and re-invested, after its association with older pathological narratives,” which were also, and continue to be, productive. Saxey is referring to the confessional model that, as Foucault argues, became integrated into scientific discourse in the nineteenth century. As Foucault contends, “Paradoxically, the *scentia sexualis* that emerged in the nineteenth century kept as its nucleus the singular ritual of obligatory and exhaustive confession, which in the Christian West was the first technique for producing the truth of sex.” The multiplicity of

110 Saxey, 82
112 Saxey, 82-83
113 Foucault, 68
discourses around sex that emerged in multiple disciplines, including medicine, psychology, psychiatry, biology, etc., all have their roots in Christian confession. As Foucault argues, the persecution and medicalization of peripheral sexualities—such as homosexuality—demanded that people with “abnormal” sexual desire and practices “step forward and speak, to make the difficult confession of what they were.” The medicalized policing of aberrant sexualities and the pathologization of homosexuality are both deeply bound up in the power of the confessional model as the way of “extracting” the truth of sex, while actually producing the “truth” itself, including the modern category of homosexuality, which did not exist before the 19th century. With this in mind, I wish to echo Diggs’ questions concerning the relationship between lesbian coming out stories and the historical import and authority of identity narratives:

In what way did confessional practices in the human sciences produce ‘identities’ and extend control over them? In what ways do lesbian confessional texts appropriate and resist abnormalization? How have self-identified lesbians manipulated the rhetoric of confession and case history? Do lesbian feminist coming out stories reinforce the validity and authority of pathologized narratives about sexuality—verifying an “I” that is indeed primarily a “thinking thing?” Or do they dispute and effectively pull apart the “I,” consequently subverting the authority of medicalized confessional narratives? In quite a few ways, in order to tell coherent and meaningful stories about ourselves, we must inhabit the narratives we use; we cannot move outside the stories we tell, but this does not simultaneously mean that we cannot also challenge or trouble the conventions of traditional identity narratives and the notion of an autobiographical “I” through

114 Ibid., 39
115 Diggs, 133
employing and manipulating them. Saxey contends that, “…the coming out story is not passively adopted but actively reworked. Lesbian feminism moves the issues of choice and similarity to the forefront (rather than innate identity and difference).”\textsuperscript{116}

Bechdel’s self-conscious emphasis on acts of remembering, retelling, reassembling, and rereading exemplifies the “reworking” of the traditional identity narrative. These aforementioned narratological decisions self-consciously and performatively produce an “I.” There is very much a true self for Bechdel—her lesbian identity is her real, embodied self—and yet, her ongoing epistemological crisis and attempt to account for her queer origins, which are, in many ways, fundamentally unknowable, and the questioning of the “I” that began when she was a prepubescent child, also pulls apart the notion that there is a “true self” outside of the narrative discourse through which she performatively produces and embodies her lesbian identity.

In this way, \textit{Fun Home}, like many other lesbian feminist coming out narratives, both chronicles a discovery of sexual identity while also effectively troubling the notion that the autobiographical self exists outside of narrative discourse.\textsuperscript{117} As Saxey writes:

\begin{quote}
The authors of any future texts will have their specific concerns but will again reach for the coming out story to explain things addressed by their fore-runners for decades; how a deeply-held identity can be unknown to the individual for years; \textit{how to describe one’s self-creation at the same time as one’s self-discovery}… [emphasis added].\textsuperscript{118}
\end{quote}

Recognizing and honoring the ways in which identity grounds, centers, is deeply-held and embodied while also challenging the notion that a “true self” remains lodged in

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{116} Saxey, 83
\textsuperscript{117} For examples of other lesbian feminist narratives, see: \textit{The Original Coming Out Stories} (1990), \textit{Testimonies} (1988, 1994, 2002), \textit{All That False Instruction} (1975), and \textit{Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit} (1985).
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 96
\end{flushleft}
the recesses of the mind, or outside of discourse, entails viewing narrative as both self-creation and self-discovery. Bechdel does not abandon the forms of memoir and autobiography, nor does she forsake the autobiographical “I” and its significance to identity, but instead uses these forms and narrative conventions to both simultaneously tell her story and tell a story about telling stories. To return to this chapter’s epigraph, Bechdel’s comparison between religion and memoir, and “the leap of faith” that she claims memoir requires, arguably sheds light on the tension present between her constant interrogation of her own autobiographical authority and the realization of her true self and lesbian desire. Perhaps “a leap of faith” is a metaphor we can use to come to understand how to describe simultaneous processes of self-discovery and self-construction. Speaking to Bechdel’s earlier epistemological crisis, it takes a great leap of faith to simultaneously recognize that the true self does not exist outside of the discourse that produces it and still trust your own story—and to trust, we must.
Chapter Three: Continuous Conversion: Queering Pentecostal Subjectivity

Historically speaking, the experience of conversion is extremely significant to all kinds of Christianities. The early accounts of the conversions of St. Paul, Constantine, and Augustine are examples of traditional narratives that have insisted upon the significance of conversion experiences to Christian subjectivity and consequently shaped the content and form of future conversion narratives. In an edited volume entitled *Conversions*, Kerr and Mulder argue:

The word conversion does not often appear in the Bible, but certain synonyms such as ‘repentance,’ ‘regeneration,’ and ‘being born again,’ occur almost everywhere and with great frequency throughout the Scriptures. The notion of ‘turning’ can be variously stated, as for example ‘to turn,’ ‘to return,’ ‘to turn to,’ ‘to turn away from,’ ‘to turn toward,’ or ‘to turn around.’ To be converted is like making a ‘U-turn.’ It is ‘starting at square one again’ or ‘back to the drawing board.’

Additionally, the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* also defines conversion as “turning in position, direction, destination,” or, “the action of turning round or revolving, revolution, rotation.” All these various ways of defining conversion ultimately imagine it as a kind of “turning,” whether it’s the act of turning away or toward something, the act of returning, or a revolution. Taking Kerr and Mulder and the *OED’s* definitions as my point of departure, I posit that the process of conversion

---

119 I want to acknowledge that calling this story the “conversion” of St. Paul is a controversial claim in academia—here, I am specifically referring to the ways in which popular audiences and Christians interpret and map onto Paul’s narrative the modern categories of “conversion” and “Christianity.”


is much more complicated than a singular, total moment in which a fundamental change happens. Rather, these definitions seem to suggest that conversion, as a complete revision of personal history—the act of “starting at square one again”—is fundamentally continuous. The upheaval and subsequent rearticulation of one’s personal history requires ongoing, continuous processes—as the words “revolving” and “rotation” seem to suggest—of reconstruction that actively recreate the subject and bring into being her new “true self.”

In *Language and Self-Transformation*, anthropologist Peter Stromberg argues that the process of conversion exceeds the boundaries of the conversion narrative itself. Particularly for evangelical Christians, through the practice of evangelism, conversion becomes an ongoing process. According to Stromberg:

> Normally the conversion is viewed (by both believers and by students of the conversion) as an historical, observable event that is referred to in the conversion narrative…It is furthermore assumed that the transformational efficacy of the conversion experience occurs in the original event.\(^{122}\)

The story of conversion works to describe a historical event that has already transformed the believer speaking. Although this may be the logic at work in the story, Stromberg argues that we must view conversion narratives as acts of *performance*, particularly in terms of evangelism. Simon Coleman, another anthropologist who researches charismatic conversion, takes Stromberg’s argument as his point of departure. Coleman argues, “Telling and retelling conversion stories is a central ritual of faith, framing personal experience in canonical language and

---

recreating that experience in the telling.”123 Thus, the purpose of evangelism is not just to convert others, “but also—perhaps even primarily—a means of recreating or reconverting the charismatic self.”124 Coleman makes a case for conversion as continuous, an ongoing process through which the subject continually revises, reorients, and recreates herself, chiefly through retelling the very narrative of the seemingly total and instant moment of rebirth that is supposedly now past. The practice of telling conversion narratives, whether it’s publishing a story, speaking in front of a congregation, on a street corner, or on YouTube, constitutes the subject’s deliberate practice of continuously and performatively embodying her religious identity. In this way, conversion is a recurring process through which subjects make meaning of their experiences. It extends way beyond the moment that the subject first claims to be born-again, and involves far more complex and continuous processes of meaning making that performatively produce the “true self” purported to exist outside of the story.

In this chapter, I focus specifically on pentecostal stories, instead of examining the broader genre of evangelical conversion narratives. Although pentecostal and evangelical narratives have much in common in terms of both structure and content, I narrow my focus for the sake of my comparison between pentecostal and lesbian feminist identity. As I have shown in my Introduction, there are several key points that make this comparison feasible. To briefly recapitulate, the significance of the body to pentecostal experience and philosophy sets pentecostal

---

124 Ibid., 17
spirituality and identity apart from other types of Christian identities, including evangelical Christianities. As James K.A. Smith argues, “Pentecostalism is a distinctly embodied practice of Christianity,” as practices such as bodily healing and glossolalia exemplify. Like much of queer theory, this affirmation of embodiment calls into question the validity and authority of the abstract notion of the autonomous individual. Moreover, as Smith argues, “Narrative is central to pentecostal spirituality...bound up in the very DNA of Pentecost where, in Acts 2, we see Peter and the disciples making sense of their experience by weaving it into a larger received narrative.” Although conversion is significant to many kinds of Christian identity, narrative and testimony are particularly bound up in what it means to be pentecostal, to be part of a pentecostal community, and have a personal relationship with the Holy Ghost. Lastly, as Warner argues, since many pentecostals consider themselves oppressed and marginalized by mainstream Christian denominations and society at large, both pentecostal and queer identity are performed as minority identities. Although pentecostal conversion narratives arguably belong to a larger genre of evangelical conversion stories, they also depart from evangelical Christianity in very notable ways that are central to my comparison between lesbian and pentecostal identity.

In this chapter, I argue that conversion narratives performatively produce the pentecostal subject’s embodied self that supposedly already exists outside of discourse through acts of storytelling that retrospectively intervene in the subject’s past. As Elaine Lawless argues, “The evidence of the Holy Ghost experience, and the

---

125 J. K. A. Smith, 60
126 Ibid., 51
127 Warner, 230
conversion, are not actually complete until a narrative recounting of the experience is delivered by the one who experienced it."\textsuperscript{128} Quoting Berger and Luckmann, Lawless continues, “Each re-telling of the event becomes an event itself.”\textsuperscript{129} Although the “original” event, following the logic of conversion narratives, figures as the conversion event, this event only comes into being through narrative discourse. It is not just that narrative is significant to the ways in which pentecostals understand their identities, a form for understanding truths, but that the narrative knowledge expressed through testimony is irreducible—for pentecostals, narrative \textit{is} knowledge, \textit{is} the truth.\textsuperscript{130} So, by this logic, if narrative \textit{is} the truth for pentecostals, then the act of speaking and writing these narratives, and the processes involved—that is, the revision of personal history, the acts of storytelling through which the subject reassigns meaning to past events—is the performative production of truth. Moreover, it is a performative production of truth through which the pentecostal subject is continuously converting, being reborn, and bringing the true self to which she aspires into being.

These narratological processes shared by pentecostal testimony are remarkably similar to Saxey’s notion of the “progressive re-assessment of the past.” Pentecostal conversion narratives do not subscribe to a model of linear progress, but rather work backwards in order to account for a beginning that the subject wasn’t aware was a beginning at the time. As a result, a particular kind of epistemological logic undergirds pentecostal conversion narratives that implicitly guides

\begin{flushright}
\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 11
\textsuperscript{130} J.K.A. Smith, 64
\end{footnotesize}
\end{flushright}
narratological decisions and consequently draws attention to the narrative discourse itself, as opposed to the plot or the story events. In this way, like lesbian autobiography, pentecostal testimony troubles the notion of the “unified autobiographical ‘I’” Saxey describes by challenging the same basic foundations of autobiography: “the veracity of memory, the linear progress of self-development, and one’s awareness of one’s own desires,” ultimately exposing the ways in which discourse constructs the “true self” it supposedly just describes. This construction of the embodied self happens through narratological decisions, chiefly acts of retrospective intervention that actively construct the transition from darkness and falsity into light and truth, and an emphasis on social processes that are significant to the pentecostal subject’s born-again experience. Much like lesbian feminist stories, these pentecostal conversion narratives actively account for the simultaneity and inextricability of self-discovery and self-creation.

I will investigate two pentecostal conversion narratives and the ways in which they performatively produce the self purported to exist outside of the story. Instead of using literary texts, I will be turning to YouTube videos of testimony uploaded by churches and charismatic groups. There is a remarkable absence of critically acclaimed autobiography written by pentecostals about their conversion narratives. The point of my essay is not to speculate about why there does not seem to exist a highbrow memoir comparable to Fun Home, but rather take a genre on its own terms. The majority of pentecostal evangelism and testimony outside of churches and public spaces seems to exist on YouTube and through self-published books. Although not conventionally viewed as accomplishments of “academic prowess,” these works are
important cultural texts and narratives that use complicated rhetorical structures and strategies. By using YouTube videos and bringing them into conversation and comparison with *Fun Home*, I am using materials that both employ and combine language (whether spoken or written text) and visual elements to tell a story, albeit in different ways. Just as Tolmie argues that Bechdel “queers the canon and politicizes the autobiographical,” I hope my analysis in this chapter also helps queer traditional notions of what a literary-cultural text looks like.

I will first outline the conventional framework of pentecostal conversion narratives. Next, I will do close readings of two conversion stories and analyze the ways in which they emphasize storytelling such as remembering, reassessing, and retelling, how they focus on social processes, and performatively produce a pentecostal subject who is continuously converting and recurrently recreating herself. Ultimately, I will do this in conversation with Bechdel’s narrative and Saxey’s claims about lesbian feminist coming out stories. How do both lesbian feminist coming out stories and pentecostal conversion narratives destabilize the autobiographical “I” and the abstract notion of the autonomous individual through similar narratological decisions? And in doing so, how do these stories affirm embodiment and not only produce the self, but make the body? And finally, how does this comparison, as J.Z. Smith argues, modulate and perhaps even “queer” the categories of religion and sexuality and the presupposed relationship that exists between them?

Some scholars argue that pentecostal conversion narratives tend to rigidly conform to a more or less standard framework. According to Grant Wacker, Melani McAlister is an example of a scholar who treats cultural products as cultural texts and narratives, expanding our traditional understanding of literature. See Epic Encounters.

---

131 Melani McAlister is an example of a scholar who treats cultural products as cultural texts and narratives, expanding our traditional understanding of literature. See Epic Encounters.

132 Tolmie, 87
pentecostal autobiographical texts all reflect a “relentlessly stylized, three-step sequence.”\textsuperscript{133} He continues:

The initial step explained the problems that drove converts to seek a life-transforming spiritual experience in the first place. The second detailed the event itself….The third step elaborated the benefits received. This three-step pattern gives pause, since most converts penned their testimonies long after they had passed through the first two steps and were heartily enjoying the third. From that vantage point, they cast their words in a dramatic before-and-after framework in which the pentecostal experience marked a transition from darkness into light.\textsuperscript{134}

He argues that this framework is more or less ubiquitous, and also suggests that it is ultimately constraining. Perhaps similar to Zimmerman’s argument regarding conformity in lesbian coming out stories, Wacker believes that this kind of framework creates a particular kind of authoritative community standard that is prescriptive, an argument that does not attribute very much agency to the pentecostal subject. Rather, I argue that when a pentecostal subject, whether consciously or not, uses the sequence Wacker has outlined to reassess, reinterpret, and revise her personal history, she is exercising creative agency that ultimately brings her embodied self into being. Donald Miller, who explores conversion in new paradigm churches, where members practice charismatic Christianity, also attempts to address the essential, ubiquitous elements of conversion narratives, while accounting for far more agency on the subject’s behalf. He emphasizes the “desire for a new life” and contends that, “when converts describe their conversion experiences, it is precisely their needs and

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid..
their desire for a new life that are at issue.”\(^{135}\) This overall desire for change enables conversion when the convert-to-be experiences what Miller refers to as “trigger events”—i.e. reading books, a conversation, a random visit to church, a traumatic event—but importantly, he argues that these events would not trigger conversion unless the individual is already desiring “a new life.” In other words, more than Wacker, Miller seems to account for the agency of the pentecostal subject by suggesting that desiring change leads converts-to-be to self-consciously and actively pursue a born-again experience. Lastly, Miller describes the “turning points” of the conversion process. According to Miller, a turning point is the moment when the process of change in worldview begins. He emphasizes that, “While some people do describe dramatic moments of epiphany, most point to a longer process in which the individual’s ‘will’ and intentions are transformed.”\(^{136}\) Arguably, this “longer process” of which Miller speaks is similar to the notion of continuous conversion that Stromberg and Coleman identify. As Wacker contends, pentecostal subjects might use a “dramatic before-and-after framework in which the pentecostal experience marked a transition from darkness into light,” but this framework is not nearly as constraining as it is an active way of making meaning, a process through which the pentecostal subject continuously converts and brings her “true self” into being.

The first narrative I will address is the testimony of Suzi Traughber, a video called “Suzi Traughber: ‘How I Received the Holy Ghost.’” This video is one of the


\(^{136}\) Ibid., 74
many videos of testimony uploaded to the “isaiah58brodcast”137 YouTube account, an account run by a charismatic faith ministry based in North Carolina. They have 56 videos, mostly recordings of testimony, but also some videos of worship. Traughber’s video is three minutes and fifteen seconds long and was uploaded in July of 2011. Traughber, an older white woman, is sitting on a couch in a living room as she tells her story. She opens her narrative by first remarking that, “When it all happened and as events led up to that time, I did not know at the time that God was leading me to repent, that he was putting me in a situation in my life that made me desire him.”138

Traughber does not begin with a linear retelling of the events that led up to her conversion. Rather, by retrospectively intervening in past events, she attempts to account for the beginning of a story that she did not know was a beginning at the time. As she says, she did not know at the time the true meaning behind the events, but in light of her conversion, she now realizes that the past was part of God’s ultimate plan for her.

Here, it is useful to consider the difference between narrative discourse and plot. A plot would start at the beginning of a story—the opening of a linear story—and the narrator would take the audience through the story events in chronological order. In Traughber’s narrative, however, she begins in the middle of her story. This is a narratological decision that consequently draws attention to the narrative discourse and to the ways in which she is constructing her own story. It is only by starting in the middle that Traughber can give her account of a beginning that she did

---

137 Isaiah 58 is a verse that distinguishes between true and false worship from the Book of Isaiah in the Hebrew Bible.
not know was the beginning at the time. As she says, multiple times and in multiple ways, “[God] had me cornered. And I did not know.”\textsuperscript{139} By making the narratological decision to not tell her story in chronological order, but rather carry out a progressive reassessment of the past, Traughber draws significant attention to the complexity of her narrative discourse. As a result, she draws attention to processes of retrospective intervention, their significance to her understanding of her own conversion, and how they reframe her personal history.

In \textit{Thinking in Tongues}, James K.A. Smith makes clear that pentecostals like Traughber are actually confronted with a serious narratological challenge in that their stories must account for what is unknowable. According to Smith, pentecostal testimony is an implicit critique of modern, Western understandings of epistemology. This is best demonstrated and articulated through a distinctly pentecostal affirmation of “a more expansive, affective understanding of what counts as knowledge [that avows] the \textit{primacy} of the heart and affections as the \textit{basis} for a rational, intellectual engagement with and interpretation of the world.”\textsuperscript{140} Smith continues that in this way, “Pentecostal worship constitutes a kind of performative postmodernism, an enacted refusal of rationalism…an epistemology that resist[s] the slimmed-down reductionism of modern cognitivism.”\textsuperscript{141} The way pentecostals tell their stories while witnessing both refuses and critiques Western thought’s continuous privileging of reason and rationalism, i.e. our deeply engrained cultural understanding of the origin of knowledge and “truth” that we inherit from the Enlightenment. The common pentecostal refrain “I know that I know that I know” arguably exemplifies this

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{140} J.K.A. Smith, 59
\textsuperscript{141} Ibid.
postmodern critique of modernist epistemology because it is “an almost-nonsensical, quasi-glossolalic mantra that is struggling to articulate what might be inarticulable—a sense that there are ways of knowing that cannot be translated into propositions or syllogisms.” The refrain “I know that I know that I know” represents how pentecostals arrive at knowledge that might be inarticulable or unknowable through the “primacy of the heart.” In this way, pentecostal epistemology challenges Enlightenment thought’s “valorization of thinking as the core of human identity and a devaluation of embodiment as a source of deception and distress.” But what does a narrative that locates its knowledge in what is unknowable look and sound like? And how could a speaker possibly communicate the unknowable, and, if it is possible, through what kinds of narratological decisions?

Traughber’s choice to begin in the middle of her story is a narratological decision that is implicitly premised on the logic of Smith’s pentecostal epistemology, and ultimately accounts for what is an unknowable beginning to her story. Her decision to tell her story in this particular way epitomizes the ways in which her narrative agency—that is, the ways in which she, consciously or not, draws attention to the constructedness of her own narrative discourse—figures prominently in her own upheaval and reconstruction of her personal history. Still before delving into the story events of her conversion, she admits, “I actually did not know when I received the baptism that I had received it.” Her recognition that even her first experience with the Holy Ghost is a retrospective intervention explicitly challenges Wacker’s suggestion that the conventional framework for pentecostal testimony is constraining.

142 Ibid.
143 Ibid., 54
144 Traughber
leaving little room for questioning and doubt. Rather, from the very beginning, Traughber makes clear that her characterizations of the events prior to her conversion and her conversion experience itself are both retrospective interventions, and that these characterizations are the only way through which she can represent the unknowable truth of her story—the way in which “she knows that she knows that she knows.” Her use of acts of storytelling such as reassessing and retelling, extremely significant to the “beginning” of her story, arises from the pentecostal epistemological logic implicit in her conversion story and ultimately draws considerable attention to the constructedness of her narrative discourse.

When Traughber does delve into the story events that lead up to her born-again experience, she emphasizes the social processes that are central to her conversion, drawing attention to the way in which she makes her “self” in relation to others. In doing so, her conversion story implicitly critiques the abstract notion of the autonomous individual that we inherit from the Enlightenment and that is critical to modernist, Western epistemology. As she explains,

Many years ago it was a very difficult time, it was a traumatic time. I was in my kitchen alone and I raised my hands and I said, ‘God, if you’re real, please let me know,’ and I put my hands down, continued with the day, very distraught, actually. And soon after that I was at a charismatic prayer meeting, hearing people singing in tongues like I’ve never heard before….I needed something from God, and I wanted that. And I asked someone about it, ‘What is that?’ And they said, ‘Well, they were singing in tongues. I said, ‘I would like to have that.’

Here, Traughber describes the suffering she was experiencing and her consequent “desire for a new life,” to use Miller’s vocabulary, as well as the central trigger event in her story: the chance visit to a charismatic prayer meeting. As Miller argues,

145 Ibid..
“When converts describe their conversion experiences, it is precisely their needs and
their desire for a new life that are at issue.”\textsuperscript{146} Moreover, he continues, “For the
convert, being ‘needy’ is the rationale for the conversion, not a reason to dismiss
it…”\textsuperscript{147} Traughber’s narration compresses the time in between praying to God for a
sign and finding herself at a prayer meeting, and so it is unclear whether she seeks out
a prayer meeting on her own or if she was invited by a friend, but it is safe to infer
that either way, attending the prayer meeting is Traughber’s own choice resulting
from her desire for a new life. When she finds herself listening to the attendees of the
meeting speaking in tongues, she is still searching for a sign from God, and it is
through the social act of witnessing this community and talking to a charismatic
Christian about glossolalia that she begins to connect her prayer with the events
occurring around her.

Moreover, when observing the worshippers at the charismatic prayer meeting,
the experience of listening to glossolalia shapes Traughber’s understanding of God in
a way that exemplifies the pentecostal epistemological logic Smith describes. When
describing her experience, she says, “I knew it was God, I didn’t know what it
was.”\textsuperscript{148} Due to the syntactic complexity of the sentence, it is unclear whether she
means that she knows what she is hearing is God but is unsure of what the practice is
called, or if one moment she is sure it is God and then completely unsure. Either way,
her claim exemplifies the epistemological difficulty of representing the unknowable
because the grammar of this sentence does not work according to modernist
epistemological logic. Rather, the knowledge Traughber receives from watching

\textsuperscript{146} Miller, 71
\textsuperscript{147} Ibid..
\textsuperscript{148} Traughber
pentecostals speak in tongues—simultaneous knowledge of God and the unknowable—follows the epistemological logic of “I know that I know that I know” in that her claim is nearly nonsensical but nevertheless represents an unknowable truth that was becoming apparent to Traughber through the social processes occurring around her. The way in which she represents this unknowable truth to her audience is through the act of retrospectively attributing meaning to glossolalia and the other events at the charismatic prayer meeting.

In the rest of Traughber’s narrative, she describes receiving the baptism of the Holy Ghost—even though, as she clarifies in the beginning of her story, she did not know at the time that she had received the baptism as she was receiving it. She claims that after she told someone at the meeting that she wanted the experience of speaking in tongues, the person instructed Traughber to kneel down and pray, and she was soon speaking in tongues. As she explains, however, “God did not at that time give me that infilling inside of myself that I’ve heard of people’s experiences.”149 Traughber directly compares her own memory of this event with other people’s conversion narratives and stories of encounters with the Holy Ghost, thus making meaning of her first experience with glossolalia in a way that is fundamentally social. Traughber’s perception of what a conversion narrative and experience is supposed to sound and feel like informs the ways in which she interprets and subsequently retells her experience. Moreover, her comparison between other conversion narratives and her own experience leads her to question and doubt the validity of what she identifies as her born-again experience. As Traughber says, “So as time went on, I began to ask God questions about this. I said, ‘At that time in my life did I receive the baptism of

149 Ibid..
the Holy Ghost? Or was I simply speaking in tongues? After asking these questions, she claims, “Immediately God answered me in a feeling or a knowledge that He gave me—it wasn’t so much in words but what the feeling was that at that time when I was speaking in tongues, that’s when I received the baptism of the Holy Ghost.” The questions she is asking about her experience illustrate that Traughber’s conversion story is ultimately dependent on processes of remembering, reassessing, and retelling. Through questioning and reconstructing these past events, even her born-again experience itself, which is pivotal to pentecostal identity, Traughber questions the veracity of her memory, makes retrospective interventions, and ultimately exposes the ways in which her story produces the “true self” it supposedly just describes. Moreover, through questioning and consequently constructing her first encounter with glossolalia and the Holy Ghost, two deeply embodied experiences, her narrative is bringing into being not just a pentecostal “self,” but her pentecostal body, powerfully experienced by pentecostals as a site of truth.

Although the logic at work in conversion narratives is that the conversion event is already past, the conversion event Traughber is supposedly just describing only comes into being through her narrative discourse. As her narrative shows, she draws significant attention to the narrative discourse itself, as opposed to a linear plot, and the ways in which she is constructing her story and thus her identity both in relation to other conversion narratives and through her own retrospective interventions. Implicit in these particular narrative decisions is the kind of pentecostal

\[150\] Ibid..
\[151\] Ibid...
epistemological logic that James K.A. Smith describes, an underlying grammar that both accounts for what is unknowable and implicitly critiques modernist understandings of the origin of knowledge and the abstract notion of the disembodied, autonomous individual, affirming both embodiment and the social self. According to this logic, neither Traughber’s conversion experience nor her pentecostal body exist outside of the story. The narrative she is telling and retelling performatively produces the pentecostal body through continuous conversion, bringing into being the “true self,” which emerges from embodied practices, to which Traughber aspires over and over again.

The second narrative I will turn to is an hour-long YouTube video of Pastor John Russell’s sermon at the Pentecostals of Wisconsin, where he was a guest speaker at the congregation. Russell was the first African American minister at the Pentecostals of Alexandria (POA) in Louisiana and is now the senior pastor at Calvary Tabernacle, a daughter church of POA. The video was uploaded to the Pentecostals of Wisconsin’s YouTube account “apostolicpow” on February 20th, 2012. Unlike Traughber, who only briefly states that the time of her life during which she converted was a “difficult” and “traumatic” time, Russell’s testimony mainly involves detailed description of the extreme hardships he experienced prior to his conversion. Additionally, unlike Traughber, who is sitting on a couch as she speaks, Russell is in the pulpit, sharing his story with an audience of worshippers as he preaches. Throughout the video, audible screams and shouts of “Hallelujah!” and “Amen!” can be heard. As I will explore, the presence of his audience shapes this narrative.

particular telling of Russell’s conversion narrative as an event in and of itself. I will first address the ways in which, like Traughber, Russell does not start in the beginning of his story, but rather makes a similar narratological decision to begin elsewhere in the story, drawing attention to the narrative discourse itself. Next, I will examine the ways in which Russell’s other narratological decisions, such as his use of retrospective intervention, continue to exemplify the pentecostal epistemological logic as described by James K. A. Smith that challenges modernist assumptions about knowledge and truth. I argue that these acts of storytelling become notably evident through conflicting and even contradictory statements Russell makes about his own agency in an attempt to make meaning of his past suffering. Ultimately, through examining these narratological elements, I will show how this particular telling of Russell’s conversion story performatively produces the embodied “true self” to which Russell aspires, a pentecostal body that is continuously converting.

Before delving into the story events of his conversion narrative, Russell explores the relationship between his story and his audience. He passionately declares to the worshippers sitting before him that God brought him from Louisiana to Wisconsin specifically to deliver someone from sin that night. He continues:

[God] brought me here and put me through a lot of stuff…and I finally figured out why—it’s because the things he allowed me to go through, somebody here is going through it, and tonight he sent me to help you get delivered tonight. He didn’t deliver me and did not give me delivering power.¹⁵³

Instead of telling his story in chronological order, Russell begins his narrative at the very present moment, far after the conversion experience is supposed to have taken

place, and reassesses his past in light of not only his born-again experience, but also his opportunity to speak at this particular congregation. His claim that God “put him through a lot of stuff” and delivered him from sin to ultimately help someone else become saved that very night is a significant narratological decision that draws attention to the narrative discourse, as opposed to the plot. Like Traughber, he is accounting for a beginning he did not know was a beginning at the time, and the implicit logic at work in his speech results in a narrative that functions more as a progressive reassessment of the past than a linear story. Hence, Russell draws significant attention to the constructedness of the narrative discourse and his use of retrospective intervention as a form of meaning making while situating his conversion as an event that has a specific relationship to the audience in front of which he is standing.

When Russell recounts the story events of his conversion, he spends considerable time describing the hardships he experienced during his childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood, consequently reassigning meaning to his memories in the context of his new identity. He describes growing up poor in a violent and abusive household. Russell explains, “I didn’t know that stuff would affect me but it did…after elementary years, being home with my family, being in poverty and seeing all the violence and stuff like that…it really just messed me up bad.”

Through remembering and retelling these past experiences, he actively makes meaning of the trauma he experienced by accounting for the theodicean question of why God would let such suffering occur. He explains, “The Lord spoke to me, ‘Because I want you to experience some of these things for such a time as this that I would deliver you from

154 Russell
these things but then you would help preach to others that are going through or may be in the same place you used to be.” In light of this excavation of meaning, Russell chronicles the ways in which his childhood positioned him for failure: in middle and high school, he became involved with drugs, had a potentially promising career in college as a basketball player, but began committing adultery when married to his first wife and eventually became addicted to crack cocaine. He includes all of these details to fully depict what he understands as a downward spiral that he simultaneously construes as part of God’s ultimate plan for and also as the result of decisions he has made. He says, “The Lord showed me how I went from one stage to the other stage, making bad decisions from drinking from the abuse from poverty to drugs to all this stuff and then it leads to crack cocaine.” It is strange and unsettling to hear Russell refer to abuse he involuntarily witnessed and the poverty into which he was born as his own “bad decisions,” and I do not want this to go unmentioned. I want to focus more, however, on the ways in which multiple and at times seemingly contradictory assertions about Russell’s agency and God’s ultimate plan highlight narratological decisions that depend on reconstructions of personal history that, through the epistemological logic at work in his narrative, make meaning of his suffering in such a way that renders it as necessary to his processes of self-construction and self-discovery. Harkening back to Butler and Freud’s ideas concerning melancholy and identification that I explored in Chapter One, Russell’s emphasis on the degree to which he suffered, and the reasons he gives for why he

155 Ibid.
156 Ibid.
faced such hardships, are inseparable from the ways in which he continuously produces his pentecostal identity.

As I’ve established, much of Russell’s testimony consists of him remembering and retelling his memories from his adolescence and young adulthood, which he retrospectively characterizes as consequences of both his “bad decisions” and as a necessary part of God’s plan for him. This simultaneous characterization becomes most clear when Russell tells his audience about his born-again experience. As he claims, he was tempted by Satan to stand on top of a bridge and jump off. Just before Russell is about to commit suicide, Satan shows him a memory from an experience in church when Russell was around nine or ten years old. According to Russell, “[Satan] showed me how that Sunday morning I began to worship the lord… and tears started coming down my eyes… I was losing control over my body…I didn’t know what it was then, but the Lord told me that was Him trying to come in.” As Russell says, he did not know it at the time, but he understands now that God has always been trying to be part of his life, and he had initially rejected him as a child. Russell remembers, “My lips began to stammer and I didn’t even know what it was. Had I accepted Christ then I would have saved myself a whole lot of trouble.” Russell claims that his early rejection of God resulted in the bad decisions he makes as a teenager and a young adult. Still, he claims, “I believe [God] marked me that day, He sealed me that day.” In his retelling of this memory, he also arguably suggests that his spirituality and his identity as a charismatic Christian, an identity that he now takes to be his true self, has always been there, but had been perhaps lying dormant as

---

157 Ibid..
158 Ibid..
159 Ibid..
a part of God’s plan for him and, in contradistinction, his own “bad decisions.” The near contradiction of these statements—that Russell had a choice to accept God but he did not, and so his subsequent sinful activities are his own fault, and that God sealed Russell’s fate that morning in church and let him witness violence, grow up in poverty, and become involved in drugs, all so he could later save people through his testimony—speaks to the complexity of his narrative discourse and his agency as a pentecostal subject who is actively making meaning of his memories through specific narratological decisions. Russell could not have known then that God was marking him out on that Sunday morning, nor that God was trying to save him from a life of “trouble.” Rather, these are his own reassessments of his past in light of his pentecostal identity.

I argue that Russell’s claims that his experiences as an adolescent and young adult are firstly, part of God’s plan, and secondly, the direct consequences of his own bad decisions, are not contradictory. To a non-pentecostal, at least, they seem to defy what we take to be basic logic and “common sense.” It is precisely this logic premised on reason and Enlightenment rationalism, however, that pentecostal epistemology is implicitly challenging. The logic of Russell’s story avows the primacy of the heart, constitutes an affective act of both repentance for sin and a proclamation of the glory and power of his God, and accounts for what is unknowable, i.e. the “I know that I know that I know” that renders logical what seems to not make sense. It is only through acts of storytelling that Russell can communicate to his audience the “truth” of his conversion, make meaning of his past, and fully describe his journey to his pentecostal identity. It is precisely these acts of
storytelling, however, and the narrative discourse in which they happen, that continuously brings into literal being the true self to which Russell aspires. Moreover, like Traughber, Russell’s pentecostal self is an embodied self that remains a site of powerfully felt truth. The very end of the YouTube video features both Russell and his audience speaking in tongues. As people begin to stand and raise their arms up, Russell walks around the room, speaking in tongues and placing his hands on people’s foreheads, healing them from the sin from which he has been delivered, confirming that Russell has come to this given congregation to deliver someone, or multiple people, from evil. The inclusion of glossolalia and bodily healing in the video recording of Russell’s conversion narrative is a significant testimony to the ways in which the body is viewed as deeply significant to a pentecostal individual’s relationship with her spirituality, her pentecostal community, and the Holy Ghost. Moreover, watching Russell speak in tongues after he delivers his testimony is a powerful example of the ways in which his story doesn’t produce an abstract self, but his pentecostal body.

I argue that both Traughber and Russell’s testimonies exemplify the ways in which pentecostal conversion narratives performatively produce the very truth that they purportedly describe. This simultaneous self-discovery and self-creation happens through acts of storytelling—namely, acts of remembering, reassessing, and retelling that reconstruct the subject’s memories of her past in light of what she deems her true identity. As Traughber and Russell’s personal narratives demonstrate, pentecostal testimony must account for the “unknowable;” pentecostals telling their conversion narratives must account for a beginning that they did not know was a beginning at the
time, and consequently they bring significant attention to the narrative discourse and the narratological decisions they make to communicate this “unknowable” knowledge to their audience. Arguably, these narratological decisions exemplify a pentecostal epistemological logic that understands the story as truth itself, i.e., as the production of a truth that does not exist outside of the story. In this way, a pentecostal’s embodied identity and conversion experience do not exist outside of the discourse in which it happens and is retold. As Coleman argues, it is through retelling these narratives that the pentecostal is continuously converting and arguably bringing into being her “true self” every day. Moreover, these narratives do not just produce the “true self” that they purportedly describe, but bring into being the pentecostal body itself, ultimately emphasizing a broader pentecostal affirmation of embodiment. Glossolalia, the embodied experience of the Holy Spirit’s infilling—which Traughber discusses in her narrative and Russell performs at the end of his video—is central to the born-again experience described in conversion narratives. Arguably, its discursive function exemplifies the epistemological logic also implicit in conversion narratives and pentecostal worship in that the practice effectively articulates what is inarticulable; it is intelligible through its unintelligibility. Glossolalia constitutes the embodied experience of accounting for and understanding what is unknowable. Pentecostal conversion stories—that both describe experiences of glossolalia and also, when told in the pulpit, even involve glossolalia—are quite literally embodied narratives that bring the pentecostal body into being.

Finally, I argue that these stories work in similar ways to lesbian feminist coming out stories. The epistemological logic that undergirds conversion narratives
destabilizes and calls into question the abstract notion of the autonomous individual through questioning the veracity of memory, awareness of desires, and challenging modernist conceptions of the origin of knowledge. In this way, pentecostal epistemological logic firmly positions the truth as the story, as inextricable from the discourse that contains it. As I have demonstrated, lesbian feminist memoir also challenges the notion that there is an “I” that exists outside of the acts of storytelling and narratological decisions that performatively bring into being the subject’s embodied true self. Thus, lesbian and pentecostal identities do not exist outside of nor underneath coming out or conversion narratives, but are rather actively produced through narrative discourse itself. Both of these kinds of stories not only work to performatively construct the self they supposedly just describe, but they make pentecostal and lesbian bodies. The pentecostal subject telling and retelling her conversion narrative is continuously converting and thus actively embodying her religious identity, and the lesbian subject who shares her coming out story over and over is perpetually bringing into being her lesbian body. Lesbian feminist memoir and pentecostal testimony are stories that ultimately call into question and even queer longstanding and commonly accepted understandings of the origin of knowledge and subjectivity.
Conclusion: And Without Her Nothing was Made that was Made

Before exploring the further implications of this comparison between lesbian feminist coming out narratives and pentecostal conversion stories, I will briefly revisit what personal stakes I hold in this project. The stories we tell about ourselves and about other people do a lot of creative and productive work. They do more than just appearing to describe a preexisting “I” or religious or sexual identity; as Foucault and Butler have shown us, there is no doer behind the deed, and we—our embodied selves—are performatively produced through discourse, through our own stories and how we relate to narratives belonging to other people, whole genres, and larger cultural discourses. Through storytelling, we become legible subjects. Possibly one of the most powerful and ancient testimonies to this is found in the New Testament. I’ve chosen John 1 as my epigraph not only because it holds deeply personal significance for me, but also because it beautifully articulates a very complex idea about creation and narrative that I believe is still relevant. The verse reads, (pronouns queered), “In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God. She was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Her, and without Her nothing was made that was made” [emphasis added].160 “Logos,” or “λόγος,” a Greek concept that denotes “reason,” “intelligence,” or “word,” is usually interpreted and used by Christian philosophers to refer to Jesus Christ as the incarnation of God’s

word.\textsuperscript{161} Logos, however, in its Greek usage, also connotes speech, a continuous statement, \textit{a story}.\textsuperscript{162} With this understanding of “Logos” in mind, I argue that John 1 describes a strangely familiar story of creation: everything is made through stories and nothing exists outside of or underneath the stories we tell.

The stakes of this project are high because lesbian feminist coming out narratives and pentecostal conversion stories are creation stories in and of themselves in that they quite literally bring into being identities and bodies. Moreover, they are creation stories that deeply matter to our discursive understandings of “sexuality” and “religion.” Through comparing these narratives, and showing the similar ways that these deeply significant stories bring into being very different identities, my ultimate aim is to show that we need to start telling a different story about the relationship between sexuality and religion—specifically, a story that departs from dominant discourses that imagines these categories as a binary opposition, that pays better attention to the realities of religious and sexual identities and communities, and opens up space for healthier relationships to be formed between people and communities.

Granted, these categories are always inflecting each other and have been historically formed in relation to one another, as Foucault proves in \textit{The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1}. Yet, in the popular U.S. imagination, they are often understood in a binary opposition. My comparison thus modulates these understandings of “religion” and “sexuality” and calls for a rearticulation of these categories. As J.Z. Smith writes, “Comparison…is an active, at times even a playful, enterprise of deconstruction and


reconstitution which, kaleidoscope-like, gives the scholar a shifting set of characteristics with which to negotiate the relations between his or her theoretical interests and data stipulated as exemplary. For Smith, comparison is a heuristic tool that the scholar uses to redescribe data and then rectify categories in terms of new understandings. My comparison between these two genres of narrative, too, ultimately produces a redescription of “religion,” “sexuality,” and the imagined relations between them.

There are surprising similarities between pentecostal conversion narratives and lesbian feminist coming out stories. Both genres eschew traditional chronology in favor of narrative discourse that draws attention to itself through conducting what Saxey refers to as a “progressive reassessment of the past.” As a result, these stories emphasize acts of storytelling such as remembering, reassessing, and retelling, and make significant retrospective interventions in the author or speaker’s past. For both pentecostals and lesbian feminists, the “truth” cannot exist outside these acts of storytelling. The pentecostal who reassigns meaning to past events is continuously converting by bringing into being the true self to which she aspires, and the lesbian feminist who grapples with memory to revise a history that now seems very queer is at once engaging in both self-discovery and self-construction. Underlying both genres of self-narrative is a kind of epistemological logic that accounts for what is unknowable—epitomized by the common pentecostal refrain “I know that I know that I know” and Bechdel’s assertion that memoir is like religion in that it requires a leap of faith. This logic performatively invents and ultimately brings into being a bodily truth for pentecostals and lesbians that is nonetheless powerfully felt. As a

163 “On Comparison,” 53
result, the self-narratives of both pentecostals and lesbian feminists call into question
the idea of the abstract, autonomous individual that we inherit from Enlightenment
thought as well as the autobiographical “I” that supposedly exists outside of the
discourse that is producing it. These narratological, epistemological, and even
ontological connections between these genres of narrative indicate that pentecostals
and lesbian feminists have more in common than many would think.

What does this comparison, and the great similarities it brings to light, mean
for the categories of “religion” and “sexuality” as we popularly understand them in
the U.S.? How can they help modulate, resdescribe, and ultimately rectify new
understandings of these categories? One way that my comparison helps trouble our
assumptions about “sexuality” and “religion,” without collapsing the categories into
each other, is by following up on Pellegrini’s suggestion in “Testimonial Sexuality;
Or, Queer Structures of Religious Feeling: Notes Toward an Investigation” that
perhaps many religious and sexual identities are performed similarly. What does it
mean to say that perhaps sexuality—and specifically, queer sexuality—behaves more
like religion than it does like race, an analogy upon which born-this-way logic
espoused by LGBT activisms depends? And moreover, an analogy that appropriates
other peoples’ histories and experiences of oppression and can consequently wreak
havoc and break up potential alliances—with black churches, for example. In
Jakobsen and Pellegrini’s Love the Sin, they entertain the implications of shifting
from the popular analogy made between sexual identity and race to a new paradigm
of religion before ultimately arguing that we must push beyond the use of analogy and recognize the value of freedom.\textsuperscript{164} They argue:

To say that religious identity is not encoded in the genes or passed through amniotic fluid or marked in the anterior region of the hypothalamus (some of the more popular sites for locating the ‘origins’ of homosexuality) is not to say that individuals who identify as religious or with a particular religious tradition understand their religious identity as chosen in any simple way. The patterns of commitment that are entailed in religious identity may shift, but those patterns, which seem to touch the very core of a person—the soul even—establishing and anchoring an individual’s moral center, are hardly a simple matter of ‘choice.’ Doesn’t this sound an awful lot like the experience of sexual identity, which feels to many of us—homosexual or otherwise—as if it could not be otherwise, as if we could not be other than who and how we are?\textsuperscript{165}

Jakobsen and Pellegrini make a case that it makes more sense to imagine sexuality not as something that is biological, innate, and thus “not a choice,” like how we culturally imagine “race” to be, but rather as something akin to “religion,” as so powerfully felt that the matter of “born-this-way versus choice” seems irrelevant and inadequate. This powerful rearticulation of sexuality is an example of how recognizing that there are key similarities between these categories can offer a reimagining that encourages healthier relationships between different communities and promotes ideas in the best interests of queer people and queer activisms—such as putting an end to the use of arguments that rely on problematic “like race” analogies, which appropriates other peoples’ histories and experiences and additionally alienates many queers who may feel they are not born any particular way.

As J.Z. Smith writes, comparison is a tool that mutually modulates and destabilizes the two categories being brought together. Thus, rearticulating sexuality must necessarily mean rearticulating religion, and ultimately the relationship that we

\textsuperscript{164} \textit{Love the Sin}, 97-98
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid., 99
imagine between the two categories. In demonstrating the similar ways in which both lesbian feminist coming out stories and pentecostal conversion narratives challenge the abstract notion of the autonomous, disembodied individual, one way “sexuality” can help modulate “religion” is by altering our definitional understanding of religion in popular U.S. discourse by imagining religion as *embodied practice*. As scholars of religion know, defining “religion” is not easy and I’m not trying to propose a definition; and yet, the way in which we imagine religion in popular U.S. discourse matters. As I show in my Introduction, our current collective understanding of religion is inflected by Protestantism. Consequently, religion, in the popular U.S. imagination, is often thought of as a system of *beliefs*, or an abstract relationship between an autonomous individual and God, which is frankly insufficient and inaccurate when it comes down to the ways in which people practice religion in both social and bodily ways. One way of challenging this discursive and pervasive understanding is by thinking more of religion as constituting embodied identities and practices. Michael Warner describes watching his mother and her friends during Bible studies:

> They would pray in tongues while vacuuming the shag carpet…In church, weeping in the intense but unfathomable love of Jesus, they repeated certain gestures: head slowly shaking no, eyes closed above damp cheeks, arms stretched out in invisible crosses, the temporarily forgotten Kleenex clenched in the hand. (Because Pentecostalists exalt weeping and catarrh so much, I still associate the smell of tissue with church.)¹⁶⁶

Warner characterizes his mother and her friends’ religious identities as deeply embodied, as enacted through affective, bodily acts as well as through the networks of support and community that existed between the women. He is even viscerally

¹⁶⁶ Warner, 227-228
reminded of his own past religious practice by something as everyday as the smell of
tissue. In this way, Warner shows how religious identity and experiences with
“religion” are fundamentally bound up with bodies, materiality, and social practices.

It is also true, however, that pentecostal practice uniquely affirms embodiment
and materiality in such a way that distinguishes it from other kinds of Christianities.
And yet, this crucial difference between pentecostal practice and perhaps a more
pervasive understanding of Christianity—which is that it disavows the body in favor
of the soul—does not mean that other kinds of religious identities are not still
embodied identities. Here, I am taking an extreme example in order to highlight a
problem that is shared, which is that “sexuality” helps modulate “religion” by
bringing into focus the importance of materiality and practice that is in fact central to
most religious identities. As Pellegrini and Jakobsen argue, “For both individuals and
communities, then, religion is never a matter solely of text and belief, but crucially
involves—and we could even say instantiated by—practice.” 167 We inherit from the
Enlightenment and from the Protestant reformation an intensely specific definition of
religion that privileges mind over body, the individual over the social. Rectifying a
category of religion that brings into greater focus practice and the ways in which
religious identities are embodied firstly honors the realities of religious practice and
secondly recognizes the problematic ways in which this dominant definition has been
completely inflected by a single religion originating in Western Europe with the
posting of the 95 Theses. Lastly, we open up huge possibilities for a world where we
can take up new ethics that value embodiment, a world where perhaps bodies are not
violently dehumanized and denied access to basic healthcare, working, and housing

167 Love the Sin, 99
rights. As Jakobsen and Pellegrini argue, “The shift from being against discrimination to being for freedom also entails a shift in focus from identity to practice.”168 By this they mean a shift away from “tolerance,” which arguably maintains the same central terms of inclusion while excluding and violently marginalizing bodies that are marked as “different,” to a new social imagining premised on radical plurality. This shift entails thinking of both sexual and religious identities as powerfully felt, practiced, and ultimately embodied.

Thus, this redescription of “religion” and “sexuality” and the rectification of new categories that pay better attention to social realities is a world-building project that espouses ethics of embodiment and social freedom. Jakobsen and Pellegrini argue:

We do not want to stop at an analogy between religious and sexual identity. Rather, we want to use this analogy to jump-start more expansive considerations of not just what it means to be different, but also what it means to enact our identities differently. Tolerance extends the welcome mat to those who are different only on the condition that they set aside their difference and appear the same—like ‘everyone else.’ Instead, we hope to open social space for new forms of life that are not attached to prefixed notions of what it means to be ‘gay’ or what it means to be ‘religious.’169

Analogies are useful, but they are only so useful. Through ultimately redescribing “religion” and “sexuality,” I hope to also point to the same more expansive considerations of the way we imagine difference in the context of the social democracy in which we supposedly live. Jakobsen and Pellegrini go on to ask, “How then to resist and challenge exclusion and at the same time change the terms of inclusion? Is it possible to build a public that allows for robust contestation and

168 Ibid., 101
169 Ibid.
radical pluralism?170 This possibility hinges on imagining social categories that value embodiment and difference. This imagining is more than just a theorization; as Jakobsen and Pellegrini argue, it is a doing, a way of actively supporting differences. Drawing an analogy between religion and sexuality, often discursively understood as in fundamental opposition, is one way to demonstrate the processes of redescription in which we must engage in order to bring about justice for all bodies, to build a world that values freedom, difference, equity, and a world that does not systematically dehumanize and enact violence against bodies that are queer, trans*, poor, disabled, and/or aren’t white.

I believe in the possibility of building a public that espouses ethics that value bodies and freedom. As a Unitarian Universalist, I am probably one of very few in my own tradition who finds deep (and unconventional) meaning in the doctrine of original sin, which many people, Unitarian Universalist and otherwise, understandably reject. For me, original sin means the condition of the world we are born into and consequently of which we are an inevitable part; these conditions are original because they await us. And for those of us in the U.S., we have been socialized in a neoliberal culture that is deeply sexist, racist, classist, heterosexist, cissexist, and ableist. By means of being born into them, these systems of oppression become part of us. Our bodies can represent them to others, we can and do internalize violence perpetuated by these systems, and they inevitably shape our relationships with other people. But unlike conventional understandings of “original sin,” I do not believe that these systems are necessarily permanent, nor that “guilt” is especially useful when fighting against self-alienation, alienation from others, and injustice.

170 Ibid.,149
What is useful is being in relationship with one another, treating each other’s bodies with respect and even love, becoming reconnected through sharing experiences of privilege and oppression and working to build a new kind of larger community that fights for justice. Through this community building, we form what we might believe are unlikely partnerships and thus begin reimagining the social landscape in which we live, working to fight collaboratively for a world where we can all live livable lives and freely practice the identities we so powerfully feel.
Appendix

Fig. 2. Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006. 73. Print.
THE NOTION THAT MY SORDID PERSONAL LIFE HAD SOME SORT OF LARGER IMPORT WAS STRANGE, BUT SEDUCTIVE.

FEMINISM IS THE THEORY. LESBIANISM IS THE PRACTICE.

AND BY MIDTERM I HAD BEEN SEDUCED COMPLETELY.

JOAN WAS A POET AND A "Matriarchist." I SPENT VERY LITTLE OF THE REMAINING SEMESTER OUTSIDE HER BED.

THIS WAS STREWN WITH BOOKS, HOWEVER, IN WHAT WAS FOR ME A NOVEL FUSION OF WORD AND DEED.

I LOST MY BEARINGS. THE DICTIONARY HAD BECOME EROTIC.

SOME OF OUR FAVORITE CHILDHOOD STORIES WERE REVEALED AS PROPAGANDA...

OS-, MOUTH, ORAL, OSCILLATE, OSCULATE, ORIFICE....

INDEX OF INDO-EUROPEAN ROOTS

OH.

GOD, CHRISTOPHER ROBIN'S A TOTAL IMPERIALIST!


96

AND IN A WAY, YOU COULD SAY THAT MY FATHER’S END WAS MY BEGINNING.

OR MORE PRECISELY, THAT THE END OF HIS LIE COINCIDED WITH THE BEGINNING OF MY TRUTH.

BECAUSE I’D BEEN LYING TOO, FOR A LONG TIME. SINCE I WAS FOUR OR FIVE.

DAD HAD TAKEN ME WITH HIM ON A BUSINESS TRIP TO PHILADELPHIA.

IN THE CITY, IN A LUNCHEONETTE...

...WE SAW A MOST UNSETTLING SIGHT.


Works Cited


Bechdel, Alison. Presentation and Q&A with Alison Bechdel. Wesleyan University, Middletown. 19 Sept. 2012. Reading.


Diggs, Marylynne. "Lesbian Confession and Case History." *Confessional Politics*: 


Smith, Jonathan Z. "Sacred Persistance: Toward a Redescription of Canon."


Works Consulted


