

*That Power: Performing Power, Trauma, and Queer Religious Futurity*

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## Abstract

Conservative religious ideology is a key contributor to the ongoing violence of LGBTIQ2S+ exclusion and discrimination in Canada. This qualitative arts-based research project foregrounds the life experiences of 2 queer individuals from conservative Hindu (Manchari (Ari) Paranthahan) and conservative Christian (Jonathan Brower) upbringings to activate a conversation about the possibilities and limitations of queer religious agency and futurity. Using critical narrative inquiry and theatre creation, Paranthahan and Brower collaged their narratives about gendered, sexual, racial, and religious attachment and exclusion into a script and then publicly performed it as a live full-length play. The script and performance, titled *That Power*, are included within the thesis as findings. Key theoretical influences framing the discussion are the responsibility of witnessing testimony (Oliver, 2001), depathologizing trauma (Cvetkovich, 2003; Rothberg, 2014), the potentialities of queer performance utopias (Muñoz, 2009; Pryor, 2017), and feminist anti-racist solidarity (Mohanty, 2003). The analysis is guided by questions regarding how performance mobilizes queer trauma through relationality; the ways stories can galvanize an intersecting analysis about race, gender, and faith; and how a theatre creation model enriches the possibilities for queer futurity. The discussion positions *That Power* as a cultural product that helps reconstitute subjectivity for its creators while also becoming a mode of embodied collective resistance by performatively working through trauma and reframing queer relationality and feminist solidarity.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Key words: queer trauma; queer futurity; queer religious agency; queer relationality; queer theatre performance

## **Acknowledgments**

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### **Dedications**

This is not one man's effort; though my name appears first, I walk alongside giants who I owe so much. This thesis would have been impossible without the love and support of many. First to my ancestors, whose survival and love brought me into existence and continue to offer me new ways forward. To Ari, my immense gratitude and learning with and from you is woven through this work (more on that in the introduction). To mon grand chou Kyall, it is no secret that your love and affection is the magic that restores and rejuvenates me, that has brought me back to life, that ushers me into our future. To my supervisor, Dr. Margot Francis, in the face of many obstacles and while providing mentorship to many, your time with me has always felt like a priority and a gift—almost as if I was your only student. Your care, delicate guidance, constant belief, and trust in my capacities has brought me back time and again to strive to finish this thesis. Thanks for keeping me honest, just, and in pursuit of the generative. To my supervisory committee: Dr. Susan Spearey and Dr. Brenda Anderson, I am so grateful for the behind-the-scenes support. Your excitement for this work, your help in the final stages, and all the unseen contributions are invaluable. And Sue, thank you for giving me the lens and language to recalibrate how I think about my work. To my external examiner, Beau Coleman, MFA, your theatrical enthusiasm for the work during my defense was a dream. To Colin Anthes, thank you for your devising workshop. To the Department of Dramatic Arts, thank you for the rehearsal/performance spaces provided.

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*This is for you. This is for me. I will carry all of you with me always.*

### **Land Acknowledgment**

As a settler on this land, I want to acknowledge the Turtle Island territories on which this thesis was written, and the workshop of *That Power* performed. While researching, co-creating, and performing *That Power*, and writing the first half of this thesis, I was an uninvited guest on the ancestral lands governed by the Dish With One Spoon Wampum between the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and the Anishinaabe Nation (known as St. Catharines, Ontario). I finalized this thesis as an uninvited guest on the unceded ancestral lands of the Coast Salish Lekwungen-speaking peoples, now known as the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations (known as Victoria, British Columbia). I thank these peoples for their hospitality as I live, work, and play on these territories and I choose to live as a guest who respects the hospitality shown to me and choose the path of mutual respect that leads to all persons co-existing side-by-side, in agreement. I have much to learn about how acknowledgment can be an integration of “intentions, states of being, and actions in your own bones and blood and breath” (Ravensbergen, 2019, p. 30). This work and learning towards living in an active state of acknowledgment as a permanent uninvited guest and settler on these lands will continue past this thesis.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Art with social justice underpinnings contains a vision that exceeds what its makers expect to accomplish materially, and that is the space of art, utopia, the imagination. The performance is both useful in some way, and a gesture toward something not attainable any time soon, but what those performing most wish. To embody such aspirations, all the performative drawers must be unlocked. (Cohen-Cruz, 2010, p. 9)

Then I think, can't we just make art? I am reminded there is a prayer in the act of writing ... this prayer of art that sustains in the face of grave disappointment, all the small dyings of heart. (Moraga, 2011, p. 12)

### About the Research

The catalyst for this thesis research is threefold: (a) first, understanding the violent impact of conservative Christian doctrine that excludes LGBTIQ2S+ identity and queer<sup>2</sup> bodies from recognition and/or participation within Christianity, including the impact on my own body; (b) the recognition that this religious exclusion is a reality in the lives of queer religious people of many faiths; and (c) my experience using autoethnographic theatre to explore narratives of queer exclusion and resistance.

This research investigates the process of theatre creation and performance as a site for queer religious agency<sup>3</sup> and futurity.<sup>4</sup> The focus is a script titled *That Power*, co-authored by Manchari (Ari) Paranthahan and me, alongside reflections on its creation process and performance. The dissertation will (a) provide an autobiographical context

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<sup>2</sup> I use “queer” and “queerness” interchangeably with “LGBTIQ2S+” as meaning a “compact alternative to lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender, but it also emphasizes affinity and solidarity over identity ... [a deliberately loose, inclusive association” (Marcus, 2005, p. 196), which I employ to encompass variety and fluidity within orientation, sexual expression, and gender identity. I do not use 2S when referring to South Asian LGBTIQ+ populations.

<sup>3</sup> I visit queer religious agency in depth further in the paper, but in short, I use queer religious agency to describe the actions/beliefs of queer religious persons engaged in or having understood that their queer and religious identities are not separate or dichotomous, but part of a greater wholistic identity that is complementary.

<sup>4</sup> I use the term futurity in a positive sense to refer to the possibility of a future; both the possibility to imagine that future and to eventually experience it (in the future). Specifically, in this work, in the face of extermination of queerness, the possibility of imagining and eventually living in a future where queer is a reality (and a positive) is queer futurity. My use of the term is inspired by the scholarship of Muñoz (2009).

which positions my interest in queer religious agency and futurity; (b) outline the relationship (or lack thereof) between LGBTIQ2S+ persons and the two implicated religions within the research—Hinduism and Christianity; (c) examine the Canadian context of religious anti-queer discrimination; (d) outline the methodology that guided the research (including research methods and theoretical context); (e) provide the workshop script and performance of *That Power* as findings; and (f) reflect on that script and its performance through a theoretical framing of temporally bound performances of queer trauma and queer futurity.

I have been engaged with thinking about the possibilities of queer religious agency and futurity since I left my own fundamentalist Christian church, Rocky Mountain Calvary Chapel, and my conservative Christian upbringing, to embrace a queer life in 2011. A key moment in that journey was my posting a coming out video on Facebook (see: *It Gets Better* 2011, University of Calgary, 2012) where I called out the emotional and spiritual bullying and homophobia that I had experienced at the hands of many in my former church communities, the parachurch conservative Christian communities and organizations I had been a part of (YWAM; Power to Change; InterVarsity Christian Fellowship), the conversion therapy<sup>5</sup> programs I attended at

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<sup>5</sup> Also known as reparative therapy, ex-gay ministry, or sexual orientation and gender identity and expression change efforts (SOGICE or SOGIECE) (Community-Based Research Centre, 2020; Salway, 2019). It consists of efforts—through counseling, religious practices, behavioural modification, cognitive reframing, and other means—to attempt to change sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual or hinder gender identification in the gender assigned at birth (Fjelstrom, 2013, p. 802). In Canada, SOGIECE is primarily used in religious settings and enforced through mandated heteropatriarchal theological beliefs (Wells, 2019). It is proven to be harmful and entirely ineffective (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Borowich, 2008; Dehlin, Galliher, Bradshaw, Hyde, & Crowell, 2014; Fjelstrom, 2013; Flentje, Heck, & Cochran, 2013; Haldeman, 2001; Jones, Botsko, & Gorman, 2003; Maccio, 2011; Schidlo & Schroeder, 2002; Schroeder & Schidlo, 2002; Smith, Bartlett, & King, 2004; Weiss, Morehouse, Yeager, & Berry, 2010). SOGIECE operates on the assumption that “a homosexual orientation or transgender gender identity is invalid and consists of “sinful” behaviours that are the result of a dysfunctional upbringing, trauma, or the “fallen nature” of humankind” (Fjelstrom, 2013, p. 802). The hoped-for outcome, disguised as helping with “healing for sexual and relational brokenness” (Living Waters, 2009), is that the individual will begin to

Journey Canada,<sup>6</sup> and the non-affirming anti-queer theology present in all the former listed. It would take me many more years to understand the life-altering impact of this damaging heteropatriarchal system. I thought I wanted faith in my life, but it felt like my Christian and queer identities were at war with each other, so I put my faith on hold until I could find a version of Christianity that wouldn't ask me to do the impossible: change my sexual orientation or stay celibate for life (even more than that: a Christianity that would celebrate my queerness). After returning to the University of Calgary to finish my Communications degree and add a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Drama, I became interested in ways I could express my journey toward claiming my sexual orientation and faith through my art.

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identify as heterosexual because it is believed that heterosexuality is each person's true or actual "God-given orientation" (Fjelstrom, 2013, p. 802). SOGIECE operates within a systemic form of oppression that claims that God only allows heterosexual relating, which coerces minors and adults to join its programs and/or embrace its ideology (if they are not physically forced) because they see no other option (Levovitz, 2015; Rucker, 2019; VanderWal-Gritter, 2018). Though practices may vary, often including other heteropatriarchal ideology that draws in those seeking help for various forms of "sexual and relational brokenness" as defined by heteropatriarchal non-affirming Christian ideology, SOGIECE-influenced ministries can be identified when their courses and teachings exist to help, heal, or support those with "unwanted" same-sex attraction and gender confusion, by requiring forced celibacy for life for queer individuals unable to make a mixed-orientation relationship work or denying trans individuals their self-identified gender identity. Conversion therapy as a term was historically linked to physically violent or abusive techniques to change sexual orientation and this is one of the reasons many SOGIECE ministries claim they do not do conversion therapy (Rucker, 2019). Modern conversion therapy is no less violent; its abuse is spiritual and emotional (Beagan & Hattie, 2015; Brower, 2019; Fjelstrom, 2013; Gadjics, 2018; Super & Jacobson, 2011; VanderWal-Gritter, 2014, 2018). Those who have been through these programs are often called ex-gay survivors or conversion therapy survivors, but these terms are polarizing as many who continue to adhere to heteropatriarchal religious belief systems, who would be considered survivors, continue to believe they have not participated in conversion therapy. Participants are almost always referred or encouraged to attend SOGIECE programs by conservative spiritual leaders, ministries, and/or parents/family and have predominantly been raised in non-affirming fundamentalist religious communities where heteropatriarchy is taught as God-ordained and anything else is disobedience to the religion (Brower, 2018; Rucker, 2019; VanderWal-Gritter, 2018). Exodus International was the umbrella organization for SOGIECE organizations operating globally until it folded in 2013 admitting that 99% of those who attended affiliated programs experienced no change in orientation (Lovett, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Formerly called Living Waters, originally an affiliate of Exodus International before its demise, Journey Canada is a non-affirming Canadian Christian ministry offering resources and course training (at a fee) to minors and adults, which require only heterosexual relating and support and encourage sexual orientation and gender identity and expression change efforts for those with unwanted same sex attractions (conversion therapy) under the guise of spiritual discipleship. It is one of the most prominent SOGIECE ministries in Canada alongside Exodus Global Alliance Canada, God Gazers, and Courage (a Catholic apostolate), all of which have charitable status. Journey Canada (2020) continues to deny any former or current implication in SOGIECE practice and doctrine (Salway, 2019; Yourex-West, 2019). For a detailed report on SOGIECE in Canada, see Salway (2019) and for more resources see Community-Based Research Centre (2020).

### ***oblivion*: First Steps Toward Exploring Queer Religious Agency**

In *oblivion*, a play I started writing in 2014, I began my quest to understand my past through the art of theatre creation. The play draws on my personal experiences in Christian fundamentalism and conversion therapy and explores the trauma of trying to change my sexuality, a practice known as sexual orientation and gender identity and expression change efforts (SOGIECE) (Community-Based Research Centre, 2020; Generous Space, 2019; Salway, 2019). The play's ending sees the main character Tim, modeled on myself, taking a pill to erase his religion and being born again as a queer atheist (Brower, 2016). It problematizes the Christian Church's historical and current theological discrimination and exclusion of queer or LGBTIQ2S+ people—a stance that continues to manipulate those individuals to participate in forms of SOGIECE in order to be accepted into their religious communities. *oblivion*'s first act is a performance of the script and its second act is a longform audience discussion about queer inclusion hosted by me and members of the creative team. The play has toured to dozens of Christian churches, conferences, and organizations in Canada and has reached over 2,500 people. What began as my own exploration of a personal struggle became a site of education and activism to help Christians understand the urgent need to be inclusive of the LGBTIQ2S+ community (Brower, 2019). The feedback about the show was transformational to my understanding of activism through theatre and the dialogue it creates has helped move individuals and communities closer to becoming affirming and inclusive.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Three communities in Alberta have cited *oblivion* as a key factor in their church's decision to become officially affirming of the LGBTIQ2S+ community. For more details on this story, see articles I wrote for *CdnTimes* (Brower, 2017) and *Canadian Theatre Review* (Brower, 2019).

While touring *oblivion*, I changed and added to the script, incorporating feedback from the audience, along with reflections about my own shifting journey. This led me to reassess my relationship with my faith and to find some sense of hope initiated by having met so many Christians inclusive of LGBTIQ2S+ people (Brower, 2017). However, conservative Christian responses to the show made it clear that religious anti-queer discrimination was alive and well, in turn also showing the need for the show's dialogic approach. This tension remains a reminder that any pushback or homophobia that surfaces in audiences toward me and the play, though rare,<sup>8</sup> is often a symptom of systemic institutionalized heteropatriarchy and an affirmation that this story is a catalyst toward reflexivity in communities with previously held anti-queer assumptions and beliefs.

At the end of "Act One," while performing the ceremony to erase Tim's faith, his best friend Simone asks the audience if they will receive this new "blank slate" Tim into their lives and faith community with unconditional love (Brower, 2016, p. 38). In scripting the play this way, I give the audience the power to secure an inclusive or discriminatory future for Tim and to face up to what either of those futures mean for the human they have just gotten to know personally through the play and as their conversation facilitator in "Act Two" (Brower, 2018). Giving the audience power over the future of a fictitious character is instrumental in illustrating the potentially oppressive or liberatory role faith communities play in the lives of queer Christians; however, the character is still me. Each time Tim is accepted or rejected, in a way so am I—a constant reminder that that part of my past identity and former quest for belonging will always be

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<sup>8</sup> To this day the only public negativity toward me and the play has come in the form of emails after a performance from conservative Christians telling me to go back to conversion therapy, offering prayer for my "wayward" soul, and/or comparing my sexuality to a disease or addiction that is chosen and can be healed through the love of Jesus.

wrapped up in the play's structure. My participation in *oblivion* will always come with the risk of my own re-traumatization, not unlike the risk of living and creating in a heteronormative society. Yet, this vulnerability is also one of the greatest strengths of the play's format because it signals that *oblivion* continues to challenge heteropatriarchal and heteronormative ideologies present in Christian faith communities, rendering its subject matter and cause just as relevant as when it was first written. However, the play only focuses on Christian LGBTIQ2S+ inclusion, which while adding to a growing movement of queer Christian experience and literature, does not engage with interfaith and racialized experiences nor does it address White supremacy and power differentials.

These reflections prompted me to consider how I might create a new theatre project as a way to build upon the learnings of *oblivion*—something that incorporated my new understandings of inclusive and equitable theatre, and in the spirit of inclusion, moving beyond only my queer White, cisgender male, Christian experience. Consequently, I began to question what an LGBTIQ2S+ religious play would look like if other queer people of faith were invited in to collaborate. How would our religious experiences of discrimination and marginalization and our strategies for resistance, reconciliation, and integration of faith and LGBTIQ2S+ identities be similar or different? Would we have anything to offer each other in relation to trauma, heteronormative religious institutions, and approaches to queer agency and futurity? In exploring our similarities and differences, would we find common ground? These questions and research possibilities ignited my curiosity and led me to pursue this master's degree.

## Initial Research Plan

At first these questions led me to propose a thesis project that would have had me directing a diverse group of queer people from different faith traditions in the creation of a new play that thematically explored the intersection of queer and religious experiences. But, because I was deeply implicated in the questions being asked, and my positionality as a White, male queer cisgender able-bodied post-Christian exvangelical<sup>9</sup> privileged me over others who might participate, I began to question the power structures of that version of the project. How would this impact the play that emerged? I also realized that I was asking these questions about other queer individuals of faith not just to understand others better but also to understand my own journey in relation to other queer people of faith. In order to do this, I wanted (and needed) to be involved in the scriptwriting and performance to re-story my own narrative. Finally, asking others to creatively explore these questions as a researcher without doing that work myself seemed a missed opportunity for personal, artistic, and academic growth. Consequently, my vision began to shift to a theatre collaboration in which I would work as an equal co-creator. An egalitarian and non-hierarchical creative team with shared decision-making power would provide more opportunities for a socially just project. However, I had no idea how I would find a queer person of faith who also valued social justice theatre in Niagara. While percolating on who might collaborate with me, I took a serendipitous coffee walk<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Exvangelical: originally the hashtag #exvangelical was popularized on social media accounts Twitter and Instagram in 2016 to refer to those who still find affinity in the values of socially just, progressive, inclusive, humanist Christian teachings, who either were once evangelical or fundamentalist, and use the term to link to their history, while invoking a departure that is politically and inclusively motivated. See Hesse (2017).

<sup>10</sup> A meeting which we had set under the auspices of our communications committee organizing meeting for the upcoming 2018 Niagara Social Justice Forum.

to get to know Manchari (Ari)<sup>11</sup> Paranthahan. I learned they identified as a first-generation Sri Lankan Canadian, second-generation member of the Sri Lankan Diaspora, and trans/non-binary pansexual femme/androgynous person of Hindu Shaivism faith. After discovering we were both queers of faith who had Communications degrees, were performers/theatre creators, and were invested in social justice, our futures started to connect. When Manchari heard about my research project they immediately asked if there was a way we could collaborate. There was, and that conversation changed everything.

### **On My Co-Collaborator Manchari (Ari) Paranthahan**

There is one influential person, an artist and activist of colour, whose words appear in this thesis with explicit permission and that person is Ari Paranthahan, the co-author with me on the script included in the body of this thesis for the performance entitled *That Power*. He is a co-creator, collaborator, inspiration, and partner in art activism. Without his words and experiences, which he shared over months and recorded on paper with me, and which came to life on the stage alongside me in October 2018, this thesis would not exist. I have opted to include a dedication within this introduction in order to express the depth of my gratitude. In fact, the word “gratitude” only scratches the surface of how indebted I am; eternally linked as queer siblings seems most apt.

Dear Ari, “we shapeshift for protection” and yet I never needed to do this with you (Paranthahan & Brower, 2018, p. 3). We have been through so much together, more than either of us expected. Purely overlapping interests and the desire to take ownership

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<sup>11</sup> At the request of Ari, and in respect to his identity journey, I will use Ari (he/him pronouns) when speaking of Ari in the present tense, while using Manchari (they/them) in reference to how Ari identified within the script and during the playwriting and performance of *That Power*.

of our stories and see how they connected brought us further and deeper than I certainly ever expected and now things continue to change. You are in the midst of your transition, one which when we met for our first day-long meeting (where we visited my old church in St. Catharines, your current temple in Brampton, and your family home in Milton) transition was “not an option.” I remember my own epiphany that evening as we shared our Vietnamese food in a strip mall and I took notes on my laptop, wholly naïve as to how you would change my life and my learning. As you articulated, to you “family equals faith” and therefore you could only exist as a trans person in your mind, in order to protect your family’s honour, while sacrificing your freedom. As I heard you describe this dilemma, I started to realize that my questions about queer agency seemed superficial and Eurocentric—and they were. But over the next 6 months the intricate trauma knot of your life and my life—and all the joys tucked in amidst those traumas—would untangle just enough for me to see how intertwined our lives have become through this research. Looking back, there is no other way this could have been done. And now you move towards your own futurity, that which our play *That Power* could only hint at. And I realize those temporal moments of queer research, creation, and performance are archives of a transitory negotiation in both our lives. This messy and permeable queer performative archive contains links to failure and flourishing and joy, all of it bound up in our relationship inside and outside of the text/performance. What will our relationship bring next and how will it change us and the play? Will this performance be completely rewritten in light of ongoing changes in our lives, gender, sexuality, and spirituality?

I love you today like yesterday like I did in June 2018 before we started this wild project. Whatever is next, my past and my future will always be linked to you. Dear Ari, I

have come because our liberation is bound up together (Watson, 2004) and “only when you appear do I dance” (Paranthahan & Brower, 2018, p. 5).

### **Research Purpose and Key Questions**

Small pockets within majority religions in Canada are starting to address the anti-queer discrimination and LGBTIQ2S+ exclusion present within their respective faith systems (Callaghan, 2016; Fuller, 2015; Takeuchi, 2017; VanderWal-Gritter, 2014). These attempts to foster inclusion are encouraging as these communities challenge the idea that religion and queerness are incompatible, and/or that LGBTIQ2S+ persons cannot be religious or spiritual (Edman, 2016). Unfortunately, the road to educating strict and conservative religious communities about the trauma that this type of discrimination inflicts on the LGBTIQ2S+ community (including the harms of exclusion and SOGIECE practices) is long and complex (Huntly, 2011; VanderWal-Gritter, 2014; Vines, 2014). As there is so much work to do in individual denominations and specific faith communities, there has been minimal scholarship comparing queer religious experience within different faith traditions (Blanc, 2013; Cheng, 2014; Cornwall, 2011; O’Brien, 2014; Shipley, 2014; Yip, 2018). To my knowledge there is no research that investigates what these experiences might illuminate when put in conversation. The research in this thesis is a direct response to the gap in queer interfaith inquiry as well as a refusal to be excluded from faith conversations because of the ongoing anti-queer discrimination justified in many religious traditions in Canada.

This research is oriented around a qualitative arts-based research project animated by Manchari Paranthahan and me which employed our skills as theatre artists to co-create a performance exploring the possibilities and limitations of creating space for queer religious agency and futurity. Because our methodology of narrative inquiry treats

personal narratives as data (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), the primary research sources are our own stories. Using our shared points of connection as “religious” and “queer,” as well as our passion for theatre and social justice activism as catalysts, we aspired to co-create a theatre performance that embodied our combined stories without conflating their differences. We saw this research as having emancipatory potential for us as co-investigators as we questioned and played with re-visioning our personal narratives and imagining our own futurity, and for the audience, offering the chance to witness and engage with topics rarely explored. Throughout the process, Manchari and I retained full control of the exploration, scripting, and performance of our own narratives and continue to co-own and be co-invested in the script and any future productions.

Guided by initial questions surrounding the (im)possibilities of queer religious agency, the research was divided into three phases. We started by using critical narrative inquiry techniques to unearth moments within our personal narratives where our queerness and religion intersected; next we co-authored a script, entitled *That Power*, based on our findings; and lastly, we rehearsed and then performed that script to an invited audience.

This thesis is the follow-up to those first three research phases, a solo-project where I reflect on our creation and performance process. The script and video recording documenting the performance is included in the body of this thesis as data for discussion. My analysis of that script/performance is guided by the following questions:

1. How does this performance mobilize queer trauma through relationality?
2. What difference does it make to place Manchari’s story and mine in conversation?

3. How does this dialogue shape an intersecting analysis about race, gender, and faith?
4. What, within this process, enables queer futurity?
5. What does a theatre creation model add to this research?

Overall, this research provides insight into: (a) how using the testimony of trauma in the cultural product of autobiographical theatre can reconstitute subjectivity but only when queer relationality is present (Cvetkovich, 2003; Oliver, 2001); (b) how queer futurity is revealed through queer trauma as a “potentiality” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1) for the depathologization of trauma (Cvetkovich, 2003); and (c) how unfinished queer archives (Farrier, 2013) containing testimony (Oliver, 2001) need to be wrested from the sick heteronormative archive of finality (Pryor, 2017) to allow for witnessing to extend past a finalized cultural product (Cvetkovich, 2003). These implications connect to the fields of trauma studies, performance studies, queer studies, and finally cultural studies concerned with working across difference.

## **CHAPTER TWO: RESEARCH RELEVANCE AND CONTEXT**

As this research concerns two individuals who are both queer and religious, it is important to review the literature that examines the relationship—or lack thereof—between LGBTIQ2S+ persons and religion, specifically within Christianity and Hinduism. From there I outline the current Canadian context of religious anti-queer discrimination. Most of the recent scholarship investigating relationships between queer subjects and their religion comes out of the United States, where the same-sex marriage debate and conservative Christian opposition to homosexuality and sexual and gender minorities has remained at the forefront of the American consciousness (Rayside & Wilcox, 2011a, 2011b; Robertson, 2018; Vines, 2014). However, core religious doctrine and the struggles queer religious individuals face in Canada are not dissimilar to their American counterparts (Brower, 2019; Dickey-Young, 2012; Rayside & Wilcox, 2011a, 2011b; Seitz, 2014).

### **Religion-Specific Perspectives of Queerness**

It is important to examine the circumstances faced by queer people in the two religions involved in this study, Hinduism and Christianity. My focus here is to describe the dominant views on sexuality and gender identity/expression that permeate these religions. Since I prefaced this thesis with an analysis of my experience of Christian doctrine, and since the history of Christianity is predominantly understood in Canada and within Western academia, I spend more time on Hinduism in the following section. Articulating each religious viewpoint, I use the words “homosexuality” and “same-sex marriage” because they serve as a litmus test to queer inclusion. In the literature reviewed, when same-sex marriage and homosexuality are excluded or have parameters

placed on them (i.e., celibacy, non-membership, not allowed to serve or lead, etc.), other forms of queerness are absolutely excluded (Shannahan, 2010; VanderWal-Gritter, 2014; Vines, 2014).

### **Christianity**

The Roman Catholic church continues to be in strong opposition to same-sex activity and in Canadian contexts, bishops and Catholic Schools continue to encourage conversion therapy misconstruing high suicide rates among queer youths as a problem with queerness as opposed to a symptom of religious and societal rejection (Callaghan, 2016). Mainline Protestant Christian denominations are at different stages of acceptance (Huntly, 2011; Seitz, 2014; VanderWal-Gritter, 2014). The Metropolitan Community Church is one of the most inclusive; its creation came from a desire to serve the queer community (Seitz, 2015). The Unitarian and United Church of Canada are advocates for queer inclusion on a denominational level, however affirming<sup>12</sup> status is dependent on each congregation's impetus to become officially affirming, which includes a multi-year process instigated by the congregation (Huntly, 2011). The same types of affirming approaches based on congregational support for inclusion exist in the Mennonite, Anglican, Presbyterian, and Lutheran churches (Baergen, Loewen, Metzger, & Suderman, 2015; Huntly, 2011; Seitz, 2015). Aside from rainbow flags on buildings or official statements on websites, queer Christians in these denominations must often seek out conversations with leadership to determine the level of inclusion they can expect

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<sup>12</sup> "Affirming" is a popularized term in progressive Christian circles that refers to the celebration and full inclusion of queer people in Christian communities. "Officially affirming" refers to a designation for United Church of Canada churches that have taken their congregations through a year or more of queer education and have majority voted to publicly recognize the equality of queer persons in all aspects of their religious community; for a detailed description, see Huntly (2011).

(Church Clarity, 2019; Huntly, 2011; VanderWal-Gritter, 2014). Similar negotiations by queer Christians are required in conservative, Protestant evangelical, and non-denominational churches, which aim to be welcoming (i.e., friendly) so as not to turn anyone away but exclude queer Christians from participation in church life (except sitting in the pews) when they are in a relationship (VanderWal-Gritter, 2014; Vines, 2014). Official policy and doctrine prohibit same-sex marriage in nearly<sup>13</sup> all cases, but the potential for membership, volunteering, and leadership positions is interpreted differently in each setting. Where outright exclusion is present, SOGIECE are often part of the queer Christian experience (Fjelstrom, 2013; VanderWal-Gritter, 2014; Vines, 2014).<sup>14</sup>

## **Hinduism**

The Hindu religion contains many explicit and implicit references to transgender Gods, while ancient texts celebrate same-sex love and the third gender (Das Wilhelm, 2010), Hindu temple art contains depictions of queer sex and love acts, and the Kama Sutra is both religiously and culturally important (Das Wilhelm, 2010; Naisargi, 2012; Takhar, 2014). In Hinduism, God is understood as “unlimited and untethered by any gender restrictions” (Das Wilhelm, 2010, p. 101). In ancient Vedic India, the Tritiyap-Prakriti (or people of the third sex)—a term for persons with non-normative gender identity, gender expression, and/or sexual orientation—were accommodated and welcomed as civilized and adding to the whole of society (Das Wilhelm, 2010). Despite the Western perspective that Hinduism is more liberal and open to sexual exploration,

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<sup>13</sup> Non-denominational churches are at times not subject to larger organizations, so their stances vary but tend toward exclusive. Church Clarity is a North American organization that exists to clarify which churches are inclusive; see: [www.churchclarity.org/](http://www.churchclarity.org/).

<sup>14</sup> For more resources on Christian perspectives on LGBTIQ2S+ inclusion, see: [www.affirmingconnections.com](http://www.affirmingconnections.com) and [www.generousspace.org](http://www.generousspace.org).

predominantly because of the wide knowledge of the Kama Sutra, contemporary conservative Hindu ideology and India as a nation-state both oppose queer expressions of sexuality and promote censorship and the criminalization of same-sex relationships (Naisargi, 2012; Siker, 2007; Takhar, 2014; Valentine & Waite, 2012).

The arrival of this anti-queer attitude and belief system is complex. Das Wilhelm (2010) describes the homophobic reality of modern-day India as a gradual descent from Vedic India where there was accommodation and acceptance for many forms of sexuality and gender identity “into puritanism and homophobia due to caste consciousness and foreign religious influence” (p. 114). This complex, 5,000-year-long decline started with the public disavowal yet private flourishing of homosexuality during Islamic rule in Northern India and reached its most discriminatory phase with the outright criminalization of homosexuality during British rule in 1860 (Siker, 2007; Das Wilhelm, 2010). The factors impacting anti-queer attitudes were not solely British, as certain influences that cannot be pinned to one religion are also present, including xenophobia, machismo, and religious fundamentalism (Bacchetta, 1999; Das Wilhelm, 2010).

However, British rule, where Christianity was the state religion, was the most influential in espousing negative attitudes into Hindu culture, and importing and imposing the following beliefs that continue in modern Hinduism:

Homosexuality is unnatural. ... Homosexuality does not exist in the animal kingdom. ... Homosexuality is a curable disorder. ... Homosexuality is acquired or chosen. ... Homosexuality and cross-dressing are sinful ...[and] should be criminalized. ... One should not associate with homosexuals and transgenders. ... Homosexuality should not be openly discussed. ... Homosexuality is a modern

day occurrence. ... Homosexual marriage is shocking ...[and] homosexuals and crossdressers are demonic. (Das Wilhelm, 2010, pp. 119-124)

These intense and anti-queer beliefs have left a legacy, and colonial legislation in India attempted to eradicate pro-queer Vedic teachings through state law and Christian mission schools amongst other strategies (Siker, 2007). Underlying these beliefs are heteropatriarchal values that take primary direction from Christian doctrine proclaiming that there are only two genders, relationships are only valid when procreation is possible, and that the male rules over the female (Anderson, 2009; Brownson, 2013; Vines, 2014). Interestingly, in modern-day religious experience around the world, Christianity and Hinduism both carry forward the colonial legacies of anti-queer discrimination that were embedded by British imperialism.

Modern global Hinduism encompasses “a range of contradicting positions” on sexuality and gender, not unlike Christianity (Takhar, 2014, p. 238) and recent legislation points to a greater societal acceptance of sexual and gender minorities including most notably, the Indian Supreme Court’s decision to strike down Section 377 of the law and to decriminalize same-sex consensual sex in September 2018 (Bengali & Masih, 2018). Recognition of transgender Hindus as persons continues to be fraught with celebration and exclusion, where even hijras (transgender gurus) are at odds with each other, and hijra activists campaign against hijra gurus who preach against queer sexual practices (Goel, 2016; Katyayal, 2015; Tripathi, 2015).

Unlike SOGIECE programs in Christianity, there is no evidence of organized conversion therapy attempts to change same-sex orientation or gender identity. Instead, there seems to be an either/or scenario where individuals falling along the LGBTIQ+

spectrum are either celebrated or excluded, and if excluded, often treated as invisible (Naisargi, 2012; Somasundaram & Tejus Murthy, 2016). Additionally, for gender minorities, familial pressure and threats to prioritize upholding the heteronormative family narrative—which includes trying to stop trans individuals from undergoing hormone therapy and gender reassignments for the sake of family honour—are not uncommon (Bacchetta, 1999). South Asian women who identify as LGBTIQ+ are particularly censored for “transgressing traditional, cultural, and religious boundaries” if they have any form of sexual or gender expression/identity that draws them away from heterosexual marriage, effectively silencing them to the point where many avoid further stigmatization by entering into opposite-sex marriages (Bacchetta, 1999). This pressure and its impact can be considered a form of SOGIECE. Even more relevant to this study, Takhar (2014) highlights that the right wing “Hindutva ideology excludes expression of sexuality of any form from its understanding of nationhood” which is a nation that sees itself expressed through patriarchy, respectability, and conformity (pp. 240-241). This heteronormative understanding of Indian nationhood also paints alternate sexual expressions and homosexuality as Western constructs to be exiled, and these ideas reverberate throughout the South Asian diaspora (Bacchetta 1999; Takhar, 2014).

Even in progressive Western countries like Canada, coming out remains a challenge for members of the diaspora because many face community and family exclusion, isolation, and see themselves as exiles (Takhar, 2014). Consequently, gender and sexual minorities often hide their non-heteronormative identities/experiences out of fear and this alienation and exclusion can aggravate mental health struggles (Super &

Jacobson, 2011; Takhar, 2014). In addition to religious discrimination, in Hinduism, culture and family are deeply connected to nationalism, in which

qualities of virile, militaristic masculinity combined with obligatory asexuality (for Hindu nationalist leaders) and forced heterosexuality (for Hindu nationalized masses) are valorized and placed in opposition to queer gender and sexuality (assigned to all Others). In this scheme, queer gender and sexuality are constructed as already outside the Hindu nation; when queerness reenters, it must be immediately exiled. (Bacchetta, 1999, p. 143)

Hindu nationalism exists also in the Canadian diaspora, where this trio of religion, culture, and family co-exist within a broader context of racism and White Christian supremacy. In this context, LGBTIQ+ Indo-Canadians face an interlocking set of oppressions where “‘Othering’ discourses of racial ambiguity, invisibility, hypervisibility, tokenization, exoticification ... mark queer Desi<sup>15</sup>/South Asian bodies” (Rodricks, 2018, p. 400). Although queer identity in South Asia and South Asian diasporic communities is not considered an easy identity, Takhar (2014) notes that “representations of alternative sexualities and support groups are contributing to a gradual alleviation from invisibility and isolation” (p. 241).<sup>16</sup>

These religious beliefs and opinions about queer people within Christian and Hindu religious traditions are the position taken by the major religious denominations,

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<sup>15</sup> Note: Rodricks (2018) uses “Queer Desi/South Asians” as a term not only to delineate queer and Hindu, but also to incorporate the navigation of multiple worlds, where “they are considered marginal to their respective communities, and as a result, build a specific repertoire of tactics and strategies to navigate not only physical spaces but the emotional ones as well” (p. 400).

<sup>16</sup> Included in these representations in India are pride celebrations (Chatterjee, 2019), and queer and Hijra communities, many dedicated to queer activism (LGBTQ India Resources, 2019; Naisargi, 2012; Prakashan, 2014; Tripathi, 2015). However, Canadian queer Hindu representation through grassroots organizing and community groups is sparse and localized to the GTA with only Dosti (2019) having an official organized presence and QTBIPOC operating unfunded (QTBIPOC Sauga, 2019).

temples and congregations. While there are more progressive attitudes and approaches taken by different denominations, gurus, and sects, these majority-held perspectives define the context for queer persons inside these religions where they face incredible and often insurmountable discrimination that firmly communicates they are flawed, unequal, and unwelcome if they are recognized as existing at all (Bacchetta, 1999; Fuist, 2016; Rodricks, 2018; Vines, 2014). Those who attempt to remain in communities that hold these views because of familial, communal, or cultural ties, fear of the unknown or eternal damnation, a sense of duty or commitment, or because they find just enough value in their spiritual identity to endure, often remain closeted (Super & Jacobson, 2011; VanderWal-Gritter, 2014; Vines, 2014). Thus, it isn't difficult to understand why a movement towards secularism<sup>17</sup> hovers over queer religious subjects in the face of such circumstances (Seitz, 2014).

### **Queer Secularization Narratives**

Secularism presents an inviting opportunity for the emancipation of queer religious individuals because of its promise of equality and deliverance from a conservative religious context that is so frequently opposed to non-heteronormative and cis-gendered sexualities. Benefits include relief from the cognitive dissonance, negative self-concept, and internalized homophobia compounded by the spiritual abuse regularly

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<sup>17</sup> My use of the term “secularism” is employed through the lens of David K. Seitz (2014) who states that the common conceits of the secular are universality and neutrality. However, he makes clear that queer secularism has been complicit in indulging Islamophobia and xenophobia and pushes for a more complex vision of secularism that is oriented toward “meaningful solidarities across religious differences” (p. 96). I use the term secularism here to point toward a movement that suggests queer liberation is an outcropping of secularism, which I tackle with some criticism. I understand secularism as a move away from the constraints of institutionalized theological religion or the abandonment of faith and/or religious belief. It is a project “revealing the historical contingency of the hegemonic equation of secularism and sexual emancipation” (p. 96). My project here is not to propose secularism as a solution. This thinking is in line with Seitz as we are both of the mind that there is a counterbalance where queer secularism must “engender solidarity across multiple religious differences” just as queer faith experiences must critique “religiously authorized homophobic violence” (p. 96).

associated with anti-queer religious teachings and opinions (Halkitis et al., 2009; Hattie & Beagan, 2013; Seitz, 2014; Super & Jacobson, 2011). Nonetheless, to proffer secularism as a preferential option to avoid religious discrimination and its resulting consequences negates the varying desires of queer religious subjects, including those who find value in their religion as well as negating the affirming work of liberal religious communities. Additionally, secularization storylines tend toward the dismissal of any positive aspect religion offers towards identity formation, including meaning-making, comfort, social cohesion, and promotion of healthy self-esteem (Fuist, 2016; Kocet, Sanabria, & Smith, 2011; O'Brien, 2014). Secularism also needs to be thought of through a lens that considers the context for those living in a Christian majority country like Canada, where non-dominant religious beliefs (Hinduism) are often deeply connected to cultural solidarities in the face of White supremacy. More specifically, the desire for racial and ethnic solidarity is a factor at play in the South Asian diaspora, where the pressure to maintain loyalty to family, faith, and culture instead of giving in to Canadian "individualism" and embracing an identity that is "outside the Hindu nation" becomes a life-changing line of negotiation (Bacchetta, 1999).

### **Navigating Inclusion, Exclusion, and Reconciliation**

For those who do not choose secularization, many face an uphill battle for family and community acceptance, personal acceptance, and identity integration. Regarding community acceptance, Halkitis et al. (2009) have outlined ways in which religious communities navigate and accept (or don't) the existence of queer members in their midst. These four levels of acceptance also translate into how many queer individuals think of their queerness in relation to their religion and personal faith. These range from

(a) full acceptance, (b) qualified acceptance (i.e., acceptance of gay people, but not in sexual relationships), (c) rejecting, nonpunitive (i.e., love the sinner, hate the sin), and (d) rejecting punitive (i.e., homosexuality is a sin and is punished by an eternity in Hell) (Halkitis et al., 2009). As Fuist (2016) points out, anything but full acceptance means queer people who remain in their religious communities face mild to extreme discrimination. Given that few religious communities exist where queer persons are completely accepted, any attempt by a queer religious person to stay or enter into a non-inclusive community requires hiding a piece of themselves, or bearing the emotional labour of advocacy for inclusion, which can span years (Fuist, 2016; Seitz, 2014; VanderWal-Gritter, 2014; Vines, 2014).

### **Canadian Religious Freedom Context**

Anti-queer discrimination and exclusion remain soldered into most conservative Canadian religious communities (Blanc, 2013; Dickey-Young, 2012; Rayside & Wilcox, 2011a; 2011b; VanderWal-Gritter, 2014). In late 2017, the Trudeau Government officially apologized to the queer community for many decades of discrimination vowing to support equal rights at all costs (Trudeau, 2017), but unfortunately to this day there is (a) no national ban on SOGIECE (Community-Based Research Centre, 2020; Salway, 2019; Stroh, 2019); (b) no employment protection for queer individuals working for religious organizations (Brockbank, 2017; Woudstra, 2017); (c) no consequence or jurisdiction over hate-speech, homophobia, transphobia, and inequitable treatment of sexual minority community members within religious institutions and communities (Fine, 2018; Mulgrew, 2017); and (d) no protection for students, volunteers, and community members from theological manipulation that attempts to control and eliminate non-

heteronormative sexuality (Coren, 2018; Fine, 2018). The primary reason these five areas remain unprotected by the government is the “fundamental” *freedom of conscience and religion* section 2a in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which protects religious institutions, thereby enabling discriminatory beliefs against sexual minorities (Government of Canada, 1982). Freedom of religion not only allows these institutions to hold and enact homophobic and transphobic beliefs without consequence, despite the harm they may cause to those in their community (of any age), but also gives legal recourse to challenge any legislation that attempts to contradict their religious freedom (Government of Canada, 1982; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2006). Thus, the Canadian Charter continues to allow religious-based anti-queer discrimination to persist despite federal declarations that queer individuals have the right to be treated equally (Government of Canada, 1982).

The reality of the situation is that because of legislative protection, anti-queer discrimination remains unchallenged in many religious communities, causing inconceivable harm and discrimination (Rocker, 2019; VanderWal-Gritter, 2014) and serving as justification for hate crimes, which in the queer community have been increasingly leading to bodily injury and death (Armstrong, 2019). Sadly, because non-physical spiritual and emotional abuse leaves no visible bruises or scars, non-affirming religious communities and organizations continue to claim they are doing no harm and are simply upholding freedom of religion, freedom of speech, parental rights, and protection of the vulnerable (OneAccord, n.d.a, n.d.b) by clinging to heteropatriarchal non-affirming doctrine (Generous Space Ministries, 2019; Rocker, 2019; Sharpe, 2019; VanderWal-Gritter, 2019). All of this unfortunately overshadows over three decades of

Canadian Christian activism prioritizing LGBTIQ2S+ inclusion spearheaded by the United Church of Canada (Huntly, 2011), The Metropolitan Church (Seitz, 2017), Unitarian (Canadian Unitarian Council, 2019), and Anglican Church (Proud Anglicans, 2019) among other Christian and Catholic denominations (Affirm United Canada, 2019). Also notable is the work of Generous Space Ministries, a former SOGIECE organization that has apologized and become an affirming ministry specifically supporting LGBTIQ2S+ Christians and advocating for queer inclusion in conservative churches (Generous Space, 2019; VanderWal-Gritter, 2014).

Despite the LGBTIQ2S+ Christian activism noted above, the picture I'm painting here is rather bleak: (a) our government is celebrating Canadian society as a utopic beacon of queer equality while it fails to effectively legislate to end anti-queer religious groups from harming LGBTIQ2S+ persons in their communities; (b) religious groups and organizations are allowed to explicitly discriminate against queer individuals, excluding them from their communities; and (c) queer people are suffering for a lack of belonging, agency, and connection with their religion and/or religious communities because of this. The issue at hand, more than just religious freedom versus queer human rights, is that an entire population of queer religious persons are seeking a place to belong and a sense of agency and futurity as both queer and members of their faith traditions. Indeed, queer religious individuals remain the elephants in the room of most Canadian religions—including Christian and Hindu communities—and continue to suffer inequitably while the nation celebrates LGBTIQ2S+ progress. This exclusionary atmosphere and legislative context need to be challenged and change is primarily the responsibility of these institutions (church, state, media).

However, in the meantime it seems the grassroots approach to creating opportunities for rethinking queer religious futurity can unfold when queer individuals have spaces and communities to re-imagine the role of religion in queer life (Fuist, 2016; Gibbs & Goldbach, 2015; Hattie & Beagan, 2013; Seitz, 2014). Given the Canadian context of religious anti-queer discrimination, how does a religious queer person find agency and a sense of a future in the midst of identities that cannot be protected by the state and are framed as incommensurate by conservative religious organizations, familial and cultural communities, public discourse, and even their own self-ideation? And, what does a queer religious identity, if recognized as worthy of legitimacy and agency, add to their lives?

### **Queer Religious Agency and Futurity**

When queer religious subjects are engaged in reconciling their queerness and religion, they are participating in what Kocet et al. (2011) call attempts for “personal faith renewal” (p. 166). These individuals are actively resisting religious exclusion on their own terms, something Justaert (2017) calls “queer religious agency” (p. 176). This is not simply the work of re-insertion into religion; it is a deconstruction and rebuilding of new ways of organizing belief in order to exist as a queer in a religious context. With an increase in the queering of religion that is taking place in the west, queer religious agency is birthing “new religious movements” (O’Brien, 2014, p. xxii). When queer religious subjects are given alternatives to exclusion or secularization, new religious worlds can be built, worlds that are necessary for the flourishing and health of the queer person where they can express their own religious and queer agency (Fuist, 2016; Justaert, 2017; Van Doorn, 2015). Edman (2016) suggests that from this place of flourishing, queer religious

individuals might begin to see the core of their queerness as virtuous, “inspirational[,] and aspirational ... [and begin to] disrupt any and all efforts to reduce into simplistic dualism [their] experience of life, of God” so their identity is not just compatible or reconcilable with their religion “but an embodiment of it” (p. 3).

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

Creating a collaborative piece of theatre for performance based on personal narratives that encompass the breadth of life experience where religion and queerness have overlapped is a daunting task. One of the biggest challenges is that although asking where queerness and religion overlap is a relevant initial query, its answer requires a wholistic exploration of multiple intersecting identities, feelings, relationships, power structures, and social conditions. I chose critical narrative inquiry as the methodology for investigating this question as I believe it allows for the creative catalyzation of personal narrative and experience in all its complexity as valid forms of data collection and analysis.

### **Narrative Inquiry: An Overview**

The fundamental tenet of any narrative research project is the assumption that story is “the fundamental unit that accounts for human experience” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 3). Narrative research then is the study of any narrative, life description, folklore, and anything a researcher or narrator deem to be story, and consequently the analysis of that data to make sense of experience (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Narrative researchers understand narrative to be “both method and phenomena of study” and recognize that the “reconstruction of a person’s experience in relationship both to the other and to a social milieu” is the goal of such an inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 3).

Narrative inquiry honours lived experience and can be a way to inquire into stories of groups that often go unheard, making it a useful tool for social justice researchers (Atkinson, 2007). Narrative inquirers using a critical lens are often interested in bringing minoritarian stories to life through the most humane, collaborative, and

resonant ways possible with a focus on human complexity and “a desire to do work that has the potential to increase connectivity and reflection” (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007, p. 41). With its ability to focus on any voice as a narrator, critical approaches to narrative inquiry can centralize marginalized voices by supporting and emphasizing narratives that are considered “counterstories,” working against dominant narratives (Clandinin, Murphy, Huber, & Murray Orr, 2009, p. 89). Additionally, because life stories are bound up in personal location, narrative inquiry affords a research lens that can validate every story and recognizes that each individual experience is shaped through social, political, cultural, and institutional influences (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). This wholistic approach to the complexity of story, if it is used to amplify minoritarian voices, can offer emancipatory and transformational learning opportunities for those involved, and the findings from such research can impact policy and practice across diverse fields (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007).

### **Ontology and Epistemology**

A narrative inquiry approach to research requires that researchers understand they are working intersubjectively, where their story and the stories they interact with will impact the research. Additionally, this research in turn prioritizes words as the landscape of inquiry, that the local, specific, and particular are most important, and that there are multiple ways of knowing (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Morgan-Fleming, Riegle, & Fryer, 2007; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). The ontology of narrative inquiry is located within experience, because all narrative is birthed from experience. Consequently, narrative inquirers understand that experience influences story and story is influenced by the description of itself when it interacts with different realities including memory, narration

and different genres of storytelling, including the consideration of who is on the receiving end of the story. All these realities are also impacted by the narrator's understanding of reality (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007). Emphasizing that experience is transactional and hinges on creating new relations and possible worlds through interactions and transactions, Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) describe a narrative inquiry as the opportunity to experience life in a new way, "not just in retrospective representations of human experience but also in the lived immediacy of that experience" setting the basis for embodied performance of personal narratives (p. 43).

### **Critical Narrative Inquiry**

Interested in examining narratives that emerge from dialogue, this research employed the performative/generative method of eliciting narratives from conversation (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007). Applying a critical epistemological lens to the performative/generative method offered the most to this research given that it adheres to "no stable truth [and that] temporal understandings [are] situated in history and political relations" (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007, p. 151). A practical approach to critical narrative inquiry requires that the narrative shift between narrators is equitable and that the narrators' identities and power differentials are explicitly considered at all points in the research and acknowledges that that this type of inquiry is best suited to long relationships (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007). During the research process, Manchari and I followed these guidelines and more specifically the recommendations that "(a) narrators ... meet and talk for regular life events," (b) their conversations, observations, and field notes are open ended, and (c) there is a "critical whole-text analyses by researches and narrators, semistructured analyses, [and] narrators always give feedback"

(Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007, p. 151). I interpreted this last direction as Manchari and I both being able to critically analyze and discuss all the text we produced, as well as the contents of the full script.

On a practical level, our critical narrative inquiry approach helped us to do the following: (a) collaborate on the research design, establish collective goals, co-ownership, and rules of engagement; (b) build trust with each other and be vulnerable through shared casual experiences and conversations leading to deeper relationality; (c) understand our stories as data, giving ourselves permission to consider our everyday lives as relevant and important data; (d) share our stories (both narrative and textual) with confidence using different techniques; and (e) analyze and re-story our data into a cohesive script/performance.

### **Critical Underpinnings**

I see critical narrative inquiry as being in alignment with feminist anti-racist thought because it prioritizes identity and experience “as a source of knowledge and a basis for progressive mobilization” and looks toward solidarity through relationship (Mohanty, 2003, p. 6). Critical narrative inquiry situates itself in the midst of differences, acknowledging borders and fault lines between narrators, and recognizing “that the lines between and through ... races, classes, sexualities, religions, and disabilities, are real—and that a feminism without borders must envision change and social justice work across these lines of demarcation and division” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 2). I was drawn to narrative inquiry because its conversational and dialogical nature offers a non-judgmental space for experience, opening a space for “feminism without silences and exclusions ... to draw attention to the tension between the simultaneous plurality and narrowness of borders and

the emancipatory potential of crossing through, with, and over these borders in our everyday lives” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 3). The key here being the importance of “everyday lives”; critical narrative inquiry prioritizes casual and generative conversation. Using critical narrative inquiry allowed for a broader view of our own positionality to emerge: highlighting the impact of everyday politics (including everyday trauma), economy, social marginality and privilege on our respective experiences. It afforded the space, time, and solidarity to start to recognize, analyze, critique, and consider strategies and visions for transformation of the “interwoven processes of sexism, racism, misogyny, and heterosexism that underlie and fuel social and political institutions of rule” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 3). The collective and intersecting narrative resulting from the combination of Manchari’s stories, my stories, and our shared stories evokes for me Mohanty’s notion of “feminist solidarity;” the full definition is worth including here:

I define solidary in terms of mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities. Rather than assuming an enforced commonality of oppression, the practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together. Diversity and difference are central values here—to be acknowledged and respected, not erased in the building of alliances. (Mohanty, 2003, p. 7)

Our narrative inquiry worked at the levels of daily life, collective action, and textual and performative creativity, all of which mirrored “feminist solidarity” and was “constituted around feminist visions of social transformation,” namely reaching for our own queer futurity (Mohanty, 2003, p. 5).

### **Performing Narrative Inquiry**

Zatzman (2006) demonstrates that narrative inquiry can be understood as “process and product,” opening a world of research possibilities where narrative can come full circle, told by a co-investigator, recorded textually, then revised and re-presented by them through embodied performance (p. 114). Incorporating theatre into this narrative inquiry called for research terms to be translated into theatre creation language. The narratives Manchari and I shared can be considered our “pre-text” (Zatzman, 2006). Those pre-texts generated what Clandinin et al. (2000) call co-composed field texts, which emerged from the combination of our stories that took literary forms: poetry, playwriting, journals, and letter exchanges as well as notes about dramatic exercises that generated scene ideas. The two other texts that were co-composed were the interim research text and the final research text. The interim research text is the script, which we created by incorporating co-composed field texts into collaborative playwriting. Lastly, our performance of the script in October 2018 is the final research text.

Just as Zatzman (2006) engages with theatrical narrative inquiry that opens up vast textual and performative possibilities, Taylor (2003) sees theatre is a “catalyst for reflection and inquiry,” one that “seeks incompleteness [and] ... demonstrates possible narratives” (p. xii). Theatre as a site of possibility stemming from narrative provides a “form of socio-artistic engagement,” and is “an act of intervention, a method of resistance, a form of criticism, and a way of revealing agency” (O’Connor & Anderson, 2015, p. 49). Using “presentational theatre” as our theatrical style to present “non-fictional material within thinly-disguised fictions of authentic contemporary reality” (Taylor, 2003, p. 12) provided a way for Manchari and I to “imagine the world as it might

become ... the first and necessary step in creating the possibilities of social justice” (O’Connor & Anderson, 2015, p. 19), otherwise known in this project as queer religious futurities.

### **Research Team**

Before I move into describing how the research was conducted, I want to explain the composition of the research team for this project. I proposed this research as the principal student researcher and co-creator/co-investigator alongside Manchari. My intention was to investigate this critical topic despite and because of obvious power differentials. As I already noted, we are both located in the world very differently. In the process of writing the script, our multiple differences were not ignored, yet our queer religious identities remained the primary lens through which the investigation into other identity categories occurred.

At the time the research commenced, Manchari was an undergraduate student in dramatic arts at Brock University and had volunteered to collaborate on this co-creation and performance. The design of the research necessitated a collaborative exchange in the process of creating a script and rehearsing and performing where both of us were involved at all levels of the theatrical performance. Together we engaged in a critical narrative inquiry that was relationally focused, equitable, non-hierarchical, and explicit about difference. Because of this model, the Research Ethics Board informed me that there was no ethics application required as Manchari was not *just* a research participant; they were essentially a co-researcher. This meant considering questions of research design, including whose good the project was for and whose goals were the project goals, which is why the project was designed in consultation and co-collaboration with

Manchari, including the sharing of the preliminary thesis proposal and its various iterations until accepted, the direction of the initial questions about the possibilities and limitations of queer religious agency, the incorporation of specific benefits chosen by Manchari, the terms of credit and ownership of the resulting piece (co-authorship and co-performance, and the co-ownership of the script and performance for all future iterations), and the intended direction of the thesis dissertation. This transparency involved multiple and ongoing conversations about how the research could benefit them and their motivations for participation so that at all points along the way, even when circumstances shifted, Manchari was comfortable to continue and we were both aware of the potential as well as the risks within the project.

### **Navigating Traumatic Stories**

It was both risky and necessary that Manchari and I witnessed each other's stories to transcend the borders established by our differential locations, especially as our stories were linked to trauma. We decided to fictionalize aspects of the script to help with "aesthetic distance" so that our stories had a buffer space from literal representations and we were not "overcome with emotion or shut down" in our workshop process or performance (Cohen-Cruz, 2006, p. 105). We were concerned with our own re-traumatization, so we worked with Bundy's (2009) suggestions based on trust and safety in the context of the research, incorporating her suggestions of both having co-ownership and the power to control what parts of our stories we told each other, at what times, how we retold them, and how they would be re-written and physically embodied. All of this hinged on the model of collaboration and co-ownership. The traumatic storytelling was held within a container of critical narrative inquiry that ensured that we first focused

informal time and attention on witnessing each other's stories before the narrative of the script/performance was explored thematically or dramatically. This way we made space for both of us to first feel heard and have our stories held by each other prior to the pressure of creating a performance (Salverson, 2001).

While Manchari and I shared stories, our experiences, difficulties, values, beliefs, and responses to the work were distinct. Nevertheless, the design of co-creation provided breathing room for these differences. Our experiences witnessing and responding to each other's narratives were separate from the narrative negotiation of the performance (which I detail below). Thus, listening to each other was a critical prologue to being able to agree to step into content creation for the script and the final performance.

### **On Researcher Non-Neutrality**

It is important to note that this research exists in the liminal space between theatre practice and positionality, what Gallagher (2006) calls "moments of rupture/rapture" (p. 69). My attempt to balance this rupture/rapture tension was to acknowledge that I was implicated in the research and needed to responsibly and consciously include myself in the inquiry; attempting to dance with the complex tension between identification and performance (Salverson, 2001). Adding to the conversation about being implicated, Gallagher (2006) suggests that this type of theatre work thrives within a "dialectical tension" that is aligned with "drama's post-modern, multi-perspectival narrative devices that have the potential to extend interpretive power, interrupt master narratives, and deeply engage in the self/other dichotomy at the very core of understanding of power relations and agendas of democratic and transformative pedagogies" (p. 76). These are generative tensions that are best acknowledged for the sake of everyone involved in the

research. Similarly, Salverson (2001) points to the need to acknowledge that it is impossible for me to be an objective party in this research and theatre creation; there is always a power structure, a research question, and a primary researcher among other decisions that contribute to an embedded power structure. O'Connor and Anderson (2015) acknowledge this impossibility of neutrality advocating that researchers take a “stance of non-neutrality in research” while recognizing that all research is political even if it carries emancipatory goals (pp. 5-7). Salverson prioritizes positionality and implication in this type of research, offering lines of flight for trusting that inner voice and gut connections as access points into risky work. Consequently, as I embarked upon this project as an artist and researcher, I navigated a very fine line between “detachment and contact” while ever-conscious that I was not simply dealing with theatre about the other devoid of my self (Salverson, 2001, p. 119).

### **Methods**

The following section details the timeline and process of utilizing critical narrative inquiry and theatre creation to co-author the script of *That Power* and to co-perform it for a live audience.

#### **Research Timeline**

- July 1–October 3, 2018: 185 hours of combined workshop, rehearsal, and performance.
- September 6–October 3: Rehearsals and playwriting/script revisions.
- September 10, 2018: Audience invites for performances sent out.
- September 19, 2018: First draft of the script completed.
- September 20–October 1, 2018: Script rewrites.

- October 2, 2018: Dress rehearsal of the performance for an invited audience.
- October 3–5, 2018: Four performances of *That Power* for invited audiences.

Though Manchari and I were starting to develop a friendship beforehand, the research project officially commenced in July 2018 and concluded in October 2018. During that time Manchari and I met 30 separate times, spending a total of 185 hours together, including “casual meetings” (e.g., for meals, coffees, walks, road trips, events) and “structured meetings,” including workshops, rehearsals, and performances. Casual meetings populated most of our time in July and August, while structured meetings became more relevant as we moved into script and performance development in September.

### **Casual Meetings**

The purpose of our casual meetings was to continue to build our friendship and trust prior to and during the research process. These meetings occurred mostly before we started doing workshops and were all about getting to know each other. Often casual conversation was related to the topic of the research, which we were calling at that time “queer religious agency,” but mostly we would talk about our lives and experiences. The most pivotal of these meetings was an 8-hour day spent together road tripping, first attending my former church in St. Catharines and then Manchari’s Temple in Brampton, their family home in Milton, and finally, a dinner out to discuss the day.<sup>18</sup>

### **Structured Meetings**

**Workshops.** Workshops contained three main components: preparation for physical and vocal performance, devising (content creation), and playwriting. Each workshop ran about 4 hours on average. Workshops started with a brief physical and

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<sup>18</sup> There is one scene in the play that is the direct result of letters we wrote to each other about this experience.

vocal warm up and then a check-in where Manchari and I would open our lines of communication (Weigler, 2001). These check-ins would most often lead us directly into conversations consistent with narrative inquiry where we would re-examine our own experiences through storytelling. Both of us took notes on our computers or in notebooks. We used many prompts to extend conversation, including sharing music, reading Tarot cards, sharing photos, and going over notes from texts we had read or discussing our own life context. At the end of each workshop, we would go through our notes and write interesting quotes, ideas, topics, song titles, and other things that stuck out onto cue cards (one item per cue card; Norris, 2009). This research was mostly table-work, but the further into the process we got, the more we used improvisation (improv) to generate ideas. For improv, we would scatter the cue cards on the floor and each pick several to build a scene around without telling each other what cards we had. We also used our workshops for writing scenes and poetry using the cue cards as prompts for ideas. At the end of each workshop we would touch base about how the day went and if it brought up anything we needed to speak about.

We kept a running list of home writing assignments that we would collectively decide upon at the end of each workshop. Often these assignments were to write out one or two stories that were most important to us from that day's meeting in the form of a letter, a scene, a poem, or any other prose. Several times we also assigned each other the task of querying personal/social, temporal, and locational memories to determine past and present positionalities, then wrote about these in the form of a letter to each other with the hope of illuminating the differences and similarities between our past and present selves and each other (Zatzman, 2006). The consequent workshop we would read each other our

writing, discuss what stood out to us as listeners, ask questions, and make notes, and this would all naturally stoke conversation and complexity. Our workshops continued like this until the end of August.

**Playwriting.** The participatory work continued as we moved from gathering content to deciding upon play structure and beginning to co-write scenes by incorporating miscellaneous content. Playwriting occurred during workshops and included the interplay between questioning, telling stories, gathering research, improvising, and interpretation through multiple aesthetic possibilities (Norris, 2009; Weigler, 2001). Once we had a significant amount of writing, we revisited all the material (more than 50 pages each plus playwriting notes and cue cards) that had emerged, named every piece of writing, and then mapped it all onto a whiteboard. Individually, we read through our own texts to analyze and decide what we thought was most important to include into the script. Then we highlighted our favourite pieces and also listed pieces or themes we wanted to write about but hadn't yet (Atkinson, 2007; Clandinin et al., 2009). We spent several workshops and homework assignments writing new material and once all the pieces were in draft form, we listed everything on the whiteboard again, highlighted our favourites, and searched for any narrative connecting tissue that could help us come up with a coherent story arc. Then we each had a turn suggesting reasons to include pieces that the other person hadn't selected. We did this process over and over talking about how things were connected and playing with structure based on content themes such as coming out, childhood experiences, falling in love, body image, religious practice, and family influence. We looked to balance the performance time between us (our solo-written text), ensuring the script was as equitable as it could be, knowing that our writing was different

in tone and style. We rarely re-wrote text that was already in draft form, but we did write new responses to letters we had written each other. We had full control over the content and length of each of our scenes, but also sought feedback from each other for flow and to decide the placement of each scene within the script. Additionally, our own content could be revoked by either of us at any point, minimizing the risk of misrepresentation, the misuse of narratives, and the risk of re-traumatization (Salverson, 2001; Thompson, 2009). We both held equal weight when dealing with elements in the script that we had co-written (namely the fictional scenes or connecting fibre). This negotiation continued through script development up until the performance and ensured democratic decision-making remained central to the process. The final script and performance emerged as a blend of both coherent narrative arc and a series of dislocated yet interwoven story fragments. The script remained in draft form until rehearsals began in September but continued to be reshaped until the very first workshop performance.

**Rehearsals.** Rehearsals occurred at Brock University's Marilyn I. Walker School of Creative and Performing Arts in September 2018 and started before we had a full draft of the script. Once we had a draft on September 19, our rehearsals consisted of working from that draft and staging elements for performance. Collectively we both became co-directors, and through trial and error, decided how each scene would transition and lead into the next, all gestures and movements, and all other performative elements, set decorations, and props. We also memorized and rehearsed lines and polished the play through repetition. We did not share our writing, themes, or script with anyone prior to

the dress rehearsal except my thesis supervisor to ensure that every choice in the script and performance was entirely our own.<sup>19</sup>

**Performance.** We used the content as our guide to decide which audiences we wanted to invite to see the performance. Because of the larger themes of religion and queerness, we invited the queer Christian (and allies) community group in St. Catharines called Generous Space and the QTBIPOC Mississauga group. Close friends as well as my thesis committee and Social Justice and Equity Studies Master's program cohort were also invited. The dress rehearsal was performed on October 2, 2018, and the workshop premiere with our invited audience was performed on October 3 and 4 at Studio C at the Marilyn I. Walker School of Creative and Performing Arts. It was then performed twice on October 5 at Brock University for an Education class on diversity.<sup>20</sup> In total, *That Power* workshop performance was performed for just over 100 people.

### Theoretical Context

During the period Manchari and I were writing *That Power*, the key texts that we gathered around us were those that distinguished between queering religion and queer religion. The former uses a queer lens/hermeneutic to reframe religion in order to overlay queerness onto a system that has been deeply homophobic/transphobic and read it against the grain. The latter, queer religion, was our starting point of inspiration. The books *Queer Virtue* by Elizabeth Edman (2016), and *She of the Mountains* by Vivek Shraya

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<sup>19</sup> We brought Colin Anthes, Artistic Director of Twitches and Itches and Essential Theatre Collective in to work with us for several hours in early September. He asked us about words that were emerging powerfully in our workshops and then through his guidance, we came up with a series of gestures and speech acts that made their way into the show. Anthes did not see any rehearsal or read our script prior to or after his time with us.

<sup>20</sup> Performed at the request of Dr. Kim Radersma, a close friend. The Brock course code was EDUC 8P02: Diversity Issues in Schooling. This performance was in a classroom but still contained all performative elements except the ability to enter and exit the stage.

(2014), fit with our collective desire to unearth the goodness and virtue of queers (ourselves included), what I want to call a “holy queer origin.”<sup>21</sup> Edman and Shraya were indexes, inspiring us to strip back the layers of heteronormativity superimposed on our faiths to reveal the queer origins and virtues already intrinsic to them, and to subsequently unmask the origins of how we personally understood our religions and Gods as in and of themselves queer. We weren’t interested in just imagining queer as normative, this was a treasure hunt to reveal and reclaim our queer religious origins.

Vines (2014) had already given me a base to understand that queerness was a gift, and that I had much to offer as a queer person of faith. It was Edman’s (2016) *Queer Virtue* and Shraya’s (2014) *She of the Mountains* that brought our collective understanding of queer religion up a level. Not only did we both start with the foundation that we were a gift to our communities, families, and faiths because of our complexity, not in spite of it; we were also equipped with a new arsenal: queer religion. Both authors frame their faiths as inherently queer and how that queerness is a god(s)-intentional blessing, telling autoethnographic stories of their queer belonging which are synced to their understanding of how queer their Gods are.

Edman’s (2016) framing of Christianity as inherently queer, in its transcendence of binaries, and God who rose from the dead and was three gods in one among other things, gave me the more expansive analysis I needed to start challenging the overpowering modern-day heteropatriarchal Christianity I grew up in. Shraya (2014) was an inspiration to Manchari as the novel posited that the Hindu Gods were already

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<sup>21</sup> A holy queer origin (read also as wholly queer origin) seems to me a natural extension of Matthew Fox (1983) and Danielle Shroyer’s (2016) “original blessing,” where we not only are a picture of our divinities (i.e., created in their image) but are also beloved and good at origin point prior to anything else.

shapeshifting and gender-bending and that this canvas could produce incredible autoethnographic art and literature in a contemporary Canadian context. These understandings came at a time where I needed a reason to believe a project about faith was going to be generative at all. In a reversal of my SOGIECE days, where I had fought hard to claim the title “queer Christian,” now the Christian part of that sentence was what felt incredibly shameful—something I didn’t want to own because of its link to the continued oppression of minorities and myself and the resurgence of the conservative Christian right coming out of the woodwork to fight against the ban for conversion therapy nationwide. For Manchari, it came at a time they were dealing with the understanding that their own queerness was good but that the expression of it could only exist in their mind because of the importance of keeping peace with and protecting their family, who were the centre of their faith/culture. At the same time their faith and culture were a minority experience in Canada and they rarely felt a sense of belonging in Eurocentric queer spaces. It was at this moment that Edman and Shraya came into our lives and were employed in our creative practice. Both of us read these books and the reclamation of our Gods in *That Power* is deeply influenced by their analysis.

### **Thoughts on Power**

Before I move into introducing the script of *That Power*, I need to preface this analysis with a description of how I think about power. Earlier in this thesis I described the legal context for anti-queer discrimination and prejudice through religious institutions, the constitutional protections for “freedom of religion” that result in limits for the Canadian federal and provincial governments in combating homophobic discrimination, and the impact this context has on individual queer people of faith. It is

this very context of oppression that necessitates an analysis of power as critical in reclaiming queer life from religious subjugation. In order to provide a more nuanced analysis of this context I draw on a decolonial feminist anti-racist perspective that deconstructs the idea of power as a monolith while also troubling the notion of the unitary queer religious subject. In our feminist collaboration, Manchari and I were invoking Mohanty's (2003) idea of "imagined communities...with divergent histories and social locations, woven together by the political threads of opposition to forms of domination that are not only pervasive but also systemic" (pp. 45-46). Through the process of creating *That Power*, a new level of power started to emerge that was in line with Sandoval's (2000) methodology of the oppressed, and Mohanty's (2003) feminist solidarity, aligned with deep relationship and coalitional consciousness. As queer religious persons narrating our stories as data and then presenting those stories through our own embodied performance, we were recognizing power "as a site of multidimensionality" and understanding that our own subjectivities were being "continually redetermined by the fluctuating influences of those powers that surround[ed] and traverse[d] us" (Sandoval, 2000, p. 75).

Our ability to articulate the uneven distribution of power at work in our lives enabled the research to move from a focus on identity on a macro scale (which had catalyzed the research), to situational micro experiences. This enabled us to uncover the historical, "material and ideological specificities" that constituted Manchari and I as powerful or powerless in particular contexts throughout our storied lives as well as our relationship; all unveiled through the creation and performance of *That Power* (Mohanty, 2003, p. 23). Through performance we were exercising our power to witness our selves,

our trauma and each others' trauma, and to perform scenarios of empowerment by, with, and for each other. Through performance, we were drawing on Sandoval's (2000) idea that power is performative. While we had been—within our faith communities—marginalized and subordinated, as we re-imagined these narratives through performance, we claimed difficult coalitional psychic terrain and in so doing began to develop an “original postempire ... citizenship” through which we remade our social position, at least within the boundaries of the stage and our relationship to become agents of liberation reaching for our futures together (Sandoval, 2000, p. 78). We were using the medium of theatre creation to chisel out “a new social body—one capable of acting justly [for ourselves and each other] on behalf of equality” (Sandoval, 2000, pp. 76-77), crossing the borders of our own stories and performing power for each other both in the past, present, and future. However, this performative border crossing with our social bodies was invited and relational, as we performed as former or current oppressors for each other, their power over us was no longer held by them but instead by each of us, who were linked deeply and compassionately through the love we had established in feminist solidarity and through the relationality embedded in critical narrative inquiry and theatre creation. The result of this re-visioning of power in the process is the materialization of a script and performance that Ari and I are both incredibly proud of, that in its complexity and depth says so much more than this thesis will ever be able to cover in 130+ pages.

## CHAPTER FOUR: SCRIPT AND PERFORMANCE OF *THAT POWER*

This chapter presents *That Power* by Manchari Paranthahan and Jonathan D. Brower as research findings in the form of the October 2018 workshop<sup>22</sup> performance script and an archival video recording of the opening night workshop performance on October 3, 2018. The included script was updated after the October 3-5, 2018 workshop performances to reflect all textual changes and stage directions incorporated into our four live performances.

The script and performance go hand in hand because the script is only the blueprint for the live theatrical performance. As playwrighting scholar David Ball (1983) articulates, “a script is not a prose narrative in mere dialogue form. It is writing heavily dependent on special methods and techniques for the stage” (p. 3). Our performance of *That Power* is the combination of research process, playwriting, aesthetic choices, and rehearsal. To better understand the layered aesthetic elements presented in the script’s stage directions and to get a sense of Manchari and I as actors and the subjects of this research, we recommend that readers watch the performance video before reading the script in order to curb the imagination from overlaying fictional or unrealistic versions of us. The performance of *That Power* can be accessed at <https://youtu.be/CYgGUHfYk5M>. The creative process, script, and performance are all discussed in Chapter Five.

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<sup>22</sup> The performance is in the form of a staged reading where Manchari and I hold our scripts in our hands while performing. This format enabled us to stage the play dynamically while avoiding the need for many more weeks of rehearsal time to commit the play entirely to memory.

## THAT POWER

Created by Manchari Paranthahan & Jonathan D. Brower  
October 2018 Draft

### Cast - 2 Actors

M = Manchari, also in order of appearance: Being Side B / Kali / Mom / Jr. High Girls / Jake / Elliot / Kathleen / Christian Prophet / Email / YWAM Director / Beach Girl / Pastor Kwyn / Franz / Text Message / Reverend Pentland / Body / Text Message

J = Jonathan, also in order of appearance: Being Side A / Jesus / Amma / Appa / Nadi Astrologer / Trinity / Rohan / Cousin / White People

*Stage directions are offset and use M & J no matter what character they play*

### Setting

An empty space, liminal. Somewhere between terrestrial and otherworldly.

### Scenic Props | Props

There are five exits/entrances, downstage right (DSR), downstage left (DSL), upstage right (USR), upstage left (USL) and a door upstage centre (USC) created with black pipe and drape. There are two bowls of coloured traditional Hindu kollum powder. The bowl of red kollum powder sits on the ground DSR and the bowl of blue kollum powder sits DSL. Downstage centre (DSC) sits is a ceremonial tray with flowers, a bell, hair, fabric and other traditional Hindu items on it. Beside it lays a Bible.

### **Scene 1 - Gods of the Universe Council**

*M & J walk in from USC door together under a single black cloak. They are a being with three arms, two heads, and four legs*

Being Side A: Gods and goddesses, saints and angels, deities and samis, trimurti's and trinity's, please take your seats. Welcome back to the Gods of the Universe Council Meeting! The rest of this meeting will be conducted in English as we will be discussing terrestrial affairs. We hope you enjoyed your vegan lunch. Here in the celestial closet we like to make sure everyone is accommodated for so you're welcome Buddha. For this part of the meeting, God the Father has sent his regrets as there was an unexpected flood on floor 890, but his Holy Spirit is still with us. As a reminder, the sounds of the solar system and the lights from the stars should be the only lights and sounds we hear and see during this meeting. In other words, turn off your walkie talkies.

Being Side B: Before we continue, we would like to acknowledge that we meet on Indigenous spaces, over which Indigenous ancestors and current indigenous peoples still hold jurisdiction. Here in this part of the Celestial Closet, we are meeting on the shared spaces of the Onkwehonwe. This shared space is held by Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabeg, and Wendat peoples. All of us, both Indigenous and celestial dwellers are 'treaty people' responsible to uphold the treaties first made here. Another reminder that in this part of the

celestial closet, our custodial staff aren't unionized, please clean up after yourselves. Next on the agenda we have a proposed resolution to the Universal Interfaith Cooperation Act. We would like to create a subcommittee to investigate the Queer Religious phenomenon happening on Earth. This subcommittee would be co-chaired by the divine being Jesus of Nazareth & Kali the Destroyer.

Being Side A: I will need two celestials to pass this motion? Can I get a first please?

*Waits for a hand to raise*

Thank you Allah. And a second please?

*Waits for a hand to raise*

Excellent thank you, Akna.

Being Side B: The motion has been passed. Kali & Jesus, we'll leave the rest up to you.

*They bow and exit the door. Both re-enter from opposite wings, J from DSR and M from DSL. M wears a black hoodie with sheer sleeves and black leggings. J wears black pants and a black t-shirt with a pink pocket. Each push in a rolling chair. On M's chair is a red wrap. On J's chair is a black satin billowy collar and a black knee-length armless knit sweater. Once they reach DSC with their chairs, they get dressed in these items while they speak, transforming into Kali & Jesus.*

## **Scene 2 - Jesus & Kali Meeting**

Jesus: So we've picked the queer pairs for every religion except our own.

Kali: Now we just need a Hindu/Christian pairing.

Jesus: ...so here are some of the Christian contenders - *(they meet centre stage)* - we've got a non-binary Roman Catholic from Bolivia who's a professional soccer player, an evangelical twin male from Canada who's going to be a pastor in training and then a theatre artist, a Pentecostal woman from Seoul who's an orchestra conductor, a trans Quaker who-

Kali: -Let's go with the twin!

Jesus: Jonathan Duncan Brower...For a project like this I would usually steer clear of pastors - they seem to think they speak for me.

Kali: Well Shiv would love the theatre part. It just tells me that there may be more openness. You heard about what happened between Shiv and Apasmara?

*Jesus gives a blank stare*

Kali: The God of ignorance?

Jesus: Well that's ironic. (*he sits*)

Kali: (*Kali takes a stance. Pause. Then she dances during the following text*) Well Shiv got so angry that he took his avatar form of Nataraja and performed his dance of destruction on Apasmara. Apasmara can't die, otherwise the balance between knowledge and ignorance would be obliterated. So all Shiv can do is suppress him for eternity. Both Nataraja and I believe that ignorance can only be overcome through art. Therefore, if the pastor is interested in theatre....

Jesus: Yes, I see your point. I do like a good parable.

Kali: Exactly! (*sits in chair*) Now, here's who I have...a cultural Hindu architect in Rome...a queer questioning Hindu accountant with a health science background, an aspiring Hindu engineer video game fanatic, a non-binary queer with an interest in vedic astrology...and theatre!

Jesus: Them! It has to be them!

Kali (*agrees enthusiastically*): Yes. Manchari Paranthahan. But...born 10 years later.

Jesus: Manchari. Oohhh, yeah I like that!

Kali: So, what other information do we have on both of them?

*During the rest of this scene both Gods go back and forth to sides of the stage taking handfuls of the coloured kollum powder (Jesus takes red for Jonathan, Kali takes blue for Manchari) and tracing designs on the floor as they speak about ancestry. As one speaks, the other watches them trace and possibly moves to the site where they are tracing the powder*

Jesus: Jonathan's ancestry on his Father's side, the Brower's are a long line of Nazarene and evangelical Christians, lots of pastors here, going back hundreds of years. They were Dutch settlers to New Amsterdam in the 1600s and made their way as homesteaders into the US prairies then up into what eventually became Alberta. His Father was the last born of four children and one of the first non-practicing Christians in his family. Jonathan's mother's side, the Ballantynes, are Scottish immigrants who moved to Alberta in the early 1900s. His mom was the last born of four children who were atheists until the 1970's Jesus Movement, and then-

Kali: -Jesus Movement?

Jesus: Oh just another revival. (*beat*). After that all of his mother's family became born again Christians. What is Manchari's ancestry?

Kali: Both families have ancestral roots in Sri Lanka, as Tamil Hindus. Both sets of parents have grown up together, their families intertwined since birth. Both the mother and father are the fourth to be born into their families. The father's parents only gave birth to one son, the mother's, only one daughter. Arranged to be married at a young age unless they moved away or fell in love with other people. But they were driven apart... a death in the mother's family, a brother who went missing when he was recruited for the war...and the father had to provide for his family so he left. A struggle...for liberation. A genocide, the misrepresented separatist group, the Liberation of Tamil Tigers Eelam, a ruthless, bloody war, the shift from paradise island to invisible cage - a war no one talks about because everyone is guilty through their silence. *(pause)* And what brought Jonathan into the world?

Jesus: Jonathan's parents met at a Baptist young adult group in Calgary and got married six months later. They made careers as entrepreneurs and didn't plan for kids. When they found out she was pregnant, the doctors thought his mom was having one baby, so after they delivered his sister, they went in for the placenta and there he was hiding in the back, a meager 4 pounds and change. They hadn't planned a name for him, so he was first called Pluto the placenta. *(Kali takes some of Jonathan's powder in one hand)*. How did Manchari arrive on earth?

Kali: The parents' union was stimulated by a need for protection. They fled to Canada and were married soon after. Their marriage started off with a dowry that was never paid, something that eventually tore the two families apart. But they had a new home in a new land. Friendships were lost, families were emotionally torn apart, but everyone was safe and secure. Their marriage is something that he calls destiny. That she calls a choice. That their families call a mistake. Situations that they persevered through to provide for their first born.

Jesus: *(he kneels and observes M's powder)* mmm. Deep lines of faith.

Kali: In both of their histories. *(beat)*

Both: Now, the plan...

*J exits DSR and M DSL taking the rolling chairs off and crossing over the ancestries they've designed*

### **Scene 3 - Earthgazer**

*M & J crawl in from DSL and DSR respectively and meet in the middle over the combined kollum powder in fetal position, M with back to audience, J with back to backstage. They curl up then break apart and roll to their feet, see each other and J speed walks in a wide clockwise circle around the stage while M completes a smaller counterclockwise circle at a slower pace*

J: Authentic expressions of life unbound (*repeated 3x*) | M: The way mapped out (*repeated 3x*)

*Both meet centre stage facing each other*

M: Invisible

J: Beings (*both place right hands on heart*)

M: Finding life together (*M reaches right hand out, J takes M's wrist and pulls M in front of him while placing his hands in claws in front of her eyes*)

J: Why does destruction (*widens hands so M can see*) have to be a bad thing

M: (*raises left arm and spins J*) We shapeshift

J: (*lays on ground facing up, position of Shiva*) For protection

M: (*takes the position of Kali*) Only when you appear do I dance

*Ends with M standing over J while he is on his back (traditional Kali over Shiva stance). J stays lying on his back. M exits USL. Transition*

#### **Scene 4 - Crazy**

*J jumps up and is buzzing around excited interacting with the audience*

J: I came back from Bible camp crazy, crazy! About something out of this world, something phenomenal like, GOD...an everlasting flowing source of something that in the end will always win, a thing called Good and called Love. I want to remember all the joy and comfort God has given me! Everything is clean. I am a new Christian and I can't wait 'til grade six just knowing God will be with me helping me along the way. I confess I have had doubts but God will forgive me. He made us, we are not just a cosmic disaster! I have learned that all the questions you have to ask about God are nothing, the only question you have to ask yourself is: Do I love God? My answer - YES!!

Mom: (*enters from door*) Shhh!!! Jonathan! Don't be so loud about God, dad likes to be quiet about God (*exits via door leaving it open*)

J: If you're not loud about God how will people find out that He is ALMIGHTY LOVE!?!

#### **Scene 5 - Bharatanatyam Dance**

*M enters USL with block, walks to DSC and sits on block. J stands behind M.*

M: Shut up! *(beat)* This is stupid Mom. *(J starts putting bobby pins in M's hair and trying to keep M still)*. I don't want to do this, I'm only doing this for you because you're the one that wants to dance.

Amma: You shouldn't be saying this.

M: I don't want to go. This doesn't matter.

Amma: Nataraja is watching you.

M: You're crazy *(grabs stomach in pain)*. I feel sick.

Amma: See. *(J keeps putting pins in)*

M: Don't. Say. Anything.

Amma: You can't listen to what your white friends tell you about dance. When we dance, its for god. It's a form of prayer. It's for him, for Shiva, Nataraja. *They do things differently. You have to know yourself (puts hand on M's shoulder and continues to pin)*. There's a reason you keep getting sick after you make fun of Bharatanatyam. It's bigger than us.

M: Can you stop putting pins in my hair?

Amma: Why?? You still have to go on stage.

M: You're kidding!

Amma: It's not for you. OR for me. It's for him.

*M gets sick again and leaves stage left. J sits on block facing audience*

## Scene 6 - Boy One

J: It is 12:58 pm on January 1st 1997. I am waiting for my friend Ryan who I met last night at the new years eve party. He has this perfect blonde hair. He said he would be here between 12 and 1 so I am wondering if he is coming. Ryan is staying at the Fountain Hotel, he is 11 like me and lives in Denver, Colorado. I am getting worried about Ryan, he might not be coming and mom and dad and Jackie are all out eating lunch and I'm here alone in our hotel room watching and waiting for Ryan to do something. *(J stands) Ryan's room (J turns and faces door) is 235 Fountain (he takes two tentative steps towards the door and knocks)*

## Scene 7 - Period Party

*Transition to banquet hall room. M is throwing up in the bathroom offstage, J is outside the door and winces as he hears M in pain*

Appa: Are you okay Manji?

M: *(slowly)*...yeah.

Appa: Can you open the door please?

M: ...No.

Appa: Come on Manchari!

*M groans and continues to throw up*

M: I know. I'm coming. Just hold on a second.

Appa: I have to go say hi to everyone. Do you need anything?

M: ...no.

*J exits USL. M enters from door, tired and groggy in traditional Sri Lankan clothes. M stands in front of the mirror and starts to fix themselves. M tugs at the jewelry and clothes. J enters DSL and picks up flowers from the tray DSC. He looks at M and smiles*

Appa: You look beautiful.

M: I feel sick.

Appa: *(walking to M)* Let's get these on you

M: *(J puts flowers in M's hair)* This is so unnecessary.

Appa: *(a beat)* There! All done. You look great.

*J notices M's discomfort. He waits to see if M will change their mood then gets frustrated when they don't*

Appa: Kunju, what's wrong with you? Why are you acting like this?

M: I don't want this-

Appa: Why can't you just do this for us? Don't let me down here. There are people out there waiting to see me-to see YOU! They want to see you like this. You look amazing. Why are you worried?

M: I'm not worried, I just don't feel comfortable.

Appa: *(trying to calm down)* Why are you trying to make our lives harder? What did we do to you?

*They stare at each other*

M: ...I just don't like how tight this is.

*M tugs on their clothes*

Appa: We're already late! I'll see you out there.

*J starts to leave the room USL. He stops himself and turns around*

Appa: Kutti...please try to be a bit of a girl today.

*J exits USL. M stares at the mirror again and continues to tug at their clothes*

M: I didn't think there was a word explaining how I feel now. All I know now is that THIS would happen once a month and everything would start to get bigger. Clothes would get tighter, boys would get closer and I would like it. Right?

Appa: *(from offstage)* Manji!

M: Coming!

*M exits through door taking block with them and closes door behind. J enters DSL and picks up bell from tray and starts ringing it. M opens door about to walk down the aisle and J stops ringing bell. M takes one step forward and the bell rings. With each further step M takes J rings bell*

M: Maybe it's all the people staring at me *(step)*

At my wedding without a groom *(step)*

Maybe it's the way Shyanne and Nate stared at me in gym class *(step)*

Maybe it's the fact that I didn't like the way Nate stared at me *(step)*

Maybe it's that I didn't like where he was looking *(step and bell start to accelerate)*

Or how other people look in the same places *(step)*

Or how my body is developing *(step)*

Or that I am turning into this person *(step)*

That curves are showing up EVERYWHERE! *(step)*

*J moves stage left as a photographer*

M: Or maybe it has nothing to do with any of that. Maybe, it's just growing pains.

Appa: Say Cheese!

M: Cheese! (*M ends up centre stage*)

*J takes a picture, puts bell on tray, then picks up tray and rushes to M at centre stage. He stands on M's left side, facing stage right, while M faces audience. He starts to make circles in the air with the tray in front of M as M speaks. Once he has completed three circles frontwards with three thrusts of the tray at the end of the three circles, J puts tray down, exits and comes in frantically as another person performing the ritual. He does the same motions on this side continuously as M speaks*

M: Our family plans events like there's no tomorrow. I got my period in June. They planned a puberty ceremony in August of the same year. In a banquet hall. Filled. With 250 people. I was almost certain that they were doing this just to make my life that much more miserable, I can look back and see the cultural significance of an event like this. Apart from having a reason to get together, it's also a way of saying,

Appa: Hey look! She can bear children now! You can marry her! And we're still Hindu!

M: At 11, I had no idea that I could feel the way I felt for someone like Shyanne or Nate or Shyanne and Nate at the same time and have it be okay. I had no idea that the discomfort from my body could be more than a changing body and mind. I had no idea that I had a choice, that there was an option for something else. I didn't even know how to spell –

Appa: (*stops ritual for a second and delivers to audience*) – Dysphoria?

M: What?

Appa: (*puts tray down*) Smile for the camera!

*They pose for a selfie. J grabs M's hand and swings them around so they are facing each other with J's right sides to audience. Transition*

## Scene 8 - Popular Girls

Jr. High Girls: (*confronting J ominously, pushing J on bolded words*) Dear Jonathan, this is a list of all the things we hate about you. All five of us have each written a section and our signatures represent the feelings of all of the girls in grade eight French immersion. When you...**clingy!** And you...**try hard!** And you...**queer!** We hate you. Don't even try

to talk to us or make this better, we won't respond, we don't care about you. You are invisible!

*J ends up on floor on knees. M takes ritual tray from USC and places it back at DSC then exits DSR. J prays*

J: Thank you Lord! Thank you that I know when people judge they have no right to and are not right. Thank you you'll let everything turn out great once we move to Victoria. I'm thankful that even though they're splitting up, mom lets dad sleep on the couch once in a while. Thank you that Pastor Kwyn wants to be a stand-in father for us when dad's not around - says I need a stable man in my life. Thank you for letting Holly be my first kiss this summer. She commented on how I always look girls in the eye and not the breasts. Girls! Can't live with em can't live without em! I learned that on the Muppets...Lord I am thankful that I'm not a dickhead like Dylan, a guy who doesn't treat his friends or women with respect. I wish I didn't like him so much. But I thank you that when faced with temptation over boys today you let me withstand it. Lord thank you that you have given me the chance to repent for my sins this week. I know I already accepted you in my heart, but Jesus can you please come in and live there again, just in case I sinned too much and you left? I just want to be sure. I love you. Amen

*M pushes chair with scrolls in a box over to J while entering DSR and he starts frantically searching through and reading scrolls. M sits centre stage and takes prayer position*

## **Scene 9 - Kandam**

M: He keeps looking through different boxes and I almost want to say, "It's okay if it isn't there, really! It's not a big deal!" He just flew in from India last night and barely looks settled in. Appa says its because he brings boxes full of scroll over every time. Nadi Astrology is a form of Dharma astrology and in Hinduism, dharma means cosmic order. Whether or not you're on the right path is determined by how you feel about what you're doing. That's why we're here. Because I told my parents about my relationship with my body - it doesn't feel like my own. They think this is the work of the evil eye. Something that has clouded my better judgment. That I am derailing, falling off track. We enter another room and he is holding a handful of scrolls. (*J stops sorting and brings several scrolls and sits in prayer position mirroring M while continuing to decipher scrolls*). He starts reading in Sanksrit a mile a minute trying to clarify, figure out which scroll is for the family from the proper kingdom, the right village, the right time. He's already read through ten and none of them were for me. Does this mean I don't have a destiny?? I don't think I want to hear what the scroll has to say. What if it isn't the life that I pictured? Then I hear my father's name. He lists my father's family history, his occupation, his health and then mentions his wife - my mother. He lists her history, her occupation, mentions a third child, a son, is on its way, then mentions my sister. Then...

J: God what is your plan for this life? Am I even close to being on track?

Christian Prophet: The Lord laid some things on our heart for you. I wanted to encourage you with a bit of revelation I received from God. He has prepared you for special purposes. God has exciting plans for your life.

Nadi Astrologer: (*looks directly at M*) Manchari. (*reads from scroll*) Your father is an accountant who will suffer a heart attack. Your mother works with machines and will encounter numerous problems at work. You will be the one to help them. Your sister is doing well as an architect. You are 22 years old, doing public service work and you are having problems with school. You will make friendships in strange communities. You will work while you get your education. You worry your parents often. You will go through many love relationships and breakups with people from other religions and backgrounds.

Christian Prophet: (*gets up and starts reshaping with J's ancestry kollum on the floor*) You are extraordinary in Christ. God has called you to France, tu vas preparer le chemin. He has blessed you with the gift of evangelism and a heart of worship. God has appointed you with a unique role in his kingdom. You are a child of promise. Take hold of God's promises and prophesy them over your own life. There is a battle between the natural man and spirit man inside you. The lord prepares a table for you in the presence of your enemies. He anoints your head with oil (*M anoints J by making a cross on his forehead*)

Nadi Astrologer: (*picks up scrolls and places them back in box then moves to M's kollum powder and starts reshaping it*) You will marry your husband at 25. He is an educated person who is fair and handsome. He will have a birthmark on his back. He will only have one or two brothers, lives in a city near a factory and will have good health. He lives an hour away from you, studying financial accounting or working with computers. This will be a love marriage. But be careful around the time of the wedding, someone will return.

Christian Prophet: Jesus is with you. You will get over this. He is your healer. He has removed your iniquity. You are an elephant in a circus, but you weren't meant to amuse people, you are mighty and strong but chained by one leg with a weak chain easily broken by his power. It is already broken and you are free, but you have stayed in place moving not more than inches back and forth.

Nadi Astrologer: Time will be wasted thinking about what to do after your degree. Permanent work won't be available right after school. Health problems will delay school. You are prone to jinxes. People will compete with your family. You will often question whether or not you should quit your job to study. You may study abroad. You will study law or teaching or both.

Christian Prophet: Rise up and walk. (*J and M rise and walk to meet each other mid stage*) He has given you strength. You think you don't have it but you do. Like an elephant in the jungle you will cut down trees and shrubs and obstacles making the way, paving the way for your future.

M & J: (*facing each other, in unison*) You are made specifically for a purpose and when you try to stray from your calling, it doesn't work.

### Scene 10 - The Unraveling

J: (*J faces audience and hugs M while speaking*) I didn't realize I loved Jake from youth group so much until I told him I was attracted to guys and he said

Jake: Your hugs feel different than a friend's (*M moves to floor*)

J: I think I always wanted something more.

Jake: I'm praying for you to overcome this struggle.

J: I lie awake at night and pray for him too, thinking of his body. I want him to love me the way I love him.

Jake: I can't give you what you need.

J: He's right. When I think about losing him, I cry.

*Transition. J grabs a beer bottle from the scroll box and dances around*

J: I went to a grad party last night and got totally tanked. I was so hyper and loving it and dancing and I felt great! Apparently I started acting really fruity and at one point told Joe "your ass looks hot in those pants!" (*hands M the beer bottle*) During spin the bottle Elliot asked

Elliot: Are you gay?

J: No...

Elliot: Have you ever been attracted to a guy?

J: ...Yes. (*pause*) Tina and Kathleen defended me

Kathleen: He can appreciate when someone is good looking.

J: I know what I meant. I hate hiding. I liked being drunk cause I got to be myself for a night. I actually did come out to Kathleen, but she said

Kathleen: You're not gay Jon (*moves to audience and whispers that J is gay. J gets up*)

J: Today at school I felt somewhat proud and equal, but in D block spare people were avoiding me. So what if I like guys too, nobody seemed to care last night.

*Transition. J moves to front, stands beside chair*

J: It's unraveled. Everyone knows I like guys and most of the school won't speak to me anymore. Elliot and his crew made one of my best friends choose between friendship with me and them. He chose them. It's like I'm sick and they're gonna catch it or something. They don't deserve my friendship anyway.

*M brings in other rolling chair from DSL. Transition. A noisy restaurant. M & J sit in rolling chairs*

Mom: Did you want the Mulligatawny again?

J: I'm not that hungry. Can we share?

Mom: Sure. Why aren't you hungry?

J: The thing I have to tell you.

Mom: Oh ok. Just let me know when you're ready.

*Awkward silence*

Mom: Maybe we should order our meal first                      J: Mom I'm gay and I'm ok with it

Mom: Ok with what? What did you say honey?

J: No. Please don't make me say it again

Mom: But I couldn't hear you.

J: Maybe this isn't the right time.

Mom: Jon, this seems important. Tell me what you said-

J: *(upset, raises voice)* I said I'm gay!

Mom: Oh. It's ok honey, I love you.

J: I'm sorry mom. I've prayed against it every day since I learned it was a sin. But I'm tired of fighting it - tired of it being a bad thing. I just want to experience real love like everyone else gets to *(M reaches a hand out to J for comfort. Shift. M pulls J up and as he faces audience, M moves one chair away)* She had no idea. She listened and said she supported me no matter what. That I could bring my new boyfriend over for dinner. *(J moves around chair)*. My first week at the University of Victoria I meet eyes with this Swedish guy in the computer lab, we make out in his dorm and then he starts weeping. I didn't know he was a Christian too! How can two people from across the world have the

same programming? *(beat)* We go to church together *(J sits in chair)* and when it's time for communion we can't stand up to get into the bread and wine lines. We're paralyzed. Neither of us feel worthy of Jesus' sacrifice anymore. *(beat. J starts spinning in chair)* All first year I drink and party and date men and then one drunken night I write myself an email *(J stops chair facing stage R, M enters stage DSR drunk holding the beer bottle)*

Email: It's time for this to end. You need to fix who you are and how you're gonna be. Let God guide you and listen to the word, you know it's right and you know you can trust it more than anything at all. People are not what you need, it's Jesus. No more drunk, no more sex, no more happy times, *(M pulls chair and points at J)* and especially no more dance, you're too sexy for the world. You need water and Bible school!

J: Considering this a sign from on high *(J pushes chair SL over kollum)* I drop out of University, go back in the closet, and move to France to train as a missionary with YWAM. *(M enters from DSR with Bible and goes to centre stage. J walks upstage and around M, surveying them)* While there, and languishing in my effort to suppress my attractions, the school director tells me *(meets M centre stage and shakes their hand)* about a global Christian ministry that helps those struggling with unwanted same-sex attraction.

YWAM Director: Torrents de Vie.

J: Translation.

YWAM Director: Living Waters.

J: So God can heal this! *(M hands J the Bible)* There's hope! *(he holds Bible close. Beat)* There's a program in Calgary, so I move back.

*J gets on knees with Bible and looks up Hebrews 11:23. M stands behind him facing audience*

J: By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be mistreated with the people of God rather than enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.

## Scene 11 - Hope

M: You keep running away from me, and I'm tired of chasing something that I don't even think exists. What if this is just an illusion? *(beat)* If I had you here, it would be enough. I don't need you here forever, just for a moment. You're the closest I've ever gotten to her, that lovely figure in the sky. Sometimes it feels like she fully devours me, that I become her in this way. Why does everyone call her a demon? Why do people refuse to see the good in her? I love that she is an embodiment of their love, together. There are people that call her a tyrant, the problem child because she keeps breaking

without thinking. Something that we have in common? Anger is my favourite emotion. In Vedic astrology, they call me Mithunam, Gemini, a woman and man in one. Something I wish was more tangible. And the only reason I keep trying is because I can see it. It's right there, when I close my eyes (*J starts to pray*). Somehow, I learned how to close my eyes while they were still open. I've kept them closed for most of my life. I stopped seeing what was actually happening in front of me. The people around me. What I had done. Who had left for good. But I think, if I had you I wouldn't need any of that. Which is why I needed it all when you left. I don't know how many other irresponsible awful ways I can try to get your attention. You keep hiding when I want you to see me, and I retreat when you appear. How much longer do we need to continue this dance?

*Transition*

### **Scene 12 - God is Good**

*J: (kneeling)* On Thursday at Living Waters as we were praying for me after we learned about restoring the true masculine, Jerry our group leader had a vision of me playing volleyball on the beach shirtless with a bunch of other shirtless guys and I was just as buff as them but I didn't see it, I didn't realize, and there was this girl watching only me and she says

Beach Girl: I'm yours!

J: And then

Beach Girl: You set that ball Jon, you set it good!

*J: (J stands and turns 360 to meet M centre stage)* The next day at church Kwyn tells me

Pastor Kwyn: You're like me when I was your age, a heart for ministry! I'm not getting any younger and I think you might be the man to be our church's next kids pastor! You'll need a partner in ministry, a wife, and I think God's shown me who it is and He is preparing you for each other!

*J: He even tells me her name!! God is good! (J runs upstage and exits through door, bringing a block back in with excitement)*

### **Scene 13 - Dance with Franz**

*As M speaks the following monologue, J walks in slow motion with the block overhead. As M continues, the text weighs heavier and heavier on J and he experiences the weight of the words through the simulated weight of the block. Eventually it overwhelms him and he drops it. When he does, M stands on it continuing the monologue. J tries to push the box but fails and by the end of M's monologue, he will have given up and is prostrate in front of the box*

Franz: Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well - Matthew 6:33. *(beat)*. Cher Jonathan, I'm at camp, thinking of you a million times a day. We've been doing devotions here every night, on forgiveness, God's plan for our lives, suffering. God is just showing me my own sinful nature. Even through you, what you've lived through and experienced, and what you've shared with me, God is teaching me a lot! Sin is sin in God's eyes, your sin is no bigger, smaller, less or more significant than mine. I think that through this, my feelings have grown even deeper for you and although, at some moments, I feel overwhelmed and unable to handle it, I remember to lift my eyes, to fix them on God, and then I know without a doubt, that with his strength, his love and his grace, I can....we can journey along together. God knows my heart and my desires and wants to serve me the best, and he has - by bringing me you! *(beat)* I prayed for us. For our relationship to always be centered on Christ, for our feeling and attraction for one another to grow according to God's will! The more time I spend with God, and the nearer I feel to him, the more I want to be with you, a part of your life and you a part of mine. Isn't that wonderful? God is so so good! *(beat)* I can't wait for you to be with me again at Christmas! Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine - Ephesians 3:20. Praise the Father of all good things. Ta chérie, Franz.

*Transition. M moves to USR, gets on knees and starts crawling across the stage during this monologue*

#### **Scene 14 - Letter from Appa**

Appa: Hi Amma, I am trying to be a good father. That's why I let you do anything, except this. It is bad Amma, it will destroy your health honey. I need my lovely beautiful daughter. I cannot give her up. Don't let you father down in this society. You know we love you so much. According to your horoscope you are our best daughter. Please, please try to understand us. We need our Manchari back with her normal behaviour: joyful, talking back, girl. Amma I thought I am the best father, for that reason I am fighting with your Amma always because everyone thinks I'm giving my girls too much freedom. Don't make that sentence true. My kutti, can I give you a suggestion? Why don't you write about your feelings as a story. That way you can reduce your stress Amma. *(J prays as Appa would, fully prostrate with legs and arms out and face to floor)* I am strongly believe God. Kutti I am praying to my God. All these feelings has to be temporary please take it away from us. I am not saying this is your fault, or our fault. This is God's fault. God has to help us pass this difficult period. This is my big request Kunju. Please be a happy girl. Don't feel guilty. I strongly believe I didn't do anybody bad thing. I know God is not going to give up on me. If you don't understand what I wrote please call me at work. Take care Kunju. I will pray for you. *(J ends sitting on block)*

#### **Scene 15 - Flying to Franz**

*J mimes undoing a plane seatbelt and stands pulling a rolling suitcase. He stops as he sees M and speaks facing them*

J: At the Ottawa airport I get to the escalator and there she is at the bottom waiting. Her eyes survey me with this deep...what is it? Frustration, persistence? Like a hard-boiled egg she can't get the shell off. I only have seconds to compose myself (*J looks away*) Oh god, I looked away! I shouldn't have done that! I haven't seen her for six months and I broke eye contact! (*pause. He moves towards M*) There's no escaping this. I have to believe we can make it. (*J hugs M. M is limp*). I'm so happy to see y-

Franz: -You're not attracted to me anymore!

J: What?

Franz: I can see it in your eyes – the way you're looking at me

J: No, that's not! Yes I am!

Franz: You can't lie to me, I know you. It's ok though, we have a week, I will make you fall back in love with me.

*M grabs J's hand and pulls/drags him around the room*

J: She tries all week – I'm reading the book of Joshua and how he brings the Israelites into the promised land flowing with milk and honey. Pastor Kwyn is my Joshua, Living Waters is my Joshua, Franz is my Joshua. They will lead this lost boy into that promised land (*M pushes J onto block, grabs the Bible and sits on his lap*)

Franz: I've read all about this struggle you know. And I'm not giving up. God told me we're supposed to be together so you can overcome this. (*pause – M gets upset*) I just don't have the tools I'm used to. You make me feel powerless Jon. I can't use my sexuality to control you (*M gives him the Bible and gets up while touching J's shoulder, goes around him and stands behind block facing the audience*)

*M turns J to face USL. M mirrors J's movement*

J: She does this thing where she lifts up my shirt and strokes my tummy with her nails. It feels amazing. But when she kisses me it feels like I'm kissing my elbow crease (*he raises his right arm*). I'm staying in her parents basement. She comes into my room late one night, (*M pulls his right arm so he faces them with back to the audience*) pulls me into the common room, and starts stroking me over my jeans. This is so wrong. (*M reaches out a hand and he takes it*)

Franz: Touch my breasts while you come, I want you to be thinking of me. (*M pulls his hand close to their chest*)

J: (*J continues to hold M's hand, letting them guide the movements - they push and pull*) She pulls my hand under her shirt and continues touching me. Her skin is warm, I hold her in my hand but feel nothing – no attraction. I start to see men when I close my eyes –

“oh god, oh god!” *(J pushes against M turning on block to face DSR and drops Bible on ground)* Shame. *(M pulls J's hand so he faces the audience)* She looks like a cat who just caught a bird. I can't tell her that nothing about that felt right, but my body's already told her otherwise. *(M leaves J's side and moves upstage to door, opens it and greets family)* She doesn't mention my lack of attraction the rest of Christmas. *(J moves opposite way around block and stands USR facing door greeting family)* I silently panic as I meet her pregnant sisters who already have four kids each and hear how many kids she wants.

Franz: Definitely four, maybe five.

J: They're Catholics. *(beat. J moves to USR chair, Franz sits in USL chair, both face audience)* Back in Calgary the reckoning to this long-distance relationship happens over the phone.

Franz: I watched the movie *He's Just Not That Into You* last night...I need you to tell me that I'm beautiful

J: You are beautiful.

Franz: Not like that. When you say it like that it's generic. I want you to mean it *(M is trying to get the audience on their side, rolling eyes and etc.)*

J: *(having trouble meaning what she wants)* You are beautiful! I mean it!

Franz: NO! You don't love me. When you say it I can hear it in your voice. You think I'm beautiful like women are beautiful but you're not attracted to me. You don't want to jump me. You're not desperate to get into my pants.

J: Isn't that a good thing?

Franz: It's not enough. *(she tears up. J stands and goes to her)* It's not enough.

J: Our plan is thwarted. We can't fix me. *(J pushes Franz in chair USL, she exits)*. She breaks up with me. *(J walks to USR and faces audience, while backstage M closes upstage door)* Six months later she moves from Ottawa to Calgary *(M enters from USL with Sari, drops it behind the block, and walks to J. They stand beside him facing audience and J & M both raise a hand open palm in worship)*, starts attending my church, and I see her four times a week *(M smiles and puts a hand on his shoulder)* What the fuck?! *(beat)* I pray and pray for months, I go back into Living Waters, and finally when I think I might be ready to try again with her and I tell her and she says.

Franz: I found someone else.

J: What?! Why did you come here then.

Franz: Oh It wasn't for you – *(takes a few steps away from J)* God was calling me to Calgary, I don't know why, but I had to follow-

J: -But you came into my church, my friend circle, my life...

Franz: We can still be friends. *(beat)* Jeremiah 32:27. Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh, is there anything too hard for me?" *(M sits facing J)*

J: *(sits defeatedly in USR chair facing audience)* Yes. This boner I have for men is too hard!

*Transition. J and M face each other*

### **Scene 16 - Dropping Out**

J: Dad, I'm dropping out of school

Dad: What!?!

J: There's a good reason.

Dad: There better be - you know the deal. I can only cover your rent if you're studying.

J: Dad, I wanted to tell you this years ago... I'm attracted to guys- and I know it's wrong it's been getting worse so Pastor Kwyn wants me to move in with the Young Adults pastor and his wife so I can see how a functional marriage works from the inside out.

Dad: That's ridiculous! Who does he think he is?! And what are you gonna do there?

J: I've been accepted into their Pastoral training program.

Dad: I'd rather you just be gay and stay in school!

J: I have to get past this. Nothing else has worked *(J exits upstage door and leaves it open, chair remains)*

Dad: You're making a big mistake son. Which father will you listen to?

### **Scene 17 - Response to Appa**

*M remains on stage and delivers the following lines while J gets dressed backstage as Jesus adding a chain belt around his upper chest with the extra links hanging vertically down his torso resembling a cross*

M: Hi Appa. I am trying to be a good kid. I try to do everything you ask me to do to but not this Appa. This is bad for my health. I need to be true to myself. Appa, you have been a great father. You know I love you so much. According to your horoscope, you are going to have a third child, a son. Did you ever think they could have been talking about

me? Please try to understand me. I don't feel like Manchari anymore. I am someone different.

*J enters in slow motion pushing in the DSL rolling chair to centre stage beside the block, then exits USR. At the same time M starts to dress as Kali adding a sari to their costume*

I have let you influence me too much. I do everything you say because I know your life has been hard. I know I am making your life even harder. But this is what I'm going through. I don't know how to stop it or pretend like it isn't happening. I want to feel comfortable in my own skin. But you're right. There are some people that have options in these scenarios and some people who don't. If I do have the option, through my fluidity, why would I choose the option that destroys more than it builds, more than it loves?

*M finishes dressing and becomes Kali. J enters from door, closing it behind him. On the tray is a teapot, two small cups, and a compact makeup set*

I hear you and I know how much you believe in God. At this moment, I don't know what I believe. *(Beat. J puts tea service on block, M sees him, he stands beside and behind M)* So maybe you're right. Maybe I just continue to learn how to deal with it instead of create a big mess. But what if this makes a mess of me? I hear your suggestion. Writing about it might help. Who knows. I really want to believe in God. Please be happy Appa. I strongly believe that I've never harmed anyone, so I don't know why this is happening now. I know that God nor I will give up on me, or you. If you don't understand what I wrote, please call me at work. Take care Appa. I will pray for you.

### **Scene 18 - Call On The Wrathful Mother**

*J places his hand on M's shoulder, both face audience*

Jesus: When we created, the writers saw our birthing of the universe in binaries, missing the in between, the slippages of our love that painted the canvas of creation with complexity. Day does not exist without night and in between there is dusk and dawn. Does the sea not wet the sand and the frog not make its home on land and sea? Do I not exist in God while my spirit is all around. We are boundless, and humanity boundless in our image. Do we not admire the sky as most beautiful at sunrise and sunset? Manchari must learn that the overlap, the in-between, is the most beautiful.

Kali: When all else fails, call on the wrathful Mother because you are both one. We need to see how they will respond.

Jesus: The father?

Kali: Yes, but also Manchari. *(they sit in chairs and face each other)* We need to see what they do next. Neither Brahma, Shiv, Vishnu, nor I said queerness wasn't allowed. Hell, we're all queers ourselves! *(M opens makeup kit and dips fingers into red paint)* We

all shapeshift and transform for the greater good, with purpose. It is something that is divine for us. (*M paints a bhindi on their forehead*) But for humans...it seems like they've lost our message.

Jesus: (*pours tea for them*) Yes. They operate out of fear for what they don't understand.

Kali: We have no spiritual reason to reject queer people. We are all fellow nomads on our path, all working towards Moksha. Members of the third sex create their own kind of art through their love making, through the capacity they have to love when so much hate has been given to them. The divine powers and insights that the gods hold only come through transitioning. Hijras, or Hindu transgenders, shouldn't just be allowed to live. They should be celebrated. The only reason there's resistance is because of the influence of the British Empire (*they both take an audible sip of tea, Jesus slurps*)

Jesus: Binaries in our name brought suffering as legacy. (*M runs a stroke of red makeup from J's right forearm to palm*) These tables will turn, but only through relationships of love. (*M repeats this on J's left arm*)

Kali: All Manchari can do is learn to be okay in the liminal space.

Jesus: (*lifts right foot onto the block as if relaxing*) What will you teach them from this?

Kali: (*draws a red line down the top of J's right foot*) Whenever I transform into this version of myself, (*motions for J's other foot, he complies and lifts it onto the block and M repeats. J removes his feet from the block and leans forward in chair*) I remember that whoever doesn't love me with my hair unbound, when I'm unafraid to be myself, unafraid to be powerful and vulnerable, of being judged and mocked, don't deserve me. (*M traces red makeup across J's forehead*) When they don't appreciate how I make them open their eyes and realize that the beautiful parts of me are also the fearsome ones, that the auspicious ones are also the violent ones, those that resist to see me fully, as a mirror - as something that can help them transform - they do not love me. These are valuable lessons.

*Transition. J and M turn in chairs together to face the audience. J moves chair forward in front of block*

## Scene 19 - Compromised

J: I told my church about my struggle. From the pulpit.  
 Transparency. They used it against me.  
 Suddenly a danger to the men, they take their distance but pray for me.  
 But Jacob, you understood, and found me (*M moves chair to J and reaches out hand, J takes it and they hold hands*)  
 Told me my struggle was yours  
 Brothers in the same battle, desperate for healing (*they move their chairs together and J places his arm over M's shoulder*)

When we held each other, on my couch week after week, with right intentions  
 “Non-sexual holding” to fulfill our need for male intimacy  
 Recommendations from ex-gay therapy  
 A last-ditch technique to reduce attraction  
 It took all my will not to reach for you.  
 And your wife,  
 With her support behind us, wanting our deliverance  
 Never saw it coming  
 We fell in love  
 The intensity of our touch was shocking, everything stood on end.  
 I pulled the plug before we crossed that line (*J puts distance between them*)  
 Why the hell did we think that would work? (*beat*)  
 You had her love to fall back on (*M exits through door, not closing it*)  
 But it was too late for me, I’d been resurrected  
 I now knew what was missing  
 Everything my faith wouldn’t let me have  
 And there was no turning back.

*Transition. Time passes. J lays facing upwards over both chairs. He faces DSR*

J: It’s finally happened. Lying there naked in the aftermath, I wondered “have I traded in the grace of Jesus for my earthly pleasures and happiness?” or “did my body just liberate me?” I’d intentionally left Jesus at the door and tried not to think about Him watching us, disappointed. But was he? Disappointed? Was he watching? (*M enters USR and kneels to play with J’s kollum*) These questions begin to loosen the chains. I start to accept my sexuality. To be ready for a relationship. To stop fighting and start living. (*beat. J stands*) I am strategic, to avoid being fired and ostracized, going back to school becomes my excuse to quit my job as Kwyn’s assistant, to quit my pastoral training, and to leave my church. (*J walks toward USL exit and stops, faces downstage*). But...I’ve only delayed the inevitable. I am a slow-burn scandal. (*J exits through door and closes it*)

## Scene 20 - Trinity

M: The next time you are intoxicated by his presence, remember that he has the power to lure you in. (*Beat. M opens door. J comes in and collects the Jesus clothes then exits*) This is the longest move of my life. I should have moved out in December - we both should have. We thought about it, we talked about it - and we decided not to. We weren’t ready. (*M moves block out the door*) By now it’s the end of April and I have never been more ready to leave this place. By this place I mean the apartment, but a part of me might mean the city and another part of me might mean you. Moving into this place was initially the start of our future (*J stops and looks at M and exits upstage door, closing it*). Now, all of it just seems silly.

*M lies down and turns to face the audience*

All of our things are packed and somehow it feels emptier now than when we first moved in. I take a look around and can't seem to connect to anything in it anymore. I think that's how I know it's time to leave. I don't care for it anymore. I don't want to know what ends up happening to it. I don't care if the broken parts of it get fixed or it stays the same. I don't care if the stain on the ceiling of the loft floor comes out. I don't worry about its future or stay up at night thinking about who is doing what in it. I don't worry about the cracks in the walls, the thin walls, the extremely thin walls, I don't even think about the apartment anymore, unless someone brings it up. *(beat)* Wait...am I talking about the apartment or am I talking about you?

*Beat. J walks in DSL swiping on a phone*

Know that he needs you in your entirety to protect you. Without you, he would only be one half of a whole. *(J arrives at his kolum facing SR)* I remember seeing your name on my phone, recognizing you from work and swiping right anyways. And then - a match! *(they face each other)* I remember sitting in dark bars with you and learning more about your life. I remember hearing you say

Trinity: He was just a phase

M: and

Trinity: I don't know what I identify as

M: and

Trinity: I'm just attracted to everyone!

M: and thinking - yeah. Me too. *(beat)* I remember you telling me how your family reacted when you told them you were in love with a woman - Me too. I remember you telling me about your ex and how you thought he was the one - Me too. I remember you telling me how hard it was to find a woman that didn't judge you, for being attracted to men - Me too. I remember hearing you tell me about the person who wouldn't stop when you asked him too. Me too. *(J spins M)* I remember going to strip clubs with you, wondering why we weren't just stripping for each other at home. *(M spins J)* I remember you telling me you had just started dating your now-fiancée.

*Both step back one step but continue facing each other*

I remember you saying you were pregnant. *(Both step back another step)* That you were getting married. *(Both step back another step)* That you had moved in together. And wondering if one day I would end up saying, reluctantly

Both: Me too.

## Scene 21 - Boundaries

Kwyn: Hi my son! Haven't heard from you for a long time. Are you okay? Are you upset at me? Looking to connect. I heard your sister was at church on Sunday but you weren't. What's up my son? Love you! Chat soon...Kwyn.

J: Do you trust me enough to believe me when I say I know what's best for me?

Kwyn: *(moves to J's dust and plays in it)* My son, when you love someone you want them to see around the corners of danger, so they know what's coming. And if you have a better view-

J: -You become their eyes for them? But you couldn't see that you were the danger. I know you tried to help me heal, and I let you, but I can't make it work with women, and I'm not called to celibacy, and I can't replace you in ministry. And the plan you told me God had for my life didn't happen! So maybe I don't believe. *(J goes upstage to leave, but M calls out)*

M: I've mourned you, Jonathan *(J stops)*

J: You mourn me while I am still alive? Only months after I left. I come out and you preach a sermon about backsliding and the slippery slope of homosexuality and use me as the example?

Kwyn: Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.

*J exits USL and M exits USR. Transition*

## Scene 22 - Upside Down

*J & M burst through door*

Jesus: Wow. Are you watching this?

Kali: Oh yes

Jesus: He's missed who was right in front of him.

Kali: Jonathan?

Jesus: Kwyn. The whole church in fact. The religious leaders of my day missed me too. They were afraid of new revelations. Of realizing that the faith I offer is malleable. I continue to give new revelations, but they are too busy policing the borders of their religion to see that the spirit has left them. Only those with ears to hear the "others," will see that they are the future of the faith. My spirit has fallen on them indeed.

Kali: You speak of the marginalized? Sexual and gender minorities, women, and people of colour?

Jesus: Yes. The heretics. As I was. Their otherness gives them a unique perspective to see the flawed religion set up by systems of fear and power.

Kali: We must give them the strength to turn the system upside down as you once did.

Jesus: It starts with them realizing they carry our image, that their complexity mirrors ours. I ask my children, “who do you say you are?” And when they tell me, I affirm them, “YES, YOU ARE!” You see, my spirit moves toward inclusivity.

Kali: Your kingdom is expanding.

Jesus: No, the fences are being removed and wells are being dug instead, to gather and embrace difference, to welcome and affirm it, not to control it. The suffering that has been visited upon these people contains within it the seed of reversal, it offers in itself the opportunity for undoing.

Kali: How fitting. We can burn the fences then?

*J goes to ground and lays on his back briefly as subtle as possible in crucifixion pose, then immediately into the position of Shiva from earlier Earthgazer scene*

Jesus: We must let them decide what burns.

*Transition*

### **Scene 23 - Brahmins**

M: The Brahmins are always criticized for not doing it right.  
 For turning old warehouses into temples.  
 For using the wrong paints or materials to dress their gods.  
 For having donation boxes in every corner of their spaces.  
 For not being Hindu enough or caring enough to do the right thing.  
 But most of the Brahmins were forced to leave. Most of the Brahmins had to rebuild in the West. No one talks about that part. The Brahmins are holding on to their culture and their religion as best they can in any way they can. Temples keep popping up everywhere without the proper scientific considerations or preparations because we’re running out of time. Leaving the pieces they couldn’t bring back and assimilating would have been the easy thing to do. But the Brahmins refused to give in. No one seems to look at it that way. Things like Nadi astrology and puberty ceremonies are the only bits of home we have left. (*M starts to take the pose of Kali over Shiva*) If your house was set on fire, you’d at least grab one or two things before you left too, wouldn’t you?

## Scene 24 - I Love Destruction (Heretics)

*J stays on ground. M dances Bharatanatyam around J as he speaks.*

J: I love destruction  
 Acid rain  
 Sheets of hail  
 I want to see that tree fall on my house  
 I need to know the death toll so I can ooh and ah  
 carnage  
 I'm fascinated  
 It reminds me of a bigger power than myself  
 It tells me I'm not in control  
 And neither are you (*J gets up and gets Bible from DSC*)  
 I count the seconds between lightning and thunder  
 Just hoping it's close  
 I want to be reminded I'm not alone  
 Be put in my place (*J and M move to their kollum areas, M continues to dance*)  
 Perspective, you know  
 I don't often feel invincible – actually never  
 I feel created (*pushes kollum with Bible*) weak (*repeats motion*) vulnerable (*repeats motion*)  
 I forget how to live  
 I have no control (*tosses the Bible into his kollum*)  
 But when I see destruction  
 I remember that striving is meaningless  
 That the world is old  
 The storms and fires of ages past have wiped us away  
 We will be gone again

*A rumble of thunder. They both look into the sky. Beat*

And then I'll wish I went out into the storm like I did as a kid  
 lying in the grass waiting for the thunder to roll over me  
 (*J lays in his kollum*) My body pelted by the tears of God  
 Crying for the earth, for the dead, for the injustice,  
 Crying the tears I wish I could cry  
 Crying for my bloated black heart that never healed when you (*looks at Bible*) destroyed  
 me. And I let you, because I love to watch (*he lays still*)

M: A long time ago, there was need for destruction. Shiva from the trimurti, the Hindu trinity, saw a need for a partner. Sathi, born into Daksha's family, the son of Brahma, already had an agreement with Shiva. Clouded by her mortal life, she was still able to realize that it was time to reach him. They were destined for each other, and she felt a calling. Drowning herself in the fire was the only way she'd be released, becoming the essence of everything Shiva needed. When they come together as one they are

Aardanihswara, the androgynous form. And when she feels evil approaching, she transitions, transforms into Kali - the goddess of death and sexuality. (*Earthgazer pose*) Motherly love and doomsday. (*Flourish pose*) Some would call her the goddess of time, others... (*double bloom, double hand out post*)

J: (*he sits up abruptly*) My past looks forward at my present state and calls me

Both: A heretic

J: History looks back on the heretics and remembers them as heroes. For wanting to belong, but not fitting the mold. For seeing things differently. (*J flips through the Bible and stops somewhere within Genesis*) The scattered and beautiful languages of the world that came after Babel

M: Breaking (*J rips out that page, tosses it, then flips a couple pages*)

J: The rotting corpses that made the ground fertile after the flood

M: Tearing (*J rips out that page, tosses it, then flips to New Testament*)

J: The joyful beggars rushing to pick up the coins Christ scattered across the temple in His rage at the pious

M: Scratching (*J rips out that page then flips a few pages ahead*)

J: A naked God dissolved by blood and vinegar on a hill of death (*J stares at this page*)

M: Killing (*J pushes Bible away*)

*M walks over with some of their own kollum and sits in front of J.*

M: Destruction as fresh revelation.

J: (*J picks up a handful of his kollum and places it in M's hand*) When I came out of the church and embraced my queerness, I was destroying the image I had built of myself as a good Christian boy, a potential minister. The idol that I and others looked up to, I had to tear down. I walked to the edge of the mountain and slid down to the lowest rung of their respect. I lay on the ground in that valley alone and look up - and there before me was the true face of God, and *they* smiled. (*M runs J's powder through hair*)

M: Like you, I only emerge when I have to. (*M drops powder into J's hand*) I only act when it is absolutely necessary. (*J runs the powder through his hair*) I don't believe in fighting fire with fire until there is no other option. I get angry too. I get more than angry. I start fires just thinking about death. They'll tell you I'll destroy anything in my path. But I only destroy what needs destroying.

## Scene 25 - Trauma

*M stands and moves centre stage. J rises slowly and walks upstage and then directly approaches M from behind in a slow walk*

M: The violence he brought still exists in my body, this time in the form of guilt and shame.

Just like the war, what he did was bloodier than it needed to be

I kept apologizing for what he did because he refused to. I did it so often that it became who I was.

Shame and guilt shapeshift my body in various ways - for protection. Just once I'd like to say that my body pain comes from that crime, intergenerational trauma, constantly living in fear, dodging discrimination all while trying to be a good kid, friend, sibling, student and co-worker. But instead, I say, "It's chronic pain and It's not that bad." *(J gets up with back to audience and walks behind M facing the door)*

When did I stop living?

When did I become so obsessed with safety that I became

Closed off, angry, and stiff.

My body is used to putting itself back together because it keeps falling apart

Every time my body betrays *(J steals wrap)* me I wonder if it's in my blood to crumble into myself and then flourish again *(J unravels wrap)*

Just like the island did A beautiful paradise turned *(J circles M's shoulders & hair with wrap)* prison for all of its innocent citizens

The world's biggest secret and the part they played in it *(J raises wrap slowly)*

Was not knowing who to believe

Relatable.

After years of silently screaming Me Too, I think about how my family comes from a country that fought itself for 30 years.

I wonder if that's why we're always screaming at each other. *(M grabs wrap and holds it in front of J)*

I wonder if I only slightly sucked up my mother's fear when I was inside of her.

I would do anything *(J grabs wrap back)* to undo the pain that the cage caused her

I think about how my father fills his time with work and sleep *(J twirls and sweeps wrap)*

Then work then sleep *(J sweeps wrap back and forth)*

Then work then sleep

To erase the memories *(J throws wrap into the air and lets it land)*

The bodies on the floor *(J steps on the wrap)*

The sirens filling the air *(J picks up wrap and looks into the sky)*

Protect the family at all costs, says his father, so many times *(J holds up wrap and walks toward M from behind)*

That mine forgot how to live too.

Maybe that's where I get it from. *(M starts to kneel, J wraps wrap around M's head and shoulders like he's pushing her down)*

I wonder if all the abuse my mother faced and the emotions my father refused to feel all got transferred to me.

In the form of depression and anxiety

I start to have nightmares of a war I never lived through  
 That no one ever talks about  
 Because everyone is guilty in their silence  
 From paradise island (*J holds wrap up*) to invisible cage (*J wraps wrap around M's face  
 and then holds it up again outstretched*)  
 Back to paradise island  
 Like nothing ever happened. (*J lets wrap drop to the floor behind M and looks at the  
 audience*)

J: What lives in the body, lives in the mind

M: When force, neglect, or abuse

J: Are used to erase, reject, and refuse

M: The pieces that should be beautiful (*M begins to rise*)

J: Acquire futures of harm

M: No matter their size

J: New injuries become death blows

M: Over and over

J: Like pouring scalding water

M: On open wounds  
 our bodies ache and curl

J: Aware of every injustice  
 Every prick

M: Reminds us  
 That we must fight  
 Or lose our voice

J: (*he faces M*) For if you don't, who will stand for you?

M: (*they face J*) And for you?

Both: I will.

J: But you are already fighting to be heard

Both: (*to audience*) Will it be you? (*Beat*)

*Both turn again to each other, putting right hands to heart like in Scene 3*

J: May we have the compassion we need for this moment. For this feeling.

M: May we learn to trust our minds and our bodies

J: To flow with all the feelings, and not judge them

M: Remembering that sometimes *(They take each others' hands and kneel)*

Both: Forgiveness is all I have  
The power to let go of the one who hurt me  
from needing to be the one who heals me

*M rises and goes to J's kolum*

## **Scene 26 - Taking Onus**

J: *(facing audience)* Thank you Jesus for the moment that I was told, whoever I was, wherever I was at, I was welcome to join other Christians on the journey. And thank you for the moment that that United Church Reverend told me

Reverend Pentland: *(gathers torn scraps of Bible and also gets Bible. Looks over J's kolum)* God speaks in many ways and because of the way it was weaponized in your life, if the Bible is getting in the way of your relationships with Jesus, then it is sin, so stop reading it for now.

J: For the moment he decided to own harm he hadn't caused as if it was his own, for modeling Jesus

Reverend Pentland: *(moves to J)* I'm sorry Jonathan. For what we have done to you. It was wrong. It was bad theology. It is the church's job to be a place for the marginalized, to repair the damage and help you reclaim what was taken. And since I represent the church, it is now my job. We can't get time back, but we can get joy back. This is to be a place of worship for all people. You don't have to prove you belong anymore. You belong. *(Tosses Bible)*

J: *(M helps J stand. J is facing SL and M is facing SR)* And thank you for the moment I realized I hadn't missed my calling, because my calling was always wrapped up in my queerness.

*Transition. M takes J's left arm and swings him so they switch spots. J faces USL, M faces audience*

M: I never thought I would ever meet-

Rohan: Someone just like you?

M: Yeah. I thought that chapter closed. I didn't think I'd have the chance to figure out who I was without it hurting everyone around me. I never thought I could meet queer people in a faith space, especially not

Rohan: A brown, queer, trans person?

M: Yeah. How do you exist?

Rohan: Validation from myself. Accepting help from others. Screaming resistance at the top of my lungs. Praying for a safer tomorrow.

M: How do you keep going?

Rohan: I wipe the slate clean every night. Start over in the mornings. I do what I have to to maintain boundaries. I leave. I return. I stay. I allow myself to change just as my body does. And love. Love helps a lot with that.

M: From who?

Rohan: From myself

### **Scene 27 - When I Met You**

*J & M hold hands and pull each other together face to face*

J: A nude body changes everything. When I faced the goodness and frailty of you, when I started listening to what you dear body were telling me, you screamed at me

*M pushes away and runs to SL*

Body: You torturer!

*J moves delicately toward M, M keeps cautiously surveying J ready to run*

J: For years I filled you with junk, to make you undesirable so I wouldn't go on Grindr or to the gay clubs, so no one including me would want you. The more disgusting I felt about you, the less I was a danger to my theology. I'm sorry.

Body: *(stays back)* But we are fair my love, we are fair.

J: But I shut up your springs and sealed up your fountain. Because you wanted me to love men, to trust how I felt, so I didn't believe you were leading me to God.

Body: *(steps toward J)* I was! I am a part of the divine, part of your connection *(M walks tentatively to J but remains a step or two away)*

J: I put you in bondage.

Body: I have been here all along.

*M and J reach out right hand slowly, they pull together while he holds M's hand close to his face*

J: Dear body, I remember you (*beat*). I face who I am, the naked truth, and in my nudity (J pulls M so they face upstage door and he faces audience)

J: Kyall appears, catching my glow  
My Hermione Granger  
My nose in a book love  
My young outside, old timey spirit  
Exuberant arms raised in the air  
Praising every bite  
Of life that he can chew

*J turns on the spot clockwise 180 degrees to face the door, while M does the same movement and faces the audience*

M: I was shocked at how unapologetic you were. I loved how you put yourself first.

*Both turn clockwise 180 degrees*

J: Nature his rhythm, my agnostic seer  
I went down to the garden of nuts to see the vegetation of the valley  
To see whether the vine had budded  
And the pomegranates had bloomed  
before I was even aware, We were each others  
And *blessed* was the only word I had  
As an offering to my body, mind, soul and spirit  
For aligning in that moment  
To follow him into the waters of our love

*Both turn clockwise 180 degrees*

M: I was swept off my feet. I continue to smile when I see you.

*Both turn clockwise 180 degrees*

J: And though my language Biblical, his scientific  
We make evolution look like an act of God  
I am transfigured under his spell  
And I see myself for who I am  
And he is looking towards forever

Not my saviour, not my rescue  
 Not divine, neither of us  
 Nor would we want that  
 Just lovers, destined to be different

*Both turn clockwise 180 degrees*

M: I was empowered by how brave you were. I started to feel brave too. You made me feel abundant. Like anything was possible.

*Both turn clockwise 180 degrees*

J: And we draw love from the same well  
 That we built  
 With the water that flowed over  
 When I outgrew my container  
 That could not hold back  
 the wine of Dionysus poured in  
 or the stories of others  
 Who had come into our lives  
 And didn't fit the mold  
 Nor the radical stage on which we met  
 Nor the truth that unequal yokes  
 Make better hollandaise anyway  
 And as the questions pushed at the walls  
 geysers of complexity shot skyward  
 bursting forth the revelation  
 Of us together

*Both turn clockwise 180 degrees*

M: You helped me get a step closer to where I want to be. With you, I am brave enough to finally be me.

*J turns clockwise 180 degrees so both him and M are facing audience*

J: And now our well is open  
 To all who come to drink  
 Who have overflowed the banks  
 Of expectation

*Transition. J exits USR. Backstage J changes into Jesus, removing his shawl and t-shirt to reveal a black bodysuit, red cummerbund/corset, and the chain belt now sits at his waist with the extra links hanging between his legs*

## Scene 28 - Vocabulary

*M stays and delivers monologue to audience.*

M: Three years ago if you had asked about my gender identity, I would have said transitioning was not an option. I thought maybe my transness could exist through my faith. Maybe through the legends and the stories of Kali and Shiva, Radha and Krishna, I could find some peace in my story, in my limitations and barriers. Now I realize, it's about vocabulary. Mainstream queerness refuses to accept my faith. It tells me I need to pass. Hormones, surgery, new name. I convince myself that I am a liar, that I want attention, that I am healing wounds my parents gave me. Other people refuse to see it too. Just like home, there wasn't a space for all of me. How dare a brown body come into this space and claim it as their own? I used to think that the easy thing - not acting on my transness, being queer in secret - would help save my family, make them happy. Trips to the temples would turn into a regular thing, the gay would be prayed away, we would all find harmony. I wouldn't be isolated, they wouldn't ship me off anywhere, they could retire peacefully. I used to wonder - if something was bad for everyone but me, could it still be the right thing to do? Religion means family. Family equals faith. The importance of vocabulary. For me, lesbian turned into pansexual. Female To Male turned into non-binary. It wasn't that transitioning wasn't an option, it just needed a different word. For me, transitioning turned into existing.

*M turns to face upstage door. J opens door and steps onto the threshold, not yet entering while M speaks*

## Scene 29 - Revelations

Text Message: Hi Jon. I know we haven't talked for a couple years but I've had it on my mind to make sure you know about Pastor Kwyn's cancer news. He has stage 4 pancreatic cancer with some cancerous spot on his lungs. I know that how everything ended between you wasn't easy on both of you but I thought if you didn't know this you would probably like to know. If there was any chance of reconciliation or healing this may be the time. Obviously it is completely up to you. Just thought you'd like to know if you don't already.

*M exits upstage door passing J but not seeing him. J enters. M closes door behind him. He walks diagonally to DSR to his kolum*

J: Are we holding each other back?  
 From across the world  
 Memories or chains  
 The end of us has years between it, and now  
 Would it kill you to change your mind?  
 Doesn't death give us revelations  
 Like, you're supposed to realize you never had it  
 Figured out – nor did I, but the difference was

You had the power to string me up by my soul  
 Make me believe you heard the almighty wind  
 Whisper in your ear the destiny I couldn't hear  
 On my own, cause I was weak, and doubting, you said  
 And now I rise in knowledge and flourish  
 my mind soaked in questions you said would undo me  
 But gave me life instead  
 So I killed your ideas, and I rewrote the rest  
 In my head I never wanted to see your face again

*M opens upstage door, not entering, only watching J*

And now here I am daily thinking of your skin  
 melting off your body  
 They post on your wife's Facebook prayers against your  
 Enemies. They mean the cancer, but it stings me  
 Cause I was – we became.  
 The only reason I left was you wouldn't approve  
 And when I called you on it, you recoiled

Pastor Kwyn: *(still in doorway)* We're not homophobic, we're not scared  
 Come back and we'll welcome you but be prepared  
 To repent and turn away from that life that you built

*J: (delivers to M)* No way, this relationship won't save my day  
 Or my life, or my soul  
 You had it all – never with me, but over me  
 The power you held  
 With your zealous words that spoke over those  
 You needed to hear  
*(back to audience)* And now they try to save you  
 Extra hours for me to sit here wondering  
 Do you still think of me, like I still think of you?  
 Does a dying man make amends with his final days  
 Or am I wasting hope thinking you might love me now  
 For who I am and drop your guard and your God and your theology  
 To embrace me with your words, and make it right  
 This isn't mine to repair when the core of me  
 Was your problem, our undoing.  
 I can't compromise with poison.  
 And I was yours and you were mine  
 Like self-assigned father like prodigal son  
*(faces M)* When you get up there or down there and find out  
 Your beliefs were the death of many  
 Feel free to contact me, and apologize...  
 No, instead just leave me alone... *(turns back on M)*

Why won't you just die?!! (*M exits slamming upstage door. J takes big breath*)  
 No. I don't want that...I just don't want you to matter anymore.  
 You will always be my own personal volcano  
 And I've gotta explore  
 The meaning of why I can't mourn  
 Or grieve a loss that happened long ago  
 That's ready to erupt (*beat. He moves to DSR exit*)  
 Dammit! I thought I forgave you!

*J exits DSR. Transition. M enters DSL*

M: I'm at a family party - North York. The men are in one room drinking and smoking, the women are in another making food. They won't talk to us until they get fed. Then they get the women drunk and ridicule them. I think to myself, this is my future. There he is, the one from the scroll who's destined for me. He fits everything from the list except the love part. I play their games literal and emotional until I have to vomit. I run to the washroom in time. Then sit on the floor to rest. I can't believe this is my family. This is my future. I look down and see my phone. I wonder who I could call and can't think of anyone...(beat)

Hey everyone, I'm just sending this video out to the people i feel safe with cause I'm going through a time. I'm drunk - maybe you noticed, can I tell you my secrets? Just don't tell me I sent this to you! This seems like the perfect time to confess to everything everyone wants me to, to all that things that I didn't do, become all the things people think I am, walk into the destiny mapped out for me, cause I just want to make everyone feel better. So tonight's your night. Presenting to you - your infamous narcissistic dreamy idealist ethereal alien! First off, I'm trans, non-binary. Just kidding. But I am. Just kidding. Do you believe me now? I lied to you and you and you. Just kidding!"

I press send.

I'm on a loop  
 On the bathroom floor  
 Alcohol and money aren't helping anymore  
 I'm on a loop  
 Saying over and over  
 Somethings wrong  
 It's getting worse  
 I need your help  
 Please stop.

*J opens door*

Cousin: Manchari, what are you doing in there?

M: Oh nothing, I'm just making a funny video, but actually, could you delete it please?

Cousin: (*walks in*) - Sure, give me your phone. (*takes phone and looks*) OMG, hey everyone, you have to see this! (*walks with phone held high into the audience and sits in a reserved chair*)

M: What other relationship could go wrong?  
 How much worse could things get?  
 But no one seems to hear me  
 Death by video  
 What a sorry state  
 What else can they say about me now that I haven't already said about myself?  
 Even at my most vulnerable  
 Does anybody care?  
 Maybe I've hurt them too much already.  
 What is it about  
 The way I share my story  
 That scares people away?  
 Have they just put me on mute  
 Unsubscribed from my pain  
 Unfollowed the thought patterns  
 Deleted me from their brain  
 Do they not care for me like they used to  
 Or have they tired of fighting for me too?  
 Maybe it doesn't matter what I say at all

Cousin: What are you? A girl? A boy? Something in between? What does that even mean?

M: All 250 of them at the party saw my video too, did you?  
 I deleted all traces of it so I wouldn't remember  
 I trusted too easily, acted foolishly, was outed carelessly,  
 But the people that should have cared, (protected me)  
 took it the furthest,  
 Their laughs echo in my brain  
 Add it to the archive so you never mess up again  
 I think about how I'm just human  
 About how often I have and will continue to make mistakes  
 Maybe I just need to let it go  
 Own up to the role I played  
 But what if everyone's tired of me  
 What if no one wants to see me cry anymore  
 Will they hear me out long enough so I can say  
 I'm sorry?

*J starts whispering into the audience*

White People: She has no agency. They don't work hard enough. He's a-

### Scene 30 - Things People Love to Say About Brown People

*M stands centre stage.*

M: -Things people love to say about brown people-

*J returns to stage with a spool of brown twine that was under his seat. While M talks, J echoes **bolded** words and on those words he wraps M in string)*

M: As if we asked to be married off before we knew what consent was  
 As if we asked to provide free emotional labour  
 As if we asked to carry the **burdens** of those around us  
 They say this without considering  
 The need to hold onto our cultures that have been dismissed and **overtaken** throughout history  
 The need to make sure we keep our families close even when they don't understand who we are  
 Acting like we don't understand that we get to be our own people  
 But also **neglecting** that sometimes when they talk about agency, they're really talking about

Both: Assimilation

White People: They don't work hard enough

M - Because our parents can't speak English well enough to please your customers  
 Because their schooling **doesn't matter** here  
 Because our education is rooted in making us more employable  
 Because we're always wondering whether or **not** we're **employable**  
 Because we know there's a high chance that we're not your first choice  
 Unless you have a **quota** to fill  
 Unless we plaster a smile on our faces  
 Unless we both silently agree to never talk about

Both: Race

White People: He doesn't care

M: Because I'm too **exhausted** to show you I do  
 Because being reduced to my race is draining  
 Because my parents call me four times a day to make sure I am **safe**  
 Because they keep asking me to come home (J: **go home!**)  
 Because I want too  
 Because they need my help  
 And I need their warmth  
 Because I haven't found it outside of

Both: Home.

White People: She's a liar

M: Because you refuse to see things this way  
 Because you couldn't even fathom that it could get this **bad**  
 Because you never experience it  
 Because you can't wrap your head around the

Both: Injustice

White People: You keep messing up

M: As if you didn't bring me to this point.  
 As if I could have avoided it if I had just listened. (J: **what did you say?**)  
 As if I'm the one who refuses to grow.  
 As if this is all

M: My fault White People: Your fault

*J speeds up his wrapping of M in twine during this next part*

M: And they wonder why we like to keep our private lives private?  
 Why our walls are up so high, why we're so untouchable  
 They don't realize that the reason we keep them at a distance is  
 So they won't call our men **abusers**  
 So they won't call our mothers **complacent**  
 So they don't undermine our values (*beat*)  
 So there it is (*J places spool of twine on floor and exits USL*)  
 Was it good enough for you?  
 Respectful enough, theatrical enough?  
 Was it too indulgent?  
 If a tree fell in a forest, would you still hear it?  
 Does it need to fall for you to hear it?  
 Or will you only hear it if it falls the way you want it to?

*J enters DSL with a pair of scissors holding them out as he approaches M*

White People: Stop making excuses, you're so angry. Just hurry up and get your shit together so we can get on with it. (*he tries to hand scissors to M but M refuses, so he walks away from M to far DSR and stops keeping his back to M*)

M: You tie us up  
 But you're the ones who are bound  
 Maybe someday you'll see  
 You can't just hand us the scissors and walk away

### Scene 31 - I See You

*J turns 180 degrees, takes a breath and speaks to M from his kollum*

J: Even if they won't say it, I will: I'm sorry.

*Beat. He moves to the twine centre stage and starts respooling it while speaking. J sees M as Manchari for the first time and speaks the next section directly to Manchari*

I see you there suffering  
 Taking all that shit  
 From the man, the hetero, the white  
 the cis queer like me  
 None of us fucking get each other do we  
 Like instead of lifting you up,  
 we're too busy ordering DNA tests  
 to see if we got some POC blood  
 that can save us from the plight of having to look  
 at the privilege we've been holding  
 But didn't realize  
 'til you told us  
 That we used the wrong pronoun  
 Enabled racism, microaggressions, phobias  
 all of them  
 Embedded in our white skin, our white systems  
 Like the hurt that's etched into yours (*pause*)  
 I see you  
 Taking it  
 And turning it to gold  
 When you can, cause you feel you've got to  
 Cause you gotta work harder better faster stronger  
 Cause that's just what we put on you  
 A road full of checkpoints and borders  
 Prove your papers and your education  
 Your faith and your motivation  
 Queer and nobody believes it  
 cause we too busy paying attention  
 To the attention you bring  
 To our skin, and our policy  
 Granted we didn't think of you, until now  
 And we're trying to hide it  
 Cause it's shameful, so it's "easier"  
 for all of us if we just "get along"  
 And pretend it's "all good"

Both: It's all good

J: It's all sour!

Gaslighting for hours, months

In the dark, our secrets keep you awake

Cause we can't own them, so we happily gift them

To you,

oh "we ain't done no such thing"

We're above board, friendly

Just trying to put out our own fires

As the world burns around us

We shove the matchbox under the carpet

And don't tell anyone we swiped

our white match

Along the brown surface

Of another's skin, the flame

revealing our need for each other

But not knowing how to come together

Except anger (*both take breath in*)

and fire (*both take breath out. Beat*)

And then we meet

And I'm a picture of oppression

To you – but you see me

We see us, I seek you

Out to hear your story

Like mine, not like mine

They've been stepping on your earth while you look to heaven

Pushing out your faith, like crutches made to burn

You the kindling for too many campfires.

Made for more than that.

And I say – let's talk about it

friend, where all of this meets

Convergence

Difference

And we talk

And we talk

And we feel lost, together (*M sees J as Jonathan for the first time*)

Rejected by faith

and the secular, by queerness

And the way we find expression, this drama

Won't support us either

So we find our own way (*Both make their way to centre stage facing each other*)

Making meaning

And we think we know each other

And maybe we do

All I can do to not hurt you by default

Of my power, and my skin  
 My position and my faith  
 That's not yours – that doesn't need to be  
 Cause all you bring is more  
 Important, unique  
 And your story doesn't need me  
 but somehow with you, I feel changed  
 And I'm afraid, that you don't  
 But I hope, you will (*J places the spool and the scissors DSC with the Bible and tray*)

*Having been seen by each other, J and M materialize as Jonathan and Manchari*

### **Scene 32 - Temple and Church**

Manchari: Dear Jonathan      Jonathan: Dear Manchari

*J moves to stand DSL in M's kollum and Manchari moves to DSR to stand in J's. During this scene both step delicately trying not to disturb the kollum, observing the lines and pattern as they speak. This is a conversation*

Manchari: When we drove up into the church I could already feel your stress. It felt a little bit like you wanted to run and keep looking back, or use your hands to cover your eyes and keep a little slit open to peek through. You seemed curious but betrayed. We walk inside. You already seem to notice a few faces and I am trying to judge by the expressions on people's faces if these are the "good Christians" or not...the ones that accept you and love you or the ones that seem to on the surface. Do you know how many of them truly support you? Does it matter to you? Or have you been hurt enough already?

Jonathan: I'm thinking of you as you dip your fingers into the coloured powder – with authority. You know exactly what to do- second nature. Is it always like that when you are at temple – do you feel confidence in ritual? How your hands are cupped just the right way so the sweet warm milk doesn't run down your wrists as you bring it to your mouth. As you step around the temple you know the direction, the prayers – you say you and your family don't know the gods well, but that doesn't impact your faith. Is it strange to belong in a place where the statues know you but you don't know them?

Manchari: Everyone starts to sing but you're still silent. You don't seem convinced by the lyrics. You don't seem to know what to do, or maybe you do and you're just still in shock from being here in the first place. I hear the words that are being said and see the movement happening around me. Some are swaying like they're in a trance. Others are quiet and reserved, still sitting. Some seem sad...I wonder which category you are filling right now. Then you start to sing (*J starts to sing a worship song*) and I feel shivers - how powerful that must have been for you to be able to bring yourself out of the place that kept reminding you that this place wasn't for you, that you didn't belong here and show up and sing anyways.

Jonathan: Hands on rice, turning taps to wash feet, giving alms, running through your short hair to slick away the remnants of the sacred kollum. The expression of faith here is linked to hands and what you do with your hands in the expression of sexuality is also tied up with hands? Do you like your hands? Have they been good to you? Do they help you know who you are, touch who you want and what you want, or do they hold you back, clasp each other, strong arm you to obey another master? As my hands follow yours, I realize the power of *our hands*. And you tell me the people there imagine them, in their minds, interlinked as a couple. And even though I feel welcome here only because you are my guide, you tell me that with me at your side you gain status in their eyes. That they will all be talking about this long after I leave, wondering whose family you are from - and if they'll be invited to the wedding.

Manchari: What were you told being a Christian is? What could it be? Do you know? Have you lived it, if not now, in the past? Is living a life with your faith as you always pictured tainted by those around you, telling you something needs to change? I look around at the friendly faces after the service and am still shocked that some of these people would tell you you didn't belong here or that you need to change. I am still unsure of how I feel about the church and the temple. Both places require some negotiation it seems, but to what cost?

Jonathan: It burns. The spice goes up my nose, heat that comes from the meal we share, sitting on the ground cross-legged, eating the blessed rice with our fingers as everyone watches us. Where are these traditions from? Do they harken back to someone's home? (*they step out of each other's kollum and move toward centre stage*) As we step out into the heat of the afternoon, the peeling paint on the portraits of the rainbow-coloured Gods outside makes this place look derelict, invisible in a nondescript mostly empty strip mall. But the life inside those walls tells another story. What is it about this space that feels more centered on something else, more humble. And for you, more home?

### Scene 33 - Future Letter From Appa

*J exits and then re-enters USL with dustpan and broom and starts sweeping M's kollum into a pile and pouring it into their kollum bowl while they speak*

Appa: Manchari Kunju, where there is true love, anything is effortless. Anything you want, just ask. I trust you know what you need. my beautiful. I cannot wait to meet you. My religion is love. Handsome child. Teach me, for you have much to share. Your father, You know. You come first, your destiny is open. you will be our best child. Who has always been with us. I don't need you to be anything but you. I don't have all the answers. You know, I love to spoil my kids. Freedom to my children. I believe in your happy life Kunju. You are handsome charming beautiful child, growing child. My Kutti, you are not alone in any of this. Kutti I am praying, but only for what you want, by being yourself. Kutti - please be a happy person. You remember, we are alive, praise God. Deep breath when you feel bad. Big request Kunju: Please be happy. If you don't understand how, call me. Take care Kunju.

### Scene 34 - We Fucked Away the Rules

*M takes the dustpan and broom from J and collects his kollum in a pile, pouring it into his bowl*

Jonathan: Did you know that when we fucked  
 We broke their rules  
 The power that held us down  
 For all those years  
 The contracts we signed to never speak  
 Outside of conversion therapy  
 Voided, by our skin stuck together  
 Never better  
 We sang a hymn to set the mood  
 Our voices raised in words we'd sung  
 With conviction long ago  
 Now just muscle memory  
 The comfort in harmonies  
 As the words left our throats  
 And our mouths united  
 And your throat was pleasing as it took me in  
 Where the worship had left  
 And yet begun again  
 What they held from us  
 We fulfilled, took back as friends  
 Connected finally to our bodies, not theology  
 In the moment surprised by what they said  
 to each other, shameless  
 Proclaiming liberation  
 Captives set free, from our jeans  
 As you slide between my slippery slopes  
 And enter me like the holy spirit  
 With no prayer on my lips  
 No thought of the past  
 Just trust as we realize  
 Our veins throb to remind us  
 That we have overcome

Jonathan: *(sung to the tune of "We Shall Overcome")* We have overcome, we have overcome, *(sings rest quieter and humming while M speaks "we have overcome, today. Oh deep in my heart, I do believe. We have overcome today")*

Manchari: We taught each other  
 We found out how to move each other  
 In ways I was never taught through movies or books

Every moment with you took away the guilt and shame that lingered from a crime I didn't commit

Every moment with you brought me closer to my faith

Every moment with you felt like the beginning of something

I need a new beginning. Are you free sometime this week?

Both: (*singing*) Oh deep in my heart, I do believe, we have overcome today.

### Scene 35 - Home

*J and M face each other*

Both: Where is our home?

Jonathan: Is it the queer community?

Manchari: The faith community?

Jonathan: The activism community?

Manchari: The school community?

Both: Where do we go to be all that we are?

Jonathan: I call upon the example of the untameable heretic Jesus, who queered the binaries of human and god, death and life. To uplift and affirm those that have been labelled unclean, unwelcome. His revelation was always first for the outcast.

Manchari: I call upon the celebration of queerness expressed in the Vedic & Hindu teachings as a model that should exist in our communities. Our inclusion will not exclude, it will only reveal those that would turn us away from love to uphold their own selfish convictions.

Jonathan: We are not unholy. Our faiths accept us, it's the many followers that don't.

Manchari: We will be the revelation that illuminates those who desire to truly love and those who cannot accept to love their neighbour as themselves. Because we know that

Both: Love does no harm. (*they move to their own kollum bowls DSR & DSL*)

Jonathan: Death and destruction are in our midst

Manchari: Our marginalized prophets call out for justice

Both: A reckoning.

Jonathan: They have been crying in the wilderness warning after warning.

Manchari: Prophesying another resurrection is on its way.

Jonathan: That will move through us who have experienced rejection

Manchari: And have become hospitable because our multiple communities have forgotten how.

Jonathan: It will rise through the embrace of difference.

*Both speak the next line in unison while moving toward each other DSC*

Manchari: Our difference is dissonance / harmony. Jonathan: Our difference is harmony / dissonance

Both: *(Meeting in middle, facing each other. A pause)* It doesn't matter if it's covered in flames and blood. We are beautiful together. *(beat)* And that's why I love you.

Jonathan: Never forget that we are everything without the other.

*Both hold up their bowls*

Manchari: But together

*Both pour their red and blue kollum into a single pile. Red into blue into purple*

Both: We are that power.

*J and M turn to face the audience and stay DSC to signal the end of the show*

## **Epilogue**

Jesus: Divine beings, Kali and I would like to thank you for your rapt attention-

Kali: -and we would like to give thanks to you for electing us to serve as co-chairs on this subcommittee. This evening's presentation concludes the preliminary report of our findings.

Jesus: I'm sure you will all agree that it is of universal importance that an extension be granted to this subcommittee to continue operations in light of our findings. In addition, we would like to propose that this subcommittee be expanded to include everyone in this celestial closet.

Kali: Could we get one of you to move this motion *(waits for a hand to raise)* Thank you, what is your name? *(Waits for name and writes it down)*. Thank you divine *(insert human's name)*

Jesus: And someone to second the motion please? (*Waits for hand and name and writes it down*). Thank you celestial (*insert human's name*)

Kali: Oh, another earthling! How did they all get in here?

Jesus: Someone left the closet door open I guess.

Kali: Bet you all got a shock when you saw what was hiding in this one!

Jesus: We might still have some of that vegan lunch leftover. Nothing goes bad in here.

Kali: In any case, the motion has been passed. Thank you all! We move forward together!

Both: Any questions?

*End.*

## CHAPTER FIVE: REFLECTIONS ON *THAT POWER*

My theoretical allegiances for analyzing the work you have just read will focus on the themes of queer trauma and queer futurity. I invoke the scholarship of theorists working in depathological trauma studies and queer studies (performance archives and utopias) using their theoretical insights to further investigate examples from the process and performance. The process of building new theoretical allegiances post-performance enables me to engage ideas that help extend the significance of *That Power*; nevertheless, I want to emphasize that although the script/performance was a collaborative effort, this theorizing strictly follows my own hunches.

The structure of this discussion takes its focus from the following: that traumatic experience needs to be (a) recognized, (b) gathered around and witnessed in relationship, and (c) depathologized in order to re-frame it as culturally relevant and necessitating cultural response or “response-ability” (Oliver, 2001, p. 105). This structure follows Oliver’s (2001) thesis that the act of bearing witness is the commencement of reconstituting and repairing “address-ability and response-ability” injured through various forms of oppression (p. 105). Oliver further explains that, “bearing witness works through the trauma of objectification by reinstating subjective agency as the ability to respond or address oneself” (p. 105). In this reframing, the working through of trauma can reveal the potential for a reversal of futures. By investigating queer trauma, theatre and performance can be a queer futurity tool helping us to see what is not yet but might be, and to use that desire for a better future as a building block for collective resistance.

In writing about the cultural product of *That Power* in a thesis that will be published, the script/performance becomes a form of trauma archive. This is paradoxical

as it archives and recognizes minoritarian queer experience, which in its very form subverts classification as genre (which is beneficial), while also becoming beholden to a static reading of a finalized public document that holds the moment of performance for analysis and interpretation even though its theatrical form and content call for continuous permeability. The latter has the possibility to be detrimental to the reader if their desire is to hold our stories to the moment on record, whereas the reader might instead choose to see the archive as suggestive or generative, a version containing the seeds of possible worlds within it through unlimited performative possibilities. What is required then is that this queer archive is recognized as permeable and transitory; one that destabilizes finality to aid the reader in achieving a dynamic vision of it. An archive such as this holds its cultural products with open hands, archiving only their traces, just as the performative paths we took in *That Power*, replotting and reconstituting our stories, are at the end of the play only whisperings of our working through trauma shaped by kolum powder patterns on the stage. This vision of the archive would recognize trauma as a liminal space, which remains open, in transition and anchored in the relationality that is built into a collaborative, collectively owned cultural product. This framework informs the sections that follow, where trauma is identified, located, testified to, witnessed, performed, and that working through of trauma gives way to relationality. This relationality propels the section on queer utopia and futurity, finishing with an epilogue on the limitations and possibilities of the archive.

I begin my analysis by drawing on Cvetkovich's (2003) work which positions queer performances of trauma as culturally relevant and important, a potential "archive of feelings" which can provide a "radical space to live in ... full of possibility ... where a

person can go to claim agency” (Carland & Cvetkovich, 2013, p. 73). I then move on to explain the depathological lens I use to think about the trauma within the script—working particularly with Nixon’s (2011) ideas of slow violence in conversation with Rothberg (2014) who expands the definition of trauma,<sup>23</sup> which is useful for understanding the overlapping and intersectional trauma histories at play in the script/performance. This is followed by a section on recognizing our collective trauma as relational collateral (Craps, 2014; Rothberg, 2014), leading to an analysis of the ways Manchari and I used this process to become witnesses for each other (Oliver, 2001). With the building blocks from Oliver’s theory on the importance of bearing witness to the self to regain subjectivity, I extend her thoughts to include an analysis of the ways the recognition of traumatic experience in relation to the trauma subject can become a catalyst in working toward a better future. I use this generative approach to think about the trauma identified in the show and in the final section of the analysis connect it to Muñoz’s (2009) queer utopic vision and Pryor’s (2017) ideas of time slips to demonstrate how performance can queer time.

### **Queer Trauma Performances**

Cvetkovich’s (2003) work in *An Archive of Feelings* provides a landmark analysis of queer performances of trauma as necessary contributions to cultural production and public consciousness. Cvetkovich frames everyday trauma as a key element in the affective language that describes life under capitalism and examines “how shock and injury are made socially meaningful, within cultural experience” (p. 19). She works to establish the concept of “an archive of feelings” as a place of belonging for cultural

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<sup>23</sup> Rothberg draws on Nixon’s (2011) thesis surrounding slow violence as a building block to approaches to trauma theory where trauma as definition needs to continually be broadened to include more complexity. He invokes Nixon to call for trauma theory to recognize the traumatic experiences that stem from non-sensational and non event-based circumstances.

products that foreground queer performances of trauma. Her aim is to reposition and reclaim trauma from the medical and psychiatric community who have pathologized it by clinically defining it as only experiences “outside the range of usual human experience” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 17). Instead, Cvetkovich reclaims it as social and cultural discourse and gives it back to those who make culture, so that cultural productions of trauma can be framed as socially meaningful. Her hope is to re-imagine performances of trauma, and in so doing she forges a new approach for thinking about the ways affective life can serve as the foundation for public culture (Cvetkovich, 2003, pp. 19-20). Cvetkovich suggests that diverse performances can offer new models for the archive of feelings, and I believe *That Power* is one such model, unique in premise and execution.

Cvetkovich’s (2003) interest in the affective life of trauma as cultural production is explored through analyzing autoethnographic queer theatrical performances that demonstrate everyday trauma as both unrepresentable and ranging in emotion, all of which adds to the scope and complexity of an “emotional archive of trauma” (p. 23). She sees performance of personal narratives of trauma as “affective experience[s that are] unsettling, unpredictable, and necessary” for inclusion in queer archives because they are linked to personal agency over trauma and memory (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 25). Like Cvetkovich, I believe *That Power* opens portals to the possibility for trauma to reveal and transform the performer and the audience, especially in its ability to resurrect Oliver’s (2001) idea of an inner witness that is vulnerable to oppression. For what queer life—and thus autoethnographic queer performance—is not stamped with at the very least heteropatriarchal oppression?

Trauma and testimony are explicitly linked in Cvetkovich's (2003) analysis of queer experience, performance, and cultural production, which declares that "the life stories of performance art are often structured around, if not traumatic experiences, moments of intense affect that are transformative and revealing" (p. 26). They also often revolve around family histories, mapping the queer offspring of heterosexual parents and cultural traditions," which is precisely where *That Power* begins, but not where it ends (Cvetkovich, 2003, pp. 26-27). Transformation is a key word here as it links to the possibility and futurity present within the recognition of trauma.

### **Framing Trauma**

The research for the cultural production that became *That Power* was steeped in questions regarding how Manchari and I as subjects having unique and collective trauma experiences could move from pathological definitions of our trauma to a more generative vision. Moreover, the research engaged us in mobilizing and replotting our traumatic experiences to reveal what could be different and should have been better in our lives. Essentially, we were using our analysis of structural and interpersonal trauma to reveal longing which in turn could invoke futurity. Additionally, we were placing value on our selves as interpreters and testifiers while valuing our traumatic experiences as contributions to social and cultural production. The generative turn was then to acknowledge and reframe the existence of trauma in our lives not as a signifier of brokenness or stuck-ness, but as a signifier of the areas in which we were longing for brighter futures.

The personal narratives investigated in this research are complex and visit a host of experiences, many of which include trauma. The central questions in this thesis

concern the agency of queer people of faith and are implicitly linked to the trauma of rejection, of not belonging, of irreconciliation, and of loss (of faith, of purpose, of community, of self). Trauma theory provides multiple access points into understanding these narratives as complex “trauma knot[s]” (Luckhurst, as cited in Rothberg 2014, p. xi) which are made up of past and present experiences of suffering (socio-political-institutional) that have “everyday” and “insidious” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 33) consequences impacting the self and the understanding of self through time (Rothberg, 2014). The trauma theory I find most valuable uses a depathological lens to reconstitute the subject with traumatic experience through their own testimony (Oliver, 2001) and expands the repertoire of cultural production to value archives of traumatic experience while subverting definability and event-specific origins (Cvetkovich, 2003). Rothberg’s (2014) perspective on trauma adds intersectional insights to this lens; his project of building a “non-Eurocentric, fully historicized trauma theory” (p. xiii) includes the presentation of trauma as everyday, insidious, and intersectional, and allows for an analysis of the intergenerational-socio-cultural-historical-institutional power that contributes to traumatic experience. In addition to this, Rothberg invokes Nixon’s (2011) concept of “slow violence” as, like climate change, something that is complex and not easily mapped, as a prime example of trauma theory that moves beyond trauma definitions that are event-focused.

### **Slow Violence**

Rothberg (2014) primarily employs Nixon’s term “slow violence” to point out trauma’s erosive capacities, which stem from intersectional oppressive forces over time that are not solely linked to a singular traumatic event, but instead to a drawn-out series of experiences of oppression. Similarly, Craps (2014), Cvetkovich (2003), and Pryor

(2017) critique trauma theory for being too individualized, Eurocentric, and medicalized in ways which lead to neglecting to question acute stressors and structural forms of violence outside individual experience that enable “traumatic abuse, such as racism, economic domination, or political oppression” (Rothberg, 2014, p. 50). Cvetkovich (2003) posits that this type of trauma is “structurally unknowable” (p. 19), linked both to acute historical events, everyday events, and emerging from systemic contexts. Cvetkovich is pre-empting Nixon (2011) here by prioritizing the unspectacular complexity and attritional violence of delayed or erosive destruction. Accordingly, I find the trauma produced by slow violence to be an important starting place for analysis of *That Power* because it illustrates how systems of oppression that have long been established, and their impact, may lack any distinct trauma event.

You can see this slow violence evidenced within the script in many ways, in fact too many to go into exhaustive detail. However, starting from the third scene “Earthgazer” (p. 49) onward to “Trauma” (p. 73) (excluding the Gods scenes), Manchari and I map out the continuous and repetitive instances of public and familial expectations which adhere to heteronormative and heteropatriarchal systems that are sexist, homophobic, and transphobic. “In Period Party” (p. 51), “Kandam” (p. 55), “God is Good” (p. 60), “Dance With Franz” (p. 61), “Letter from Appa” (p. 61), “Flying to Franz” (p. 62), “Dropping Out” (p. 64), “Compromised” (p. 67), “Revelations” (p. 79), and “Temple and Church” (p. 87) we show the expectations to live according to straight time and the attritional violence of those experiences.<sup>24</sup> This would typically be thought

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<sup>24</sup> Pryor (2017) uses this term in relation to trauma: “straight time not only negates a trauma survivor’s lived experience of past events, it also reproduces the logic of capitalism: the system ... that creates the conditions under which racial, gender, sexual, and economic violence gets enacted in the first place” (p. 4)

of as following our “destinies” by completing post-secondary education, getting married, having kids, taking the jobs expected of us, as well as the expectation to perform a specific gender identity, gender expression, sexual expression and sexual orientation. In “Brahmins” (p. 70), “Trauma” (p. 73), “I See You” (p. 85), and “Things People Love to Say About Brown People” (p. 83), we show the trauma of living under White supremacy and its perpetuation of racism, its inability to acknowledge privilege, slow racial violence, and intergenerational trauma. Finally, adding to the already painful experience of slow violence: having to continuously prove that we experience(d) oppression and trauma to everyone including our Gods and their followers. We have tried to demonstrate this in the interconnecting scenes where Kali and Jesus observe our lives and finally “get it,” and bear witness to the slow violence occurring in our lives. The scenes “Boy One” (p. 51), “Period Party” (p. 51), “The Unraveling” (p. 57), and from “Response to Appa” (p. 65) through to the end of the play are articulations of the ways we recognize the trauma of slow violence in our lives and then challenge those dynamics, in ways that eventually allow others (and ourselves) to subvert those systems.

During the creation process, Manchari and I realized the sources of our trauma were both collective and individually experienced. Collectively we experienced straight time, heteropatriarchy, internalized homophobia, SOGIECE, and sexual trauma. In addition to that list, Manchari experienced transphobia, sexism, racism, homonormativity, tokenization, and intergenerational trauma from a genocidal war, and I experienced religious fundamentalism and targeted conversion therapy (these lists are non-exhaustive). These experiences are forms of slow violence causing trauma in the form of rejection, isolation, disconnection, powerlessness, invisibility, and the impossibility to bear witness to what has occurred—the annexation of subjectivity (Oliver, 2001).

### **Trauma as Impetus to Self-Reflection**

Trauma theory also helps me to think about the relationship between victim and perpetrator and at the same time extends past those rigid definitions to explore the messy contradictions in which I am implicated as someone who benefits from colonization, White supremacy, capitalism, Christian privilege, male privilege, being able-bodied, identifying with my assigned-at-birth gender, and other privileges. In the words of Rothberg (2014), I am an “implicated subject” more than a bystander and more than a direct perpetrator in the violence of the systems that I am beneficiary to—systems which ensure “uneven experiences of trauma and wellbeing simultaneously” (p. xv). It is in this recognition of the contradiction that I hold in this liminal space, that my own capacity for reflexivity can open me up to the possibilities of solidarity across social locations, subjectivity, and structural inequalities (Rothberg, 2019). Rothberg (2019) says that this “clear understanding of one’s own implication in multileveled conditions of violence and injustice is not a sufficient condition for social change, but it may be a necessary step for the creation of alliances among differently situated subjects” (p. 33).

During the creation process, I was standing on stable ground as a fully funded Master of Arts student doing a thesis, contemplating my past relationship with religion while not actively placed in situations of discomfort or discrimination related to that experience. I was able to avoid discomfort and harm through privilege, which allowed me to separate myself from oppressive communities and discomfort because of my relational status and cultural distance. At the same time Manchari was daily experiencing misogyny, discrimination, racism, family challenges and identity negotiation among other challenges. Both of us benefit from elements of capitalism and the colonialism of Canada, yet I as a White Christian male could be seen as a portrait of oppression to

Manchari. As performers and creators there was no doubt we were differently “implicated subjects,” and interwoven into “a system that generates dispersed and uneven experiences of trauma and wellbeing simultaneously” (Rothberg, 2014, p. xv). The scenes “I See You” (p. 85) and “Things People Love to Say About Brown People” (p. 83) emerged from our conversations about being differently implicated and the implications about my privilege, White privilege, and the impacts of systemic racism in Manchari’s life. However, our ability to talk about these issues only developed over time and the deepening of our relationship.

During our workshops, especially in our casual meetings, I had been a witness to many moments where Manchari was treated differently by others and I was constantly wondering what I could do as an advocate. It continued to bother me that prior to this research, I had only thought about these things when we were together. “I See You” (p. 85) was created in response to wrestling with questions about how I could support Manchari. I remember thinking something along the lines of, “what could I tell you to make you feel better? What would help? All I can do is listen and validate, but what good does me witnessing all this do?” (Author’s reflection). These questions helped give rise to what Oliver (2001) defines as “infinite response-ability,” where my inner witness incorporated my dialogic relationship with Manchari through witnessing and in doing so, gave me the ability to create an enabling and empowering subject position that was cognizant of my status as an implicated subject and alert to the need for continuous vigilance (p. 87). Put another way, this infinite response-ability helped me “access realms of social ignorance that are built into systems of power and privilege” that I partake in, and in turn, to begin to acknowledge these recognitions explicitly (Rothberg, 2019, p. 34).

I started writing with those previously mentioned questions in mind, but my emotions were overtaking me and all I could do was write broken sentences, which turned into poetry.<sup>25</sup> I was scared of the product, it felt like white tears to me, but we promised each other we would share as long as we felt safe. When we got together for our next workshop on September 5, 2018, we shared 2 weeks' worth of writing. When I shared "I See You" Manchari teared up and said they felt seen and heard. That moment I took ownership of my racism and participation in a White supremacist society, and more importantly, bore witness to Manchari's testimony (Oliver, 2001). This exchange opened up future sessions where we talked openly about racism. Manchari's piece "Things People Love to Say About Brown People" (p. 83) and "Vocabulary" (p. 79) emerged as texts where Manchari was bearing witness to their self.

### **Gathering Around Collective Trauma**

Although our lives and life experiences are vastly different, over time we were able to develop a base of solidarity from which we were able to explore our lives and traumatic experiences and this reciprocal relationship enabled the creation of *That Power*. However, our starting point was our collective queer religious trauma. As we shared elements of our stories over the months, we peeled back layers of everyday, insidious trauma (Cvetkovich, 2003), and event-based trauma which included but also surpassed the queer religious framework to expose our own personal and collective "trauma knot[s]" (Luckhurst, as cited in Rothberg, 2014, p. xi). I believe a large part of our solidarity initially came from the "collective trauma" of experiencing different versions

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<sup>25</sup> My poetry was inspired by longings to put into scene form deep emotional memories that didn't have a clear narrative form. Poetry became a way to process through certain pieces of our stories that were new and raw—things that we possibly hadn't borne witness to.

of SOGIECE where our religions attempted to force us to try to change the core of who we were in relation to our sexual orientation and gender identity and expression. The trauma of trying to adhere to this expectation from our faith communities was indeed a very slow violence. For Manchari, the familial and cultural pressure to exist and identify as the gender they were assigned at birth (female), a gender they did not identify with, was linked to faith practices and heteropatriarchy within Hinduism. For myself, my conservative Christian community was also heteropatriarchal and allowed only heterosexual relationships, so I was pressured to fit in both through mandated celibacy and orientation change efforts through conversion therapy. This collective SOGIECE trauma was our “bridge between disparate historical experiences ... [where] listening to the trauma of another ... contribute[d] to cross-cultural solidarity and to the creation of new forms of community” (Caruth, 1995, as cited in Craps, 2014, p. 46).

Extending out from the solidarity of our shared collective trauma required creating a performance text and space that would enable each of us to identify and name our own traumatic experiences on our own terms. The process of naming our own trauma required knowing ourselves subjectively. What we were not aware of until the play development began was the extent to which we felt “cognitively and perceptually destroyed as witnesses” because the corrosive impact of our religions (especially in adherence to heteropatriarchal sexuality and gender expressions) had dehumanized and objectified us, making it almost impossible to speak and bear witness to our own dehumanization (Oliver, 2001, p. 90).

### **Testifying to Trauma**

The creation process was not aimed at revealing sensational stories of suffering, trauma, and resulting voicelessness but as we looked for agency and our capacities to respond and claim a future within the show, it became clear we still felt we had little agency and had even less capacity to dream of possible futures. The question was how to testify to these things and keep hope in the air. This was no small task. The difficulties became clear as we would get stuck in improv scenarios and writing exercises where we attempted to forecast or write about the different outcomes we might desire for our lives—yet, it seemed impossible, even though we desired alternatives, to imagine the “what ifs.”

In one specific scenario, Manchari shared a letter with me that their father had written them; the scene “Letter from Appa” (p. 61) is an almost word-for-word transcript of the letter. As an exercise I asked Manchari if they would like to write a response; the result was the scene “Response to Appa” (p. 65). This result felt encouraging, with Manchari saying they felt it had given them a bit more of a voice. Then I asked what it would look like to write a version of the letter, to themselves, in Appa’s voice, one that affirmed their gender identity. Here we hit a roadblock, as Manchari was not able to imagine this process. Their belief that this fatherly affirmation would never come was coupled with the existing trauma from years of familial rejection and erasure of their trans identity. The history of their family attempting to pray the gay away and marry them off made it nearly impossible for Manchari to imagine a positive and accepting response. This was the context in which I asked for permission to try and write a letter based on what Manchari had shared with me: their desire for inclusion, affirmation, and belonging just as they were. The result, “Future Letter From Appa” (p. 88), which

remains unchanged in the script, took both of us by surprise. I had simply reversed the pronouns and rewritten it as a celebratory letter of encouragement having listened to Manchari testify about being misgendered and blamed for their parent's unhappiness. This was a glimpse of the power of bearing witness, which came prior to the period when either of us was able to bear witness fully to our *own* stories. It was also the first moment written for the script where the yet to arrive future horizon of queer utopia became visible (Muñoz, 2009). After this, Manchari worked to transform a dozen letters from my ex-girlfriend Franz, condensing and distilling the key messages into "Dance with Franz" (p. 61). I had been unable to read through them or face that legacy. These moments of holding each other's stories when we could not hold them ourselves worked to re-establish the dialogue with our inner selves and with each other. The script holds those stories and moments and through re-presenting them allowed us, as writers who had felt like objectified victims, to "reassert [our] own subjective agency and humanity into an experience ... [where] it was annihilated or reduced to guilt and self-abuse" (Oliver, 2001, p. 93). Through the performance of those scenes in *That Power*, we took this a step further into meaning-making, working to gain a sense of agency over our story by performing these moments for each other night after night.

What I can recognize now looking back is that in the early days of our working together our shared experiences of trauma provided enough of a bridge that we were able to testify to each other, and this "witnessing" helped open up our abilities to listen, respond, and reawaken the inner witness. This process helped each of us develop a sense of subjectivity and agency (Oliver, 2001). In this process we started to emulate Oliver's (2001) "truth of performance," where a lived experience such as victimization and trauma

cannot accurately be articulated through facts on a page or written history but can only truly materialize through testimony. For Manchari and I, our experiences of being dehumanized and othered, which could have been repressed or lost to memory were regained through testifying to each other (Oliver, 2001, p. 92). Hence, memories and experiences that were once buried through slow violence were now given verbal form and validation through a collective naming of injustice. These were moments of new consciousness born from the ashes of our collective trauma and became the building blocks for the next challenge of our process: to give this testimony form within a written script while keeping the truth of performance intact.

Manchari and I held within us characters in search of a play where they (and we) could “live through witnessing” together (Oliver, 2001). To come alive through witnessing and testimony to one’s own subjectivity is reminiscent of a rebirth, similar to how Moraga (2011) speaks of her first moments of consciousness within a community where she experienced “genuine collectivism” for the first time. The collective element here was as crucial for her as it was for us, where Moraga and collective, like Manchari and I, recognized systemic and structural betrayals that extended past individual experience and that required the response of a rebirth in consciousness together through “art inspired action” (Moraga, 2011, p. 6). Moraga’s “epiphany of art-inspired action” was writing. Like Moraga, this is where we started as well; however, we needed theatre to provide the creative and collaborative space to fully embody all the “dyings of heart” (Moraga, 2011, p. 12) we had experienced and shared with each other: the moments of betrayal, objectification, and injustice that pushed us to look toward art for a radical revisioning of our lives. Simply words on a script page or an analysis in a thesis could not

begin to provide a performance articulate enough to hold the truth of our experiences, especially as they interacted with each other and began to change the way we understood our stories (Oliver, 2001).

Thanks to the research methodology of critical narrative inquiry and our budding friendship, Manchari and I were able to begin writing about and unpacking trauma knots. Our partnership allowed us to get to know our selves again through social interaction, bearing witness first to our selves, and resurrecting our inner witness and subjectivity enough to begin to bear each other's trauma (Oliver, 2001). Oliver cautions that there is a paradox in bearing witness to one's own oppression, as that oppression dehumanized one into an object, and objects cannot speak. So, how does one address oneself when we may experience ourselves as a voiceless object? One writes oneself into being. And, how does one bring a written self into being? Through performance. Even if objects cannot speak, through the magic of theatre performance, they can become embodied and personified.

### **The Performative Witness**

The first layer of research for *That Power*, our critical narrative inquiry process, was giving testimony to each other, and bearing witness to each other's stories. We found safety in convergence and collective trauma. Arguably we did not bear witness to our own trauma and oppression until we entered the second, third, and fourth levels of testimony. The second layer was writing that testimony into the script, the third was rehearsing (repetition of) that testimony for each other, and the fourth was performing that testimony for an audience. Each level was a new step in vulnerability, and each level carried its own weight of shame in articulating how we had seen ourselves as broken objects and/or had been painted as worthless (Oliver, 2001). The vulnerability of bearing

witness to each other during the first three levels solidified our solidarity and friendship, but the fourth level opened a door to shame via objectification all over again because of the public nature of live performance. It was also however, liberating as Oliver (2001) notes, to publicly re-inscribe and re-assert our “humanity and subjective agency into both social and psychic life” through the performance (p. 105). This multi-level process of bearing witness started the reparation of what Oliver calls “address-ability” and “response-ability” toward our inner selves which were damaged through trauma and oppression. Functionally we were moving through the trauma of objectification by taking agency over our stories, and in re-presenting them were regaining the ability to respond and address our selves as well as a wider audience (Oliver, 2001, p. 105). Yet, there was cognitive dissonance in public performance. In the safe haven of research, writing, and rehearsal, all of our traumas and joys were exposed only to each other; where friendship, nuance, explicitly named power differentials and privileges, the gathering around collective trauma, and the gift of time had built us a bubble of trust. Conversely, in performance we felt like we became objects again in the eyes of an audience who were spectators but not necessarily capable of bearing witness and certainly not all equipped to take care of our stories. We had moved from 100 hours of witnessing each other to 80 minutes of testimony in front of an invited audience who knew us individually, but not collectively. However, the act of performance was *also* an act of reclamation that felt subversive, for we owned every word, action, and choice. To put our bodies out there as testifiers was to performatively invoke trauma, embody it, and re-embed our selves as powerful (Kabir, 2014).

Theatre's emphasis on the collaboration of bodies, and interconnectedness of affect, body, and place works to access "affect-worlds" that enable the traumatized to use "the resources of the body to re-embed itself in place" (Kabir, 2014, p. 73). An affect-world is simply the opening up of a performative toolkit that relies on the physical presence of other human beings. The body is the key to that toolbox, and when dealing with traumatic narrative, to re-insert the body of the one who experienced that trauma as the one in charge of the re-production of that trauma re-positions that body into place, providing the opportunity for the reclamation of the body through performance (Kabir, 2014). Since affect-worlds are birthed through this embodiment, Kabir argues that bodies must "be returned to the centre-stage of analysis" (p. 72). Our queer bodies not only took centre stage, but our survivance and existence as queers inserted into our own stories of the past, which had previously required our subservience to heteronormative life pathways, meant that the presence of our present queer bodies rejected any reproduction of heteronormative analysis or interpretation.

Within *That Power*, Manchari and I drew on affect through poetry, gesture, and dance, thus incorporating testimony alongside affect. We employed our diverse cultural and religious experiences of affect to position our performances and our text differently—illuminating our backgrounds and aesthetic, mystical, and religious traditions. Manchari brought a history of Hindu dance, specifically the Bharatanatyam (Nataraja's Dance of Destruction) that they repeated throughout the show (see "Bharatanatyam Dance," p. 50; "I Love Destruction (Heretics)," p. 71). I invoked forms of Christian worship that had been beautiful to me, hymns and the style of poetry that King Solomon (Song of Songs) and King David (Psalms) used in the Bible (see "When I

Met You,” p. 76; “We Fucked Away The Rules,” p. 89) while also tearing apart biblical traditionalism while revisioning hope in stories of destruction (see “I Love Destruction (Heretics),” p. 71; “Home,” p. 90). Gestures of the Gods were also part of our affect world, which communicated an affection and an equilibrium (Jesus with a hand on Kali’s shoulder, Kali standing over Jesus). Thus, through affect-worlds we re-positioned our bodies within our own re-storied narratives of trauma, allowing them to become the locus that enlivened the script from a one-dimensional narrative to a multi-dimensional embodiment of narrative as well as sites for the reconstitution of the self.

Moments like the body reclamation in “When I Met You” (p. 76), composed through poetry and dance, used hope and affirmation as an antidote against the ways in which trauma from toxic theology had lodged itself in my body in shame and displaced and isolated me from an embodied relationship to myself (Kabir, 2014). To be back in relationship with my body or back in my body, was a call and response process achieved first through testimony transformed into text and then staged with our bodies. When Manchari became my body and affirmed my beauty and theirs, our delicate dance on stage toward each other was a reuniting of lovers where I was reconciling my body, mind, and soul in real-time on stage as an actor and as self. It was a performance, but it was also a rekindling of body affirmation and love that felt new and liberatory each time we did the scene. This performance, an embodied personification of a dislocated body acting out a physical reconciliation through touch and dance, became a queer utopian move that recalibrated what it means to suspend our disbelief and believe in the character being played, and at the same time acknowledge the non-virtual actor labouring within the performance for his own liberation (Farrier, 2013).

In combining both character and body simultaneously to perform reconciliation, we shifted the main focus to the Jonathan as performer body yet still engaged the virtual character of Jonathan. In doing so we modeled what Stephen Farrier (2013) sees as a form of queer agency that is inherent in the fibre of theatre as an art form. Just as time can slip and be queered in theatre (Pryor, 2017), so can the performer's relationship to the virtual character and their own self as actor become queered and slip in and out of levels of being and meaning—affecting the performer and the audience—and creating new affect worlds (Farrier, 2013). The subversive nature of exposing the virtual and not-virtual levels of theatre at once—the mechanics behind the scenes—is a utopian queer move that points directly to a “politics of subversion” also present in theatre, one that is accessible to all practitioners but often superseded by heteropatriarchal theatre conventions known as “traditional” or “classical” theatre (Farrier, 2013). Farrier (2013) asks that the erasures theatre invokes be cast aside so bodies can play together, not cancelling each other out but instead offering a utopian space where “theatre as the stage upon which a queer utopic vision of the possible can be enacted” (p. 50). Farrier's vision of theatre as already queer and needing to be revealed as such, is in fact another way of saying theatre, like our faiths, has a holy queer origin bursting with desire for future revelation that has not yet arrived (Muñoz, 2009).

The creation and performance of *That Power* is an index to the “multivalent ways in which trauma is at once both cataclysmic and ordinary, collective and individual, sudden and ongoing ... [and the toll it takes] in psychic and material life but also the ways in which this trauma is recognized, or not, as time slips by” (Pryor, 2017, p. 5). The performance is also however, a cultural product of creativity and relationship that calls

out for ways of understanding the existence of trauma as a signifier for a generative and revelatory futurity, one that longs for a working through of traumatic experience where the recognition of disappointment and harm catalyzes a replotting toward new modes of resistance.

### **Seeds of Hope and Reversal Within Traumatic Experience**

Despite the previous sections, I want to resist locating *That Power* as a specific genre linked only to trauma, as that risks overlaying one reading of the script/performance. It is possible that in this way I still ally with Cvetkovich (2003) in rejecting universal models of trauma so as not to erase “essential differences between traumatic experiences, differences of historical context and geopolitical location, as well as specificities of individual experiences that can be lost in a diagnosis that finds the same symptoms everywhere” (pp. 31-32). For just as Ari and I are differently oriented around queerness, around faith, around race, we are also differently oriented around trauma and what we believe the traumatic experiences within *That Power* offer our personal journeys.

A seed of reversal is always present within traumatic experience, but the agency to recognize it comes from us only through a working through of trauma initiated by testimony and witnessing in relationship. It is the recognition of trauma which sparks the ability to dream of futurity, an idea that complicates queer trauma and lends itself to a depathological view of its potentialities. What I want to offer through this queer vision of trauma is that our suffering is soldered to our joys, our hopes, our desires, and that our potential to vision queer futures stems from the very negation and subversion found in our traumas, where the “pleasure and pain of queerness are not a strict binary” (Muñoz,

2009, p. 74). This is in line with Tuck's (2009) "desire-based framework" that articulates "not only the painful elements of social realities but also the wisdom and hope ... [the] so much more than that" (p. 416). Similarly, Muñoz (2009) frames desire as "involved with the not yet and the not anymore" (p. 26).

Within the script and performance of *That Power*, Manchari and I demonstrate many transformative and revealing moments of desiring through the intense affect of destruction—a theme that resonates through the second half of the performance (Cvetkovich, 2003). "I Love Destruction (Heretics)" (p. 71) pulls us out of what was just a beginning realization and commentary on our past and catapults us into a full-on embrace of subversive theology and politics in our lives in an effort to reframe and recast meaning. This destruction is pre-empted by a scene in which Kali and Jesus offer us the choice to "decide what burns" and to see the "seed of reversal" present in trauma/oppression that affords the chance to desire things differently. The scenes that follow tackle destruction as deconstruction, a dismantling that builds on moments from the recent past where our selves recognize the coming horizon of queer futurity as a beacon of hope.

### **Longing for Decolonial Love**

The desires for what is to come—the not yet futurity revealed through engagement with traumatic experience—can be the basis for intersubjective longing, establishing the potential for kinship and affinity through art, with "alliances and affection across lines of difference" (Maldonado-Torres, 2008, as cited in Figueroa, 2015, p. 44). These affections come from witnessing each other's stories and from the shared recognition of the violence, injustice, and dehumanization of coloniality, and the need for

“decolonial reparation,” and “the possibility of a different future” (Figuroa, 2015, pp. 43, 47). To me, the witnessing that occurred during creation and that continues even today within our relationship is only a starting point for consideration of what decolonial reparations might look like.

I want to clarify that when I speak of decoloniality within the context of this research, I am referring to the history of colonization of Manchari’s ancestors in Sri Lanka by my Dutch and British ancestors, territorially, economically, socially, and religiously among other genocides and atrocities. We make reference to this in the script indirectly in our origin stories in “Jesus and Kali Meeting” (p. 47), but also while playing Kali and Jesus drinking tea in the “Call on the Wrathful Mother” (p. 65). True decolonial reparations begin with an “understanding of ... accounting for ... [and subverting of] the *longue-durée* of colonialism” starting with a “redefinition of relations across difference, a recognition of structural, gendered, and intergenerational violence and a move away from its normalization where...reparations are (re)imagined as decolonial love” (Figuroa, 2015, p. 46). The overarching theme in our script is a move to show not just the need for queer religious inclusion, but the need for the Christian church to recognize and acknowledge our participation in sexism, colonialism, racism, and transphobia among other atrocities. The collaborative process of this research is a radical act that uses subversion and relationship to reveal the need for reparations. In doing so, I hope it is also a first step toward reparations with Ari—an onus and ownership on my part that goes beyond recognition, to listen, and then to show up and act as an advocate and friend in the fight. Reparations are ongoing states of being and acts that are relationally based, which is where this work begins. But only time, consistency and enduring relationship

can bring forward the depth of decolonial love that scholars such as Maldonado-Torres and Figueroa are calling for.

I believe *That Power* represents one experiment where a “radical and complex understanding of kinship and love” begins to materialize queer futurity with the development of loving and ethical relationships as the glue (Figueroa, 2015, p. 43). According to Maldonado-Torres (2008), “decolonial love is an integral part of the imagining of decolonial futurities because it imagines a world in which ethical relationships become the norm and not the exception” (p. 244). However, the process of imagining together a world of ethical relationships could only begin at the moment I began to understand through this art what it means to bear witness to the trauma of coloniality and racism.

The possibilities for relationality that emerged as a result of this learning can be highlighted in an example that honours our relationality. During the play, our Gods never interacted with us directly and never answered us. They only observed and commented, thus their power to affirm our queerness was something that was established through a growing relationship. One of the key ways we aesthetically symbolized the trajectory of our lives apart and together in relationship was through the kollum powder. The powder is symbolic of our destinies and life spans being shaped by different powers: time, relationships, and even more acutely, by our selves as actors performing on the stage of our lives. As the performance moved forward following our chronological timelines, our destinies began to move closer together symbolized by the red and blue kollum powders spreading around the stage as we embodied our lives performatively. The red and blue kollum were scattered separately, leaving red and blue traces around the stage. They also

started to entwine, and at these places the kollum appeared slightly purple where our stories had connected and our bodies had interacted. Throughout the show, when a character manipulates the kollum, they are exerting a type of power over our lives—reshaping and messing up the pattern of the kollum without permission. By the end of the performance, through the growing relationship of Manchari and I, we eventually invited each other onto our kollum, in “Temple and Church” (p. 87). Following that offer of trust we eventually became mutual caretakers of each other’s kollum in “Future Letter from Appa” (p. 88) and “We Fucked Away the Rules” (p. 89). These were interventions into each other’s destinies that could only be invited through a relationship of love. I can only hope that the relationship built through this research foreshadows a way of being in the world that continues to develop a decolonial praxis, and that the script provides an archive of theatre creation as a tool for collaboratively building new worlds and new futures together.

### **Queer Utopias: The World Is Not Enough**

Just as decolonial love is based in desire and desiring, so too is queer utopia. Its specific desire is to desire differently, better, and more, for circumstances of hope, astonishment, queer relationality, and an unfinished queerness (Muñoz, 2009). Gesturing toward non-existent worlds that are better versions of the present is Muñoz’s (2009) suggested “temporal maneuver ... to wrest ourselves from the present’s stultifying hold, to know our queerness as a belonging” (p. 28). Muñoz describes his work on queer utopia and futurity as “a resource for the political imagination ... a flight plan for a collective political becoming,” which is to say that he sees his theories as “practices that need to be seen as necessary modes of stepping out of this place and time to something fuller, vaster,

more sensual, and brighter. From shared critical dissatisfaction we arrive at collective potentiality” (p. 189). The work that we undertook in *That Power* was catalyzed by a desire to step into something brighter in response to collective critical dissatisfaction and trauma.

Numerous times in our sessions we asked each other how we could creatively compose ourselves as subjective agents who offer self-respect, grace, humour, and humanity to stories that were difficult and potentially re-traumatizing. How could we offer “response-ability” for each other while acting out an oppressive character with oppressive words? To become those oppressors for each other as actors, it was as if we were stepping forward in love to say:

This happened. It is valid, and you need to testify about it. I won't make you say the words, I will hold the words of your oppressor in my mouth, but I ask you to hear my voice of love over them. To see my body on stage as your scene partner as your friend. I am here for you and I can't promise it won't hurt to hear these words, but I honour your choice to testify, which I hope enables you to take agency over your story and tell it the way you need it to be told. (Author's reflection)

What I have articulated above offers only a fraction of the profundity of the performative gesture of these moments. The inarticulable moments of embodiment, acts of listening, moments of invitation to respond, being seen by each other through eyes of trust, all of these performatively establish intersubjectivity between the two of us, where words can only fall short. Re-inscribing each other as both liberators and oppressors, implicated subjects within the scenes, was for me a demonstration of vulnerability and queer relationality that is difficult to recreate safely. This was a type of advocacy that

materialized a longing for relationality and collaboration to offer deep and long-lasting solidarity in the form of infinite response-ability, calling on queer performances of trust as practical and applicable access points for subverting oppression and lifting each other up toward the queer utopian horizon where the “temporal stranglehold ... [of] straight time is interrupted or stepped out of” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 32).

### **Queer Religious World-Building**

Our very first meeting after Manchari had agreed to co-create with me was one of excitement, where we imagined all the possible worlds we could build for our upcoming play. We considered what performative possibilities could arise in a narrative based in the past, present and the not-yet-here, pitching different temporal arrangements in which the past was a “field of possibility in which [we could] act in the present in the service of a new futurity” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 16). After this meeting, when we started to do narrative inquiry into our past, we decided to postpone consideration of the fictional futures until we knew what of our own lives and relationships would make it into the script. Only in the week before our self-imposed script deadline (September 19, 2018) did we happily discover the current narrative frame of the story: queer gods observing queer humans with an intention to learn, affirm, and bless our identities and orientations. The ripple effect of these queer gods is the potentiality of queer religion and wisdom.

The premise that there exists a “Gods of the Universe Council” (p. 46) within a “celestial closet” is of course a tongue-in-cheek fictional conceit, one which we use to implicate our audience from the very beginning. In fact, the premise of a council meeting where we address our audience as principalities and deities and immediately imbue upon them the power to move and second a motion forward, situates our audience as having explicitly initiated the transformation that occurs throughout the show. The “Epilogue”

(p. 91) functions similarly, where our audience enacts a motion to continue the work of the queer religious subcommittee and carry the learnings forward.

Though Manchari and I believed on some level that each of our Gods are real, the Jesus and Kali queer religious task force was invented to serve as the connecting tissue between our stories, giving the play a narrative momentum that drives it forward and sets up a reason for the auto-ethnographic structure of its telling. We each chose to include, and embody, the God of our religion with whom we had the strongest personal connection and ensured they were equal in power and insight in the performance.

While the choice to set the show within the fictional hierarchal power structure of a religious council meeting is intentional, we also immediately intervene in that power structure of competing religions by equalizing all the Gods into a democracy and chairing their meeting as two humans working together under a cloak of interfaith cooperation. Audience members can surmise that it was the two of us that opened the celestial closet door to let other humans in to witness the narrative unfold in the first place, and that introduced the motion to the Gods to recognize and investigate the queer religious phenomenon happening on earth. All of this establishes our own narrative world and sets the tone for the interventions and the reclamation of power, agency and futurity throughout the show.

The performance uncovers multiple layers illuminating how power operates in relationships with our Gods, with our religions, with others, with ourselves, and with each other, and this process provided impetus for the title of the show. However, the title does not conclude which power is central, only that our performance serves as a “stage upon which a queer utopic vision of the possible can be enacted” (Farrier, 2013, p. 50).

The overlaying fictional connective tissue is our “wish landscape” of utopia, one in which our gods finally bear witness to us through our testimony (Muñoz, 2009). Yet even when this happens, it does not suggest utopia in the ways most understand utopia to be perfection. Instead, the (im)possibility of queer futurity is highlighted by our invocation that we are still working within systems of domination and oppression and goes so far as to invoke the gods of religions whose followers have oppressed us. We have not written a utopic fantasy world because we use our own narratives, thus we are both bound and liberated by the “limits of our agency and its most enabling conditions” (Farrier, 2013, p. 50).

When the Gods begin their investigation in the play, each pours out a coloured kollum powder while telling the origin and ancestry of how Manchari and I arrived on earth (pp. 60-61). This is an act of creative power that we afforded them, and yet we ourselves as actors/playwrights/creators are also enacting this, holding the power to give power. The gods are also outside of time, and we embody them as they seem to bring us into being. Theatre in its essence gives us the ability to hold this porosity or permeability of multiple embodiments, performing as our gods, our selves, and others. At the same time, our queer subjectivities are always reminding us “that it is possible to live, at least in part, outside of or in opposition to the time of capital, and to challenge timelines that presume the inevitability of linear gender and sexual development” (Pryor, 2017, p. 4). This is “the virtual and the actual, the character and the body simultaneously” coupled in co-presence, where at all times in the script Manchari and I hold the power of our queer selves, while performing as allies, oppressors, and implicated subjects (Farrier, 2013, p. 50).

It is only at the end of the play that an observer might realize that all the autobiographical scenes are being presented outside of straight time, in a queer temporality where time folds in on itself, so that at the “Epilogue” (p. 91) it is as if our gods are presenting their findings like a television recap of our lives to Gods of the Universe Council. It is as if all time is happening concurrently, and the Gods are outside of time—just as we (the non-virtual actors) are. Even though the Gods have selected us for their research, they work outside of time as observers, so though at first it seems they are laying out our destinies, because they are timeless, it may also be that they are simply recreating what they have observed. Nevertheless, the Gods do act on our lives, and the primary example of this is in the scene “Call on the Wrathful Mother” (p. 65) a scene which has the potentiality to work back into the future and past to change our present. In fact, it does, as from that moment in the play we begin to embrace our queerness. This utopic futurity working outside of time is a “time slip” where

normative conceptions of time fail, or fall away, and the spectator or artists experiences an alternative, or queer temporality. In this regard, a time slip reveals a previously unseen aspect of either the past, present, or future (while complicating the presumably linear relationship among and between each) – with an eye toward hidden histories, buried traumas, unclaimed experiences, invisible structures, and previously unimaginable futures. (Pryor, 2017, p.9)

Within this time slip, utopic futurity works backwards to undo straight time in our performance so that even our past is infused with queer futurity.

### Potentialities of Unfinished Utopia

By performing our past and present narratives on stage, and accounting for moments where the script was outside of time as well as when it reflected not yet realized desires, *That Power* became a queer world-building project full of “potentialities” suggesting queer utopia (Muñoz, 2009). Through the doing of queer performance the play was, as Muñoz (2009) so accurately describes, an antinormative performance of queer citizenship of “embodied and performed queer politics [offering] glimpses into an ensemble of social actors performing a queer world” (p. 49). This minoritarian queer world-building contests the majoritarian public sphere, insists on the “minoritarian subject’s status as world-historical entity,” is both theatrical and quotidian, and “transports us across symbolic space, inserting us in a coterminous time when we witness new formations within the present and the future” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 56).

One of the key reasons Muñoz’s theory of queer futurity links so well to this research is that it is concerned with an imperfect, unfinished yet concrete queer utopia to come that can only be suggested, instead of the abstract utopias that are commonly understood to be paradise. Because utopia is actually in flux, Muñoz relies on glimpses of “potentiality” within cultural performances to see the future and “if we consider performance under such a lens, we can see the temporality of ... utopian performativity, which is to say it is a manifestation of a “doing” that is in the horizon, a mode of possibility. Performance, seen as utopian performativity, is [intrinsically] imbued with a sense of potentiality” (p. 99). It is worth defining potentiality, as it is exactly this potentiality which I believe *That Power* aspires to. According to Muñoz, the distinction between possibility and potentiality is key, in that

possibilities exist...within a logical real...which is within the present.

Potentialities have a temporality that is not in the present but ... in the horizon, which we can understand as futurity ...it is something like a trace. ... Reading for potentiality is scouting for a “not here” or “not now” in the performance that suggests a futurity. (p. 99)

Consequently, queer utopia or queer futurity is the “not here” of potentiality, simply a non-prescriptive, unfinished, and ideal future space and time outside of heteronormativity that “permits us to conceptualize new worlds...[and] offers us a critique of the present...by casting a picture of what can and perhaps will be” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 35). *That Power* aims for this “potentiality” or glimpses of the future in the present, through, in part, bearing witness to the past (Oliver, 2001). Additionally, there are moments of potentiality cast throughout the script, some of which are intentional, and others which only now upon reflection do I see suggesting a queer future.

It should be said that some of the most startling moments in the play also surprised us as actors. There is the use of the doorway, which was simply to be an ethereal black door giving us an entrance that was not from the wings. I had trouble in rehearsals remembering when I needed to close the door. And then, serendipitously in the performance, it seemed that certain characters closed the door on our lives when they left, or we closed the door on them, but other characters like our parents appeared and the door stayed open. This slip conveyed the possibility for relationship with those for whom the door stayed open during the scene. It just so happened that on opening night (which is the performance provided in the video archive) the door stayed open for all the right people with whom we both hope to continue in relationship.

Other aspects of the script and performance were more clearly planned. For example, the representation of Kali and Jesus who formed a subcommittee focused on the queer religious phenomenon on earth. Here we sent our Gods on a journey to witness our stories and to negotiate a friendship (a nod to our own relational journey). Their proclamations about us offered affirmations to all queers, and their empathy offered us a way back into those faiths in the future. We also chose to have them address the audience and break the fourth wall at the end to suggest that we all need to learn more about queer religious others and recognize the strength offered in relationship-building across difference.

One final flash of utopian potentiality is the moment when Manchari and I pour our kollum powder together at the very end of “Home” (p. 90). “Home” itself is a call to the future, to us, and to the audience, to help us imagine where we might belong, and who we might be in the midst of wreckage and potential. As Moraga (2011) puts it so articulately, “there is no home, I learned, except what we build with a handful of others through a tenacious resistance to compromise” (p. 6). When we declare, while pouring our kollum together that “We are that power” (Paranthahan & Brower, 2018, p. 58), we are looking to a “previously unimaginable future” together (Pryor, 2017, p. 9). We are declaring that we are no longer going to be victims of “ethical loneliness” where as survivors of trauma, the violence remains unnamed and unrecognized. We are no longer unheard witnesses abandoned by humanity (Prior, 2017). What our imagined and possible futures might look like together is unknown, but we end with collective potentiality where we began with collective trauma.

### **Archiving Trauma and Futurity**

*“Archives shift. Truths change. Memory fails. Time slips” (Pryor, 2017, p. 4).*

Queer performance, queer relationality, queer trauma, queer futurity, and queer archives are wrapped up in time, but time is beholden to their queerness. As I’ve explained briefly earlier in this discussion, when time is queered or experienced queerly in performance “time slips” occur because time is allowed to misbehave and be deviant, giving it the opportunity to “move backward, lunge forward, loop, jump, stack, stop, pause, linger, elongate, pulsate, slip” (Pryor, 2017, p. 9). Time must slip to remind us of the violence of linear history and what we have called progress, so that it can

beckon the spectator away from the monolithic experience of time as a machine marching ever forward and into a subaltern landscape of slanted knowledge, where traumatic injury is visible and another world is possible. Time slips pull back the curtain on systemic forces of injury, allowing them to be validated as real in the public forum that is live performance. (Pryor, 2017, p. 9)

I see time’s ability to slip as a direct challenge to the traditional archive, or at least the usual heteronormative way of thinking about the archive as the gathering of moments or events in time that have already passed which remain in some original form in stasis in some sort of preservation scenario. This type of archive is curated by privilege, often inaccessible, and operates on straight time, where time (moments of time deemed important enough to preserve) is frozen to suit the needs of the archivist.

With a critical view of straight time and this type of archive, Pryor (2017) links heteronormative time and heteronormative cultural production to the reason the archive is predominantly a source of state power and a reification of norms that erase or fail to

acknowledge queer trauma. She argues that both the archive and the archivist are sick, perversely looking to order time, and story normatively, looking for clear beginning, middle, and end. In contrast to this sick archivist, Pryor's work, alongside Cvetkovich's (2003) which creates a new way of valuing cultural production by curating an archive of feelings, and Rothberg's (2009) work, which introduces memory as multidirectional, are archival interventions. They queer how we think about archives, memory, and time. These thinkers reframe how an archive is valued and constructed, whether by using emotions and personal memory as criteria for archival inclusion (Cvetkovich, 2003), or by proposing that memory and archive are not only indefinite resources, but that memory is a public subject and space that is open to continual reconstruction (Rothberg, 2009). Building on these thinkers, I believe *That Power* is also an intervention into a sick archive. The current performance and script gesture toward escaping this terminal diagnosis because of the queer relationality, queer trauma and queer futurity embedded within, which work to subvert straight time. However, there is no avoiding the fact that *That Power* is still destined to become (part of) an archive that is this thesis, and this unearths a challenge to our response-ability and address-ability to our past and future selves represented in the script/performance (Oliver, 2001).

Though we are incredibly proud of our work, the version of *That Power* in this thesis is stuck in the moment prior to Ari's transition, something Ari has been undergoing for almost a year at the time of this writing. For myself, it deals with a moment of crisis that was occurring during the fall of 2018: Pastor Kwyn's impending death. Now, a year after his passing, this moment is something I have mostly come to terms with, when at that time it was much more significant and destabilizing. There is no denying that this version of *That Power* reflects a very specific moment in time because of the memories

we unearthed and how we assembled them. Ari has already authored new scenes to replace those that had only begun to articulate experiences he wants to share in the next version. I nevertheless value placing *That Power* within the body of this thesis as findings for the script to live in its very first unedited / un-dramaturged iteration that captures a specific temporal moment of performance working through trauma. I also believe that no performance of witnessing and working through trauma is ever fully complete, so to add it to any archive is to believe its offerings in its current form are enough of a contribution. Additionally, Ari and I continue to have the ability to birth an entirely new version of the show—we will always have that power.

Oliver (2001) states that every testimony that is made visible in live performance shows the “psychoanalytic truth, or the truth of performance” and to avoid misrepresentation—one must continue to “live through witnessing” (p. 92). There is no doubt in my mind that as Ari and I move forward in our friendship and develop the script we are committing to continuing to live through witnessing. For *That Power*, I want to invoke these ideas to suggest two things: (a) that the show must continue to be performed in order for us to continue living through witnessing these inarticulable moments that come alive only in performance, and (b) that since living through witnessing continues to perform the paradox of bearing witness to our own oppression and trauma, we can rewrite the script in order to testify to the multiple moments in the future where our inner witness is re-constituted. Living through witnessing should also suggest that the testimony can change as the one testifying regains agency over aspects of their experience (Oliver, 2001).

### A Permeable Transitional Archive

As I mentioned above, including the script/performance as findings for this research means I am acutely aware that there is a certain finality to the script and performance video that involves indefinite public access. So, I have a request to my readers: that you see this version of *That Power* as unfinished, knowing now, because I am telling you, that it *will* remain permeable and in transition in response to its co-creators despite its inclusion in this thesis and despite any independent or professional production that may come. I want *That Power* to be a permeable transitional archive of queer futurity. Permeable in that it is always open to its creators' revisions, transitional because any changes will always shift the meanings and learnings. That's not to say *That Power* shouldn't be produced and published; on the contrary, I would like that very much as I believe it is a meaningful cultural product that contributes to Cvetkovich's (2003) archive of feelings.

What I am proposing is that despite any production (that could have multiple lives and span many years following this model) it should also remain open to revision. I'm not talking about just keeping the script in development until it becomes the absolute best version of itself ready for professional production and then followed by publishing and royalties.<sup>26</sup> I'm talking about treating each version as a meaningful cultural product, without requiring that once it has been mounted or staged in that iteration, that the show has lived a full life and must retire to the archive. This means I hope the show might continue to be reborn differently on stage in response to the growth of the lives it

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<sup>26</sup> This is the straight time of theatre production in a heterocapitalist world where we are often bound to seek profit off our cultural products, or if not profit, status in order to be given the space, funding or belief we have the capacity to continue to create and produce "relevant works."

represents. If the script remains open to future changes, the archive remains permeable to future performances<sup>27</sup> as various realizations reverberate into our own lives. I don't think this is a model for every play, but I believe it suits narratives containing non-fiction testimony of lives that are still in progress, lives that are still impacting one another.

Ahmed (2014), in her book *Willful Subjects*, speaks of her search to gather an archive of willfulness, defining an archive as “following a depositing rather than finding what is deposited” where she is not asking what willfulness is but instead what willfulness is doing (p. 17). If we follow *That Power* as a cultural trace or deposit of the queer lives of trauma and futurity, we can see a temporal moment that existed in the script / performance and that makes its own contribution to a wider queer archive of feelings (Cvetkovich, 2003). Archived in this way, it is only a trace or deposit, a permeable transitional thing that affords its creators a chance to subvert that version of itself. That way, the essence and form of *That Power*, like our lives, remains fluid, always moving into potentialities, always permeable to new learnings and new insights, that impact even how we re-member our past and hope for certain futures.

More than pointing to potentialities, this permeable transitional archive is a synonym for an unfinished imperfect utopia (Farrier, 2013; Jones, 2013), that which lingers on Ari and my queer horizons of futurity (Muñoz, 2009) gifting us the infiniteness to write tomorrow what we cannot dream today. Materializing futurity through content, form, and cultural production, *That Power* is a seed of reversal and the desire

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<sup>27</sup> *That Power* is already materializing its own exciting queer future outside of this thesis research. Through grants awarded by the Ontario Arts Council (recommended by Suitcase In Point, Tottering Biped Theatre, and Green Light Arts) the script is receiving professional development in Toronto with playwright / dramaturge Diane Flacks. The show has been programmed for a premiere performance at Suitcase In Point's annual In The Soil Arts Festival in June 2020 at Oddfellows Temple in St. Catharines, Ontario.

within it germinates in the soil of traumatic experience guiding each moment of transformative growth toward unknown queer futures of flourishing. This seed of reversal has no best before date, but it must be allowed to grow and bend through the short seasons of a life.

## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

There is no time to deal with “trauma” and “memory” in a heterocapitalist culture defined by rapid progress and (re)productivity. There is, however, such time in performance. Always already a place out of time, always already exceeding the present, theater, dance, and performance have the capacity to create new temporal worlds—in which queer rather than straight time is the structuring structure of the event, and where seemingly “settled knowledge” can be disrupted and transformed. (Pryor, 2017, pp. 78-79)

Perhaps this conclusion should be titled “re-visiting,” as I don’t believe there are many more conclusions to draw, only visits. If there are two words that can gesture to what I hope is represented in this thesis, and in the diverse fields of theatre, trauma, futurity, religion, relationship, and queerness, they are Pryor’s (2017) words: “disrupted and transformed” (p. 79).

### Disruption and Transformation

I have talked at length about trauma. Trauma causes disruption in lives, altering futures and relationships. The disruption and transformation I want to draw out here is that which comes from re-visiting and working through trauma within research. Disruption in *That Power* was a tool for transformation. Working to put our narratives together and create a new world in theatre is disruptive to heteropatriarchal forces of oppression and transformed the way we understood our own power and location, affording us a new citizenship as queer world-builders. This thesis is in turn disruptive and transformational: in its format, disrupting typical academic expectation, and in its resistance to prescribing conclusions to the script, performance, and consequently this research. Disruption undoes certainty and comfort but embracing disruption as generative leads to new forms or trans-form-ation.

### **Re-Visiting the Research**

As I noted at the start of this thesis, the catalyst for this research was my experience touring my semi-fictional, autobiographical play *oblivion*; an experience that built a foundation for this work by revealing areas for growth. *oblivion*'s limitations fueled the initial proposal for this research, which was intended to build on the social justice work *oblivion* initiated while extending its scope to examine religious discrimination and exclusion of LGBTIQ2S+ persons through a wider interfaith, feminist, anti-racist lens. This research also provided a space to explore and recognize my under-theorized experiences of privilege and homonormativity stemming from heteropatriarchy's compromise to accept assimilated forms of queerness that are cisgender, White, and non-subversive. Most importantly, this research was an opportunity to take account of the greater systemic forces compounding religious anti-queer discrimination in Canada. It was a way to recognize and gain agency through an aesthetically queer "politics of subversion" (Farrier, 2013, p. 50) that had to be first for Manchari's and my benefit. While our capacity to shift the broken systems of our religions and religious communities was minimal, our ability to transform our own understanding of belonging within or without those systems was essential.

I began the research with the following questions:

1. How does this performance mobilize queer trauma through relationality?
2. What difference does it make to place Manchari's and my stories in conversation?
3. How does this dialogue shape an intersecting analysis about race, gender and faith?
4. What, within this process, enables queer futurity?

5. What does a theatre creation model add to this research?

I want briefly to revisit each question based on the discussion and conclusions present in the reflection above.

Manchari's and my stories in conversation create a theatrical landscape that is completely original, giving birth to relational potentialities for queer self-reflection that are as unique and diverse as we are. Our stories together suggest that though we have been differently and inequitably impacted by structural violence, through theatre we were capable of re-presenting those stories in ways that attempted to break through those divisions and imagine futures that were more equitable. Our stories together suggest that oppression and different positionalities cannot predict the power or the potentiality of friendship.

Our dialogue, in the creation process and within the script and performance, shape an intersecting analysis about race, gender, and faith through their very existence as minoritarian stories of resistance (Moraga, 2011) that foreground subjectivities rarely explored in conversation. More than that, this dialogue is given form through witnessing, gesturing toward reparations beyond recognition that present solidarity as collaboration and whole-body embodiment of each other's narratives.

The research model of critical narrative inquiry leading to theatrical performance is built on long term relationships, where research questions and results are co-created and co-authored, thus hoping to develop a structure for more equitable and just power structures from the beginning. However, different positionalities made the research process riskier for Manchari, and only in continuous negotiation and relationship building, did we begin to find our way into supporting each other in telling our stories

and wishing for better futures. A key piece of this was my beginning to come to terms with owning more of my privilege and power both in creation and within the script.

Any activity could have been a collective goal to work together on, but theatre creation using our own words and our own bodies and leading to a public performance with a deadline gave us: (a) an urgency to create; (b) a mode of communication that was a shared interest and mode of creation we were familiar with; (c) a toolkit of aesthetic and embodied experiences to draw on that could only be theatrically re-presented; (d) a context to take our voices back by requiring our literal voices and subjectivity and agency; (e) all of the above, allowing us to take back power by stepping into the roles of our past selves with our present knowledge; (f) a need for each other as scene partners, accomplishing something that would be impossible for either of us on our own; and (g) a live testimonial form that resists easily being archived.

*That Power* is a site of multiple queer futurities, while also suggesting forms of queer relationality. This movement towards futurities is also an archive that renders moments of trauma visible as available for re-embodiment and re-placement through aesthetics of refusal and intervention. Here the seeds of reversal ignite imagination of a more just world and provide a performative index to a greater archive of feelings—a healing balm for a sick archive. This script/performance as archive must remain transitional and permeable—focusing always on means and not ends. In this way *That Power* is a cultural product of evolving personal and social significance to both co-creators, providing a relational intervention that is also unfinished, and which acknowledges that queer relationality is always in flux.

I have discussed at length how *That Power* engages with themes of queer trauma, queer relationality, queer futurity, and queer archives, but when I think of this research,

those are only the academic offerings, while the script/performance are only the cultural products. None of these are the most important result of this project. The result of this research is love. Love for Ari, someone whom I could have loved upon meeting elsewhere, but never could have foreseen loving because we have birthed something that will forever link us and spur on our collaboration for years to come. This love is the result of a shake-up, a disruption in straight time, that is leading (yes, still present tense) to my transformation.

### **A Future Worth Desiring**

Manchari and I entered the research with visions of what I am calling “holy queer origin,” believing that our religious communities are broken, but that we ourselves are virtuous—and asking how we might gain more agency in the midst of trauma. It was this desire for futurity, which is generative and hungry for change and seeking answers through knowledge and relationship, that fuelled this project. We longed for queer normativity and queer relationality within our respective faith traditions and coalitions, for racial justice that could transcend the political-socio-economic, race, and faith boundaries that have kept us apart. This is a picture of desire-based research, where desire is “exponentially generative, engaged, engorged ... not mere wanting but our informed seeking... both the part of us that hankers for the desired and at the same time the part that learns to desire. It is closely tied to, or may even be, our wisdom” (Tuck, 2009, p. 418). I believe that in this research it was our collective trauma that provided a portal to access this wisdom, just as Cvetkovich (2003) proposes that a “focus on trauma serves as a point of entry into a vast archive of feelings, the many forms of love, rage, intimacy, grief, shame, and more that are a part of the vibrancy of queer cultures” (p. 7). We desired and longed against the grain of our collective and individual traumatic

experiences and our working through gestured toward a queer horizon of vibrant possibility. The desire was not a future in spite of our trauma, but a future because, against, and beyond it.

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