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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

SANTA CRUZ

**PRODIGAL KNOWLEDGE: QUEER JOURNEYS
IN RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR BORDERLANDS**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

HISTORY OF CONSCIOUSNESS
with an emphasis in FEMINIST STUDIES

by

Karen Ann deVries

June 2014

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ABSTRACT

Prodigal Knowledge: Queer Journeys in Religious and Secular Borderlands

Karen deVries

How might feminists better inherit worlds produced by the modern method of dividing knowledge into religious and secular, sacred and profane? While many moderns pledge allegiance to one sphere or the other, the complicated heritage of various feminisms includes a few theorists who are queerly positioned in relation to this Great Divide and its discursive apparatus. To elaborate this queer positioning, this dissertation introduces a Prodigal Daughter figure who belongs to a kin group of feminist figures intent on producing “situated knowledges.” Neither properly religious nor secular, Prodigal Daughter has a fractured sense of belonging to her heritage of Western Christian Realism and its religious and secular offspring. Honing in on this logic through a reading of the Christian Parable of the Prodigal Son, the Prodigal Daughter disidentifies with dominant Christian and Secular knowledge formations and gathers up stories regarding knowledge about religion in the contemporary United States.

Juxtaposed to phallogocentric stories and modes of knowledge production, the dissertation draws on personal memoir to enact a counter-narrative of a permanently Prodigal Daughter. Unlike the straight and narrow path of a Pilgrim’s Progress conversion narrative, Prodigal Daughter charts her path in a wayfaring mode seeking worldly knowledge and wisdom. Part I is oriented around belonging, knowledge, and

authority in the Christian Reformed Church in Churchill, Montana. Formed in this crucible, Prodigal Daughter experiences an increasingly fractured sense of belonging and ventures out into the secular world. Part II traces Prodigal Daughter's knowledge seeking endeavors in several allegorical places, including: the Lands of Liberal Learning (Chapter 3), a Pluralist Pantheon (Chapter 4), the Bluffs of Betrayal and Registers of Difference (Chapter 5), and eventually, the Quagmire of Critique (Chapter 6). The dissertation concludes with Signposts to Feminist Worldly Wisdom where Prodigal Daughter acquires the language to help her and her queer kin flourish in a world structured by discursive regimes that reproduce subjects and conditions of possibility through markers of religious and sexual identity.

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To study knowledge is to unravel the threads that connect seemingly bound objects, practices, and individuals. In the web of connections that make up Prodigal Knowledge, crucial conversations and friendships with colleagues in and around the History of Consciousness Department at Santa Cruz loom large. I am forever grateful to Ulrika Dahl, my road buddy for two decades, for introducing me to the richness of Santa Cruz and its knowledge worlds. Gillian Goslinga, Sandra Koelle, Gerwin Gallob, Lindsay Kelley, Sha LaBare, Krista Lynes, Natalie Loveless, Harlan Weaver, Jonathan Weiss, Martha Kenney, Surya Parekh, Scout Calvert, Jasmine Syedullah, and Cassie Ambutter have been not only colleagues but also friends, sharing humor, inspiration, frustrations, and a strong desire to create better worlds.

In my early graduate years, M. Christine Rose, Eva S. Hayward and our feline companions – Trixie, Bathory, and Neptune – made up my family and taught me a serious love of monsters. I first began thinking through the figure of the Prodigal Daughter during our lively kitchen table conversations at 1458 Hyde Street. The phosphorescent spark we named *Kongii Hatefulopagus* burns brightly in my memory and throughout the many revisions in our cumulative texts.

Beyond the Santa Cruz academic world, the support of a handful of friends holds together the fibers of my being. During my leave-of-absence from graduate school, I recuperated from a series of losses. The friendship and wisdom of Eugenia Funk and Sara Rushing helped me find my voice and fall in love with my life again. Linda Unger not only helped me train for a 500-mile bicycle ride, find contract work

in the midst of the Great Recession, and tune into my health, but she also excelled as a dissertation coach, offering timely reminders to breathe and stay focused. Juliet Heizman taught me that “there is no guilt in yoga” as she introduced me to a life-changing practice of awareness and alignment that does away with any mind/body dualism. Jennifer Boeder, my soul sister since college, graces my life with uncensored sarcasm, music trivia, righteous indignation, serious compassion, and love of the dance. Her friendship lays down a deeply satisfying groove for living well in the world.

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appreciation for Donna Haraway, my adviser. In both her everyday life and in her scholarship, she provides nourishing models for being in relationship with the world. She taught me to be a “both ... and” kind of girl, to be a critic and a caretaker, to be a lover and a fighter, and to passionately engage while also detaching. Rusten Hogness and Ms. Cayenne Pepper played shadow supporting roles on my Dream Team. Rusten’s insights regarding courage and writing struck a generative chord that continues to reverberate. Cayenne took me on walks and kept me company during some of the most difficult and rewarding phases of the writing journey

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My last and most important acknowledgement is reserved for my mother, Ardi DeVries. Early on, she taught me all the important lessons about being prodigal as she forged her own wayfaring path. She gives me strength to rise up and pass the wisdom on. Our adult friendship is one of the greatest treasures of my life. The stories that follow are dedicated to her and to prodigal daughters everywhere.

Introduction

Prodigal Siblings and Children of the Future

Tables for feminist philosophers might not bracket or put aside the intimacy of familial attachments; such intimacies are at the front; they are ‘on the table’ rather than behind it. We might even say that feminist tables are shaped by such attachments; such attachments shape the surface of tables and how tables surface in feminist writing.

– Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*

Children of the future, remember that I did my best.

– *Antonia’s Line*

This incarnation of the story of the Prodigal Daughter begins in the middle of the Christian season of Lent a few years ago. I had been reading and rereading portions of *Augustine and the Fundamentalist’s Daughter*, a memoir by Margaret Miles. The daughter of a fundamentalist preacher, she became a professor of Historical Theology at Harvard Divinity School for 18 years before becoming Dean of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. Her memoir chronicles her changing conceptions of self and world as she journeyed away from her fundamentalist father’s house and into the larger world and the halls of higher education.

As I mulled over the similarities and differences between my journey and hers, I received a text message from Taylor, my then 9-year old niece, alerting me that she was ready for one of our frequent video chats. She lives in Churchill, Montana – the same conservative, evangelical, Dutch immigrant, Christian community I was raised in. I live in Santa Cruz, California where I study discourses

about religious and secular knowledge formations. I was pleased that she had received my earlier message relaying the information that I wouldn't be available during our usual chat time because I was going to an evening lecture.

Immediately after we established video contact, Taylor informed me that she was in the middle of studying for a Bible test. She attends Manhattan Christian School, the same school I attended from Kindergarten through the 12th grade. Curious, I asked which verses she was memorizing. She zoomed her video camera phone in on a piece of paper with the text from Proverbs 2:6-8.

For the Lord gives wisdom,
and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.
He holds victory in store for the upright,
He is a shield to those whose walk is blameless,
For he guards the course of the just
and protects the way of his faithful ones.¹

“Aah. That’s a good one,” I said. The Old Testament books commonly grouped under the category of “wisdom literature” are some of my favorites. She swung the camera over to another piece of paper that said something about Solomon’s temple – the camera shook too much for me to get a good look – and mentioned that she would be tested on this as well. I was about to ask more questions about the test when her eyes and ears perked up. She heard her favorite song playing on the Wii in the family room and ran out to dance with her two younger sisters, all the while sending me shaky video of their performance. I smiled as I realized that they were dancing to Carly Rae Jepsen’s song, “Call Me Maybe,” a catchy pop song from the previous summer.

¹ Bible references throughout this dissertation are from the *New International Version* published by Zondervan Bible Publishers in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

I smiled partly because I enjoy seeing “the girls” – the term my entire family uses to describe the three of them – dance. When I was her age, neither the church nor the school allowed dancing. I also smiled because I’m aware the video associated with the song has a homoerotic subplot, and I appreciate increased visibility of non-normative sexualities in mainstream media.² The girls, however, were unaware both of historic prohibitions against dancing in their community and of potentially subversive representations of sexuality in the video. For one thing, they were not watching the official video but were playing a dance game with a soundtrack. They also don’t know what homosexual or gay, much less homoerotic, mean. They certainly don’t know that Auntie Karen is queer, which is to say that no one has talked to them about my sexual desires and lovers. They seem to have a good grasp on the fact that I’m different from what passes for normal in their world as they frequently say things like, “Auntie Karen, you’re weird!” I usually respond by opening my eyes wide, smiling, and saying, “I know. Isn’t it awesome?!” Then we all laugh and continue enjoying each other’s company.

The version of Christianity my brother and his immediate family subscribe to adheres to the doctrine that a good Christian ought to love the sinner but hate the sin. Homosexuality, in this tradition, is “a condition of disordered sexuality that reflects the brokenness of our sinful world.”³ They are members of the Christian Reformed

² The video revolves around the female singer’s interest in a young man who appears to be her neighbor. She sings her desire for him to “call her maybe” while he, shirtless, washes his car. Though he is friendly with her throughout, the video concludes with him giving his phone number to one of the young men in the band.

³ Their church’s official position does not use this exact phrase but spells out the equivalent sentiment in its statement on homosexuality: “Homosexualism (that is, explicit homosexual practice), however, is

Church in North America (CRC). Mike, my only sibling, is two years younger than me. We both grew up in the same institutions – Manhattan Christian Reformed Church and the K-12 Manhattan Christian School – that share a parking lot on the top of the aptly named Churchill. These institutions, nine miles south of the small town of Manhattan, Montana have anchored a Dutch immigrant community of farmers since the early 1900s.⁴

In our late teens, my brother and I both left the church and, to varying degrees, the community. One could say that we were prodigal youngsters. In a Christian landscape, descriptions of young adults as prodigal invoke the Biblical parable of the prodigal son as narrated in the 15th chapter of the Gospel of Luke. This teaching, attributed to Jesus, unfolds as follows. A father has two sons, and the younger asks for his inheritance, a bold and scandalous move. The father complies. This son then leaves for a distant country where he squanders his inheritance, we are told, in wild living and runs out of funds as a famine seizes the land. He finds work feeding pigs, animals that would have been particularly offensive to his Jewish sensibilities, yet is hungry enough to yearn for their food. At his lowest point, he thinks of his father's hired men, who have food to spare. He decides to return home, repent to his father, and ask for work as a hired hand.⁵ The father sees the son returning from a distance,

incompatible with obedience to the will of God as revealed in Scripture. The church affirms that it must exercise the same compassion for homosexuals in their sins as it exercises for all other sinners.” See expanded version at <http://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/position-statements/homosexuality>, accessed May 24, 2014.

⁴ Manhattan Christian School is officially non-denominational but, in practice, is primarily supported by the Christian Reformed Churches in the area.

⁵ The language the parable uses to describe this decision, translated either as “he came to his senses” or “he came to himself,” is usually interpreted as a decision motivated by genuine repentance. However,

is filled with joy, and runs out to meet him. The son immediately repents and declares himself an unworthy son. Instead of treating him as one of his employees, however, the father treats him like royalty by giving him new garments (signifying a return to a position of authority) and kills the fattened calf (the animal reserved for extraordinary occasions) to feed the community in a celebratory feast. The older brother returns from working in the field, inquires about the music and dancing that has already begun, and learns that his brother has returned. Angry, he refuses to join the festivities. His father goes to talk with him, and the elder son points out the injustice of the situation: he has been a dutiful son and has never received so much as a young goat to celebrate with his friends whereas the prodigal brother, who squandered his inheritance with prostitutes, receives the fatted calf and a party. The father explains, “you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”⁶ The parable ends there.

This parable, first recorded approximately 100 years after Jesus’ lifetime, is enmeshed in the fabric of Christianity. The plot line, which follows a lost sinner who realizes the error of his ways, repents, and is welcomed back into the fold by a loving God (the Father), sums up one of the main structures of Christian conversion

the language is vague enough for some to read against the grain of Luke 15’s general emphasis on repentance. This alternative reading explores the possibility that the prodigal son’s decision to return might be an act of cunning opportunism thus rendering the Father’s love even more surprising and unwarranted. See, for example, David Buttrick, *Speaking Parables: A Homiletic Guide* (Kentucky: John Knox Press, 2000), 199-204. While my reading addresses the theme of repentance as part of the structural logic of the parable, it but does not require an investigation into the Prodigal Son’s intentions.

⁶ Luke 15:32.

narratives.⁷ In fact, liturgical traditions⁸ frequently include the story as part of their prescribed readings during Lent, a season focused on prayer and repentance. While Christian theologians have debated whether Jesus' parables should be read as allegories concealing hidden mysteries or as simple stories conveying self-evident lessons, renderings and retellings of the Prodigal Son story have flourished over the centuries. It was one of the most frequently represented parables in medieval artworks, and this trend has continued to the present day.

Some of the more famous renderings inspired by the story include Albrecht Dürer's 1497 *Prodigal Son Among the Swine*; Rembrandt van Rijn's 1637 *Prodigal Son in the Brothel* and his 1660 *The Return of the Prodigal Son*; and early 20th century sculptures of the prodigal son by both August Rodin and Constantin Brâncuși. Performance adaptations of the story include an 1884 cantata by Claude Debussy; a 1929 ballet that brought together the talents of Sergei Diaghilev, George Balanchine, and Sergei Prokofiev; and a 1968 opera by Benjamin Britten. In my lifetime, the story has been taken up in song lyrics by the heavy metal band, Iron Maiden; the roots reggae band, Steel Pulse; the punk band, Bad Religion; and the hip

⁷ While the literature on Christian conversion (by practitioners and by those who study them) is extensive, Christian understandings of it are always based on scripture. For a thorough analysis of the similarities and differences between different discussions of conversion in the New Testament, see: Ronald D. Witherup, *Conversion in the New Testament* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1994), 44-56. Witherup notes that Luke's interest in conversion as reconciliation and forgiveness is most apparent in the three parables regarding the theme of lost and found (of which the Prodigal Son parable is the third). Additionally, Luke makes more explicit connections than Matthew and Mark between conversion, repentance, and the forgiveness of sins.

⁸ Here, I use liturgical traditions to indicate those denominations whose member churches follow a centrally standardized order of events, including scripture readings, during religious services. For example, congregations of the Episcopal Church all follow the liturgy set up in *The Book of Common Prayer* so that on the 4th Sunday of Lent every 3rd year, all Episcopal homilies will read and reflect on the parable of the prodigal son.

hop artist, Kid Rock. The story has been reincarnated in several films including: Lana Turner as seductive pagan priestess in *The Prodigal* (1955); an evangelical apocalypse film, *The Prodigal Planet* (1983); and most recently, a documentary, *Prodigal Sons* (2008), about a transgender woman's high school reunion in Montana. In contemporary literature worlds, Toni Morrison and Marilynne Robinson, two Pulitzer-prize winning authors have recently penned retellings of the parable in the context of 1950s race relations in the United States where they flesh out markedly different understandings of what "home" and "return" look and feel like for different characters.⁹

These prominent cultural references barely hint at the parable's ubiquity within contemporary, explicitly Christian worlds. To gain some sense of the story's presence, consider an amazon.com search through the Christian Books and Bibles category which returns over 7,000 books with "Prodigal Son" in the title. In my research quests for prodigal influence, I also encountered *Prodigal Magazine*, a Christian online publication that is "passionate about helping people live and tell good stories" in accordance with the understanding that "God designed you with interests, talents and passions as signposts to point you in the right direction. Living a good story means paying attention to these signposts."¹⁰ The editors understand the power of a good story, and they have capitalized on one of Christianity's most famous stories.

⁹ Marilynne Robinson, *Home* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).

Toni Morrison, *Home* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012).

¹⁰ <http://www.prodigalmagazine.com/>, accessed February, 2014

With a simple architecture, the parable outlines three figures who chart different courses in life and encounter various sorrows in their relationship to the world and their desires vis-à-vis belonging and nourishment. The parable form invites listeners to interpret their lives and imagine specific details through the structures of the story. Given its themes and the material force of Christianity during the last two thousand years, perhaps it is not surprising that the parable has had such a long life.

The parable of the prodigal son and its influence are explained in detail here because the story functions as both a referent and point of departure for themes that unfold in the pages ahead.¹¹ Given the Christian world that constituted us, the description of my brother and myself as prodigal teens signifies our initial waywardness in leaving the Christian fold while also pointing to larger societal concerns, specifically the tense relations between individuals, families, and communities who identify themselves variously as religious, particularly Christian, and those who understand themselves as secular, or to use the language from a recent Pew Research Center poll, the “nones.”¹² To finish setting the stage for the dissertation, a return to my story is in order.

In the decades since I left home, I have made numerous return visits to the Churchill community as it is inextricably bound to my birth family. Unlike the Prodigal Son figure, however, I have preferred my wanderings in the world, despite

¹¹ A few other scholars have also used the parable to structure their texts. See, for example: Kevin Mills, *The Prodigal Sign: A Parable of Criticism* (Eastbourne, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2009). Mills reads the text through a deconstructive lens as he theorizes the relationship between contemporary literary critic, those who have come before, and the market demand for originality.

¹² “Nones” are those Americans who do not identify with any religion. This demographic is growing quickly and is now at record levels with one-fifth of the US public and a third of adults under 30 currently religiously unaffiliated. <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/this>

occasional hardships, over a return that ends with conversion and reabsorption into the patriarchal authority structure and phallogocentric power structure that characterizes the Churchill community. I use the clunky term, phallogocentrism, deliberately and technically here to invoke a host of arguments put forth by the deconstructionist tradition. While phallogocentrism refers to the privileging of the masculine in relations of power, logocentrism references the central mode of Western philosophical thought which posits a logos or cosmic reason as a universal cause ordering the world. In dominant Christian traditions, this logos is seen as the self-revealing thought and will of God. Phallogocentrism then references the combination of both phallogocentrism and logocentrism. My understanding and critique of phallogocentrism is informed by explicitly feminist engagements with and beyond the deconstructive tradition, particularly Rosi Braidotti's analysis put forth in her text, *Nomadic Subjects*, where her figure of the nomadic subject embodies a feminism that refuses the normativity of the phallogocentric regime and instead identifies points of exit and other modes of subjectivity.¹³ Nomadic subjects and their kin in the Society of Undutiful Daughters understand themselves and the world as made up of indeterminate, interdependent, material and semiotic entanglements which are constantly in process.¹⁴

¹³ Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 63-171.

¹⁴ The figure of the Undutiful Daughter and the Society of Undutiful Daughters are incarnations of Rosi Braidotti's nomadic subjects. Rosi Braidotti, "Preface: The Society of Undutiful Daughters," *Undutiful Daughters: New Directions in Feminist Thought and Practice*, ed. Henriette Gunkel, Chrysanthi Nigianni, and Fanny Söderbäck (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), ix-xix.

Instead of completely avoiding my community of origin, I have enacted a warier form of return, a return marked by and attuned to difference. Though I have maintained connections with my family, I have remained unrepentant in my refusal to take on the logic of the CRC which would require characterizing my disposition as depraved, disordered, or unworthy. On rare occasions, I have re-entered the physical church building to attend funerals and weddings, and I revisit the school gym to hear my nieces sing at their yearly Christmas program. In and beyond these encounters, however, I inhabit positions of fractured belonging which, from the perspective of the church, might variously be named heretic, blasphemmer, or apostate. While each of these names possesses honorable and rich traditions, I have longed for and imagined another figure, a figure not contained by the Law of the Father, a figure who tells stories and provides wisdom to enable flourishing outside of phallogocentric community formations. In attending to this longing, the figure of the Prodigal Daughter has become my companion. She is committed to learning to inherit the world differently.

My brother, on the other hand, not only returned to both church and community, but he also embraced them with unexpected enthusiasm. He currently holds an elected position on the School Board and is an active member of the Christian Reformed Church. He regularly attends a weekly men's Bible study group and participates with his daughters in the local GEMS (Girls Everywhere Meeting the Savior) club. His story mimics the plotline of the Christian parable of the Prodigal Son, and he labors to reproduce, in his own life and in the lives of his children, worlds

constrained by an evangelical understanding of the same storyline. After years of studying religion, I am deeply aware that people have different beliefs about the world, and I am able to engage in studies of different social formations with “passionate detachment,” with one exception: I struggle to remain detached in encounters with Churchill and my brother’s family.¹⁵

When the topic of queer sexualities creeps into our seemingly innocuous conversations, it feels like my being and much of what, who, and how I love are at stake. Bishop Gene Robinson, the first openly gay bishop of the Episcopal Church (and of all historic Christian episcopates), articulates the mild version of my allergy. He argues that the problem with tolerance resides in the fact that no one wants to be merely tolerated. To be tolerated is to be regarded as suffering from an undesired but inescapable illness. In his recent book, he uses cancer as an operational metaphor: “One might acknowledge the existence and pervasiveness of cancer, and learn to tolerate its presence, but would never affirm it as something to be desired or respected.”¹⁶ He acknowledges, however, that tolerance trumps intolerance and violence but reports that being on the receiving end of it nonetheless feels “abusive and life denying.” Beyond mere allergy, my ideological immune system is acutely

¹⁵ I gleaned “passionate detachment” from Haraway who develops the terminology in conversation with Annette Kuhn. Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Perspective,” *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 192. Annette Kuhn, *Women’s Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982).

¹⁶ Gene Robinson, *God Believes In Love: Straight Talk About Gay Marriage* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 49.

aware that discourses of tolerance frequently mask a desire to eradicate that which they claim to put up with.¹⁷

Recently, the rise of the more gay-friendly Millennial generation and concomitant changes in evangelical formations have given me hope that this demographic of Christianity might change its stance. This past year, the popular evangelical author and founder of the Mars Hill Bible Church, Rob Bell, announced that he has changed his mind about homosexuality and now endorses marriage equality.¹⁸ Through the miracle of social media, one can find a number of evangelical preachers, theologians, and lay people working to, as one of them puts it, “repair the breach between the Church and the LGBT community.”¹⁹ While seeds of change have taken root in places, large-scale change remains elusive. The evangelical news source, *Christianity Today* reports that while “a 2013 Pew Forum survey noted that nearly three-quarters of Americans think that legal recognition of same-sex marriage is ‘inevitable,’ evangelicals remain largely opposed to redefining marriage, with less than a quarter favoring the policy.”²⁰ After the Supreme Court of the United States recently struck down a key part of the Defense of Marriage Act, the Executive

¹⁷ For an analysis of this desire to eradicate made manifest in surplus killings of queers, see Eric Stanley, *Queer Remains: Insurgent Feelings and the Aesthetics of Violence*, Dissertation, History of Consciousness Department at University of California/Santa Cruz, 2013.

¹⁸ Podcast of the March 13, 2013 event at San Francisco’s Grace Cathedral where he made this statement available here: <http://www.gracecathedral.org/cathedral-life/the-forum/detail.php?fid=182>, accessed May 24, 2014.

¹⁹ The quote is from the About section of CanyonWalker Connections’ Facebook page. The organization, which is based in Reno, Nevada, was founded by self-described evangelical, Kathy Baldock. According to her statement on the organization’s web page, in 2004, she believed that she would not see any LGBT people in heaven. After six years of “ministering in this messy spot,” she changed her views and became an advocate for full inclusion. <https://www.facebook.com/CanyonWalkerConnections/info> and <http://canyonwalkerconnections.com/about-2/>, accessed May 24, 2014.

²⁰ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/topics/s/same-sex-marriage/>, accessed May 24, 2014.

Director of the CRC released a statement reminding people that the Church teaches that “homosexual activity is sinful but the orientation is not.” This statement also announced that the recent synod had established a committee “with the goal of teaching us how to be more pastoral to homosexual people.”²¹

The CRC statement triggers the aggravated self-recognizing immunological rejection of “love the sinner, hate the sin” discourse. My immune system counters that there is nothing wrong with, disordered, or shameful about diverse sexual orientations, and the classification of them as either sins or as any other kind of undesirable social relation is an egregious problem that urgently needs to be rectified.²² I have arrived at these truths in my journey of overcoming my internalized shame, in large part an effect of dominant Christian understandings of sexuality and sin, about both my body and my queer desires. In my wisdom literature, it is a sin to exacerbate and reproduce ideologies that generate alienated and oppressive understandings of the flesh and its heterogeneous desires.

I first encountered this understanding of sin when Professor Anne Carr, a feminist Roman Catholic nun and theologian, encouraged me to read the work of Dorothee Soelle during my time as a graduate student at the University of Chicago Divinity School. A German feminist theologian who came of age during the

²¹ <http://www.crcna.org/news-and-views/boot-reflects-supreme-court-decisions>, accessed May 24, 2014.

²² See Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (New York: NYU Press, 2003). Their analysis of the problem with liberal discourse is compelling, but the constructive part of their book is less so (but certainly provocative) because it relies too heavily on constitutional law as a method for bringing about change. They propose an interpretation of the U.S. Constitution in which they rethink the “free exercise” of religion clause as a way to think about the free exercise of sex.

Holocaust, Soelle developed a post-Auschwitz theology in which God is not outside of history but rather shares in the ongoing sufferings of the world. She articulated a profoundly different understanding of Christianity than the version passed down by the Church Fathers, which, at least since Augustine, has understood fleshy materiality, particularly female and feminized bodies, as the original source of sin. Rejecting this lineage and in dialogue with Marxism as taken up by liberation theologians, Soelle articulated a political theology that understands sin in terms of alienation whether it be of the worker from her work, from her fellow humans, or from her physical environment. Impelled by a strong love for creation, Soelle's theology rejects normative heterosexuality and sees intimate relationships for all sexual orientations as opportunities to love and encounter the world more fully.²³ Carr and Soelle, *Prodigal Daughters par excellence*, taught me how to inherit differently as they echoed the Psalmist who reminds me, "I am fearfully and wonderfully made."²⁴

Despite my convictions, in the 21st century after Christ, these particular truths regarding the nature of love and sexuality are at stake in the friction between my brother's thoroughly religious world and my markedly secular but nonetheless Christian knowledge world.²⁵ Notwithstanding our shared heritage, there are oceans of different literacies, experiences, and allegiances between me and my brother. Getting on together is the name of our game, and it is fraught with difficulties. While Mike and I are able to dance around our differences most of the time, the friction

²³ Dorothee Soelle with Shirley A. Cloyes, *To Work and To Love: a Theology of Creation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). See especially chapters 5, 6, 10 and 11.

²⁴ Psalm 139:14a.

²⁵ Subsequent chapters explore meanings of secular and religious in the context of modernity in conjunction with my "secular Christian" perspective.

between our knowledge worlds can result in strained communications if not outright splitting.

A report of a family altercation illustrates some of the difficulties of difference and provides an occasion for the kind of ethical thinking that preoccupies my Prodigal Daughter. A few years ago, my dad and stepmom and I went to my brother's house for a Christmas Eve dinner. During a family conversation about my nieces' recent visit to a neighbor's farm, Taylor asked why cows chew their cud. My dad, who grew up on a dairy farm, said he had heard speculation that, "according to evolution," there had been a time when cows needed to take in food more quickly than they could digest it as they competed against faster animals for scarce resources. Curious to know more about my dad's sources, I started to ask him where he had learned this. Although evolutionary biology has never been taught in Churchill, my parents had modeled curiosity without taking strong positions for or against evolution. I had assumed that Mike had continued to walk this line, so I was completely taken aback when he suddenly interjected, with some agitation, that the problem he had with evolution is that it is always taught as truth.

Unlike me, Mike had gone to public school for his last few years of high school. Whereas my high school rebellions revolved around disputes with teachers and preachers regarding politics and knowledge, Mike's rebellions were more behavioral. He had been involved in an altercation with the principal who caught him smoking cigarettes on school property during school hours, an offense that might have ended in suspension or worse. My parents, however, were annoyed by what they

perceived as the overly authoritarian posturing of the Churchill establishment which seemed to unfairly target Mike and a few other boys. Enraged when she received a phone call from the school, mom drove to the high school and told the principal off with enough righteous indignation to rival Jeannie Riley's tone in the song, "Harper Valley PTA." She withdrew him from Manhattan Christian School on the spot, and within a week, they had completed the paperwork to enroll him at the local public school. I was away at college during all the drama, but telephone conversations with both mom and Mike included play-by-play accounts. Although Mike was at first apprehensive about public school, he quickly adapted, made friends, and told me frequently how much better it was.

In high school, I had considered transferring to a public school because I thought I might receive a better education there. I had gone so far as to visit the public school to see how it felt, but, shy and overwhelmed by the hundreds of students when I was used to my tight-knit group of 17 classmates, I stayed at Manhattan Christian. In retrospect, I should have been braver. I envied Mike's public high school education, particularly what I presumed to be his exposure to evolutionary science which, in the years since leaving Churchill, I have come to trust as the most accurate understanding humans have developed regarding relationships between living things. So when he announced that he didn't approve of the way public schools teach evolution, I was both surprised and angered to learn that his return to the CRC fold included adopting a more conservative creationist perspective than we had grown up with. Almost involuntarily, I rolled my eyes.

Mike informed me that he saw the eye roll, and his tone advised me that he knew that I thought his position was ridiculous. This awareness seemed to fuel him further as he told me that, in fact, massive weather events could change landscapes in a matter of minutes, and that there was just as much evidence for creationism as evolution. He went on to talk about how all the evidence shows that the Earth is the center of the universe because “everything is moving away from us.”

I began to realize that he was taking this opportunity to repeat information he had no doubt gleaned from one of his frequent Bible study meetings at the non-denominational Grace Bible Church which he and several of his CRC friends attend regularly. Later, I would remember that, a few years earlier when I had been living in Montana, I had seen a brochure on his kitchen counter advertising a Creation Conference to counter myths in biology where a creation scientist would be doing a Q&A about a movie called *Darwinian Evolution: Religion of Death*.²⁶ Another time I had noticed a DVD jacket about “rampant misinformation propagated by ecological alarmists.”²⁷ At the time I had seen these resources, I had written their presence off as items his friends must have wanted him to look at but certainly not something he thought was true. Then I remembered a time when he and I had taken Taylor to the local Museum of the Rockies to see their world-class dinosaur exhibit. On the way into the museum and in what I thought was an engaging pedagogical moment, I had pointed to some birds flying overhead and told Taylor that they were living

²⁶The conference was organized by the Montana Origins Research Effort, a group organized “to learn about scientific support for six-day literal creation and the global flood of Noah’s day.” <http://creationsciencedefense.org>, accessed May 24, 2014.

²⁷The video in question was “Global Warming: A Scientific and Biblical Expose of Climate Change” put out by Answers in Genesis, Coral Ridge Ministries, 2008.

descendants of the dinosaurs we were about to see. Mike had glared at me and told Taylor not to listen to everything Auntie Karen says. I had been confused and a little hurt by his reaction, but I had never found an opportunity to follow up with him.

As I absorbed his words that Christmas Eve, layers of denial melted away, and I felt as if I finally understood the author of the Acts of the Apostles description of Saul's conversion as an experience where the scales fell from his eyes enabling him to see in clear and shocking detail.²⁸ Only, instead of seeing God in all his glory, I saw my brother as a fully interpolated member of an epistemological and ontological world that our parents inhabited the borders of, and that I had rejected. I initially left the CRC because I disagreed with the sexist interpretation of scriptures and doctrine. Embarking on a secular study of religion, I quickly came to see the Bible as a profoundly human text rather than as an absolute source of knowledge and authority which had been directly handed down from God. From my perspective, the CRC vision of the world is based on falsehoods that have been used to promote anti-materialist ideologies and are complicit both in the denial of human kinship with the planet and the denigration of female and feminized (e.g. non-white and non-heterosexual) bodies. Instead of two siblings at the dinner table together, we were on opposite sides of a Great Divide.

Reeling from Mike's revelation, I asked, "Do you really believe that?" He replied, "Yes, Karen. Six 24-hour days" as his right hand cut through the air repeatedly to emphasize each word. Then he said that it angers him that religious

²⁸ Acts 9:17-18.

perspectives aren't taught in public schools. I replied that, indeed, the world could use a lot more literacy about different religions, and I pointed out that evolution is taught as a theory whereas creationists teach their version as truth. He countered that, when he had attended public school, evolution had been taught as truth.

As Mike's words sunk in, and I began to understand that he was, in a sense, outing himself to me as a creationist, I realized that I was not prepared to defend much less explain evolution. It had been years since I read any Darwin, and I had never officially studied biology after high school. If I had known this would be an issue, I might have prepared myself by reviewing materials at the National Center for Science Education or UC Berkeley's Understanding Evolution web site.²⁹ Both the issue and my brother's position on it had caught me off guard. But this was not a conversation that could just be abandoned. Feelings were running high around the table – at least for the adults. The kids had left to sort out the gifts we would be opening later.

My stepmother demanded to know if anyone had ever actually proven evolution. She had been my second grade teacher, and her creationist perspective was not surprising. Choosing my words as carefully as adrenaline allowed, I said that I was aware of significant research which I was not very knowledgeable about but which pointed towards all kinds of connections between species and that in fact, new species were being discovered all the time. She said, "OK, scientists are discovering new species, but is there any proof that humans evolved from monkeys?" I took a

²⁹See <http://ncse.com/> and <http://evolution.berkeley.edu/evolibrary/about.php>, accessed February, 2014.

deep breath and said, “There’s a lot I don’t know about evolution, but what I do know is that the evidence against strict creationism is incredibly compelling.” She asked for an example, so I brought up carbon dating as evidence that the world is much older than strict creationist accounts suggest. Mike then replied that the only way to know for sure how old something is would be to stand there and watch it but that no one had lived long enough to do this so there was no way of knowing. The audacity of his requirement for a personal witness to chronicle the history of the Earth incensed me, and I lashed out, “If you’re so opposed to science, why don’t you just go live like the Hutterites or the Amish.” Earlier, we had been talking about a family at a local Hutterite colony that my dad had befriended, and he had used the word “superstitious” to describe some of their beliefs. Regretting the hostility that accompanied my words almost as soon as they were out of my mouth and feeling ashamed of myself for resorting to an *ad hominem tu quoque* form of disagreement, I quickly suggested that we change the subject.

The conversation did more than surprise me. It also upset me. I felt vulnerable and angry at the same time. My heart was beating fast, my face was hot, and tears were on their way. I excused myself and went to the bathroom where I began to sob uncontrollably as I asked myself why this conversation upset me so much? What did it matter to me if we didn’t agree on the nature of life and the universe? Partly I was upset that Mike had become so much more of a Biblical literalist than either of our parents had been. I had thought that his re-entry into the Churchill community was primarily for social reasons, and I had not realized that he had become a true believer.

But why was this realization affecting me so much? After years of studying religion, I am hyper aware that people in different cultures understand themselves and their worlds very differently. And I already knew that my brother's community is an incredibly conservative place where creationism is par for the course. What were all these intense emotions I was feeling? I looked in the mirror and surmised that I might be experiencing a bodily register of the hostility my brother and his community felt towards my way of being in the world.

I went out into the living room to participate in the Christmas Eve gift exchange, but I could not stop crying. I mumbled something about needing to get going because I did not want my mom to be alone on Christmas Eve, even though I knew she was fine. I needed to breathe some fresh air, feel safe again, and figure out what I was feeling. I drove away, cried some more, and processed my emotions with my mom. Over a decade ago, she had left the Churchill community after my parents divorced and her friends stopped calling. Perhaps those friends judged her for the divorce, or perhaps they just didn't know what to say. At any rate, she understood the fractured sense of belonging I articulated, but she was surprised that it was all hitting me so hard. I was too.

By the next morning, I began to get a handle on my reaction, which I knew was out of proportion to the perhaps not so shocking revelation that my brother was a creationist. I understood that I was feeling a domino effect of implications associated with this realization. Several years prior, I had fallen on hard economic times and had taken Mike up on a short-term job offer in Montana on one of his construction

projects. The Christmas Eve discussion gone awry reminded me of a brief exchange we had had on the job site. He had reminded me that the Bible says that homosexuality is a sin and asked me how I responded to this. I had replied that the Bible says a lot of things that Christians ignore. I offered to loan him one of my favorite books on the topic, *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, but he replied that reading was the last thing he had time for. In the moment, I read his question as a sign of possible openness, but now I was sure that, if such openness had ever existed, it had disappeared in inverse proportion to his increasing immersion in the evangelical CRC world. It was finally clear to me that, in matters regarding sexuality and religion, he was not open to hearing my interpretations much less agreeing with my conclusions.

A few days later, my mom, in an effort to understand conflicting reports, informed me that Mike and his wife felt like I had attacked them, in their home, for their beliefs and their decisions about how to raise their kids. I felt bad that I had been hostile, and I regretted my eye rolling condescension even as I recognized that these unimpressive behaviors resulted, largely, from my sudden realization that the kind of belonging and connection I had ached for was never going to happen. They were never going to celebrate me. I had lashed out from a position of being freshly wounded. That Christmas Eve, I stopped denying all the ways, over several decades, the directions my life had taken left me feeling increasingly unloved and unaccepted by the community that spawned me. I finally grieved. It had been a long time coming.

Before I returned to Santa Cruz, my brother and I did our version of patching things up. I felt too vulnerable to talk to him about our Christmas Eve altercation. He didn't bring it up either but suggested we go to a movie together. Aware that one of the few things Mike and I have in common is a sense of humor, I picked a holiday American Comedy film, *Parental Guidance*. Eventually, sitting side by side, we laughed as we watched Billy Crystal and Bette Midler play grandparents navigating generational differences around parenting practices when they suddenly find themselves taking care of their grandchildren for a few days. The film's focus on family life as full of good intentions and human failings requiring grace and humor might have helped us laugh together.

With time and in conversation with my feminist community, I began to see that, on a raw Christmas Eve, everyone at my family dinner table was at risk.³⁰ The Prodigal Son's heteronormative evangelical creationist world and the Prodigal Daughter's queer ecumenical secular evolutionist world are, in significant ways, hostile to each other.³¹ They each hold fast to their true and right perspectives as they judge their sibling's perspective to be rife with false doctrines. Stranded on opposite sides of this Great Divide, none of us, least of all me, knew how to engage each other in a way that acknowledged our deep differences while still valuing our

³⁰ Donna Haraway, another Prodigal Daughter *par excellence*, initially made me aware of this possibility. The insights that have followed this recognition run throughout the dissertation.

³¹ Here, I am building on David Hollinger's distinction between ecumenical (instead of the old term, "mainline") and evangelical Christianity. David Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013). While there is nothing necessarily or inherently queer or secular about ecumenical Christianity, I have come to occupy, simultaneously, these positions, and it has been my experience that ecumenical Christianity is quite friendly to the kinds of queer worlds I want to flourish.

connectedness. My incarnation of the Prodigal Daughter confronted the reality that the Prodigal Son had no interest in being persuaded to her position, thus rendering the mode of conversion impotent. Indeed, apprehending this reality was part of the revelation.

Had she known battle lines were about to be drawn, she might have prepared herself, in the mode of critique, with knowledge to counter or debunk his position. As a matter of principle, the Prodigal Daughter ought to have been better armed to engage in the critical mode, but as a matter of strategy, she knows critique is a highly ineffective tool for getting on together. Perhaps it is better that the sharp knife of critique was not available that evening as it may have prevented her from realizing that she needed to find another way to encounter and recognize her Prodigal Sibling. I have said that the Prodigal Daughter is a figure who tells stories and provides wisdom to enable flourishing outside of phallogocentric community formations and that she is committed to learning to inherit the world differently. Now I also add that this project requires learning modes of engagement beyond conversion and critique. They have turned out to be ineffective if not completely useless in helping to navigate an ethical relationship with her Prodigal Sibling. I suspect that Prodigal Daughters need to learn to connect with Prodigal Siblings over shared concerns even as we learn to share stories and perspectives without aiming to convert each other. The question of what this looks like is a story in process with rhizomatic possibilities for openings and foreclosures at every turn. This question along with the tensions and possibilities

found in the triangulated relations between epistemology, ethics, and politics run throughout this dissertation.

My Christmas Epiphany, in all its fresh messiness, grief, and emergent possibilities for communication – real touch in storied worlds – without the lust to convert, was only a few months behind me on the Lenten day that I watched Taylor and her sisters learning to choreograph their bodies in relation to the music, the dance game, and each other. While the sadness associated with my fractured sense of belonging runs deep, my return-without-celebration is not without nourishment. On a more recent visit home, Mike and I avoided the difficult dances and opted instead to take the girls on a hike through some of our favorite mountain trails. We enjoyed each other’s company as our feet shared passage through landscapes we both love. For me, the hike also provided a beginner’s lesson on learning to be kin without the imperatives of conversion stories.

Although I have never felt more than an inkling of desire to have children of my own – partly out of concern that the Earth is excessively strained by the current and growing human population – I revel in Aunthood. Taylor’s texts and phone calls invoke smiles whose existence is usually overshadowed by my persistent melancholy. Watching the girls dance, I was reminded of just how much joy their mere existence brings me. I don’t know why this is the case or how long it will last, but I bask in the rays of delight on those rare occasions when it finds me. They too are “fearfully and wonderfully made.”³²

³² Psalm 139:14a.

When the song ended, Taylor, the iPod, and I returned to her room to continue our chat. I told her that I couldn't talk much longer because I needed to get going to make it to the lecture on time. "What's a lecture?" she asked. I paused for a minute to come up with an analogy from her world. "Well," I said, "it's kind of like when you go to church on Sunday, or ... actually it's more like when you go to your weekly chapel at school, except we don't sing songs. We listen to someone give us a message that helps us think about life." There are some significant differences too, but I decided to stick with similarities for the moment. I started to explain that I was excited about this particular lecture because my advisor, Donna Haraway, would be speaking, but our conversation was interrupted again. Chloe, the family's year-old Labrador, joined us, licking the iPod. Taylor dissolved into giggles while simultaneously yelling, "Gross! Chloe, stop it!" I smiled again, thinking that dog interventions were a fitting way to transition from a video chat with Taylor to attending a Donna Haraway talk.³³

After Taylor and I said our goodbyes, I looked over the information about the evening event entitled, "Shifting Worlds."³⁴ The phrase is an apt description of my journey away from Churchill into a lifelong love affair with the wild world. Here I borrow Deborah Bird Rose's nomenclature where "the wild is a refusal to submit to the conventional limitations of Western thought, including a refusal to submit to

³³ In her recent work, Haraway has turned her attention to dogs and other non-human animals. See: Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003) and *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

³⁴ The event in question was part of the UCSC Anthropology Department's Emerging Worlds speaker series, and it staged a conversation between Donna Haraway and the British anthropologist, Marilyn Strathern.

illusions of certainty, to dualisms and to human-centrism, among other limitations.”³⁵

Shifting worlds also conjures Haraway’s notion of worlding – i.e. the ongoing indeterminant and contingent processes, for all living and nonliving entities, of making and remaking ourselves, our worlds, and the conditions of possibility for future flourishing and suffering. In her texts, Haraway simultaneously tells stories about and performs this kind of worlding by writing “into a more vivid reality a kin group of feminist figures.” Figures, she explains:

collect up hopes and fears and show possibilities and dangers. Both imaginary and material, figures root peoples in stories and link them to histories. Stories are always more generous, more capacious, than ideologies; in that fact is one of my strongest hopes. I want to know how critically to live both inherited and novel kinships, in a spirit neither of condemnation nor celebration. I want to know how to help build ongoing stories rather than histories that end.³⁶

Informed and inspired by Haraway’s motley crew and their storytelling practices, this dissertation writes into more vivid reality the Prodigal Daughter figure outlined in this introduction. Figures, Haraway insists, “cannot be literal and self-identical. Figures must involve at least some kind of displacement that can trouble identifications and certainties. Figurations are performative images that can be inhabited. Verbal or visual, figurations can be condensed maps of contestable worlds.”³⁷ While memoir pieces are woven throughout my analyses, the Prodigal Daughter figure collects up more individuals, stories, hopes, and fears than those particular to me as she converses with other figures who want to change the way we

³⁵ Deborah Bird Rose, *Wild Dog Dreaming: Love and Extinction* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 12.

³⁶ Donna Haraway “Introduction: A Kinship of Feminist Figurations,” *The Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1.

³⁷ Donna Haraway, *Modest Witness@Second Millennium.FemaleMan©_Meets_OncoMouse™: Feminism and Technoscience*. (New York: Routledge, 1997), 11.

tell stories about religious and secular formations. Haraway shares wisdom gleaned from her feminist community that applies here, namely, “it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what concepts we think to think other concepts with.”³⁸

Along these lines, Haraway introduced me to a powerful mode of storytelling, Ursula K. LeGuin’s carrier bag theory of fiction.³⁹ LeGuin tells the reader that in Paleolithic, Neolithic, and prehistoric times, 65-80% of the food humans needed was gathered, a task that took approximately 15 hours per week, leaving a lot of time for the bored and restless to “slope off and hunt mammoths.”⁴⁰ No doubt, she imagines, stories about thrusting spears into titanic mammoths were more interesting than tales of wresting multiple oat seeds from their husks. However, these hunting stories of Man the Hero have now been told *ad nauseam*: “We’ve heard all about all the sticks and spears and swords, the things to bash and poke and hit with, the long, hard things, but we have not heard about the thing to put things in, the container for the thing contained.”⁴¹ Here, LeGuin is referencing the theory that the first cultural device was a container, a sling or net carrier, to hold gathered products. Instead of focusing on Hunter-esque stories that reduce narrative to conflict and end in death – e.g. about “how the mammoth fell on Boob and how Cain fell on Abel and how the bomb fell on Nagasaki and how the burning jelly fell on the villagers and how the missiles will

³⁸ Donna Haraway, “Sowing Worlds: a Seed Bag for Terraforming with Earth Others,” *Beyond the Cyborg: Adventures with Donna Haraway* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013) 138.

³⁹ Ursula K. LeGuin, “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places*. (New York: Grove Press, 1989), 165-170.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 165.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 167.

fall on the Evil Empire, and all the other steps in the Ascent of Man,” the carrier bag theory of fiction proposes a model of storytelling where the point of the story is to hold nourishment for the living. Carrier bag stories attend to the “useful, edible, or beautiful” things you might put in a basket, homes and places as containers for people, and medicine bundles as containers for healing. LeGuin is quick to note that the carrier bag mode does not preclude tales of aggression, but instead of functioning as the center of the story, these activities are “just damned things you have to do in order to be able to go on gathering wild oats and telling stories.”⁴²

Prodigal Knowledge: Queer Journeys in Religious and Secular Borderlands is a carrier bag for the Prodigal Daughter as she labors with her kin both to “hollow out a place to flourish” and to keep the stories going.⁴³ The urgent task of getting on together on a planet with conflicting knowledge worlds provides a larger context for gleaning wisdom from disparate sources. Deborah Bird Rose is my guide in this endeavor as she also seeks meeting points between what she values in religion and what she loves in the world. Rose practices this weaving in her quest to articulate an ethics for decolonization and taking care of unexpected country during a time of extinctions and exterminations that mark the current era of the emergent Anthropocene as unprecedented human activity is significantly altering conditions of possibility for living on Planet Earth.⁴⁴ It is my hope that these stories might provide

⁴² Ibid, 168.

⁴³ Haraway, “Sowing Worlds,” 139.

⁴⁴ Rose, *Wild Dog Dreaming*, 16. See also: Deborah Bird Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonization* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004). Donna Haraway, “Speculative Fabulations for Technoculture’s Generations: Taking Care of Unexpected Country,” *Australian Humanities Review* Issue 50, 2011.

nourishment for fellow Prodigal Daughters and any other Wayfaring Strangers who are curious and hungry for better knowledge in the storied worlds known as Life on Earth. Most especially, may they feed the Children of the Future.

PART I

A Godly Heritage in the Gallatin Valley

We are in Amsterdam, Montana. Here, in close mutual proximity, live a group of people who clearly value the preservation of a history that ties them all to the Netherlands. They have mostly married within their own group; they are not just neighbors, they have also become relatives. The older people especially have an uncanny grasp of the maps of kinship relations, strangely reminiscent of what is common in preliterate societies. Moreover, as a group they are aware of their own separate identity; in conversations with them you are struck by the fact that they refer to outsiders as ‘Americans,’ as if they had not been Americans themselves for a long time. The great majority of them have joined a church that spans the entire continent but whose members are almost exclusively of Dutch descent. They live scattered across the fertile hilly area in the western part of the Gallatin Valley, with no clear center of settlement remotely similar to Dutch villages or small towns. Yet, to someone hovering over the area on a Sunday morning, the community would become clearly visible. It is like a spider’s web in the early morning light of an autumn day. Like so many dewdrops, an army of cars converging on the church would show the structure of the social web – its center, its connecting points, its reach.

– Rob Kroes, *The Persistence of Ethnicity*

Feminist objectivity makes room for surprises and ironies at the heart of all knowledge production; we are not in charge of the world. We just live here and try to strike up non-innocent conversations by means of our prosthetic devices, including our visualization technologies.

– Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges”

During the winter of 1988, Rob Kroes, an American Studies Professor at the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands, spent several months in Montana’s Gallatin Valley researching and getting to know the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) Dutch immigrant community members whose families have made the area their home since the 1890s. The first epigraph of Part I of this dissertation is taken from the book that grew out of his research. His book reports that a few years prior,

he had been traveling northwest on Interstate 90 through south central Montana when an exit sign for “Amsterdam/Belgrade” caught his attention. He acted on his curiosity and drove west, following the signs from the town of Belgrade toward Amsterdam through a wooded area where he crossed the Gallatin River and then encountered fields of farmland rolling gently on either side of the road for several miles before culminating in a gradual, two mile incline up a hill where he arrived at what used to be called the Holland Settlement and is now officially called Amsterdam-Churchill.⁴⁵ Observing a white church, Holstein cows grazing nearby, and a cemetery full of tombstones marked with Dutch names and engraved with Dutch words of remembrance, Kroes noted that if he could have blotted out the mountain ranges surrounding the Gallatin Valley, he would have thought he was in the Netherlands.

Intrigued and puzzled by what appeared to be a remarkable story of ethnic cohesion, Kroes later returned to learn more about the community in an effort to explore its history and to understand an instance of what he called “the persistence of ethnicity.” His project succeeds at both the historical and sociological endeavors. Attentive to dynamics of class and religion, he traces mid-19th century immigration patterns from the low country northern provinces of Friesland and Groningen to a web of communities scattered across the Great Lakes and northern plains regions of the United States⁴⁶ before zooming in to outline relations specific to Montana which

⁴⁵ Amsterdam-Churchill does not have a municipal government but has enough population to be identified as a census designated place by the United States Census Bureau. In the 2000 census, the population was 727. In 2010, the population was over 1,000.

⁴⁶ Today, one can find CRC communities throughout the United States and Canada. The most prominent kinship networks that formed the Churchill community of my youth loop back and forth between Grand Rapids, Michigan (home of CRC headquarters and two CRC colleges, Calvin College

he describes as a map “filled with ghostly windmills: spooky skeletons reminiscent of misfortune, despair, and failure.”⁴⁷ He refers here to many immigrants’ failed attempts to homestead in places that, despite promises made by railroad officials and land developers, proved to be unfarmable due to hail and drought weather patterns. From there, he paints a more fine-grained picture of the Amsterdam-Churchill community, which became home both to those who had failed elsewhere and to others in the Dutch immigrant network in search of land that could provide better resources for new families, as a rare example of economic success and ethnic cohesion.

While there is a significant body of literature on the Christian Reformed Church in North America, Kroes’ thoroughly researched book – combining interviews, participant observation, and archival work in both church and state records in Montana and in the Netherlands – is the only scholarly account of the Amsterdam-Churchill community to date.⁴⁸ Indeed, his book is a treasure trove of information providing a larger perspective than I had previously gleaned either as a child coming of age in this community or from my adult encounters with materials

and Kuyper College); Sioux Center, Iowa (home of another CRC college, Dordt College); Chicago, Illinois; Lynden, Washington; and Edmonton, Alberta.

⁴⁷ Rob Kroes, *The Persistence of Ethnicity: Dutch Calvinist Pioneers in Amsterdam, Montana* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 42.

⁴⁸ For recent literature on Dutch immigration patterns, the Reformed Church in America, and the Christian Reformed Church in North America, see the following: Hans Krabbendam, *Freedom on the Horizon: Dutch Immigration to America: 1840-1940* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009). Howard J. Wiarda, *The Dutch Diaspora: The Netherlands and Its Settlements in Africa, Asia, and the Americas* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007). Corwin Smidt et al., *Divided by a Common Heritage: The Christian Reformed Church and the Reformed Church in America at the Beginning of the New Millennium* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006). For the most thorough and wide-ranging studies of the Dutch in America, see the lifetime of scholarship by Robert P. Swierenga, Professor of History at Hope College in Holland, MI. His publications and his selected bibliography is available at <http://www.swierenga.com/pubs.html>

put together by the Churchill-Amsterdam Historical Society. While Kroes' historical data and narrative includes much of the same information collected by the Historical Society (e.g. names, dates, anecdotes, and photos), his descriptive and explanatory framework employs a more secular language of social science whereas the community-based Historical Society relies on a religious language of faith. Yet both perspectives produce knowledge about the community.

For example, the Historical Society prefaces a 1977 publication with the statement that the community's good fortunes are a realization of "God's blessings to us through [our forefathers] toil for success and their religious (goodly) heritage which has been passed on to this generation."⁴⁹ Assessing the strengths of the first pioneers, the same publication again uses the language of a Calvinist faith, which emphasizes human sinfulness and dependence on a mighty God, to make sense of the history of community and the ongoing heritage it produced:

Those first settlers were by no means sinless. Yet one must stand in awe of their fortitude and courage in the light of what they accomplished. One must stand in awe of the God who gave those struggling pioneers strength of mind and body to face what appeared to be unsurmountable odds; who gave them insight to see that in time, they would succeed; and who gave them faith – the greatest gift of all. For it was the 'faith of our fathers' that did indeed present us with a goodly heritage.⁵⁰

Kroes, on the other hand, understands the community as held together by a combination of both a shared religion and an ethnic consciousness.⁵¹ In other words, to make sense of the community, the Historical Society speaks in the religious

⁴⁹ Gallatin County Historical Society and the Churchill Amsterdam Historical Society, *A Goodly Heritage: A history of the Churchill and Amsterdam area of Montana*. 2nd edition (Churchill Amsterdam, Montana, 1989). Copy on file with author.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 19.

⁵¹ Kroes, 101.

insider's language which imagines a particular understanding of a male God as both authority and judge over all that occurs within his creation. Conversely, Kroes uses the tools of social science which, in this case, belong to the secular outsider's language that imagines religions, understandings of gods, and ethnic consciousness as aspects of human relations to, with, and in the world.

While volumes have been written both on ideal angles of vision for assessing insider and outsider perspectives in the study of religion⁵² and on the differences and similarities between religious and secular modes of knowing,⁵³ my queer feminist *Prodigal Daughter* is suspicious of this gendered Great Divide. Instead, she provides an analysis that traverses the borderlands between insider and outsider, religious and secular. She casts lots with Donna Haraway's figure of the Modest Witness who recognizes and participates in the public practice of producing knowledge with the understanding that all knowledge is radically, historically specific and contingent. Like the Modest Witness and her family of feminist figures,⁵⁴ *Prodigal Daughter* opposes all instances of what Haraway has named the "god-trick" – i.e. claims to possess transcendent knowledge or infallible perspectives – because such claims to possess infinite vision are illusions.⁵⁵

⁵² *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader*, ed. Russell T. McCutcheon (New York: Cassell, 1999).

⁵³ *Secular Theories on Religion: Current Perspectives*, ed. Tim Jensen and Mikael Rothstein (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2000). José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁵⁴ Haraway, "Introduction: A Kinship of Feminist Figurations," 1.

⁵⁵ Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," 189.

Although the term “god-trick” certainly denotes a strategy employed by practitioners of religions to authorize their perspectives, Haraway uses it to describe a move that has been deployed in non-religious realms, particularly the sciences, as well. In her essay, “Situated Knowledges,” Haraway critiques both the disembodied perspectives of those claiming to have universal knowledge and cynical relativist perspectives that all knowledge is constructed and therefore equally desirable.⁵⁶ To articulate a feminist mode of crafting reliable knowledge claims about the world, Haraway sidesteps both the absolutist rationalist (a view from everywhere) and the relativist constructionist (a view from nowhere) variants of the god-trick. In place of these authorizing maneuvers, she insists on the privilege of partial perspectives. Whether conceptualized through metaphors of vision or through theories of subjectivity, a knowing self is always partial, in process, never finished and therefore able to participate in the ongoing creation of knowledge with other partial perspectives about the worlds in which we find ourselves. Partiality characterizes all embodied, knowing selves whether they are marked as religious or secular, insider or outsider.

Built on the partial perspective of a queer feminist Prodigal Daughter who once called the Churchill community home, Part I situates both the Churchill community and the Christian Reformed Church within a history of Reformed Christianity and locates the CRC in a spectrum of conservative Protestant Christian formations in the United States. Refusing any god-tricks, Prodigal Daughter

⁵⁶ Ibid, 183-186, 195.

understands herself and her various communities as participants in a world organized by contingent, historical, semiotic, and material forces. She provides an accounting of one particular version of what “home” looks and feels like for those who are supposed to belong to but do not fit, or are torqued by, the structures of white, heteronormative, conservative Christian knowledge formations.⁵⁷ In search of wisdom for flourishing and non-innocent conversations which, as Haraway notes in the second epigraph of this chapter, are at the heart of all knowledge production, Prodigal Daughter learns to inherit the world faithfully.

In lieu of the Prodigal Son’s mode of inheritance which utilizes the god-trick to reproduce power relations and worlds which favor only those alleged to have a birthright in the phallogocentric order of things, Prodigal Daughter conceptualizes inheritance as an active engagement with the worlds and traditions that formed her even as she is committed to opposing and transforming the Prodigal Son’s life-denying practices.⁵⁸ The Prodigal Son aims to reproduce what Donna Haraway has termed the Sacred Image of the Same, a pithy reference to Enlightenment stories that are mediated by “luminous technologies of compulsory heterosexuality and

⁵⁷ Susan Leigh Starr and Geoffrey Bowker, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences*, (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1999), 26-28, 190-194. Starr and Bowker use the concept of torque to describe the “invisible anguish” of situations where lives are broken, twisted, or “torqued” by their encounters with classification systems.

⁵⁸ Donna Haraway. "Staying with the Trouble: Xenoecologies of Home for Companions in the Contested Zones." *Fieldsights - From the Editorial Office, Cultural Anthropology Online*, July 27, 2010, <http://www.culanth.org/fieldsights/289-staying-with-the-trouble-xenoecologies-of-home-for-companions-in-the-contested-zone>, accessed May 19, 2014. Through her reading of Jacques Derrida and Deborah Bird Rose, Haraway articulates a mode of inheriting the past in the present so as to age the future.

masculinist self-birthing.”⁵⁹ These blinding light stories, which flourish in both Christian traditions and contemporary secular technoscience cultures, deny the interdependence and diversity that actually defines and determines ways of life for all creatures. The Prodigal Daughter aims to diffract and queer established power relations in hopes of producing different and better possible livable worlds.⁶⁰ This notion of history as ongoing inheritance provides fertile ground for understanding Christian Reformed knowledge formations – specifically the authority structures that undergird them and the associated practices of faithfulness and truth telling they produce. Along the way, Part I identifies some of the origins of fractured belonging which are so often a hallmark of queer kinship. Part II then traces journeys through houses of higher education where the Prodigal Daughter encounters, relays, and reworks what counts as knowledge about religion as she searches for better modes of being in the world.

⁵⁹ Donna Haraway, “The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others” in *The Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 64-124.

⁶⁰ My understanding of the possibilities of knowledge relations that might mirror the Sacred Image of the Same and of diffraction as a method for doing knowledge differently is informed by my reading of Donna Haraway’s *Modest_Witness*.

Chapter 1

Christian Reformed Belonging in Churchill, Montana

The Gallatin River begins in the northwest corner of Yellowstone National Park and flows northwest through the Gallatin National Forest before winding through the Gallatin Valley on its way to joining the Jefferson and Madison Rivers at the Headwaters of the Missouri in Three Forks, Montana. In 1805, the Lewis and Clark expedition christened these rivers after powerful men in Washington, DC. The Gallatin pays homage to then U.S. Treasury Secretary, Albert Gallatin. Surrounded by six different mountain ranges,⁶¹ the Gallatin Valley currently has a population of approximately 90,000 people living on 2,606 square miles of land.⁶² During my formative years (1972-1990), the population was closer to 40,000.⁶³ At least half of Gallatin County's population lives in the town of Bozeman, a college town home to Montana State University, located on the east side of the valley floor at the base of the Bridger and Gallatin mountain ranges. From Bozeman, Interstate 90 follows the old Northern Pacific Railway on a northwesterly route as it encounters, at roughly 10 mile intervals, the smaller towns of Belgrade, Manhattan, and Three Forks. Revisiting Kroes' path, one can exit the Interstate at Belgrade and travel southwest to arrive at

⁶¹ These six mountain ranges are: the Absaroka Mountains, the Bridger Mountains, the Crazy Mountains, the Gallatin Mountains, the Madison Range, the Spanish Peaks, and the Tobacco Root Mountains.

⁶² Land area statistics from the United States Census Bureau: http://www.census.gov/geo/maps-data/data/docs/gazetteer/counties_list_30.txt, accessed April, 2014.

⁶³ Gallatin County Public Document population statistics available at: http://www.gallatin.mt.gov/public_documents/gallatincomt_plandept/Plans&Policies/GallatinCountyProfile2001.pdf, accessed April, 2014.

Amsterdam-Churchill which is 20 miles from Bozeman and 10 miles from either Belgrade or Manhattan.

Churchill names an area atop a knoll at the center of the old Holland Settlement where private homes cluster around two Christian Reformed churches, the private K-12 Manhattan Christian School, and the Churchill Retirement Home. Amsterdam indicates the region, about a mile and a half down the hill, that once functioned as a grain transportation stop on a long ago defunct spur of the Northern Pacific Railway. Amsterdam still hosts an automobile dealership, a K-6 public school, and two streets lined with homes. Halfway between Amsterdam and Churchill, one finds the Amsterdam Voluntary Fire Department, the Churchill branch of the Manhattan Bank, and Churchill Equipment (a family run farming equipment company started by my maternal grandfather and one of his brothers). The reference to Amsterdam, Montana in the title of Kroes' book no doubt advertised the theme of a Dutch transplant community in a manner reminiscent of the railroad companies' attention to cosmopolitan marketing when they named railway stops and towns after globally recognizable cities.⁶⁴ In my youth, however, it was more common to refer to the larger area inhabited by the Dutch community as Churchill, a practice I continue in these pages.

⁶⁴ Roberta Carkeek Cheney, *Names on the Faces of Montana: The Story of Montana's Place Names* (Missoula: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 2008), xii & xvii. For example, the town of Belgrade, MT was named by a Serbian investor who was a special guest on the Northern Pacific Railway for the ceremony to drive the last spike in 1887. Manhattan, MT was named by a group of New York investors who bought land in the area for their Manhattan Malting Company which transported grains via the railway. In Northern Montana, officials of the Great Northern Railroad chose town names such as Malta, Harlem, Dunkirk, Kremlin, Havre, Zurich, Tampico, and Glasgow by spinning a globe.

Indeed, Kroes understands the centrality of Churchill as the place that organizes relations in this community when he writes the last sentences of the aforementioned epigraph, “Yet, to someone hovering over the area on a Sunday morning, the community would become clearly visible. It is like a spider’s web in the early morning light of an autumn day. Like so many dewdrops, an army of cars converging on the church would show the structure of the social web – its center, its connecting points, its reach.”⁶⁵ Harkening back to my high school years which took place during the same period Kroes conducted his research, if one could have zoomed in closer on a Sunday morning, one might have observed my family in a brown diesel Mercedes making our way from the outskirts of Belgrade, where we lived and where my parents owned and operated a foreign car repair business, to Churchill. We would have traced the familiar route over the Gallatin River and through its surrounding woods to collect my paternal grandmother, Hendrikje DeVries, on our way.

Like many Churchill women of her generation, Grandma lived in a world governed by an ideology of separate spheres for men and women, and this meant that she never learned to drive. When I was 8 years old, my grandfather died, and she took a few driving lessons but quickly became frustrated and abandoned the endeavor. Her children made sure she had rides to church, to tea with friends, and to town to get groceries and do any other necessary shopping. The oldest grandchild living in the Churchill area and therefore the first to obtain a driver’s license, I frequently chauffeured her from one errand to another on weekends. In her thick accent (she

⁶⁵ Kroes, 13.

immigrated in her 30s), she kept me updated on news of all the relatives before telling me about her trials and tribulations keeping the deer out of her rose bushes, and we would discuss the latest adventures of Tigger, her orange tabby cat whom I, as a young girl, had named when his arrival coincided with my reading of A.A. Milne's books.

Returning to Rob Kroes' spider web imagery on a Sunday morning in 1988, from Grandma's house, we would have made our way to Churchill, joining the small fleet of freshly washed and waxed cars in the parking lot of the big white church. We would have been greeted at the door by another family belonging to the church and then met by an usher, always a young man, who would seat us in our usual spot on the right side of the sanctuary near the front under a kaleidoscope of dark green stained glass windows. Filing into the sanctuary in the conventional arrangement of women first, with wives and husbands sitting closely together, boys sitting next to fathers, and girls sitting next to mothers, I would have taken my customary place between my grandmother and my mother. We would have silently nodded greetings (exchanging a few whispers only if absolutely necessary) to the other families who routinely sat near us – the Alberdas, the Braaksmas, the Flikkemas, the Kamps, and the Vissers – while listening to the organist pump magnificent notes of praise from the grandiose, historic Hinners pipe organ located behind the pulpit in the apse.

My eyes might have been drawn to the Dutch words etched on the bottom of the stained glass windows near our usual location, "God is liefde" ("God is love"), "Emmanuel, God met ons" ("Emmanuel, God with us") and "Heilig, heilig, heilig is

de Heer” (“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord). Pondering these words as a child, I often wondered what exactly they meant even as they produced a sense of continuity with and a feeling of belonging to those who had passed down the traditions and truths that the Churchill community followed. Sitting in those comfortably sturdy wooden pews flanked by my mother and grandmother, I also felt a sense of reverence for, fear of, and obedience to the Holy Father God who, it seemed to me, was as present as he was distant in the sunlight streaming through the windows and warming my shoulders.

As the clock struck 10am, the organist would have stopped playing and the church bell would ring out the call to worship which might have prompted me to reflect on the inevitability of death both for myself and for those around me. On the first day of 3rd grade, I had attended my grandfather’s funeral in this church and had listened to the bell ring 75 times, once for each year of his life. My father had lifted me up to peer into the open casket and instructed me to feel how cold and stiff his father’s hands were. He wanted me to know what death feels like and to understand the finality of it. Nervous but obedient, I complied, and my trepidations were soon replaced by what would become an ongoing curiosity about the mystery of death. I watched my grandmother approach the casket and heard her tell my grandfather that she would see him again in heaven.

Sitting next to my grandmother as the bell organized our lives on Sunday mornings, I often thought of my grandfather’s cold hands as I wondered what the Kingdom of Heaven would be like, which of my relatives might be there, and how it might be different than the only world I knew. The pastor’s greeting would return my

thoughts to the living, and the liturgical reminder of human sinfulness and God's grace and pardon to the repentant would likely reinforce my awareness that my salvation, while extended to me by an all powerful God, also required my ongoing vigilance against the forces of sin, habits which I regularly prayed to God to help me cultivate.

A typical Sunday morning church service would have proceeded with a prayer to God asking him to grant us the "Spirit to rightly understand and truly obey your Word of truth. Open our hearts that we may love what you command and desire what you promise."⁶⁶ Additionally, the service would have included: a communal recitation of either the Apostles Creed or the Nicene Creed, announcements about and prayers for congregation members who were suffering in body or soul, a specially crafted short message to the younger children before they were sent off to age appropriate Sunday School classes, a reading from the Bible which would ground the sermon that followed, a collection of funds for church-designated missions, and enthusiastic singing of familiar songs from the faded blue *Psalter Hymnal*. Occasionally, we would witness infants receiving the sacrament of baptism, during which all of God's people promised to "receive these children in love, pray for them, help instruct them in the faith, and encourage and sustain them in the fellowship of believers."⁶⁷

A few times a year, the congregation celebrated the Lord's Supper, a communal sharing of bread and wine which, like most Protestant and Catholic

⁶⁶ Here I quote from the Christian Reformed Service of Word and Sacrament liturgy approved by the Synod of 1981 in *Psalter Hymnal Worship Edition* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1988), 975.

⁶⁷ *Psalter Hymnal Worship Edition*, 961.

variations of this central Christian ritual, includes statements of thanks to God, remembrances of Jesus's last meal with his disciples, reminders that he suffered and was crucified so that our sins might be forgiven, and songs of praise. In the Christian Reformed Church, only "fully confessing members" – i.e. those who have both been baptized and made a public Profession of Faith – are permitted to participate in the Lord's Supper. The year Kroes did his research, I would have been taking catechism classes designed to prepare me for making my Profession of Faith.

After the sermon, the morning worship service would have concluded with a prayer followed by a doxology, a short hymn of praise. Frequently, we sang all the verses of "Our God Reigns:"

1. How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of him
who brings good news, good news;
Announcing peace, proclaiming news of happiness:
Our God reigns, our God reigns.

Refrain

Our God Reigns! Our God Reigns!
Our God Reigns! Our God Reigns!
Our God Reigns! Our God Reigns

2. Oh, watchmen lift your voices joyfully as one,
Shout for your King, Your King;
See eye to eye, the Lord restoring Zion
Your God reigns, your God reigns.
3. Waste places of Jerusalem break forth with joy
We are redeemed, redeemed;
The Lord has saved and comforted his people,
Our God reigns, Our God reigns.
4. Ends of the earth, see the salvation of your God
Jesus is Lord, is Lord.
Before the nations he has bared his holy arm,

Our God reigns, our God reigns.⁶⁸

While the version of this song in the official *Psalter Hymnal* of the Christian Reformed Church only includes the first verse, we sang the additional three verses which the worship committee had typed up and pasted into our hymnals. Together, they set the text of the Old Testament promise, as recorded in Isaiah 52, of everlasting salvation for God's chosen people, to music.⁶⁹ It seemed to me that we sang this song louder than any of the others, and I recall at least one Sunday when the Pastor was so moved that he directed us to sing all the verses a second time. Of the many songs and sermons I absorbed in my youth, the repeated experience of singing this song – one voice in a tight-knit community of souls pushing our vocal chords to capacity while the pipe organ's tubular-pneumatic valves turned air into music as if it was the breath and voice of God magnificently and gloriously guiding his people – structured the feeling of belonging to a covenantal people.

The vibrations from the hymn would have been echoing throughout the sanctuary as the pastor raised both of his hands above his head and bestowed the benediction on us: "The Lord bless you and keep you; The Lord make his face shine down upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace. Amen."⁷⁰ This familiar benediction sealed us as those whom the almighty Father God, in his infinite mercy, had redeemed just as our communal singing of the

⁶⁸ *Psalter Hymnal*, 195-196.

⁶⁹ More comprehensive versions of the hymn include an additional four verses (placed between the first and second verses listed here) which enact a standard Christian salvation history that weaves Isaiah's prophecy of a savior in the first verse with the additional verses relaying the New Testament story of Jesus as suffering servant who fulfills prophecy.

⁷⁰ Numbers 6:24-26.

doxology exemplified our variation of the Reformed tradition displaying what one Reformed scholar, Lynn Japinga, describes as a “strong sense of self-righteousness.” I felt what Japinga describes: “We alone are left. God chose us. God preserves us, and we need to preserve our identity. We are God’s elect and ought to remain pure and isolated. The world is sinful; we are saved.”⁷¹ I belonged to these people, and we belonged to God.

Thus far, I have provided a tour of Churchill and reenacted a typical Sunday morning for a Daughter of Churchill while also introducing some of the affects of belonging engendered by her knowledge regarding her place both in the community and in the larger Kingdom of God. Like all children, my incarnation of the Prodigal Daughter understood herself and her world through the knowledge made available to her by her culture, knowledge that conveyed truths or accurate claims about the realities of existence. Many years later, she would learn that the etymological roots of the English word, “truth,” can be traced to a botanical noun denoting trees and products made from wood. The semantics of a tree’s wooden qualities were extended to connote solidity, durability, steadfastness, and trustworthiness in the lexical moves from “tree” to “troth” and “trust” and then to “truth.”⁷² What one understands to be

⁷¹ Lynn Japinga, “Fear in the Reformed Tradition” in Amy Plantinga Pauw and Serene Jones eds., *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 17. The women writing in this volume are all Reformed scholars working out of feminist traditions as they work to differently inherit Reformed theology. They all belong to more “mainline” Reformed denominations than the Christian Reformed Church. Japinga, a member of the Reformed Church in America (RCA), is the only one to specifically discuss the CRC, and when she does, she describes it as “even more vigilant than the midwestern RCA about preserving its purity.”

⁷² Jonathan Z. Smith, “Foreward” to *Religious Truth: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project*, ed. Robert Cummings Neville (State University of New York Press, 2001), xi.

the case about the world is, quite often, a function of trusting both one's community and, by extension, the knowledge deemed by that community to be authoritative.

Just as she trusted the darkly stained wooden pews to hold her upright, my Prodigal Daughter trusted the fellowship of believers gathered around her. Their knowledge was her knowledge. What she did not and could not yet know was that this web emanated not from God himself (an example of the god-trick *par excellence*) but rather had been woven over centuries and across oceans by a larger web of communities who placed their trust in authoritative texts, figures, and traditions. To further understand Churchillian knowledge, an exploration of this larger web of relations and its primary authorizing knots is warranted.

Kroes's ethnography of the Churchill community comports well with my teenage conviction of belonging to a covenanted people, secure in our anticipation of God's special grace. He writes:

as partners to the Covenant, they are aware of their perennial links to a distant country where their fathers first saw the light. Thus they are in a line of Dutch descent in a very special, providential sense, a line that connects them to the Synod of Dordt, to the Secession, and to the neo-Calvinism of Abraham Kuyper rather than to such accidental places on the map as Friesland or Groningen or Zeeland. Their line of descent links them securely to an old promise of collective salvation.⁷³

My high school self would have been aware of participating in a line of providential Dutch descent, and I would have vaguely understood his reference to the Synod of Dordt and to the northern provinces of the Netherlands, but his references to the Secession and the neo-Calvinism of Abraham Kuyper would have been alien to me.

⁷³ Kroes, 9.

While I understood myself and my community as a covenanted people who worshiped the one true God, Kroes understood us as one variety of Reformed Christianity, albeit a particularly interesting one for thinking about ethnic and religious social cohesion. My post-Churchill travels in secular Lands of Higher Learning taught me skills to shed the scales of my teenage angle of vision as I learned to see Churchill from Kroes's perspective. From this partial perspective, my teenage knowledge of the world and my subject formation come into view as products of a specific tradition. A rehearsal of the history that Kroes only hints at orients Prodigal Siblings and Wayfaring Strangers who have found their way into this story.

The Christian Reformed Church of North America (CRCNA or CRC) traces its direct line of descent to the teachings of the Protestant Reformer, John Calvin. In those early years of what would become known as the Protestant Reformation, reformers engaged in high stakes disputes over correct understandings of Christianity. In the lands where Calvin's teachings took hold, those who disagreed with Calvinist doctrine were deemed heretics, an identity that could lead to death. For instance, in 1553, Calvin's governing council in Geneva arrested the Renaissance humanist, Michael Servetus, found him guilty of heresy, and burned him at the stake. Adherence to doctrine has always been a serious matter for Calvinists.

While Calvin's teachings spawned a number of traditions that describe themselves as "Reformed," the lineage we are concerned with here grounds its original authority in the Three Forms of Unity accepted as official statements of

doctrine by the Dutch Reformed Church (*Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk* or NHK).⁷⁴ The Dutch Reformed Church emerged out of a number of councils and synods held in the 1560s and 1570s.⁷⁵ In 1566, a synod in Antwerp adopted Guido de Brès's Belgic Confession which, in 37 articles, defined the Reformed faith over and against the Catholicism advocated by the Spanish Inquisition. The following year, de Brès was hanged by the Inquisition. In 1563, Frederick III, sovereign of the Electoral Palatinate, commissioned the composition of the Heidelberg Catechism. Consisting of 129 questions and answers, the Heidelberg Catechism is divided into 52 sections or "Lord's Days" which ministers were required to preach from every week in order to improve congregants' theological knowledge.

By the early 1600s, the Dutch Reformed Church was embroiled in what became known as "the Arminian controversy" regarding theological foundations of Reformed teachings about salvation. To greatly simplify a complicated story, Jacobus Arminius, a professor of theology at the University of Leiden, and his followers argued that men could choose, through free will, whether to resist God's gracefully offered atonement and eternal salvation.⁷⁶ Furthermore, the Arminians maintained that salvation and atonement were available to all men. These teachings went against

⁷⁴ The Three Forms of Unity are the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dort, and the Heidelberg Confession.

⁷⁵ Following Calvin's model of governance which he developed and implemented in Geneva, Reformed churches typically have a presbyterian polity where individual churches are governed by elected elders and deacons who, along with the minister, form a consistory. At the regional level, churches belong to an assembly of elders known as a presbytery or classis. Meetings of and between classes are referred to as synods.

⁷⁶ The substantive issues of this debate have a longer historical trajectory tracing back to Augustine and Pelagius.

the grain of strict Calvinism which argued that only those whom God had predestined to be saved, despite man's depraved sinfulness, belonged to the Elect.

In 1618, the Dutch Reformed Church called the Great Synod of Dordrecht (frequently shortened to "Dort" or "Dordt") to settle the matter. Attended by Reformed representatives from eight other countries, the Synod issued the Canons of Dort which rejected Arminianism and emphasized the inherent and total depravity or sinfulness of man, the unconditional but limited atonement made available by God but only to the Elect, the irresistible nature of God's grace extended to the Elect, and the importance of being on guard against the slavery of sin made manifest in the desires and temptations of the flesh. In my youth, I learned these five points of Calvinism with the widely taught mnemonic acronym, TULIP (T = Total depravity, U = Unconditional election, L = Limited atonement, I = Irresistible grace, P = Perseverance of the saints). The Synod of Dort designated the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort as the Three Forms of Unity. These confessions of faith became the constituting documents of the Dutch Reformed communities in the Netherlands and throughout the Dutch Reformed diaspora.⁷⁷

In 1628, the Dutch settlers who colonized New Netherland established their first Dutch Reformed congregation in New Amsterdam (now New York City). Congregations of the Dutch Reformed Church in America spread and expanded, operating under the authority of Classis Amsterdam until becoming independent in 1754. During the mid-18th century, disputes between two factions – the orthodox

⁷⁷ Smidt et al., 31.

conferentie and the more experiential *coetus* – nearly resulted in schism, but the rift “was finally healed in 1772 when the two parties were reunited largely by the efforts of John Livingstone” who also drafted a new organizational pattern that struck a balance between the parties. It reflected the Canons of Dort yet moved the Reformed Church out of its ethnic enclave by fostering a more ecumenical and evangelical orientation. By the 19th century, the Reformed Church in America (RCA) had become one of the mainline Protestant denominations in the United States as it sought to influence and preserve a democratic Protestant nation.⁷⁸

In the early years of the 19th century, during the governmental reorganizations after the fall of the Dutch Republic to Napoleon, the Dutch Reformed Church in the Netherlands experienced a schism. Many reformed clerics and professors in the universities had increasingly come to see the Bible and the Three Forms of Unity as products of human minds rather than as authorized by God. The National Synod of 1816 (the first Synod to be held since the Synod of Dort) reflected this modernizing trend by eliminating the requirement of weekly catechism preaching, mandating a new hymnal that would include hymns based on the Gospels in addition to those based on the Psalms, and altering the Form of Subscription – i.e. the oath required of office bearers affirming the Three Forms of Unity. The new version allowed subscribers to accept the creeds *insofar as* (instead of *because*) they agreed with the Bible. In addition to the theological changes, the National Synod reorganized the Dutch Reformed Church as a subordinate ministry of the state.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 21-29.

While these changes appealed to the bourgeoisie, there was widespread dissent among the *kleine luyden* or common people. Led by a group of ministers intent on restoring and preserving the true church, over one hundred congregations seceded from the national church in the *Afscheiding* or Great Secession of 1834. Those in the southern regions promoted experiential piety and evangelism aimed at emulating the early church of the apostles to the point that some charged them with Arminian leanings. The northerners stressed the need for Christian schools and catechism instruction, and they advocated a return to the strict doctrinal orthodoxy set out by the Synod of Dordt. They saw the change in Form of Subscription as “emasculating the creedal foundation of the church” and offering protection to those who denied the vital doctrines. In the words of Robert Sweiringa, the preeminent historian of the Dutch and the Reformed in America, “The northern faction had steel in their bones, while the southern party had rubber.”⁷⁹ The various factions were united, however, in their aversion to the emergent rationalist, humanist perspective of the post-1816 Dutch Reformed Church.⁸⁰ Together, the Seceders formed the Christian Reformed Church in the Netherlands (*Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk in Nederland* or CGKN).

The Dutch Reformed Church, backed by the power of the state, viewed the Secession as quasi-treasonous and retaliated by levying heavy fines, deploying troops to break up worship services, and imprisoning some of the leaders. Official

⁷⁹ Lecture of Robert P. Swierenga at Graafschap Christian Reformed Church, Holland, Michigan, March 10, 1997. http://www.swierenga.com/Graafschap_pap.html. Accessed January 23, 2014. Sweirenga is one of the most preeminent and prolific historians of the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

⁸⁰ Kroes, 15-16.

suppression ended when William II took over the throne, but Seceders continued to suffer social ostracism, economic boycotts, and job blacklists. Persecution appeared to strengthen the church. By 1849, 40,000 people belonged to the *Afschiding* churches, and, by 1869, that number had grown to over 100,000.⁸¹

In 1879, Abraham Kuyper, a minister and politician (who would become Prime Minister of the Netherlands from 1901-1905) founded the Anti-Revolutionary Party, which united the interests of the *kleine luyden* and opposed both ecclesiastical and statist secular forms of government. Instead, they “called for the formation of separate Christian institutions (‘pillars’) which would care for church members from cradle to grave” thus initiating the neo-Calvinist pillarisation model of governance which operated in the Netherlands until World War II.⁸² Political parties were segregated into separate pillars – Protestants, Catholics, secular liberals, and secular socialists – with each revolving around its own social institutions such that members of different pillars had little to no personal contact with others. In the early 20th century, this structure enabled the Kuyperians to ally Catholics and Protestants under the moniker “Antitheticals” (because of the antithesis between religious and secular parties) in their victorious *Schoolstrijd* (“School struggle”) to obtain public financing for religious education. In his 1898 Stone Lectures at Princeton Seminary, Kuyper further extended his separatist philosophy when he maintained that ethnic homogeneity is the will of God. His political theology and Christian nationalism are

⁸¹ Robert Sweiringa Graafschap lecture.

⁸² Smidt et al., 37.

often cited as early influences on the founders of Apartheid in South Africa.⁸³ The Kuyperian influence would become important to the development of the Christian Reformed Church in North America as well.

In 1883, the seeds of yet another schism were planted when the Dutch Reformed Church completely abolished the Form of Subscription agreeing instead to “promote the interests of the Kingdom of God in general and especially those in the State Church.”⁸⁴ The Kuyperians opposed this move and its concomitant increasing modernism in the Dutch Reformed Church. Drawing on the Latin word, *dolere*, meaning to mourn or declare one’s sorrow, they identified themselves as the *Doleantie* because they grieved the path taken by the Dutch Reformed Church. By 1886, they split from the state church and adopted the standard Synod of Dordt Form of Subscription. In 1892, after much discussion and compromise, the *Doleantie* churches merged with those from the *Afscheiding* into the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands (*Gereformeerde Kerk Nederland* or GKN).

Although the Seceder and Kuyperian churches represented less than 10% of the membership of the Dutch Reformed Church, their story extends to both the Christian Reformed Church in North America and to Churchill. Between 1846 and 1941, largely due to structural transformations in the economy of the Netherlands,

⁸³ Abraham Kuyper, *Calvinism: Six Stone-lectures* (Charleston, SC: BiblioBazaar, 2009). Alan Davies, *Infected Christianity: A Study of Modern Racism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1988), 93.

George Harinck, “Abraham Kuyper, South Africa, and Apartheid” in *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 23:2 (2002), 184-187.

⁸⁴ Robert P. Swierenga, "The Form of Subscription in Dutch Reformed History" from "The Vibrancy of Confessionalism," Returning Church Meeting, First Byron Center CRC, 17 April 2008. http://www.swierenga.com/FOSDutchRefChurch_lec.html, accessed January 23, 2014.

over two hundred thousand Dutch citizens immigrated to the United States and another hundred thousand followed them between 1948 and 1960. The first to arrive settled primarily in Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Iowa with later groups extending further westward into Minnesota and across the Dakotas.⁸⁵ Between 1845 and 1880, over thirteen thousand Seceders emigrated. In 1848, Albertus Van Raalte, one of the leading ministers in the *Afscheiding* immigrated with his family and forty others to what is now Holland, Michigan. Others quickly followed until the Holland colony had five congregations, all of which were led by immigrant Seceder ministers. At first, their new Classis Holland functioned as an extension of the Seceder church in the Netherlands, but within two years, it joined the Reformed Church in America (RCA) which had courted the immigrants and provided much needed financial assistance.

While some in Classis Holland wanted an ecumenical and experiential faith, others promoted a separatist focus on a pure and true church. Many were uneasy about the RCA which they viewed as an Americanized version of the Dutch Reformed Church. Those who were suspicious cited a number of “irregularities” in the RCA, including: serving of “open communion” – i.e. extending an open invitation to all believers to participate in the Lord’s Supper⁸⁶; singing of “man-made” hymns rather than strict psalm-singing; failure to deliver sound doctrinal preaching based on

⁸⁵ Krabbendam, xviii. Additional Dutch immigrant communities were also established in Chicago, Detroit, Paterson (NJ), and Rochester and Buffalo in New York State. See also Robert P. Swierenga, *Faith and Family: Dutch Immigration and Settlement in the United States, 1820-1920* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 2000).

⁸⁶ The Reformed Church in America version of open communions extended to all Protestant believers but *not* to Catholics.

the catechism; too much accommodation to American culture which was particularly evident in the deficient attention to establishing Christian schools; and a lack of solidarity on the part of the Americans with the Secessionist movement.

In 1857, ten percent of Classis Holland (approximately 750 people) separated from the RCA. Seeing themselves as the preservers of the true church, they formed the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA or CRC) taking the phrase, “in isolation is our strength” as their motto.⁸⁷ Membership growth was slow until 1867 when a CRC Synod banned membership in Masonic Lodges, a much stronger position than the RCA which had left the matter up to individual congregations. In the Netherlands, the GKN was adamantly opposed to lodge membership because it promoted Enlightenment ideals.⁸⁸ After the Masonic Lodge conflict in the United States, the GKN recommended that its emigrants join the CRC instead of the RCA. Attracting both former RCA members displeased with the RCA response to the conflict and immigrants from the northern provinces of the Netherlands – the heart of the Secessionist impulse – the CRC experienced an 800-fold increase in membership between 1873 and 1900.⁸⁹ With the influx of new members, the CRC developed a strong foundation and founded Calvin College and Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan (where the denomination is headquartered) and initiated ministerial training.

⁸⁷ Statistics from Robert Sweiringa Graafschap lecture. Motto cited in Japinga, 6.

⁸⁸ Smidt, et al., 33.

⁸⁹ Robert Sweiringa Graafschap lecture.

During the first half of the 20th century, CRC membership grew to over 200,000 souls.⁹⁰ The CRC promoted a typically Reformed world which Lynn Japinga, a Professor of Religion at Hope College in Michigan, summarizes in a recent collection of essays by feminists working from within Reformed traditions.⁹¹ She explains that they all place emphasis on the sovereignty and transcendence of a God who is understood to be gracious but not easily satisfied. He is imagined variously as a judge to be feared, respected, and obeyed or as a father who strongly disapproves of disobedience and independent thinking. Because salvation comes from God and not from human effort, Reformed traditions also place a strong emphasis on human sinfulness as a tendency about which one must constantly be vigilant. Thanks to God's grace, humans are capable of good, but their default mode is "more likely to be selfish, arrogant, greedy, and lustful."⁹² Historically, Reformed traditions have seen themselves as protecting the integrity of the gospel and preserving truth and purity by naming wrong beliefs and maintaining complete doctrinal agreement.⁹³ Reformed subjects are constantly on guard against wrongdoing in the form of sin and heresy.

In the spectrum of Reformed traditions in America, the CRC has historically pursued a more separatist orientation than other denominations. This is perhaps best evidenced by its communal commitment to establishing Christian schools envisioned as places where "Christ's lordship over all creation is clearly taught." Indeed, several

⁹⁰ Membership statistics available at <http://www.crcna.org/welcome/membership-statistics>, accessed April, 2014.

⁹¹Japinga is also a minister in the RCA. Of the various traditions represented in this volume, she is the only one who specifically discusses the CRC. Thus far, I have not been able to find any writings by women (or men) in the CRC who claim to have a feminist orientation.

⁹² Japinga, 3.

⁹³ Ibid, 5,

CRC synods in the late 19th century made special declarations to this effect, and subsequent synods in the 20th century reaffirmed and expanded the scope of this perceived covenantal mandate to include institutions of higher learning.⁹⁴ In addition to the denominationally owned Calvin College, six other colleges were established and affiliated with the CRC over the decades: Kuyper College in Grand Rapids, Michigan; Dordt College in Sioux Center, Iowa; Trinity Christian College in Palos Heights, Illinois; King’s University College in Edmonton, Alberta; Redeemer University College in Ancaster, Ontario; and the post-graduate Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto, Ontario. With a clear preference for independence over entanglement, the history of the CRC for the first half of the 20th century is a history of focus on doctrinal and ecclesiastical purity. Determining what exactly constituted that purity, however, was not a given. Tracing the contours of the key conversations within the CRC will move us from the larger web of relations back to Churchill and the Prodigal Daughter’s Godly Heritage.

In the early 20th century, the mix of different kinds of Kuyperian influences with the more doctrinally focused earlier Seceders led to the formation of three distinct parties in the CRC: the Antitheticals, the Positive Calvinists, and the Confessionalists.⁹⁵ The first two subscribed to different Kuyperian emphases. The Antitheticals followed Kuyper’s early writings which emphasized a fundamental difference or “antithesis” between the church and the world and promoted separatism.

⁹⁴ <http://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/position-statements/christian-education>

⁹⁵ Here I use the nomenclature of a recent team of professors at Calvin College and Hope College in the previously cited Smidt et al., 35-38.

The Positive Calvinists followed the later Kuyperian theological concept of “common grace.” The orthodox Reformed view held that God’s special grace (the “irresistible grace” articulated in the Canons of Dort) extended only to the Elect, but when Kuyper’s party and his government needed to work in coalition with other political parties, he developed the notion of common grace which held that “unsaved individuals can do good things and possess useful knowledge; the doctrine ‘legitimized a certain amount of cooperation between the redeemed and the unbelievers.’”⁹⁶ The third party, the Confessionalists, rejected both variations of Kuyperianism, which they viewed as insufficiently Reformed, and maintained allegiance to the Seceders of the *Afscheiding*. The Confessionalist perspective characterized the views of the largest group of CRC members in the early 1900s, and it dominated against the twin enemies of Modernism and Worldliness.⁹⁷

Doctrinally, the Kuyperian parties both held a supralapsarian understanding of the Fall of man in which God’s election occurs *prior* to creation whereas the Confessionalists were infralapsarians for whom God’s election occurred *after* the fall. This distinction had practical consequences for Christian Reformed understandings of the requirements for salvation. For the supralapsarians, the Elect had been redeemed at birth so that receiving the sacrament of baptism and the preaching and hearing of the gospel “did not induce but simply confirmed regeneration.”⁹⁸ For the infralapsarian Confessionalists, on the other hand, their salvation hung in the balance

⁹⁶ Ibid, 37. The quote within the quote is from James Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: A History of a Conservative Subculture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 20.

⁹⁷ Smidt et al., 40.

⁹⁸ Bratt, 47.

and depended on receiving the gospel and the sacrament of baptism. In 1906, the Confessionalists position on this matter won out when Synod “declared infralapsarianism to be the more Reformed and thoroughly scriptural position.”⁹⁹

On the issue of common grace, however, the Kuyperian position dominated in 1924 when Synod articulated its position that God shows general favor or common grace to all creatures, adopting what became known as the Three Points of Common Grace.¹⁰⁰ A small group of ministers, led by Reverend Herman Hoeksema, rejected this decision as pure Arminianism that is contrary to the Reformed confessions of faith. The CRC responded by expelling Hoeksema and two other ministers for deviant doctrinal teachings. Hoeksema and his followers in Grand Rapids formed the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRC). Although this schism originated in Grand Rapids, it would also cut through the heart of Churchill.

Churchill’s Dutch origins begin in the 1890s when approximately 15 different families, hailing primarily from Friesland and Groningen, acquired land in the Gallatin Valley and began to farm it.¹⁰¹ Most of them had been recruited by a Presbyterian minister, Reverend Wormser, himself a Dutch immigrant who worked both for the Board of Domestic Missions of the Presbyterian Church in America and for railroad interests who formed the West Gallatin Irrigation Company. Both parties

⁹⁹ Smidt et al., 38.

¹⁰⁰ The Three Points of Common Grace: (1) In addition to the saving grace of God, shown only to those who are elected to eternal life, there is also a certain favor, or grace, of God shown to his creatures in general; (2) Since the fall, human life in society remains possible because God, through his Spirit, restrains the power of sin; and (3) God, without renewing the heart, so influences human beings that, though incapable of doing any saving good, they are able to do civil good. <http://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/position-statements/common-grace>

¹⁰¹ Based on his work with historical documents at the Gallatin County courthouse, Kroes reports that 26 farmers applied for homesteads while several others purchased land from the irrigation company. Kroes, 43-52.

had tasked him with recruiting Dutch farmers to the Gallatin Valley. At Wormser's insistence, these immigrants formed a Presbyterian congregation for the first few years of the settlement. In 1902, a CRC missionary from the Classis of Orange City, Iowa arrived and began to organize the settlers. In 1903, 19 families and 5 single men decided to found a CRC congregation and build a church on the top of the hill in the center of the community thus naming it Church Hill (which was later changed to Churchill).

In keeping with the CRC focus on Christian education, in 1904, the community specifically referenced the Three Forms of Unity in the documents establishing an Association for Founding and Maintaining Christian Education on a Reformed Basis. As Kroes notes, the symbolic dimension of this organizational withdrawal from established forms of American society is particularly noteworthy because the Dutch were already in relative control of public education as they were the only settlers in the area. "Yet, as they saw it, that was not enough. They felt insufficiently free to bring up their children in their own Christian way of life."¹⁰² Two Christian schools were established, one next to the church and the other in the hills area northwest of Churchill. Eventually these two would merge. The area continued to attract Dutch immigrants, and by 1913, two years after a new and larger church had been constructed, more than 90 families belonged to the First Christian Reformed church which, to this day, anchors the community and shares a parking lot with Manhattan Christian School.

¹⁰² Kroes, 55.

In the 1920s, a few people in the area joined non-CRC churches “professing belief in the Christian fundamentals” by joining groups such as the home-based “two-by-twos” and the Missionary Alliance Church while others joined nearby evangelical Baptist churches in Manhattan.¹⁰³ However, the vast majority of Churchillians continued to define themselves in relation to the CRC. A small group of them became increasingly alarmed by what they saw as increasing Arminianism in their midst as evidenced by some of the previously mentioned departures, and they worried that the CRC was not taking a strong enough stance against it.

When the CRC expelled Reverend Hoeksema and his followers in 1924, the news reached Churchill through personal letters, reports from classis meetings, and denominational publications such as *The Banner* and *De Wachter*. Some Churchillians, like Jacob Kimm (one of the original and wealthier landholders in the area) interpreted events through the same angle of vision as Hoeksema’s Protestant Reformed Church. In a 1926 letter, Kimm wrote:

In the area of church and school there is much commotion among the Hollanders in the United States. Church teachings are being preached in a way as if man has it in his power to do much through good works. Well, we know better than that. On our own we can do nothing but through God’s grace ... the protesters are much purer in their teaching and preaching from the Chr. Reformed. Recently we had Rev. Bultema from Muskegon here. That is another fine speaker, but of course he was not allowed to speak in the church, so it had to be in a schoolhouse. He has preached six times, 3 times in English and 3 times Dutch. Always a large audience, for a sparsely populated country. Always the school brimming over with people. You may read about Bultema; and also about Danhof, Hoeksema, and others. Would it all were to God’s honor and salvation.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ *A Goodly Heritage*, 27. Kroes cites Sam Dijk as one example of a man who had been an elder in the CRC but left, along with several brothers, to join a Baptist church outside of the Churchill mainstream, 100.

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Kroes, 95.

In his rendering of events, Kroes identifies Menko Flikkema and Nick Danhof as two of the men in Churchill who “assumed the role of gatekeepers of the Dutch community” as they advocated for a return to the old doctrinal tenets of predestination and God’s covenant with his chosen people.¹⁰⁵ Kroes notes that these men were neighbors on the western edge of the settlement in dry-farming country where life was harder and more insecure. What Kroes may not have known is that Danhof’s wife, Agnes, was Menko’s sister. I know this detail because Menko was one of my great-grandfathers. He and his wife, Anna, had ten children. The eighth one, a daughter, is my maternal grandmother. Menko and his sister had immigrated in 1911 and arrived in Churchill in 1916 after a few years in Amsterdam, Idaho. Elders Flikkema and Danhof show up in the minutes of a 1935 school board meeting where, on behalf of the church consistory, they expressed concern that the school principle did not subscribe to Article 37 of the Belgic Confession, which spelled out the amillennialist Reformed doctrine of God’s final judgment, but instead held a premillennialist understanding of last things. The principal agreed not to teach his views.¹⁰⁶

While several ministers from the Protestant Reformed Church visited the Gallatin Valley, the arrival of Reverend Bernard Kok in 1938 tipped the scales toward schism. Kok had been the pastor of one of the original PRC churches in Grand Rapids until 1937 when he became a traveling missionary keeping the PRC community

¹⁰⁵ Kroes, 102.

¹⁰⁶ Kroes, 104.

informed of his journeys through letters to their periodical, the *Standard Bearer*. He had a well-earned reputation for giving fiery sermons, and, after a few months, he chose Churchill as his new place to serve the word. In September of that year, *The Standard Bearer* began publishing reports of his missionary activity under the heading, “News from Manhattan,” and by the following November, Reverend Kok had set up a PRC congregation in Churchill. Twelve families (approximately 80 people) left the CRC and joined the PRC, electing Great Grandpa Menko as an Elder.

Menko and Anna Flikkema had 10 children. In the winter of 1949, their eighth child, a 19-year-old daughter named Agnes (after Menko’s sister) found herself in a state of pregnancy. She had been dating David Hoekema, a young man who had recently returned from World War II and whose family also attended the Protestant Reformed Church. They told their parents about their situation. In keeping with the traditions of the time on Churchill, they stood in front of their congregation on a Sunday morning and apologized for their sinful activity. They were married at the minister’s house with only a handful of witnesses. Menko had walked his daughter there, but his wife, too ashamed of her daughter to join, stayed home. Five months later, they had a daughter they named Ardyce. Twenty-three years later, this child of sin and shame gave birth to me.

Throughout the 1950s, the CRC and the PRC held separate services and met on opposite sides of Churchill Road. The CRC *Wachter* published accusations that Kok was practicing devious and intimidating behavior, and Kok fired back in his reports to the *Standard Bearer*. While Reverend Bratt, the Churchill CRC minister,

declined to engage in public debate with Reverend Kok, Kroes tells a different story about another man, Henry Westra, an “amateur theologian” in the community who enthusiastically rose to Kok’s challenge. Westra was:

a poor immigrant from the Friesian country near Ee. ... To him it was a self-evident truth that there is general grace. He recognized it in the beauty and bounty of all of God’s creation. He had an evangelical openness toward the world, an eagerness to open his arms widely and embrace it all. To him the main concern was not the boundary line between the Dutch and the others. He was among the first to marry a non-Dutch wife. As a lay preacher he went out beyond the outer edge of the Dutch community in the south into the dry-land country. Due to his sustained missionary enthusiasm, a separate Christian Reformed congregation now exists there where people of Dutch origin sit next to people of different backgrounds.¹⁰⁷

The congregation referenced here is located in Gallatin Gateway, 20 miles southeast of Churchill on the way to Yellowstone Park. Elsie, Henry’s wife, was not only not Dutch, but she also had Native American ancestry – a fact that everyone in my youth knew but no one talked about.¹⁰⁸ In 1948, Henry and his two siblings, Sam and Dora, sponsored the immigration of their cousin, Jitze DeVries along with his wife and their three boys, to Churchill after they had lost everything to the Nazis in World War II. Their third son is my father who was 3 years old when they arrived. I grew up with Henry’s grandchildren, my third cousins, one of whom, Heidi, was in my class. Not only is Heidi’s father a second cousin to my father, but our mothers (descendents of Menko) also happen to be cousins. On Sunday mornings of my youth, Heidi’s family sat on the opposite side of the church from my family, and we

¹⁰⁷ Kroes, 113. Henry Westra died in 1989. Kroes had many conversations with him, and his assessment of the man comports well with my memories of him.

¹⁰⁸ While there are no records, to my knowledge, documenting racism in Churchill, the CRCs understanding of itself as an ethnic community of the Elect oriented around maintaining the purity of doctrine more than suggests a racial logic undergirding Christian Reformed knowledge formations.

attended Sunday school together. Today, Heidi's older sister, Jill, teaches at Manhattan Christian School where she also coaches my niece in volleyball. Perhaps this kind of awareness is what Kroes references when he says that Churchillians have an especially "uncanny grasp of the maps of kinship relations."¹⁰⁹ The Churchillian web of belonging continues.

Returning for the moment to the players in our ongoing Story of Schism and Belonging, Henry Westra's preaching clearly antagonized Reverend Kok who attacks him in a 1940 *Standard Bearer* article, "Foul Arguments Refuted:"

Although the Rev. Bratt lacks the moral courage to face us in open and public debate on the issues of 'Common Grace,' to which we have repeatedly challenged him, he cannot refrain from making derogatory charges against our churches. In this dishonorable practice he is ably assisted by the so-called leader of the young people, Mr. Henry Westra, who claims to be an ardent supporter of Calvin and Calvinism, so much so, that he claims to agree with every word the Reformer had ever written ... in the first place I am sure that he has not even read a small part of all the Reformer's works, and in the second place it is folly to ascribe to any human document that which alone is worthy to be ascribed to the word of God, "And yet," to speak in the language of Calvin, "this ape of Euclid puffs himself off in the titles of all his chapters as a first-rate reasoner," by boasting to the young people that I would not even be able to debate with a 'hill-billy' like him.¹¹⁰

Kroes' analysis of Churchill's Faith of the Fathers Feud revolves around this question: "How can we conceivably relate the history of conflict and schism to the unmistakable cultural and social continuity of this community of Dutch origin in America?"¹¹¹ He briefly entertains what he calls a secular Marxist approach which might posit that the conflict was an expression of underlying economic disparities

¹⁰⁹ Kroes, 12.

¹¹⁰ Kroes, 115.

¹¹¹ Kroes, 116.

between the different groups. He dismisses this approach, however, because the data simply doesn't support the conclusion. Both groups included members of established families (Kimms and Van Dijkens), and those without property, including more recent immigrants (Flikkema and Westra). Taking an alternative approach of viewing the conflict on its own terms and taking it as seriously as those who were involved in it did, Kroes maintains that the tendency to "see things of the world in the light of God's governance" – i.e. the shared religious worldview and – undergirded and even strengthened the Churchillian communal identity.¹¹² While the CRC and PRC congregations in Churchill drew a line in the sand over the issue of common grace, the contestation ultimately functioned to "confirm their identity, setting them apart from a social environment that had no inkling of what they were so worked up about ... The struggle demanded their full commitment, and it kept their community from breaking along the different faultlines of secular politics"¹¹³

In the next decades, the Christian Reformed Church slowly but surely began to shed at a few layers of its separatist mentality as the outside world made itself felt. World War II demanded and received the sacrifice of many sons. Then an influx of impoverished and war-devastated immigrants like my father's family followed networks of kinship and arrived in Dutch-American communities. Kroes describes these new immigrants in Churchill as "strangers in Jerusalem" for whom the self-enclosed community was initially quite foreign. However, the advent of mechanized farming techniques in conjunction with new immigrant efforts to achieve social

¹¹² Kroes, 117.

¹¹³ Kroes, 120.

mobility meant that the Churchill community relied increasingly less on voluntary cooperation and instead began to interact with those outside the community in professional associations. Kroes assesses the situation as one in which “the inherent logic of economic entrepreneurship won out against any tendency toward introversion.”¹¹⁴

At the denominational level, the PRC experienced internal strife which would reunite the two Churchill churches. In 1940, Reverend Kok left Churchill and Reverend Hubert De Wolf served Churchill’s PRC congregation.¹¹⁵ In 1944, he departed and became the second pastor of First Protestant Reformed Church in Grand Rapids where his preaching of “conditional theology” – which allowed that God promises salvation to all on the condition that they have faith as a prerequisite for entering the Kingdom of God – garnered the attention of the PRC leadership. Conditional theology reflected the work of Klaas Schilder and the PRC’s mirror organization in the Netherlands, the *Gereformeerde Kerken “Vrijgemaakt”* (“Liberated” Reformed Church). Reverend Hoeksema saw conditional theology as heresy and the church leadership suspended De Wolf and several elders. However, insofar as conditional theology allowed that salvation might be available to all, it enabled the De Wolf group to reconcile its position with the spirit if not the letter of the CRC’s doctrine of common grace. Exiled from the PRC, De Wolf initiated steps toward denominational reunification with the CRC.¹¹⁶ In 1960, Churchill’s PRC

¹¹⁴ Kroes, 127.

¹¹⁵ *A Goodly Heritage*, 31.

¹¹⁶ Robert P. Swierenga, "Burn the Wooden Shoes: Modernity and Division in the Christian Reformed Church in North America"

church cast its lots with the De Wolf group and several other churches that reunited with the CRC. Choosing the name Bethel Christian Reformed Church, they continued meeting as a separate congregation in their new building a quarter mile to the west of the mother church (formerly named First CRC and now named Manhattan CRC). To this day, these two churches gather the Churchill community together.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the CRC shifted its energy and focus from debating the finer points of doctrine to contending with the encroaching world. Issues like lodge membership and the singing of non-Psalms based hymns receded into the background, and references to Arminianism or heresy in the historical record became increasingly rare. Instead, the CRC turned its energies and attentions to the issues which had come to define emergent fundamentalist and evangelical movements in the United States.

While fundamentalist and evangelical organizations had divergent and sometimes even conflictual histories in the first half of the 20th century, the second half witnessed the development of a conservative Protestant Christian subculture that came together in an effort to reshape the world according to their understanding of the Bible.¹¹⁷ Frequently referred to in secular discourses as the “Religious Right,” the “Christian Right,” or the “New Christian Right,” these mostly white, conservative Protestant groups developed a loose coalition and typically defined themselves over

Paper Presented to the University of Stellenbosch Conference (South Africa), International Society for the Study of Reformed Communities, June 2000. http://www.swierenga.com/Africa_pap.html, accessed April, 2014.

¹¹⁷ Julie Ingersoll, *Evangelical Christian Women: War Stories in the Gender Battles* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 11-16. Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), xv-xvi.

and against those they perceived to be liberal. This formation took institutional shape in 1942 when several of its leaders established the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE).

In texts describing this emergent formation, the CRC and the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS) are referenced as the two later immigrant churches with more doctrinal emphasis than the earlier immigrant groups (who now see themselves as native) that have formed Bible-based churches.¹¹⁸ Both the CRC and LCMS are organizationally concentrated in the upper Midwest. While the CRC boasts a Dutch heritage and membership statistics in the 200,000 range, the LCMS demographic has a primarily German heritage and membership of over 2 million. In his definitive reference book, *Protestant Faith in America*, J. Gordon Melton cites these two churches as denominations that split off from their mainline elders in protest against the liberalizing trend of the early 20th century as they joined self-identified evangelicals in creating broadcast ministries in the 1970s and 1980s.¹¹⁹ In his more granular analysis of the emerging coalition, Joel Carpenter cites the CRC's on-again, off-again affiliation with the NAE as a good example of the ambivalent reception also experienced by other conservative ethnic Protestant groups such as the Mennonites.¹²⁰

The CRC had joined the NAE in 1943 in a move that, according to historians and sociologists of Reformed traditions in America, reflected:

¹¹⁸ See, for example, Vincent Crapanzano, *Serving the Word: Literalism in America from the Pulpit to the Bench* (New York: The New Press, 2001), 48-49.

¹¹⁹ J. Gordon Melton. *Protestant Faith in America*. (New York: Facts on File, 2003), 52 & 69.

¹²⁰ Joel A. Carpenter *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 141-160.

its closer ties to the separatist fundamentalists than to the theological liberalism found within mainline churches. But ... the CRC association with the NAE was troubled from the start. Every year after joining, calls resounded in the church's press and pulpits for separation. In 1951, only eight years after joining the NAE, the CRC left, drawing a theological line between itself and fundamentalism.¹²¹

Although the CRC would not rejoin the NAE again until 1987, the denomination defined itself along similar lines as the larger emergent conservative evangelical Protestant Christian subculture. Despite their uneasy alliances, the CRC and the NAE shared concerns with maintaining a conservative stance authorized by and in support of their claims to possess the infallible word of God, and they worked together on two different Bible translations: the Revised Standard Version (RSV) and the New International Version (NIV).

In 1959, the CRC Synod addressed a controversy that had arisen within the church regarding the question of infallibility. Citing more than 200,000 variations in Biblical manuscripts, a Calvin College seminarian named Marvin Hoogland published an article that argued for "limiting doctrine to matters of faith and conduct but not to statements of natural science, grammar, and history."¹²² Synod had reproached Hoogland, but a handful of professors, including the President of Calvin College, defended his writings saying the Christian church had always struggled with questions of infallibility and scripture. Synod received jeremiad letters from across North America and from other Seminary professors protesting the Modernists in their midst and demanding the church maintain its place as "one of the most orthodox

¹²¹ Smidt et al., 41. Scholarship addressing the relationship between the CRC and the NAE generally agrees that the CRC initially joined the NAE primarily to facilitate the practical issue of placing chaplains in the military during World War II.

¹²² Marvin Hoogland, "Infallibility Questioned," *Stromata*, Sept. 1958, 8-10.

churches on the face of the globe” and do justice to Reverend Billy Graham’s characterization of the CRC as a “sleeping giant.”¹²³ In 1961, Synod affirmed the inerrancy of Holy Scripture “in its entirety is the written Word of God, inspired by God to be our rule of faith and practice ... The infallibility of Scripture is inferred from inspiration, and the inspiration of Scripture secures its infallibility.”¹²⁴

Lingering questions regarding the authority of scripture became more pressing again when some CRC seminarians went to study at Kuyper’s Free University in Amsterdam where new methods of interpreting scripture – particularly the first chapters of Genesis – had been introduced. In 1968, concerned about these liberal hermeneutics, Synod ruled on the issue of Biblical Authority, this time directly addressing the question of historicity, stating that:

The authority of Scripture is inseparable from the historical reality of the events recorded in it. Interpreted historical events are presented in Scripture not simply as isolated events but for their revelational meaning. Scripture is self-authenticating; it is not dependent on the findings of science, but these findings may lead to a better understanding of Scripture and must be developed within a Christian community faithful to the authority of Scripture.¹²⁵

Anchored in its doctrinal tradition and the affirmation of Biblical authority, the CRC continued to shed its separatist mentality as it confronted what it saw as a “flood of changes in values, lifestyles, and social interactions” during the 1960s. After the Civil Rights Movement, church membership began debating the ways the

¹²³ Sweirenga, “Burn the Wooden Shoes.” One can find references to Billy Graham using this phrase to describe Lutherans as well.

¹²⁴ <http://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/position-statements/bible-inspiration-infallibility>

¹²⁵ <http://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/position-statements/bible-authority>

church might, or if it even should, combat racism.¹²⁶ In 1971, the CRC established the Synodical Committee on Race Relations (SCORR) which held discussions with the Reformed Churches in South Africa regarding its policy of Apartheid.¹²⁷ These discussions took place at the denominational level in Grand Rapids, but they were rarely if ever discussed in the Church of my youth.¹²⁸

In the 1970s, the CRC took official positions on key issues that defined the culture wars. Regarding homosexuality, the CRC declared it “a condition of disordered sexuality that reflects the brokenness of our sinful world.”¹²⁹ The church also condemned all abortions except in cases where the life of the mother is threatened. While these positions have remained static over the years, the CRC moved in a slightly liberal direction regarding a few worldly pleasures. In 1928, Synod had made declarations on the topic of “worldly amusements” that warned members against theater attendance, dancing, and card playing. In the 1960s, Synod declared the film arts to be a legitimate cultural medium to be used with discernment by Christians. In the 1970s, Calvin College began to allow social dancing, and Synod stated that the inclination to dance is rooted in creation rather than in the fall but reminded CRC members that although dance is a valid expression of God’s image,

¹²⁶ http://www.crcna.org/welcome/history#The_Sixties

¹²⁷ <http://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/position-statements/race-relations>

¹²⁸ The CRC’s official position statement reports that the church began to deal with the issue of race in 1957 in relation to segregation. Declarations were made in 1968, 1969, and 1977. In the 1970s, a Committee on Race Relations was established. During the following decades, the CRC has continued to maintain committees and make statements about “God’s Diverse and Unified Family.” In my research, I have not been able to find any in-depth analysis of the CRC and race. This remains an area for further study.

¹²⁹ <http://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/position-statements/homosexuality>

like all human capabilities, it suffers from our sinful and fallen condition. Christians are called not to reject but to redeem dance.¹³⁰

As a result of the feminist movement of the 1960s, the role of women in church leadership became a hotly contested issue. While the pietistic branches of the emerging conservative evangelical Protestant subculture tended to encourage women's leadership, the Reformed traditions discouraged it.¹³¹ Two separate committees in 1973 and 1975 reporting to Synod concluded that excluding women from ecclesiastical office could not be defended on biblical grounds, but Synod judged the church was not ready for women in office and appointed more committees. In 1978 and again in 1981, separate committees recommended that women be ordained as deacons but not as elders. Both times Synod deferred the issue. In 1984, the Headship Committee, which had been appointed to study the issue of the headship of men over women in marriage and its implications for the church, made the same recommendation that Synod had passed six years prior – that women be ordained as deacons. Subsequent Synods in the 1980s maintained that the headship principle prohibits women from serving as elders or ministers. The battle for CRC women to hold all forms of ecclesiastical office would only begun to be won in the 1990s and even then, small victories would occasion large schisms, Those events, however, would not occur until after my Prodigal Daughter had departed on her prodigal path.

Returning to Kroes' spider web imagery of a Sunday morning in Churchill in the late 1980s, my incarnation of the Prodigal Daughter knew very little about the

¹³⁰ <http://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/position-statements/dance>

¹³¹ Ingersoll, 14.

larger web of relations that had been woven over centuries and across oceans to produce her and countless others. She trusted the people who produced and conveyed the knowledge that structured her world. In their turn, they trusted and gave power both to (1) authoritative texts such as the Three Forms of Unity and specific translations of the Bible and to (2) male figures from John Calvin to the ministers who upheld the tradition to those who saw themselves as splitting in order to preserve the life of the true Church. It would be decades before she would learn of the *Afscheiding* and the *Doleantie* much less the CRC's shared ancestry with South African apartheid through the legacy of Abraham Kuyper. While she was earnestly involved in studying the intricacies of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, she would not have known the distinctions between common grace and special grace or the history behind the two churches on opposite sides of Churchill Road. She had not yet learned to see herself as anything other than a member of her community. With our carrier bag now stocked with an awareness of the larger forces producing the microcosm of Churchill, we can return to my incarnation of the Prodigal Daughter and her developing quest for better worlds and better knowledge.

Chapter 2

Prodigal Relations and Fractured Belonging

Margaret R. Miles helps me provide an accounting of what “home” looks and feels like for those of us formed in and torqued by the structures of white, heteronormative, conservative Christian knowledge formations. A recently retired scholar of Christianity with particular expertise on the widely influential 4th century theologian, Augustine of Hippo, Miles taught at Harvard Divinity School for 18 years before becoming Dean of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley in 1996.¹³² Miles’s father was a fundamentalist preacher, and her memoir, *Augustine and the Fundamentalist’s Daughter*, chronicles her changing conceptions of self and world as she journeyed away from her father’s house and into the larger world and the halls of higher education. When I first encountered her text, I quickly recognized her as a fellow, albeit senior, Prodigal Daughter similarly engaged in a lifelong process of learning to differently inherit dominant Christian traditions. She writes:

For much of my life I have been occupied with a strenuous and urgent effort to come to terms with the fundamentalist psyche I inherited. This book describes the complex process of identifying fundamentalist characteristics in myself and deciding whether I want to retain them, adjust them, or discard them. Altering my beliefs was easy compared to changing my assumptions

¹³² Her publications include *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies* (Boston: Beacon, 1996); *Desire and Delight: A New Reading of Augustine’s “Confessions”* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006); *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian and Postchristian West* (Boston: Beacon, 1989); *Practicing Christianity: Critical Perspectives for an Embodied Spirituality* (Crossroad, 1988); and *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture* (Boston: Beacon, 1985), as well as numerous chapters in books and articles. Among her awards are a Guggenheim Fellowship (1982), a fellowship at the Rockefeller Study and Conference Center, Bellagio, Italy (1983), and a Henry Luce III Fellow in Theology grant (1994-95).

about myself, other people, and the world. Habits of mind and behavior were most difficult to identify and modify. It has been startling to recognize that, in some significant ways, I am still a fundamentalist. For example, I choose to retain a certain suspicion of American society – its social arrangements, media, and consumer orientation – that is highly reminiscent of my parents’ religious *and* immigrant perspective. Since I am a scholar, I have learned to call this habitual suspicion a ‘critical approach.’ But most importantly, I sought to change my beliefs and values without losing my father’s passion.¹³³

Although Miles and I are a generation apart and we grew up in different branches of conservative Protestant Christianity, her assessment of fundamentalist habits of mind comports well with my Christian Reformed experience. Thinking with Miles helps me name some of the features that defined my heritage. While Miles values both the passion and the critical perspective she gleaned from her heritage, the list of habits she sought to discard or adjust is a bit longer and includes the tendency to prefer binary oppositions as a primary mode of making sense of the world. Fundamentalists, she writes, find it difficult “to accept complexity and ambiguity” resorting instead to categories of right or wrong, good or bad, us and them. These categories function as “laborsaving devices” which are much easier to use than to “notice and puzzle over the irreducible complexity of human beings and human life.”¹³⁴ Additionally, she writes, fundamentalists “have the confidence that their judgments are supported by divine fiat, that they enjoy the God’s-eye view. They tend to have the answers before the questions have been articulated.”¹³⁵

These characteristic habits of mind – binary visions authorized by God’s decree – accurately describe a few of the foundations of Christian Reformed

¹³³ Margaret Miles, *Augustine and the Fundamentalist’s Daughter* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011), 7.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

worldmaking activity related in the previous sections. Adding some of my memoir-based insights to those provided by Miles, this section begins to flesh out some of the Prodigal Daughter's formative habits of mind before the dissertation follows my Prodigal journey away from Churchill and into a lifelong love affair with the world, a journey that includes the ongoing project of learning to inherit worlds partially produced by and shared with conservative Christian formations. Additional habits of mind relevant to Christian and Post-Christian Prodigal Daughters include: an acute alertness to wrongdoing, usually conceptualized in terms of sin; a faithful disposition to steadfastly tell the truth regardless of the consequences; and a well-developed aptitude for reading the world through Biblical stories along with a concomitant ability to find oneself interpolated into Biblical narratives.

This aptitude to constantly live in Christian stories provides a larger structure for understanding conservative Protestant Christian knowledge worlds. Both my Christian Reformed and Miles's fundamentalist subjectivities were formed in the crucible of worlds authorized and understood through what is often described as a literal understanding of the Bible. Although this style of interpretation is often disparaged by secular moderns, a recent body of literary and anthropological literature illustrates the vast amount of work that goes into producing and maintaining the complexities of Bible-based worlds.¹³⁶ Christians formed in these worlds give

¹³⁶ Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*. Crapanzano, *Serving the Word*. Susan Harding, "Representing Fundamentalism: The Problem of the repugnant Cultural Other," *Social Research* 58: 373-393, 1991. Susan Harding, "The Afterlife of Stories: The Genesis of a Man of God" in *Storied Lives*, ed R. Ockberg and G. Rosenwald (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 60-75. Susan Harding, "The Gospel of Giving: The Narrative Structure of a Sacrificial Economy" in *Vocabularies of Public Life: Empirical Essays in Symbolic Structure*, ed. R Wuthnow (London: Routledge, 1992), 39-56.

priority to the written word and view the Bible as the foundational and grounding authority explaining all aspects of existence. If the Bible said that Jesus ascended into heaven on a cloud after he arose from the dead, then that is exactly what happened. If I had suspicions about such claims in my youth, which I occasionally did, I quickly quashed them by reminding myself of God's word in the New Testament book of Hebrews, "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."¹³⁷

While Christian faith in miracle stories often functions as a lightning rod for mockery, contemporary Christian worldmaking inheres in the mundane ways Bible-believing Christians understand themselves through engagement with Biblical narratives that constitute them as both listeners and active participants in an ongoing story.¹³⁸ Margaret Miles articulates this mode of engagement as an obsessive fretting over one's relationship with God that produces the following effects:

Fundamentalists require themselves actually to do what they say they will do. The fundamentalists of my childhood did not talk to "make conversation," and did not understand people who did. We heard everything said to us as if it were a promise. . . . Fundamentalists personalize the universe . . . They understand everything that happens to them as ordered by a "personal savior" God. Nothing is coincidental or accidental. . . Scripture is God's direct communication to fundamentalists in the particular circumstances of their lives, which, of course, God knows. Generations of Christians have comforted themselves with the belief that God allows nothing to happen to them that is too much for them to bear. This is a performative belief; trusting that it is true, they then go on to bear whatever needs to be borne. They interpret the pains and distresses that come to them either as God's punishment, or as tests of their faith.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Hebrews 11:1

¹³⁸ Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*, 35.

¹³⁹ Miles, *Augustine and the Fundamentalist's Daughter*, 8.

Churchillian knowledge is grounded in the authority of the Biblical text where correct interpretation is guided by a specific variant of the Reformed tradition and mediated by preachers and teachers whose ongoing retellings breathe continued life into the stories as they are made relevant to contemporary Christian worlds. In the Christian Reformed tradition, phallogocentric to the core, the Bible is understood as the vehicle through which God the Father provides his self-revealing thought and will. Most significantly, one experiences oneself as directly addressed by God through scripture and therefore understands one's life as part of the ongoing living word which constitutes the world. In order for *Prodigal Daughters* to become *Prodigal*, they are first interpolated as proper Christian subjects, and prodigality often begins when feminist knowledge exposes and challenges the sexist structure of totalitarian knowledge regimes. This sequence of events describes the trajectory of my mother's journey which, in turn, influenced my journey.

The feminist movement of the late 1960s and 1970s did not attract a large following of Christian Reformed members, but it did influence a small group who organized the Committee for Women in the Christian Reformed Church (CW-CRC), which lobbied Synod to include women in church leadership. This organizational effort took place primarily in Grand Rapids, and as previously related, encountered serious resistance for several decades. In Churchill, Ardi DeVries, my mother, was one of very few women who supported the CW-CRC. She recalls only one other woman, Mary Bolhuis, who she knew also received the Committee's newsletter. Ardi's support of the CW-CRC was connected to her young adult self-identification

as a feminist. In her senior year of high school, she had received a scholarship to attend the University of Montana in Missoula, but her parents insisted that she attend Calvin College, which she did for a year, before marrying my father. They moved to Denver where he worked as an automobile mechanic, and she obtained a Business degree at the University of Denver. Shortly after finishing her degree, I was born, and my parents decided to move back to Montana to raise a family in the same place that had nurtured them. During her sojourns away from Churchill, Ardi followed national news about the women's movement efforts to pass an Equal Rights Amendment. She was particularly impressed with Gloria Steinem's empowering rhetoric which prompted her to join the National Organization of Women and to read Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*.

My earliest memorable encounter with feminism involved a serious schism between my parents. I had wanted to join my father on an excursion, the details of which now escape me, but he informed me that I couldn't go with him because I was a girl. After he left, my mother found me, greatly distressed, and persuaded me to tell her what had upset me. She told me that dad was quite wrong; that, in fact, "anything boys can do, girls can do better;" and that I must promise not to listen to anyone who told me anything different. I heard and responded to her words with the same attentive earnestness with which I heard scripture. When dad returned home, I told him, with serious naiveté, that what he had told me wasn't true. I had expected him to be as relieved as I was, but my good news did not go over well. My parents had a huge fight which troubled me, but I would get used to it. It would take 30 years for

their marriage to end. Feminist epistemologies, politics, and ethics played a major role in their irreconcilable differences. While I embraced my mom's early feminist lessons, Churchill did not see eye to eye with her.

In my early childhood, all of my friends were boys. This was not so much a result of preference as it was circumstance. There simply weren't any other girls around. We lived on the outskirts of town and did not have any immediate neighbors. My brother and I primarily played together or with the two cousins closest in age to us, Craig and Mark, sons of one of my mom's sisters. One afternoon, Craig informed me that he had bad news, but he also had a plan. The bad news was that the adults – particularly his father and his paternal grandparents – had expressed concern that I, a girl, was spending so much time with boys. At the time, his grandmother, Vi DeBoer, was my first grade teacher, and Craig was in kindergarten. We were the best of friends and always played together during recess. Craig had been informed that steps were being taken to prevent us from playing together. He proposed that I should cut my hair short so that people would think I was a boy. It took some time for him to convince me that this was a good idea, but the fear of being torn apart from my best friend terrified me.

I gathered up the courage to tell my parents that this was what I wanted even though I was too afraid of losing my friend to tell them why this was my plan. Mom, sensing that something was wrong but unable to get me to divulge my secret, was not enthused by my proposal. To my surprise and relief, dad convinced her to let me go through with it. When I showed up at school with a short haircut, my classmates

laughed and asked me if I wanted to be a boy. I was too mortified and embarrassed to respond. I didn't want to be a boy. I just wanted to be able to play with my friend.

Our trick was not going to work. I was marked for life as a girl. This, of course, had already been true, but it marked my first deep awareness of the stigmata of femaleness.

Angry at the authorities who policed my freedom but reluctant to provoke another parental fight over gender, I did not tell my parents about my problems at school where rules were articulated to prevent me from playing with the boys. For a year or two, Craig and I tried to ignore the admonitions, but the teachers monitored us at recess and split us up. In second grade after a lunch-hour intervention, we returned to our classroom for our daily devotions. I no longer recall the Bible passage under review, but I understood Ms. VanderMolen's explication of the text as a message that God did not want me to play with boys either. I was angry enough at the social order, but now it turned out that God, whom I genuinely believed in, was behind these injustices. I gravely considered the matter and decided that, if these were God's people, I did not want to belong to them. I would reject God just as I had heard Satan had done. While the other 16 children bowed their heads to thank God for his bounty, I offered a prayer up to Satan telling him that I was his willing servant. I did not receive a response, but I knew how prayer works. I would need to trust my heart.

The next day at lunch, I determined that, as a follower of Satan, I needed to do something mean to God's followers. I walked up to the teeter-totter where Shauna Oostema, one of the nicest, kindest girls I knew was eating an apple. I knocked it out

of her hand and watched it roll across the ground as the exposed fleshy parts picked up dirt. The look of confusion and betrayal on her face shattered all of my devilish resolve. Then she started to cry. I felt horrible. She called Ms. VanderMolen over who asked me to apologize and then sent me to put my head down on my desk. During my punishment, I realized that I did not have the stomach to be a follower of Satan. I prayed to him and told him I could not hold up my end of the deal. I also prayed to God telling him that I had made a horrible mistake and asked for his forgiveness. Again, no response, but I began to feel better.

Craig and the boys moved on and did not seem overly sad to lose me for a playmate. They had each other. For a year or two, I was too proud and stubborn to admit defeat and try to play with the girls in my class. Also and perhaps more causally, I was painfully shy. I spent recess time by myself, usually with my head in a book. Eventually, a few girls whose parents attended a nearby Baptist church joined our class, and they became my closest friends through high school.

Several decades after these events, my dad would marry my second grade teacher, Connie VanderMolen. When they started dating, I was living in San Francisco. He called to ask me what I thought and what I remembered about her. I relayed that she and Mrs. DeBoer had been the two people who had actively policed my freedom to play with my friends and that, although this memory still angered me, I also wanted him to be happy. Dad reported back that when he asked Connie about my recollections, she had no memory of these events. She was starting out in her teaching career and imagined that she was probably following Vi's tutelage. Connie

and I have never discussed my memories, but she has informed me that she quite consciously refuses any identification with feminism. She remains a steadfast community member even in retirement volunteering at the retirement home, the school, and the church.

In her memoirs, Margaret Miles quips that she once saw a t-shirt announcing a gathering of people who had happy childhoods – “it was to be held in a phone booth.” Miles also notes that “childhood disappointments make the child notice that there are other people with their own perspectives and projects in the world.”¹⁴⁰ I share these anecdotes of my early gender trouble not so much to complain about an unhappy childhood – in many ways it was happy enough – but rather because they provide an illustration of Churchillian orthodoxy that rigidly policed gender. Even the slightest hint of challenge to its social arrangements such as a boy/girl friendship between children in the 1970s would not stand. I had bumped up against the rule of orthodoxy, and it did not allow much room for divergent perspectives or projects in the world. The anecdote about my short-lived deal with the devil also demonstrates that, as a proper Churchillian Christian subject, I negotiated the relations of power that stigmatized femaleness through the knowledge made available to me in the living word.

At Manhattan Christian School, we received the word in our weekly or monthly (depending on age) chapel services where visiting missionaries, preachers, and teachers would share their understanding of the Christian message with us.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 20.

Chapel services and our daily instruction provided not only immersion and instruction in the living word, but the messages we received also fostered and honed an acute alertness to wrongdoing articulated through language attentive to sin and its effects. Pastor Bill Wohlers, chaplain at the Montana State Prison in Deer Lodge, frequently visited and shared stories about God's redeeming grace in the lives of those prisoners who had fallen so far into sin. Dorothy and Will Kirkendall (daughter and son-in-law of Henry Westra) had become CRC-sponsored missionaries working with Wycliffe Bible Translators to bring the good news of God's victory over sin to various regions in Central America. When they made return trips to Churchill, they shared stories of the important work they were doing. Another time, a speaker warned us about all the devil worship that lurked beneath the surface of rock music as he showed us slides of album covers belonging to questionable artists.

The most memorable chapel I recall, however, involved a story of remarkable suffering and forgiveness. A woman from Michigan named Marietta Jaeger spoke to us about the 1973 kidnapping of her 7-year-old daughter, Susie, from a campground just outside of Three Forks, Montana. The morning after receiving a special good night hug from Susie, Jaeger and her husband awakened to find that someone had cut a hole in the side of the children's tent and abducted Susie. A year later, the FBI arrested David Meirhofer, a man who lived in Manhattan, Montana who confessed to killing Susie and three others, one of whom, Sandra Dykman, had roots in the Churchill community. He was suspected in the murder of a dozen other women. Meirhofer also confessed to torturing and raping Susie for a week before strangling

her to death and dismembering her body. While I was captivated by the horrendous story of suffering Jaeger told, which was shocking both because of its pathology and graphic devastation and because it had happened so close to my home, the suffering set the stage for Jaeger's message.

Jaeger related that in the year before Meirhofer was arrested, her prayers of anguish had revealed to her that God grieved her loss with her but that he also wanted her to transform her hatred and desire for revenge into forgiveness and love. She compared her faith journey to the one undertaken by the Biblical figure of Job who suffered greatly and unfairly and whose faith had been tested yet he continually acknowledged God's omniscience. Like Job, she knew that God must have a reason for allowing this to happen. She began to forgive the kidnapper who, prior to his arrest, had taken to calling her with taunts. Eventually, she told him that God loved him, and she began to experience feeling God's love for him. After his arrest, she publicly stated her opposition to capital punishment and befriended his mother. Though Meirhofer committed suicide in jail, Jaeger's journey continued as she began to understand that God had allowed Susie to be a sacrificial lamb just as he had done with Jesus. She also began to understand that God wanted her to take "Susie's parable" into the world to continue spreading the gospel of faith and forgiveness.¹⁴¹

In addition to chapel services, we received daily instruction in living Christian stories in our daily devotions and classes. Ray Leenstra, a man who believed that God

¹⁴¹A few missing holes in my memories of this chapel have been filled with my father's assistance. He shares my interest in local history and remembers the events well. In one of his many garage sale adventures, he acquired an envelope of local newspaper clippings from the case along with a book written by the chapel speaker. Marietta Jaeger, *The Lost Child* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983).

ought to be a part of every square inch of Christian living and education, was the school principal during my teen years.¹⁴² He also taught my junior high math classes. Because they took place immediately after the noon recess, we customarily had devotions before launching into figures and calculations. It was not uncommon, however, for Mr. Leenstra to become so passionate about the Bible verses of the day that we would skip entire math lessons. When we got too far behind, we would have a couple of intense days playing catch-up.

Even though I abandoned my Christian Reformed faith shortly after leaving Churchill, I have taken good care of the Bible I received in junior high with my name engraved on the front cover. I never shed the habit of treating the text with respect. Revisiting the five chapters that make up the book of James, I see my highlighter marks carefully mapping the abundant instructions Mr. Leenstra explored with us. It is one of the most marked up books in my Bible. Rereading those passages now, I see pieces of my ethics and politics reflected back at me. Though I am not always successful at being “quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry,”¹⁴³ I value this humble intra-active way of being in the world. In the admonishment that one’s faith ought to be acted upon,¹⁴⁴ I see a version of my conviction that the appropriate response to suffering is to attend to it with care while working to improve

¹⁴² After 13 years at Manhattan Christian, he and his family moved to Redlands, California where he was administrator at Redlands Christian School for 25 years. He recently died and my high school classmates widely shared this memorial video of him on social media: <http://vimeo.com/62709468>. His obituary is here: <http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/bozemandailychronicle/obituary.aspx?pid=164601059>, accessed May 26, 2014.

¹⁴³ James 1:19.

¹⁴⁴ James 2:14-25.

conditions of possibility for more flourishing and less oppression. In the warning to rich oppressors,¹⁴⁵ I see my disdain for conspicuous consumption, corporate greed, and rampant waste of resources.

When I was in junior high, I witnessed another encounter between feminism and Churchillian orthodoxy. Mom decided to run for election to the school board. Women were not allowed to hold leadership positions in the CRC, and although this position held tacit sway at Manhattan Christian School, it had not been codified there. When a position on the school board opened up, mom decided to run for election. She encountered significant opposition in the community, particularly from the older generations, but she was determined. I listened to her repeatedly practice her well-reasoned and persuasive speech. We picked her outfit together - an emerald green silk blouse, which I loved. When she returned home from the meeting where the vote was held, she greeted me with a big smile and told me she had won. I was bursting with pride. Dad was silently neutral but became more negative with time as her position demanded significant attention. Mom was already busy as the primary caretaker of me and my brother, and she did all of the administrative and financial work for the business my parents owned together. In this and myriad other ways, dad was content with the status quo while mom worked to challenge it. Then and now, I tended to see things from her perspective.

By my junior high years, I had a sense that the dominant ideologies at work at Manhattan Christian School and the Churchill community did not define the kind of

¹⁴⁵ James 5:1-6.

world I wanted to live in or reproduce. While mom's school board election represented a small but important victory, I began to chafe against the constraints of CRC orthodoxy and the conservative politics it advocated. While most of Churchill lauded the rise of the Moral Majority and Ronald Reagan's escalation of the Cold War against the Evil Empire, mom and I enthusiastically watched the Democratic National Convention and sat riveted as Geraldine Ferraro became the first woman to garner the Vice-Presidential nomination from a major American political party. I signed up for and attended Montana State University's "Expanding Your Horizons" weekend program to orient young girls towards career paths not typically taken by women. I became convinced that going to a good college would be the best way to leave home and find better worlds.

Although I espoused and subscribed to political persuasions that were in the radical minority in Churchill, I nonetheless understood myself and the world through the knowledge conveyed to me by CRC authorities. The Christian Reformed understanding of history placed inexplicable happenings and interventions in the world, as described in both the Old and New Testaments, in a previous era that my classmates and I colloquially referred to as "Bible times." To our minds, the Bible fully contained all of the accumulated history and wisdom that humans had amassed since the sixth day of creation when God breathed life into Adam and Eve.¹⁴⁶

In junior high, we took a field trip to the nearby Museum of the Rockies as part our required course on Montana History. The museum had recently established a

¹⁴⁶ Genesis 1: 26-31

world-class paleontology research facility, and the dinosaur exhibit presented a problem to my understanding of history. I asked Mr. Walhof, who taught several of my History and Bible classes, how one could account for the multi-million year existence of dinosaurs when the book of Genesis clearly stated that God created everything in 6 days. He took a deep breath and explained to me that there were different theories which the church was divided over. Some people maintained that God brought the earth into existence complete with dinosaur fossils. Others argued for a metaphoric understanding of the days of creation such that the one day might actually refer to lengthy epochs. The latter option seemed most plausible to me. He said that the important thing to know was that God made us all. When I mentioned this information to my mom, she affirmed that this was indeed a controversy in the church. A physics professor at Calvin College advocated a position more along the lines of the metaphoric view, but his view had caused a lot of controversy in the CRC.¹⁴⁷

Although I took several science courses in high school – geology, biology, chemistry, and physics – the topic of evolution rarely came up. Mr. Selles, the same man who taught me the Heidelberg Catechism on Sundays, taught all of the science classes from 8-12th grade and some of my math classes. At the beginning of sophomore year biology class, he had us skip the first chapter of the textbook which

¹⁴⁷ Howard Van Til, *The Fourth Day: What the Bible and the Heavens Are Telling Us about the Creation* (Grand Rapids, MI: B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1986). Van Til describes himself as a physicist and astronomer interested in taking the Bible seriously. The CRC's current position statement on "Creation & Science" states that scientific and theological interpretations are subject to Biblical authority. <http://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/position-statements/creation-science>, accessed May 26, 2014.

dealt with the topic of origins of the universe. I was happy to have a lighter homework assignment and might have forgotten this altogether but a related anecdote stands out in my memory. Mr. Selles had finished giving his lecture and we were having one of our frequent free form conversations before moving on to the next class. One of my classmates asked him why we hadn't read that chapter. He replied that it wasn't important for the kinds of things we would be learning, and while it was a decent textbook, the first chapter was a lot of speculation about the possibility of evolution. Then he laughed and said we didn't need to waste our time on outrageous theories about humans being related to monkeys.

Today, I wish I knew what the textbook had said or even which textbook it was so that I could find it and see what a CRC-approved textbook might have said that was considered too radical. My desire to return to the text reminds me just how much of a literalist I am as I immediately assume that knowledge exists in the book. It would be just as accurate to say that Mr. Selles' understanding of the world, which he conveyed to me, was the knowledge that mattered. He was also my cross-country running coach, and I have fond memories of riding in his truck talking with him as we trailed the faster runners who logged more miles.

In a lecture on dimensions, he told us about a novel in which geometric figures who live in a two dimensional world discover worlds with more dimensions. Until it had journeyed to the third dimension, the square was not capable of comprehending a sphere. This was, for Mr. Selles, an apt description of the ways humans were incapable of comprehending the mystery of God. Mr. Selles described

the story with such affection that, many years later, I wrote to him and asked for the book title, which I had forgotten. He forwarded it to me – Edwin Abbot’s 1884 novel, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*. Upon reviewing the text, I was annoyed to note that women were represented as simple lines whereas men were represented as more complex polygons. I doubt Mr. Selles would have observed or been troubled by this point, but his appreciation of both the book and the sense of wonder it conveyed stayed with me.

If it were possible, I would like to have a conversation with him about creationism and evolution now. Unfortunately, he is no longer with us. In 2003, he and three students were killed in a Driver’s Ed accident. The students killed were classmates of some of my cousins, and one of them was the son of my 4th grade teacher. The accident both devastated and galvanized the Churchill community members as they raised funds to build a Memorial Event Center where my nieces now play basketball.¹⁴⁸

By the time I was 16 and around the same time that Rob Kroes was conducting his research on Churchill, I had finished my in-depth study of the Heidelberg Catechism, and my classmates had begun to make their public Professions of Faith. I was ambivalent. Although I understood and agreed with basic church doctrine, I was troubled by a few issues. Teenagers who were interested in making a Profession of Faith at my church were required to consult with Pastor Gunnink to

¹⁴⁸ In October of 2013, Manhattan Christian also dedicated a memorial park to the victims. A news report with video of the event is available here: <http://www.nbcmontana.com/news/manhattan-christian-dedicates-memorial-garden-to-crash-victims/22245308>, accessed May 26, 2014.

ensure their readiness. I decided to bring my issues to him. When we met, I told him that I considered myself a Christian and that I believed that the Bible was the word of God, but that I had not been able to reconcile my reading of scripture with the CRC's positions regarding women. Specifically, I relayed that I did not see a scriptural basis for refusing to allow women to serve in ecclesiastical office nor did I think that abortion constituted murder. In my mind, it was quite possible to be a Christian and to be pro-choice. While I had not expected him to agree with me, I had assumed that we could have a conversation about these issues. I sincerely thought there might be room for different views in the CRC if they were faithfully based on God's word. I was wrong. He told me that it sounded like I had some serious concerns and that I should return when I had sorted them out. I was stunned.

What I did not realize was that my questing represented a direct attack on the purity of CRC doctrines. Whereas I understood my questions as effects of a faithful engagement with and an attempt to reconcile both the word of God and the gender disparities I saw in the world I inhabited, Pastor Gunnink heard them as deviation from orthodoxy. Like my great-grandfather Menko, he understood himself as gatekeeper of the pure church. From his position of authority, derived both from the community and the tradition, Gunnink had the power to determine which kinds of Faithful Christians could belong to the CRC. To Faithful Daughters who questioned the structuring order of the place assigned to them, the Faith of the Fathers responded not with an invitation to dialogue but rather by suggesting departure and return only when or if changed. In the CRC, Prodigal Children are only welcomed back when

they repent of the error of their ways and assent to the purity of Church doctrine. The bough of belonging that had begun to strain when my 7-year-old self made a short-lived deal with the devil finally cracked. Churchillians belonged to God, but it was no longer clear to me that I belonged to them. To use Edwin Abbot's language, for the line to become a polygon, I would need to find a world that encouraged and allowed me to experience more than one dimension.

In the midst of my disorientation and difficulty making sense of my relationship to the Christian Reformed Church, music provided a way forward. I had been playing saxophone for several years, and with the help of private lessons, I excelled at reading music. Playing by ear, however, was never my strong suit, but this was not a problem in my text-based Protestant culture. We read music. After a few years playing classical music, I found a new teacher, a local musician and public school teacher named Alan, who played jazz. I had never really listened to it before, but I was intrigued both by learning new skills and by the prospect of inhabiting jazz worlds which seemed to be populated with the most interesting people. The first time that Alan played an avant-garde jazz track for me, I wondered how it could count as music rather than mere noise. This was a curious problem to be explored, however, and I immersed myself in practice and slowly began to understand it.

Alan suggested that it might be good for me to attend some summer jazz programs. Mom agreed. She wanted both to expose me to the larger world and to help me build my skills. True to the over-determined gendered pattern of the Christian working family structure operative in Churchill, my father worked long hours 6 days

a week and left the activity and decisions about raising children, particularly daughters, to mom. I loved the idea of getting out of Montana. Perusing the advertisements in *Downbeat* magazine, we decided on the summer jazz camp affiliated with the Monterey Jazz Festival. At Manhattan Christian, I was a dissenter, a girl who did not fit the norms. In Monterey, I was just another kid with a horn learning to make music with others. My rural background was not a natural fit with the local prep school kids, and I mostly kept to myself getting to know only the other sax players. While I enjoyed playing with talented musicians my age, I especially loved seeing the central coast of California. We performed in different venues, including the Kuumbwa Jazz Club in Santa Cruz. At the time, I had no idea that I would someday return to this town as a graduate student.

The summer between my junior and senior year, after it had become clear to me that I did not belong in the Christian Reformed Church, I enrolled in a summer music program at Berklee College of Music in Boston. Compared to the other students, my skills were intermediate at best. Unlike either my rural experience in Montana or my prep school encounter in Monterey, I was now surrounded by people my age who took their passions seriously, and we were in a place that nourished those passions. I felt at home there, and I began to think of myself as belonging to a community of musicians.

At Berklee, I learned music theory from a saxophonist named Herman Johnson. He interspersed his lessons on intervals, chord progressions, and scales with his philosophy of life which he summarized for us as “Herman Johnson’s 10

Commandments.” While I no longer remember the individual commandments, I still recall his grand summation: “Whatever you do, do it with love.” Herman practiced what he preached, and he was beloved by his students, myself included. In an effort both to revisit the influences on my teenage self and to indulge my curiosity regarding his path, I recently looked him up on the internet. In addition to a few references to the Herman Johnson Jazz Quartet, I found a news clip from a local Boston television station which had interviewed him for a short profile piece. After 17 years of teaching music at Berklee and public schools, Herman Johnson now lives on welfare, teaches private music lessons, and plays in bands at jazz clubs while performing frequently as a street musician. He explains to the reporter that he keeps playing because of love. “Music,” he says, “it means love. It means connecting. It means sharing and caring and hopefully a smile.”¹⁴⁹ He still practices what he preaches.

Then and now, Herman Johnson’s message and the love with which he imparted it orient my passionate engagement with the world. When I graduated from high school, I massaged his wisdom into my graduation speech arguing that his model of love was quintessentially Christian. Love and faithfulness, however, were not enough to gain access to full membership in the Christian Reformed Church, and the Prodigal Daughter joined the small percentage of people who left the CRC because its “clearly defined norms ... enforced by the giving and withholding of acceptance in the community” were “too limiting, too intolerant, and too clannish.”¹⁵⁰ My

¹⁴⁹ The WEBN clip is available here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nxv7x_cw9aA, accessed May 26, 2014.

¹⁵⁰ Gary D. Bouma, “Keeping the Faithful: Patterns of Membership Retention in the Christian Reformed Church” in *Sociological Analysis* 1980, 41:3, 259-264.

incarnation of the Prodigal Daughter left Churchill and went out into the world with a carrier bag filled with a well-developed alertness to wrongdoing, a predilection to look for knowledge in written texts, an ongoing commitment to faithful engagement with the world, and a hunger for better stories and worlds for women and girls. In addition to a serious formation as a Child of the Book, she had also acquired a nascent attunement both to the unwritten sounds of jazz and to improvisation in the service of love.

PART II

Inheriting Religion in Houses of Higher Education

So much of what one has become includes “gatherings” along the way that have helped to create one: the loving involvements, the commitments, the unbreakable connections beyond blood ties, first loyalties, intimacies across color, class, nationality and age. One can return to one’s birthplace for a short time only – no matter how much love evidences itself on both sides. There is always the implication of betrayal once one asserts herself, breaks the cultural pattern, and refuses to participate in the indoctrination of the clan. . . . From the time I experienced myself as a woman and a stranger in a strange land or in exodus toward new time and new space, I came to know home was not a place. Home is a movement, a quality of relationship, a state where people seek to be “their own,” and increasingly responsible for the world.

– Nelle Morton, *The Journey is Home*

Many thoughtful participants in the contemporary movement towards reconciliation describe the process as a journey. I understand people to be emphasizing the open-ended quality of reconciliation – that there is no tribunal, no final determinations of guilt, innocence, and clemency, and no formal declarations of closure. Rather, there is this ongoing domain of our lives in which we sustain an open commitment to social and cultural change. Reconciliation consists of efforts to acknowledge the harm of the past and its links to the present, to undo some of this painful history and to work towards new relations between and among us – relations as yet not fully imagined. The word ‘journey’ is thus extremely important for us, but a journey is always more than metaphor, and in the case of reconciliation, I think that the term is meant quite literally.

– Deborah Bird Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonisation*

Chapter 3

Lands of Liberal Learning

In the autumn of 1990, mom and I drove east on Interstate 90, tracing in reverse the routes and migration patterns of settler colonies who had come before us as we made our way from Churchill, Montana to Appleton, Wisconsin where I began my undergraduate studies at Lawrence University, a small liberal arts college that appealed to me because it was not religious, because I felt at home when I had visited as a prospective student, and because it offered the possibility of pursuing a Bachelor of Arts degree in the College in conjunction with a Bachelor of Music at the Lawrence Conservatory.

Located in east-central Wisconsin about 100 miles north of Milwaukee, Appleton is one of many towns along the Fox River, which flows northward from Lake Winnebago on a 40 mile course to Lake Michigan's Green Bay.¹⁵¹ The river's name derives from its Chippewa name, "Wagoshiwi-sibi" from "wagosh" for fox.¹⁵² The Fox Cities form the core of the third largest contemporary metropolitan area of Wisconsin.¹⁵³ The Fox River Valley is both a fertile agricultural area and a manufacturing region home to one of the country's leading centers of papermaking

¹⁵¹ The Fox Cities include: Appleton, Buchanan, Clayton, Combined Locks, Freedom, Grand Chute, Greenville, Harrison, Hortonville, Kaukauna, Kimberly, Little Chute, Menasha, Neenah, Oshkosh, and Sherwood.

¹⁵² Wisconsin Historical Society Dictionary of Wisconsin History.

<https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/dictionary/index.asp> , accessed March 17, 2014.

¹⁵³ Per the 2010 census, the largest metropolitan areas are Milwaukee with a population of 1,751,316; Madison with a population of 630,569; and the Fox Cities with a population of 385,264. In 1990, the census numbers were slightly smaller with Milwaukee at 1,607,184; Madison at 427,295, and the Fox Cities at 315,121.

and printing.¹⁵⁴ Lawrence University sits atop a bluff on the north shore of the Fox River where all of the facilities combined occupy less than one square mile of land.

Lawrence is a residential college which means that for all four years of enrollment, students live on campus in a community that weaves academic inquiry with shared meals, recreational activities, and leisure time. When I arrived, total enrollment lingered around 1,200 students, which seemed huge compared to my high school of 90 students. Some of my classmates chafed at what they felt were too close quarters, but for me, used to immersion in a smaller, tight-knit community, Lawrence offered what felt like the perfect mix of freedom and structure. My new community was made up of mostly white, middle-class students who primarily called Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Illinois home. While the student body included admittees from across the country and a small but diverse international population, the vast majority were descendents of white settler colonies whose histories tied into webs of increasingly dispersed immigrant communities that had once been structured by a range of Christianities, with the largest demographics belonging to Lutherans and Methodists from Scandinavian and Germanic countries followed closely by German Roman Catholics.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ For example, the Fortune 500 company, Kimberly-Clark Corporation, founded in the Fox Cities makes personal care paper-based products including Kleenex facial tissue; Kotex feminine hygiene products; Cottonell, Scott, and Andrex toilet papers; Wypall utility wipes; Huggies diapers, and Depends diapers for adults. Since graduating from Lawrence, I have made a game of looking for Kimberly-Clark products in public restrooms throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe. Nine times out of ten, I find both fixtures (e.g. towel-dispensers) and paper products that are generic or branded products manufactured and distributed by Kimberly-Clark. It's more difficult than one might imagine to go to the bathroom without being connected to the Fox Valley.

¹⁵⁵ For a thorough analysis of the demographics related to specific religions populating the Plains and Great Lakes region, see: Philip Barlow and Mark Silk, editors. *Religion and Public Life in the Midwest: America's Common Denominator?* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2004). In keeping with

Like many private colleges in the United States today, Lawrence has no official attachment to religious organizations, but it was founded and shaped by subjects who belonged to Christian denominations. The story of relevant interests and conditions that led to the formation of Lawrence University begins with the figure of Eleazar Williams, an Episcopal missionary whose great-grandmother, Eunice Kanenstenhawi Williams, at the age of 7, was taken captive along with her New England Puritan family and approximately 100 others by French and Mohawk forces during a 1704 raid on Deerfield, Massachusetts. Eunice's mother was killed by her captors en route to Quebec, but her father, the well-known Puritan minister, John Williams (a relative of influential Puritan ministers Jonathan Edwards, Cotton Mather, and Increase Mather) was released after two years of government negotiations.

Williams wrote about his experiences in his memoir, *The Redeemed Captive Returning to Zion*, which became one of the more well-known colonial captivity narratives of the era.¹⁵⁶ Summarizing the effects of the Puritan captivity narrative genre, Tracy Fessenden, a contemporary scholar of American Religion and Literature, explains that it functioned to render "Indians invisible by rewriting contact with them as part of an ongoing dialogue between God and the Puritan soul, a rewriting that both veiled and underwrote the violence required of Puritans to empty Indian lands of the resistant spiritual and physical difference of Indians

the Germanic influence, these regions have a disproportionately high number of Anabaptists (Amish, Mennonite, and Hutterite Brethren) communities.

¹⁵⁶ In the 19th century, James Fenimore Cooper drew on this captivity narrative when writing his well-known novel, *The Last of the Mohicans*.

themselves.”¹⁵⁷ Embodying this description perfectly, Williams’ text describes what he calls his “redemption” from the forced captivity and sinful ways of both “savages” and “Jesuits” before he and four of his children were “redeemed” to Zion – i.e. released and returned to their Puritan communities.

Eunice, however, remained a permanently unredeemed daughter. She had been adopted by a Catholic Mohawk family just south of Montreal, and the French government refused to interfere with adopted captives. She eventually married François-Xavier Arosen, a Mohawk man, who took her last name and with whom she had three children. Although she was never persuaded to leave her Catholic Mohawk family, after 36 years of separation, Eunice and her children visited and then maintained contact with the Williams family in Massachusetts. In 1800, her grandson, Thomas Thorakwaneken Williams, sent his son, Eleazar, to Massachusetts to attend a Congregationalist missionary school (which later became Dartmouth College) where Eleazar renounced his Catholicism and served as a Congregationalist missionary for the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions.¹⁵⁸

In 1815, Eleazar left the Congregationalists to join the Episcopal Church and take up missionary work with the Oneida Indians. By all accounts, he was an eloquent preacher, and for a time, wielded much influence.¹⁵⁹ In 1820, he agreed to act as envoy for both the New York Ogden Land Company and the United States

¹⁵⁷ Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, The Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 6.

¹⁵⁸ Karen Woods Weierman, *One Nation, One Blood: Interracial Marriage in American Fiction, Scandal, and Law, 1820-1870* (Boston: University of Massachusetts, 2005), 67.

¹⁵⁹ See, for example, the entry on him for the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* funded by the Department of Canadian Heritage, http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/williams_eleazer_8E.html, accessed March 3, 2014.

government to persuade a group of Oneida to move west. Thomas Ogden and Secretary of War, John C. Calhoun, sponsored him as a way to solve what they saw as “the Indian problem” in their efforts to own and exploit native lands in New York.

Williams, imagining himself as a new leader of a Christian Indian empire made up of Stockbridge, Munsee, Brotherton, Oneida and other Christian Indians from New York and New England, led a delegation to the Fox River Valley to negotiate with Ho-Chunk and Menominee chiefs about buying land. The negotiations dragged on for a decade, and during the process, Williams married a 14-year-old Menominee-French girl named Marie Madeline Jourdain who had inherited a large tract of land on the Fox River. Eventually, the Menominee granted land to the Oneida who then repudiated Williams’ leadership, and the Episcopal Church replaced him with a different missionary. Running out of funds and other kinds of support, Williams returned to New York in 1844 where he contacted and borrowed money from Amos Adams Lawrence, a Boston merchant, philanthropist, and Episcopalian abolitionist.¹⁶⁰ Williams put up over 5,000 acres of his wife’s property as collateral. The debt was never paid, and Lawrence took ownership of the land.¹⁶¹

Looking for a way to increase the value of his unexpected property gains by attracting more settlers to the Fox River area, Amos A. Lawrence decided to establish

¹⁶⁰ Amos A. Lawrence was also instrumental in establishing the University of Kansas as he played a major role in abolition efforts that took place along the Kansas-Nebraska border. The town of Lawrence, Kansas is named after him. The town of Appleton, Wisconsin is named in honor of his father-in-law, Samuel Appleton.

¹⁶¹ The continued adventures of Eleazar Williams include a claim he made to be the “Lost Dauphine,” i.e. the child of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. According to the Wisconsin Historical Society, he convinced enough people of this claim to generate a steady supply of trans-Atlantic donations though he ultimately died in poverty. <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/odd/archives/001202.asp>, accessed March 2, 2014.

“an institution of higher learning or college.” Writing to his agent in Green Bay, he indicated that while he would prefer the school to be organized by the Episcopal Church, he knew that was “out of the question, as our form of worship is only adopted slowly and will never be popular in this country.” Instead, he proposed that the Methodist Church might be a good sponsor as there were already a significant number of Methodist settlers in the area, and he had a “high opinion of the adoption of principles of Methodism to the people of the West.”¹⁶² In 1847, he commissioned three Methodist ministers with connections to the Fox River Valley to establish a frontier school for the purpose of promoting “gratuitous advantage to Germans and Indians of both sexes.”¹⁶³ Enthused about the proposition, the Methodists raised the required matching funds and construction commenced. Classes began at Lawrence University in the fall of 1849 with 5 teachers and an enrollment of 35 students, 13 of whom were Oneida. The college joined the small but growing list of coeducational institutions in the country.¹⁶⁴

In 1880, a young man named Samuel Plantz graduated from Lawrence and continued his studies first at the University of Berlin and then at the Theological School of Boston University where he became a Methodist minister. In 1894, he accepted a position as President of Lawrence and initiated what would be a 30-year administration. Under his leadership, the student body grew from 200 to over 1,000,

¹⁶² Quotations are taken from letters as reported by the Appleton Public Library - <http://apl.org/community/founding/lawrence>, accessed March 2, 2014.

¹⁶³ Quotation from Lawrence University web site, <http://www.lawrence.edu/info/about/history>, accessed March 2, 2014.

¹⁶⁴ Lawrence is often cited as the first coeducational institution without an official religious affiliation. Others from the same era include: Oberlin (Presbyterian) in 1837; Hillsdale (Baptist) in 1844; Franklin (Baptist) in 1845; and Otterbein (Church of the United Brethren in Christ) in 1849.

the faculty increased from 9 to 68, the endowment expanded from \$100,000 to \$2 million, 8 major buildings were constructed, and the Conservatory of Music was established.¹⁶⁵ These developments were consonant with larger winds of change that reshaped all of higher learning in North America and Europe.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, the dominant higher education model in the United States changed dramatically. The Protestant establishment colleges, which functioned as the nation's higher education network, shifted away from colonial and antebellum formats which Julie Reuben, a historian of education, describes as advocating a "unity of truth" model where a Christian natural theology framework attempted to reconcile knowledge about the natural world with God's divine revelation as revealed in scripture.¹⁶⁶ Under the classical curriculum, studies included courses in mathematics, antiquity, rhetoric and oratory, natural philosophy, astronomy, chemistry, mineralogy, and political economy with a senior capstone course in moral and mental philosophy that drew together the accumulated knowledge and placed it in a Christian framework.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ For these statistics and a thumbnail sketch of all of Lawrence's history, see <http://www2.lawrence.edu/library/archives/timetrad/timetrad.html>, accessed March 2014.

¹⁶⁶ Reuben's institutional history is based on extensive research in the education journals and magazines of the period with specific research attention focused on eight representative universities – Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Johns Hopkins, Chicago, Stanford, Michigan, and California at Berkeley. Slightly complicating the traditional story (as told by Laurence Veysey in his 1970 *The Emergence of the American University*) of an education "revolution" in the late 19th century, she is more alert to continuities between the classical college and the modern university yet aware of the undeniably radical changes in the late 19th century. Her research indicates that "university reformers continued to view piety and moral discipline as one of the aims of higher education, but wanted to replace older authoritarian methods with new ones."

Julie A. Reuben, *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 12.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

The classical college unity of truth model unraveled throughout the 19th century as American scholars responded, with varying degrees of resistance, both to the influence of David Friedrich Strauss and the Tübingen School whose historical approach to the New Testament denied the divinity of Jesus and to Charles Darwin's publication of *On the Origin of the Species* which challenged the precepts of Baconian science that had undergirded Christian natural theology. Education reformers visited German institutions and returned to the United States advocating for a broadened curriculum to include more modern and practical subjects. At the same time, the United States Congress began promoting the teaching of scientific knowledge, which had previously circulated primarily through learned societies, medical schools, and non-collegiate academies. The Morrill Land-Grant Acts of 1862 and 1890 called for and funded the creation of agriculture colleges throughout the country. In short, the late 19th century witnessed the emergence of the modern university form which has historically been associated with the demise of an explicitly Protestant educational framework and the introduction of a new secularized curriculum.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁸ George Marsden's scholarship currently sets the standard for analyzing higher education and the process of secularization in this period. He marks a chronological distinction between "methodological secularization," prominent in the late 19th and early 20th century, that advocated scientific methods without necessarily critiquing or discrediting religion and its successor, "ideological secularization," which explicitly rejected religion. In his analysis, the liberal Protestantism which dominated universities in the early 20th century eased the transition between these two modes of secularization. Reuben positions her work as complicating Marsden's analysis regarding which players caused or might have prevented what she calls "the marginalization of morality." That complication and her thesis about explicit discourses of morality, while interesting, are beyond the scope of this particular Prodigal story. George Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). See also John H. Roberts and James Turner, *The Sacred and Secular University* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

A century later, an interdisciplinary team of scholars assessing this formation of the modern university in both the United States and Europe described the late 19th century as a period marked by:

disciplinarization and professionalization of knowledge, that is to say, by the creation of permanent institutional structures designed both to produce new knowledge and to reproduce the producers of knowledge. The creation of multiple disciplines was premised on the belief that systematic research required skilled concentration on the multiple separate arenas of reality, which was partitioned rationally into distinct groupings of knowledge. ... [F]rom then on the universities became the primary site of the continuing tension between the arts (humanities) and the sciences. ... In the course of the nineteenth century, the various disciplines spread out like a fan, covering a range of epistemological positions.¹⁶⁹

The new arrangement of disciplines that emerged between the Civil War and the first World War included mathematics and the experimental natural sciences (physics, chemistry, biology) at one end with the humanities or “arts and letters” (philosophy, literature, painting, sculpture, and musicology) on the other end. History, which had previously narrated morally edifying tales about bygone eras, was reconstituted as a discipline focused on establishing facts about the past, and it joined

¹⁶⁹ Immanuel Wallerstein et al, *Open the Social Sciences: Report of the Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1996), 7-9. Commission members included: Immanuel Wallerstein (Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Sociology, Binghamton University), Calestous Juma (Executive Secretary, UN Convention on Biodiversity), Evelyn Fox Keller (Professor of History and Philosophy of Science, MIT), Jürgen Kocka (Professor of the History of the Industrial World, Freie Universität, Berlin), Dominique Lecourt (Professor of the Philosophy and History of Science, Université de Paris), Valentin Y. Mudimbe (Professor of Comparative Literature, French and Italian, Stanford University), Kinhide Mushakoji (Professor International Studies, Meiji Gakuin University), Ilya Prigogine (Director, Ilya Prigogine Center for Studies in Statistical Mechanics and Complex Systems, University of Texas at Austin), Peter J. Taylor (Professor of Geography, Loughborough University), and Michel-Rolph Trouillot (Krieger-Eisenhower Distinguished Professor of Anthropology, and Director, Institute for Global Studies in Culture, Power and History, The Johns Hopkins University).

five new disciplines – economics, sociology, political science, anthropology, and the oriental sciences – under the banner of the human or social sciences.¹⁷⁰

By the early 20th century, the massive changes to the education system elicited significant critique from educators and reformers. After decades of disparaging the classical college, public discourse shifted to display a newfound nostalgia for the “unity, moral purpose, and high ideals” that were seen as missing from the new universities. Some conservative Protestants, the most extreme critics of the new structure of knowledge, continued to insist on grounding education in Biblical authority, and they developed their own educational institutions to do just that. For instance, the history of Calvin College, touched on in Part I, can be seen as an example of the conservative Protestant education model.¹⁷¹ Moderates associated with small private institutions began to identify as “liberal arts colleges” defined in part by maintaining the smaller environment of the traditional college while selectively adopting some of the university reforms. Moderates within the larger research universities shared ideas with their liberal arts colleagues and campaigned for another wave of university reform.¹⁷²

As reformers across the land took up the language of “liberal education” to describe and promote their versions of ideal education models, the phrase attached to a wide variety of referents which shared the characteristic of extolling freedom, liberty, and liberation but with significantly different understandings of what those

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 9-14.

¹⁷¹ The web sites for both Calvin College and Manhattan Christian School describe their education models as “liberal arts.”

¹⁷² Reuben, 230.

words denoted and what kind of models ought to be deployed. By 1945, self-described liberals and conservatives across political and epistemological spectrums used a language of liberal education so broad that the Eighth American Scientific Congress concluded that “There must be some confusion here, if only in the use of our terms.”¹⁷³

To help navigate the tropics of Liberal Education during this era, Bruce A. Kimball’s book, *Orators & Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education*, provides a useful map.¹⁷⁴ A historian and philosopher of education, Kimball develops two heuristic devices or typologies for mapping the varieties of liberal education at home in the modern university. Specifically, he distinguishes between what he calls the *artes liberales* which are closer to the classical unity of truth model, and he juxtaposes it to the late 19th century emergent “liberal-free idea” that drew significantly on Enlightenment thinkers like Locke, Rousseau, Hume, Diderot,

¹⁷³ Henry W. Holmes, “What is a Liberal Education?” *Proceedings: Eighth American Scientific Congress Held in Washington May 10-18, 1940* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, 1945), vol. 12, p. 147.

¹⁷⁴ Bruce Kimball, *Orators & Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education*, expanded edition (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1995). While I find Kimball’s analysis useful when discussing late 19th and 20th century transformations in education, I am troubled by his larger project. Specifically, he draws a distinction between those he calls Orators and Philosophers with both traditions harkening back to Ancient Greece and Rome. He associates the Orators with Cicero, Isocrates, and the sophists while Plato and Aristotle belong to the Philosophers. He sees these two schools as representing respectively *oratio* and *ratio* or the two parts of *logos*. In the ancient context, these distinctions make sense, but Kimball attempts to map them onto education trends covering over 2000 years of “Western” history. Kimball is aware of the potentially anachronistic feature of this project but considers it worthwhile nonetheless. Given the problem of anachronism, however, I am unconvinced that these two poles can adequately do the work he asks of them. Too much is lost in the process. For instance, he reads Augustine and Luther as exemplifying the *oratio* tradition while he reads Aquinas as occupying the *ratio* tradition. I contend that it is more accurate to read all three of these theologians in the *ratio* tradition as they disagree over interpretations and uses of Plato and Aristotle all the while disavowing the nonetheless constitutive *oratio* tradition. Despite the problems with Kimball’s larger heuristic sorting framework, he excels at reading and relaying the trends of specific eras, particularly the period that witnessed the emergence of the modern university.

Newton, and Descartes. Where the *artes liberales* aimed to produce an elite citizenry of societal leaders, the liberal-free idea emphasized the volition of the individual and tended toward more egalitarian visions of society. In lieu of the old model's coherent body of classical language and texts prescribing shared commitments to ongoing values and standards, the new model advocated skepticism, tolerance, and freedom from a priori standards. Where the *artes liberales* subordinated inquiry to the transmission of traditional knowledge, the liberal-free idea emphasized intellect and rationality.¹⁷⁵

During the post-Civil War decades, as the new German model of scholarship and academic research became increasingly influential, several debates about "liberal education" took place with some arguing for a model more akin to the *artes liberales* while others argued for approaches closer to the liberal-free ideal. One can see, for instance, these different understandings of liberal education at play in the late 19th century debate between zoologist, Thomas H. Huxley (representing the liberal-free idea) and the writer, Matthew Arnold (representing the *artes liberales*). Huxley, an ardent Darwinian, delivered a public lecture entitled "Science and Culture" in which he critiqued Arnold's emphasis upon the classics and argued instead that the natural sciences should be a cornerstone of liberal education.¹⁷⁶ Huxley delivered the address at the opening of Johns Hopkins University, and his views were popular with research university supporters. Arnold's ideas, which he had expressed in his public lecture,

¹⁷⁵ Kimball, 37-38, 119-122.

¹⁷⁶ Kimball, 171-174.

“Literature and Science,” on the other hand, were particularly lauded at small colleges across the country.

Eventually, the liberal-free idea would come to dominate higher education insofar as, in the words of one commentator, the “new meaning of a liberal education that superseded all the others was the search for truth – not abiding truth, but contingent truth, based on facts and sources.”¹⁷⁷ This move toward the liberal free idea, however, was neither uniform nor continuous but rather an ongoing source of struggle. Kimball notes that these abstracted types, while descriptive of historical trends, are more caricatures than accurate descriptions of specific institutions. The historical landscape of Liberal Learning in the 20th century is better understood in terms of what he calls “the accommodations.”¹⁷⁸

The *artes liberales* accommodation advocated studying the classics but, in lieu of its prior emphasis on sustaining tradition, now directed its approach towards enhancing critical intellect. This accommodation was exemplified by “New Humanist” orientations advocated by liberal Protestant and Jesuit Catholic institutions. It can equally be seen in the approaches promoted by Alexander Meiklejohn and Robert Maynard Hutchins. Meiklejohn was Dean of Brown University from 1901-1912 before becoming President of Amherst College until 1923 when he left to found the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin-

¹⁷⁷ Sheldon Rothblatt, *Tradition and Change in English Liberal Education: An Essay in History and Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), 173. Quoted in Kimball, 171.

¹⁷⁸ Kimball, 219.

Madison. Hutchins was Dean of Yale Law School from 1927-1929 before becoming President and then Chancellor of the University of Chicago until 1951.

The liberal-free accommodation, on the other hand, maintained that the study of the natural sciences and “modern” subjects provided appropriate means for cultivating virtuous character in the emergent elite of educated citizens. Kimball sees examples of this accommodation in the 1930s Oberlin plan which took evolution as its “Basic Philosophy” and organized its curriculum around an evolutionary scheme of knowledge.¹⁷⁹ Other examples of this accommodation can be seen in the legacies of Abraham Flexner, a medical school reformer and founder of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, and Frank Aydelotte, President of Swarthmore College from 1921 to 1940.

While many institutions and reformers can be identified with one of the accommodations, Kimball also notes a new trend that emerged in the 1920s and 1930s just as a growing number of high school students sought college educations. Specifically, liberal education was increasingly identified with and equated to “general education.” This new approach blurred the previously mentioned accommodation distinctions beyond recognition as it embraced their contradictions. Assessing the various instances of the generalist mode, Kimball writes that they:

affirmed diversity but called for unity; offered breadth and eschewed superficiality; extolled freedom and called for discipline; proclaimed democratic equality while demanding standards; honored individuality beside social responsibility; hailed intellectual along with spiritual, emotional, and physical development; promised ‘a foundation on which to base ... occupational activities’ but not vocational education; and recognized that no

¹⁷⁹ Kimball, 187-188.

idea of liberal education is final but expected their students to find a firm philosophy of life.¹⁸⁰

The liberal arts ideal that emerged in the 1940s comes together around the idea that the primary objective of liberal education is to produce an educated, versatile, and refined citizenry skilled in the analysis and discrimination of values. These skills were to be cultivated first and foremost through the reading of the classics.

Following this emergent trend in understandings of liberal education moves us from the larger story of the wide-ranging changes in American education during the first half of the 20th century and deposits us back on the banks of the Fox River in Appleton, Wisconsin. Kimball cites the approach advocated by Henry Merritt Wriston as particularly representative of the new trend that obliterated distinctions between the accommodations. Wriston, the son of a Methodist minister from Wyoming, became President of Lawrence College in 1925 after Samuel Plantz, the previous president, died. In 1908, the Plantz administration had dropped the school of commerce and changed the institution's name from Lawrence University to Lawrence College to underscore its commitment to undergraduate liberal education which, despite the broad range of connotations, generally eschewed the promises of "utility" and job-specific training promoted by research universities.¹⁸¹ The presidencies of Plantz and Wriston are generally understood to be a foundational period for the school insofar as they not only added faculty, increased the library holdings, and established a new curriculum, but they also articulated a vision of liberal arts

¹⁸⁰ Kimball, 196.

¹⁸¹ Kimball, 183-184.

education that continues to undergird the approach to education that is still practiced at Lawrence.

Drawing on his frequent convocation speeches at Lawrence's Memorial Chapel, Wriston wrote and published a book titled *The Nature of the Liberal College* in 1937.¹⁸² When I graduated from Lawrence, my classmates and I received copies of Wriston's book along with our diplomas. The bookmark addressed to the Lawrence Class of '94, which was included in our copies, contains a note from then President Warch explaining that not only was Wriston one of the great American educators of the twentieth century but that his tenure at Lawrence "shaped the college and defined its mission in liberal education as no other before or since. This volume, in a sense, articulates many of the ideas and ideals that have informed your Lawrence experience."

Wriston's book promotes many of the standard characteristics that came to be associated with the liberal education model that Kimball cites as concomitant with a generalist mode. For instance, it valorizes broad foundations and eschews models focused on "utility," "standardization," "productivity" and "financial gain." A careful reading of the book fleshes out some particulars of what my college classmates continue to refer to, prompted by the school's marketing efforts, as "the Lawrence difference." For instance, he takes pains to articulate the importance of teaching as a personal matter in which strong relationships with students transfer values which are "acquired by a species of infection, and in the incipient stages are not consciously

¹⁸² Henry M. Wriston, *The Nature of a Liberal College* (Menasha: Lawrence College Press, 1937). The year he published his book, Wriston left Lawrence and became President of Brown University.

realized or identified by the student.” One also learns that the residential model requiring all students to live on campus for the entirety of their college experience harkens back to a Jeffersonian ideal first implemented at the University of Virginia in the early 1800s. This ideal was taken up and reemphasized in the early 20th century by Harvard, Yale and other liberal arts colleges seeking to recover aspects of a “conditioned environment” aimed at producing what contemporary theorists, including myself, might call a liberal subject.¹⁸³

The *Nature of the Liberal College* then can be read as a summation of a particular incarnation of a liberal ideal that took shape during the first decades of the 20th century and spawned a culture of learning that significantly infected and reshaped the lives of many, including at least one Prodigal Daughter. A brief exploration of this liberal ideal will help to orient fellow sojourners making their way through these stories. Divided into ten chapters addressing various topics from the college library to the emotional life of the student to the structure of the disciplines, the book coheres around the topic of chapter one, “The Liberal Ideal.” On the first page, Wriston gestures towards both the transformative aspect of liberal education and the difficulty of defining the enterprise:

It is a profound experience. An experience is only superficially something that happens to a person. Fundamentally, it is something which occurs within him, makes some organic change in the structure of his life and thought, and leaves him permanently different. The effects are not transitory; they are part, thereafter, of that mysterious entity which we call his personality. Therefore an experience is not only like, indeed it is a manifestation of, growth itself. As

¹⁸³ Ibid., 26.

such it can be described only in its external, its superficial, aspects, for no objective statement can give adequate expression to a subjective change.¹⁸⁴

Having acknowledged definitional difficulties at the outset, Wriston nonetheless embraces the project of describing the form of liberal education. The liberal ideal, he writes, is an education focused on “the acquisition and refinement of standards of values – all sorts of values – physical, intellectual, emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual.”¹⁸⁵ He continues by orienting his rhetoric around “building a program of study and experience for each individual with the ideal of self-realization at its center.”¹⁸⁶ He further describes the liberal ideal as one which results in a creative relationship to knowledge.¹⁸⁷ Adding to this vocabulary of growth, values, self-realization, and creativity, he adds wisdom to the mix when he writes:

Wisdom must be distilled from knowledge, and it is wisdom in which we are chiefly interested; knowledge alone is inadequate. Emotional sensitiveness, aesthetic discrimination, spiritual awareness and power can none of them be measured by any testing device. But they can be recognized and responsible judgments formed about them. The essence of the liberal spirit lies in this group of imponderables; that they cannot be weighed or measured detracts no whit from their vital character.¹⁸⁸

The task of Wriston’s liberal institution then is to cultivate these “imponderables” by producing and reproducing encounters that teach students to think, reflect, develop and express ideas and opinions with verbal and analytic precision.¹⁸⁹ Near the end of the book, he writes that the student’s “growth and maturity, the rise or decline of prejudice, changes in his sense of values, will all make

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 1

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 9.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 98.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 44, 98.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 86.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 139.

him an intellectual stranger to his earlier self; the opinions he formed and the judgments he expressed will require to be reshaped continuously.”¹⁹⁰

President Warch’s 1991 Introduction to Wriston’s book provides a few guideposts for contemporary readers. He points out that although the book was composed during the Great Depression and a time of “radical experiments in social, political, and economic organization worldwide ... Wriston’s argument for what he styles ‘the liberal ideal’ transcends the moment of its articulation. It represents ... one of the most enduring and powerful analyses and celebrations of liberal education and of the special and distinctive nature of the liberal arts college.”¹⁹¹ Warch also predicts that “it is more likely that an individual who reads this book following his or her liberal education will grasp its messages more clearly and will find that they constitute a spirited and significant framework in which to make better sense of the experience.”¹⁹²

Indeed, as I read Wriston’s words nearly a century after he wrote them and nearly two decades after I graduated from Lawrence, they resonate, which is to say they describe not only my experience of liberal learning at Lawrence but also a way of thinking about knowledge that continues to matter to me, but my liberally educated mind wants more conceptual precision than Wriston provides. The various modes of critical theory which have infected me over the decades cause a slight allergy to Wriston’s humanist language of “self-realization” as I detect he views human subjects

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 157.

¹⁹¹ Richard Warch, “Introduction” in Wriston, v-vi.

¹⁹² Ibid., vi.

as autonomous individuals whereas I see subjects (human and otherwise) as imbricated in and produced by larger webs of semiotic-material relations.

Despite these concerns, I value and promote many of the tenants of the liberal idea - particularly its emphasis on explicitly thinking with and about values and wisdom in one's pursuit of knowledge. These endeavors have marked my entire life. My early adult formation in Wriston's crucible of liberal learning did indeed produce what he hoped for: I became an intellectual stranger to my earlier self. In the Lawrence iteration of Liberal Learning, I first encountered the reality that studying others – particularly different versions of one's own religion, different religions, and different conceptions of “religion” – changes how one understands oneself and the intra-acting worlds that constitute one.¹⁹³ Learning how to navigate those changes in my ongoing intra-actions with others has become, to use Wriston's description of the liberal ideal, a “lifelong preoccupation.”¹⁹⁴

Wriston viewed love, religion, and liberal education as the profoundest of human experiences as he thought they represented “normal responses to the yearning for a glimpse at the reality and the significance of life.”¹⁹⁵ While my more capacious understanding of profundity makes room for an infinite variety of mundane and specialized topics, the three he identifies have occupied much of my life. The central project of this part of the dissertation retraces some of my paths through the academic

¹⁹³ Here, I am using “intra-action” in the sense developed by Karen Barad, a feminist quantum physicist whose work has greatly influenced (or “intra-acted” with) me and many of my interlocutors. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

¹⁹⁴ Wriston, 3.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

study of religion in order to gather up stories not only about the information gleaned in studying knowledge formations classified as “religion,” “religions,” or “religious” but also to find and articulate some measure of wisdom and ethical thinking to guide engagements through these tropics and the lives they variously gather up and cast off.

As part of that journey, a brief look at Wriston’s variety of Christianity is warranted. Reading it alongside the earlier chapters on Christian Reformed relations illustrates the drastic change in orientation my incarnation of the Prodigal Daughter experienced when she encountered the Lawrence Difference – a change that would lead to more strained belonging than previously described. As mentioned, Wriston was the son of a Methodist preacher, and many of the key founders of Lawrence were also Methodists.

Tales of the history of Methodist Christianity invariably begin in 18th century England where this variety of Protestant Christianity emerged out of the teachings of John Wesley, an ordained Anglican priest who was part of a Bible study group called the Methodists.¹⁹⁶ After a period of missionary and pastoral activity in the American colonies, Wesley returned to England where he encountered the teachings of Peter Böhler and other members of the Moravian Church of the Brethren, who were preaching en route to joining settlements in the colonies.¹⁹⁷ After attending one of

¹⁹⁶ Some general sources such as *Encyclopedia Britannica* indicate that the name “Methodists” is connected to the group’s methodical approach to scripture, while others such as the *HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion* state that the name was applied derisively and has an uncertain derivation.

¹⁹⁷ The Church of the Brethren is typically classified as an Anabaptist form of Christianity and as descendants of the Radical Reformation. The Amish, Hutterites, and Mennonites are direct descendants whereas the Brethren, Bruderhof, and Apostolic Christian Church are later developments. The Moravian Church of the Brethren is a direct descendant of the 14th century Hussite movement initiated by Jan Hus.

their services, Wesley reported a conversion experience where he felt “his heart strangely warmed” and he finally understood that his trust in Christ assured him salvation and forgiveness of sins.

Informed by this experience, he became a circuit preacher and advocated a mode of Christianity that deemphasized doctrine and focused instead on the power of God’s perfect love for all men. His teachings were the epitome of Arminianism, those theological ideas that my Calvinist ancestors had so abhorred, which granted salvation to all men. He developed a society that ordained preachers, and it existed as a revival movement within the Church of England until shortly after his death when the Methodists established an independent form of governance.

Vigorous missionary activity combined with the Methodist practice of itinerant or circuit preaching during the religious revival atmosphere of Great Awakenings enabled the Methodist movement to spread quickly throughout the United States drawing members especially from the middle and working classes. Early Methodists, oriented around tropes like Wesley’s strangely warmed heart, preached a message of love that focused on and appealed to congregants’ emotions. By the end of the 19th century, the church claimed almost a half a million members worldwide, and by the end of the 20th century, the American churches claimed over 13 million members ranking Methodism the third largest (after Baptists and Lutherans) of the Christian Protestant denominations. While Methodists, like all Christians, view the Bible as the authoritative guide to their faith, most varieties of

the faith accepted the findings of modern biblical scholarship and Darwinian science.¹⁹⁸

While a thorough summary of Methodism is beyond the parameters of information required for mapping the Prodigal Daughter's journey, the broad strokes painted above are enough to situate its traces in Wriston's text and in his vision of the liberal ideal. These traces indicate points of connection and continuity between liberal Protestant religious formations and the now secular universities they shaped.

In discussing the institutional form for promoting the liberal ideal, Wriston draws distinctions between modes of engaging with the past, present, and future. He argues that institutional efforts "to deal with the future" are "self-defeating" as institutions are inherently conservative. In his view, institutions do not exercise leadership but rather promote permanent values for future leaders.¹⁹⁹ Regarding the past, he writes that "History is strewn with the wrecks of institutions" that sought to free themselves "from the past and deal only with the future." Conversely, he writes, "the great permanent institutions, like the church and the universities, have been those which freely acknowledged their roots in the past, while seeking to make life here and now significant and vital."²⁰⁰ In his estimation, the Christian churches have had such a long life because of the significant "ethics of Jesus," but, in his estimation, they have not been successful at attending to the needs of the present. In particular, he

¹⁹⁸ The acceptance of these new kinds of knowledge was by no means without struggle. See for example: Thomas H. Yorty, "The English Methodist Response to Darwin Reconsidered," *Methodist History*, 32:2 (January 1994). Given both the incredibly broad history that I'm telling here, however, and in comparison to the Christian tradition elaborated in Part I, the acceptance and incorporation was remarkably fast.

¹⁹⁹ Wriston, 19.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

writes, “the church has lagged behind science. Again and again the church has been made ridiculous by insisting upon a cosmography which was obsolete.”²⁰¹

To summarize Wriston then, some institutions fail because they tilt too much towards the future. Of the two institutions anchored firmly in traditions of the past, the church lags. He sees liberal educational institutions, however, as the means to provide precisely the kind of guidance demanded by the present.

The student must live in the world and be part of the world. . . . But he must live, also, out of the world and beyond the daily grind. . . . The college may take pride in being a cyclone cellar, if it takes the student for a time and gives him some peace and security from the stresses and strains of gainful toil, and opportunity for the cultivation of powers that will let him meet those tensions with alert mind, calm spirit, and courageous heart. This is just as valid a function as that of the cathedral, which typifies the peace that passes human understanding.²⁰²

In this quote, Wriston transposes a particular variant of a Christian mode of engagement with the world into an understanding of the liberal ideal. For this Prodigal Daughter, his reference to living in, of and beyond the world in immediately conjures the Apostle Paul’s words to the Romans, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”²⁰³ Wriston’s elaboration continues with a reference to the gospel story in which Mary of Bethany anoints Jesus’ feet with a bottle of expensive perfume.²⁰⁴ In that story, the disciple, Judas, objects to this practice as it seems extravagantly wasteful. He indicates that the perfume could have been sold and the money, a year’s worth of wages, given to the poor. Jesus, however, tells Judas to leave Mary alone as the poor will always be with

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid., 21.

²⁰³ Romans 12:2a

²⁰⁴ John 12:1-11.

them, but he will not. In the gospel sequence of events, the story takes place in the short period of time prior to the betrayal and crucifixion of Jesus, and his rejoinder to Judas is often interpreted as an instruction for Christians to hold love for Jesus in higher esteem than love of money. Wriston takes up the story, however, to focus on the “more abundant life” of the mind that a liberal arts education provides over and against a focus on material success.²⁰⁵

This reference to a gospel story lesson is but one of many Christian traces sprinkled throughout Wriston’s text. While he returns frequently to the “more abundant life” phrase, he also references the Parable of the Sower in his discussion of the importance of alumni influence on prospective students.²⁰⁶ Where Christian conversion tropes often focus on “the regeneration of the soul,” Wriston talks about the liberal ideal as focused on the “regeneration of the hearts and minds of individuals,” a task of reform that has occupied “the greatest teachers of all times,” including but not limited to Jesus and Socrates.²⁰⁷ For Wriston, the Bible is not an ultimate authority, but he views it as conveying an often underestimated emotional power and a narrative of “progress of man’s aspirations and faith.” It is, in his estimation, “the greatest single piece of literature.”²⁰⁸

Last but not least in the series of Wriston’s Christian traces, Prodigal Daughters might be attuned to the Methodist emphasis on languages of the heart. One

²⁰⁵ Wriston, 23, 38.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 37.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 44, 88, 140.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 119.

can hear these chords in the chapter Wriston devotes to the emotional life of the student where he maintains that:

only when the intellect and emotions work together can a satisfactory result be achieved. So true is this, that one may safely go much further; there is no fundamental difference between the two. They are divided only in our definitions, not in love. Our definitions correspond to our convenience, not to reality. We are actually speaking of two aspects of the same thing, but too often we are betrayed by our use of words into divorcing that which God hath joined together.²⁰⁹

On a September day at the beginning of the last decade of the 20th century, I arrived on the Lawrence campus with its trees ablaze in Wisconsin's autumnal glory completely unaware of most of these stories and the material force of the ideas they represent. I knew nothing about histories of Episcopal and Methodist collaboration to found the school much less connections to Puritan captivity narratives and an unredeemed daughter or fantasies of Christian Indian empires and realities of Christian empires. I lacked any historical consciousness regarding the emergence of the modern university and competing understandings of the liberal arts ideal. After a few days, I might have recognized the names Samuel Plantz and Henry Wriston but only because a dormitory and the campus arts center were named after each of them respectively. Regarding the various and divergent threads of Christianity, I wouldn't have been able to cite a single difference between Calvinists and Methodists much less connections between liberal Protestants and secular institutions.

As I made my way to Memorial Chapel to witness the Matriculation Convocation, I would have appreciated the beauty of the building with its impressive

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 117.

steeple, a series of columns towering above the front doors, stained glass windows, a magnificent pipe organ, a wrap-around balcony, and enough seating to accommodate the entire student body. In the early 1900s, the structure had been commissioned and paid for by Methodist friends of the college to function as both a religious center and a civic space. It reminded me of a grander version of the white church my family attended in Churchill. It seemed obvious to me, however, that this place no longer served what I would have defined as a “religious” purpose: no one talked about God or read from, much less, referenced the Bible here. This seemingly secular gathering place was, to my mind, a beautiful artifact from a different time that conveyed a sense of grandeur to the educational enterprise.

Finding a place to sit, I felt both respect and excitement when everyone stood to watch the faculty, dressed in full regalia, process down the center aisle and take their seats in the front rows of the chapel. President Richard Warch addressed our class. A white-haired, affable man with a gift for eloquence, I would come to know him as a friendly face I often encountered on the sidewalks criss-crossing the campus, picking up the occasional pieces of litter left on the lawn, and exchanging greetings with students by name.²¹⁰

In his speech to us, entitled “When a University Is a College” he took great pains to distinguish between academic community and intellectual community.²¹¹ His

²¹⁰ Warch died in September, 2013. Lawrence held a public memorial for him at Memorial Chapel. That video is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oUdf58oIens>. For a shorter (approximately 10 minutes) tribute video, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SB_s7_u7kyY, accessed March 31, 2014.

²¹¹ Lawrence had changed its name from “College to “University” in the 1960s when the Milwaukee-Downer College for Women merged with Lawrence. The convocation speech in question can be found

speech was adapted from a keynote conference address he had recently given to the Associated Colleges of the Midwest (ACM) on the topic of intellectual community in liberal arts colleges.²¹² Written in the immediate wake of several popular jeremiads about the ruinous state of higher education in America – e.g. Allan Bloom’s *Closing of the American Mind* and the ACM’s not-so-implicit premise that “things have gotten worse” – Warch offered general reflections on the current state of affairs in higher education. He maintained that while the jeremiads from Bloom and other prophets of doom reflected precious little about the liberal arts model, some of the difficulties they elucidated nonetheless afflicted everyone in higher education.

He identified the multiplying, increasingly professionalized academic fields to have emerged since the late 19th century and the concomitant exponential increase in knowledge as key historical factors leading up to the current environment in which differentiations among disciplines typically provide individual scholars with a coherent identity and sense of self. He associated these fields with *academic communities* made up of divisions, departments, and sub-specializations organized around fostering detailed, often insular, expertise. While he cited academic communities as necessary and important, Warch maintained that their mere existence does not necessarily provide a sense that knowledge coheres or that knowledge can be

in this collection of all of President Warch’s Matriculation Convocations. Richard Warch, *A Matter of Style: Reflections on Liberal Education*. (Appleton: Lawrence University Press, 2011).

²¹² The Associated Colleges of the Midwest (ACM) is a consortium of independent liberal arts colleges. Member schools are: Beloit College in Beloit, WI; Carlton College in Northfield, MN; Coe College in Cedar Rapids, IA; Colorado College in Colorado Springs, CO; Cornell College in Mount Vernon, IA; Grinnell College in Grinnell, IA; Knox College in Galesburg, IL; Lake Forest College in Lake Forest, WI; Luther College in Decorah, IA; Macalester College in St. Paul, MN; Monmouth College in Monmouth, IL; Ripon College in Ripon, WI; and St. Olaf College in Northfield, MN.

shared beyond the confines of one's specialization.²¹³ This latter sense of knowledge, as something that coheres and can be shared broadly, indicates the presence of an *intellectual community*:

a place where ideas are taken seriously and where a common curiosity and a spirited exchange about ideas of importance and influence are central and significant ... not a place where each individual only does his or her intellectual thing apart from and hence uninterested in others, but where we have conversations across disciplines, beyond disciplines, and where we understand the life of the mind to be an experience of pleasure and purpose. It is a place, in short, where individual intellectual competencies flourish, to be sure, but where communal intellectual concerns thrive as well.²¹⁴

The thrust of Warch's speech, a late 20th century version of Wriston's liberal ideal, persuasively informed us that while many institutions of higher learning have academic communities, not all of them have intellectual communities. Lawrence, he intoned, was an intellectual community that embodied the best and largest purposes of the liberal education model. He continued, this model "promotes diversity, skepticism, and debate while viewing the world as changing, not fixed ... It takes standards and values seriously even as it avoids indoctrination," and it is dedicated to "the intellectual and personal growth of each individual student."

Warch's speech hit all the right notes for this Prodigal Daughter in search of better knowledge. I vividly remember being emotionally undone by it. I absorbed his words with the earnestness acquired in Churchill where my training in and around the Bible had taught me to understand myself as belonging to a Calvinist God and his people. Warch continued by addressing us as new members of this intellectual

²¹³ *A Matter of Style*, Kindle Loc 9049.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Kindle Loc 8840.

community. “You are more than welcome; you are now one of us. We are here to enable and promote and stimulate your learning, but it is, in the last analysis, your business. Take it seriously.”

In lieu of the Churchill model where all knowledge was structured around transmitting and maintaining the purity of doctrine, the Liberal Learning model marshaled all its resources to provide transformative encounters and creative engagements with knowledge. Faithful engagement with and questioning of knowledge would be encouraged here. The Prodigal Daughter had not only been graciously welcomed but she also knew immediately that she belonged. Her encounters with knowledge on the banks of the Fox River would be the first of several occasions on her journey where she would become an intellectual stranger to her previous selves. These encounters launched her on a path that would take her through a variety of world-changing tropics ranging from the Bluffs of Betrayal to New Faiths and Old Fears amidst the Empire of World Religions. In her travels through graduate education, she would lose her footing in the Quagmire of Critique before finding her way again with the help of a motley crew of radical thinkers she encountered in California. From the History of Consciousness program in Santa Cruz to the Christianity of San Francisco’s Grace Cathedral, the Prodigal Daughter’s journeys toward Feminist Worldly Wisdom nourished her with Prodigal Knowledge.

Chapter 4

A Pluralist Pantheon

[R]eligious traditions are more like rivers than monuments. They are not static and they are not over. They are still rolling – with forks and confluences, rapids and waterfalls. Where those rivers of faith flow depends upon who we are and who we become. ... I grew up in Bozeman, Montana, in the Gallatin Valley, one of the most beautiful mountain valleys in the Rockies. The Gallatin River cuts through a spectacular canyon to the south, then flows like a stream of crystal through the fertile farmlands of the valley. I had three horses stabled on our land by the Gallatin and spent hours every week riding along the river. By the time I was twenty, I had made my way “back East,” as we called it, to Smith College, and then much further east to India, to the Hindu sacred city of Banaras, set on the banks of another river, the Ganges. Banaras was the first real city I had ever lived in. It was a city in the time of the Buddha, twenty-six hundred years ago, and the guidebooks called it “older than history.” Bozeman had been settled for scarcely one hundred years.

– Diana Eck

Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras

In the early 1990s, Diana Eck, a Professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies at Harvard University Divinity School, taught a course on “World Religions in New England” in which she and her students set out to document a changing religious landscape in the Boston area.²¹⁵ This work prompted Eck to establish the Harvard Pluralism Project which developed affiliations with academic institutions across the country in efforts to continue documenting and studying the presence of diverse religions in the United States for the purpose of considering the implications of this changing landscape for public life as well as the challenges and

²¹⁵ The results of this initial research can be viewed at <http://pluralism.org/wrgb>, accessed April, 2014.

opportunities that might emerge from ongoing commitments to “pluralism,” a term whose understandings I explore and circumambulate at length.²¹⁶

For many scholars of religion, Eck’s work with the Pluralism Project has been read as a dominant approach to the study of religion in the contemporary United States, but it is not without its critics. To guide our tour through the contemporary study of religion, this chapter first traces some of Eck’s roots and routes and subsequent chapters follows divergent paths forged by a few of those critics. My journeys in the academic study of religion can be characterized as an initial undergraduate orientation aligned with Eck’s mode that then took a sharp critical turn when I entered graduate school. Following these routes and their intersections with mine, the following chapters pay particular attention to the signs scholars left which, in their turns, both oriented and disoriented this Prodigal Daughter as she risked departures and deviated from straight and narrow paths on her queer journey through religious and secular borderlands.²¹⁷

Shortly after launching the Pluralism Project, Eck wrote and published *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*, in which she narrates her early Christian formation in the United Methodist Church in Bozeman, Montana; her scholarly and personal encounters with different religions – particularly but not exclusively Hinduism; and the ways these encounters shaped and enlarged her

²¹⁶ Detailed history and mission statements as well as a multitude of resources put together by the project over the last two decades are available here: <http://pluralism.org>, accessed April, 2014

²¹⁷ My use of this sense of queer is indebted to Sara Ahmed’s theorization of queer lives as those which risk departure from straight lines and make new futures possible by going astray and getting lost. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Objects, Orientations, Others* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2006), 21.

Christian faith. She relates stories from her youth where she developed “a sturdy faith in God, a very portable sense of what constitutes the church, and a commitment to the work of the church in the world.”²¹⁸ She regularly attended a Methodist Youth Fellowship (MYF) camp where one year she helped build a church on a settlement on the Blackfoot Reservation near Glacier National Park. Another summer, she and her family took a bus to Mexico to help build a silo on a rural development farm near Pátzcuaro.

On her way to begin undergraduate studies at Smith College, she joined the MYF delegation to the 1963 Civil Rights March on Washington DC. One of her summer jobs during her college years included working for the Montana Board of Health on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation outside of Lame Deer in southeastern Montana where she witnessed what she called “the racism of my own state [in the] real conditions in which most of the Native American peoples lived” alongside the disproportionate numbers of Native American men drafted for service in Vietnam. Observing that “the Vietnam War seemed a tragic testimony to how little those of us in America knew about Asia,” she decided to spend a year studying in India.²¹⁹ Arriving in Banaras, Eck immersed herself in the study of Hinduism where she experienced her “first real challenge to her faith” brought on by her desire to make sense of the non-Christian people she met. In particular, she cites personal encounters with Jiddu Krishnamurti whose existential questions reoriented her understandings of

²¹⁸ Diana Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey From Bozeman to Banaras* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1993), 5.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

the world. Though Eck does not describe Krishnamurti's thought in her books, it is worth exploring briefly here as it introduces a thread that will become important for our later evaluation of Eck's approach to the study of religion.

During the early 20th century, Krishnamurti had been taught by the theosophist, Annie Besant, at the Theosophical Society's International Headquarters at Adyar in Madras. Originally founded by Helena Blavatsky in 1875, the Theosophical Society combined its understanding of Eastern and Western religious traditions to create a synthesis she called the *Perennial Religion* which sought to discover and synthesize hidden knowledge and wisdom from various religions to provide salvation and enlightenment for its followers.²²⁰ Blavatsky's synthesis was structured around the Society's understanding of the "Intelligent Evolution of All Existence" which was said to be occurring on a cosmic scale with a hidden spiritual hierarchy of Ascended Masters, enlightened beings who have overcome their previous human incarnations. Blavatsky stated that the Society's purpose was to prepare humanity for a new World Teacher who would arrive on the scene in the latter part of the 20th century to direct human evolution.²²¹ After Blavatsky's death in 1891, Annie Besant took over leadership and predicted the appearance of a World Teacher would occur sooner than Blavatsky had anticipated.

In 1909, the Theosophists at Adyar determined that the young boy, Jiddu Krishnamurti, who lived near the Society headquarters, was the "vehicle" for the long

²²⁰ Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled: Secrets of the Ancient Wisdom Tradition* volumes 1 & 2, (London: Forgotten Books, 2008). Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy*, (London: Theosophical University Press, 1999).

²²¹ Within the Theosophical Society, this World Teacher is often referred to as Lord Maitreya.

expected World Teacher. In 1911, the Society founded the Order of the Star of the East to proclaim his coming, and Krishnamurti was made Head of the Order. As a young man, however, he grew uncomfortable with his emerging guru status, and in 1929, he dissolved the Order in front of 3000 members maintaining that “Truth is a pathless land, and you cannot approach it by any path whatsoever, by any religion, by any sect.”²²² This move marked the beginning of his lifelong refusal to pledge allegiance to any nationality, caste, religion, or philosophy. He spent his life giving talks and writing on the topics of meditation and psychological revolution, the nature of inquiry, and the effects of technology on society. He developed close friendships with the novelist, Aldous Huxley, and the physicist, David Bohm. The directional vectors of influence are impossible to trace, but the ideas promoted by each of these influential thinkers were shaped through their intra-actions. Taking up permanent residence in Ojai, California where he established the Krishnamurti Foundation of America, Krishnamurti travelled back and forth between India, Europe, and the United States where he gave talks and filled lecture halls before he died in 1986 at the age of 90.

Eck encountered Krishnamurti in 1965 when he was giving a series of talks in Banaras. She reports that he posed her “first real encounter with the ‘otherness’ of a worldview” insofar as no one in her world “had ever asked about the value of labeling, judging, discriminating, and categorizing experience or suggested that by

²²² Krishnamurti’s speech, “Truth Is a Pathless Land” is available on the web site of the Krishnamurti Foundation of America: <http://www.jkrishnamurti.org/about-krishnamurti/dissolution-speech.php>, accessed April 13, 2014.

doing so we distance ourselves from experience.” Krishnamurti’s questions made Eck aware of her mind’s perpetual categorizing and labeling activities which in turn prompted her to question her attachment to her Christian identity. She writes: “Did the name matter? Did the label provide me with a shelter or barrier to shield me from real encounter and questioning? What did I have invested in this name? Everywhere I turned I saw question marks.”

When she met Krishnamurti, Eck had recently read Paul Tillich’s collection of sermons, *The Shaking of the Foundations*. Tillich, one of the most influential liberal Protestant theologians of the 20th century, articulated a Christian existentialist philosophy in which God is understood spatially as the “Ground of Being,” temporally as the “Eternal Now,” and as an entity “Being-Itself.” While Eck reports appreciating Tillich’s thought, the encounter with Krishnamurti and his questions about her habits of apprehending the world were, for her, “the real shaking of the foundations.”²²³ Despite her initial sidelining of Tillich at the beginning of her memoir, Eck returns frequently to him and to his understanding of God which significantly informs hers and runs throughout her text.

In India, Eck also met Achyut Patwardhan, a political activist and founder of the Socialist Party of India who had spent years in prison in the service of the nonviolent movement for India’s independence. She describes him as “a great spiritual friend” at a time in her life when questions were tumbling through her mind. His emphasis on love in the face of suffering reminded her of the Christians she most

²²³ Eck, *Encountering God*, 9.

admired as a teenager. Although Eck was initially challenged by the fact that he was not a Christian, she came to understand Krishnamurti, Patwardhan, and other non-Christians she encountered as examples of what Christians might describe as “witnesses to their faith” which is to say that the way they lived their lives was an embodiment of what Eck refers to as “their faiths.” To her twenty-two-year-old self, it was a discovery to learn that “Christians did not have a corner on love, wisdom, and justice.”²²⁴

Eck reports that her early encounters in India launched her into “a life of work and inquiry, spiritual and intellectual” that included becoming a scholar of comparative religions with a focus on Hinduism and continuing involvement in the United Methodist Church where, to this day, she participates in the interfaith dialogue work of the World Council of Churches (WCC). Established in 1948, the WCC was organized to promote an inclusive, “ecumenical” (from the Greek, *oikoumene*, meaning “whole, inhabited world”) “fellowship of churches seeking unity, a common witness, and Christian service.”²²⁵ Worldwide membership is estimated at 590 million people in approximately 150 countries. In the United States, member denominations include mainline Protestant, Episcopal, Eastern Orthodox and other churches affiliated with what is now known as the National Council of Churches (NCC).²²⁶

²²⁴ Ibid., 9.

²²⁵ Ibid., 9 & 10. See also <http://www.oikoumene.org>

²²⁶ In 1950, the Federal Council of Churches (est. 1908) merged with several other ecumenical organizations to form the National Council of Churches (NCC). For a list of WCC member churches, see <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/member-churches/north-america/united-states-of-america>, accessed March 31, 2014.

In his recent book on Protestant Liberalism in modern America, historian David Hollinger describes the WCC as the “emblematic enterprise” of Liberal Protestants who adopted a pro-science perspective that they “defended against the anti-evolution, anti-Higher Criticism parties that were known as ‘fundamentalist.’” As Liberal Protestants shifted their emphasis from foreign missions to social service, they increasingly endorsed a number of socially progressive causes. The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), formed in 1942, had defined itself in opposition to these liberalizing Protestants.²²⁷ These two different organizations, the NAE and the WCC, can be read as institutional frameworks for the two dominant forms of Protestant Christianity operative in the United States since at least the middle of the 20th century. Significantly, neither organization includes Roman Catholics under its umbrella.²²⁸

After her life-changing sojourn in India launched her into the comparative study of religions which included graduate work at Harvard, Eck returned to India eight years later to write her doctoral thesis on what the city of Banaras and the gods gathered up there “mean to Hindus.”²²⁹ Her work on Hinduism has continued throughout her career particularly in her research regarding India’s temples and shrines and their interwoven pilgrimage networks. Her relatively recent publication of *India: A Sacred Geography* is a result of that study.²³⁰ Eck describes her work studying Hinduism as an effort at glimpsing “the world of meaning in which people

²²⁷ Hollinger, xiii.

²²⁸ The Roman Catholic Church sends accredited observers to WCC meetings.

²²⁹ Eck, *Encountering God*, 10. Diana Eck, *Banaras: City of Light* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

²³⁰ Diana Eck, *India: A Sacred Geography* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2012).

of another faith live their lives and die their deaths.”²³¹ And a few pages later, she mentions that she understands her work as an academic to be about “understanding the religiousness of others ... an enormous task” that involves recognizing a “plurality of religious claims” made by people “of many religious traditions bear[ing] witness to the truth, the transcendence, the universality, the uniqueness, and the distinctive beauty of what they have known and seen.”²³² I flag Eck’s brief reference to her understanding of the academic study of religion here because we will soon meet critics who take issue with her assumptions. To continue following Eck’s journey, however, the reference to her academic work merely sets the stage for the project that unfolds in the pages of *Encountering God*.

While the comparative study of religion gives rise to the recognition of a “plurality of religious claims as a fact ... among many facts,” she writes, this awareness need not “constitute a betrayal of one’s own faith.” In this text as with her interfaith work, Eck is interested in inheriting Christianity in a way that is both faithful to and makes room for the ways her encounters with non-Christian religions reshaped her understandings of herself and her tradition. In a later work, Eck described *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* as the text in which she tackled this question:

What does Banaras and all it represents mean for me, as a Christian? Through the years I have found my own faith not threatened, but broadened and deepened by the study of Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and Sikh traditions of faith. And I have found that only as a Christian pluralist could I be faithful to the mystery and the presence of the one I call God. Being a Christian pluralist

²³¹ Eck, *Encountering God*, 10.

²³² *Ibid*, 14.

means daring to encounter people of very different faith traditions and defining my faith not by its borders, but by its roots.²³³

Eck then takes pains to note that her text is not so much *about* a theology that ponders how one might engage in rethinking one's faith but rather it *is* a theology written for "ordinary people who do not think of themselves as theologians, but who struggle with real questions of faith in the world in which we live." It is, she writes, "a theology with people in it."²³⁴

The theological orientation of Eck's book becomes even clearer when one notes its title, *Encountering God*, while also recollecting that the Greek origins of "theology" (*theo* and *logos*) reference a systematic study of god. Of the eight chapters that make up her text, Eck devotes four of them to classically Christian theological topics. Three are structured around her enlarged understanding of the three figures of the Christian Trinity, and the fourth explicitly focuses on prayer practices. The more explicit theological chapters are framed by sections narrating her broadening understanding of Christianity in her journey from Montana Methodist to Christian Pluralist. Throughout her texts, Eck invites her readers to encounter what she calls the plurality of religions that not only exist around the globe but also are increasingly at home in the United States as she advocates for and explains her understanding of pluralism as the ideal mode of engagement for navigating religious difference in a democracy.

²³³ Diana Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), 23.

²³⁴ Eck, *Encountering God*, 14-16.

Within the framework of Eck's projects, pluralism references a "dynamic process through which we engage one another in and through our very deepest differences." She elaborates by exploring four different features of pluralism. First, it indicates more than a diversity or plurality of religions but also references an "energetic engagement with diversity." It requires participation and "attunement to the life and energies of one another." Secondly, pluralism goes beyond tolerance which only creates a climate of restraint but does nothing to foster understanding. Whereas tolerance does not require differing parties to know anything about each other and thus "does nothing to remove our ignorance of one another," pluralism is an "active seeking of understanding across lines of difference." Thirdly, pluralism is not relativism, which would require displacement or "abandonment of one's commitments or identities," but is rather the "engagement with, not abdication of, differences and particularities." Finally then, pluralism occurs in and through dialogue and thus requires a commitment to "being at the table" with one's commitments even though not everyone at this metaphorical table will necessarily agree with one another.²³⁵

To further illustrate pluralism, Eck summarizes a scene from *The Book of Lights* by Chaim Potok. In the novel, a rabbi from Brooklyn, on leave during the Korean War, travels to Japan with a Jewish friend where they find themselves in front of a shrine (possibly Buddhist or Shinto, the novel doesn't specify). Peering through

²³⁵ Eck, *A New Religious America*, 70-72. See also: http://pluralism.org/pluralism/what_is_pluralism, accessed April, 2014.

the door, they observe a man with his palms together and his eyes closed as he rocks back and forth slightly in front of the altar. The rabbi asks,

“Do you think our God is listening to him, John?”

“I don’t know, chappy. I never thought of it.

“Neither did I until now. If He’s not listening, why not? If He is listening, then – well, what are we all about, John?”²³⁶

Eck uses the rabbi’s question as a starting point to further develop three possible responses to the rabbi’s questions, and she describes them as exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist. The exclusivist responds that his encounter with God is the one and only truth, excluding all others. The inclusivist responds that yes, our God is listening, “but it is our God as *we* understand God who does the listening. The pluralist might say our God is listening, but he or she would also say that God is not ours, God is our way of speaking of a Reality that cannot be encompassed by any one religious tradition, including our own.”²³⁷

The difference between the inclusivist and the pluralist response hinges on how much epistemic humility one has regarding one’s own position. Inclusivists imagine other perspectives only through terms they have set. Pluralists recognize the limits of their perspectives as partial and seek not only to understand others but also to allow themselves to be changed by their encounter. Eck elaborates further:

Within each tradition there are particular religious resources for the move toward the active, truth-seeking engagement with others that is the distinguishing mark of pluralism ... The aim of all this religious thinking is not to find the lowest common denominator or the most neutral religious language. Far from it. The aim is to find those particular places within each tradition that provide the open space where we may meet one another in

²³⁶ Eck, *Encountering God*, 166.

²³⁷ *Ibid*, 168-169.

mutual respect and develop, through dialogue, new ways of speaking and listening. The aim is not only mutual understanding, but mutual self-understanding and mutual transformation.²³⁸

A pluralist, *par excellence*, Eck's more explicitly theological chapters demonstrate her Christian engagement with the religions she encountered in India which, through dialogue, both "stretched and clarified" her understanding of God.²³⁹ A brief sojourn through the two chapters covering God and Jesus will provide a more than adequate sense of both Eck's pluralist project and some of the substantive issues that her critics raise.

In the chapter on "The Names of God," Eck asserts that "in many religious traditions, Hindu and Christian included, people speak of the Divine as both ultimate and personal, beyond and yet within, transcendent and yet near." Furthermore, she maintains that everyone, even those "who are uncomfortable with the term *God*, who quarrel with God or who reject God, have an idea and an image of God" even if "our" ideas are more abstract such as Paul Tillich's conception of God as "ground of being" or "ultimate concern." For Eck, "we are all theologians when we allow ourselves to encounter and ponder real questions about God." The task of religious pluralism then is to engage the "many ways of speaking of the Divine, about the gods, about God."²⁴⁰

Posing the example of an encounter she had visiting a mosque and Islamic center in Nairobi, Eck relates that when her Muslim hosts brought her to the train

²³⁸ Ibid, 189.

²³⁹ Ibid., 46.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 46-49.

station, their farewells were interrupted by the Islamic call to prayer. Eck responded by lowering her head and “enter[ing] into the spirit of prayer with them,” something she was able to do because her pluralist perspective understands Allah not as “the Muslim God” but rather as the Arabic word for God which, she points out, Arabic-speaking Christians also use when they pray. Reflecting on this encounter, Eck concludes that an exclusivist perspective would have viewed Allah as a false god, an inclusivist perspective would have seen the Muslim conception of Allah as a less clear perception of God than the Christian conception. Instead, her pluralist position enabled her to see “one God whom both Christians and Muslims understand only partially because God transcends our complete comprehension.”²⁴¹

The Hindu tradition with its many gods poses a different question for Eck which requires her to “push beyond my scholarly work into my theological thinking as a Christian: How do *I* understand Vishnu? Is Vishnu God?” Again, she responds by distinguishing between the three positions, and the pluralist position responds that “we honor the same God, whom Christians and Hindus know by different names, experience in different ways, and see from different perspectives and angles.”²⁴² Eck proceeds by reading the Upanishads (a collection of texts central to Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains) as addressing the same questions that Paul Tillich connected to questions of Ultimate Reality, the Divine, or God. She finds the Hindu concept of *brahman*, typically translated as “an unchanging reality amidst and beyond the world which is indefinable,” particularly resonant. She then moves to argue her recurring

²⁴¹ Ibid., 49-50.

²⁴² Ibid., 53.

point that the “divine reality, God, is made known in ways that are accessible to human beings.”

Using language that conjures Krishnamurti’s teachings, Eck writes that in both Hindu and Christian traditions, “only the real spiritual pioneers strike out on the trackless path toward God’s essence” whereas most people use speech, emotions, concepts, poetry, and prayer to access what she refers to as “the Divine.” For Eck, the roughly 330 million gods in the Hindu tradition represent 330 million different ways of revealing the Divine. She acknowledges that while many monotheists may be troubled by this concept, she views the task of “tak[ing] the multitude of God’s names and forms seriously” as “the world’s most energetic challenge.”²⁴³

The chapters that address Christian understandings of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and prayer are further examples of Eck’s deft ability to weave a Christian Pluralist theology out of her encounters with world religions. During her time in Banaras, an elderly Indian man introduced to her as “Uncle” who had never before met a Christian asked her to tell him about her *ishtadevata*, which she defines as her “chosen god.” Struggling with her limited Hindi vocabulary, Eck told him that Jesus Christ was the “Son of God” and was both fully god and fully man as she attempted to convey the sense of Christian incarnation by using the Hindu term, *avatara*, which indicates “divine descent.” In the Bhagavad Gita, the ten avatars of Lord Vishnu range from a fish, to a boar, to a man-lion, to a dwarf, to a human. Eck imagines that these stories are transforming and powerful for Uncle even as she finds some of them

²⁴³ Ibid., 57.

moving, particularly the “theological Darwinism” she reads in the move from sea-going fish to mammal to human to superhuman. Uncle, however, incredulous that Christians would only have one avatara seemed to consider a god who would only show himself once to be a stingy, small-minded, and self-centered god.²⁴⁴

Exploring further her understanding of the incarnation of God in Christ, Eck names important implications of the Christian understanding: the incarnation makes God present in human form in a way that “sanctifies” the human insofar as “God finds us, and we find God, in the human faces of one another and in the human fabric of our lives.” She concludes that, in this sense, Christians cannot help but be inclusivists when it comes to Christology. While Eck holds onto the theological project of seeing God in all humans, she reports that she is unconvinced about Christian language of Jesus as unique, particularly insofar as it is often a declaration of exclusivity. Instead of a theology of the Good News of the Christian Gospel being the only Good News in town, Eck points out that Christianity has a rich history of many different Christologies and understandings of Jesus of Nazareth. For her, uniqueness need not indicate the Jesus story is the only true story of “God’s dealings with humanity.” Rather it is only unique insofar as it “reveals to us the face of God, which is love. And Jesus Christ reveals to us the meaning of the human, which is love. This double revelation is enough.”²⁴⁵

Continuing to explore the uniqueness of this story, Eck confesses that, as a Christian, Jesus enables her to see God “grounded in the soil of human life and death”

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 81-82.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 89.

which is an understanding of God that she simply does not see in any of the gods of India where the “humbling of God to ‘earthen vessels’ is unheard of.” She goes on to report that she knows many Hindus and Muslims who find this humbling humanity of Jesus disturbing just as she knows of others, like Gandhi, who have been drawn to the divinity of Jesus as the Christ *because of his compelling humanity*.²⁴⁶ While Eck finds the Jesus Christ story unique for both its attention to the human and its focus on love, she quickly states that these facets do not justify an exclusive understanding of Christ because “exclusivity is utterly contrary to the Jesus we meet in the synoptic Gospels.”²⁴⁷

It is worth noting that the qualifier of “synoptic” excludes the Gospel of John with its oft-cited passage attributed to Jesus, “I am the Way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”²⁴⁸ Indeed, Eck reports that when she talks to church people, this passage is inevitably brought up as a counterpoint, but she thinks this approach treats the Bible like “an ammunition belt full of verse-size bullets to be fired off as they are needed” in a way that does violence to the early church context of a small group struggling to find its identity in the Hellenistic world. For Eck, the meaning of the Bible is found in its “undergirding message as appropriated through the questions and struggles of each community of faith.” She reminds the reader of the context in which Jesus said these words. On the last night Jesus spent with his disciples, Thomas asked him how the followers were to know the way that

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 89-93.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 93.

²⁴⁸ John 14:6

Jesus was going. Eck reads the “I am the way” response as a pastoral invitation to follow his lead rather than as a polemical comment meant to condemn.²⁴⁹ In the preface to the 2003 edition of her book, Eck reports that in the ten years since its initial publication, she has “heard from Christians who are grateful to read these passages in a new light and to look again at Jesus’ insistent love for both neighbors and strangers in the gospels.”²⁵⁰

Concluding that the road of intolerance and exclusivism runs counter to the spirit of Jesus of Nazareth, Eck finishes her chapter of pluralist Jesus theology by using her understanding of the faces of Shiva (a creator, a sustainer, a destroyer, mystery, and grace) and the five *rasas* or tastes of Krishna (child, friend, lover, lord, and supreme one) to rework her understandings of Christ. Learning to see these faces and taste these *rasas*, Eck writes that her “own capacity to see and understand the meaning of *incarnation* in Christ has been extended greatly by the faith of the Hindus.”²⁵¹ Although Christians don’t speak of faces as a way to evoke images and perceptions of Jesus Christ, Eck suggests that “we could” and proposes five different faces of Christ: (1) not-yet with the taste of hope; (2) divine child with the taste of delight and tender, unconditional love; (3) healer with the taste of liberation and wholeness; (4) one who struggles with temptation and death with the taste of

²⁴⁹ Eck, *Encountering God*, 94. While I am on board with some of Eck’s project (as the latter part of this chapter will clarify), I find this reading quite unconvincing as it ignores the declarative “no one comes to the Father except through me.” In fact, in her efforts to rework Christianity, Eck never addresses the imagery of God the Father but simply uses an existential notion of God as Being. I note these issues here primarily to flag additional work that a thoroughly reworked Christianity might need to address.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, xiii.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

suffering; and (5) as risen savior with the taste of joy and faith. For Eck, the Christian liturgical year beginning in Advent provides a structure in which Christians have long refined their capacities to live life in relation to these varied and multiple glimpses of God.²⁵²

While Eck's journey in the pages of her memoir continues to rework Christian understandings of the Holy Spirit and of prayer based on insights from her encounters with Hinduism, our journey moves ahead and reconnects with her concluding remarks and metaphors which range from cosmological to communal to historical to fluvial. At the cosmological level, Eck references the vision of philosopher and theologian, John Hick, who sees pluralism as nothing less than a "Copernican revolution" in contemporary theology that has moved away from a Ptolemaic position that imagined other traditions revolving around the sun of Christianity as their validity was measured in terms of proximity to the light.

From a "Ptolemaic" Christian inclusivist position in which other traditions of wisdom or devotion were understood to revolve around the sun of the Christian tradition, their validity measured by their distance from the center, the Christian pluralist makes a radical move, insisting that as we become aware of the traditions of Buddhists or Muslims, we must begin to see that it is God or Ultimate Reality around which our human religious traditions revolve – not any one tradition or way of salvation. As Hick puts it, "We have to realize that the universe of faiths centres upon God, and not upon Christianity or upon any other religion. [God] is the sun, the originative source of light and life, whom all the religions reflect in their own different ways."²⁵³

Building on this theological Copernican revolution, Eck's employs communal language to call for a new "imagined community" or a "global village" that possesses

²⁵² Ibid., 97-117.

²⁵³ Ibid., 190.

a wider sense of “we” than the world has previously known. To further make her point, she summons the Hindu language of the world as a single family, *va-sudhaiva katumbakum*; the Buddhist notion of *sangha* or community; and Christian understandings of *oikos* and *oikoumene* for the “whole inhabited earth” as different paths potentially converging on this new community.

She also includes a lengthy summation of Gandhi’s work to create a wider sense of “we” and rehearses a detailed history of Liberal Christian ecumenical interfaith movements before issuing strong statements regarding the importance of interpreting one another “fairly and accurately” while also fostering a spirit of dialogue that allows for critical reevaluations of different criteria for truth and value. The attention to criticism leads her into a brief discussion of exclusivists, where, interestingly, she modulates her language slightly and describes them as “absolutists” who, by definition, cannot abide criticism. While she does not elaborate on her move from a language of perspective to a language of power, I note it here as another thread our story will return to. She associates absolutism with both dogmatism and fanaticism and recommends the dynamic of self-criticism as a way to avoid their lures and to keep dialogue open to many perspectives and voices.²⁵⁴

Mutual and self criticism for Eck involves apology, reparation, and what Jews call *tikkun olam*, “the mending of the world” where forgetting and leaving behind will not do. A 1987 letter from Christian bishops and church officials in the Pacific Northwest provides an example of the kind of healing Eck promotes. Addressed to

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 221-224.

the Tribal Councils and Traditional Spiritual leaders of the Indian and Eskimo Peoples of the Pacific Northwest, the letter is a formal apology on behalf of the churches for their long-standing participation in the destruction of traditional Native American spiritual practices. It is also an acknowledgement that the churches were all too willing participants in the rampant racism and prejudice of the dominant culture. After pledging solidarity with the tribes on “important religious issues,” the letter concludes “May the God of Abraham and Sarah, and the Spirit who lives in both the cedar and the Salmon People be honored and celebrated.”²⁵⁵

In a historical mode, Eck returns to the story she begins her book with: the 1893 Parliament of World Religions and the statement made by its President that “Henceforth the religions of the world will make war not on each other, but on the giant evils that afflict mankind!” Eck reports that reading these words prompts a sigh of sadness and a tinge of cynicism as a century later, the world’s religious traditions continue to provide fuel for and play a role in global hostilities. Although interfaith cooperation has gotten “a good start,” she notes that interfaith violence has kept pace. In Eck’s story, the first Parliament marked not so much the beginnings of an interreligious movement, but rather the beginnings of the modern Christian ecumenical movement with a prevailing energy for mission over dialogue. She locates the real breakthrough in the 1960s when the Roman Catholic Church’s Second Vatican Council focused attention on interreligious relations. And in 1968, the World Council of Churches addressed the question of other religions in a section named

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 225.

“Seeking Community: The Common Search of People of Various Faiths, Cultures, and Ideologies.” Today, she writes, “interreligious dialogue is on the agenda not only of the churches, but also of Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist organizations.”

While there is no question for Eck that religious traditions have been part of the problem when one surveys contemporary conflicts, it is equally clear to her that religious traditions must be part of the solution. For Eck, the solution is dialogue.

Dialogue begins with the questions that arise from the common context of our lives together. Education, good government, health, families, AIDS, violence, and the response to violence – these are the subjects of interreligious dialogue. What about humanity’s relation to nature? What is an ethical issue? What is the meaning of justice? What criteria should we bring to the making of just decisions? These are the questions of interreligious dialogue.²⁵⁶

Beyond dialogue, the newly imagined community and the larger sense of “we” that Eck seeks requires images of interrelatedness and interdependence. She discusses several from various religious traditions including the Hindu image of the world as four-petaled world lotus with India being the southern petal and the Oglala of the Great Plains image of themselves as one people among the “Seven Fireplaces” of the Sioux. Nearing the end of her text, Eck then makes a subtle shift from speaking of images mapping current community to speaking of images about future community, and she cites the Christian idea of the Kingdom of God as the world God intends and the world in which we must be co-creators before asserting that this is not a Christian community but the community of the “whole inhabited earth.” She reads the early Christian understanding of “kingdom” as an imagined community that:

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 218.

would not be imposed from above and ruled from on high, but would grow from the smallest seeds, like big bushes from tiny mustard seeds. It would be a kingdom inherited not by the rich and powerful, but by the poor, the widows, the homeless, and the strangers. This community would not secure its identity by dominion or exclusion, but was imagined to be an open house for all the peoples of the earth, coming from the East and West, North and South, to eat at table together. This imagined community is not off in the future in some heavenly place and time, but among us in community in this very world and within us. It is not some other place, but this place transformed by justice and filled to the brim with peace. The Kingdom of God is much wider than the church. It is the Kingdom of God, not of the Christian church. The role of the immediate followers of Christ in bringing this to be is not imagined in grandiose language, but in the most humble of domestic language. We are to be like yeast in the bread dough, like salt in the food, like a light to the path.²⁵⁷

Building on this homiletic, Eck then concludes her book by calling on the imagery in the final book of the Christian Bible. Revelation 21-22 relays a vision of a holy city where it is always daytime, the gates of the city are always open, and people of all nations bring “the glory and honor of the nations.” She notes that this image draws on the earlier imaginative vision of the prophet Ezekiel who also saw the city and the temple. In the Ezekiel version, a stream flows from the sanctum and gradually becomes a great river flowing with the waters of life and bringing abundance and healing wherever it flows. Revelation picks up on this imagery as well but in the later version, the water flows from the throne of God with a tree of life on either side. The leaves of the trees are for the healing of the nations, and the water of life is free. Eck reports that she knows this kind of imagery does not belong to Christianity alone. When she reads this vision, Eck sees the Ganges, the Hindu River of Heaven, flowing from the foot of Vishnu to the head of Shiva to the top of Mount Meru before splitting into four channels to water all of the Earth. The stream she knows best flows

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 230.

south into India skirting the edges of Banaras where pilgrims bathe at dawn. She concludes her memoir with the speculative statement that “surely the Jordan is one of those streams of the River of Heaven – and the Gallatin as well.”²⁵⁸

During the summer before my last year of college, I encountered Eck’s *Encountering God*. I was home for the summer doing research for my senior thesis on a New Religious Movement called the Church Universal and Triumphant (CUT). CUT leadership had purchased 12,000 acres bordering the northern edge of Yellowstone National Park. They established their headquarters here and named it the Royal Teton Ranch. I frequently drove the 75 mile distance from Gallatin Valley to the next valley to the east, Paradise Valley to get to their ranch. The route took me over the Bozeman Pass before turning south to follow, in reverse, the path cut by the Yellowstone River which flows in a northern direction. A few years prior, Robert Redford had filmed *A River Runs Through It* on the Yellowstone. I had been moved by it when I saw it in a theatre in Appleton.

The story, based on the autobiographical novella of the Montana author, Norman Maclean, takes place near Missoula, Montana, and it follows two sons of a Presbyterian minister as they come of age in the 1920s and 1930s. One could say that it is a Prodigal Son story, but it ends quite differently than the Gospel version. Narrated by the older studious brother, Norman, the story weaves threads of familial connection with a thorough grounding in the Bible transposed into a metaphysics of fly fishing. Maclean writes:

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 231.

In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing. We lived at the junction of great trout rivers in western Montana, and our father was a Presbyterian minister and a fly fisherman who tied his own flies and taught others. He told us about Christ's disciples being fishermen, and we were left to assume, as my brother and I did, that all first-class fishermen on the Sea of Galilee were fly fishermen and that John, the favorite, was a dry-fly fisherman."²⁵⁹

After introducing their early life, most of the story takes place during a summer when both Norman and his brother Paul were in their early 30s. Norman had gone to college "back east" and had become a professor at the University of Chicago. Paul stayed in Montana where he led a rowdy life, drank too much, got into fights, and gambled with a high stakes crowd. Norman comes home for the summer and fishes with Paul while also worrying about him. The brothers and their father go on one last fishing excursion. Norman and his father bring up the rear as they discuss the Gospel, particularly John 1:1 "In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The father tells Norman that he used to think that the water came first, but "if you listen carefully you will hear that the words are underneath the water." Norman counters that Paul would say the words are formed out of water, and the father says, "No, the water runs over the words. Paul will tell you the same thing."²⁶⁰ The story then moves to relay the beauty and artistry of Paul's fishing form as he performs a masterful catch. It was the last fish Paul caught. He was killed in a fight soon after.

²⁵⁹ Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 1.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 95-96.

Maclean writes that a river “has so many things to say that it is hard to know what it says to each of us ... It is those we live with and love and should know who elude us.” Writing in his 70s, he reports that nearly all those he loved and did not understand when he was young have died, but he still reaches out to them, and he concludes his novella with these words:

Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world’s great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs. I am haunted by waters.

For many years, I was haunted by Maclean’s story. In the foreword to the 25th anniversary edition, the author, Annie Proulx describes it as one of the “truly great stories of American literature – allegory, requiem, memoir – and so powerful and enormous in symbol and regret for a lost time and a lost brother, for human mortality and the consciousness of beauty, that it becomes part of the life experience of the reader, unforgettable.”²⁶¹ Proulx’s assessment comports well with my reception of the story. Maclean’s haunting amplified my own confusions over my increasingly fractured sense of belonging to a Montana community, though I had not yet lost anyone to death. I identified with the narrator as a fellow Montana expat. Sitting in a theatre in the lands around the Fox River, I felt out of place. I longed to be transported back to Montana, to breathe the mountain air, and to feel the cold water of recently melted snow rush over my feet. I belonged to a faraway place. The Biblical language structuring the story resonated with my confusions, ambivalences, and

²⁶¹ Annie Proulx, “Foreword” in Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), xi.

questions about Christianity which had only become more acute at Lawrence. The knowledge I gleaned there had further fractured my sense of belonging to Churchill.

Eck's college encounters with different rivers of religious traditions presented a challenge to her faith that she met by developing a more capacious Christianity. Remembering her first recognition of a plurality of religious claims, she wrote that this kind of awareness need not constitute a betrayal of one's faith. What Eck assumes here is that one's tradition is flexible enough to accommodate questions and modifications from a questing Prodigal Daughter. Clearly, the variety of Christianity she practices, mainline Methodism which is part of the Liberal Protestant coalition, has continued not only to welcome but also to celebrate her as she is an ambassador for their interfaith efforts.

My story is not so seamless. As narrated in Part I, the Faith of my Fathers had shown me the door when I faithfully questioned it. The Christian Reformed exclusivist tradition would not tolerate a Pluralist Pantheon anymore than it would tolerate questioning Prodigal Daughters. The two different varieties of Christianity that formed Eck and me, both of which took hold in the lands watered by the Gallatin River, produced vastly different kinds of Christianity and understandings of God. Whereas Eck gleaned knowledge about other religions thus launching her on a journey to a Pluralist Pantheon, my encounters with knowledge about my religion pushed me instead to encounter the Bluffs of Betrayal.

Chapter 5

Bluffs of Betrayal and Registers of Difference

In speaking of lies, we come inevitably to the subject of truth. There is nothing simple or easy about this idea. There is no “the truth,” “a truth” – truth is not one thing, or even a system. It is an increasing complexity. The pattern of the carpet is a surface. When we look closely, or when we become weavers, we learn of the tiny multiple threads unseen in the overall pattern, the knots in the underside of the carpet. That is why the effort to speak honestly is so important. Lies are usually attempts to make everything simpler – for the liar – than it really is, or ought to be. ... Patriarchal lying has manipulated women both through falsehood and through silence. Facts we needed have been withheld from us. False witness has been borne against us.

– Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose*

Throughout the world, “Parliaments of Religion” are no longer experiments held at a World’s Fair but instead are everyday assemblies occurring in schools, hospitals, and city streets throughout North America, Asia, and Europe. At the same time, combatants in new ‘wars of religion’ base their legitimacy on claims to defend religious traditions or worldviews, in such diverse places as Pakistan, Nigeria, and (in a less overtly militarized zone) Washington, DC. Religion is proliferating; academics, journalists, and policymakers increasingly take religion as a subject of inquiry, and laypeople of all sorts consider it a rubric by which to understand shifting social forces in local neighborhoods and around the globe.

– Pamela E. Klassen and Courtney Bender,
After Pluralism: Reimagining Religious Engagement

During the winter quarter of my first year in college, I decided to take a Religious Studies course titled “Old Testament/Hebrew Bible.” My music courses had been more challenging than I had anticipated, and this course seemed like an easy way to fulfill one of my general education requirements. After all, I had spent my entire life immersed in the Bible, and my senior year of high school had included a required Bible course organized around reading Paul Little’s book, *Know Why You Believe* that addressed questions about the reliability of Biblical documents and

archaeological evidence about scripture. Little's book had assured us that Christianity is rooted in history and that the Bible's historical references are true.²⁶² A brief excursion through Little's tropics sets the stage for my story of betrayal.

In the chapter, "Is the Bible God's Word?" Little begins by reminding the reader that the apostle Peter tells us that God has communicated "everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him [Jesus Christ] (2 Peter 1:3)," but it is nonetheless valid to ask "How do we know the Bible in its totality is God speaking?" and "is this book really divine, from God himself?"²⁶³ Little then offers a variety of approaches to answering this question, all of which end in the affirmative. He begins by stating that "the Bible itself claims to be the inspired Word of God" and these claims are to be taken as seriously as when a person on trial declares their innocence. The implication here is that such testimony is to be considered a faithful representation of the speaker but subject to outside corroboration.

Little adjusts his argument to focus on the extraordinariness of the text which links books "written by about forty authors" to a "single theme, God linking to humanity and humanity's response."²⁶⁴ Referring to another Bible verse (2 Timothy 3:16), Little reminds the reader that the Bible describes itself as "God-breathed" or, in some translations "inspired." He explains that the Biblical sense of "inspired" is unique insofar as God is the author so that, unlike the works of Shakespeare or

²⁶² Paul E. Little, *Know Why You Believe* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 91. The book was initially published in 1967 and has been reissued several times with new editions appearing in 1968, 1988, 2000, and 2008. In 2006, *Christianity Today* (founded by Billy Graham) voted this book one of the top 50 that have shaped evangelicalism.

²⁶³ Little, 74-75.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 76-77.

Beethoven, the Bible “is the product of God himself. These are not mere human ideas but God’s divine character and will revealed through human words. . . . God worked through the instrumentality of human personality but so guided and controlled the people that what they wrote is *what he wanted written* (emphasis original).”

At this juncture, Little discusses those who adopt a more metaphoric reading and compares it to reading the Bible the way one might read Aesop’s fables, i.e. as “nonfactual stories recorded only to illustrate or convey spiritual truth.” He dismisses this logic as evading the “clear intent of the words grammatically and syntactically” which not only misses the overall unity of the entire Biblical story but also leads to a “subjective pick-and-choose interpretation removing any thought of divine biblical inspiration.” While one must be careful when talking about “taking the Bible literally” or describing it as inerrant, the general principle he advocates is acknowledging that “the thoughts God wanted written were written.” He acknowledges that 20th century standards of scientific and historical precision and accuracy may not apply to Biblical writers, but while some possible discrepancies may exist due to translation errors, these problems do “not prevent us from accepting the Bible as the supernatural Word of God.”

Thus far, Little’s text relies on the Bible as a self-authorizing text or as testimony he trusts. Revisiting some of the response papers I wrote for this class twenty years after the fact, I can see that self-proclaimed Biblical authority was already not convincing to me. I wanted to hear more about the outside verification, and I was looking to Little for answers. Immediately following the mandate to accept

the text as the supernatural Word of God, Little defers to another expert, E.J. Carnell, whom he says “illustrates from science” that Christianity assumes a supernaturalness in the Bible the way a scientist assumes nature is “rational and orderly” but “both are hypothesis based.” Little then critiques science because it claims nature is mechanical yet cannot account for the “mysterious electrons jumping around as expressed by what is called the Heisenberg principle of uncertainty.”²⁶⁵

My high school self did not realize that E.J. Carnell was not a scientist but rather a Baptist minister and former President of the evangelical Fuller Theological Seminary. Neither did I possess enough scientific literacy to understand that Carnell and Little’s conception of “science” as assuming a mechanical view of nature represented an impoverished and anachronistic understanding of a diverse body of knowledge. A richer understanding of science knows that it is not only oriented around the tasks of understanding the seemingly mysterious workings of the world but also accommodates uncertainty and ongoing revision, including the Heisenberg principle (which is a product of rather than a refutation of science). For a young reader with only a rudimentary understanding of science who belonged to a community of Bible believers, however, Little’s framing of the argument served the rhetorical purpose of rendering “science” as a confused if not shortsighted and possibly even untrustworthy approach to understanding the world.

Having dispensed with science, Little concludes this chapter with a series of examples of the Bible proving itself insofar as it relates numerous examples of

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 85.

prophecies which are then also fulfilled, including the various predictions about the coming of a savior. These are, Little declares, “further confirmation that the Bible is the Word of God.”²⁶⁶ The following chapter, “Are the Bible Documents Reliable?” provides additional examples of what I would eventually learn to recognize as circular reasoning, but to my high school self, appeared convincing. After reminding the reader of his previously established “primary truths” – that there is a “rational body of truth for belief in God and Jesus Christ;” that God is a personal and knowable God who communicates with his creation; that God came to Earth in the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ; and that God uses the Bible to reveal himself – Little turns to the task of examining the Bible’s “credentials and reliability.”²⁶⁷

The task of examining the books of the Bible and their origins, he informs the reader, is the realm of “textual criticism” which examines the reliability of the text by comparing the copies with the originals and asking questions about the accuracy of the later versions. He then discusses the various writing technologies (e.g. clay and wooden tablets, papyrus and parchment scrolls) prior to the 15th century invention of moveable type and the Gutenberg Press. Then Little tells the reader that the earliest and most widely used copy of the Hebrew Old Testament is the 900 AD Masoretic text which was the product of Jewish scribes who had been “custodians of the Hebrew text.” The Masoretic text, Little reports, is in “remarkable agreement” with all present copies of the Hebrew text.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 86.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 92.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 94.

Little then moves into a discussion of the 1947 discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran (an archeological site in the West Bank of contemporary Israel) which have been dated almost 1000 years prior to the Masoretic text and include fragments of every book in the Old Testament except for Esther. He informs his readers that comparison between the scrolls and the Masoretic text shows that the text is extremely similar. Of the seventeen letters that differ, ten are spelling idiosyncracies that do not change the meaning, four are the presence of a conjunction which is a matter of style, and the other three are small additions which do not change the sense of the passage.²⁶⁹ Little then moves into a discussion of documentary evidence about the New Testament where he reports that the “great scholar F.J.A. Hort,” after a lifetime of studying the documentary evidence, concluded that not more than one-thousandth part of the whole New Testament is affected by differences between sources.²⁷⁰

After establishing the reliability of the texts, Little addresses the question of the canon which asks how we know that the books in the Bible are the ones that ought to be there and how do we know that we aren’t missing any? He then goes into the variations between Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish canons before quoting a Biblical scholar, Edward J. Young, who reports that the books that were received as authoritative were those that were “recognized as utterances of people inspired by

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 96.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 97. Little addresses additional issues surrounding the New Testament, particularly the several decades that passed between the death of Jesus and the writing of the Gospels. Since I am focused on the Old Testament here, I did not go into his analysis. Suffice it to say, he concludes that all evidence points to the accuracy of the received texts.

God to reveal his Word.”²⁷¹ Little concludes that “canonicity is a question of the witness of God to each individual confirming the truth in the hearts of those who read it.”²⁷²

Revisiting Little’s text today, it is not difficult for me to identify his rhetorical strategy. He begins by reminding the reader of the power and authority of God and his revealed word in the Bible before raising a potentially relevant question or objection. Instead of answering his hypothetical questions directly, however, he informs the reader of previous authorities, usually in the form of briefly referenced “experts,” who have studied the questions in great detail and have concluded that all the evidence suggests that the word of God is exactly what it says it is. In the process of making his argument, which is always stated in the declarative, Little cites an extensive variety of Bible verses in a narrative that synthesizes his larger point.

When I first read Little as a high school senior, I found him persuasive. I may have had questions about the way the CRC interpreted the Bible, but his seemingly well-reasoned exposition assured me that the important issues had been addressed, and even more importantly, he didn’t report any controversy. Though it sounds (and was!) naïve, I trusted him and the community of believers who made his book a best-seller to report the facts that mattered. His book reassured me that the Christianity I knew was the same Christianity that had existed for hundreds of years and had been followed by all those who had faithfully continued to read and teach the Bible. Most importantly, his book left me with the impression that the answers to these questions

²⁷¹ Ibid., 102.

²⁷² Ibid., 106.

had always been a clear-cut matter. When I walked into Lawrence University's Main Hall on the bluffs overlooking the Fox River on a blustery winter day, I had no idea that the "Old Testament/Hebrew Bible" class was about to blow my mind and crack my world wide open. Nor did I know that the knowledge gleaned there would push me to a place where I felt deeply betrayed by the community that weaned me.

When I first began reviewing my files and revisiting my books to write this chapter, I had remembered that the primary book we read in the Old Testament course immersed me in what I would call a "secular" approach to the study of the Bible. So I was surprised and slightly amused to discover, upon reviewing the book, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction*, that the author, Lawrence Boadt, was, in addition to being a Bible scholar, also a Catholic priest. In fact, his Introduction to the text includes a lengthy quote from Pope Pius XII's 1943 Encyclical, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, which inaugurated a modern approach in Roman Catholic Biblical studies authorizing, as we shall see, a much broader understanding of textual criticism than the gloss I had encountered in high school.

My amusement at this discovery of the Catholicness of my early secular formation stemmed from a recognition of multiple ironies not the least of which was that my radical break with Calvinism was brought on by engaging with the thought of one of its historic enemies. I saw added layers of irony in my misrecognition of a Catholic reading as a secular approach, a collapsing that both is and is not accurate. To the extent that secular perspectives are concerned with knowledge as a product of human interactions with the world, Boadt's book easily qualifies. He does not rely on

assertions that the Bible is self-authorized by God but instead uses secular modernist approaches to understand the various books of the Hebrew Bible as products of the Jewish communities that wrote down and organized them. Boadt's perspective might be considered religious, however, insofar as he thinks one can "discern a living God who still speaks to us" in the text.²⁷³ All ironies aside, studying the Old Testament with the Boadt text as my guide prompted me to further reject CRC knowledge.

The knowledge I gleaned from Boadt included a thorough overview of the vast array of historical periods, peoples, languages, and lands covered by the Old Testament. We also learned a variety of details about archaeological methods and major digs and non-Biblical literary finds before we arrived at the literary tools that changed my understanding of knowledge about the Bible. Boadt referenced the same science of determining the accuracy and quality of texts that Little had described as "textual criticism," but Boadt described this method as what earlier scholars referred to as "lower criticism" to distinguish it from the task of "higher criticism" which indicates "interpretation of the corrected text." Like Little, Boadt also references the Masoretic text, but instead of emphasizing its remarkable consistency, Boadt explains that compiling this document required a significant amount of interpretation on the part of the Jewish scholars who had to decide which vowels to insert into the vowel-less Hebrew words which had been handed down over a thousand year period during which many words changed both meaning and grammatical shape. Where Little reassured his readers of consistency without discussing specifics, Boadt emphasized

²⁷³ Lawrence Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 14.

historical specificity and change over time in such a way that I could begin to imagine the text as contingent and evolving.

Learning about the difficulties of lower criticism, I began to see that there was no guarantee that the Masoretic text relayed the same information in 900 AD as its antecedents. This realization was but a small taste of what was to come. In a section titled “The Bible as Literature and Story” Boaldt transitioned from talking about lower criticism to higher criticism, and he stated that “because authors in every age and every culture express themselves differently, modern literary-theory must offer us ways of understanding ancient writers.” Accordingly, we must read the stories as offering insight into the specific problems of the people who wrote them.²⁷⁴ Boaldt went on to compare the ancient and modern methods of recording historical events. Where the modern scientific historian attempts to reconstruct past events objectively and accurately, the ancient Israelite historian recorded traditions. And where the ancient historian seemed content to include several parallel versions of the same story, the modern historian seeks out conflicting accounts to find the original one. In other words, the modern historian attempts to ascertain specific details about the past whereas the ancient historian was concerned with relaying larger mythological patterns that drew connections between ordinary events and larger cosmic structures.²⁷⁵

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 75-77.

²⁷⁵ To back up his claim about patterns, Boaldt makes reference to scholarship of Mircea Eliade which my upcoming “critics” take serious issue with. I generally agree with their critiques. However, I have sidestepped the issue here because it would require a significant digression. One need not accept Eliade or Boaldt’s analysis to follow the arc of my current story where the primary aim is to explore the vastly different ways of reading the Bible which had previously been unknown to me.

Building on the idea that ancients both understood and made sense of their worlds in vastly different ways than I had previously imagined, Boadt's text introduced a variety of literary tools – source criticism, form criticism, and tradition history criticism – to both “get behind the present unity” of the Old Testament and to better understand the historical context in the terms of those who lived it. Source criticism, in particular, changed everything for me. It focuses on problems of whether or not there might have been written documents prior to the present text, and it has particularly been proposed as one way to solve the problems of repetitions and inconsistencies in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, usually attributed to Moses. Before taking the course, I had not even been aware that there were problems of repetitions and inconsistencies in the books that my people read as accurate historical accounts of events.

Eighteenth-century researchers noted the use of two distinct names for God (Yahweh and Elohim) in Genesis leading them to conclude that Moses must have used two or more different written sources when he composed them. Critics also noted contradictory styles of writing that appeared side by side and called the covenant mountain Sinai in one place and Horeb in another. German and English scholars in the 18th and 19th century debated ways to approach these kinds of problems until 1872 when Julius Wellhausen published his *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* in which he put forth his “Documentary Hypothesis” which identified four clear written sources which were presumed to have been combined in the surviving versions of the Pentateuch.

The first source, the J document (for Yahwist), was considered to be the oldest and was dated to the period when David and Solomon united Israel as a kingdom and was told from the viewpoint of the southern tribe of Judah to glorify the monarchy. The second source, the E document (for Elohim), emerged after Solomon died and the nation split. It provided a northern perspective that did not glorify Jerusalem and the southern kings. The third source, the D document (for Deuteronomist), dated to approximately 622 BC, produced the Book of Deuteronomy which represented a reaction to the ideas in the J and E theology of promise and instead emphasized legal traditions, obedience, and faithfulness. Finally, the P document (for Priestly) emerged during the period of Babylonian Exile (597-586 BC) and was organized by priests to set forth a number of traditions that would allow Israel's covenant to be lived and to last without land, temple, or king.

Our professor gave us a list of the different Bible verses in the Pentateuch that had been attributed to each of the sources, and I went through my Bible and used different colored highlighters to mark each according to its document source. Thumbing through the pages and reading the differently colored blocks with attention to the different understandings of God in each one, it became obvious to me that the CRC community had lied to me. I had trusted them to be faithful witnesses to history as much as to God, and now I realized that for at least 100 years, many people had been reading the Bible very differently. While I was aware that there were different Christian denominations, my 18-year old self had thought of them as basically all the same with the exception of Roman Catholics who, I had been taught, made the grave

error of obeying the Pope instead of reading the Bible. Little's book had reassured me that the experts had looked into the evidence, and it all pointed to the obviousness of what we took to be the literal reading. Little and my ancestors, it appeared to me, had failed to pay sufficient attention to the historical record.

Of course, I knew that it would be unlikely for most people in my community to have known what I was learning, but surely the teachers and preachers who went to college and seminary would have explored this knowledge? I felt acutely betrayed as I constantly wondered how my people could not know? Perhaps they did. If not, why not? And if so, why was I not told? Even if they had encountered this knowledge and had dismissed it, then I wanted to know how they had made that assessment. I have never been able to satisfactorily answer these questions directly. My occasional attempts to broach the subject with members of the community have inevitably been met with resistance and suspicion. I am no longer a trusted member of the community. From their perspective, I am a Prodigal Daughter who has woefully strayed. From my perspective, they belong to a community with a totalitarian patriarchal authority structure that polices knowledge and exacts a high exit cost paid in wages of fractured belonging for those who question and challenge it.

Looking at the different colored blocks of text in my Bible, it seemed clear to me that where I had once worked hard to integrate various stories to make sense of a God who was revealing himself to me, I now saw the results of human communities who had different understandings of God that they were constantly reworking. Where I had previously seen black and white continuity and unity of obvious truth, I now

saw massive differences and ongoing contestations, negotiations, and conversations. It was not at all clear to me that the ancient Israelites wrote anything down because it was, as Little had said, exactly what God wanted them to write. Everything I thought I knew about the world was based on a lie, and God turned out to be a concoction of human imagination.

I finished the course by trying on the different way of reading the Bible that Boadt proposed; in effect, as an ongoing story lived by historically situated people wrestling with making sense of their circumstances. For my research paper, I chose to write about the book of Ecclesiastes which had long been my favorite. I learned that, along with Proverbs, Job, and the Wisdom of Solomon, it belonged to the genre of “wisdom writings.” These books, Boadt writes, are united by a set of common characteristics including minimal interest in acts associated either with divine salvation or with Israel as a nation. Instead, the wisdom texts adopted a questioning attitude about the problems of life including why there is suffering, inequality, and death or “why the wicked prosper.” Additionally, their searching questions focused on finding answers to questions about how all humans (not just the followers of Yahweh) should live, and their answers frequently revolved around joy in the contemplation of creation and God as creator.²⁷⁶

The skepticism and agonized searching of Ecclesiastes (a.k.a. Qoheleth) comported well with my confusion after discovering source criticism. Indeed, Boadt writes that it is “the most skeptical book in the Bible.” Where Proverbs provides

²⁷⁶ Boadt, 472-473.

guidelines for living that are confidently summed up as wisdom based in the fear of the Lord, Ecclesiastes has doubts as to whether such confidence has any basis. Recall the Proverbs text that my niece, Taylor, was memorizing in the anecdote that I relayed in the first pages of the dissertation:

For the Lord gives wisdom,
and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.
He holds victory in store for the upright,
He is a shield to those whose walk is blameless,
For he guards the course of the just and protects the way of his faithful
ones.²⁷⁷

In lieu of Proverbs conjoining of wisdom, knowledge, and a positive appraisal of a rewarding life, the author of Ecclesiastes registers a decidedly less positive tone as he dwells on the impermanence and meaninglessness of all things when he writes, “I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men! ... For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.”²⁷⁸ And a few verses later, he reports:

Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom, and also madness and folly ... Then I thought in my heart, ‘The fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise?’ I said in my heart, ‘This too is meaningless.’ For the wise man, like the fool, will not be long remembered; in days to come both will be forgotten. Like the fool, the wise man too must die.²⁷⁹

Though Ecclesiastes admits that God directs all things, it also insists that we cannot know what God is doing or why and so the best way to live is to enjoy what God gives us now to the best of our abilities. Explaining the difference in tone, Boadt reports that Proverbs emerged from a number of sayings that were collected under

²⁷⁷ Proverbs 2:6-8.

²⁷⁸ Ecclesiastes 1:13 & 18

²⁷⁹ Ecclesiastes 2:12a & 15-16

King Solomon's command and formed into a book that would come to include many later additions. Ecclesiastes, on the other hand, captures some of Israelite thought after the Babylonian Captivity, particularly registering doubts about both old answers and new "rational approaches of Greek thought that began to influence the Near East at that time."²⁸⁰

Reading the Old Testament with Boadt, I began to see that the stories about God collected in the Old Testament told me more about how a specific group of people made sense of their conditions and intra-acted with their world at different times than it told me about the nature of an atemporal God. Where Proverbs represents a confident collection of wisdom from a people who are ruling an empire, Ecclesiastes represents a skeptical collection of wisdom from a people suffering through exile and captivity. I learned to listen to the specificities of historical context and to pick out different riffs voiced by people intra-acting with their context. Learning how to listen for and understand this kind of improvisation required a slightly different set of skills than those I employed in my jazz studies, but some of the foundational principles applied. The more thoroughly I understood the contextual registers in which the compositions occurred, the more likely I would be able to hear nuances of continuity and departure in the range of options for tracing emergent patterns and dissonances in the stories that sustained ongoing communities. In learning to read the Bible differently, I was learning to register difference.

²⁸⁰ Boadt, 484.

My feelings of betrayal were matched by an emerging curiosity to better understand the broad range of possible responses people had developed to make sense of the mystery of existence. I stopped identifying as a Christian yet pursued the academic study of religion with a focus on Christianity. I was curious to know more about what I had begun to glimpse as the varied and multiphonic history of Christianity. I learned that historians know very little about the religion *of* Jesus and that it is more accurate to think of Christianity as a religion *about* Jesus. I learned that the recently discovered Dead Sea Scrolls and Nag Hammadi library included not only the Masoretic text but also the Gospel of Thomas which was dated to about 140 CE and contained a non-messianic representation of Jesus. This knowledge oriented me in the direction of New Testament source criticism where, again, I learned that the stories signified differently to those who had originally told them than they did to later communities who structured their lives around them and passed them on over the centuries.

During the same years that I was learning about the variety of ways to read the Bible, a friend invited me to attend a concert by Michelle Shocked, a provocative musician about a decade older than me. Shocked had run away from her east Texas home at age 16 to escape what she has described as an austere Mormon family. Her mother caught up with her and had her committed to a psychiatric hospital where she underwent shock therapy. As a young adult, Shocked spent several years hitch-hiking across the United States and Europe during which time she was raped. Returning to the United States, she participated in the squatters rights movement in San Francisco

and New York City where she also protested corporate contributions to both Democratic and Republican campaigns. Originally named Karen Michelle Johnston, she chose the name Michelle Shocked to symbolize her many experiences of feeling “shell-shocked.”²⁸¹

I loved Shocked’s mix of bluegrass, folk, blues, and swing as much as I loved her lyrics, and I was especially taken with her song, “Prodigal Daughter” which reworked the minstrel standard, “Cotton Eyed Joe.” In the folk versions of the tune, references to the “Cotton Eyed Joe” stand in as the reason the person telling the story has not been married: “Had not have been for the Cotton Eyed Joe, I’d have been married a long ago, Oh I’d have been married a long time ago.” Introducing the song, Shocked explained that, to her, the phrase “Cotton-Eyed Joe,” loaded with the racial connotations endemic to minstrelsy, represented something so shameful that it could not be named. Improvising on that theme, she decided to write a song about the double standard that often describes the different way women who have abortions are treated in comparison to the men who are equally responsible for the terminated pregnancies.

What's to be done with a prodigal son?
Welcome him home with open arms
Throw a big party, invite your friends
Our boy's come back home

When a girl goes home with the oats he's sown
It's draw your shades and your shutters

²⁸¹ See Shocked’s bio on her web page <http://www.michelleshocked.com/bio2.htm>. See also the interview from her 1992 tour in Australia: Zany Begg, “The Mellowing of ‘Miss Shell Shocked’” in *The Green Left Weekly*, December 9, 1992. <https://www.greenleft.org.au/node/2454>, accessed April 26, 2014.

She's bringing such shame to the family name
The return of the prodigal daughter

Singing, oh! Cotton Eyed Joe
Went to see a doctor and I almost died
When I told my mama, Lordy, how she cried
Me and my daddy were never too close
But he was there when I needed him most

Look, here comes a prodigal son
Fetch him a tall drink of water
But there's none in the cup because he drank it all up
Left for a prodigal daughter²⁸²

Shocked's feminist revisioning of the parable appealed to me both because it expressed the injustice experienced by those silenced and shamed by the standard patriarchal structures and because she used the Biblical and musical genres she had inherited to boldly speak back to the patriarchal version as a faithful witness to a different kind of story that had long been silenced. During the summer of 1993, I listened to Shocked's parable frequently as I followed the Yellowstone River to the Royal Teton Ranch to conduct my thesis research on a new religious movement that I understood as also reworking the stories they had inherited to produce a new world vision.

That summer I saw Eck's *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* displayed prominently in the window of my favorite bookstore, the Country Bookshelf in downtown Bozeman. Prior to this sighting, I had not been familiar with Eck or her work, but I knew of and admired her mother, Dorothy Eck,

²⁸² http://www.michelleshocked.com/chords_prodigal_daughter.htm, accessed April, 2014

who some have referred to as “the ‘Grand Dame’ of Montana Progressives.”²⁸³ Dorothy Eck’s political career began when she joined the League of Women Voters and became a delegate to the 1972 Montana Constitutional Convention where she drafted the language of Article X – Education and Public Lands, which included this statement: “The State recognizes the distinct and unique cultural heritage of American Indians and is committed in its educational goals to the preservation of their cultural integrity.” After a serious awareness and voter canvassing campaign implemented by Eck and 18 other women, the Constitution passed by a narrow margin with 7 out of 10 urban areas voting for it and the conservative, rural areas voting against.²⁸⁴ Eck continued in politics and represented Bozeman as a Democrat in the Montana Senate for 20 years. Though Churchill was certainly one of those conservative, rural areas about 20 miles west of Bozeman’s periphery, my politics and yearnings aligned more closely with the example set by Eck.

The discovery that the daughter of one of my heroines had successfully pursued a path like the one I had recently chosen registered to me as nothing less than an outrageously good fortune. I purchased the book but only skimmed it as my research seemed more pressing. By this time, I had read Mircea Eliade’s *The Sacred*

²⁸³ See, for example, a 2011 interview with Dorothy Eck on one of Bozeman’s alternative news web sites, http://www.bozeman-magpie.com/perspective-full-article.php?article_id=215, accessed December 12, 2013.

²⁸⁴ For a thorough review of the influence of Eck and the League of Women Voters, see: Kelly Kirk. Montana State University, History MA Thesis. *State of Change: Gender and the 1972 MT Constitutional Convention*. 2011.

For an assessment Indian Education in Montana since 1972, see the report, *Montana Indian Education: Laws and Legal Issues Forum*. November 9-10, 2003. Great Falls, MT. Sponsored by the Montana Indian Education Association and the Indian Law section of the Montana State Bar and written by the Native American Law Students’ Association (NALSA) and the University of Montana School of Law. <http://mtiea.org/downloads/NALSAFinalReportonIndians.pdf>, accessed April, 2014.

and the Profane: The Nature of Religion, and my understanding of the academic study of religion, which was informed by his work, was quite similar to Eck's. Because I no longer identified as a Christian, I might not have been as interested in her project of making Christianity more capacious, but I understood the point of my work to be oriented around understanding what Eck called "the religiousness of others." I was pursuing the kind of academic work that her theology promoted. What I would not discover until graduate school is that both Eck and Eliade shared a similar theology that oriented their approach to the study of religion in ways I would learn to be critical of. To continue our journey then, an additional excursion into Eck's work is warranted.

Explaining the process of how and why she came to develop the Pluralism Project, Eck recounts some of the themes of her teaching at Harvard from the mid-1970s until the early 1990s when the challenge was to get her students "to take seriously what we then called the 'other,' to begin to glimpse what the world might look like from the perspective of a Hindu, Muslim, or Sikh ... on the other side of the world." However, by the early 1990s she began to encounter several students in her classes who claimed these identities not as international students but rather as Americans. Whereas she was used to working with Jewish and Christian students "trying to relate the critical study of religion to their own faith," she explains that it had "never occurred to me that one of my roles as a professor would be to teach American-born Hindus about their own religious tradition."²⁸⁵ She quickly realized

²⁸⁵ Eck, *A New Religious America*, 12.

that these students were the children of the first generation of immigrants who had settled in the United States after the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 significantly changed American demographics. Between 1965 and 1990, more than 15 million new immigrants had arrived in the United States, and more than a third of them came from Asia.

Meeting this new generation, Eck recounts that it became clear to her that the “very shape of our traditional fields of study was inadequate to this new world.” While she read the work of colleagues who worked in the developing fields of “multicultural studies or ethnic studies,” she was “astonished to find a strong normative, ideological secularism that seemed studiously to avoid thinking about religion at all. ... Their lively discussions of Asian immigrants, for example, proceeded as if Asian Americans had no religious lives, built no religious institutions, gathered in no religious communities.”²⁸⁶ Without time to undertake a new research project, she decided on a makeshift strategy of teaching a course with students who would do research alongside her.

In 1994, Eck and a team of students began production of a multimedia CD-ROM, *On Common Ground: World Religions in America*, to expand the work and scope of the Pluralism Project and to make the findings widely available to educators and the general public. Released in 1997, it is divided into 3 sections: Landscape, Religion, and Encounter. The Landscape section identifies 300 different “communities of faith” in 18 cities and regions of the United States. The Religion

²⁸⁶ Eck, *A New Religious America*, 18.

section introduces 15 different religious traditions in the American context and summarizes some of their basic features. The Encounter section looks at the range of ways Americans have historically responded to religious difference. This latter piece provides a history that runs from first contact with and colonization of indigenous peoples to debates about tolerance and the important “free exercise” and “no establishment of religion” clauses in the first amendment. It also includes the Chinese Exclusion Acts as xenophobic responses to immigration and then jumps to the contemporary era where encounters are often mediated through neighborhood zoning battles, court cases, and curriculum challenges as well as through interfaith dialogue and other new forms of cooperation.²⁸⁷

By the late 1990s, Eck had been appointed to the US State Department Advisory Committee on Religious Freedom Abroad, and she had been awarded a National Humanities Medal from President Bill Clinton and the National Endowment for the Humanities for the Pluralism Project’s work investigating America’s religious diversity. In 1998, Eck and her partner, Dorothy Austin, a psychology professor and an ordained Episcopal minister, became the first same-sex couple to be masters of Lowell House, one of the undergraduate residences at Harvard. Eck has described her community there as “visible testimony to the new religious America that is ours.”²⁸⁸

In late 2001, Eck published her most recent book on religions in the contemporary United States: *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country”*

²⁸⁷ Diana Eck. *On Common Ground: World Religions in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

²⁸⁸ Eck, *A New Religious America*, xii.

Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation.²⁸⁹ It rehearses the history of immigrations to the United States with a brief reference to a few anti-immigrant episodes before launching into a discussion of the ways the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 changed American demographics. By 1990, more than 15 million new immigrants had arrived in the United States, and more than a third of them came from Asia. The bulk of Eck's text draws from and promotes her ongoing work on the Pluralism Project as she describes the histories, practices, and beliefs of increasing immigrant numbers of American Hindus, American Buddhists, and American Muslims in cities across the country.

The preface to *A New Religious America* frames the work in light of that year's September 11 catastrophe when 19 Arab nationals from Muslim countries, members of the militant Islamist organization, Al-Qaeda, hijacked planes and flew them into the United States Pentagon and the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. Throughout the United States, the attacks quickly prompted an unprecedented number of xenophobic incidents and hate crimes perpetrated against American Muslims even as interfaith outreach efforts ramped up to counter the stereotypes and violence. Assessing the landscape in the months after 9/11, Eck writes, "It is too soon to gauge the climate of the new religious America in which we all now live. One thing is certain: the challenge of relations between and among people of different religions and cultural traditions, both here in the United States and

²⁸⁹ Eck, *A New Religious America*.

around the world, is moving to the top of the agenda.”²⁹⁰ While the climate may be changing and difficult to register, Eck’s unwavering approach continues to recommend dialogue between and increased literacy about world religions as a way to manage tension, misunderstandings, and real disagreement.²⁹¹

In the last decade, Eck has continued to promote both pluralism and interfaith dialogue on a national and global scale, and the Pluralism Project continues to receive numerous awards and financial resources from major funding organizations.²⁹² In 2009, she presented the prestigious Gifford Lectures on the theme, *The Age of Pluralism*.²⁹³ Along with the Global Centre for Pluralism and the European Union’s Quest for “A Soul for Europe,” Harvard University’s Pluralism Project is one of the major participants along with politicians, religious leaders and academics in North America and Europe who see pluralism as the best mode for navigating present and future challenges.²⁹⁴ In 2012, after receiving numerous awards, the Pluralism Project

²⁹⁰ Ibid., xiii.

²⁹¹ Ibid., xvi.

²⁹² A list of major funders can be found at: http://www.pluralism.org/about/major_funders

²⁹³ In 1887, the annual lectures were established by Adam Lord Gifford in Scotland to “promote and diffuse the study of natural theology in the widest sense of the term – in other words, the knowledge of God.” The long list of people who have accepted invitations to give the Gifford Lectures includes: Friedrich Max Müller, William James, Henri Bergson, James Frazer, Alfred North Whitehead, John Dewey, Karl Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr, Niels Bohr, Paul Tillich, Hannah Arendt, Ian Barbour, Jaroslav Pelikan, Mary Douglas, Carl Sagan, Richard Dawkins, Charles Taylor, Bruno Latour, and Stephen Pinker.

Podcasts of Eck’s Gifford lectures are available at iTunesU: <https://itunes.apple.com/us/itunes-u/gifford-lectures-audio/id396651186>.

²⁹⁴ The Global Centre for Pluralism is a cooperative organization with ties to both the Aga Khan Foundation development agency and the Canadian government. The Aga Khan, who claims to be a direct descendent of the Prophet Mohammed, is the Imam of Nizari Ismailism which is the second largest branch of Shia Islam.

The “Soul for Europe” Strategy Group is an initiative and parliamentary working group in the European Union. It aims to “ensure that Europe makes greater and better use of its cultural assets ...[and] integrating national histories, value systems, world views and fostering intercultural dialogue.” It is composed of “more than 50 civil-society representatives from more than 20 countries from the

launched On Common Ground 2.0, a web-based version of the project initiated in the 1990s.²⁹⁵ Today, pluralism as both an interpretive matrix and an ethical prescription has become so ubiquitous that a team of scholars who recently devoted four years of collaborative work to studying its effects described it variously as a “doctrine” and a “a widely recognized social ideal embedded in a range of political, civic, and cultural institutions.”²⁹⁶

In 1993, as the Pluralism Project was just getting started, similar issues of religious difference and competing truth claims were on my mind. I had decided to research and write about the Church Universal and Triumphant (CUT) for my senior honors thesis because I had grown up hearing that the group was a cult. In addition to my compounding lack of trust in Churchillian knowledge, I had always been fascinated with cults. As a young girl, I had read everything I could find about the People’s Temple cult and the Jonestown mass suicide. My immersion in Religious Studies made me aware that the term “cult” had a history of analytical usage to describe a recent or young religious formation but since the 1970s, it had primarily been used to discredit groups considered potentially dangerous. To avoid the derogatory connotations of the word, scholars had begun using the terminology, “New Religious Movement” instead.

areas of culture, politics, business, research and media. The Strategy Group is responsible for the conceptual development and dissemination of the idea of ‘A Soul for Europe’ through projects and initiatives.” The Initiative is supported by current and past presidents of the European Parliament along with other high ranking leadership and is intended to function as a bridge between civil-society initiatives and political decision-makers. <http://www.asoulforeurope.eu/>, accessed April, 2014.

²⁹⁵ <http://pluralism.org/ocg/>, accessed April, 2014.

²⁹⁶ Pamela E. Klassen and Courtney Bender, eds. “Introduction: Habits of Pluralism” in *After Pluralism: Reimagining Religious Engagement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 2.

CUT was founded in the 1970s by Elizabeth Clare Prophet and her husband, Mark Prophet, when they set up their first headquarters in Colorado Springs, Colorado where Mark Prophet died. Elizabeth Clare Prophet then moved the headquarters to Pasadena, California until in 1986, they moved again to Montana and established a working ranch where members lived, worked, and practiced their religion. The group can best be described as a contemporary variation on theosophical thought that also incorporates a large spectrum of new age teachings into its worldview. Both of the Prophets claimed to be Messengers of the Ascended Masters whom they communicated with regularly. In addition to the Ascended Masters identified by the original Theosophical Society, Prophet identified more than 200 Ascended Masters who were not part of the original theosophical Masters of Ancient Wisdom. Prophet communicated regularly with different Masters in a process called “receiving dictations” which were published weekly in CUT’s newsletter, *Pearls of Wisdom*. They also owned a publishing house, Summit Lighthouse, which produced dozens of books by Elizabeth Clare Prophet in which she wove masterful histories that claimed to identify the mystical paths of all the world’s religions as revealed to her by the Ascended Masters.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, CUT leadership had predicted a heightened danger of nuclear war, and church members had put significant energy into building fallout shelters and stocking them with supplies. This activity provoked public scrutiny which intensified when the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) investigated the group in

conjunction with charges that members had used false identities to purchase weapons. Articles and letters critical of CUT appeared frequently in the local newspapers, the *Bozeman Daily Chronicle* and the *Livingston Enterprise*. There had been at least two incidents where accusations of kidnapping and brainwashing were traded back and forth between CUT members and their estranged family members who hired deprogrammers from the anti-cult movement.

In the months leading up to my research, an encounter between law enforcement and another New Religious Movement near Waco, Texas – the Branch Davidians – had ended tragically. An ATF raid turned into a gun battle which was followed by a 51 day standoff and concluded with a FBI initiated tear gas attack. In the confusion that followed, several fires broke out. While it remains unclear to this day if the Branch Davidians set the fires intentionally or by accident, the resulting blaze killed all but 9 of those under siege, putting the death toll from the encounter at 80 Branch Davidians and 4 federal agents. I had been studying in France when the news broke. I vividly recall the words relayed to me by the son of the French family I lived with. “Ils ont tous brûlé,” he said. They burned. I had been following the news in the *International Herald Tribune* but had not anticipated this turn of events. Perhaps I hadn’t heard or understood him correctly. I indicated my confusion, and he repeated, “Ils ont tous brûlé.” They all burned. His careful enunciation and the throaty sound of the French “r” provided a soundtrack for the images I conjured of screaming faces contorted in agony as fire melted skin and singed flesh.

These images were fresh in my mind the first day I drove through Paradise Valley to conduct interviews with several CUT members at the Royal Teton Ranch. I had been in touch with church leadership via mail and telephone, and they had invited me to visit them. While the armed guard at the ranch gate gave me some pause, my encounters with CUT members were pleasant. Unfortunately, I never had an opportunity to meet Elizabeth Clare Prophet who members often referred to as “mother.” Instead I worked directly with Murray Steinman and Kathleen Fortino, the two people who managed public relations for CUT. They arranged interviews with church members, answered my many questions, gave me a tour of the ranch, and took me out to lunch at their macrobiotic restaurant.

An anthropologist would have wanted to spend more time at the ranch, to observe the daily routines and practices of the members, to be immersed in their culture. Although these activities were certainly on my agenda, it quickly became apparent that participant observation was not an option. All of my activities on the ranch were scheduled and accompanied. In a move typical for a Child of the Book, I decided to focus on reading all of CUTs literature to provide a thorough exposition of what I understood to be their beliefs. This was no small task as Prophet had published over 100 books. I found her extensively researched text, *The Lost Years of Jesus*, most interesting. She pointed out that the standard gospel texts of Christianity covered the life of Jesus up to about age 12 and then only discussed the last few years of his life. What had occurred during the intervening years? Prophet claimed that Jesus had traveled to India during those lost years where he had incorporated eastern

thought into his teachings but that this wisdom had been lost. Her work claimed to have rediscovered the lost teachings. While I doubted the historicity of her claims, I read her texts as a syncretistic melding of Buddhist and Christian myths.²⁹⁷

My expository thesis was structured around the idea that several “misunderstandings” about CUT might be resolved or at least alleviated if outsiders had a better understanding of CUT’s beliefs. For instance, the daily affirmations and mantras members engaged in which the anti-cult movement described as “brainwashing” were, from an insider’s perspective, a dynamic form of prayer intended to balance karma. My approach was in line with a variety of New Religious Movement scholars who argued that increased literacy, particularly geared toward law enforcement audiences but also the general public, regarding religious groups can help to deescalate conflict. For example, during the mid-1990s, religion scholars James Tabor and Eugene Gallagher published an in-depth study of the previously mentioned Waco tragedy where they argued that because the federal agents failed to understand the Biblical apocalyptic beliefs of the Branch Davidians, their tactics actually confirmed the Davidians perceptions of end times, and the agents missed key opportunities to diminish tensions.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁷ Elizabeth Clare Prophet, *The Lost Years of Jesus: Documentary Evidence of Jesus's 17-Year Journey to the East*. (Gardiner, MT.: Summit University Press, 1987).

²⁹⁸ James D. Tabor and Eugene V. Gallagher, *Why Waco? Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). A recent memoir from one the Branch Davidians who survived agrees with Tabor and Gallagher’s analysis. See: Clive Doyle, Catherine Wessinger, and Matthew D. Wittmer, *A Journey to Waco: Autobiography of a Branch Davidian* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012). A recent summary of this memoir in *The New Yorker* has given the story new life. See Malcolm Gladwell, “Sacred and Profane: How Not to Negotiate with Believers,” *The New Yorker*, March 31, 2014. http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2014/03/31/140331fa_fact_gladwell, accessed April 28, 2014.

While I was confident that my reading of CUTs texts presented a perspective that *might* enable one to understand the group differently than they had been portrayed in local media, I had absolutely no confidence that the general public, particularly the Churchillian variety, possessed much interest in acquiring a different perspective. Furthermore, I had begun to lose confidence in the analytic usefulness of the term “misunderstanding” insofar as it failed to get at what I could see were serious differences in perspectives. While the pluralist mode acknowledges the importance of showing up at a metaphorical table that values different commitments, it has nothing to offer for those of us interested in thinking about the kinds of differences that prevent or preclude people from showing up at the pluralist table. Although I did not realize it at the time, I had run into one of the limits of pluralism. I valued its epistemic humility, but I was also looking for better ways to live in worlds structured more by serious difference than by common ground. My continued wayfarings in graduate school would soon introduce me to critical knowledge that undermined the foundations of the Pluralist Pantheon.

Chapter 6

Deconstructing Divinity and the Quagmire of Critique

[Eck] goes on to explain both the internal complexity and the dynamic character of specific traditions, using the metaphor of rivers. “Religions are far more like rivers than like bounded circles or even complex structures.” And again, “Today all these rivers of faith are flowing through the landscape of America.” The problem with the metaphor, as with her approach generally, is its failure to acknowledge the cultural patterns that are not banks of a river but part of the liquid elements that give shape, force, and meaning to *all* religious traditions.

– Bruce Lawrence,
*New Faiths, Old Fears: Muslims and Other Asian
Immigrants in American Religious Life*

A feather’s not a bird. The rain is not the sea. A stone is not a mountain, but a river runs through me.

– Rosanne Cash, *The River and the Thread*

In the fall of 1997, I continued my journeys gleaning knowledge about religion at the University of Chicago Divinity School in the Hyde Park neighborhood on Chicago’s south side. In the 1880s, a college known as the Old University of Chicago, which had been run by Baptists, experienced financial and leadership problems and closed its doors. To breathe life into a new form of the old school, two wealthy businessmen, Marshall Field and John D. Rockefeller, donated land and money to build an independent, coeducational, secular institution that opened in 1892. The first president of the University of Chicago, William Rainey Harper, a Baptist clergy member and a distinguished Semiticist, was committed to the scholarly study of religion as one of the key features of a great research university. He brought the Morgan Park Seminary of the Baptist Theological Union to Hyde Park thus

establishing the Divinity School as the first professional school of the new university. Located in Swift Hall on the main quadrangle of the University's campus, the Divinity School houses a wealth of history pertinent to the study and practice of religion in the United States.

The building itself is a mix of modern and gothic architecture physically attached via a cloister to Bond chapel where students training for ministry through the Hyde Park Theological Consortium practice giving homilies to their peers on Wednesdays before a communal lunch is served. Students pursuing a variety of approaches (historical, constructive, theological) connected to the study of religion regularly share space and conversations. The limestone stairs to the basement are worn down with smooth hollows where countless feet have carried knowledge workers from classrooms to the coffee shop, The Grounds of Being, where the words over the door, "Where God drinks coffee" welcome all. On the other side of the basement, one finds the restroom where, in 1991, Professor Ioan P. Culiano, a Romanian historian and expert in Gnosticism, was executed by a gunshot to the head in a case that has never been solved but many believe to be a political assassination connected to Culiano's scathing critiques of the Romanian Securitate's tactics deployed in the 1989 coup that toppled Nicolae Ceausescu's regime.²⁹⁹

When I arrived, the "Chicago School" of religion had long been associated with Mircea Eliade, another Romanian scholar who, in 1957, began teaching at

²⁹⁹ Ted Anton, "The Killing of Professor Culianu," *Lingua Franca*, Volume 2, No. 6, September/October 1992. <http://linguafranca.mirror.theinfo.org/9209/culianu.html> accessed April 27, 2014.

Chicago where he developed his widely influential approach to the study of religion. Building on the theory of Rudolf Otto (a German Lutheran theologian and scholar of comparative religion) that religion is a response to what he called a “numinous” experience or an encounter with “the holy,” Eliade maintained that human experiences of “the sacred” manifest in what he called hierophanies which then form the basis of different religions. He viewed myths as descriptions of “breakthroughs of the sacred (or the ‘supernatural’) into the World” and studied them as varieties of hierophanies.³⁰⁰ The bulk of Eliade’s work then reflects his attempt to find cross-cultural parallels and unities in different religions by focusing on a variety of myths. He understood this kind of comparative work to be a key component of what he called “the new humanism” whose central task was to “make the meanings of religious documents intelligible to the mind of modern man” so that “the science of religions will fulfill its true cultural function.”³⁰¹ Against a secularizing trend in the social sciences which viewed modern humanity as finally freeing itself from the chains of oppressive and illusory religion, Eliade argued that the modern secular condition had lost a sense of connection to the sacred which “archaic” or “primitive man” had not. Eliade died in the late 1980s, but his legacy lives on both in his wide readership and through an endowed chair at the Divinity School which has been held by Professor Wendy Doniger since it was established.

³⁰⁰ Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 6.

³⁰¹ Mircea Eliade, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 2.

Although I had read Eliade's *The Sacred and Profane* as an undergraduate, I knew very little about the specifics of his larger project. However, I was enthused about what I did know. I understood him as someone who was not content with either the religious or secular vision of the world that he had inherited, and as a result, he was creating a new vision based on rigorous scholarship. I identified with both his discontent and desire for a new vision. I had expected the Divinity school to be a place where the faculty worked together on this project as they taught their students to do the same. This turned out to be a naïve expectation.

The areas of study at the Divinity school are divided into three broad committees with each overseeing select areas of study. The Committee on Constructive Studies in Religion oversees Religious Ethics, Philosophy of Religions, and Theology. The Historical Studies in Religion Committee oversees Biblical Studies, History of Christianity, and History of Judaism. Lastly, the Committee on Religion and the Human Sciences oversees Anthropology and Sociology of Religion, Religion and Literature, and the History of Religions (formerly called Comparative Religions).

My application for admission had focused on my interest in combining constructive studies with historical studies. At the time, I described my work as oriented around a "crisis of meaning" I saw emerging after old paradigms of Christianity had been wounded by Darwin, Nietzsche, and Higher Criticism. From my current vantage point, I can see that I was projecting my own disorientation onto a historical narrative. I knew that Liberal Protestants and Catholics after Vatican II had,

to varying degrees, absorbed some of the implications of these historical wounds, but those responses, while much preferred over the route my ancestors had taken, seemed to have inadequately appreciated the implications of the wounds.

My thinking and vocabulary were no doubt a reflection of the influence of Professor Karen Carr, one of my undergraduate religion professors. An imposing and brilliant teacher who was as famous for the large Janis Joplin poster in her office as she was for wearing mini-skirts with cowboy boots, Carr's *History of Christianity in the Modern World* had included a similar narrative.³⁰² The Chicago admissions committee assigned me to an advisor in the Philosophy of Religion area, and I arrived at Swift Hall with a voracious appetite to learn as much as I could about every aspect of the study of religion. I knew, instinctively, that philosophy was only one of the tropics I would need to explore.

During the first year of the Masters program at Chicago, students take a series of three courses introducing them to specific approaches within each committee. My first quarter began with the Introduction to Religion and the Human Sciences course where we started out reading Eliade. From there, our professors informed us that there were a variety of approaches within the field, and the course proceeded with guest lectures from various professors representing different approaches. Two of those lectures were delivered by Jonathan Z. Smith, a Historian of Religions, who held a position outside of the Divinity School as a Distinguished Professor of the Humanities. Like my encounter with source criticism years prior, encountering

³⁰² Karen Carr, *The Banalization of Nihilism: Twentieth-century Responses to Meaninglessness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

Smith's approach to the study of religion completely disoriented and reoriented my world.

The first lines from the Introduction to his collection of essays, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, provide an entry into the different mode of thinking that I began to pursue. He writes:

If we have understood the archeological and textual record correctly, man has had his entire history in which to imagine deities and modes of interaction with them. But man, more precisely western man, has had only the last few centuries in which to imagine religion. It is this act of second order, reflective imagination which must be the central preoccupation of any student of religion. That is to say, while there is a staggering amount of data, of phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religious – *there is no data for religion*. (emphasis in original)³⁰³

Reading Smith, I realized that the category of religion had been so naturalized for me that I imagined the world had always been divided by what I thought of as different religions. This realization carried several important implications. First, understanding that relations with gods had only recently been classified as something now commonly understood to be religion required understanding religion as a category people had constructed to divide the world up according to their interests rather than as an atemporal response to something called “the sacred.” Secondly, Smith's work illustrated that Liberal Protestant Christians had been responsible for much of this classificatory work beginning in the 16th century, and their understanding of what did and did not count as religion was structured by a Protestant anti-Catholic polemic that privileged an emphasis on belief over a perception of

³⁰³ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xi.

Catholicism as focused on empty ritual. In its earliest formations, the Latin Christian adjectival and adverbial form (*religious* and *religiose*) had connoted careful performance of ritual obligations. After the Protestant Reformation, evacuated of its ritual connotations, the noun form of religion took over and signified a set of beliefs and doctrines held by people who read texts. European colonists associated it with an expected universality that characterized what they perceived as more advanced civilization. This presumption was so pervasive that only the perceived lack of it was noteworthy. For example, in his 1553 account of his travels with Columbus to the “New World,” Richard Eden wrote that “the inhabitantes went naked, without shame, religion or knowledge of God.”³⁰⁴

Those formations that came to be understood as “religions” were those that seemed to the observers to be most like Protestant Christianity with its emphasis on belief and textual authority. Early classifications were dualistic, between “theirs” and “ours” with subsequent nomenclature such as “heathenism,” “paganism,” and “idolatry” mapped onto the side occupied by “theirs.” The historical record is also full of distinctions between religion (ours) and magic (theirs) along with true (ours) and false (theirs). Christianity became the norm which Judaism and Islam problematically participate in through their association with the “Abrahamic religions” which was presumed to be the pinnacle of civilization.³⁰⁵ Along these lines, the 19th century witnessed a division between “high” or “spiritual” religions that were seen as closer

³⁰⁴ Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 269-284.

³⁰⁵ For a thorough analysis of the racializing logic endemic to the philological piece of this project, see Maurice Olender, *The Languages of Paradise: Race, Religion, and Philology in the Nineteenth Century* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2009).

to Christianity while “natural” or “primitive” religions were associated with “fetishism, totemism, shamanism, anthropomorphism, preanimism, animism, family gods, guardian spirits, [and] ancestor worship.”³⁰⁶ The “high civilizations” that were considered to be Europe’s ancestors became the object around which Oriental Studies cohered while Anthropology studied those who, because they lacked texts, were deemed to have “primitive religion.”³⁰⁷ With significant assistance from Orientalist knowledge-makers, the religions deemed to be more universal became known as what is now commonly referred to as “World Religions.”³⁰⁸

As I took seriously the kinds of analysis Smith offered and made possible, any attachments I had to the Eliadian paradigm were severed. Eliade’s first principle positing “the sacred” which all religions represented through hierophanies suddenly came into stark relief as a “god trick” authorizing the projection of a Liberal Christian notion of God onto other religions/cultures yet only counting them as “religions” if they somehow seemed to glimpse the same light. To revisit Eck’s cosmological metaphors, what she perceived as a radical move from the old Christian Ptolemaic position where other traditions revolve around the sun of Christianity to the new Christian Pluralist position where God is the source around which religious traditions revolve now appeared as a subtle but powerful Christian maneuver insofar as the Sun

³⁰⁶ Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religioius,” 277.

³⁰⁷ Some of this history is also sketched in Wallerstein et al, *Open the Social Sciences*.

³⁰⁸ Since Smith first published this collection of essays and the previously referenced essay, “Religion, Religions, Religioius,” many scholars have been at work following his suggestion through the historical record. Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India and “The Mystic East”* (New York City: Routledge, 1999). David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charleston: University of Virginia Press, 1996). Donald S. Lopez, Jr. ed., *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism Under Colonialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

God *is* the universal Liberal Protestant God, capable of absorbing and bleaching all other cosmologies into his magnificent white light. While the Eliadian paradigm provides a seductive theology, Smith's interventions suggest that it tells us more about a specific version of Christianity than it does about other formations that may or may not be designated as religions.

My realization that the study of religion had been complicit in an ongoing Western colonizing project triggered my ever-present alertness to wrongdoing and fueled my curiosity and desire to learn how to do the study of religion differently. This endeavor required getting a better sense of the academic study of religion. About the same time I started my graduate endeavors, Karen Carr, my undergraduate advisor, had forwarded an article to me from the then popular academic news magazine, *Lingua Franca*. Its author, Charlotte Allen, provided a caricatured map of the study of religion in which she tells a story about a fault line of an academic debate. Allen had been at a HarperCollins book party for a Bible scholar, Burton Mack and his recently published book, *Who Wrote the New Testament: The Making of the Christian Myth*. In a conversation with Ron Cameron, another Bible scholar and chair of the religion department at Wesleyan University, Allen had assumed he shared her understanding of religion which she had remembered learning from an Eliade book in college. Specifically, she thought of religion as a personal or private attempt to connect with “what’s out there – or in here” as she pointed first to the

ceiling and then to her heart. Incensed, Cameron retorted, “No! Religion is a social way of thinking about social identity and social relationships!”³⁰⁹

As Allen narrates the story, Cameron and several other attendees at Mack’s book party were part of “a rump group of scholars” who, for over a decade, had been pushing for a dramatic redefinition of the word “religion” – a redefinition that could undermine the foundational logic of approximately 1,200 undergraduate theology and religion programs in the United States. In her telling, the American Academy of Religion (AAR) with a membership of around 8,000 people represents variations of the Eliadian paradigm. From 1909 through the 1950s, the AAR had operated first as the Association of Biblical Instructors in American Colleges and Secondary School and then as the National Association of Biblical Instructors, or NABI, an acronym its founders cleverly advertised as also the Hebrew word for “prophet.” In 1963, the United States Supreme Court significantly reinterpreted the First Amendment when it ruled on the issue of school prayer in *Abington School District v. Schempp*. The majority opinion stated that while public schools cannot teach religion, they are well within their limits to teach *about* religion. NABI, “ready for another transformation” reconstituted itself as the AAR.³¹⁰ The following years witnessed the emergence of numerous public university religion programs.

³⁰⁹ Charlotte Allen, “Is Nothing Sacred? Casting out the Gods from Religious Studies” in *Lingua Franca*, November, 1996, 31-40.

³¹⁰ The quoted text is from the AAR’s web site which makes no mention of the Supreme Court decision http://web.archive.org/web/20081228235153/http://www.aarweb.org/About_AAR/History/default.asp, accessed April 29, 2014. Allen’s article makes the connection between these two events. For a more nuanced analysis that registers the importance of the legal ruling but also sees the NABI-to-AAR transformation as a move from an explicitly Protestant devotional knowledge practice to a post-

The rump group of scholars Allen had encountered make up a much smaller organization, the North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR) which was founded in 1985. Allen sees NAASR, with approximately 50 dues paying members and a “small scattering” of subscribers to its journal, *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, as “a tiny David to AAR’s Goliath.”³¹¹ The bulk of her article relays biographies of some of NAASR’s key members such as Donald Wiebe at the University of Toronto’s Centre for Religious Studies and Gary Lease at the University of California at Santa Cruz in the History of Consciousness Department along with Jonathan Z. Smith. Allen proceeds to characterize the fault line as one separating the AAR theologians and followers of Eliade from the NAASR offspring of the Enlightenment who use social science tools such as Durkheimian functionalism to study objects popularly constituted as religions. NAASR’s efforts to define “the ‘scientific’ study of religion as the only truly ‘academic’ study of religion” represent for Allen, “an obvious effort to bring the strict European division between *Wissenschaft* and theology to the U.S.”³¹²

Wrapping up her article, Allen suggests that a good start to overcoming the fault line would be “to recognize that in this era of self-proclaimed postmodernity, the Enlightenment is over. Its hallmarks – philosophical positivism and the conviction that scientific methodology can explain everything – now seem dated, even to many hard and social scientists.” With this in mind, she remarks that “[i]t may be a good

Protestant field in search of an identity, see D.G. Hart, *The University Gets Religion: Religious Studies in American Higher Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 200-222.

³¹¹ Allen, 33.

³¹² *Ibid.*, 36.

thing for religious studies to be a shapeless beast, half social science, half humanistic discipline, lumbering through the academy with no clear methodology or *raison d'être*.”³¹³ While Allen’s critique of a certain conception of Enlightenment positivism resonated with me, her map failed to provide any directions for finding scholars or organizations who shared her perspective. I was going to have to chart my own relationship with the shapeless beast.

I took classes and read widely with scholars, including theologians, positioned on opposite sides of the fault line, but in matters of methodological and theoretical starting positions, I cast my lots with Jonathan Z. Smith. While I was at the Divinity School, he gave two invited lectures on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Eliade’s *Patterns in Comparative Religion* in which he performed a reading of Eliade’s work that was both generous and critical. The reading was generous insofar as it kept faith with what Smith described as the academy’s demands that “we make great efforts at complex and varied modes of understanding before we venture critique,” and his lecture provided a thorough tour through not only Eliade’s text but also the intellectual context in which it was written. After acknowledging his indebtedness to Eliade’s work for greatly expanding approaches to synchronic or morphological relations (i.e. structural patterns) in the study of religion, Smith’s reading took a critical turn by taking issue with Eliade’s “onto-theological hierarchy” which could not accommodate sufficiently rigorous attention to the diachronic or historical dimensions of the societies that produced the myths in question.

³¹³ Ibid., 40.

Smith ended his two lectures with an anecdote that helped orient me in my search for approaches to the study of religion. In the 1960s, he and Eliade had both taught at the University of California at Santa Barbara where they had held a public discussion about the study of religion. Afterward, a student rushed up to Smith and declared, “I get the issue between you! Smith says Eliade can’t account for human beings; Eliade says Smith can’t account for God!” Noting that the student’s precision of language and adequacy of understanding may not have been entirely accurate, Smith responded, “OK ... presuming you are right, I’d rather go to bed at night with my headache than with his.” Building on this anecdote, Smith’s final sentence expressed his “deep appreciation” for Eliade’s effort, enterprise, and complex intellectual history. In the end, however, he concluded “my response remains the same as I gave to that student some thirty years ago.”³¹⁴ I shared not only Smith’s predilection for more rigorous attention to historical context but also his headache preference.

Talking with Smith in numerous independent studies, I realized that the Divinity School might not be the best place for me to pursue my doctoral studies. Smith’s strained relations with the faculty at Swift Hall presented a problem, and the faculty on the Committee for Religion and the Human Sciences were uncomfortable with my decision to ask Smith to be my advisor.³¹⁵ Additionally, I had begun to

³¹⁴ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 98

³¹⁵ Bruce Lincoln, who is also critical of the Eliade approach, was one of these professors. He also taught me invaluable skills in his Historiography for Historians of Religion course where we read Michel Foucault, Walter Benjamin, and Hayden White. I initially wanted to work more closely with Lincoln, but when I tried to talk to him about the questions that led me to study religion, he cut me off

explore science studies in search of tools to help me make sense of different knowledge worlds and my travels through them. I had also just begun coming to terms with my queer desires, and I was searching for knowledge to help me navigate worlds structured by sex/gender norms. I needed feminist theory and feminist science studies.

One of my close friends from college, Ulrika Dahl, was pursuing her PhD in Anthropology at the University of California at Santa Cruz, and she thought my interests would be a good fit with the History of Consciousness program in Santa Cruz. Smith thought so as well. He put me in touch with his colleague at Santa Cruz, Gary Lease, one of the NAASR scholars discussed in Allen's article. I met with Lease at that year's AAR and NAASR meetings where I also attended an AAR sponsored "Feminist Theory and Religious Reflection" panel organized around the ways that work by the feminist science studies scholar, Donna Haraway, helped feminist theologians develop better theologies of embodiment. The interaction with Haraway's thought mediated through the panel combined with my conversation with Lease made it clear that working with both of them at Santa Cruz was exactly what I needed. I applied and was accepted.

To guide me on my way, Smith gave me a copy of a lecture he had given at the University of Arizona in 1992 in which he explored the history of the western

saying that "personal reasons were a good reason to come to the study of religion, but they were not a good reason to stay." Smith, on the other hand, took interest in my questions and provided much needed direction. When I was not accepted into the Divinity school PhD program, Lincoln told me directly that my decision to work with Jonathan Z. Smith had torpedoed my application. To use the terminology gleaned from President Warch in Chapter 3, *The Lands of Liberal Learning*, one could say that the Divinity School was a place where academic community stifled intellectual community.

imagination of the usually racialized ‘other.’ The lecture is an elegant anthropological argument against intellectual projects (“from heresy to deviation to degeneration to syncretism”) that shore up similarity by disguising or denying difference only to produce denial, estrangement, and unintelligibility. Smith argues instead for intellectual contributions that pay attention to translation “across languages, places and times, between text and reader, speaker and hearer.”³¹⁶ In the copy Smith gave me and with a nod to my interest in conversion and transformation, he wrote “For Karen – A bit of the old for the new world of Santa Cruz.” The wisdom I gleaned from Smith regarding attention to historical context, translation, and difference continues to nourish me.

In California, a wide variety of interdisciplinary knowledge projects provided the tools to conceptualize my Prodigal Daughter figure and to make sense of the form and the content of her wayfaring journey. With Lease’s guidance, I became more familiar with the NAASR “thought collective” which, though unified in its critique of the Eliade approach, was by no means monolithic.³¹⁷ In fact, the organization had begun to experience an internal fault line. On one side, NAASR’s founders – E. Thomas Lawson, Luther H. Martin, and Donald Wiebe – advocated approaches aimed at developing rational choice theory and a cognitive science of religion which, at the

³¹⁶ Jonathan Z. Smith, “Differential Equations: On Constructing the ‘Other,’” Department of Religious Studies at Arizona State University, The University Lecture in Religion, 1992.

³¹⁷ Ludwik Fleck coined the term, “thought collective,” to refer to the “community of persons mutually exchanging ideas or maintaining intellectual interaction” which forms a third component (in addition to an individual knowing subject and the known object) through and in which knowledge is formed and transmitted. Ludwik Fleck, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 38-51.

risk of extreme simplification but to quote part of a title from a much lauded cognitivist book, aims to explain “why religious people believe what they shouldn’t.”³¹⁸ On the other side of the fault line, one finds those who identify themselves as participating in a range of “historical-critical” approaches to the study of religion. Russell McCutcheon, a former student of Wiebe’s, is one of the more frequently cited scholars in this burgeoning network of young scholars who are more influenced by Marxist and post-structural theories than by cognitive psychology and rationalist philosophy.³¹⁹

The historical-critical methods and theories promised to provide better understandings of the kinds of knowledge that represent the established orders along with an exploration into the ways things might have been and could be different.³²⁰ Informed in part by the historical-critical approaches proffered by NAASR and in part by various critical approaches to the study of race, class, sex, and gender gleaned in Santa Cruz, I began to think of myself as a “critical scholar of religion.” Learning to see the world as structured by power which simultaneously constitutes and circulates in and through institutions, practices, and ideologies, I began to chafe under some of the restrictions of the NAASR approach. For several years, finding my way through

³¹⁸ D. Jason Slone, *Theological Incorrectness: Why Religious People Believe What They Shouldn’t* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

³¹⁹ This fault line was the subject of heated discussion at a panel on “The Identity of NAASR and the Character of the Critical Study of Religion” at NAASR’s 2012 annual meeting in Chicago. Program available at <http://naasr.com/recentpanels.html#2013>, accessed April 29, 2014.

³²⁰ I have long been suspicious of the cognitivist approach as too disembodied to offer either an accurate knowledge or a sustainable politics. In 2001, I presented a paper critiquing the cognitive approach to the Critical Theory and Discourses on Religion Section at the National Annual Conference for the American Academy of Religion: “Constructing the Mind-Brain: Cognition, Conversation and Conversion in the Scientific Study of Religion.”

what I would come to call “the quagmire of critique” occupied the bulk of my energies. To further explore this quagmire, a tour through a few passages in Russell McCutcheon’s book, *Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion*, which I read as a crystallized ethos of the historical-critical wing of the NAASR approach, provides the contours for tracing the Prodigal Daughter’s further wayfarings.

McCutcheon opens his book with an anecdote that he sees as illustrating an ongoing divide in the study of religion. After giving a paper to a regional meeting of the AAR, he fielded a question asking him if he was saying that religion was “*also* social, biological, political, economic, and so on, or whether [he] was saying that religion was *only* social, biological, political, economic, and so on.” For McCutcheon, this distinction between *also* and *only* sums up the divide. He positions himself clearly on the *only* side as the proper approach for scholars studying religion as part of the human sciences in a public university. This approach views religion as a “thoroughly human doing.” McCutcheon quickly states that he takes the “participant or insider’s viewpoint utterly seriously ... but not in the way that believers might like.” He does “not see the participant as setting the ground rules for how his or her behavior ought to be studied by scholars.” Instead of focusing on what he calls metaphysical reduction – what religion *really* is – he practices methodological reduction which focuses on “*how* (i.e. description) and *why* (i.e. explanation) human communities divide up, classify, and ontologize their *ad hoc* social worlds in particular ways.” More specifically, he writes that he is interested in the

sociorhetorical functions served when social groups deploy dichotomies such as sacred and secular.

Summing up the chapters of his text, McCutcheon describes them as all starting from a feeling of impatience at the “naturalness” with which many leading scholars of religion

naively presumed: (i) that religion equals morality; (ii) that scholars of religion have some special insight into the nature of the ‘good’; and therefore (iii) that they have a responsibility for securing the fate of the nation-state or cooking up some therapeutic recipe for attaining self-knowledge or happiness

Writing against this dominant approach which views religion as a “privatized, internal, mysterious something” that is intimately linked to the liberal humanist rhetoric for reproducing the modern idea of the nation-state, McCutcheon argues that “the study of religion, from top to bottom, needs rethinking.”³²¹

Taking aim at several of these leading scholars whom he describes as understanding religion as a series of “free-floating signifiers” and “never-ending hermeneutical vortexes,” McCutcheon’s essays critique this dominant approach and provide some initial directions for “engaged public intellectuals, or culture critics” who instead attend to “the means by which historically grounded human communities authorize and ... act as mythmakers in efforts to construct and contest social identities that they are working to extend over time and place.”³²² He sees this latter task as in line with Jonathan Z. Smith’s proposal that scholarship orient around the task of

³²¹ Russell T. McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), xii.

³²² *Ibid.*, xv.

redescription, a cognitive and social activity involving provocative juxtapositions geared toward seeing things in a new and frequently unexpected light. In McCutcheon's formulation then, redescription requires distinguishing between emic and etic, or insider and outsider, categories. In his model for the study of religion and with reference to his book title, the outsider maps onto the critic, and the insider maps onto the caretaker. The critic's task is to take the insider's vocabulary as data to be redescribed in the service of a scholarly account oriented around the purposes of classification, comparison, and explanation.

In the chapter, "Our 'Special Promise' as Teachers," McCutcheon positions the critical approach in opposition to caretaking theological and humanist discourse that, "taking religious impulses as merely given, simply aims to describe the diversity of religions, to identify the factors that contribute to religious change and conversion, and to interpret the deep and enduring meaning of religious symbols." The key failing of the caretaking approach for McCutcheon is its "obscured politics" which he detects and shines a light on in the thought of, Jacob Neusner, one of the most published and celebrated scholars of Judaism. McCutcheon hones in on a lecture in which Neusner stated the "the special promise of the academic study of religion is to nurture this country's resources for tolerance for difference, our capacity to learn from each other, and to respect each other." As part of this project, Neusner advocates excluding provocative political topics from the classroom agenda in favor of what McCutcheon describes as identifying differences in order to manage and minimize them for the benefit of the nation-state. He then groups Neusner with several other major scholars

of religion: Gerald Larson who recommends developing an All India Institute for Research on Religion as a possible means to mediate conflict; Martin Marty, the field's "most vocal liberal commentator" and scholar of American religion at the University of Chicago; and Diana Eck and the Harvard Pluralism Project.³²³

The key strategy at the heart of these approaches posits religion as an "obvious and timeless cultural or moral good instead of as a rhetoric that authorizes diverse and competing conceptions of 'the good.'" Those who deploy the first strategy assume that scholarship on religion must "provide the means for transcending social, historical, political difference inasmuch as it enhances morality, teaches tolerance, and increases compassion and diversity." For McCutcheon, this caretaking approach is "none other than a repackaging of the old social gospel movement, something akin to Eliade's reactionary 'new humanism.'" ³²⁴ Focusing his analysis on what he calls the caretaking "monolith," McCutcheon maintains that its emphasis on religion as oriented around notions of "ultimate concern" functions to obscure the liberal individualism of its promoters who see religion as a matter of personal creed or faith. Turning to the previously described kind of Smithian understanding where dominant conceptions of "religion" function as a liberal Protestant standard for classifying the world, McCutcheon argues that scholarly discourses on religion inevitably take place in a "modernist and nationalist context where substantive collective goals are individualized thus leading to an "easy brand

³²³ Ibid, 157.

³²⁴ Ibid, 158.

of tolerance ... that obscures material, historic difference by celebrating insubstantial, timeless unity.”³²⁵

For McCutcheon, the problem with liberal pluralist ideologies coheres around the tendency of powerful hegemonic social forces to prematurely resolve differences through a one-sided set of terms. To give his critique “some teeth,” he turns to the case of Diana Eck’s CD-ROM, *On Common Ground*, and an accompanying 1993 web article that described pluralism as “the cultivation of a public space where we all encounter one another.” McCutcheon takes issue with Eck for what he calls her ill-defined public which he analogizes to a conception of the Internet as a universalist, democratic public forum that fails to recognize “the degree to which one must be a government agency, corporate entity, or member of the middle class with money and time to burn to gain access to it.”³²⁶ Furthermore, he sees her distinction between toleration and pluralism as “merely rhetorical.” Recall that in Eck’s framework, pluralism is distinct from tolerance insofar as the former requires both parties to understand something about each other’s differences whereas toleration does not. McCutcheon maintains that the only way to have such “co-existing differences” is for them to be minor enough to easily be put up with, and he writes, “there are many ‘real commitments’ with which encounter is, for Eck’s ... well-meaning liberal sentiments, downright impossible.”³²⁷

³²⁵ Ibid, 159.

³²⁶ Ibid, 160.

³²⁷ Ibid, 162.

McCutcheon's analysis then returns to an aforementioned caretaker, Martin Marty, whose book *The One and the Many* put forth the ground rules of conversation and storytelling as the dominant modes of encounter but ignored organized political action and contestation as outside the boundaries of liberal acceptability. Those not in favor of these rules are branded as "exclusivists by Eck or as radicals, militants, extremists, tribalists, agitators, people with strident voices who are inspired by belligerent leaders by Marty." Describing this strategy as "name calling," McCutcheon points out that it eliminates from serious consideration the groups liberals claim to include in their pluralist umbrella. In his view, pluralist encounters between "real commitments" is restricted to easily resolved differences within the terms of a narrow party line.

Coming to the end of his critique, McCutcheon states that, to him, pluralism sounds a lot like tolerance, and he proposes that the study of religion can do considerably more than recommend civics lessons near and dear to the heart of liberal discourse. To further elaborate on this provocation, he describes toleration as a general disagreement or disapproval coupled with a voluntary withholding of power that could be used to coerce behavior of the less powerful. Here toleration implies significant disapproval, real sociopolitical authority, coercive power that could be marshaled in the service of disapproval, and a suspension of that coercive possibility for practical reasons. In this framework, toleration is always part of a normative discourse of dominance, and pluralism – simply "the friendly face of tolerance" – is

always a virtue of and for the powerful who set its terms. Neusner, Eck, and Marty all see the future of the nation-state at stake in promoting these values.

Once again drawing a line between caretakers and critics, McCutcheon asks: “As university professors, are we to police these nationalist limits (i.e., must our motto be, To Protect and Serve the Nation-State?) or are we to teach our students some of the skills necessary for identifying these usually invisible limits, naming and dating their manufacturers, and scrutinizing their implications?”³²⁸ His question is, of course, rhetorical as it distinguishes between the caretaking mode in the service of a liberal nation-state and a critical mode which studies discourses of religious and cultural tolerance and pluralism as “mechanisms used to help focus collective attention, whether for good or ill, thereby actually concocting and authorizing specific ideas of the nation-state and, by extension, authorizing those social worlds made possible by just these ideas.” In McCutcheon’s larger body of work, critical analysis focuses on a variety of authorizing mechanisms, including a distinction between history and mythmaking. As he uses these terms, history attends to everyday, material activities and patterns of dominance whereas mythmaking posits ahistorical unities across time and place to reproduce an idea of sameness that actually functions to reproduce existing social structures and formations.³²⁹ In his reading, caretakers focus on mythmaking while critics focus on history, and scholars of religion ought to

³²⁸ Ibid, 164.

³²⁹ Ibid, 165-166.

embrace this latter role thereby living up to a “long and important tradition of scholars as social provocateurs.”³³⁰

Published in 2001 when I was in the early years of my doctoral work, McCutcheon’s book initially provided me with a new map through the field of religious studies. However, the more I immersed myself in varieties of critical theory, the more uncomfortable I became with what I began to see as the limitations of his particular critical mode. Just as my journeys brought me up against the limits of pluralist discourse, my continued wayfarings further undermined both the pluralist approach and the strictly critical approach to knowledge. Ever Prodigal, I was hungry for a more nourishing mode. To find better sustenance, I needed to untangle the various threads of McCutcheon’s story.

Several foundational pieces of his critical framework have continued to provide not only guidance but firm footing. As outlined in the first half of the dissertation, *Prodigal Daughters* claim kinship with *Modest Witnesses*. These relations hold fast to an understanding of all knowledge as situated as they labor to produce “faithful accounts of a ‘real’ world, one that can be partially shared and friendly to earth-wide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness.”³³¹ McCutcheon’s focus on discourses about religion as thoroughly human doings requiring analysis that attends to classification and sociorhetorical functions of discourse comports well with a situated knowledge perspective. Like McCutcheon, *Prodigals* are painfully aware and

³³⁰ Ibid, 174.

³³¹ Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 187.

critical of neoliberal discourse that imagines religion as a matter of individual, privatized belief. This discourse ignores the formative aspects of the larger social webs that produced it (such as the webs of belonging outlined in Part I of the dissertation) and in so doing disavows the mechanisms through which existing power structures are reproduced. Additionally, both *Prodigal Daughters* and *Critics* are committed to analyses that view all discourse as the result of ongoing and indeterminate translation (or “redescription”).

On slightly swampier ground, a *Prodigal* approach is skeptical of McCutcheon’s collapsing of pluralism with tolerance. While both discourses require a dominant group to set the terms structuring possible conversations, *Prodigal Daughters* know the difference between being on the receiving end of a tolerant versus a pluralist encounter. A tolerant encounter with queerness views this difference as a threat and displays a thinly disguised desire to eradicate bodies representing non-normative sexualities. A pluralist perspective, on the other hand, inhabits a position of openness where all parties are amenable to the possibility of mutual transformation. Of course, these encounters rarely, if ever, take place on a level playing field, but the pluralist willingness to learn to see the world differently marks an important distinction from mere tolerance. These terms function as more than hair-splitting, name-calling, or boundary policing in the service of the nation-state. Rather they indicate importantly different orientations to knowledge in the world. *Prodigals* who

know the difference between these two approaches are also aware that the kinds of differences engaged in pluralist encounters are by no means “easily resolved.”³³²

The biggest source of trouble for Prodigals caught in the Quagmire of Critique, however, concerns the prohibition against taking any constructive positions as part of political projects aimed at composing better worlds. Such positions run the risk of being seen by other Critics as committing the cardinal sin of moving from ideological critique to ideological formation.³³³ The Critic’s approach to the study of religion revolves around the primary task of exposing the category as a modern construction. Instances of these constructions are then examined as examples in a wide array of sociocultural forms, and particular attention is devoted to the authorizing mechanisms (e.g. appeals to origins) typically deployed by social groups which may or may not identify as religions. This project, which opens up possibilities for thinking about civil religion and nationalism, remains important to my Prodigal Daughter, but it is not enough.³³⁴ She is hungry for more nourishing ways of imagining the world. She values the Pluralist’s epistemic humility while rejecting its neoliberal view of religion. She knows the world is constructed, but knowledge oriented only around exposing the constructions is not enough. Rather than viewing

³³² One example of these difficulties can be seen in the various schisms that have occurred in mainline Christian churches around the issue of homosexuality. The vast literature on interfaith relations is a testament to the difficulty of the larger genre of pluralist encounters. See for example, Jane I. Smith, *Muslims, Christians, and the Challenge of Interfaith Dialogue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

³³³ See, for example, Marsha Aileen Hewitt, “Ideology Critique, Feminism, and the Study of Religion,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 11 (1999): 47-63.

³³⁴ I have recently worked with McCutcheon’s international collaborative research group, Culture on the Edge, which interrogates the contradiction between the historicity of identity and common scholarly assertions of static and ahistorical origins. My engagement with this work is included in a forthcoming book, *Fabricating Origins*, to be published by Equinox Press in late 2014.

the world as full of constructions to be exposed, she sees these constructions as composed by an infinite number of worldly actors who are differently positioned in networks of power. Earth-wide projects of finite freedom require better navigation skills, and awareness of constructedness is only the beginning. Viewed through these changing kaleidoscopes, she is differentially both Pluralist and Critic yet neither properly Pluralist nor Critic. In her constant leavings and returning, she is, as always, Prodigal.

Where McCutcheon's analysis dismisses the Pluralism Project as an inappropriate caretaking endeavor, Bruce Lawrence provides an analysis and critique of Eck's project that leads me out of the Quagmire of Critique in a different direction. I first met Lawrence, a scholar of Islam, during my time at the University of Chicago. He was teaching there as a Visiting Professor while he researched religious pluralism and diasporic Asian communities in America. His resulting book, *New Faiths, Old Fears: Muslims and Other Asian Immigrants in American Religious Life*, links religious studies with cultural studies as he moves from "prescriptive, often triumphalist declarations of theology to the descriptive, ever cautionary, and always tentative observations of culture."³³⁵

Where McCutcheon positions Eck as a Caretaker juxtaposed to his preferred Critic, Lawrence tells a slightly different story which he calls a Tale of Two Professors about Diana Eck and Samuel Huntington, both of whom called Harvard home. Huntington, a conservative political scientist who died in 2008, is well-known

³³⁵ Bruce Lawrence, *New Faiths, Old Fears: Muslims and Other Asian Immigrants in American Religious Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 29.

in academic circles for his “clash of civilizations” thesis which viewed the post Cold War world as inevitably agonistic with conflicts between civilizations caused primarily by a combination of religious and racial differences. For him, Western Civilization, which was built on Judeo-Christian ideals, is threatened, in particular, by Islamic and Confucian civilizations. Characterizing Eck as an “ardent dialogue advocate” and Huntington as a “die-hard cold warrior,” Lawrence points out that neither has examined the “religion-culture link at the heart of each of their projects.” They both see religion in the world religions such as Christianity, Buddhism, Islam as “whole and universal and timeless” forms presupposing an internal order where “sameness and difference are accounted for without being contextualized.” He calls this view Religion One.

His preferred mode, Religion 2, denotes religion as internally differentiated, “Christians who are urban sophisticates versus Christians who are rural preliterates, Muslims from Djakarta versus those from Dakar, upper-caste Hindus from Bombay versus lower-caste Hindus from Bengal.”³³⁶ Lawrence views these forms of religion as polyvalent. Polyvalence “negotiate[s] equivalence without guaranteed permanence, it is pragmatic hope rather than utopian idealism. It is a value-added rather than a value-neutral projection of culture-specific norms.” Religions, in this view, can be understood as “kaleidocultures” full of changing spectrums of cultural values and experiences that must always be analyzed within their specific historical contexts. His book then goes on to tell a story about different kaleidocultures connected to Asian

³³⁶ Ibid., 26-27.

diasporic religions in the United States. Where Eck focuses on dialogue that presupposes common ground and Huntington focuses on conflict that presupposes antagonistic difference, Lawrence's analysis focuses on immigrant kaleidocultures whose struggles for recognition and flourishing are always mediated through what he terms "racialized class prejudice."³³⁷

While an exploration into the full range of Lawrence's project is beyond the scope of my current project, his attention to a key question – "how to approach religious idioms/experiences while keeping race, gender, class, generation, and locational differences in tension" – provided a signpost for this Prodigal Daughter indicating that one could take an alternate route than the one mapped out by the Critics. Noting that Lawrence's story collected up his knowledge about his area of expertise, I wondered what kind of story might I tell if I were to collect up my knowledge about methods and theories in the study of religion, on the one hand, and my knowledge about different Christian kaleidocultures in the contemporary United States, on the other hand. The story I decided on, of course, is the one that you have been reading. It traces my various journeys in the study of religion by following several rivers that run through me which include not only the Gallatin, the Fox, and the Yellowstone but also the river of Christianity. To make sense of her relationship to Christianity, the Prodigal Daughter would need Feminist Worldly Wisdom.

³³⁷ Ibid., 9-10.

Conclusion

Signposts to Feminist Worldly Wisdom

Why is it that as we grow older and stronger
The road signs point us adrift and make us afraid
Saying "You never can win," "Watch your back," "Where's your husband?"
Oh I don't like the signs that the signmakers made.

So I'm going to steal out with my paint and my brushes
I'll change the directions, I'll hit every street
It's the Tinseltown scandal, the Robin Hood vandal
She goes out and steals the King's English
And in the morning you wake up and the signs point to you

They say "I'm so glad that you finally made it here,"
"You thought nobody cared, but I did, I could tell,"
And "This is your year," and "It always starts here,"
"You're aging well."

Well I know a woman with a collection of sticks
She could fight back the hundreds of voices she heard
And she could poke at the greed, she could fend off her need
And with anger she found she could pound every word.
But one voice got through, caught her up by surprise
It said, "Don't hold us back we're the story you tell,"
And no sooner than spoken, a spell had been broken
And the voices before her were trumpets and tympani
Violins, basses, woodwinds and cellos, singing
"We're so glad that you finally made it here
You thought nobody cared, but we did, we could tell
And now you'll dance through the days while the orchestra plays
Oh, You're aging well

Now when I was fifteen, oh I knew it was over
The road to enchantment was not mine to take
Because lower calf, upper arm should be half what they are
I was breaking the laws that the signmakers made.

And all I could eat was the poisonous apple
And that's not a story I was meant to survive
I was all out of choices, but the woman of voices
She turned round the corner with music around her,
She gave me the language that keeps me alive, she said:

"I'm so glad that you finally made it here
With the things you know now, that only time could tell
Looking back, seeing far, landing right where we are
And oh, you're aging, oh and I am aging,
oh, aren't we aging well?"

– Dar Williams, “You’re Aging Well”

In the early 1990s, Joan Baez, a well-known American folk singer who made a name for herself during the counterculture movements of the 1960s and 1970s, decided to focus her energies on nurturing the ongoingness of the folk music tradition by touring with promising young artists and introducing them to her significant fan base. To determine which artists to work with, Baez issued a call for interested musicians to write and submit a song. Dar Williams, a woman belonging to my generation who had recently finished her Bachelor’s Degree in Religious Studies and Theatre at Wesleyan University, was making her way into a music career and seized the opportunity. She wrote the song that forms the epigraph for this conclusion. Baez loved it and chose Williams to be the first of several young artists to tour with her. At least this is the story I remember hearing at the mid-1990s concert in Chicago where they exchanged banter before singing the song together.

I begin my conclusion with this song and this story because they both point to the kinds of ongoing endings and beginnings that nurture Prodigal Daughters. They are stories by and for women who have received and pass on wisdom to help reorient

and guide those of us who don't like the signs that the dominant signmakers have made, signs that point us adrift and make us afraid. Like this dissertation, the song celebrates the strategy of stealing the King's English and resignifying it to tell different stories. In my reading of the song, the Woman of Voices gives Prodigal Daughters a language and a community that keeps them alive and helps them flourish through the ongoing call to witness made manifest in storytelling.

While Williams speaks of the Woman of Voices in a musical register, my Prodigal Daughter listens for and retells stories from Women of Voices who help me steal the King's English to rewrite stories written in a Christian register. This endeavor combines the literacies of a Child of the Book with an orientation towards jazz improvisation in the service of love, an orientation first relayed to my teenage self by Herman Johnson in a music theory course. In the journeys relayed in the previous pages, the community of women whose voices called to me to sing a song of the Prodigal Daughter includes Margaret Miles, Toni Morrison, Marilynne Robinson, Dorothee Soelle, Anne Carr, Nelle Morton, Adrienne Rich, Donna Haraway, Susan Harding, Roseanne Cash, Deborah Bird Rose, and Ursula LeGuin.

In Part I – A Godly Heritage in the Gallatin Valley, I wove a story of a Christian Heritage that produced me but whose authoritarian knowledge system could not contain either my questions or my sexuality. Feminist knowledge worlds extended a lifeline to my mother who passed it on to me, thus pointing me to non-Evangelical Houses of Higher Education and journeys I trace in Part II – Inheriting Religion, where I learned to think about religions as worlds that produced and reproduced

different kinds of knowledge. Scholars who specialize in studying these worlds and their knowledges have significantly different approaches to the topic. A caricatured portrayal of their differences lines approaches and scholars up under signs labeled insiders or outsiders, religious or secular, and caretakers or critics. These binary categories are poor signposts for the Prodigal Daughter as she continues her journey.

Drawing several threads of these stories together as we hollow out a place for Prodigal Daughters to flourish, it is time to talk about the issue of return in her story. To help me in this venture, I introduce you to Elaine Pagels, who I encountered at San Francisco's Grace Cathedral during the early years of my doctoral work. She is a Professor of Religion at Princeton University, where she is well known for her research and writings on the so called "Gnostic Gospels" and early Christianity. The Gnostic Gospels is the terminology many scholars use to reference a collection of codices discovered in 1945 at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt. The manuscripts, which included a complete copy of the Gospel of Thomas (briefly discussed in Chapter 5), have been dated to the second thru the fourth centuries of the Common Era. The codices relay stories about Jesus told by some of his early followers who were eventually deemed heretics by the Church Fathers (particularly Irenaeus) as they established an emerging orthodox Christianity. Pagels earned her Ph.D. in Religion at Harvard University in the late 1960s and early 1970s where she worked with Helmut Koester and his team studying and translating the Gnostic manuscripts.³³⁸ In 2004,

³³⁸ Koester, in turn, was a student of Rudolf Bultmann, a prominent and influential German Lutheran theologian (of a liberal Christian variety) and New Testament scholar in early 20th century Germany. Bultmann is foundational for the move to "demythologize" the Christian Gospels by separating cosmological and historical claims from philosophical, ethical, and theological teachings.

Pagels came to San Francisco where she participated in an interview at Grace Cathedral about her latest book, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*.

I had read and appreciated excerpts of her earlier work, and when I heard she would be in San Francisco talking not only about the Gnostic Gospels but also about the issue of belief, I decided to make a pilgrimage to hear her. My doctoral work at the time was oriented around trying to untangle modern Christian conversion narratives and associated tropes that increasingly understood belief as a marker of identity which, in turn, set the boundaries of belonging for groups managed by the nation-state.³³⁹ I was curious to learn how or even if belief might have been a different kind of issue for early Christians.

Located in the heart of San Francisco's Nob Hill, Grace Cathedral is the cathedral church for the Episcopal Diocese of California, which once indicated a state-wide region but now comprises primarily the San Francisco Bay area. Grace Cathedral's predecessor, Grace Church, was established and built in 1849 during the California Gold Rush. That building was destroyed in the fires of San Francisco's 1906 earthquake. With significant financial assistance from the railroad baron and banking Crocker family, construction began on the current structure in 1928 and was completed in 1964 as the third largest Episcopal cathedral in the country. Designed in a French Gothic style but made with concrete and steel, it is a stunningly beautiful building.

³³⁹ For a comprehensive exposition and analysis of this problem, see Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

Before arriving to hear Pagels talk, I had not given much thought to the venue and had arrived thoroughly unprepared for what turned out to be an impressive encounter. I made my way up the Great Stairs, stopping at the top to take in the cityscape extending to San Francisco Bay. Walking around the courtyard, I noted a labyrinth carved into the concrete which, I later learned, was based on a famous medieval labyrinth at another cathedral in Chartres, France. For at least hundreds of years, people have been walking labyrinths as a form of prayer or meditative practice. The front doors to Grace Cathedral are replicas of Ghiberti's bronze doors (a.k.a. "Gates of Paradise") of the Baptistery of San Giovanni in Florence, Italy. The ten panels depicting scriptural stories are full of narrative drama, and the surrounding frames include 24 statuettes and 24 heads. I knew that one could spend years, or possibly a lifetime, studying not only the stories depicted in the doors but also the attendant theories of representation for making sense of how they might have been interpreted differently over the centuries.

The inside of the cathedral was equally impressive with over 60 stained glass windows, depicting yet more stories as they diffracted light throughout the vast structure. Below the windows at eye level surrounding the nave, one finds a series of murals painted by Jan Henryk de Rosen and Antonio Sotomayor that depict historic figures and scenes including an image of Saint Francis of Assisi, the aforementioned 1906 earthquake, and the 1945 founding of the United Nations in San Francisco. The cathedral is also home to three different organs, including a 7,466 pipe Æolian-Skinner and, high in the tower, a carillon of 44 bells.

As I entered the cathedral, my attention was immediately drawn to the Interfaith AIDS chapel on the right. Reading the information panels, I learned that the small room is not only a memorial to the thousands of San Franciscans who have died of AIDS and an ongoing remembering of those still living with HIV/AIDS, but it also honors caregivers and volunteers who work with HIV/AIDS-related illness “whatever their faith.” The centerpiece of the chapel is Keith Haring’s “The Life of Christ” altarpiece which he completed just two weeks before his own death from AIDS at the age of 31 in 1990. Made of bronze and white gold, the triptych figures a Christ child held by a multi-armed figure positioned between tears and a radiant heart. The crowd depicted below is full of movement and life, and the side panels host angels floating and dancing. On the many occasions I have visited the chapel since first encountering it, I am always struck by the dozens of lit candles brightening the room as I imagine the heartbreak and suffering of those whose lives have been claimed by the disease as well as those who are left behind. The candles provide a testimony to ongoing love and care that soothes and celebrates.

Absorbing the realization that I was in a church that had neither disavowed nor repudiated the many queer bodies disproportionately connected to the AIDS crisis but had rather developed an ongoing commitment to love and sustain them and their queer kin, I began to get a sense that the variety of Christianity practiced here was radically different than what I had encountered in my previous journeys. Stopping by the docent station, I read some of the welcome literature which advertised Grace Cathedral as a “House of Prayer for all people” with a congregation consisting of

“seekers and believers.” Wondering what the “seekers” piece of that equation meant, I made my way downstairs where the talk was to take place as part of what I learned was a weekly Forum organized around the principle of “connecting the spirit without disconnecting the mind.” I added this curious phrase to my basket of items to ponder. The Dean of the Cathedral, the Very Reverend Alan Jones introduced himself and Elaine Pagels, and the conversation began.

I no longer remember exactly what I expected, but I recall being pleasantly surprised and intrigued by the direction the conversation took almost immediately. I knew of Pagels as someone who had written about the history of a movement that early Christians had deemed heretical, and I knew that she was critical of the imperial form of Christianity that emerged in the 4th century, not least of all because it associated sin with sex and the female body.³⁴⁰ I did not, however, know that she identified as a Christian much less how she reconciled her scholarship with her identity. These turned out to be the topics framing the book she discussed that morning.

Beyond Belief begins with personal reflections relating her motivation for writing the book. During the early 1980s, on a Sunday morning in February, she had gone for a run in New York City’s upper east side. She had not slept in days and had been sick with fear and worry about her two-and-a-half-year-old son, Mark, who had just been diagnosed with a rare and probably fatal lung disease. Needing to catch her

³⁴⁰ Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

breath and warm up, she stepped into the vestibule of the Church of Heavenly Rest where she reports:

I was startled by my response to the worship in progress – the soaring harmonies of the choir singing with the congregation; and the priest, a woman in bright gold and white vestments, proclaiming the prayers in a clear, resonant voice. As I stood watching, a thought came to me: Here is a family that knows how to face death. . . . Standing in the back of that church, I recognized, uncomfortably, that I needed to be there. Here was a place to weep without imposing tears upon a child; and here was a heterogeneous community that had gathered to sing, to celebrate, to acknowledge common needs, and to deal with what we cannot control or imagine. Yet the celebration in progress spoke of hope; perhaps that is what made the presence of death bearable. Before that time, I could only ward off what I had heard and felt the day before.³⁴¹

Her son died four years later, and the following year, her husband died in a mountain climbing accident in Colorado leaving her with two young children. Before and after these deaths, she reports that she returned to the Church of Heavenly Rest often:

not looking for faith but because, in the presence of that worship and the people gathered there – and in a smaller group that met on weekdays in the church basement for mutual encouragement – my defenses fell away, exposing storms of grief and hope. In that church I gathered new energy and resolved, over and over, to face whatever awaited us as constructively as possible for Mark, and for the rest of us.

While Pagels was drawn to the communal sharing of suffering, issues connected to belief troubled her. When people said things to her like “Your faith must be a great help to you,” she wondered what they meant. Faith, she writes, appeared to be “more than simple assent to the set of creeds and beliefs that worshipers recited every week,” and in fact, it seemed to have “little to do with whatever transactions we were

³⁴¹ Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003), 3-4.

making with one another, with ourselves, and – so it was said – with invisible beings.” Instead, she says that she was “acutely aware” that she and others in the congregation were “driven by need and desire” and the occasional hope that their communion had the potential to transform them.³⁴²

As a teenager, Pagels, whose parents were not religious, had briefly joined an evangelical Christian church that fed her craving to belong to the right group, the “true ‘flock’ that alone belonged to God.” However, she became disenchanted when a close friend was killed in a car accident and her fellow evangelicals declared that he was “eternally damned” because he was Jewish and not “born again.” In college, she decided to learn Greek so that she could read the New Testament in its original language, hoping to discover the source of its power, but ended up experiencing the stories in different more literary and historical ways. She decided to pursue graduate work in the history of Christianity because she found the tradition simultaneously “compelling” and “frustrating.”³⁴³ For many years, however, she was comfortable keeping Christianity at an academic distance. Finding herself in the Church of Heavenly Rest provided communal support that helped her face death and suffering, and it also provided a new intellectual problem.

She began to wonder “when and how being a Christian became virtually synonymous with accepting a certain set of beliefs.” Trained in early Christian history, she knew that Christianity had “survived brutal persecution and flourished for generations – even centuries – *before* Christians formulated what they believed into

³⁴² Ibid., 5.

³⁴³ Ibid., 30-31.

creeds.” In addition to this historical query, she asks another set of questions. Based on her encounters with people in the church:

believers, agnostics, and seekers – as well as people who don’t belong to any church –... what matters in religious experience involves much more than what we believe (or what we do not believe). What is Christianity, and what is religion, I wondered, and why do so many of us still find it compelling, whether or not we belong to a church, and despite difficulties we may have with particular beliefs or practices? What is it about Christian tradition that we love – and what is it that we *cannot* love?³⁴⁴

Pagels historical narrative begins with various groups who had been students or followers of Jesus and their struggles to come to terms with his crucifixion and death. Early Christian identity emerged in connection with the practices of baptism and a communal meal. From the beginning, groups developed different interpretations of how these practices fit into their cosmological views of the world, but according to Pagels, they all shared an emerging identity organized around a new model of kinship that attended to the suffering of societal outcasts (e.g. orphans, prisoners, prostitutes, lepers) with a generosity ordinarily reserved only for members of one’s own family. These practices combined with Jesus teachings that God loves everyone equally became the basis for nothing less than “a radical new social structure.”³⁴⁵

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 6.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 9. Pagels relies heavily on the analysis of sociologist, Rodney Stark, for her understanding of the causes and effects of early Christian social formations. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). Her analysis obscures or ignores the fact that the question of how and why Christianity took hold for so many is one about which scholars are by no means in agreement. For a perspective more representative of the NAASR collective, see Ron Cameron and Merrill Miller eds., *Redescribing Christian Origins (Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series)* (Leiden: Society of Biblical Literature by Koninklijke Brill NV, 2004). While my Prodigal Daughter finds this scholarship endlessly fascinating, she does not need an authoritative analysis of what happened 2000 years ago to ground her engagements with the present world.

The bulk of Pagels project reads the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of John as presenting two competing visions of the relationship between God and humanity. Where John's gospel identified Jesus as "God's only begotten son" which he connected to the light that came into being through God's creation, Thomas's gospel drew "a quite different conclusion: that the divine light Jesus embodied is shared by humanity since we are all made 'in the image of God' ... although most people remain unaware of its presence."³⁴⁶ Her analysis then traces a pattern where what "might have been complementary interpretations" became rivals. Where the Thomas perspective viewed people as seekers, the John perspective develops the figure of "Doubting Thomas" who exemplifies a faithless and false understanding of Jesus.³⁴⁷ Eventually, the men who became known as the Church Fathers, particularly Irenaeus, insisted on developing "a canon of truth" to unite the disparate Christian groups. He championed John as offering obvious, plain passages opposed to the "wild readings" of Thomas, and the latter were deemed heretical. As part of the efforts to destroy any challenges to the emerging ecclesiastical hierarchy, the heresy hunters burned the texts that did not conform to what they deemed to be the canon of truth. This canon of truth was further codified into creeds requiring believers who assented to statements of truth when Constantine converted to Christianity, and it became an Empire Religion.

Pagels begins her last chapter with several thoughts that resonated with me.

She writes:

³⁴⁶ Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 41.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 58, 69-72.

When I found that I no longer believed everything I thought Christians were supposed to believe, I asked myself, Why not just leave Christianity – and religion – behind, as so many others have done? Yet I sometimes encountered, in churches and elsewhere – in the presence of a venerable Buddhist monk, in the cantor’s singing at a bar mitzvah, and on mountain hikes – something compelling, powerful, even terrifying that I could not ignore, and I had come to see that, besides *belief*, Christianity involves *practice* – and paths toward transformation.³⁴⁸

Recall Pagels’ earlier question, “What is it about Christian tradition that we love – and what is it that we *cannot* love?” By the end of her book, it is clear that she loves a particular community of people who call themselves Christians who gather together in the face of suffering by reliving, reinventing, and transforming the knowledge they have received. What she does not love is the predominance of an authority that requires assent to codified statements of truth. She identifies more with the seekers and those “uprooted from their original home within Christian churches” and “stigmatized as ‘heretics’ who have often wandered alone.” She prefers the heretical texts which offer the testimony of innumerable people who follow Jesus’ words, “seek, and you shall find.”³⁴⁹

I had arrived at Grace Cathedral that morning imagining that I would hear a historical argument about the triumph of orthodoxy and an elucidation of the content of heretical texts that had almost miraculously been recovered after centuries of loss. I had not imagined that I would encounter a woman whose statements about belonging and belief resonated with me. I was surprised to find that someone who was not a believer, in any standard sense of the term, identified as a Christian. Even more

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 143.

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 185. The quote is from Matthew 7:7. In her footnote, Pagels notes that Tertullian (another Church Father) objected to the way that ‘heretics’ used this saying in much the same way she is using it.

shocking was the realization that I was in a room full of people who were seriously enthusiastic about her not-so-implicit suggestion that Christianity ought to gather up more of its heretical stories and turn down the volume on the belief discourse.

Pagels' story made me curious about what it might mean to be a non-believing member of a Christian community, and everything about Grace Cathedral made me curious about the community it gathered up. I attended more events as well as services there, and for the first time in my life, I was invited to participate in the Eucharist regardless of which groups I did or did not claim membership in and regardless of what I might or might not believe. I read the Dean of the Cathedral's book, *Reimagining Christianity* which opens with this quote from James Baldwin:

The domain of morals is as chartless as the sea once was, and as treacherous as the sea still is. It is not too much to say that whoever wishes to become a truly moral human being (and let us not ask whether or not this is possible: I think that we must *believe* that it is possible) must first divorce himself from all the prohibitions, crimes, hypocrisies of the Christian Church. If the concept of God has any validity at all, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him.³⁵⁰

Jones takes this challenge from Baldwin seriously as he works to reimagine Christianity as a tradition oriented around the experience of being loved. In matters of theism, however, Jones relies on an Eliaden understanding of God as "the Sacred," and my critical orientation could not follow him there.³⁵¹ I decided to stick with James Baldwin on this one.

³⁵⁰ James Baldwin quote from *The Fire Next Time* in Alan Jones, *Reimagining Christianity: Reconnect Your Spirit without Disconnecting Your Mind* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2005) xi.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 15-25, 137-150.

Nonetheless, I was drawn to his emphasis on belonging over belief, and I took seriously the suggestion that this version of Christianity might welcome seekers who lived in the religious and secular borderlands beyond belief. To test the boundaries of the invitation, I took the regularly offered Inquirer's Class where I was surprised to discover that people I encountered were hungry for the kinds of knowledge about various Christianities that I had accumulated in my journeys. Every time I offered a perspective that might be taken as critique, the clergy and my fellow inquirers not only welcomed it but also asked for more.

On the day when we discussed the Trinity, the Director of Congregational Life told us that in her many years participating in the series she had noticed that folks who came from different traditions tended to be drawn to different persons of the Trinity and she was curious which ones called to us. When my turn to speak arrived, I tentatively explained that, from my perspective, Jesus was not a God but a person whose teachings had been taken up and made into a religion that projected societal ideals onto a Father figure God in ways that I thought had done a lot of damage over the centuries. I had never given much thought to the Holy Spirit but, in a conciliatory gesture, I proposed that maybe I could get on board with the idea of spirit as breath or aliveness, but I quickly followed up that I had become pretty allergic to the consumer culture of the "spiritual but not religious" label that structures so much of the New Age worlds popular in the Bay Area.³⁵² To my surprise, my response

³⁵² David Delgado Shorter's forthcoming article on "Spirituality" does a wonderful job of explaining the problems with of this discourse both in general and with particular reference to appropriations and understandings of "Native American Spirituality." Shorter uses the work of Timothy Murphy to expose the false dichotomy between spirit and nature that is an inheritance of western philosophy with

delighted the class, and many nodded agreement. One of the lay ministers smiled and described me as a survivor of a particularly abusive form of Christianity.

Continuously and pleasantly surprised by my encounters at Grace and hungry for a community that might love me, I decided to join this group of seekers and believers. In the nomenclature of some of Grace's clergy, I became a "Gracecopalian." Shortly after joining, however, I moved away from San Francisco, and I never had a chance to thoroughly explore what being a member of Grace's immediate community might be like. I make occasional pilgrimages to the cathedral when my work brings me to San Francisco, and I'm particularly drawn to the Ash Wednesday services whose mantra, "remember that you are dust," I read as a reminder that I belong to the Earth. In recent years, I have come to describe myself more as a Buddhiscopalian Pagan.

Much of my tentative return to a borderland variety of Christianity occurred during a leave of absence I took after one of my advisors, Gary Lease, died. When I returned to the academy to finish my PhD, it was increasingly unclear to me whether I was religious or secular, an insider or outsider, a critic or a caretaker. In sorting through available tools for making sense of my changing orientation, I encountered a

ongoing effects. Shorter then maintains that the problem with these discourses is their disavowal of and disconnectedness from the material realities that structure the lives of those who function in the "new spirituality" as only an absent romanticized ghost rather than ongoing communities continuing to grapple with a legacy of dispossession and colonialism. Both Shorter and Murphy were students of Gary Lease and mentors of mine. After Lease's death, Murphy took his place on my dissertation committee until he too died in March of 2013. Although my project has focused on daughters, Gary Lease and his students are part of my larger kinship network which supports the flourishing of Prodigal Daughters. Timothy Michael Murphy, *The Politics of Spirit: Phenomenology, Genealogy, Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011). David Delgado Shorter, "Spirituality" in Fredrick Hoxie (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Indians* (London: Oxford University Press, forthcoming, November, 2014).

few options. I could follow the lead of Paul Tillich, the theologian who informed so much of Diana Eck's work, and call myself a Secular Christian, but the various critiques explored in the previous chapter made this an unappealing option. I could follow an emergent trend in some academic circles and call myself either "PostSecular" or "PostChristian."³⁵³ While I am informed by and in conversation with post-structuralist perspectives undergirding much of this work, I realized that my immersion in thinking with both Donna Haraway and Deborah Bird Rose caused me to develop an allergy to the temporal register of nomenclatures oriented around posts.

Based on wisdom gleaned in her work with indigenous people in Australia's Northern Territory around the Victoria River District, Deborah Bird Rose proposes a different way of thinking about time and history than the typical modes enacted by Christian Realism and its barely secularized offspring, Technoscience.³⁵⁴ These modes typically function in forward-looking manners focused on apocalypse, salvation, redemption, or damnation where the past is something only to be disavowed and overcome. Adopting an indigenous perspective, Rose instead advocates turning our back to the future and focusing our attention on facing our ancestors. This temporal mode of knowing requires the knower to overcome the sanctioned amnesia so typical of white settler colonialism and to know more about

³⁵³ Rosi Braidotti, "In Spite of the Times: The Postsecular Turn in Feminism," *Theory, Culture & Society*, November 2008, 25:6, 1-24.

³⁵⁴ For a reading of Technoscience as a barely secularized offspring of Christian Realism, see Donna Haraway, *Modest Witness*.

the heritage that produced one than Western knowledge formations (religious and secular) often allow in order to leave to those who come after less blasted country.³⁵⁵

Along these lines, in an essay entitled “Staying with the Trouble,” Donna Haraway engages with Derrida’s oft-quoted statement that “inheritance is never a given; it is always a task. It remains before us.”³⁵⁶ Reading Derrida’s conception of inheritance through Rose’s temporal lens, Haraway summarizes both as providing an imperative to “inherit the past thickly in the present so as to age the future.”³⁵⁷ Compelled by this approach, my Prodigal Daughter turns her back on efforts to tilt towards the future which she discerns in efforts to imagine ourselves as post-anything. Instead, facing those who came before her, she is learning how to inherit the stories and worlds produced by dominant forms of Christianity in the hopes that inheriting her past more thickly will lead to more flourishing and less suffering in a present that just might extend into the future.

As part of these efforts, three theorists - José Esteban Muñoz, Tim Ingold, and Maria Puig de la Bellacasa - provide some tools and vocabulary to help Prodigal Daughters negotiate the religious and secular borderlands. In his book, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Queer theorist, José Esteban Muñoz illustrates that queer identity encompasses more than either a simple identification with one’s culture or a purely oppositional stance against it. His text looks at the ways, in particular those outside the racial and sexual mainstream

³⁵⁵ Deborah Bird Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country*.

³⁵⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 67.

³⁵⁷ Donna Haraway, "Staying with the Trouble."

negotiate majority cultures neither by alignment nor exclusion, but rather by transforming them for their own purposes. He refers to this process as disidentification. Encountering his analysis and its engagement with and indebtedness to feminist knowledge developed by Third World feminists and radical women of color – including Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, Chela Sandoval, Norma Alarcón, and Audre Lorde – my queer Prodigal Daughter immediately recognized herself as situated in the borderlands of the religious and secular.³⁵⁸ Here a community of identities-in-difference, having failed to be properly interpellated into the dominant discourses, are engaged in the play and work of disidentification through minority forms of performance, survival, and activism.³⁵⁹

While Muñoz's analysis and transformative work revolves around performance art, my Prodigal Daughter's primary mode of engagement with the present focuses on queer feminist storytelling that seeks to transform worlds identified as both religious and secular. Throughout this dissertation, she has been inheriting her worlds by tracing her journeys as she tells a story that disidentifies with dominant conceptions of religion and secularism. She refuses an understanding of religions and religious identity as either, in an Eliadian vein, manifestations of the sacred or, in a neoliberal vein, as a freely chosen individual assent to statements about the world. In other words and as explained in the previous chapter, she understands religions as social formations that produce different kinds of knowledges and

³⁵⁸ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007). Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2000). Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (New York: Random House, 2007).

³⁵⁹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

subjectivities. Depending on one's frame of reference, a social formation might be seen as religious or secular. Prodigal Daughter also refuses understandings of secularism which imagine the world as governed primarily by forces named Reason or Nature.

As an additional component of her disidentification, she is attached to certain connotations connected to the words religious and secular. The etymology of religion points to both *relegere* meaning "to reread" or "to be careful" and *religare* meaning "to bind fast" or "place an obligation on." The Prodigal Daughter is religious insofar as she is inextricably bound, despite an increasingly fractured sense of belonging, to a Christian history and its ongoing effects on and in the world. She is made up of Christian stories, histories, and knowledge which she religiously rereads and reworks. On the secular side of the equation, the Latin *saecularis* denotes "the world" which is traditionally opposed to or separate from the Church. It can also indicate an era. Prodigal Daughter identifies as secular insofar as she knows that she is living in an era defined and governed by what recent scholars have termed "formations of the secular."³⁶⁰ Additionally and unlike the Prodigal Son, she is fully committed to living in and loving this world in all its fleshy, messy entanglements.

When confronted by potential policemen asking if she is religious or secular, an insider or an outsider, a critic or a caretaker, the Prodigal Daughter replies that she is neither/nor yet both/and. This is another way of saying that she is permanently

³⁶⁰ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003). Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

Prodigal. Prodigal Daughter turns out to be a much more suitable name than any of the previously reviewed options. It names a relationship-with-a-difference to the Prodigal Son. When he returns, he has repented for his sin of leaving his Father's house to cavort with the world. He is no longer Prodigal but is now rather a Beloved Son who has repented of his Prodigal errors.

In the Lukean parable, the term, prodigal, describes those who leave to have intercourse with the world, and these are connotations I want to hold onto rather than repent. In dominant forms of Christianity, one does not have to look far to find examples of negative associations between sinfulness and sexuality. Indeed, the sinful world has typically been symbolized with any number of associations between sexual desire, femaleness, darkness, materiality, and Earthly existence that can only be overcome through moving to the light of the Father Sun. This dualism between light and dark is present in both the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of John. Prodigal Daughter, however, knows that while the Earth requires sunshine for ongoing life, she is a terran creature who belongs to the planet.³⁶¹

In juxtaposition to the Prodigal Son mode of return that reproduces the Church Fathers' hegemonic status quo organized around canon, creed and ecclesiastical authority, the Prodigal Daughter's return with a difference favors an ongoing process of seeking or wayfaring over the boundedness of belief. In his remarkable history and analysis of lines, the anthropologist, Tim Ingold, draws a distinction between two

³⁶¹ Bruno Latour's figure of "The Earthbound" articulated in his 2013 Gifford Lectures might be a companion sibling for Prodigal Daughters, but Latour is more oriented towards agonism, war, and trials of strength whereas Prodigal Daughters are more oriented towards finding alternate paths.

different modes of travel which he extrapolates to two different modes of knowledge: the wayfaring mode and pre-planned navigation or transport. Drawing from various ethnographies of indigenous modes of knowing, he describes wayfaring as a moving through the world *along* paths that are not predetermined in an ongoing process of growth and development or self-renewal. In this mode, the journey is home, and life happens while traveling rather than being a matter, as with the destination-oriented transport mode, of getting from one point to another. Wayfaring lives and grows in reciprocal relationship with the world whereas the transport mode, deployed most frequently by imperial and commercial forces, dissolves the intimate bond of locomotion and perception to focus instead on moving *across* and dominating the world. Where the mode of transport obliterates the world it leaves behind, wayfaring allows for many returns, regenerations, and places that give ongoing sustenance. Wayfaring attends to paths in “relation to the ever-changing vistas and horizons” which always include inevitable twisting and bending.³⁶² Prodigal Daughters are wayfarers, and Prodigal Knowledge consists of the wisdom accumulated on these journeys.

For Prodigal Daughters bogged down in the quagmire of critique, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa’s article, “Matters of care in technoscience: Assembling neglected things,” provides tools to regain one’s footing.³⁶³ While a thorough exploration of this path awaits my future Prodigal paths, a brief summation of its signposts will orient

³⁶² Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 162.

³⁶³ Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, “Matters of care in technoscience: Assembling neglected things,” *Social Studies of Science*, 41 (2011): 85-106.

other wayfaring strangers who have found themselves on similar ground. A feminist science studies scholar, Puig writes as part of a conversation amongst science and technology studies scholars wrestling with a similar quagmire of critique. In her thought collective, Bruno Latour has expressed his frustration with theorists who, finally aware that knowledge is constructed, insist on only pointing out the infinite ways and places that constructed knowledge is at work. For Latour, the strength of the constructivist insight points to an awareness that the knowledge and worlds can be composed in a variety of ways and that the status quo is not the only necessary or possible world. But the dominant mode of critique has become mired in a debunking vortex that ignores the work that actually goes into composing knowledge. To counter critique gone awry, Latour proposes that scholars attend to what he calls “matters of concern” and the work of holding things together or composition.³⁶⁴

In conversation with Latour’s proposals, Puig uses feminist thinking to push his understanding of “matters of concern” towards what she calls “matters of care.” Care, as she defines her terms, is both a mode of doing *and* intervening. It composes and critiques. It is a much more powerful mode of engagement than Latour’s concern, which advocates something akin to a distanced respectful representation of different interests. Puig’s attention to care reminds her interlocutors that care has traditionally been a feminized and devalued form of labor that is nonetheless vital for ongoing existence and various kinds of reproduction. Where concern suggests a cool

³⁶⁴ Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter, 2004), 225-248. Bruno Latour, “An Attempt at a ‘Compositionist Manifesto,’” *New Literary History*, 2010, 41: 471-490.

detachment from these labors, care implies “an affective state, a material vital doing, and an ethico-political obligation.”³⁶⁵ On the critical side, Puig maintains that “[t]o promote care in our world we cannot throw out critical standpoints with the bathwater of corrosive critique.”³⁶⁶ Along these lines, critical care gives some priority to those “who can be harmed by an assemblage but whose voices are less valued, as are their concerns and need for care.”³⁶⁷ Additionally, engaging in a matters-of-care orientation to knowledge production includes attention to knowledge workers’ cares and concerns along with the tasks of “intervening in the articulation of ethically and politically demanding issues ... not only to expose or reveal invisible labors of care, but also to generate care.”³⁶⁸

Engaging with matters of care and other the feminist knowledge practices gathered up throughout this dissertation, my Prodigal Daughter began her journeys by asking herself what she cared about? And what kind of care did she want generate in the world. My answers to this question inevitably circled back to taking thick care of knowledge worlds that focus their analytic efforts on religious and secular borderlands. My incarnation of the Prodigal Daughter is drawn to significantly reworking the Christian stories that run through her and her worlds. She wants better stories for all of her queer and straight, religious and secular, Episcopal and Evangelical kin to live in. She is currently contemplating thinking with Haraway’s *When Species Meet* to continue what she sees as Haraway’s refiguring of the

³⁶⁵ Puig de la Bellacasa, 89.

³⁶⁶ Ibid., 91.

³⁶⁷ Ibid., 92.

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 94.

Christian story of the Last Supper.³⁶⁹ Haraway is interested in becoming worldly with companion species, and my Prodigal Daughter sees this as a signpost to more feminist worldly wisdom.

While formerly Prodigal Sons feast on fatted calves with their patriarchal authority restored, Prodigal Daughters continue wayfaring in the ongoing creation of worlds not structured by the law of the father and his phallogocentric legions. In the journeys laid out in the previous pages, she has gathered up wisdom in the form of literacies, feminist community, and a borderland variety of Christianity for those who might follow or simply be curious. In the wayfaring mode, she has aimed to carve out a place to flourish rather than to tell a story that ends.

Along these lines, a reference to one of my favorite films, *Antonia's Line*, seems an appropriate place to conclude. This Dutch film by the feminist filmmaker, Marlene Gorris, tells a tale of Antonia, who is Prodigal Daughter par excellence, and the three generations of women (her "line") that came after her, one of whom, Antonia's daughter, is a lesbian. The film is narrated by Sarah, the great-granddaughter, and it begins and ends on the morning of the day that Antonia dies as her family (including several outcasts she has taken in) gather around her. The story follows Antonia and her offspring in their entanglements with the rather close-minded rural community and the patriarchal version of Christianity they manage to get on with as they carve out a place to flourish in the wake of World War II. At one point, Antonia's young granddaughter, Theresa, is raped by an unrepentant Prodigal Son

³⁶⁹ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*.

whom Antonia curses before his own brother kills him. Time flows in a dance of seasons and years during which love occasionally bursts out everywhere, and Antonia's family regularly gathers around her large table where they share food and communion. The film ends with the great-granddaughter reporting that, on the day Antonia died, she would not leave the deathbed of her beloved great-grandmother because she wanted to be with her "when the miracle of death parted Antonia's soul from her formidable body."

When my paternal grandmother – the one I sat next to and sang with in church as a child – was dying, I rushed home to be with her. With our own odd but decidedly not queer family gathered around her, I held her hand while the death rattle took over her lungs. When she struggled for her last breath, I told her that we were all there, that we loved her, and that it was OK to let go. And then I too witnessed the strange miracle of death. At her funeral, I recited some of the narrative from *Antonia's Line* which concludes in a way tailor-made for *Prodigal Daughters* committed to ongoing stories: "As this long chronicle reaches its conclusion, nothing has come to an end."

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