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Queering Job: Inverted Liberation in Boy Erased and Other Conversion Trauma Narratives

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**QUEERING JOB: INVERTED LIBERATION IN *BOY ERASED*
AND OTHER CONVERSION TRAUMA NARRATIVES**

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of
Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Harrison Beau Palen

December 2022

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AND OTHER CONVERSION TRAUMA NARRATIVES**

English

Missouri State University, December 2022

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores conversion trauma narratives with the goal of transforming— inverting The Book of Job’s holy resolution to instead entail queer liberation apart from Evangelicalism. Analyzing Conley’s bestselling memoir, *Boy Erased*, I discuss Conley’s suffering and how his liberation is not found by means of repressing or converting his attraction to the same gender. I also analyze Emily Danforth’s novel, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* to highlight how fictional accounts of queer liberation from conversion therapy help to increase awareness of the harms of conversion therapy. Throughout my thesis, I incorporate my own story of queer suffering, survival, and resilience. I steal away Job’s narrative for the sake of my own resolution away from church, forced masculinity, and closeted identity.

KEYWORDS: queer, conversion therapy, The Book of Job, drag artist, megachurch, worship leader, *Boy Erased*, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*

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—I am ever-healing from the unspoken biblical canon of the queer child in an Evangelical household—specifically, a parable of a mother and father who so desperately yearn for a son who can continue to sing “let the praise go up as the walls come down” for thousands of people, honoring the reputation of family in the process. I can comprehend now that those intimidating walls were never built of my love for another man or mustard skinny jeans. Rather, what always obstructed promised land was opposition to love itself. Boy Erased was the covenant that I yielded to as I marched for the deconstruction of the walls of my own closet. I carried Conley’s expression with me as I left the church, lost my job as a result of being queer, and ultimately, in my redefining of what family and love mean when asked to convert, change, and live hidden. This thesis is dedicated to the friends who helped pay my rent after job loss, the queer artists across the parking lot who helped me, in turn, find myself as an artist again, to my queer therapist, and to the conversion therapy survivors, drag artists, people of color, lesbians, trans women, and all other individuals who fought to pave a way forward.

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LIBERATED

What my mother didn't yet know about being gay in the South was that you never ran out of material, that being secretly gay your whole life, averting your eyes every time you saw a handsome man, praying on your knees every time a sexual thought entered your mind or every time you'd acted even remotely feminine—this gave you an embarrassment of sins for which you constantly felt the need to apologize, repent, beg forgiveness. I could never count the number of times I'd sinned against God. (Conley 86)

These words convey the former identities of conversion therapy survivor, Garrard Conley. In his *New York Times* best-selling memoir, *Boy Erased*—an account detailing his survival of spiritual abuse fostered by the practice—Conley references suffering within the Book of Job to relate to intrapersonal conflict between his own queer identity and allegiance to his familial tradition of Missionary Baptist faith. By analyzing Conley's memoir, I examine the ubiquity of the queer commonplace of Jobian suffering utilized within it and how similar suffering is conveyed in conversion therapy novel, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, as well as my own experiences as a queer individual facing and overcoming Evangelical pressure to conform to heteronormative expectation. Furthermore, I invert Job's liberation for queer intentions—this *inverted queer liberation* arrives by the achievement of liberation away from God—the liberation of queer self despite the heavily compiled social, cultural, and systemic odds against queer survival and overcoming. Ultimately, I criticize conversion therapy's existing influence by queering biblical symbols with the hopes of empowering the systemically oppressed queer. Caught between queer authenticity and pressured devotion to religion and community, *Boy Erased*, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, and my own story, transform—invert—the suffering of Job into a story that concludes with queer liberation, freedom *from* the chains of

"holy suffering" instead of a heteronormative, patriarchal "redemption" won through that suffering.

Throughout childhood, the Book of Job was a source of quasi solace—reading a story of someone’s suffering that eventually resulted in his own liberation from suffering sounded ideal, logical, and relatable to what I hoped for my future. I was desperate to depart from my own queerness. I yearned to deny and rid myself of the natural experience of my own attractions for the sake of holiness—being attracted to the same gender was constant and inescapable turmoil, yet Job’s narrative delivered me a sort of hope in the possibility that my queer suffering, my “sin,” contained some sort of divine purpose for a holier later. Regardless of my hopes, attraction to the same gender felt beyond unfair throughout my upbringing—*denigrating* to witness my straight, cisgender friends as they dated in school and as many of them married quickly after. Where was my overcoming? *When* was it coming? Was I supposed to date and marry a woman even if I was not attracted to her? Or, did God intend for me to be celibate?

My straight, cisgender friends never faced the worry of this required contemplation—a queer commonplace of suffering similar to Job’s suffering. Most queer kids immersed within Evangelical environments are required to contemplate these considerations and so much more for the sake of their own holiness. We suffer still even if we are able to transition away from holy restriction. My queerness lost me a job. I was almost evicted shortly after. I lost friends, too. I lost. I lost. *I lost*. But in my loss, I *gained* an authentic reality that Evangelicalism could never provide me. I found *new* holiness.

What if the Godly resolution to Job’s suffering is inverted for queer intentions? For myself and many queer individuals of Evangelical upbringings, our liberation is discovered *apart* from any notion of a God or place of worship. We halt the filling of communion plates with our

dollars, yet we still lift our hands in a sort of reverence, ready to give. Drag artists meet our outstretched hands, and we give directly to the source—to a human symbol of our own queer freedom. We are liberated apart from Evangelicalism—authentically queer. We arrive. We become our own *holy*.

Queer individuals in the United States suffer as a result of a religious (yet politically powerful) minority, so in great defiance, queering biblical symbols to instead entail liberation apart from Evangelical expectation is a declaring gesture of opposition to the anti-queer confines of Evangelicalism. This work finds similarity between Jobian suffering to that of the queer individual currently immersed within or who has been immersed within Evangelical culture, ideology, and tradition. Job's loss of family, belongings, and friends are, in many capacities, parallel to that of queer individuals made to repress identity within Evangelical environments. I *will* steal away a narrative that once inspired my own suffering. Job's suffering *was once* my suffering, but my liberation now arrives upon *my own* queer terms.

job

The Book of Job begins with a brief description of the size of Job's family as well as a listing of his extensive array of belongings. Rather quickly, the narrative's dynamic shifts to convey a separate conversation between God and Satan wherein Satan believes that Job would turn against (curse) God if Job's family and belongings were taken away. God allows for Satan to test Job. In turn, God essentially allows Job to endure hardship and suffering for the sake of proving his dedication. The testing of Job increases in the book's second chapter when God allows Satan to test Job's dedication to God amidst the removal of good health. Once again, God allows for such suffering to take place, leaving Job to suffer. It is important to note that throughout the narrative leading to this point, God expresses to Satan how loyal Job is.

Traditionally, Job's suffering is interpreted to showcase that God allows suffering but for the purpose of strengthening one's faith in God himself.

Later within the narrative, Job experiences the proposals of his friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. Eliphaz wrongfully conveys to Job that the intensity of punishment and suffering come as a result of his sin. Bildad expands upon Eliphaz's hypothesis regarding the cause of Job's suffering by explaining that perhaps his suffering is not the result of Job's sin yet rather, the result of his family members. Zophar claims that Job's suffering is the result of great sin and also should have been much worse similarly to Eliphaz and Bildad. Where is the empathy and the humanity in Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar's accusations? Job's friends blame him for suffering beyond his control. Eventually, a fourth individual, Elihu, provides his more distinct (yet still fallacious) concerns regarding Job's suffering and focuses on Job's reaction to the suffering that God has willingly allowed him to undergo. Elihu shames Job for claiming that he is innocent and without sin.

queering job

In a majority of Evangelical traditional beliefs, queer attraction is explained away as a trial given by God to prove one's dedication to him rather than sin. As a child, my queer experience of suffering felt similar to Job's suffering in the sense that neither instances of suffering seemed to be deserved. Why were the prayers to *not* be attracted to men never answered? *Where* was my overcoming? If Job could overcome, so could I, right?

In my upbringing, queer attraction was always discussed as if it were one of the most evil sins. There is a reason that drag queens are villainized by Evangelicals despite high Evangelical divorce rates that are vastly overlooked. White, straight, cisgender people cannot be the villain of their own religion, but queer individuals can easily be made out to be villains because they are in

the minority. Certainly, I felt like a villain although I never chose to be. I remember wondering why there were no instances of individuals overcoming queerness within the Bible. If my sexuality was to be overcome for the sake of liberation from suffering, why did the Bible not provide a framework for this specific liberation? Years of self-denial of my sexuality led me to a place of emotional defeat and confusion. Job experienced an overcoming of suffering that led to unification with his God. *Where* was my overcoming? The idea of God felt more distant than ever. I gained no liberation from queerness because of any notion of God. Only beyond Evangelical boundaries did I achieve liberation. Hating myself for a “choice” to be attracted to men that I never made was a part of my suffering. Loss of family, good health, and financial stability were a part of my loss and suffering as well. My liberation is Job’s liberation inverted. My queer liberation is away from any God.

conversion therapy

To accurately convey the extent in which the Jobian suffering and liberation commonplace can be related to the conversion therapy experiences of suffering and liberation, this work will begin by defining the various manifestations of conversion therapy in the United States, as well as outlining a history of conversion therapy in the United States including a detailed account of prominent leaders within the movement, the organizations in which they are or were involved, and the present-day legal and socio-political circumstances that anti-conversion therapy advocacy faces today. Comprehending the history and extent of the harms of conversion therapy will further strengthen this study’s effort to increase the reader’s attention toward how inverting biblical symbols for queer intentions can be cathartic to queer individuals who have been harmed by systemic oppression hidden within the dogma of Evangelical “love.”

Conversion therapy encompasses what the American Psychological Association categorizes as Sexual Orientation Change Efforts (SOCE) and Gender Identity Change Efforts (GICE). SOCE in the United States describes:

“... methods based on psychotherapeutic techniques and theories (e.g., behavioral therapy, psychoanalysis, medical approaches) and religious and spiritual approaches (e.g., prayer, Bible study) that aim to change a person’s same-sex sexual orientation to other-sex orientation (e.g., gay to straight), regardless of whether mental health professionals or lay individuals (including religious professionals, religious leaders, social groups, and other lay networks, such as self-help groups) are involved.” (Haldeman 20)

Contrasting SOCE, GICE is described as “a variety of practices enacted by health care practitioners and others (often religious counselors) with the ultimate goal of altering gender identity or gender expression to conform with social norms for gender identification and expression (qtd. In Haldeman 52).

More thoroughly defining conversion therapy, in practice, “therapeutic” approaches vary greatly. In brief summary of some of the approaches that are taken, according to the American Psychological Association:

“[t]he techniques therapists have used to try to change sexual orientation and gender identity include inducing nausea, vomiting, or paralysis while showing the patient homoerotic images; providing electric shocks; having the individual snap an elastic band around the wrist when aroused by same-sex erotic images or thoughts; using shame to create aversion to same-sex attractions; orgasmic reconditioning; and satiation therapy. Other techniques include trying to make patients’ behavior more stereotypically feminine or masculine, teaching heterosexual dating skills, using hypnosis to try to redirect desires and arousal, and other techniques—all based on the scientifically discredited premise that being LGBT is a defect or disorder (Facts).

In consideration of these various techniques for conversion, it is vital to acknowledge and advocate against the practice of conversion therapy. SOCE and GICE have been prominent in the United States for decades and are still practiced today—“nearly 700,000 people have undergone some form of SOCE, and nearly 20,000 minors will be subject to conversion therapy in the 30 states that do not currently prohibit the practice” (Haldeman 20). Research shows that lesbian, gay, and bisexual young adults who reported higher levels of family rejection [such as conversion therapy] during adolescence were more than eight times more likely to report having attempted suicide, more than five times more likely to report high levels of depression, more than three times more likely to use illegal drugs, and more than three times more likely to report having engaged in unprotected sexual intercourse compared with peers from families that reported no or low levels of family rejection (Facts).

Considering these harms, anti-conversion therapy organizations such as *Born Perfect*, have sought to end the practice, but much work is still to be done to achieve the goal of a nationwide ban. Perhaps the oppressive mindsets that led to decades of the practice taking place will take further decades upon decades to decrease in public discourse. This work will certainly be the result of countless individuals devoted to bringing awareness to as well creating tangible change. The goal of this project is to increase awareness of conversion therapy from a narrative perspective—to help to humanize those 700,000 lives harmed by the practice—to empower queer lives by claiming biblical symbols traditionally weaponized against queer existence to alternatively entail brand new meaning that hopes to educate others in regard to the turmoil of queerness amidst Evangelical communities.

three liberations

Queering the Bible in this project is specifically an act of defiance against the great extent of religious dogma that has led to the dehumanizing practices of conversion therapy. In even more specific regard to queering the Bible, this analysis will focus on the great material, relational, and physical loss of Job and how his loss and eventual unification with his God can be inverted to instead entail a liberation and unification with oneself that exists in solitude—away from destructive communities and any notions of religion. This analysis will begin its depiction of the inversion of biblical symbols by first emphasizing Garrard Conley’s liberation in *Boy Erased*. Specifically, the thesis focuses on this memoir because of its suggested notions of likened experiences between Job and Conley, because of its societal prominence as one of very few conversion therapy memoirs published, and also, because this conversion therapy memoir has been turned into a major motion film.

Following the analysis of *Boy Erased*, I will consider Emily Danforth’s *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* and specifically, why works of fiction based in thorough and ethical research (such as this novel) also manifest the queering of Jobian suffering. Furthermore, this work will showcase this fictional conversion therapy narrative to convey how suffering leading to eventual liberation within fiction can also lead to substantially increased awareness of the damages of conversion therapy as well closure for queer individuals who relate with the experiences described within the novel’s contents.

Following a consideration of *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* and fiction’s role in the queering of biblical symbols for the sake of increased liberation from Evangelicalism, this analysis will more dramatically shift outside of a traditional literary perspective—I will describe my personal stake in this project by means of a chronological account of the harms of strict

Evangelicalism's role throughout my own queer experience. This creative nonfiction work will be focused on considering the lens of Jobian suffering in my own life as a means of personal catharsis and also to display the role that *Boy Erased* played in the realization of my coming out journey despite pressure to conform to an impossible sexual orientation. Considering memoir, fiction, and biographical accounts of Evangelical-based trauma diversifies the analytical lens that is queering biblical symbols to multiple genres, which in turn, can lead to increased awareness of the harms of Evangelicalism and conversion therapy throughout different reader contexts.

BOY ERASED

In *Boy Erased*, Garrard Conley's bestselling 2015 memoir, *Boy Erased*, Conley recalls his conversion therapy experience. Conley was raised in Milligan Ridge, Arkansas. His father was in the memoir (and still is) Missionary Baptist pastor at The Bridge Missionary Baptist Church. His mother, though once a supporter of conversion therapy, is now an ally in advocating against the practice. As the Book of Job is concerned with the unprecedented loss of Job's family, property, and health, *Boy Erased* is concerned with the degradation of Conley's family relations and mental health as a result of being attracted to men and furthermore, attending Love In Action (LIA)—once one of America's most prominent conversion therapy programs. While attending, Conley experiences an alarming extent of institutionalized emotional manipulation and spiritual abuse but eventually gathers the emotional strength and courage needed to defy the confines of the truly impossible dogma of the conversion program. In his defiance, Conley displays immense resilience by leaving behind not only the condemning beliefs of Evangelicalism but also the entire community that he previously yearned so strongly to find acceptance and belonging within.

The commonplace of Jobian suffering is conveyed by Conley early-on within his memoir when he details an instance where he is assigned the task of leading a Bible Study with the goal of explaining the theme of theodicy—or the concept of the Evangelical God's prevailing goodness amidst evil—in the Book of Job. At the Bible Study, Conley's father as well as additional devout Missionary Baptists expect Conley to spew holy profundity concerning Job, yet the isolating pressures of such a hefty expectation cause him to lose his train of thought altogether. Conley recalls having been frozen in complicated thought and, from forty years later,

can acknowledge what he meant to say in those moments—“What I was trying to say seemed impossible and too complicated for words. When everything went wrong in Job’s life, when he lost his wife and two children and all of his livestock to a bet between God and Satan, his friends could only think to ask him what he did wrong, why he deserved God’s punishment. To them, this seemed the only explanation. “But what happened when good things happened to bad people or vice versa?” (49).

In discussion of Conley’s eventual conversion therapy experience taking place later on in the narrative, he pondered this classic existential question as he was exposed to the practice. If the Evangelical God is truly omniscient, why did God realistically need proof of Job’s loyalty? Considering this same omniscience, I believe that any God should have realized that Conley and countless others would attempt to convert their sexual orientations unsuccessfully. In a Christian hermeneutic regarding suffering, “suffering” is scripturally imposed as the very entity that brings one closer to their God. Thematically, the story of Job is utilized to convey that following the Evangelical God’s plan for suffering brings about restoration within one’s life. Contrarily, for Garrard and many others who have been exposed to conversion therapy, promised restoration is often intercepted by depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicidal ideation (“Bans By U.S. State”)—debilitating confusion as a result of isolated devotion to converting oneself to heterosexuality unsuccessfully. If the suffering of queer people—as they yearn for holy restoration by means of conversion therapy—is the evangelical God’s justification for their liberation, why is conversion therapy notably unsuccessful?

How could Conley realistically achieve a similar overcoming of suffering to Job—restored, closer to God—considering he earnestly tried to alter his attraction in therapy yet could not? Conley was ultimately not converted from his homoerotic desire as he originally hoped, but

his memoir inverts the liberation that Job experiences within the Jobian restoration story. Contrasting Job, instead of liberation with God, conversion therapy ironically brings about Conley's liberation from and rejection of the concept of God as well as the entwinements of familial faith tradition that the practice unsuccessfully sought to further strengthen.

In a survey of scholars who have reviewed Conley's memoir, none address Conley's allusion to Job. Greenwell's analysis emphasizes the surprisingly non-demonized role of Conley's parents, further assisting the reader in comprehending that Conley does not detest his parents even considering their prejudice but instead optimistically yearns for their empathy and understanding (72). Furthermore, Daum, Schlichenmeyer, "*BOY ERASED* A Memoir", Cart, Condran, "On the Shelf," and Lewontin address similar themes within Conley's text. Several of these scholars/works highlight Conley's experiences concisely, yet they do not necessarily engage with Conley's text beyond its more universal themes. Nonetheless, their emphasis of Conley's work is appreciated and important to helping others access his story. Possible reasoning for this literary gap may be that Conley elaborates upon *Boy Erased's* commonplace of Jobian suffering slightly more intentionally in post-publication within the first episode of his *UnErased: the History of Conversion Therapy in America* podcast, entitled "Garrard and the Story of Job," which released two years after his memoir's publication. However, even Conley's podcast episode does not fully acknowledge the Jobian suffering theme that persists throughout the entire narrative, and the intention of this essay is to expand upon this thematic relation. Furthermore, although existing scholarly reviews do not analyze the commonplace of Jobian suffering in *Boy Erased* specifically, adjacent research unassociated with Conley's memoir more generally collates Jobian suffering with queer identity struggles as this study will demonstrate.

One source likening queer identity struggles to Jobian suffering is “A Theology of Protest: Christian Responses to the Book of Job and the AIDS Crisis,” which deconstructs fundamentalist readings of Job specifically by revealing that in response to the crisis, “conservative Christians [perceived queer suffering as a tool or means for repentance and moral justice and/or believed that the conservative hermeneutic of suffering entailed a total unwavering confidence in the sovereignty and wisdom of God]. This work’s perspective benefits my analysis by elaborating upon a notable pillar of Missionary Baptist and more broadly, Evangelical faith—the theology of suffering for the sake of refinement and restoration. As “A Theology of Protest” conveys, conservative Evangelical theology explains away innate homoerotic desire as a mere vehicle for one to ultimately bolster one’s devotion to the Evangelical God. Regarding the AIDS crisis in the 80s, Evangelicals perceived what was then an incredibly lethal disease as holy punishment for the sake of eventual repentance. The repentance of Evangelicals can be applied more broadly to any who experience homoerotic attraction. “A Theology of Protest” provides perspective that also implies that Evangelicals believe experiencing homoerotic desire is a form of suffering itself also for the sake of repentance toward a heteronormative experience. In regard to Conley’s conversion therapy experience, he suffers by losing his family, balanced mental health, and sense of identity but does not become heterosexual regardless. Conley does not find restoration by means of repentance or suffering because he is gay. The conservative belief suggesting holy justification for queer suffering allows no room for the acknowledgement of deeply-rooted homophobic prejudice among heterosexuals, nor does it recognize that for queer individuals, queer suffering for the sake of heterosexual restoration oppresses and damages family relations as well as self-perception rather than liberate and heal.

“A Theology of Protest” suggests an alternative, queered reading of ‘Job’ that in contrast to the queer-damning interpretation of Evangelicals, highlights the importance of empathetically understanding individual queer suffering experiences related to sexual and/or gender identity. While “A Theology of Protest” successfully calls for contemporary, inclusive perspective regarding how the Book of Job should be read in relation to queer suffering, it does not elaborate expansively upon the specific instances of the queer suffering—like conversion therapy—that can be related. “A Theology of Protest” does briefly mention conversion therapy as an instance of queer suffering likened to Job.

Another view of queer identity struggles and Jobian suffering is Joseph Rogers. He proposes that queering ‘Job’ by means of daringly relating the text to gay sadomasochism is more liberating—in sheer defiance itself—for queer audiences than solely reading Job as a queer liberationist text (4). While this article offers an original yet bold interpretation of the Book of Job, Rogers undermines the universalistic narrative of Job by suggesting that the narrative cannot be inverted to be substantially liberating for queer individuals in itself without defiant queer allegory—comparison to gay sadomasochism. A modification of Rogers’s perspective, I believe that Jobian suffering in *Boy Erased* is an effective commonplace even without explicitly obscene allegory. Liberation from the spiritual abuse of conversion therapy arrives. Jobian suffering is inverted to result in queer liberation instead of hetero-holy sanctification.

Furthering Conley’s inversion of Jobian suffering portrayed in his interpretive mishaps at a Bible study, Conley’s traumatic experience while attending Love in Action and the spiritually isolating circumstances of the conversion program’s methodology perpetuate the Jobian allegory previously established. Upon admittance to the program, Conley is first subjected to the forced forfeiting of his belongings. In my likening Conley to Jobian narrative where Job loses his

livestock, servants, and children to external causes for the sake of unknowingly proving his faithfulness to his God, Conley loses a potential reality wherein he is allowed to express his own queerness—a conversion program requirement states that he must forfeit any entity even slightly suggestive of a homosexual identity. Specifically, the Love in Action handbook described within *Boy Erased* demands:

We want to encourage each client, male and female, by affirming your gender identity. We also want each client to pursue integrity in all his/her actions and appearances. Therefore, any belongings, appearances, clothing, actions or humor that might connect you to an inappropriate past are excluded from the program. These hindrances are called False Images (FI). FI behavior may include hyper-masculinity, seductive clothing, mannish/boyish attire (on women), excessive jewelry (on men), and “campy” or gay/lesbian behavior and talk. (15)

It is here that Conley experiences loss before he physically forfeits a single item. Love in Action’s extreme regulation of any expression of queerness becomes Conley’s more significant initial loss (in comparison to his actual forfeiture of various items) likened to Job’s loss. Conley’s loss his initial attempt—by means of self-denial—to prove faithfulness to his God as Job similarly sought to prove loyalty.

Job is initially characterized as a “blameless” and “upright” man (1.8) whereas in Conley’s instance, he is similarly *blameless* and *upright* in the sense that, living within the framework of heteronormative Evangelical expectation, he attempted to pursue a future version of self that would be purified from homoerotic desire. Conley and Job experience immense loss within the beginnings of their narratives, yet these losses—whether livestock and children, or the loss of the potential for queer expression—are only the beginning of increasingly invasive loss experienced as these various narratives develop.

After Job loses his livestock, servants, and children, he is further tested for faithfulness to his God by means of the loss of his health. The biblical text conveys that “Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and struck Job with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head” (2.7). Here, Satan even more attentively yearns for Job to falter in his loyalty to his God, and Job’s wife amplifies the temptation for Job to express frustration toward his God—”Then his wife said to him, ‘Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die’” (2.9)—yet Job reprimands his wife for this suggestion and resists “sinning with his lips” (2.10). Conley’s loss of health comparable to Job’s is the woeful, emotionally denigrating practices of the conversion program. As previously expressed, depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicidal ideation are tragic results of these practices (“Bans By U.S. State”), but what specific practice does Conley textually convey that implies his own declining mental health throughout the course of his time at Love in Action? Conley’s emotional dysregulation is perhaps the most heightened within his interactions with John Smid, the director of Love In Action. Smid interrogates Conley in regard to his relationship with his father, hoping that some profound acknowledgement of an assumed innate hatred toward his father might help him pinpoint a defined cause for homoerotic desire. Yet, Conley defies Smid’s expectations regarding anger toward his father—”I’m not angry.’ I said. ‘I don’t understand why I have to be angry’” (323).

Nonetheless, another Love In Action leader interjects: “‘You’re angry, but you’re not showing it. You’re keeping all of it hidden away, but we can see it’” (323). In this interrogation, Conley’s true feelings are not made to be important—as if a template for interrogating queer kids was used on Conley and had maybe even been used on others. Conley is confident that he does not hate his father, yet Love in Action insists that this must be his experience. Love in Action further insists that this innate hatred must be central to Conley’s homoerotic desire. How else

could homoerotic desire begin after all? Conley is deeply disturbed as he feels tears begin to rise (324). Love in Action's failure to understand Conley's specific relationship with his father buries how he authentically feels toward his father, and with this theft of his opportunity to feel, his mental health is compromised. He is devastated by the idea that he is expected to hate his father yet does not, which rather suddenly solidifies the perception that he needs to leave Love in Action's facilities immediately. Similar to the Jobian narrative, wherein Job's wife sought to tempt Job to express anger toward his God when such emotion did not truly exist, Conley is not truly angry at his father, despite Love In Action's attempts to reframe his father-son relationship.

The fully actualized queer inversion of the Jobian narrative takes place as soon as Conley exits the program altogether. It is then and thereafter that Conley is allowed to finally contemplate the possibility of liberation from the holy bounds of a religion characterized by the repression of his sexual orientation. Over the portion of the Book of Job remaining to be discussed, Job is further tested by his God and is spiritually abused by his friends who claim that he withholds some level of hidden sin that explained the cause for his suffering—also similar to Love in Action's assumption that Conley secretly detested his father. Job's suffering leads him to eventually reveal skepticism regarding why his God would allow such misfortune in his life. His God rebukes him for this mistrust, Job repents, and eventually his God grants him holy restoration wherein he regains his fortunes far beyond the extent of his wealth prior to the loss at the beginning of the narrative. Job is liberated to a restored personhood blessed by his God.

Conley's exit from conversion therapy inverts this Jobian liberation within the end of his memoir. Contrasting the Book of Job, Conley's repentance is not realized for the sake of any God but rather redirected toward himself. His eventual acceptance of his queer identity represents his form of repentance—forgiving himself for denying himself authenticity—he had

repressed his identity so adamantly for his entire life, and he shifted his perspective by leaving conversion therapy behind. Conley could no longer allow doctrine to justify a dismissal of authentic feeling and experience. Furthermore, now he could finally achieve liberation from the pressures of Evangelicalism entwined with community. If *Love in Action* was especially designed for the conversion of individuals attracted to the same sex, yet even their therapeutic approach could not accurately comprehend Conley's sexuality, perhaps Evangelicalism's condemnation of homoerotic desire was not as universally authoritative as Conley's faith tradition had convinced him to believe. The inconsistency of the Evangelical-based program allowed Conley the freedom to finally deconstruct Evangelicalism's infiltration into his identity itself. This newfound freedom is actualized in Conley's inverted liberation of Jobian suffering for the sake of queer acceptance.

When I read *Boy Erased* for the first time, I was distraught, angry, and confused concerning my own feelings toward hoping to be right with God yet also wanting to be true to my queerness. Yet out of my confusion and anger came tangible action. I knew that I could not repress my identity for much longer. Conley's memoir is the force that I needed to push me out of Evangelicalism, so ultimately, I was incredibly empowered to live authentically as a result. Conley's inversion of Jobian suffering is empowering to readers like me who have sought desperately to force the repression of their sexual orientation for the sake of aligning with biblical tradition. In the traditional usage of themes such as suffering alongside eventual restoration within Job, these themes damage queer people when applied toward misconstrued hope for conversion—the holy restoration hoped for never arrives. Only frustration thrives as a result of queer sexual desire perpetually defying Evangelical expectation. Furthermore, spiritual abuse thrives by means of the theologically misaligned application of these themes toward a

queer experience: Evangelicals may try to convince queer individuals to believe that their attraction to the same sex is only temporary—a mere spiritual test like Job’s, designed in order for queer lives to prove their faithfulness to the Evangelical God. Considering this Evangelical testing however, how could even Love In Action’s leader, Smid, who spiritually manipulated queer individuals throughout his program, promising a cure to homosexuality—how could even he fail to pass this spiritual test demanding heterosexuality? Today, Smid is married to a man. The “conversion” promised by his program never truly arrived even within his own life, and he regrets ever playing a role in providing it to others.

Smid perpetuated heteronormativity in the lives of all those queer lives that he damaged within Love In Action. Conley’s liberation was defyingly found by the means of liberation from Smid’s program. Considering this liberation, this essay concludes by inquiring: what socio-political, queer empowerment could come by the means of more queer inversion of biblical themes? What could this biblical inversion such as Conley’s accomplish for the sake of banning the conversion practice? In a nation where conversion therapy is only illegal in twenty states (“Bans By U.S. State”), what if more of those queer lives still subjected to harmful Evangelical expectations could achieve liberation from such dogma because of the relatability yet distinct inversion of biblical themes—such as Jobian suffering—for the ironic sake of empowering queer individuals to embrace their attraction authentically?

Boy Erased inverts a narrative of Jobian suffering historically attributed to conclude with holy refinement to instead free queer lives to live out their sexuality most authentically—to achieve empowering liberation from damaging theology cornerstoned in the marginalization of queer individuals. Perhaps with an increased amount of literature such as Conley’s—queer literature centered around the inversion of biblical themes to reflect queer becoming—perhaps

more queer individuals might finally gain the courage unfairly yet realistically required of them in order for them to separate themselves from religious tradition that provides no legitimate theological relief for an individual attracted to the same sex. Perhaps narratives like *Boy Erased*, where a queer soul suffers to embrace authentic identity yet eventually overcomes, attaining his own queer refinement in an act of juxtaposing the holy refinement of Job—perhaps more narratives likened to the queer-liberatory inversion of *Boy Erased* could crumble the theological and familial strongholds of Evangelical homophobia for countless lives both socio-politically and interpersonally.

THE MISEDUCATION OF CAMERON POST

With a comprehension of Jobian suffering and inverted queer liberation showcased in Garrard Conley's memoir, *Boy Erased*, this analysis will next consider Emily Danforth's *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* and specifically, why works of fiction based in thorough and ethical research (such as this novel) also manifest the queer commonplace of Jobian suffering. Published in 2012—before *Boy Erased*—*The Miseducation of Cameron Post* is written by queer author, Emily Danforth. Danforth herself did not ever attend conversion therapy. In an interview with *Mic*, she elaborates upon her own experience:

I did not, myself, go to conversion therapy, but I did grow up Christian and then for a few years in high school sort of considered myself an Evangelical in rural Montana. So I was in the youth group, I was in the prayer group and I was queer. I was a closeted queer kid. So I did spend a lot of time thinking about how hopefully God would help me rid this thing from myself. So there are definitely autobiographical elements [in the novel], but I've always been really careful to say I did not go to conversion therapy. I think that's important to make clear (Danforth)

Realizing Danforth's outside perspective of conversion therapy is vital to a preliminary understanding of her novel's place within the limited array of published conversion therapy narratives that are widely accessible. Although Danforth did not ever attend conversion with the hope to convert to heterosexual identity, she did immerse herself within the experience of conversion therapy in order to develop an accurate understanding. In an act of limited immersion journalism, Danforth posed as someone seeking out sexual identity conversion and attended an in-person meeting featuring a presentation based on a book that was written by one of the Exodus International authors (Sittenfeld). It is important to note that Exodus International is the

‘umbrella’ organization behind Love in Action, the conversion therapy program that Garrard Conley attended. For Danforth, although she never attended a live-in conversion therapy long-term (Danforth) she committed herself to the most accurate depiction of conversion therapy that she realistically could. This chapter will uncover the role of one instance of fiction that depicts traumatic real-life scenarios—including some of its downfalls—with the specific goal of showcasing how ethically-researched conversion therapy-focused fictional narratives can empower queer individuals living amidst or recovering from life scenarios of Evangelical oppression to eventually find a place of self-liberation.

The Miseducation of Cameron Post is initially set in 1989 Miles City, Montana. Quickly into the novel, 12-year old Cameron Post begins experimenting with her sexuality with her friend, Irene. Encountering shocking loss, Cameron loses both of her parents in a car wreck. It is during this sudden trauma that the Jobian commonplace of queer suffering seems to begin occurring within Cameron’s character. Although this loss is not linked necessarily to queer suffering directly, Cameron is forced to live with her conservative Aunt Ruth. Similar to Job’s experience with loss, a queer character faces not only the undeserved loss of her parents but also undergoes difficulties as a result of discovering elements of her own queerness in a time when her social environment is not conducive to exploring sexuality beyond heteronormative tradition.

In the events that lead Cameron to eventually attend conversion therapy, Cameron and another teenage girl, Coley, kiss and have sex, and this leads Cameron to a pandemonium of both contradicting and isolating emotions. Reflecting upon her first sexual experience is comparable to Jobian suffering in the sense Cameron possesses a great deal of dedication to Coley throughout Coley’s sudden withdrawal from their typical social interactions, yet Cameron also expresses anger because of this turn in the dynamic of their relationship. Like Job’s dedication

yet anger with God, Cameron is dedicated to yet angry about the one individual who helped her discover more depth regarding her own queerness. Also like Job, Cameron is subjected to confusion in this pivotal realization of her own sexuality. Her parents are gone—her aunt certainly is not a voice of reason that could help her process new queer love and loss. By the dismissal of queer suffering by Evangelical beliefs and by the loss of her family, Cameron’s queer suffering is embodied by sexual confusion and queer angst misunderstood.

Like Cameron and also like Garrard, Job’s cries for salvation from his own suffering are consistently ignored until his eventual liberation with his God at the end of his narrative. In his suffering, Job cries out in angst, “Oh that my grief were thoroughly weighed, and my calamity laid in the balances together. For now it would be heavier than the sand of the sea: therefore my words are swallowed up” (King James Bible, Job 6.2-3). Job cries out in desperation for his God’s intervention, yet he met with silent disregard. His vocal angst amidst silent disregard for his suffering is comparable to the Cameron’s suffering as she contemplates her own contradicting feelings for Coley. Coley considers her own contradicting thoughts, internally conveying to herself, “I love Coley Taylor. I’m pissed at Coley Taylor. I fucked Coley Taylor. Coley Taylor fucked with my head” (Danforth 236). Her suffering in this moment is not vocalized as Job’s is, but she embodies the commonplace of his suffering by suffering in silence within a community that cannot adequately support her as she seeks to logically reason a new realization of queer infatuation and relational longing.

Cameron’s isolation seems to accurately represent a common queer teenage experience of sexuality in the United States, which is one of many important testaments to the importance of conversion therapy narratives highlighted throughout this analysis. Sexuality itself is perplexing to comprehend as a teenager even for heterosexuals whose attractions are perpetually reinforced

by majority society, so for Cameron, in the care of her Evangelical aunt, the eventual loss of relational connection with Coley is emotionally condemning. To make matters more severe, like Job, Cameron's suffering only worsens. Coley feels guilt for her actions and informs Aunt Ruth of their sexual experience, greatly disturbing the course of Cameron's queerness far beyond their experience of and eventual loss of each other.

In Job, there is the moral intervention made by his friends who, of course, fail to comprehend the root of his suffering. For Conley, his family—especially his dad—lacks the willingness and much more deeply, the social framework concerning who a 'queer' person genuinely is beyond the limited taboos that Evangelicalism conveys. Cameron's experience with her Aunt Ruth is eerily similar to Conley's—almost so much so that the living-room intervention, the questioning of one's queerness seem like a trope (but an accurate trope). Cameron's moral intervention consists of her aunt and Pastor Crawford explaining their discovery of her and Coley's sexual experimentation, Crawford continues describing the social atmosphere in which Cameron is a part of is unhealthy for her and that she would benefit from a change (Danforth 247)—*benefit*, of course, meaning to embody refinement toward a more ideal Evangelical image.

Cameron's displacement as a queer individual intensifies when she is sent to a conversion therapy program called God's Promise wherein she is subjected to strict rules and guidelines created with the unsuccessful purpose of converting homosexual desire to heterosexual desire. If Job is a story of undeserved, unwelcomed struggling for the sake of holy refinement amidst a vain and absent God, God's Promise is a program based in aligned logic—it is a place of suffering for the sake of what the program pamphlet's citing of Ephesians 2:22-24 conveys:

being “made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Danforth 252).

Eventually, Cameron escapes God’s Promise after undergoing conversion therapy and second-hand trauma at the expense of other individuals within the program. Her suffering was a sentence—a ruthless intervention that she never truly needed.

Evangelicalism seems to perceive suffering as the means of increased Godliness, but what if suffering does not accomplish this goal? Why must queer suffering be the goal of so many heterosexual Evangelicals? What does this goal accomplish beyond queer turmoil including mental health crises and isolation? I have tried so many times to explain to Evangelicals what it like feels to be queer—how beyond my control it is to stop being attracted to one gender and force myself to be attracted to another. Why must setting aside the Bible and empathetically listening to a story of queer suffering—*without* intentions to convert—impossible for Evangelical? Why do they point to my queerness as a justification for canceling out my humanity?

Cameron faces the pain of lived queerness within a conservative culture, an aunt who does not empathize with her humanity, and two deceased parents—she will never know whether they would have accepted her queerness or not and whether or not they would have sent her to God’s Promise like Aunt Ruth had, and this contemplation is actually the contents of the novel’s conclusion.

In the final moments of the novel, Cameron visits Quake Lake, the lake that her parents had died in as a result of their car crash. She swims into the water and speaks into the open, speaking out to her dead parents about the emotional closure she never received between her, her parents, and her queerness. Cameron is unsure of what the full extent of her own queer liberation

will be after the events of the novel: She mentions that she “does not know what will happen when she reaches the shore” (469). Yet as she swims back, she comprehends the grandeur of the beauty beyond the shore itself—“there was a fire waiting. And there was a little meal laid out on a blanket. And there was a whole world beyond that shoreline, beyond the forest, beyond the knuckle mountains, beyond, beyond, beyond, not beneath the surface at all, but beyond and waiting” (470). This ending implies optimism and hope—queer liberation, healing from the trauma of conversion therapy and the loss of her parents I would arrive. She could be openly queer. Conservative ideology, her Aunt Ruth’s skepticism and lack of care did not reflect *every* mindset. Cameron could eventually find freedom within her own queerness—her own inverted queer liberation apart from Evangelicalism.

This project seeks to bring attention toward several instances of how exactly the Evangelical hermeneutic regarding suffering is the antithesis of common queer experiences with religion. The refinement toward righteousness and holiness with the Evangelical God is not achieved by strict rules and guidelines within Cameron’s narrative. Cameron does not discover refinement with the Evangelical God by means of barred communication with individuals outside of the program as such a rule implies within the pamphlet (252). Evangelical obsession with the dangers of secular influence seems almost a testament to how deeply based in fear their religious understanding is. Rather than seek to listen and understand the suffering of individuals encountering intrapersonal conflict regarding their own minority sexuality (certainly not a shared experience with heterosexual individuals), Evangelical tradition unhelpfully attempts to increase regulation, control, and censorship of queer pondering altogether—intensifying queer suffering to the point that rules, regulations, and Evangelical cultural immersion become so socially suffering that queer individuals conform but certainly never truly convert.

The Miseducation of Cameron Post conveys conversion therapy survival by means of fiction—if only fiction such as this could end up in the hands of Evangelicals—if only they would be willing to listen to Cameron’s grief. Conley’s conversion therapy story is one of very few published memoirs about conversion therapy—properly researched realistic fiction about conversion therapy helps expand the possibility of an education about the dangers of conversion therapy.

RAINBOW MEGACHURCH

I was a worship leader, but my pastor did not know my name. Standing backstage before the end of John Lindell’s sermon, I quarreled with myself—“I like men and no one in this sanctuary of 3,000 *Evangelical Christians* know that one of James River Church’s worship leaders likes men.” Seconds later, it was time to walk back out on stage and end the service with song. Hands lifted high, black skinny jeans, oversized t-shirt, white tennis shoes, LED screen glowing, microphone in hand:

Jesus
Our redemption
Our salvation
Is in his blood (Hillsong UNITED)

“Good Grace” echoed until mobs of people came forward to be saved. I already believed in Jesus Christ. I also believed that I wanted another man to love me.

Where was my salvation? *Jesus* was my life. Yet, my queerness was inescapably *my life*, too. How long did I need to suffer against queer attraction before my no-longer-gay liberation arrived? How long did I need to keep my attraction to men a secret before being attracted to men was no longer my struggle at all? When could I achieve holy liberation from suffering, like Job?

When I think about my own journey through denying, desperately yearning to alter, and eventually, genuinely embracing my own queerness and all of its complexities removed from the Evangelical potluck-of-regurgitated-dogma that I spent the first twenty years of my life immersed within, I could never lose sight of myself as the curious and impressionable young mind who once perceived Job to be the utmost of biblical heroes. In response to Job struggling

yet achieving his own holy liberation, I too felt hope that perhaps my attraction (if changed) could progress into one of God's liberatory "sin success stories" that I would often hear from the pulpit. Maybe—I thought as a teenager simultaneously discovering 'Born this Way' while working on the family farm—maybe, my homosexuality was merely a sin to overcome for the sake of embodying an easy-to-follow personal narrative that could be made parallel to the liberation account of the Bible. Maybe, however, my narrative of *not being gay anymore* was a narrative for Evangelicals to merely capitalize off of—a source of fuel for the sake of proving why and how all queer bodies should repent. Maybe the struggle of *queer attraction* held holy purpose though—if only I could repent and find God enough.

Job struggled—a lot. Job overcame. He was reunited with his God. I was determined to manifest the same reality as I yearned to ignore innate queer attraction that was assuredly inescapable. The worst pain of this inescapable attraction was the longing. I knew that I liked men, and liking men was all I had ever known. I think that I always knew that liking men was never going away. I could shapeshift to fit enough within Evangelical environments, and I could repress the way that I felt for long periods of time even, but being attracted to men always came back. I hated that my queerness would not stay away. I questioned my place in leading worship at all, and I told myself that keeping my secret would send me to hell. Yet I tried with everything within me to write my own *once gay* story—to achieve liberation from the suffering of liking men. As I sought to fabricate a parallel experience with Job, similar to the conversion therapy narratives analyzed throughout this project, I discovered no parallels. Rather, I found *congruence*—liberation in my own, independent direction, crossing ways and drifting away from the ideologies of my faith.

As a teenager, I remember telling my father that I felt I related with Job because I “struggled” with my sexuality (this is typical Evangelical jargon). “Struggling” with sin was commonly discussed among me and my friends. Mostly, we struggled with the “temptation” of sex. We were teenagers. We also knew that we needed to save ourselves for marriage. As a queer boy, I did not know what marriage would even look like for me. It did not seem possible.

When I told my father that I related with Job because I “struggled” with my sexuality, he responded by explaining that he had read Job countless times and that I should not act as if I knew the book well. I was probably thirteen years old, yet I knew that Job’s narrative was meaningful and relevant to my shamed feelings for men that I so earnestly wanted to avoid. For my entire adolescent life, my queerness felt like a curse. I felt that Job was not understood by any voice of reason around him. I also did not feel heard or understood by my family. Certainly, I did not feel heard or consistently understood by any notion of Godly intervention.

I have never explicitly compiled my own journey of queerness until now, but as a result of what I have learned from my own experiences exiting the church, and because of the transparent and alarming conversion therapy experiences of Garrard Conley (that truly changed the direction of my entire life), this thesis is written to advocate for any person who has experienced what I know to be one of the most cruel, dehumanizing manifestations of Evangelical thought—conversion therapy. I plead for tangible change that will lead to the liberation of queer individuals trapped within the grips of this monstrous product of Evangelicalism. The next portion of this work will convey the full extent of my own personal passion behind this project—this is my own personal stake.

child

Named after my mother, the “Shelly Farms” are located in Rogersville, Missouri. The population was 2,250 when I was six years old and newly beginning school at Logan-Rogersville Primary School. My experiences of early childhood in Rogersville are in very obvious ways (when I reflect upon my upbringing as a whole) the most seamless, light-hearted tidbits of family and small-town community that I remember. While acknowledging that countless moments in this time were beautiful, familial tension in this time began to present itself in subtle, less obvious-in-the-moment facets of life.

My father often made it known to me that I possessed notably stubborn and rebellious character. Regarding this apparent nature, a close religious-zealot-of-a-friend of his advised him (again, when I was approximately six-years-old) that if he did not halt my stubborn disposition, I would eventually progress into an uncontrollable teenager. In retrospect, perhaps it was my father’s initial disciplinary overextension that led to later years of mistrust rather than my own uncontrollability. It is peculiar that Job’s innocence was not trusted by those who claimed to love him.

I have been drawn to the arts for as long as I can remember. Throughout early childhood, my father eagerly supported my desires to pursue singing, theater, acting, and even dance. However, as I sought to become increasingly more involved in the arts, my father simultaneously forced me to play basketball. This was a damning decision. This was his disciplinary overextension at work. My team and coaches absolutely knew that I did not want to be at basketball practice. Yet, my father stood his ground even when I begged him to allow me to stop playing.

“Young boys need to play sports in order for their masculinity to develop correctly,” he would often say.

Meanwhile, I danced down the basketball court like the ballerina that I greenly envisioned in my thoughts then—a young child simply acting according to his passion rather than a desire to upset anyone beyond himself. Zero points were scored. Masculinity did not flourish. It is peculiar that Job’s adversity was blamed on him *despite his innocence*.

My ‘stubborn disposition’ was not the result of bad character or intentions to dishonor my father. I loved my father. Yet, when my father forced me to play sports, my perception of masculinity developed into an entity that became increasingly more volatile. Certainly no child is perfect. But in regard to my love for the arts and my dislike of sports, I was innocent. Earnestly, I did not enjoy the game nor did I enjoy the company of my other male teammates. When I danced down the basketball court, when my wrists were limp with the hopes of embodying the pop-essence of Ashley Tisdale in the *High School Musical* movies, and when my father found out that I called another boy “cute” in 3rd grade, my adversity was *not* knowing why I loved what I did yet still facing shame for embodying what was deemed too feminine for a young boy.

Surely every human is *imperfect* beneath the impossible notions of biblical standards of morality. Yet, any instance of queerness itself cannot be chosen in selfishness. Queerness is not chosen at all. Queerness exists outside of moral classification. Queerness is a human function of attraction and expression. There is no possible way in which, even within Evangelicalism, that queerness could detract from one’s innocence. When my father sought to overcorrect my queer disposition as a child, he became like Elihu in the sense that he tried to undermine my innocent femininity. Truly, I *was* innocent. I needed liberation from the ideology that attempted to repress my most authentic humanity—I did not need *sports*.

father

My father grew up in a Methodist home in Springfield, Missouri. He was a band director who took over my grandfather's music business before I was born. I have always found it interesting that he decided to move to a farm in Rogersville to invest his sons into a small-town farming community considering he lived in the suburbs for nearly all of his life and possessed no experience operating a farm whatsoever. Nonetheless, before having kids, in college at The University of Arkansas, he became involved with a Christian fraternity, and this experience is what I attribute to the initial cause of his far-right religious obsessions. Additionally, concerning this time in his life, when I was eighteen, I stumbled across a news article with a photo of him and a woman announcing their marriage to the community of Springfield—the woman is not my mother, but I had no idea who she is. My father had always told me that he had *only* been married to my mother, so I was obviously shocked. There was a divorce that he had hidden from me. So, in many respects, I feel that perhaps his religious obsession is also a trauma-response to the shame of a short first marriage. I confronted him about this secret marriage, and he expressed that I did not need to know. I was perplexed and offended by his dismissive response, yet I was also so shocked that I did not know how to respond. It took me several years after this to realize that after his failed first marriage, he did not want to experience religious shame in such a public capacity ever again. Having a queer son would not help him achieve that. A masculine, God-fearing son was success embodied—a trophy to present to his community of like-minded believers in Christ. He needed my life story to become his success story in order to validate his own insecurities born out of Evangelical expectation. Rather than allowing my own personhood to develop fluidly, his expectation condemned my perceived sin as Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar had. My femininity—brightly colored clothing, dyed hair, intentionally short and skinny pants,

limp wrists—these manifestations of my own queerness were reacted to by the means of toxically-masculine, disciplinary overcompensation. Where was my flannel and my bootcut jeans? Why was my voice expressive and emotional rather than stern and deep? I was my father's failed project.

mother

My mother grew up in a Missionary Baptist home in Louisburg, Missouri. The population is “121 including cats and dogs” as she would say. Since she was eighteen years old she has driven a Mary Kay director pink Cadillac. Before she met my father, she lived in government housing. She grew up with *enough* to be financially comfortable, but I do think that achieving her own significant financial autonomy atop my father's reputation as an Evangelical business owner heightened her infatuation with reputation. Mary Kay is rooted in perpetuating Evangelical values by the ironic means of pyramid scheme marketing—having a queer son would not help her achieve the reputation of a successful Mary Kay businesswoman. A masculine, God-fearing son was success embodied—a trophy to present to her community of like-minded believers in Christ. She needed my life story to become her success story in order to validate her own insecurities born out of Evangelical expectation. She needed to maintain her pure, Evangelical reputation because her entire career and life path was formed around Evangelical ideas. If her son did not fit within an Evangelical framework, she had failed as a parent. When my mother found out I liked men initially, she actually expressed that she had failed as a parent. My mother needed a straight, masculine son because her career and parental success depended on me. It was never about *what was best* for me and how I felt.

Rather than allowing my own personhood to develop fluidly, her expectation condemned my perceived sin as Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar had. My femininity—my *sin*—was reacted to

with the cost of toxically-masculine, disciplinary overcompensation. My mother agreed with my father's disciplinary decisions as she was consistently concerned with submitting to my father's will, but I believe that she genuinely wanted the same son as he did. My mother and father both prayed for a masculine, God-fearing son. Yet masculine clothing, masculine-dominated activities like sports never made me like girls. I still wanted to sing, dance, wear fun clothing, and express my feelings in art.

Today, I feel like my feminine perceptions of self are finally able to flourish. I can walk into a room and wear heels. I can speak in a voice that also feels naturally mine. I can sing, dance, and express my feelings by the means of the art of drag. My mother and my father surely never wanted a feminine son, but then and now, I have always been just that.

teenager I - middle school

If I had not pieced together that I am attracted to the same gender when I started 3rd grade, this concept certainly became solidified by the start of middle school. In this time of life, my father required me to attend private basketball lessons so that I could finally make him proud. My mother agreed with his decisions here, *and* she loved sports. In all honesty, I suffered through every moment of basketball practice yet became finally a bit talented at the sport. I started games, yet the other boys and I barely talked. I did not feel safe around them then, and they would talk about sex and girls in a way that I could not comprehend. Masculinity was a concept I ignored. I did not understand the allure of degrading "locker room" talk. I did not care to fit in with the other guys on the basketball team. In fact, oftentimes I found myself hardly talking to them at all. Long bus rides to basketball games consisted of listening to "Hair" from *Born This Way* on repeat and pondering if I could earnestly begin to fight against the masculine expectation that my parents attempted to enforce within me. I did not want to play basketball in

the slightest. This pondering would make itself significantly more pronounced later on, in high school. My one saving grace before high school was discovering expression in clothing in 8th grade. 2011 Fashion for me (based on the aesthetic opinions of my mother) entailed: Sperry's, Polo Ralph Lauren shirts, and khaki shorts. I liked these items then, though, and I found myself to be quite popular until high school. It was then that I eventually departed from the prep-school, pre-fraternity clothing that my mother convinced me was the epitome of what a teenage boy should wear to appear attractive. I did not fit in with the rest of the boys beforehand, and the divide certainly did not close as my clothing became more feminine in high school. Was it time to repent from the perceived-to-be-sinful femininity that I genuinely loved? I would come to love brightly colored clothing, dyed hair, intentionally short and skinny pants, and limp wrists. These expressions were authentically me, and I could not make myself hate them even if wanted to. God could not restore a desire for masculine expression that never existed. Walking to school with lavender hair felt like a reclamation of freedom that I had not accessed until high school.

teenager II - high school

Mustard yellow skinny jeans, polka dot dress shirts, TOMS, and even tight-fitting meme shirts from Hot Topic lost me the representation I had earned throughout 8th grade and freshman year (the homecoming court reputation earned from the notorious preppy frat boy clothing). Nonetheless, I felt increasingly the clothing that I picked out each morning could perhaps resemble deeper meaning—I had begun piecing together how special my femininity was. I *was stubborn* about my clothing. Quite frankly, my parents could not fathom that their son had strayed from the path of 'trophy masculinity' that I had seemed to travel on so consistently. My new, flamboyant clothing connected me with my own femininity in such an earnest way that the clothing I wore beforehand could never—my clothing set me apart. I did not want to be

aesthetically associated with the clothing styles of the oppressive men in my life including my father. I wanted to be set apart, different, individual, and unique. My parents disdained my clothing decisions, and we spent countless late nights arguing about the length of my pants, their intentional shortness, and their bright colors not reflecting what my parents believed to be appropriate for a man's wardrobe—the clothing micromanagement was only a portion of the self-made queer discoveries of my high school experience.

My older brother played an important role in the loss of any freedom in closeted queer expression that I had in high school. Even deeper, he stole a way my chance to come out of the closet on my own terms. Alec was perfectly masculine in my parents' eyes. He played golf, was voted student body president in high school, and dressed like my father. The flannels, the bootcut jeans, and the golf clothes all matched the 'trophy masculinity' that my parents expected from me. Alec's masculinity was made out to be my template, and I hated him for it.

Eventually, Alec outed me to my parents while I was at a marching band competition. When I arrived home at one in the morning, my parents were waiting for a long conversation on the couch. They interrogated me about another guy that I had been secretly talking to. I lied but eventually told the truth. They were not happy to find out that their son was gay. I will never understand why Alec would have done this to me other than that he was bothered that I expressed myself so differently than he did. I did not follow his template. I have never asked him why he outed me then, but eventually, I will.

My parents' initial reaction was not as harsh as the later reaction to finding I was talking to another guy. I continued talking to other guys secretly until they read my text messages with one of the piano accompanists at a local community theater who was about my age. In this instance of essentially feeling I was outed once again, they responded much more severely. I will

never forget sitting in English class and realizing my phone service had suddenly stopped functioning. My parents had shut off my phone service without initially telling me why. I came home, they forced me out of community theater, they pulled me out of basketball (which is still extremely surprising to me), and they almost pulled me out of the school musical that would open within the next few weeks (I was the male lead). They told me that they were planning to homeschool me. They did not ultimately do this, and I was happy to not have to face a sudden goodbye to my friends. Nonetheless, the religious interventions that they made in this time of increased restriction and surveillance set my journey toward queer self-acceptance back for many years to come.

I eventually attended my first Hillsong concert at James River Church. Hillsong approached worship music much like a pop concert including flashing lights, fog machines, massive LED screens, synthesizers and people crowded close together jumping up and down with raised. After my loss of the arts, I yearned for avenues of artistic expression again, and I felt that worship music portrayed in such a way could perhaps become my new means of expression. Eventually, overinvolvement in worship ministry would become the intervention that I thought I needed desperately because of my parents' desire for a God-fearing son.

I wish I never had stepped foot into that concert. At many times, I have scolded myself for allowing myself to ever be so susceptible to megachurch worship's pseudo cultural relevance. Overinvolvement in church was a tangible manifestation aligned with Elihu's accusation toward Job—believing I had sinned because I was never innocent in my queerness despite the actuality that my queerness was infinitely more *human* and *me* than a megachurch ever could be.

All black, skinny-jean and Chelsea boots outfits, lyrics that suggested spiritual liberation, and heightened emotional worship sets would become pillars of my megachurch experience. Yet even these could not make me masculine or straight.

the megachurch

Senior year of high school ended, and I submitted my audition video to sing as a background vocalist at James River Church to be able to perform in an atmosphere with an LED-screen, flashy lights, and electronic music like the Hillsong concert—my parents were proud me for using my love for the arts to “further the kingdom” rather than to perform within the “homosexual-filled” world of theater.

“When you were a little boy, God told me that you would someday lead a huge congregation of people,” my mother would say.

My father made it clear to me that had I moved to New York to work in theater like I had wanted to before they pulled me out of community theater, I would have eventually found myself homeless on the streets, calling home for help. This comment hurt—it still stings. I was glad then, that church-singing could make them proud yet also allow me an opportunity to perform.

I made the worship team. I started singing and genuinely loved that I was able to sing *for an audience* again. I accepted a lot of hardship as “normal” and “necessary” in this time concerning the development of my Evangelical spirituality when, in retrospect, these hardships were plainly the result of abusive spiritual power structures veiled by the guise of “respecting authority” and “platform privilege.” I repressed my sexuality significantly in this time for the sake of what I thought was a requirement for a megachurch singer. I had to live without sin. When interviewing to sing on the worship team, I was told that the church had noticed I was a bit feminine. “We don’t want feminine men here,” said one of the worship team interviewers. I told

them that I had noticed these traits about myself and would do my best to fix them. They also asked me if I had ever been attracted to the same sex. I lied because my father told me that if I told the truth, I would never get to sing. I kept this secret from the worship team for several years and genuinely felt I would go to hell for lying (even considering my father had told me to do so). James River Church's expectations nearly killed me. I had to hide myself even further, too.

For instance, there was a time when the worship staff called me in for a meeting, refused to tell me what the meeting would be about beforehand, and then informed me that my skinny jeans were too tight. I was a volunteer, yet they expected more from me than most employers do.

The megachurch was my everything until 2019. Backtracking to the end of high school once again, I also began university that same year, 2016, at a private college uncreatively entitled Southwest Baptist University. I think in my Evangelical-tainted perception, James River Church was supposed to be instrumental in the erasure of my queerness. James River Church was the liberation with God portrayed in Job that was, in reality, a falsity for me.

college

I knew that after a month of attending college at SBU that 'Bolivar, Missouri' and 'Christian college' were not right for me. SBU was somehow even more conservative in beliefs than James River Church, and most devastatingly, its campus is forty-five miles away from my friends who lived in Springfield. I begged my father to allow me to transfer to Missouri State, and he told me that if I did, he would no longer assist with the cost of school—my music and academic scholarships could not cover the cost of it all. So, I very quickly determined a plan concerning how I could graduate from SBU in three years. I loved the megachurch in this time because it felt flashy, concert-esque, and current. I hated SBU for its lack of care to even attempt to seem relevant. University chapel music was stale and amateur at best. Nonetheless, both

institutions ultimately led to suffering as a result of my queerness. Both institutions played significant roles in ushering in my own skepticism regarding Evangelicalism altogether.

end of college and megachurch

Senior year approached, and my parents had come to a place of despising even the worship-leader-aesthetic clothing that I had come to love and make my own. Even considering that countless other worship leaders dressed in all black skinny jeans and oversized shirts, they deemed my attire too feminine for the James River Church stage and were embarrassed with how others would perceive the family as a result. I was still too feminine for them. My father proposed an ultimatum—I could either allow him to buy me an entirely new wardrobe of clothing that he approved of—his plan entailed messaging me a picture of what he wanted me to wear everyday for all of my senior year of college. Conversely, the only other option within his ultimatum entailed me paying for the portion of school that he had helped me out with previously all on my own. I did not have a degree yet. I did not have any connections that could help me find a job. So I wore clothing that did not align with how I felt inside. I wore the clothing that my father required me to wear for an entire school year. I was twenty years old. That October of 2018, I discovered Conley's *Boy Erased*. In my weeping and self-reflection influenced by his pain and conversion therapy survival, I realized that my queerness could not be repressed and distorted for very much longer. Conley's genuine, afflicted words—his trauma related to my own repressed queer emotions in a way that I never knew another individual's experience could. I quickly came to realize that the spoon-fed beliefs of my parents' religion could no longer realistically remain my own. I began the process of deconstructing Evangelicalism. If *Boy Erased* initiated my own religious deconstruction of the moral dogma that I had known and

attempted to embody for so horribly long, beginning grad school clarified new direction towards actualized, celebrated, openly manifested queerness.

grad school

I started grad school at Missouri State University a month after my college graduation at SBU—I was fortunate enough to begin my studies in London on a Study Away trip. I wrote more than I had ever written previously during this time, and more specifically, I solidified my belief that religion that did not affirm my inescapable queer identity was religion that I could no longer ethically associate with. Sitting inside of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, I realized how the architectural and atmospheric grandeur of the religious environment was manipulatory—meticulously designed in such a way that people exposed to it would be more likely to visit the building and ultimately consider and believe manipulatory ideology.

I felt that James River Church worked similarly. I considered how I was initially drawn to James River Church because, from an external perspective of their worship productions alone, I perceived a great deal of artistic beauty until I realized what beliefs and practices maintained the art of the church. The dynamic, dreamlike experience of megachurch worship heightened my emotions by means of flashy LED graphics, synth sounds, and amazing vocalists. Time and time again, I would allow myself to believe illogical teachings because I cherished the way that megachurch worship made me feel so much. Yet London caused me to realize that megachurch worship was all a front for an actual lack of true empathy and authentic artistic expression within the church. Fine-tuned worship experiences made me more susceptible to predatory Evangelical teachings, and I lost myself in this realization for the remainder of the trip. I came to genuinely despise James River Church. I hated that large-scale worship and art meant the denial of my human authenticity. The worship music was merely marketing for a harmful product. I returned

home and messaged the worship leaders of James River Church that I was taking a break from the team. I never intended to return. This decision would begin the process of my own inverted queer liberation increasingly distant from the confines of Evangelicalism.

music store

I was unable to get hired as an English teacher directly after college, so I worked in social media marketing at my father's music store for nine months. During this time, I stopped frequenting James River Church even as an attendee, and I began attending drag shows at Martha's Vineyard, once a gay bar in Springfield, Missouri. A family friend happened to be there during one of the shows, and I did not realize this. In January of 2019, the family friend communicated with my family that I had been frequenting Martha's, and my father fired me from his music store as a result—less than two months before the beginning of the initial U.S. COVID-19 lockdown. I was almost evicted from my apartment because of the income loss. I was denied unemployment. I began delivering for DoorDash and Postmates because employers were, at-large, not hiring new employees at the start of the pandemic. Eventually, a friend helped me get a job packing shampoo bottles into boxes at a corporate salon warehouse. This job was grueling. I had worked so hard to become an educator. I was even in grad school. Yet, I made less than fifteen dollars an hour at a job that had no relation to my education. Order-picking, cart pushing, bubble wrap, and chili ramen noodles were my every day. I hated my life, but I was stuck within a pit of financial instability that I had to climb out of because of my father. I worked at the salon warehouse for six months until I was hired as a paraprofessional at Parkview High School.

When I began working at the salon warehouse, I began talking to my parents again. A part of me certainly still hoped for a relationship with them even though they had directly caused

me to greatly suffer in the middle of a new, financially difficult pandemic. I knew that if I had my own job apart from my father's company, they could never strip away my stability again. Atop this realization, I knew that if they treated me in a manner that criticized my queerness, I could simply remove myself from interacting them for awhile. They could not hold a job or a senior year of college over my head. They could not give me an ultimatum any longer.

educator

I felt that if I could get hired with Springfield Public Schools in even a support position (the paraprofessional position I ultimately *did* get hired to fulfill), I would possibly be able to get hired as a full-time educator (the teacher shortage was not nearly apparent in early 2021 as it is in the present). Nonetheless, even considering I started working for SPS as a paraprofessional, interview after interview led to rejection after rejection—contemplation after contemplation consistently led me to a hopeless emotional state of wondering whether or not a public school would ever want to hire a feminine male queer full-time educator. I'll never forget excitedly telling my father that I had several interviews lined up.

“An interview is not something to celebrate—getting the job is something to celebrate.” I questioned why I welcomed my father back into my life. He was the direct reason that I was desperately looking for a new (and decently paying) job in the first place—fired because I am queer and went to a drag show. I will never forget the lack of belief he had in me and the quick celebratory reversal he made when I finally did get a teaching job. It is interesting to consider that he wanted to celebrate me only when my success meant something for his reputation. He *could* tell his friends that I was a teacher. Being a teacher was a tangible monument of success (no, this does not mean that I think teachers are paid well). However, the journey of becoming a teacher and financially stable would not help him build his reputation. He was only interested in

the end product. Latching on to my success was convenient. Job was restored at the end of his narrative, and I brought about my own restoration as a queer person displaced by my own family. God did not liberate me. My own queer ingenuity did.

After a Spring semester of working as a paraprofessional and also as an assistant track coach at Cherokee Middle School (I did not enjoy this, but I felt it would give me an even better chance at receiving a teaching job), I was able to get a job teaching English with SPS at Reed Academy. My family did not believe in me throughout the journey of rejection I had faced.

God allowed Job to be tested when he could have prevented his suffering throughout the entire narrative. Yet my parents did not usher in my queer revelation even though they caused me a great deal of suffering. My queer liberation was Job's restoration inverted—like Conley and like Cameron, I discovered restoration away from God.

drag show

In the spring of my first year of teaching, I started doing some work for a local LGBTQIA+ community resource center. As a result of a drag show that I helped organize through the center, a local show promoter reached out to me about starting a drag show at one of downtown Springfield's local performance venues. Initially, I had no intention to be in the actual performance-aspect of the show myself, but the promoter convinced me to host the show—which is the reason I started doing drag myself. The name of the show is *BLESS*, and the marketing for the show consisted of several Instagram Reels and memes that made fun of the tropes of both televangelists and conservative politicians—one of these videos consisted of me jokingly (and in a southern accent) encouraging viewers to give money so that they could be “*BLESS*ed” and highly favored. Making these short, cynical videos was earnestly so fun. Eventually, the night of the show arrived.

It was 9:30PM or so. The show started at 11. My mother stood outside the show venue's, large window even though I never told her about it, and she stared inside. Of course she wished for a son that did not exist any longer. Would she attempt to sabotage my first time on stage since James River Church? Did she arrive to intimidate me? Did she intend to come inside the venue? I did not acknowledge that she was there, but internally, I was petrified. I paced around the room and found my friends. I could not believe that she truly showed up. Eventually, she left the scene, and a locally famous Springfield drag mother in the show cast discovered that my mother had shown up. She could tell that I was bothered and attempting to act as if I felt fine. How could I truly be fine? I was nearly defeated. But Tania Carrington propped her fan under my chin, "Lift your head up." *Lift your head up, lift your head up, lift your head up.* These words rang.

This motherly exchange—with a different mother—was sacred.

The show began. My first time on any stage since I left James River Church permanently, I marched out in heels, a fuzzy overcoat, a metallic bodysuit, and pleather pants, and I came out on the stage holding a sign. My sign remarked, "I Survived James River." I found liberation. I found my voice again.

son

My liberation did not arrive without expense. My liberation was not one that came by means of any God, religious practice, or conformity to tradition. In the struggle of desiring to merely survive an adolescence wherein my own femininity and queer identity were forced into isolation, in the continuation of this struggle throughout college and dedication to a megachurch platform, throughout ultimatums compiled for the purpose of censoring queer expression, amidst job loss because of queer identity, amidst the height of a jobless pandemic, near-eviction,

working in a warehouse, facing job rejection after job rejection, finally getting an a full-time teaching job, and starting a drag show where I could publicly denounce the belief system that harmed me for so long, *my* revelation was *always* queer ingenuity overdue in its complete realization.

Job overcame incredulity from those around him. He achieved revelation with his God. My queer revelation was found without God—by means of the actualization of queer identity as an openly queer educator, a drag show host, and a human being who survived organized religion. My queer revelation was achieved as a result of the inspiring revelation of queer individuals who inverted Jobian revelation for the sake of their own queer liberation. Without Garrard Conley’s memoir, I would not have written this essay, and in the most legitimate sense, I would likely still remain closeted within the Evangelical ideology that stole away my queer identity for far too long. As a survivor of Evangelicalism, I yearn to uplift narratives wherein queer individuals suffered because of dogma, because of a lack of community support, and because of heteronormative societal expectation. I insist that trauma due to queer oppression can significantly reduce in existence if heteronormative culture can come to comprehend and tangibly empathize with queer humanity conveyed in our queer narratives. I insist that biblical symbols weaponized for our condemnation can be inverted for our own liberation if we so desire. Job’s struggle is intentionally offensive, decadent, reprobate queer liberation inverted. Queer liberation is ours, and tangible queer liberation dwells within the empowerment of those narratives told and untold.

hair

I still think about the middle schooler who listened to “Hair,” and I believe that he would be proud today (though he would have many questions and about the journey to now). He would

be proud of the independence that I achieved by myself—he wanted that achievement so entirely much, yet he could not reach it. Too much restriction, repression, and denial stood in the way. The feminine son in the small farm town never knew that he would write about his experiences of being queer by means of a thesis project. He never knew that he would paint his face in drag.

At the most recent *BLESS*, I sang in drag, and I had never done this before. My wig was white and beehive-esque, and my platform boots were eight inches tall. Transforming into drag has become a cherished, otherworldly experience for me. I feel like I am most authentically myself in drag—as if my inside perceptions of my own femininity are able to manifest themselves fully externally. But at the most recent *BLESS*, I wanted to further my expression beyond my drag itself. I wanted to sing again.

The choice to sing was a difficult one to make—it had been a long time since I had sung for an audience at all—the last time being when I sang at James River Church. But I decided to sing, and I sang the song that meant the most to me throughout the different chapters of discovering my own queerness. “Hair” by Lady Gaga reads:

Whenever I'm dressed cool
My parents put up a fight
(Uh huh, uh huh)
And if I'm hot shot
Mom will cut my hair at night
(Uh huh, uh huh)
And in the morning
I'm short of my identity
(Uh huh, uh huh)
I scream Mom and Dad
Why can't I be who I wanna be?
(Uh huh, uh huh) to be
I just wanna be myself
And I want you to love me for who I am
I just wanna be myself
And I want you to know, I am my hair

I've had enough, this is my prayer
That I'll die living just as free as my hair
I've had enough, this is my prayer
That I'll die living just as free as my hair
I've had enough, I'm not a freak
I'm just here trying to stay cool on the streets
I've had enough, enough, enough
And this is my prayer, I swear
I'm as free as my hair
I'm as free as my hair
I am my hair, I am my hair (Lady Gaga)

Audience members halt the filling of communion plates with their dollars, yet they still lift their hands in a sort of reverence, ready to give. I stand on the stage, and I meet outstretched hands. I realize that I have become an artistic embodiment of queer freedom. *How can it be?* The basketball player, the son of the devout Evangelicals, and the worship leader performs in drag? I dance, twirl, and sing my favorite song. I feel liberated, and I am. I am liberated *apart* from Evangelicalism—authentically queer—inverted queer liberation displayed in full effect for all to see. The trumpets sound. The walls to my own closet have crumbled. A room of people cheer—smiling, jumping up and down, and celebrating me *as I am*—I no longer hide myself. I continue dancing and singing in my own liberation. Like I am in Heaven rejoicing for an eternity, I will never stop singing and dancing. *This* is my overcoming. I arrive. I find salvation. I become my own *holy*.

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