

BIBLE TROUBLE

QUEER READING AT THE BOUNDARIES
OF BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP

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GAZING AT THE WHORE:
READING REVELATION QUEERLY*

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In a 1998 issue of *Rolling Stone*, photographer David LaChapelle stages Madonna in a scene that suggests a modern Whore of Babylon.¹ The background of the two-page spread is a stylized magenta and blue sunset. The pop star is stretched out in the foreground and behind her is a magenta dragon showing its teeth. Madonna, the Whore, appears to be emerging out of or hovering on the surface of waters that reflect the sunset. The black lingerie and the black leopard print tights contrast with her white skin and long blond hair. Her right hand is raised as though she holds an invisible goblet, but a ball of fire moves toward the edge of the frame as though she has just released it from her hand. Necklaces, bracelets, and rings adorn her body, as she looks into the eyes of the viewer.

The image of the Great Whore from Revelation has captured the imaginations of artists throughout history. Her image can be found in the pages of medieval manuscripts, in the watercolors of William Blake, in the multimedia works of outsider artists, on film, in political cartoons, and myriad places where the artistic imagination has carried her. While LaChapelle's version may not be the most literal reading of Revelation's image (e.g., the

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1. This image can be viewed under the entry for David LaChapelle at www.artnet.com, an online gallery and auction site. The image, which is titled "Madonna: Furious Seasons," is part of a collection of photos entitled "Excess." This photograph is not the only one of LaChapelle's works that evokes the Apocalypse. Themes of destruction and the end of the world are seen throughout his photographs, which are viewable at the above site or the artist's own website, www.davidlachapelle.com.

dragon has only one head) and it may not even be a conscious appropriation of the text, it alludes to the possibility of a queer reading of the text. An openly gay artist, known for images that challenge heterosexist norms, places a queer icon in the role of the Great Whore. Although we can label LaChapelle's image a queer reception of the Whore, the image is not without its complexity.² One viewer might argue that LaChapelle subverts the meaning of Revelation by presenting the sexually powerful Madonna-Whore as a positive image, as an image to be admired by (queer) viewers. Another reader might contend that the image actually buys into Revelation's rhetoric: Madonna, the modern image of a sexually powerful woman, is depicted as an insidious threat because of her beauty and allure. In this way, LaChapelle's rendering of Revelation points to the fact that there are multiple possible queer readings of any one text, as well as hinting at the complexity inherent within Revelation's image of the Whore.

That Revelation's image of the Great Whore yields to multiple interpretations is one reason why it is arguably one of the more controversial, yet popular, images in a text teeming with controversial passages. Some feminist and queer critics find the image objectionable, if not abhorrent, even though scholars generally highlight the image's role in Revelation's anti-imperial rhetoric. In the following, I offer a queer-lesbian reading of the Whore as an entry point into the larger question of whether and how Revelation might continue as part of the queer imaginary.³ While some have argued that Revelation has little or nothing to offer queer readers, I suggest that used critically this text should continue to contribute to queer conversations. Specifically, given Revelation's engagement with the topic of empire, the text and its image of the Whore can play a role in conversations about how queer individuals, specifically those of us living in the United States, position ourselves in relation to the very empire that seeks to control and commodify us.

LOOKING AT APOCALYPSE

Written toward the end of the first century C.E. within the context of the Roman Empire, Revelation offers a narrative account of one man's vision of Jesus Christ and "the things that will happen soon" (Rev 1:1). As John

2. The language of "queer reception" is taken from Alexander Doty.

3. While I understand the reading I offer as falling within the category of queer, I do privilege a lesbian perspective, since that reflects my reading location.

moves through his narrative, intended to be read aloud (1:3), he not only describes what he sees, but he prompts his audience to see along with him. He does this by using the grammatical imperative "Look!" (ἰδοὺ) throughout the text (4:1–2; 6:2, 5, 8; 7:9; 14:1, 14; 19:11). These Greek imperatives seem awkward to some, since they are typically paired with the phrase "I saw" (εἶδον).⁴ Despite this, they effectively prompt the audience to see what John has been allowed to see, including the Whore.

Addressed to seven churches in seven cities of the Roman province of Asia Minor, Revelation is typically read as a critique of imperial power (Carey 2008). This region initially came under Roman power in the second century B.C.E. and over the next two centuries the cities of the province would compete with one another for the attention of Rome. To this end, the cities embraced the practice of honoring Roman emperors, living and dead, and even the city of Rome itself as divine, erecting temples to show their devotion (Friesen 2001). Reflecting the complex nature of imperialism, which employs a variety of strategies (political, religious, economic, social, etc.) to accrue and maintain power over others, John's critique of empire is multifaceted (Moore 2006, 97–121). For instance, John addresses the empire's control of all trade and commerce (13:16–17) and its material excesses (18:9–19), along with its use of violence, especially against those who refuse to follow its demands, namely, the followers of God and the Lamb (e.g., 6:9–11; 17:6).⁵ Most egregious, according to John, is the empire's blasphemy—its arrogant claim to power and authority that belongs to God (e.g., 13:5–6; 18:7–8). In light of the "sins" of the empire, Revelation pushes its audience to choose between devotion to manifestations of empire, which John characterizes as beasts (Rev 13), and devotion to God and the Lamb.

Not reticent about employing dualisms and violence as tools of persuasion (e.g., 16:10–11), Revelation has historically made interpreters uncomfortable. The book continues to evoke negative assessments, including among some feminist biblical scholars (Jack 2001; Pippin, 1992,

4. Consequently, some English translations, including the NRSV and the NIV, diminish the imperative used in the text by smoothing out what appears to some as a redundancy.

5. While this has prompted modern scholars to debate whether John's audience experienced violent religious persecution at the hands of the state, many scholars agree that Rev responded to some form of perceived persecution or sense of impending persecution (Collins 1984, 84–110).

1999). One the most sustained critical treatments of Revelation, a piece especially pertinent to this essay, is the entry on "Revelation/ Apocalypse" in *The Queer Bible Commentary*. In it, Tina Pippin and J. Michael Clark assert that a redemptive reading of the text is not possible. With this said, they offer a tour of aspects of Revelation and its appropriations that they find most offensive to a queer audience.⁶ The authors note, for instance, that the text maintains strict gender boundaries, as it valorizes what they see as a sexless or celibate heteromascularity (i.e., the 144,000 male virgins), precluding the possibility of a redemptive queer reading (Pippin and Clark 2006, 758–61).⁷ A more fundamental criticism of Revelation offered by Pippin and Clark is that the text's vision of the end requires and consequently creates outsiders through dualistic language and the creation of strict boundaries. This need for outsiders or evildoers stems from the conviction that Jesus will come only when there are those who need to be damned (764–65). Furthermore, apocalyptic narratives draw people into an inner circle of elites by allowing them to be voyeurs of the salacious acts of the sinful and of the terrifying violence of the divine (763). This, in fact, is one of the ways that the Whore functions in Revelation, according to Pippin's earlier book, *Death and Desire*, in which she describes the judgment of the Whore as "the ultimate misogynist fantasy" (1992, 67).

Despite Pippin and Clark's unequivocal judgment, for many the question of whether or not Revelation offers anything of value to queer readers remains legitimate. This is true not only for queer individuals situated within confessional contexts who continue to seek ways of making sense of the "texts of terror" that sit alongside stories of liberation within the canon (Guest 2005), but also for many who have felt the punch of apocalyptic rhetoric. The continuing use of resources from the apocalyptic imagination, including images and rhetoric, to create a cultural anxiety about queer bodies and sexualities, urges us, as Catherine Keller argues, to pay "attention to and through apocalypse" (2006, 8). As long as apocalyptic ways of thinking and speaking are used to celebrate gay-bashings, to blame queer people for natural disasters, to refuse giving basic human rights to those in LGBTQ communities and the like, there remains a need

6. Unfortunately, a full engagement with Pippin and Clark's essay and its critique of Rev is beyond the scope of this presentation.

7. For another reading of the 144,000 male virgins that reads this imagery in relation to Roman discourses about masculinity and that has an eye toward queer issues, see Huber 2008.

for queer readers to explore and reassess apocalyptic traditions. There is, additionally, a need to continue thinking through texts, such as Revelation, that have historically been used against queer individuals and groups (Cobb 2006).⁸ By working through apocalyptic narratives and wrestling with the images that have been used to oppress, we begin to disarm the elements of texts that have been used to repress and begin to assign new meanings to others. Avoiding interaction with Revelation and other apocalyptic texts actually creates a sense that they are somehow untouchable or nonnegotiable. This takes power from the queer interpreter and places it in the hands of those who continue to use Revelation and other apocalyptic texts as weapons. Furthermore, Keller notes that the tendency to "purge" one's rhetoric of apocalyptic elements often leads to replicating those very elements.

In light of this, the following reflects an initial attempt at a queer-lesbian reading that pays attention to and through Revelation's image of the Whore. It attends to John's image of the Whore by addressing the text of Revelation from a queer perspective that remains in conversation with the text's historical and rhetorical context. This reading pays attention *through* the Whore by approaching issues raised in queer discourses, including places where queer discourse intersects with feminist thought, through the lens of Revelation's Whore imagery.

GAZING AT/THROUGH THE WHORE

In Rev 17, John describes being lifted into the wilderness to see the judgment of the Great Whore (τῆς πόρνῃς τῆς μεγάλης), who is identified as "Babylon."⁹ The name Babylon signals for the audience, aware of Jewish prophetic traditions, that the Whore personifies a city, specifically an imperial city. Babylon refers to the quintessential "evil" city in Jewish tradition. This is a city opposed to the people of God, as Babylon destroyed

8. Some queer interpreters reject the notion that queer readers can or should "stick it out" with biblical texts such as Rev. They argue that we have simply spent too much valuable time and energy trying to work with texts that have little to yield, that our time would be better spent on creating new and liberating traditions. J. Michael Clark is particularly noted for articulating this view (Guest 2005, 258–60).

9. My reading focuses upon the image of the Whore in ch. 17, although I do keep one eye on ch. 18. While ch. 18 provides interesting points for interacting with queer discourses, this limitation allows for a more concise argument.

the first Jerusalem temple in the sixth century B.C.E., something echoed during the Roman siege of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., when the second temple was destroyed (Friesen 2001, 138–40). Given this connection, for John's audience the most natural analogy to Babylon would be Rome. This connection is solidified when the Whore is described as sitting on seven mountains or hills (17:9), a traditional descriptor for Rome, and as "the great city that rules over the kings of the earth" (17:18).

While the Whore refers to a city and not a literal woman, Revelation's imagery conjures up an image of a woman for its audience to envision and to gaze upon (Rossing 1999, 21–25; Frilingos 2004, 58–60). An angel informs John that he will show him the judgment of the Whore. The language of showing prompts the audience to visualize along with John as he is taken to see the Whore. Even though the angel informs John that the Whore will be judged, suggesting her opposition to God, John "wonders with great wonder" when he finally sees her (17:6). She is clothed in purple and scarlet and draped with gold and jewels. John's wonder or amazement when he sees Babylon is emphasized in the Greek text with the use of the related terms θαυμάζω and θαῦμα in v. 6, as well as in v. 7 when the angel asks John, "Why are you amazed?" or "Why are you wondering?" Of all the things that John witnesses on his visionary tour, the Whore is the only thing at which he *shows* amazement, although he does fall at the feet of the risen Christ when he sees him.¹⁰ Some scholars describe John's wondering at the Whore as a negative reaction or as a relatively neutral reaction (e.g. Aune 1998, 3:938). In contrast, Christopher A. Frilingos argues,

The angel's interrogative is balanced by moments in which θαῦμα is a proper reaction to the book's visions: John reports that "the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb" intoned by the faithful in heaven includes the verse "Great and amazing (θαυμαστά) are your deeds, Lord God the Almighty!" (Rev. 15:3). Two verses before John himself describes the scene as "great and amazing (θαυμαστόν): seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is ended" (Rev. 15:1). Given these passages, which place θαῦμα in a positive context, is the angelic reproach of John a rejection of wonder *qua* wonder or is it, rather, an intervention? The angel's remark disrupts the moment,

10. Interestingly, the verb θαυμάζω also describes the reaction of the people of the earth to the beast in Rev 13:3 and 17:8. Additionally, Rev does describe things within the text as amazing (θαυμαστά), but this is the only time when John enacts a state of wonder.

shifting the focus from John's reaction to the image of Babylon, which gives rise to the seer's response in the first place. (Frilingos 2004, 51)

John's wonder is a response that the angel, who gives voice to the author, apparently deems unacceptable. It is a reaction that requires at least an explanation. This implies that John's amazement at the Great Whore is a sign of his interest in, perhaps even his desire for, her. In fact, θαυμάζω could be used in contexts of desire. For instance, this term appears in the story of Judith. As the beautiful heroine, Judith, walks through the camp of the Assyrian general Holofernes, his troops "wonder" (ἐθαύμαζον) at her beauty (Jdt 10:19).

John's wonder at the Whore sparks my own interest, as a queer woman, in the Whore. As a feminist, I understand the danger in John's use of feminine stereotypes. Revelation's feminine images are far from developed images of actual women; rather, John uses archetypal images of women (e.g., mother, whore, bride), defined primarily in relation to men, as rhetorical tools (Schüssler Fiorenza 1991, 13). Pippin is one of the most outspoken critics of Revelation's use of feminine imagery in this way. She maintains that John uses these images to manipulate the desire of the audience that he assumes to be male (Pippin 1992, 72–74). However, in that brief moment, having been prompted throughout the narrative to "Look!" along with John, *my* eyes gaze at the Whore as John gazes. Like John, I hear that the Whore faces divine judgment and yet I find her fascinating and at least somewhat desirable. Perhaps this desire stems from the fact that she is labeled a "mystery."¹¹ This language evokes notions of secrecy and even, perhaps, "the closet"—the life of secrecy that shapes so many queer lives, even after they have come out (Sedgwick 2006, 68). Whatever the Whore's mystery happens to be, whether she is in the closet or not,¹² Revelation's apparent

11. The Greek in 17:5 is ambiguous, and it is difficult to determine whether "mystery" is part of the Whore's name or a reference to her name as a mystery: "And upon her forehead a name had been written, a mystery [or, Mystery], Babylon." "Mystery" is also used in 17:7 in reference to the Whore and her relationship to the beast that she rides, which has seven heads and ten horns. Since this second use is not a reference to the Whore's name, I opt to read the first use of mystery as a characterization of the woman's name, as mysterious or thought-provoking.

12. The concept of "sexual identity" is widely believed to be anachronistic when talking about the ancient world, even though same-sex practices were acceptable when they fit within the guidelines for active and passive partners (Parker 2001). Moreover, I am not arguing that John shapes the Whore as a queer woman. Instead, I am sug-

wondering
gazing

★

attempt at capturing the attention or the gaze of the male audience member has worked to capture the gaze of the lesbian-identified interpreter.

While "the gaze" is discussed typically within critical film studies, it has been appropriated in discussions of textual sources, including biblical texts. Frilingos, for example, appropriates this idea in his analysis of Revelation (2004, 39–42). This appropriation is quite on target. As noted above, Revelation is a text that readily employs the language of vision, coaching the audience to envision along with the text. In light of this, theory on the gaze seems to be a relevant tool for thinking about how a reader of Revelation, including a queer reader, might interact with images that John prompts his audience to see.

That John's use of feminine imagery, supposedly intended to harness the desire of a male audience, captures the gaze of a lesbian interpreter is not surprising. Queer readers throughout history have read against the heteronormative assumptions and codes embedded in texts ranging from classic novels to pop songs to popular films (Guest 2005, 197). The gaze, the visual attention directed toward an object of desire, often presumes a heterosexual male spectator in film, as Laura Mulvey first noted in her 1975 essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." The invisible male spectator, moreover, stands in a position of power over the female character, since it is for him that the female character is created. Subsequent scholars have argued that while films and texts have traditionally assumed a male gaze, this does not preclude women spectators from appropriating the gaze (e.g. Doty 1995, 77; de Lauretis [1988] 1993, 150–52). And, while they debate over why and how it happens, queer and lesbian critics recognize that lesbians can and do identify with male characters, that they can even take on the role of the invisible male spectator (Straayer 1995). This entails stepping into a role typically understood as masculine and, yet, the lesbian spectator often enacts a different power dynamic within this role. In other words, the lesbian gaze can be quite different from the male gaze, which assumes a power over the one being gazed upon. The lesbian gaze, in contrast, is often shaped by a desire for reciprocity—a glance back (Straayer 1995).¹³

gesting that elements within the narrative can be read as queer by a reader who reads within the queer vernacular.

13. In addition, de Lauretis reminds interpreters that the lesbian gaze, as well as lesbian desire, is not a single and undifferentiated thing. There are different gazes and different desires among lesbians (de Lauretis [1988] 1993, 152).

Interestingly, in LaChapelle's queer visioning of Madonna as the Whore, the Whore appears to gaze back at the viewer. Her eyes meet the viewer with a look that can be read as powerful. As I read Revelation, however, nothing in the text signals to me that the Whore looks back at me. She appears as a character on display. In spite of this, John arguably wants his audience to read the Whore as a character who desires power, even though she might not be a powerful character. In ch. 18, Revelation depicts the Whore's inner monologue: "For in her heart, she says that, 'I rule as a queen and I am not a widow. I will never see grief'" (18:7).¹⁴ Asserting her identity and power as a queen (perhaps *this* is her mystery!) to herself has a different effect than a gaze that communicates her power. Rather, the inner monologue rings of someone powerless trying to convince herself of her greatness. The Whore's assertion that she is "not a widow" and that she will "never see grief," moreover, implies that she refuses to imagine herself in relation to those who are least powerful, often characterized as widows (and orphans) in the Jewish prophetic tradition (e.g., Isa 1:17).

Perhaps the Whore's lack of interest in catching my eye has little to do with me and more to do with the fact that she's busy. Even before the text prompts the audience to wonder along with John at the Whore, John's angel guide announces that she "has committed fornication" (ἐπόρνευσαν) with "the kings of the earth" (17:2). She is also identified as the "mother of whores" (17:5), implying that Babylon has been living this life for some time. That the Whore is sexually engaged with male partners, kings (unless they are drag kings), might cause some queer interpreters to wonder about the Whore's mystery: perhaps she is not in the closet.¹⁵ However, the gender of the Whore's partners does not disrupt her ability to queer heteronormativity. The Whore's actions do challenge modern heterosexual assumptions about what constitutes acceptable sex and work. Eva Pendleton, a sex-radical feminist and queer theorist,

14. This is a paraphrase of Isa 47:8, where a personified Babylon says in her heart, "I am, and there is no one besides me; I shall not sit as a widow or know the loss of children" (NRSV).

15. Some queer individuals stereotype bisexuals and lesbians who have sex with men as "fence-sitters" or as "less queer" than lesbians or gays (Shokeid 2001). There are a number of reasons why lesbians, those women who identify themselves primarily through their erotic relationships with women, have sex with men. These range from financial reasons to wanting to participate in a variety of sexual practices, including some with male partners. These do not necessarily make them any less queer (e.g., Califia 2005).

argues that both queer and straight sex workers “queer” heterosexuality in a variety of ways. For example, sex workers challenge the cultural assumption that sex should be something done for love or enjoyment and not for money.¹⁶ In offering sex for money, sex workers shed light on the economic exchange that actually occurs in many sexual relationships, including marriage relationships. In contrast to marriage relationships, Pendleton and other sex-radical feminists argue, in the sex worker’s relationship with her or his client the economic power resides in the hands of the sex worker, rather than the other way around. Pendleton further argues that sex workers, especially queer women who sell sex to men, prove the performative nature of gender and sexual identity, as they enact a variety of identities for different clients (1997, 78–79). In this vein, the Whore is by definition a queer character.

The understanding of sex work that imagines the Whore as an image of queer strength is complicated by the fact that prostitution in the first century had a different cultural valence than in modern sex-radical feminism. The Greek word πόρνη can be translated into English with either “prostitute” or the pejorative term “whore.” Thomas A. McGinn notes that in the Roman world, prostitution was socially accepted and legal, although being a prostitute meant one was morally suspect (1998, 10). Prostitution safeguarded societal order by providing free males an option for sex outside of marriage other than adultery (17).¹⁷ While adultery for women consisted of any sexual relationship outside of marriage, for men adultery consisted of sexual relationships only with married women (Gardner 1986, 127). Adultery, which could yield a heavy penalty under Augustan law, was perceived as a social threat for a number of reasons (37). It complicated issues of patrimony and it typically involved a violation of another man’s honor, serious issues in a culture built around the notion of a *paterfamilias*. A woman, for instance, brought shame upon the male head of her

16. It should be noted that Eva Pendleton and other sex-radical feminists understand sex workers as those who are able to *choose* prostitution as a form of work and not those individuals who are coerced, physically, mentally, economically, culturally, into prostitution (Pendleton 1997; Queen 1997). Needless to say, this is only a percentage of sex workers living in the world, as many are trafficked against their will, even in the United States.

17. The operating assumption here, obviously, was that males would not be satisfied with a single sexual partner. Stoic discourses on marriage and sex, which argue for moderation, sex without desire, and mutual consent between (married) partners, seem to belie a cultural assumption that men might have sex with multiple partners.

household by having a sexual affair with someone to whom she did not “belong.” Within the complex system of Roman honor and shame, a man (married or not) visiting a prostitute was understood as a relatively amoral act, since it did not involve a violation of anyone’s honor. According to the cultural understanding of prostitution, visiting a prostitute could even be understood in positive terms. So, Martial encouraged an inexperienced groom to visit a brothel-keeper so she could “make him a man” before his wedding night (Martial 1978–1979, 11:78). Despite the cultural importance of prostitution, for women and men being a prostitute was regarded as one of the most shameful or dishonorable professions possible (along with acting!) (Edwards 1997, 66–95). This was doubly so for female prostitutes, who were marginalized by virtue of their gender as well as profession (Edwards 1997, 82; McGinn 1998, 15).

John’s use of πόρνη draws upon the cultural assumption that prostitution was a shameful profession. He uses this terminology pejoratively as he characterizes the “sins” of Babylon or, as noted above, Rome.¹⁸ Belying the fact that most prostitutes in the Roman world would have been of lower social classes, including slaves and ex-slaves, Revelation underscores the Whore’s obvious affluence (McGinn 2004, 60).¹⁹ As Hanna Roose notes, John shows little concern for depicting the actual social phenomenon of prostitution in the Roman world (2005, 233). Drawing upon Hebrew Bible traditions about Babylon, as well as the trading center of Tyre, Revelation emphasizes the Whore’s access to precious and exotic goods (Royalty 1998, 63–65). She is clothed in purple and scarlet, luxury fabrics in the ancient world, and in precious gems, stones, and gold (17:4). In the next chapter, the luxuries of the Whore are cataloged in a description of her destruction:

And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for [Babylon], since no one buys their cargo anymore. Cargo of gold, silver, precious stones, pearls, fine linen, purple, silk, scarlet, and all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory ... wine, olive oil, choice flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, slaves—and human lives. “The fruit which satisfied your soul has gone from you, and all the dainties and splendor are lost to you, and they will never be found again!” The merchants of these things, those who became wealthy from her, will stand far off,

18. This is my reason for using the term “Whore” rather than “Prostitute.”

19. McGinn notes that terms used to describe lower-class businesses, such as inexpensive lodgings (*stabulum*) and taverns (*taberna*), were also used as euphemisms for brothels, reflecting something of the class status of Roman prostitutes (2004, 18–22).

in fear of her torment, weeping and mourning aloud, "Woe, woe, the great city, clothed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, jewels, and pearls!" (Rev 18:11–16)

The list of Babylon's cargoes describes not only the Whore's wealth, but the list alludes to the far reach of her empire (Bowditch 2006, 307). The Whore is an imperial city that has access to the finest luxuries the world has to offer, since she has control of the places that produce such goods. Elsewhere in Revelation John alludes to the empire's economic exploitation of Asia Minor, one of Rome's sources for olive oil and wine (6:5–6; Howard-Brook and Gwyther 1999, 98–99). Likewise, the reference to slaves and human lives, listed like other forms of cargo, offers a grim reminder that imperial systems rely upon the commoditization of individuals. While empires treat humans as material goods, they are ultimately expendable. Thus, Revelation implicates the Whore in the deaths of those who follow the Lamb, supposedly innocent victims according to the narrative (17:6).

As the references to slavery and human trafficking imply, Revelation presents an image of the Whore as someone who wields power over people. Or, at the least, she is a character who desires power, as suggested above. Alluding to the Whore's identity as Rome, the city that sits on seven hills, John describes the Whore as sitting on seven kings, people of power. The Whore literally rides upon the backs of those who finance and empower her (17:9–14). Not only does the Whore gain power from her associations with the kings of the earth, but she exercises power over the people of the earth: "The inhabitants of the earth have become drunk upon the wine of her fornication" (17:2; cf. 14:8). The Whore's influence upon the people of earth, according to John, impairs their judgment and makes them as delusional or as drunk as the Whore who carries her own large, golden cup (17:4).

Revelation's dismay over the people of earth's drunkenness reflects John's concern over the threat of cultural assimilation. The people of the earth have become like the Whore (i.e., they have assimilated to imperial culture) by drinking the wine of her fornication (πορνεία). In the prophetic traditions, fornication or adultery language often functions as a metaphor characterizing Israel's supposed apostasy and its inappropriate political associations (e.g., Ezek 16; Day 2000). As Peggy Day observes, this emotionally charged language describes a breach in the covenant between God and God's people, as Israel adopts the practices, including cultic practices, of other nations (2000, 242). Echoing his prophetic predecessors, John uses the language of fornication in conjunction with other references to assimilation,

namely eating "idol meat" (εἰδωλόθυτον; 2:14, 20). Although some early Christians may have understood eating idol meat (e.g., buying and eating meat that had been offered as a sacrifice in Roman temples, participating in meals held at trade guilds where meat may have been dedicated to the gods) as pragmatic, others understood it as an accommodation to the religious and political beliefs of the culture (e.g., 1 Cor 8:7–13; Moore 2006, 116). This accommodation would have likely afforded those in John's audience social and political acceptance (Schüssler Fiorenza 1991, 56). Thus, by pairing references to the eating of idol meat with the imagery of fornication, Revelation's point is clear: assimilation into the empire is seductive (Rossing 1999, 129).

Before reading *through* the Whore's promise of assimilation toward a queer perspective, it is important to turn our attention to the end of Rev 17. In contrast to the beginning of John's vision, which highlights the allure and power of the Whore, in these final verses we, John and his reader, see the Whore stripped and burned by the kings of the earth: "And the ten horns that you saw and the beast, they will hate the Whore and they will make her desolate and naked and they will devour her flesh and they will burn her in fire" (17:16). When we imagine the Whore as a woman, the language and imagery of the text is horrific. The language of making the Whore desolate, which literally suggests making the Whore into a desert (ἡρημωμένην ποιήσουσιν αὐτήν), evokes images of rape according to Pippin (1999, 94). Although Barabara Rossing argues against Pippin's reading of this, noting that ἡρημώω is primarily used to describe when land is deforested or razed (1999, 90), I would argue that the text uses the language metaphorically to describe the "razing" of a woman's body just as a forest might be razed. The image of the kings devouring the Whore, furthermore, suggests not just cannibalism but the kings' absolute power over the Whore. Not satisfied with using the Whore, they make her part of themselves (Carpenter 1995, 117). In some sense, the imagery suggests that the powerful eventually feed upon those to whom they give power.

In spite of Revelation's assertion that the Whore is an imperial city and not an actual woman, Pippin explains that John wants his readers, namely male audience members, to take a perverse pleasure in watching the destruction of the female figure they once desired (1992, 67, 86). Revelation does, in fact, encourage its audience to rejoice in the Whore's demise, when the choirs of heaven proclaim, "Hallelujah! Salvation, glory, and power to our God ... for he has judged the great whore who corrupted the earth with her fornication and he has avenged the blood of his slaves

from her hand" (19:1-2). That the destruction of the Whore is ultimately defined as God's act of judgment underscores that the audience should approve of this turn of events.

As a queer-lesbian reader who initially desires the Whore, I take little pleasure in the depiction of the Whore's demise. I find some reassurance in the image of empire collapsing in upon itself; however, the stark imagery makes it difficult for me to rejoice along with the voices of heaven. In *Death and Desire*, Pippin makes a similar observation, writing, "Having studied the evils of Roman imperial policy in the colonies, I find the violent destruction of Babylon very cathartic. But when I looked into the face of Babylon, I saw a woman" (1992, 80). My resistance to the text at this point stems from my desire for the Whore as well as a certain identification that I have with the Whore. This sense of identification, however, should not be interpreted as my wanting to become the Whore. As described above, the lesbian gaze often desires a glance back that is reciprocal but not necessarily narcissistic. Valerie Traub, for instance, argues against the assumption that the lesbian gaze is either a desire to really become a man (transvestitism) or a desire to make one's self into the other woman (narcissism) (Traub 1995). While I do not necessarily seek to become the Whore, in this moment, when I see the Whore's judgment, I identify with her as a queer woman, especially since the threat of violence looms over the heads of most individuals who identify as queer. I recognize that there are some shared experiences between us and I hope that a violent end will not be among those experiences. Thus, in my viewing there is both an experience of distance that wants closeness with the Whore, the experience of a desiring spectator, and a certain sense of closeness that ultimately wants some distance from the Whore because of a forced recognition of shared vulnerability.

BUYING INTO/WITH THE WHORE

As mentioned above, one of the aspects of the Whore's allure is the promise of assimilation. This temptation presents itself not just to "the people of the earth" who have become drunk off of the Whore's fornications (17:2). Rather, Revelation's narrative suggests that this is ultimately the temptation presented to John's audience (Rossing 1999, 129). One of John's primary aims is to convince the churches of Asia Minor to resist the hegemony of the Empire and the allure of accommodation in all of its forms. The temptation to appropriate the patterns and plans of the dominant culture is something that many queer individuals face. As with the Whore, whose vision of

assimilation has a clear economic aspect, the attempt to assimilate queers into the dominant culture takes place in the marketplace. As the growing number of "lifestyle" magazines, available at your nearest Borders or Barnes and Noble, demonstrates, gays and lesbians specifically are now niche markets. In *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market*, Alexandra Chasin describes this as the "enfranchisement" of gays and lesbians (2001, 46). More than ever, our communities are courted by a host of companies, from credit cards to vodka to online dating services, wanting our allegiances. Just as the Whore appears queer at times, the marketing aimed at LGBTQ communities often has a veneer of queer: a television ad for an online travel agency, for instance, depicts a cool-looking lesbian couple outsmarting a dull-witted, straight couple in a game show competition for last-minute hotel reservations.²⁰ The ad draws in the queer viewer who would like to believe that lesbians are naturally more edgy or cooler than buttoned-up heterosexuals. It is easy to confuse this flattery with acceptance. Despite this, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger revealed the economics behind political and social acceptance when he commented on the state's ruling (since overturned) in favor of marriage equality, "I hope that California's economy is booming because everyone is going to come here and get married!" (Christensen 2008, 27). Although it is always nice to be wanted, Chasin and others point out that acceptance into the dominant culture comes with conditions. One commentator describes these conditions as the "heterosexualization of gay culture" (Daniel Mendelsohn, as quoted in Chasin 2001, 45). Gay culture, moreover, is made monolithic when, for example, marketing to lesbians encourages us to identify with a particular sort of lesbian, a lesbian palatable to the dominant culture of heterosexuality. This lesbian is white, educated, childless, and relatively wealthy (Clark 1995). While a few of us, including myself, may fit this image, endorsing this image and allowing it to become *the* image of lesbianism is an essentialist move that cuts against the very heart of queerness (493).

As Revelation's image of the Whore implies, absorption into the dominant culture means more than risking distinctive and queer identities (as though that was not bad enough). After describing the destruction of the Whore, the angel who narrates the vision reminds both John and the reader of Revelation that the Whore represents "the great city that rules over the

20. This commercial for Orbitz can be viewed online at <http://www.commercial-closet.org/>. Commercial Closet is an organization dedicated to analyzing the portrayal of LGBTQ individuals and issues in advertising around the world.

kings of the earth" (17:18). This may not mitigate the gruesome image of the Whore's destruction, but it does remind the reader that the Whore offers assimilation into an empire and all that it represents. Among these things is a sense of power, albeit a power that is always derivative. The Whore rides upon the backs of kings, until she is no longer useful to the kings. This should prompt us to wonder whether and/or when queer communities can expect to be devoured in a similar way by those who want us to assimilate.

Assimilation into the world of the Whore entails, moreover, participation in the violence she wields over others. As Alan Sinfield argues in *Cultural Politics—Queer Reading*, while some may see questions of imperialism as tangential to the domain of queer theory, the opposite is quite true. Imperial powers, ancient and modern, maintain their power by imposing hierarchies, sometimes violently, upon others. This includes policing hierarchies of gender and sexual identity, as well as using these hierarchies to shame and oppress. This was made clear, Sinfield observes, in the pictures of torture from Abu Ghraib in which commonly held assumptions about gender, that females are less powerful than males, were used to humiliate detainees (2005, xii-xiii). Likewise, the sexualization of the torture evidenced in the same photos, which depicted male prisoners simulating sex acts with one another, reflects the way that imperialism uses hierarchies of sexuality to maintain power over others. Buying into the system of empire implicates us in the use of such tactics. When I desire the Whore and when I identify with the Whore, I am reminded that even as a queer reader, I risk complicity in the sins of the Whore.

A PARTING GLANCE AND APOCALYPTIC POSSIBILITIES

Paying attention to and through Revelation's image of the Whore reveals a picture even more multivalent than the David LaChapelle image referenced at the beginning of this essay. Attending to Revelation's image, we do see that as a metaphorical representation of an imperial city, such as Rome, the image of the Whore is integral to Revelation's critique of empire. As such it indicts imperial power on a number of fronts, including its conspicuous consumption, its economic exploitation of others, its use of violence and lack of concern for human life, and its ability to delude the people of the earth. Even more importantly, the image of the Whore, as mentioned above, points to the seductive nature of assimilation.

Reading through the image of the Whore, we see a more ambivalent image. Even though the image seems scripted to appeal to a male audi-

ence, the image inadvertently sparks the interest of a queer-lesbian reader. I am drawn into the Whore's allure in part because she looks a little queer to me. However, she ultimately resists definition. In this way, the Whore is a true mystery. The allure of this mystery fades as I recognize that John constructs the image by drawing upon the first-century assumption that prostitutes are shameful. The double standard that presents visiting a prostitute as morally acceptable, yet denigrates the prostitute her- or himself, certainly plays into the gender hierarchies of heteronormativity. Furthermore, as I witness the destruction that befalls the Whore, her demise at the hands of the kings of the earth, I am placed in a position of ambivalence. On one hand, I find some satisfaction in the destruction of empire. On the other hand, I am troubled by the image of violence because of my sense of identification with the Whore. It is not always easy to separate the image of the Whore as city from the image of the Whore as woman. Although the image of the Whore's destruction is abhorrent and potentially prohibits one from finding any simple meaning in the text as a woman, it disrupts my gaze enough to force me to consider how I, along with the queer communities in which I participate, have become like the Whore. That is, it forces me to consider whether (or how) I have become drawn into the false promises of empire and its fantasy of power.

Reading Revelation from a queer perspective does not promise easy answers, as we see with the image of the Whore. Aspects of the text offer possible entry points for queer readings of Revelation, including the image of the 144,000 male virgins (Huber, 2008), the ambiguous gender of the Lamb, and the overall rhetorical trope of revealing what is hidden. These possibilities, however, must be negotiated within a text that employs imagery of violence and destruction and that runs the risk of replicating empire, as Stephen D. Moore argues (2006, 118–21). John may need to look at the Whore with a more self-reflective eye: he may have been so amazed by the Whore that he has become dumbstruck, blind to the fact that his narrative replicates the very rhetoric that supports the Whore. Likewise, as we gaze at the Whore or other images within the text, we need to be self-reflective, lest we mimic empire as well.

Further contributing to the difficulties inherent in reading Revelation queerly is the fact that apocalyptic rhetoric has become a central part of the vernacular of those who condemn gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transsexuals and other queers. Disentangling Revelation and its images from this appropriation of apocalyptic rhetoric is a time-consuming task. However, this process will, I hope, yield new ways of thinking about Revelation. At

the very least, through this process we can learn how to negotiate difficult texts, finding ourselves addressed by them and even challenged by them. More importantly, by engaging the texts and traditions of Revelation, we are addressed as potential subjects of imperialistic assimilationist projects, an incredibly important critique for an increasingly accepted LGBT community in twenty-first-century America.

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