
Pulse and the Closet: Frameworks for an Eschatological Discourse

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Introduction

On June 12, 2016, during the Latin Night event in a queer nightclub, Pulse, in Orlando, Florida, a lone shooter, Omar Mateen, killed 49 people. This event was one of the deadliest attacks against the queer community around the world. As a same-gender-loving Latinx living in the United States of America, it is important to emphasize that 90 percent of the victims were queer people of color, particularly the Latinx community. I emphasize this to expose the whitewashing the media did while reporting the massacre. While focused on the “queer” aspect of the tragedy, the media ignored the impact on the Latinx community and people of color.¹

However, some responses from the Latinx community were not to support, but were against, the queer Latinx community.² This experience creates a conundrum for many queer people of color, who are accepted neither by the LGBTQ scenario, which is mostly white, nor by their ethnic community who perpetuates in patriarchal, Cis-hetero-normative ideas by not accepting people with diverse sexual orientation and gender identities. This makes it an intersectional issue that works on the complexities created by the multiplicity of identities. This locates the queer community of color in an ambivalent, liminal social space or a particular no-place, which is never a fully safe space.

In this essay, I explain an understanding of what it could mean to be a queer person of color in United States society, and how the experience of a queer person of color is full of quotidian eschatological events or *eschata*. To develop my argument, I am inspired by Vitor Westhelle’s *Eschatology and Space*, in which he reminds us that the *eschaton* (the last things) is not only a temporal concept that has been the privileged approach of Western Theology, but

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also relates to space—Latitudinal Eschatology.

As an example, eschatology, in temporal terms, uses words such as “before” and “after.” In spatial terms, the walls of Pulse, or nightclubs, spaces that also served as a place for political meetings, are an *eschaton*. For some, there is a difference between the inside and the outside of the nightclub. It is that space between salvation and condemnation. However, this inside is never completely absent from the outside and vice versa. This makes that space an “already but not yet,” or spatially, a space where “all comes together but separate.”

Gender and colonization

To provide some context, today’s United States culture, even though there have been challenges, perceives gender as the binary of male and female, and sexual orientation having heterosexuality as a norm, and the belief that this has been, in time and space, the universal understanding and eternal. However, it is important to destabilize those understandings and recognize that in the Americas, our common understanding of gender and sexual orientation comes from the violence of colonization or *La Conquista*. New Testament scholar Jacqueline Hidalgo in her blog post to *Feminist Studies in Religion*, “Rethinking Religious Rhetorics, Gendercide, and HB2, after Orlando,” points out that during Franciscans’ colonization in California, “believing that their god and their tradition was clear on these matters ... presumed that the lines between ‘men’ and ‘women’ must be easily defined.” However, Hidalgo continues that “these neat binary divisions were not so

1. Steven W. Thrasher, “Latino Advocates Mourn Pulse Shooting Victims: ‘90% Were Hispanic,’” *The Guardian*, June 14, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jun/14/latino-hispanic-orlando-shooting-victims>.

2. Lindsey Bever, “Pastor Refuses to Mourn Orlando Victims: ‘The Tragedy Is That More of Them Didn’t Die,’” *The Washington Post*, June 15, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/06/14/pastor-refuses-to-mourn-orlando-victims-the-tragedy-is-that-more-of-them-didnt-die/?utm_term=.9cbc0fcfef2; Daniel Reynolds, “A Father Refused to Claim Body of Pulse Victim,” *Advocate*, June 24, 2016, <http://www.advocate.com/families/2016/6/24/father-refused-claim-body-Pulse-victim>.

readily apparent to the local native population.”³ There is a need to recognize that in *la conquista* when the *conquistadores* arrived, they not only expropriated the indigenous people who already lived in those lands, but also took dominion over them, imposing their “rational” categories of gender and race upon them.

Puerto Rican theologian Luis N. Rivera Pagán, in his book *A Violent Evangelism*, notes that *the conquistadores* started naming the islands they expropriated, which had a biblical connotation. Rivera Pagán says, “In Genesis... the authority of the first human being, Adam, over all other beings of creation is expressed in his naming faculties. (...) To name is an attribute of dominion.”⁴ Therefore, as Hidalgo reminds us, religious discourses and practices “have been deeply implicated in settler colonial violence and gendercide, undertaken in the name of ‘doing good,’ of doing what is constructed as divinely right and natural.”⁵ Similarly, Marcella Althaus-Reid points out that before the colonization or *la conquista* there was a different understanding of gender performance. Althaus-Reid says, “this is not to say, romantically, that civilizations before the end of the [Indigenous] Grand Narratives were non-patriarchal: they were different, it is true, but the Aztecs, for instance, were known for their hatred of women, while the Incas allowed women a degree of sexual freedom sadly denied when women feel under the virginal influence and the construction of theological decency.”⁶

Tobagonian scholar Steed Davidson correctly points out that “in order to assert masculinity commensurate with the colonizer, colonized men often end up performing a phallogocentric masculinity”⁷ Davidson continues by quoting Frantz Fanon, “The Black man has been occulted, he has been turned into a penis. He is a penis.”⁸ In other words, after *la conquista* society has taken for granted a particular understanding, that was violently imposed, regarding sex, gender, and other identities. Any identity that goes outside of what the *conquistadores* established as moral and right, was labeled as sinful, abomination and perverted.

Queer people of color experience the eschatology of the nightclubs

Queer people, in particular queer people of color, who are trying to find a place to be “safe,” where their identity and humanity will not be ostracized, need to create a space where they can become whole or at least perform their wholeness with all the complexities

3. Jacqueline M. Hidalgo, “Rethinking Religious Rhetorics, Gendercide, and HB2 after Orlando (@theTable: Transcending Transphobia),” *Feminist Studies in Religion* (blog), accessed June 8, 2017, <http://www.fsrinc.org/blog/rethinking-religious-rhetorics/>.

4. Luis N. Rivera, *A Violent Evangelism: The Political and Religious Conquest of the Americas*, 1st edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 10.

5. Hidalgo, “Rethinking Religious Rhetorics, Gendercide, and HB2 after Orlando @theTable.”

6. Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2001), 45.

7. Steed Vernyl Davidson, *Writing/Reading the Bible in Postcolonial Perspective* (Leiden; Boston, Mass.: Brill Academic Pub, 2017), 73.

8. Davidson, *Writing/Reading the Bible*, 73.

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of having intersectional identities. For many queer people of color, nightclubs become that place.

Entering into the history of nightclubs is beyond the scope of this essay. However, I want to focus on one function of nightclubs and what nightclubs represent for many of the people who attend them. First, mainstream society considers nightclubs as “*antros de perdición*.”⁹ This mainstream religious society’s understanding of gender and sexuality holds morality and decency against sexuality. Nightclubs, therefore, are seen as an aberrant space full of immorality. If I follow the current understanding of morality and decency, then, yes, LGBTQ nightclubs are immoral, full of sexuality, sexual relationships, and “prohibited” passions. The nightclub is a space where many things that are considered an abomination outside become holy inside. Therefore, nightclubs are dangerous for mainstream society, because nightclubs in a certain and unperfect way challenge the status quo.

In addition, queer nightclubs can become, for some, a temporary alternative to the discrimination experienced by many queer people of color; they can become a place of belonging for many of them; can become a space where the dominion of Western cis-hetero-normativity is less present. Hence, the walls of the nightclub become an *eschaton*, which at the same time means that to enter a nightclub is to become part of an “eschatological community.” The nightclub is, in an ambivalent sense, a space where outside laws (which are still present) do not govern the people inside, but an internal law arises. This does not mean that this internal law is a better one or that it is not exclusivist. I am not trying to romanticize the queer community of color and nightclubs, however, there are different values inside the nightclubs than outside of them.

Venezuelan same-gender-loving activist, Daniel León-Davis, in an interview with Amy Goodman for Democracy Now, explains the reality of many queer people. He states that “the reality is, gay [lesbians, bisexual and others] and trans people get pushed out of churches all the time, and oftentimes our safe havens become

9. The literal translation from Spanish would be “dens of dooms,” which is a phrase used by many people in Puerto Rico to refer to degenerate places full of depravity i.e., nightclubs.

nightclubs.”¹⁰ To understand more of the role of nightclubs in the LGBTQ community, in particular poor people, Asian-American LGBTQ activist and journalist, Richard Kim in his article written for *The Nation* says:

That was my first lesson that gay bars [*sic*] are more than just licensed establishments where homosexuals pay to drink. Gay bars are therapy for people who can't afford therapy; temples for people who lost their religion, or whose religion lost them; vacations for people who can't go on vacation; homes for folk without families; sanctuaries against aggression. They take sound and fabric and flesh from the ordinary world, and under cover of darkness and the influence of alcohol or drugs, *transform it all into something that scrapes up against utopia*.¹¹

Therefore, the walls of the nightclub, in particular, of Pulse, which also served as a place for political meetings, are an *eschaton*. So far, I have explained how many queer people of color feel inside a nightclub. The eschatological wall of the nightclub separates the inside—a place of safety for some in the queer community—from the outside, a place of oppression and insecurity. Speaking eschatologically, it is possible to say that the *eschaton* in the nightclub makes a clear separation between the inside and the outside. The inside of the nightclub was a place where many queer people of color could be who they are, regardless of their gender identity, sexuality, ethnicity, race and class and so forth.

The eschaton in the closet

Also related to the queer community, we have the experience and symbolic action of coming out. The expression of coming out creates a spatial reference to reveal a sexual orientation and/or gender identity. In the 1960s, the LGBTQ community incorporated the idea of the closet or *armario*. The term *armario*, Spanish for closet, come from the Latin *Armarium* which represented a space where firearms were guarded. Chris Glaser, in his book *Coming Out as Sacramento*, observes, “The closet became a metaphor for *hiding* one’s sexual identity, whether for oneself, other gay people, or everyone else.”¹² The existence of the closet in the LGBTQ community, most of the time, is perceived as negative for historical and spatial reasons. However, while many people need to be outspoken of their sexual and gender identity, for others the closet, like it was for me on a certain occasion, was a space for survival. In other words, for some the closet is a space for hiding, for others the closet, stopped being a place of refusal to accept one’s identity, and became a space where the person had some type of control. For

10. “Nightclubs Are Our Safe Havens: Longtime Patron of Orlando LGBT Club Reacts to Mass Shooting | Democracy Now!” accessed June 12, 2017, https://www.democracynow.org/2016/6/13/nightclubs_are_our_safe_havens_longtime.

11. Richard Kim, “Please Don’t Stop the Music,” *The Nation*, accessed June 12, 2017, <https://www.thenation.com/article/please-dont-stop-the-music/>. Emphasis is mine.

12. Chris Glaser, *Coming Out as Sacramento*, 1st edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 9.

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others the closet is both, a space of hiding and a space of control. The closet seems to be, as is the nightclub for queer people of color, an area of safety against the oppression of a system that decided that a particular group of individuals are less human than others.

I mentioned above that for many in the LGBTQ community, to come out means to be fully outspoken about their sexuality and gender identity, almost as if you need to write it on their forehead so that everybody will know. Sometimes that is how people introduce themselves to someone else: “My name is [X], and I am [sexual orientation or gender identity].” However, many queer friends of color find themselves pushed by many of their white counterparts to reveal their identity willy-nilly. If they do not do it, they are not “gay enough,” or they are not welcome in the community. For this reason, many queer people of color, who in their racial/ethnic community are discriminated against because of their gender identity or sexual orientation, are also discriminated in the LGBTQ community, because their experiences of survival have taught them differently.

Returning to the concept of coming out, Glaser explains that “is a lifelong process, not only because there are always new people to whom the sacred in our lives may be revealed [apocalyptic?], but also because overcoming all impediments to celebrate our ‘holiness’ requires a lifetime.”¹³ To come out seems to be both an apocalyptic experience, in the sense that it is a revelation of oppression suffered by the queer person of color, and at the same time a continual eschatological experience, where people never fully go outside the closet. I am not trying to give up the concept of the closet, but I want to acknowledge the closet as a space that brings both salvation and condemnation at the same time.

The closet is a liminal space, a space of solitude and loneliness at the same time. A distinction that makes sense in English, but not in Spanish because both translate to the same word—*soledad*. The closet is a space of *soledad*. To come out or not can function as a way for some to find a safer and braver space. It is more than

13. Glaser, *Coming Out*, 11.

only inside or outside because, as at the Pulse, inside and outside are both life-giving and risk death. Pulse and the Closet are spaces where one arrived with a stethoscope, where one is constantly measuring and monitoring the pulse of the situation. Therefore, the closet, which is where many marginal people live, is, also, a *choratic* (as we are going to discuss below) space because it is never a fully safe space. Pulse and the closet function as a safe, as well as an unsecured, space, and its walls let pass both gift and death, which as Westhelle says “are the *eschata* par excellence.”¹⁴

Eschatological discourse

Westhelle, in his book *Eschatology and Space*, challenges the western paradigm of thinking about eschatology only with a temporal perspective and exhorts us to see eschatology also through spatial lenses. He introduces the term *chora* (*Khora*), which in the Greek refers to the spaces between spaces “a space produced in the rupture of space that in itself is no space.”¹⁵ Therefore, *Chora* is a place that has its place and at the same time/space does not belong; it is a place that gives particular security, and at the same time/space, it can give or bring death. *Chora* is a space that is no-place. Westhelle also explains that “in the *chora*, one has not crossed over yet but no longer has a space of belonging. In other words, it is no longer a *topos* [place] and not yet a *utopia* [good place and/or no place], much less a *eutopia*, a fair place.”¹⁶

We can see the choragic at two levels, both the wall of the space and the inside of the space. Because, even if it is an inside it is still a symbolic no place. On the one hand, Pulse and the closet and their material and symbolic walls are eschatological spaces—where “each Estrangement and intimacy meet other.”¹⁷ On the one hand, at the wall you have the space between “two” apparent worlds—center and margins, inside and outside. On the other hand, the inside of Pulse in the Latin Night, has both an experience where you can engage in an intimacy and indecency with yourself and others, and therefore be, to a certain extent, “fully” yourself, both a person of color and a queer person at the same time without the need to negotiate which identities to perform; and find the hostility and estrangement that permeates the *wall* such as Omar Mateen who attacked and shot every/body inside.

The walls of Pulse and the closet, like the skin, are an *eschata* and a *choratic* space where they can provide gifts and death. Westhelle, using the human skin as an example, says:

The human skin, its orifices and pores, are what allow for the preservation and furthering of life as it is through these openings that nutrition happens. They are also the means via which waste is disposed and of all reproduction is made possible. But the same pores and orifices are also

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the entrance gate of viruses and bacteria that threaten the organism with annihilation. In other words, these orifices are pathways for “marginal stuff of the most obvious kind.”¹⁸

The massacre on Pulse reveals a similar experience. Omar Mateen permeates (from outside) the eschatological membrane, the walls of the establishment (the skin), and like the virus or bacteria kills the inside. However, the walls of Pulse and the closet let things go out from the margins, and infest the center like a virus or bacteria, which with the LGBTQ or queer community of color challenges the social cis-hetero normativity and white supremacy, not in a way of disposing, but as a way of transforming.

Westhelle mentions the changing in frameworks regarding temporal eschatology to a spatial one, “The riddle of the ‘already, and the not-yet’ is muted when one starts thinking more topologically and less chronologically. The kingdom is nearby. Adjacent, to our own reality, present, yet veiled in *the boundaries we avoid, and in the margins, we protect ourselves from.*”¹⁹ Westhelle seems to locate himself in the center. It is true, the center tries to protect themselves from the margins. However, some of us live in that boundary that they try to protect themselves from, and yes, we live in that indecency, that is described as uncivilized space, yet the space where one could find the truly marginal God.

However, should we talk about *center* or *centers*? In the Latin Night at Pulse, is it only one center that penetrates the inside? Maybe not, there are many centers such as U.S. imperial normativity, Cis-hetero normativity entering the space. Therefore, it is not only the center and *chora*, but it is a queer relationship that disrupts that binary. For queer people of color, it is not only one center that penetrates them, but several.

Queer spaces are indecent places, places that many people do not want to be part of because it is a place where things are distorted and do not have a clear meaning. A queer space is a space of other sexualities, of indecency, a space of many possibilities, or

14. Vitor Westhelle, *Eschatology and Space: The Lost Dimension in Theology Past and Present*, 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 104.

15. Westhelle, 102.

16. Westhelle, 99.

17. Westhelle, 100.

18. Westhelle, *Eschatology and Space*, 104–5.

19. Westhelle, *Eschatology and Space*, 27. Emphasis is mine.

as Hidalgo rightly suggests “New worlds.”²⁰ Like *chora*, the queer space is a space of uncertainty; space of disorder, but not because of the absence of order as in the *chora*, but because of multiple competing orders (centers). It can be a scary place for some people who like order. However, there are many people who already live in that place. And these are the people who create the possibility for the messianic. Because this is a space that disrupts the system, which is why the system wants to control it and contain it hege- monically. It is an antinomian space.

It is the queering of inside and outside, the multidirectional transgressions across the semipermeable eschata of the walls of Pulse and the closet where we find a messianic. Sure, all directions risk death, and death infected the inner sanctuaries of queer spaces. However, as a queer space, as a choratic space that births queer life, Pulse produced and perpetuated an infectious queering of the world outside. The inside had already been outside, and the threat of the open futures and uncertain fissures of queerness produced the fear that invaded the walls of Pulse. So, while the salvific movement of that horrible night was to exit the “safe space” of Pulse, in truth, the messianic power of queerness had already existed, and had already been in the world, spreading its gospel.

It is when the direction of the movement changes that the messianic event might happen; when the indecency trespasses the eschaton of Pulse, the Nightclub, and the closet and reaches out of the center. However, this messianism is not necessarily the “weak messianic power”²¹ that Benjamin mentions in his *thesis of Philosophy of History* but becomes a direct challenge to the normative, authority, and the Magisterium. This could become a strong messianism that will detach itself from cis-hetero-male religions. According to Ruether, Charlotte Perkins Gilman describes male religion as, “focused on killing and a fantasized flight from death into an abstract realm of the imagination, is escapist. It prevents humans from a commitment to their only real and possible task, which is finite service to the next generation on this planet.”²² It is the queer Gospel that will bring the good news and the messianic.

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20. Hidalgo, “Rethinking Religious Rhetorics, Gendercide, and HB2 after Orlando @theTable.”

21. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1968).

22. Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Eschatology and Feminism,” in *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, Mary Potter Engel and Susan B. Thistlethwaite, eds. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998), 131.