

Article

Malaysian Roman Catholic Transgender Men, Simultaneous Failures in Gender and Religion, and Customisations of Spirituality and Ethical Living

Joseph N. Goh 

School of Arts and Social Sciences, Monash University Malaysia, Subang Jaya 47500, Selangor, Malaysia;
joseph.goh@monash.edu

Abstract: In conservative, mostly Malay-Muslim Malaysia, transgender people are frequently articulated in mainstream Muslim and Christian discourses as gendered anomalies and recalcitrant religious dissidents. Due to the fact that normative gender identities and expressions are generally indexed as valid and, thus, ‘successful’ indicators of social and religious coherence among Malaysians, transgender people who are unable and/or unwilling to abide by regimes of gendered and religious normativity are regarded with scorn as simultaneous failures in gender and religion. By framing my analysis and theorising of selected narratives from two Malaysian Roman Catholic transgender men through Judith/Jack Halberstam’s concept of the queer art of failure, I argue that some transgender men of faith actively repudiate such disdainful perceptions by embracing gendered and religious failures, an intellectual resolution which they then translate into strategic customisations of their own spirituality and ethical living. These customisations, anchored in an unshakeable belief in God’s loving support and their inherent value in God’s eyes despite ecclesiastical disapproval, are acts of subversion that respond impertinently to and defy hegemonic ideologies of gender and religion, and re-imagine alternative knowledges, values, powers, and pleasures towards meaningful forms of liveability.

Keywords: Roman Catholicism; Christianity; ethics; gender; religion; queer; spirituality; transgender; Malaysia



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1. Introduction

Transgender people in Malaysia are often regarded as gendered aberrations and wilful apostates in mainstream Muslim and Christian discourses and are accused of possessing a diminished sense of morality due to their ‘aberrant’ gender identities and expressions. Owing to the fact that normative gender identities, expressions, roles, and embodiments are ordinarily considered as legitimate social markers as well as incontrovertible divine endowments for the ‘successful’ attainment of ethical living in conservative Malaysian circles, transgender people who are unable and/or unwilling to conform to regimes of gendered and religious normativity are frequently perceived and denounced as simultaneous failures in gender and religion.

In this article, I argue that some transgender men of faith respond to such contemptuous attitudes through a *purposeful embrace of gendered and religious failures*. This idiomatic expression is an intellectual resolution that refuses to align with dominant modes of gender and religious ‘validity’. This embrace follows through and takes concrete form in the strategic *customisations of their own spirituality and ethical living*, which function as a repudiation of gendered and religious surveillance and regulation, and a bold re-imagining of alternative knowledges, performances, and embodiments of gendered and religious liveability. These customisations, which are subversive acts that talk back to and challenge hegemonic systems, are characterised by a suspicion of and refusal to comply with dominant ideologies, an aversion towards normative assemblages, an excavation of absurd possibilities,

a retrieval of anomalous, invisible, transgressive, and eliminated epistemologies, and a re-ordering of insights and perceptions.

The past few decades have seen growing scholarly interest in transgender issues in religion around the world, particularly in Christianity. These include the complex relationships of transgender people with their religious communities (Goh 2020b; Levy and Lo 2013), and trans-affirming biblical (Burke 2013; Reay 2009), theological (Hipscher 2009; Tanis 2003; Whitehead and Whitehead 2014), and ethical interpretations (Childs 2009; Kolakowski 1997). There has also been a rise in Malaysian studies on the influence of religion, namely Islam, on transgender lives. Some academic discussions ascribe the origins of transgender identities to developmental disorders and hypersexual tendencies, and level accusations of wilful defiance of religious proscriptions against transgender communities (Hassan and Ghazali 2013; Zainuddin and Mahdy 2017). Others concentrate on the impact of Islam on sexual health (Barmania and Aljunid 2016; Gibson et al. 2016), religio-legal implications for transgender communities (Goh and Kananatu 2019; Teh 2008), and the impact of a disabling environment on the everyday faith experiences of transgender people (Slamah 2005; Teh 2002). Scholars also point out the creative recasting of religious tenets to accommodate transgender liveability (Goh 2019, 2021).

Penned at the intersection of queer studies, transgender studies, spirituality studies, and ethics, my article contributes to a wider pool of academic literature pertaining to innumerable LGBTQ people of faith around the world who are perceived and treated as gendered and religious failures on numerous levels, but then devise notable strategies which permit their gender, sexual, spiritual, and ethical identities and practices to converge in meaningful and life-giving ways (for example, Cornelio and Dagle 2022; Shah 2018; P. Wong 2015; Whitehead and Whitehead 2014). In a similar vein, my own research on the spiritual experiences of transgender people reminds me that such strategies are not birthed from the relinquishment of either gender identity or religiosity/spirituality, but from a concomitant practice of performing gender as people of faith and performing faith as transgender people.

My article is organised in this manner: After a brief explanation of several key terms, I examine how secular and religious laws and opinions police, persecute, and prosecute LGBTQ Malaysians. Here, I also provide examples of how LGBTQ communities are discursively crafted by religious leaders and politicians as gendered and sexual anomalies, sinful embodiments, and immoral subjects. Following a discussion on my location, method, methodology, and framework, I analyse and theorise selected narratives of two Malaysian Roman Catholic transgender men—Schulz and Superman¹—on their negotiations and navigations of gender, spirituality, and ethical living.

2. Key Terms

‘LGBTQ’ refers to individuals whose genders, sexes, and sexualities do not cohere with socio-cultural norms in Malaysia. It is useful to bear in mind that the average Malaysian does not ordinarily distinguish between non-normative gender and sexual identities in everyday speech (see Iskandar 2018), thus disrupting ‘the cultural elaboration of distinctions found in English and many other languages among transvestism, transsexualism, hermaphroditism (intersexuality), homosexuality, and effeminate behavior’ (Peletz 2002, p. 244). The Western-grown acronym ‘LGBTQ’ and its individual descriptors are readily co-opted by Malaysians of diverse genders and sexualities as self-empowering alternatives to traditionally pejorative terms in Malay, Chinese, and Indian languages that conflate gender and sexual identities and expressions, such as *‘lembut, sotong, patah, bapak, pondan, kedik, lalang, kunyit, lala, potaipayeh, ombhothu, gēi lóu, sí fāt gwái, bō lí, â qúa [and] ná yǐng’* (Goh 2020a, p. 54).

Interestingly, the truncated term ‘LGBT’ has gained popularity in the Malaysian news media since the start of the twenty-first century (Ferrarese et al. 2015), possibly to distinguish a ‘Western import’ from valorised conservative ‘Asian values’ of gender and sexuality. Alongside the aforementioned slurs, ‘LGBT’ is used as a collective derogatory term for all

Malaysians who do not comply with heteronormative and cisnormative prescriptions. As such, any overarching condemnation of non-normative gender and sexual identities and practices also applies to transgender communities.

I use ‘gendered’ (as contrasted with ‘gender’) to mean ‘the collective beliefs society has about behavior relating to a specific gender that may result in stereotypes’ (Shannon 2019, p. 599). I use the terms ‘morality’, ‘ethics’, and their cognates broadly and interchangeably to refer to principles of human conduct that are deemed right or wrong. I imitate scholars who use ‘faith’ interchangeably with religious and/or spiritual beliefs and practices (see Kidd and Witten 2008; Roseborough 2006; Yip 2005). In order to further clarify what I mentioned at the outset as customisations of spirituality and ethical living, I draw on Andrew K. T. Yip’s (2010, p. 38) spiritual framing of the transgender person as one who embarks on ‘an embodied process of spiritual growth, intimately connected to [their] relationship with [themselves], God, and others, as a gendered, sexual, and spiritual being’ to make sense of the transgender self. This process prioritises ‘personal experience ... over tradition and religious authority structures’ (Yip 2010, p. 47) without necessarily demanding an absolute detachment from theological and religious precepts and affiliations which are customarily more formal and rigid in nature. The transgender men of faith I feature in this article radically imagine God’s involvement in their lives beyond ecclesiastical decrees, which prompts them to comprehend and act ethically towards *both* themselves *and* others with a sense of loving and empowering appreciation, affirmation, dignity, integrity, respect, and sincerity.

3. Background: Law, Religion, Gender and Sexuality

Malaysia, ‘a representative democracy with a constitutional monarchy’ (Luhur et al. 2020) is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country in Southeast Asia with a population of 32.6 million people (Department of Statistics, Malaysia 2019). Malay-Muslims constitute the ethnic and religious majority of Malaysians (Liow 2009). Most Malaysians continue to wield religion as ethnic and socio-cultural markers of distinction (Aminnuddin 2020). Deep conservatism permeates every level of life and trickles down to issues of gender and sexuality and affects the lives of LGBTQ people (Lee 2011). In what follows, I describe how secular laws, religious injunctions, and religio-political rhetoric condition and circumscribe the lives of LGBTQ Malaysians and portray them as immoral and unethical.

3.1. Secular and Islamic Laws

There are currently no secular laws that specifically protect people of diverse genders and sexualities (Anis 2012). Conversely, the Malaysian Penal Code (The Commissioner of Law Revision, Malaysia 1997, sec. 377A–C) criminalises oral and anal penetrative sexual practices for all citizens, which has largely affected gay men (Malay Mail Online 2017). The Minor Offences Act of 1955 (The Commissioner of Law Revision, Malaysia 2006a, sec. 21) allows the arrest of transgender women or *mak nyah* for ‘indecent behaviour’ (Slamah 2005). Such secular laws find steady alliances with various forms of Islamic jurisprudence such as *Syariah* laws, which are enacted in slightly different ways in each Malaysian state and ostensibly apply exclusively to Malaysian Muslims.

In the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur and Labuan for instance, the *Syariah Criminal Offences (Federal Territory) Act 1997* (The Commissioner of Law Revision, Malaysia 2006b) forbids acts of “*liwat*” [or] sexual relations between male persons’ (sec. 25) and “*musahagah*” [or] sexual relations between female persons’ (sec. 26). Hence, transgender women and men who are regarded as biological males/men and females/women, respectively, can theoretically be indicted for same-sex activities. This particular law, which also penalises a ‘male person ... in any public place [who] wears a woman’s attire and poses as a woman for immoral purposes’ (The Commissioner of Law Revision, Malaysia 2006b, sec. 28), and *Syariah* laws in the states of Perlis, Pahang, and Sabah that impose fines and imprisonment on women who appear as men (Legislature of the State of Pahang 2013; Legislature of the State of Perlis 1993; Legislature of the State of Sabah 1995) are

obviously targeted at transgender people. I contend that that these laws do not only create and sustain a considerable measure of vulnerability for LGBTQ people on various levels. They also scaffold the discursive proliferation of anti-LGBTQ sentiments, and subsequent condemnation of LGBTQ people as immoral by Malaysian religious and secular leaders.

The most visibly vitriolic efforts of Islamic authorities in suppressing LGBTQ identities and expressions are arguably performed by the *Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia* (JAKIM) (Department of Islamic Development Malaysia). JAKIM considers any divergence from heteronormativity and cisnormativity a matter of grievous sin (cited in [Irawan 2018](#)). It reviles human rights efforts as insidious ploys by LGBTQ communities to erode Islamic values (cited in [Zahid 2013](#)). It has indefatigably sought out people with ‘gender confusion’ (quoted in [Avineshwaran 2014](#)) to join its rehabilitation camps and has even produced a smartphone application called ‘*Hijrah Diri*’ (‘Personal Migration/Conversion’) to amplify its efforts in reparative therapy (cited in D. J. [Wong 2022](#)). In its recently developed Islamic Social Action Plan (PTSI) 2019–2025, JAKIM plans ‘to address social problems in the Muslim community’, which includes LGBTQ communities alongside ‘drug addiction, teenage pregnancy, abortion, divorce, homelessness, HIV/AIDS transmission, alcohol addiction, free sex, incest, juvenile crime and more’ (quoted in [Zainal 2022](#); see also [JAKIM 2022](#)).

Malaysian Muslim politicians and community leaders have played a significant role in the production of deprecatory rhetoric against people of diverse genders and sexualities. In 2012, then Deputy Minister for Education Mohd Puad Zarkashi announced that ‘the Ministry of Education is committed to ensuring that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender ... symptoms do not ... damage the morals (*merosakkan moral*) of students’ (quoted in [Bernama 2012](#)). In 2018, former Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department Mujahid Yusof Rawa declared that the Malaysian government ‘do[es] not support LGBT’ because ‘it is an act that contradicts Islam (*bercanggah dengan Islam*), [and] violates morals and customs (*melanggar moral dan adat*)’ (quoted in [Zulkifli 2018](#)).

Mohd Jamizal Zainol, president of the Policy and Economic Affairs Centre of Malaysia Foundation condemned LGBTQ activities as ‘deviant sex (*seks songsang*)’ and referred to same-sex activities as ‘an accursed/a condemned and immoral act (*perbuatan terkutuk dan tidak bermoral*)’ ([Zainol 2018](#)). Protesting the public display of the portraits of queer and transgender activists at an arts festival in the Malaysian state of Penang in 2018, Mufti (Islamic jurist) Wan Mohd Salim Wan Mohd Noor commented that what LGBTQ people are fighting for are ‘animal liberties’ (*kebebasan haiwan*) because human liberties (*kebebasan manusia*) must be bound by religion and customs’, and that Islam prohibits any form of the arts which are ‘wild and immoral (*liar dan tidak bermoral*), and which can propel the nation to ruin’ (quoted in [Sinar Harian 2018](#)).

3.2. Christian Viewpoints

Although Christians are a religious minority in Malaysia ([Yeoh 2011](#)), and while Islamic homophobic and transphobic legalities, pursuits, and sentiments typically and ostensibly apply to Muslim communities alone, their resonance with mainstream Malaysian Christian doctrines and popular perceptions cannot be underestimated. Christian teachings on matters of gender and sexuality do not carry the force of law in the country but exert immense influence on LGBTQ people of Christian and other faiths. Many of them detect parallels of condemnation between ecclesiastical and theological teachings, secular laws, Islamic stipulations, and anti-LGBTQ orations from politicians and religious leaders.

For instance, the [National Evangelical Christian Fellowship Malaysia \(NECF\)](#) ([National Evangelical Christian Fellowship Malaysia \(NECF\)](#)) (2007) affirms that it cannot ‘condone homosexual behaviour because it is incompatible with God’s will as revealed in the Scriptures’. Pastor Edmund Smith of Real Love Ministry in the Malaysian state of Melaka who identifies as ex-gay/ex-transgender refers to LGBTQ people as sexually broken and addicted to sex. He asserts that ‘heterosexuality is God’s plan’ (quoted in [Lum 2013](#)) and that God ‘condemns engagement in a homosexual lifestyle’ (cited in [Lum 2014](#)). Over the years, the Roman Catholic Church has organised a series of anti-LGBTQ events

which are facilitated by its clergymen (for instance, [Goh 2015](#)). The Council of Bishops of the Methodist Church in Malaysia avers that ‘the Bible is not only unsupportive of same-sex intercourse, but it is against any sexual relationship that deviates from the one man-one woman sexual act within the context of marriage’ (quoted in [Borneo Post Online 2021](#)). LGBTQ Malaysians are constructed in Malaysian Islam and Christianity as traitors of national ideals, cultural outlaws, and intractable sinners.

4. Location, Method and Methodology

As a cisgender gay man, transgender ally, and supporter of LGBTQ rights, I acknowledge that I speak *with* rather than *for* transgender communities both in terms of presenting Malaysian transgender issues and theorising my research findings. This article supplies particular vignettes of everyday life among Malaysian transgender men that speak to their gender and religious identities and practices, rather than present them and their experiences as representative of all Malaysian transgender men.

Schulz and Superman are two English-speaking, educated, upwardly mobile, and urban-dwelling research participants out of fifteen transgender men whom I met in person and interviewed on their lived experiences of gender identity, social interaction, and religious practice for a research project on Malaysian transgender men. These men professed and shared on a diverse range of Islamic, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, and humanistic beliefs, in addition to personal spiritualities and ethics. Although there were two other men who came from a Roman Catholic background, both had denounced any affiliation with official Roman Catholicism. I intentionally chose to include the narratives of Schulz and Superman who considered themselves as practising Roman Catholics, and due to their spirited articulations of gender, faith, and ethics as transgender men. Schulz is a 28-year-old Indian logistician, and Superman is a 33-year-old Peranakan² public servant and lawyer. Both men profess varying degrees of affiliation with Roman Catholicism. My choice of showcasing the lived experiences of Christian rather than Malay-Muslim transgender men in this article is a purposeful one that aims to highlight their multiple minority status in terms of ethnicity, religion, and gender.

I sought the help of the online support group [Transmen of Malaysia \(2018\)](#) as a research gatekeeper for my project, chiefly to recruit research participants. I also approached my own personal contacts. Research participants were provided with a detailed explanatory statement of the project and a list of semi-structured questions ahead of our meetings. Before the in-depth, face-to-face interviews began, they signed consent forms with pseudonyms to indicate their agreement to participate in the project and for any data from the interviews to be used for future publications. The interviews, which lasted between 1.0 and 1.5 hours each, were audio-recorded, transcribed, analysed, and thematised using ATLAS.ti 7.0, a Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software. ATLAS.ti assisted me in coding the data or performing ‘a close study of the data and [laying] the foundation for synthesizing’ ([Charmaz 2005](#), p. 517), which I could then organise according to distinctive but interconnected themes. An important theme which emerged—a small section of which forms this article—was the critical recasting of ideas of religion and ethics by transgender men.

My analysis and theorising utilise a Constructivist Grounded Theory Methodology (CGTM) as propounded by Kathy Charmaz. As ‘both ... a method of inquiry and ... product of inquiry’ ([Charmaz 2005](#), p. 507) that holds particular import for social justice issues, CGTM is an inductive analytical strategy that constructs knowledge from the ground up by drawing on the unique lived experiences, circumstances, and contexts of human beings. CGTM’s postulation that ‘no analysis is neutral [and researchers] do not come to [their] studies uninitiated’ ([Charmaz 2005](#), p. 510) points to the value of extant scholarship and analytical frameworks as ‘sensitizing concepts’ ([Charmaz 2005](#), p. 512) in research processes that invoke this methodology.

CGTM posits that knowledge is not a latent commodity which is discovered by the researcher upon an excavation of the research participant’s lived experiences, but co-constructed by *both* the researcher *and* research participant during and after their exchanges.

CGTM acts as an intuitive, interpretive, and contemplative tool of research,³ in which the biases of both parties are channelled productively into the research project for political poignancy. As such, ‘social justice research . . . proceeds from researchers’ and participants’ joint efforts and commitments to change practices’ (Charmaz 2005, p. 512).

5. Framework

While their distinct departures from gendered and religious norms would be construed by many Malaysians as evidence of failures in gender and religion, Schulz and Superman do not explicitly see themselves as gendered and religious failures when they recount their lived experiences. They do not refer to their repudiation of these norms in favour of alternative strategies in spirituality and ethical living as their embrace of gendered and religious failures. These are expressions I coined when I deployed Judith/Jack Halberstam’s concept of the queer art of failure to analyse, interpret, and theorise these two men’s visions of what it means to be transgender, spiritual, and ethical.

Their customisations of spirituality and ethical living are resoundingly evocative of that which Halberstam (2011, p. 88) calls a queer of failure and ‘an art of unbecoming’, which are idiomatic expressions to describe ‘a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique’. As I will reveal later, both men eventually realise and resign themselves to the reality that they will never receive the endorsement of Roman Catholicism. It is this ‘refusal of [normative] legibility’ (Halberstam 2011, p. 88) for both men that marks the queer art of failure—and what is ‘the queer art of failure [which] turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable’ (Halberstam 2011, p. 88) if not an *embrace* of that very queer art of failure in terms of accepting and learning to live with the fact that they can never conform to normative expectations of gender and religion? Hence, my notion of the embrace of failures in gender and religion is also an idiomatic expression which not only mirrors public perceptions of these failures, or merely serves as an acceptance of marginalisation or perceived failures on the part of these men, but highlights the gravitas of ‘losing face’ which they experience as transgender Roman Catholics in Malaysia.

In framing the experiences of these two men through Halberstam’s theoretical ideas, I propose that failure is the gateway through which the transgender man instinctively and strategically resists and extricates himself from the impossible obligations of socio-religiously sanctioned norms. Failure informs him that ‘alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent’ (Halberstam 2011, p. 88). Therefore, the queer art of failure ‘quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being’ (Halberstam 2011, p. 88) in relation to the transgender man. When he understands that his inability and/or unwillingness to abide by the hegemonic demands of gender and religion need not translate into a categorical termination of success, he becomes aware that his dissenting spirit and its operations do not automatically preclude other options of meaningful liveability.

The transgender man who embraces the queer art of failure gradually begins to imagine more vividly the alternative narratives, epistemologies, liberties, values, powers, and pleasures that are within his realm of possibility. The customisations of spirituality and ethical living, which concretely follow from the embrace of gendered and religious failures, create a paradoxical, interstitial, and tension-filled space which Schulz and Superman inhabit by virtue of being both transgender and Roman Catholic. Yet it is also within this space that both men can expose and upend power-laden notions of success and failure, inclusion and exclusion, and validity and invalidity.

6. Results and Discussion: Customisations of Spirituality and Ethical Living

6.1. Schulz

Over the course of the interview, Schulz discloses to me that he was born and baptised into ‘a very orthodox Catholic family’. He admits that he actively practises Roman Catholicism—which he holds dear to his heart—with ‘a few fallouts here and there’, or

occasional lapses in the doings of his faith. Nevertheless, he is not oblivious to prevalent sentiments in the local Roman Catholic hierarchy and community that ‘the transgender community is going against the church teachings’. Schulz recounts an incident during which he feels pressured to choose either being truthful to himself as a transgender man or an unmitigated compliance with Roman Catholicism’s teachings on gender:

While I was ... finding out ... to see if I really wanted this whole journey for the rest of my life of being a man, right ... So I went all the way to meet this one priest ... His final reason was just this, ‘no matter what, I hope you do not go through that transition because the body is a temple of God’.

Faced with a religiously inflected dilemma of gender transitioning and living permanently as a man, Schulz decides to seek counsel from a Roman Catholic priest who evidently acts as the arbitrator of gender ethics by virtue of being a recognised religious leader. As is the case elsewhere, Christian leadership customarily perceives itself as *the* authority on matters of diverse genders and sexualities (Campos et al. 2022; Levy and Lo 2013; Naidu 2013), and it is not uncommon for LGBTQ Malaysians of faith to consult and defer to religious leaders. After a period of discussion, the priest advises against gender transitioning based on his conviction that Schulz’s body as ‘a temple of God’ belongs to God in its perfect and pristine state, and Schulz does not have the prerogative to do with it as he pleases.

The Roman Catholic Church has issued some key teachings which reveal its position against gender diversity. For instance, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Catholic Church 1997, para. 2334) conflates ‘male and female’ with ‘man and woman’ in its exegesis of God’s creation of human beings. In 2000, ‘the Vatican’s doctrinal congregation ... sent church leaders a confidential document concluding that “sex-change” procedures do not change a person’s gender in the eyes of the church’, based on ‘the key point ... that the (transsexual) surgical operation is so superficial and external that it does not change the personality’ (cited in Norton 2011) of the one who undergoes gender transitioning. In his post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris laetitia*, Pope Francis (2016, para. 56) affirmed the inseparability of sex and gender, lambasted ‘an ideology of gender’ that purportedly sought to erase gender complementarity and sexual difference to the detriment of the human race, and condemned such ideas as usurping the creative role of God and assailing the cohesiveness of the nuclear family. More recently, the *Congregation for Catholic Education* (2019) reiterated Pope Francis’ stance in *Amoris laetitia*, suggested that gender diversity and fluidity obstruct personal identity, re-emphasised the necessity of sexual difference for procreation, and rehearsed the unproblematic assumption that gender must correspond strictly to genitalia as determined by God. I contend that such theo-anthropological ideas spawn a predominantly *anatomical framework* which the Church deploys to reflect upon, decipher, and appraise transgender bodies and lives.

As such, the idealisation and hyper-sacralisation of cisgender bodies are performed through adherence to the notion of a divinely defined ontological fixity, a notion which effectively disregards the actual ‘profound embodied interiority and lived experiences’ (Goh 2016, pp. 124–25) of transgender people, and reflects ‘the Roman Catholic Church’s rejection of a half century of development on human anthropology’ (Hunt 2019). It is more than likely that such an outlook underpins the clergyman’s pastoral response when he implies that Schulz is obliged to preserve an unsullied condition of his ‘temple’ as a person who was assigned female at birth. If Schulz proceeds with gender transitioning, he is usurping God’s rightful dominance over his body and opposing God. Yet the priest’s ensuing words unexpectedly become a game changer for Schulz:

‘And just know, no matter what, God loves you’. Erm, to a certain extent, only the last part I agreed with (laughs) ... But there was no stopping, the eagerness to transition grew even stronger. Maybe because of the ... assurance that he gave me, no matter what, ‘God still loves you’. So, it shouldn’t be a problem, like no matter what, even if I choose to take this decision of going through hormone replacement therapy or surgeries for that matter, ‘God still loves you!’ ... God

views us as his child. As a creation of his. What is, is what you, you give to others or the world is from your heart, it's love. At the end of the day it boils down to love.

What I find especially noteworthy is that Schulz's decision to pursue his heartfelt gender identity is less an adverse reaction to the priest's advice against 'going through hormone replacement therapy or surgeries' than it is a response to an unequivocal assurance *from the same priest* that—and as he utters several times—'God still loves [him] as [God's] child [and] a creation of [God]' regardless of his final decision. In speaking to an official representative of a mainstream Christian institution that disapproves of transgender identities and expressions, Schulz encounters an unanticipated source of affirmation and encouragement to advance towards bodily modification.

Upon hearing this unambiguous assurance of God's love for him from someone whom he highly regards as God's agent 'no matter what' choice he makes, Schulz no longer attaches any significant degree of importance to this agent's ill opinion of gender transitioning. Instead, his 'eagerness to transition [grows] even stronger'. As someone who refuses to jettison *either* his gender identity *or* religious faith in order to conform to the regimes of gendered and religious normativity, Schulz is conscious of the fact that he inevitably embodies simultaneous failures in gender and religion. Consequently, he embraces gendered and religious failures as a queer art, and thereafter actively customises his spirituality and ethical living, which are illuminated by the certainty of God's love rather than loathing for him, and the designation of God's love as the ultimate authority for ratifying his dual identity as transgender and Roman Catholic. Furthermore, he becomes aware that he is loved 'as [God's] child [and] a creation of [God]' not *despite* gender transitioning but *within and throughout* the process of gender transitioning. This realisation echoes Jakob Hero's (2012, p. 144) theological assertion that gender transitioning is a vocation to 'actively [participate] alongside of God in the lifelong project of creation'.

I propose that the notion of God's calling to human beings to collaborate with God in their gendered journeys can also be interpreted as God's own ethical principle of sharing God's creative prowess with transgender people. This is a *Divine Ethic of Unqualified Love* which grants transgender people access to a participatory undertaking with God 'through which [they] can flourish as moral agents, embodying integrity and human dignity on their paths to gender comfort and congruity' (Hero 2012, p. 144). God's ethical principle from God's heart seems to touch and inspire Schulz's heart. Being acutely cognisant of the reality that he is the beneficiary of God's altruistic and lavish affection helps him to understand that his customisation of spirituality and ethical living cannot merely be an exercise in self-indulgence, but must spur him on to treat others in a loving manner, to 'give to others or the world . . . from [his] heart'. Moreover, he realises that to act lovingly towards others is to act ethically, and to act ethically towards others is to act lovingly.

6.2. Superman

In the few remaining minutes that led up to the commencement of the interview, Superman remarked to me that he believes in both Roman Catholicism and Universal Love. I was mystified by his words, but I interviewed him first on issues of gender identity construction, gender transitioning, gender dysphoria, relationships with family, friends and colleagues, and political and legal attitudes towards transgender men. When the moment arrived for me to interview him on matters of religion and spirituality, I posed several questions to him such as 'Can you explain what your faith is, and how it is related to your identity?', 'Do you have a name for this spirituality?', and 'How do you think God looks at you?'. Although Superman furnished me with a lengthy, enthusiastic, and thick description of his spirituality, I am only showcasing some of his more pertinent musings in this section:

My faith is not my religion . . . My spiritual base is love . . . I practise spirituality above my religious faith . . . I also saw my faith in Jesus getting stronger. Because he is the role model of love . . . I have to . . . centre my life, my focus, my thoughts, my behaviour . . . with love.

The notion of ‘faith’ in Superman’s adamant claim that ‘[his] faith is not [his] religion’ gestures towards his spirituality, which he names as Universal Love. ‘Religion’ and ‘religious faith’ serve as metonyms for his continuing ‘official’ affiliation with Roman Catholicism. That Universal Love is distinguished from and takes precedence over his ‘religion’ is an important revelation. Transgender Christians around the globe continue to bear the brunt of mainstream conservative Christianity’s suspicion and dismissiveness (Levy and Lo 2013; Whitehead and Whitehead 2014). For some, ‘ecclesiastical acceptance is laden with conditions, condescension or trivialization, while others meet with an outright lack of hospitality’ (Goh 2020b, p. 1). Superman does not divulge any disagreeable episodes with the Roman Catholic Church, but the deliberate foregrounding of his trans-affirming ‘spirituality’ and backgrounding of his trans-dismissive ‘religion’ may be a subtle insinuation of such episodes.

Due to the extreme unlikelihood that he will ever conform to normative systems of gender and religion, or that Malaysian Roman Catholicism will ever extend unqualified acceptance and validation to him as a transgender man in the imminent future, Superman realises that he personifies simultaneous failures in gender and religion. Faced with this reality, he embraces gendered and religious failures, and eagerly manifests this queer art by customising his spirituality and ethical living as Universal Love. Superman mentions Universal Love only in terms of his spirituality, but I argue that it also incorporates his ethical living. He notices his growing faith in Jesus whom he also extols as his ‘role model of love’. This imagery of Christ suggests an inclination on the part of Superman to emulate Jesus ‘as the *embodiment of radical love*, or radical love made flesh’ (Cheng 2011, p. 78; original emphasis) as he maps his way of life on a trajectory of ‘love’. It is an active doing of ‘love’ that advises, directs, enlightens, enriches, and nourishes his existence. Universal Love does not only thrust Superman towards a stronger relationship with Jesus. It prompts him to pattern his life on ‘love’ and, thus, live mindfully, responsibly, virtuously, and honourably.

I wish to probe deeper into the idea of Universal Love by suggesting that it affords Superman a threefold imagination of God. The exercise of imagining God is not indicative of an illusory enterprise in which a divine being is conveniently conjured up to fulfil a fantastical goal. Theological imaginations are necessary tools to formulate and articulate notions of God within the parameters of one’s humanness as God cannot be experienced either through ‘an intellectual leap outside the human process of discovery’ (Alison 2003, p. 58) or by eliding the human contexts in which theological musings emerge (Kwok 2005).

First, Superman imagines God in the person of Jesus whom he acclaims as the quintessence of love, a sacred person who is worthy of imitation, and with whom he experiences a flourishing relationship. As I will demonstrate shortly, he consistently references Christ as the godly source of inspiration, encouragement, inner strength, and fortitude. Second, Superman visualises God as appreciative of him for who he is, as God ‘always [sees him] as beautiful’ beyond ‘female [or] male’ and ‘masculine or feminine’ categories:

I always know he always saw me as beautiful . . . Doesn’t need to be masculine or feminine. Just beautiful . . . Even it’s female, male, doesn’t matter. All of that in that is beautiful.

Although it may initially appear as though he is belittling the significance of gender identities and expressions when he underscores God’s favourable evaluation of him, I suggest instead that Superman is actually emphasising God’s endorsement of his present life as a masculine-acting man even though he was assigned female at birth and expected to perform as a feminine-acting woman throughout life. The Roman Catholic Church may be disconcerted by transgender embodiment, which it decries as a flagrant transgression of divinely prescribed gender norms, but Superman imagines God as unconvinced and thereby unperturbed by this purported transgression. Instead, God is unashamed of God’s own bias when, in James Alison’s (2003, pp. 107–8) words, God ‘look[s] at [Superman] with the delight of one who enjoys [his] company, who wants to be one with [him], to share in something with [him]’. God revels in Superman’s existence as a transgender man whom God sees as ‘just beautiful’.

Third, Superman envisions God as ‘creat[ing him] out of love’ in order to experience the manifold facets of being human:

And why was I created, I was created out of love . . . He wanted me to experience just a little joy. Which is this life. I get to experience growth. To experience pain . . .

Trans-affirming Christian scholarship tends to magnify the theological view that transgender people are created according to God’s wondrous design and, like all human beings who evince diversity in their own unique ways, are entitled to ‘the faithful and passionate love that God has for creation’ (Lowe 2017, p. 32). In contemplating the theological cause of his existence, Superman appears to be discontented with a singular, love-centric interpretation. Rather than settling solely on the idea that he emerged ‘out of love’ as God’s plan, he submits that the love with which God created him is accompanied by the purpose of furnishing him with opportunities and occasions to ‘experience . . . joy[,] growth [and] pain’ as a human being.

Superman’s wholehearted belief in being fashioned from God’s love is at once his spiritual stance that God is continuously inviting him to embrace the immeasurable complexity of humanness through which he may, borrowing Heike Peckruhn’s (2017, p. 285) words, ‘see the world and meanings experienced in it in a different way, be it more complexly, or be it by taking on new perspectives’ as a transgender man. In his esteem, God does not bring people into being with passive existence in mind, even if God does so ‘out of love’. Instead, the love which motivates God to create human beings encompasses God’s desire for human beings to actively participate in, learn from, and grow into the expansive intricacies of human life.

Universal Love consists of an interlocking strategy which imagines God as the epitome of love who appreciates, cherishes, and takes pleasure in Superman’s existence, and who lovingly creates him for the pursuit of meaningful human existence. His customisation of spirituality and ethical living confirms his worth as a transgender man in God’s eyes. Universal Love arrests self-hatred and self-condemnation, a sense of unworthiness and worthlessness, and inordinate feelings of guilt and shame—the ‘experience [of] pain’ that comes from accusations of simultaneous failures in gender and religion. Superman does not, however, discount the possibility that he may digress from Universal Love, but he feels assured that God will support him should he ever deviate from the correct path:

He loves me so much and would send people after people, Jesus lah,⁴ Muhammad lah, Buddha lah, whoever. Mother Teresa, Gandhi, just little reminders when I lose my way there is the candle and the light.

Superman rests securely in the knowledge that when he faces the risk of ‘los[ing his] way’ or veering from Universal Love, God will dispatch spiritual beacons as ‘little reminders’ to reorient him in the right direction. While Superman does not elucidate the manner in which these ‘little reminders’ will cross his path, he may be referring to fortuitous encounters with a myriad of inspirational resources that are associated with the lives and/or teachings of these revered models of upright living whom he names and holds in high esteem. These include ‘Jesus’—his ‘role model of love’—‘Muhammad’, ‘Buddha’, ‘Mother Teresa’, and ‘Gandhi’, who championed human rights and social transformation, socio-political equity and justice, the sense-making of life, suffering, illness and death, the empowerment of invisible, marginalised and vulnerable communities, and spiritual enlightenment. To him, these are unwavering paragons of spiritual and ethical living.

Saintly persons and biblical figures are often co-opted by queer and transgender Christian authors, and their significance recalibrated through queer and transgender lenses for spiritual writings (Buechel 2020; Burke 2013; Córdova Quero 2004; Reay 2009). Many LGBTQ Christians find meaning, inspiration, and nourishment in such resources which devote particular attention to and address their spiritual needs as individuals who yearn for recognition, camaraderie, and affirmation in spaces of faith, but are viewed condescendingly as failures in gender and religion by their ecclesiastical hierarchies and ecclesial

communities (Yip 2007; Whitehead 2013). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Superman derives hope, courage, and illumination from a personal constellation of holy personages—well beyond the ambit of Christianity—to reinvigorate his customisation of spirituality and ethical living should it begin to lose its potency. He is confident that in moments ‘when [he] lose[s his] way’, these sacred individuals will come to his aid, as the God who ‘loves [him] so much’ will ‘send people after people’ to set him again on the right course.

As mentioned earlier, Superman’s Universal Love is marked by—among other elements—his ability to discern and acknowledge his inherent worth in the eyes of a loving and supportive God, which allows him to resist the internalisation of disabling and deleterious scripts. Nonetheless, he still turns his thoughts to those who are still grappling with such struggles, very possibly as part of his practice of ethical living towards others:

That’s why I truly believe that when we have our issues, we don’t recover from them to be with the healthy. I believe the strong must reach out and go to the sick, just like Jesus.

By stating that ‘we have our issues’, Superman may be referring to transgender Malaysians who continue to wrestle with a multitude of personal, socio-cultural, psychological, legal, and religious issues (Goh and Kananatu 2019; Teh 2008) due to accusations of failures in gender and religion. Although the word ‘sick’ is evocative of the widespread pathologising language used against LGBTQ people (Winter et al. 2009), it does not seem plausible that Superman is using the term in this sense. Based on the overall context of my conversation with him, I contend that he uses ‘sick’ in reference to those who are struggling with the fragmentation of everyday life, including transgender people, and face ‘issues’ of inferiority, inadequacy, meaninglessness, despondency, and isolation.

I find Superman’s interplay between ‘healthy/strong’ and ‘sick’ rather significant. Superman’s remark that ‘we don’t recover from [our issues] to be with the healthy’ harkens to his earlier comment that ‘we have our issues’, which hints at the possibility that he also includes himself in this reference and, therefore, positions himself as one of the ‘sick’. Nevertheless, he also speaks of a ‘recover[y]’ from these ‘issues,’ which may signal a shift on his part towards the positionality of ‘healthy/strong’ upon embracing gendered and religious failures. I wish to offer an additional perspective which can shed light on this interplay. In his customisation of spirituality and ethical living, Superman anchors and secures his core sense of worth in the imagination of God’s role in his life, which empowers him and steers him away from self-destruction. This suggests a ‘healthy/strong’ positionality. Yet he knows that this praxis is not impervious to vulnerability, precariousness, and instability, which implies a ‘sick’ positionality.

I propose that Superman’s oscillating experiences affords him an ‘epistemic advantage’ (Narayan 1989, p. 338) of occupying a double positionality of ‘sick’ and ‘healthy/strong’, and thereby knowledgeable of both locations. That these positionalities are irresolvable also means that they are neither dichotomous nor permanent. This epistemic advantage places him in a unique vantage point of understanding ‘sick’ and ‘healthy/strong’, and communicating appropriate responses of empathy, solidarity, and support. Superman is mindful of the fact that God materialises in his life as unquestioning love, outrageous magnanimity, and indefatigable aid. He sees God valuing, celebrating, and delighting in him, fashioning him into existence as God’s act of love, offering him the gift of humanness, and appointing saintly envoys to accompany him. Overwhelmed by the magnitude of God’s benevolence, he realises that his customisation of spirituality and ethical living cannot simply remain as a praxis of self-gratification. As Universal Love needs to be shared with others, Superman ‘reach[es] out and go[es]’ to his fellow human beings who are ‘sick’. These are people who interiorise and live out ‘the manifestations of death, like indignity, captivity, sickness, isolation and oppression’ (Tagle 1995, p. 7), and for whom the prospect of attaining self-appreciation, self-respect, and self-love remains largely unreachable.

Superman intimates that he models his mission of ‘reach[ing] out’ to others after the person and ministry of ‘Jesus’ who is his ‘role model of love’, spiritual beacon and unwavering paragon of spiritual and ethical living, but he does not specify any aspect of

Christ's life, teachings, or pastoral outreach that inspires him. His view that 'the strong must reach out and go to the sick', however, is reminiscent of a saying ascribed to Jesus in Matthew 9.12 (RSV) and Luke 5.31 (RSV) that 'those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick'.

Superman's nomination of Christ as the exemplar par excellence of his outreach cannot be uncritically interpreted only in terms of a familiar and convenient choice due to his Roman Catholic background. Instead, I submit that he sees in Jesus 'a praxis, an ethical, embodied way of life' (Isherwood 2018, p. 286), as evinced in the latter's heightened and honed sense of justice, compassion, and inclusion. In 'reach[ing] out and go[ing] to the sick', Superman seeks to imitate Christ who 'never negated or denied or rejected the value of the other' (Anderson-Rajkumar 2004, p. 106). Jesus 'stressed the personal worth of all human beings regardless of their social condition or status' and was 'truly a liberator of the human person and of oppressed groups in society' (Balasuriya 1984, pp. 174, 169–70). Hence, Christ 'speaks and lives the compassion of God by addressing the poor and the rich alike, healing the suffering, and creating an inclusive community' (Shore-Goss 2006, p. 533).

7. Conclusions

This article shares Halberstam's interest in the recuperation of banished, hidden, and transgressive knowledges through the prism of a queer art of failure. While Halberstam (2011, p. 2) 'dismantles the logics of success and failure' in gender and sexuality primarily by looking at popular culture in North American and European settings, I have deployed the queer art of failure on religion, spirituality, and ethics in Malaysian contexts. I have shown how a misalignment with a normative praxis of faith can signal failure in Malaysian gendered and sexual liveability, but also that the effects of failure, 'such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, [can] poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life' (Halberstam 2011, p. 3), and offer alternative and productive ways of living to people whose lives draw meaning from faith.

Schulz and Superman are keenly aware that their identities, appearances, comportments, and life decisions are met with disfavour and disdain in conservative political, religious, and social circles. Due to their inability and/or unwillingness to surrender to machinations of gendered and religious normativity, they are perceived as simultaneous failures in gender and religion who are morally impoverished. Rather than yielding to cis-normative ideals as a bid to secure gendered and religious legitimacy, or abandoning either their gender identity or faith, these two men intentionally embrace failure in normative gender-inflected rules on religion and religiously-inflected rules on gender. This intellectual resolution is then materialised through strategic customisations of their own spirituality and ethical living, which rebuff attempts to modulate and control their gendered and religious sensibilities and galvanise their efforts to consider and re-imagine alternative modes of life that may reside in ordinary, unexceptional, overlooked, and omitted spaces. By honing the art of failure, both men can reassess the interplays of power in their lives, and, thus, rethink strategies of living with greater freedom, authenticity, and integrity as Malaysian Roman Catholic transgender men without having to succumb to the dominant dictates of power.

Schulz and Superman speak of an explicit belief in God with whom they connect more on a personal level than through ecclesiastical institutions and ecclesial communities. Their connections with God cannot be reduced to solipsistic sentimentality or self-serving complacency. Instead, God becomes the bedrock of their spiritual and ethical insights, directions, and operations. At the core of their customisations of spirituality and ethical living is a deep-seated trust in God's intense love, appreciation, and support for them, a reliance on God as the absolute authority of their gender and religious identities, an acknowledgement of God's gift of humanness, and an unshakeable confidence in their innate worth in God's sight.

Trans-affirming customisations of spirituality and ethical living are neither desperate measures to justify an incapacity or disinclination to cohere with what are touted and valorised as ‘valid’ gendered and religious performances, nor are they personal eclectic tactics to uphold pseudo spiritualities and ersatz ethics. Instead, they are disruptive acts that spurn, provoke, undermine, and defy structures of power, discipline, and coerced conformity. They are modes of resistance that neutralise the toxic and death-dealing ramifications of normative gendered and religious impositions and pave the way towards more substantive forms of human flourishing. They open up new prospects for the democratisation of gender and faith beyond dominant and debilitating imaginaries.

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Notes

- ¹ These pseudonyms, chosen by the research participants themselves, are retained to safeguard their anonymity and privacy.
- ² The Peranakan community consists of Malaysians from mixed Malay and Chinese ancestries who practise diverse religious beliefs. See Lim (2015).
- ³ The inclusion of ‘contemplative’ emerges from a casual conversation on CGTM with Sandra Siow-san Ng in 2022.
- ⁴ ‘Lah’ is used by many Malaysians as a suffix for emphasis in ordinary speech. See Ooi (2001).

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