

# Historicizing with Queer Honesty: Retelling the History of the YMCA Without Wearing Underwear

## An Introduction

The Young Men's Christian Association, commonly referred to as the YMCA, was founded in nineteenth-century England as a respite and home for young men who had just migrated to the city. It provided a space for young Christian men to cultivate their faith and their body. In the twentieth century, however, the YMCA came to be known as a space for gay cruising, where men, both gay and on the down-low, would meet for sex. Such development suggests that its Christian emphasis was incompatible with the increasing public knowledge of the same-sex sexual activities that were taking place within its walls. The following paper opposes the dichotomization of same-sex desire and queerness on the one hand and Christianity on the other. It argues that the YMCA is not only compatible with queerness, but that since its very inception the Association has been a site of radical queerness.

The argument of the paper is threefold. First, it provides a methodology which attempts to frame how I, a Latin American gay man, attempt to queer the YMCA. Second, it provides a brief history of the institution as a means to ground my discussion on a specific historical context which ranges from the 1850s to the 1950s. Finally, the third and longest part is dedicated to a reimagining of the YMCA through a queer lens, informed by queer imagination and experience.

## Towards a Queer Methodology, or, How to Write Without Underwear

Before discussing the historical context of the Young Men's Christian Association, it is important to establish the limits, bound-

aries, and scope of my queer methodology. In her 2000 book titled *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics*, feminist, queer, theologian of liberation Marcella Althaus-Reid writes the following:

*the Argentinian theologian] may keep her underwear on at the moment of prayer, or whilst reflecting on salvation; and maybe the smell of her sex doesn't get mixed with issues of theology and economy. Writing theology without underwear may be punishable by law, who knows, [...] an action against the moral order of the country. Yet an Argentinian feminist theologian may want to do, precisely, that. Her task may be to deconstruct a moral order which is based on a heterosexual construction of reality, which organizes not only categories of approved social and divine interactions but of economic ones too. The Argentinian theologian would like then to remove her underwear to write theology with feminist honesty, not forgetting what it is to be a woman when dealing with theological and political categories. I should call such a theologian indecent, and her reflection, indecent theology.<sup>1</sup>*

I do not mean to suggest that this paper is a theological reflection of any sort. What I am doing here, however, is an indecent re-reading of the Young Men's Christian Association and, to this end, I might want to remove my underwear. Theologizing or historicizing without underwear allows the smell of my sex to mix with the reflections on this paper. I am thus

<sup>1</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 1-2.

allowing my sexual and gendered identities to inform the discourses produced by this intellectual endeavour. I am attempting to break the mind-body dichotomy that seems to inform both Christian and academic discourses, hopefully moving away from René Descartes's *je pense, donc je suis*—which divides the being into mind and matter, and puts the rational mind on a pedestal vis-à-vis the material body—to a more encompassing, body-centred reflection.<sup>2</sup>

Writing without underwear is that which allows me to read and interpret the history of the YMCA in light of my experience as a gay man, or a *maricón* [i.e., faggot], as I was called in my high school years in Colombia. Queer theologian Patrick S. Cheng highlights the importance of queer experience when doing queer theology. He writes that “[...] queer theology is premised upon the belief that God acts within the specific contexts of our lives and experiences, despite the fact that LGBT lives and experiences have been excluded from traditional theological discourse.”<sup>3</sup> Experiences of marginalization, silencing, hiding, and violence become central to the creation of new theological discourses. Similarly, my experiences as a Latin American-Canadian gay man have informed the way in which I understand male friendships and the YMCA. Far from being an apology, I disclose this to emphasize the importance of one's experience in both academic and theological endeavours.

My reflections are also coloured by my years of experience as a competitive swimmer, where I spent a lot of time contemplating semi-naked male bodies in the pool, the shower, the sauna, and the locker room. I would also add my years of involvement with the Royal Canadian Army Cadets, which thanks to notions of heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality allowed me to share my bedrooms and tents

with other boys without raising any suspicions. I am thankful, therefore, for institutions that have allowed male-bonding and male same-sex desire to emerge, while simultaneously allowing for a secrecy, a ‘don't ask don't tell’ atmosphere where no one questioned two boys showering and changing in and out of speedos together, or sharing a tent in the woods, or a room in a dormitory. These experiences, ranging from homo-social, through homoerotic, to homosexual, are at the centre of my understanding of the YMCA.

Cheng addresses two other sources of queer theology that have been relevant to this analysis: Scripture and tradition.<sup>4</sup> Scripture in this case refers not to the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, but rather to three very important texts that have influenced my thought. Firstly, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, which provided me with tools to understand male bonding. Secondly, Marcella Althaus-Reid's *The Queer God*, which taught me how to look at things differently, questioning both what has been said and what has not been said, and to tango with God in thigh-high leather boots at the Salsa Bar. Thirdly, historian John Gustav-Wrathall's analysis of homosociality and homoeroticism in the history of the YMCA, which became a historical grounding for my queer imagination. My analysis is in conversation with these three texts and so they will be

<sup>2</sup> A body-centred analysis is inspired by the following quotation: “If Queer Theology is a body-grounded theology, that is, a theology based on the incorrigible, uneducated, libertine body, we may start building a hermeneutical circle precisely from there, from that libertine, licentious and problematic body which refuses the Christian fixed exchange rate and makes of the redistribution of its own frontiers a precious thing.” See Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 53-54.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 18.

<sup>4</sup> Cheng, *Radical Love*, 12-16.

discussed and quoted throughout the paper. My queer scriptures have also become part of a larger tradition which I have drawn upon. This tradition of queer histories and teachings, which I purposely compare to Church teachings and history, are part of liberationist, anti-oppressive queer discourses that have been handed down to me as part of larger queer theoretical and queer theological tradition.

The methodology of this paper is one that pays attention to the silences surrounding the queer history(ies) of the YMCA, to the multiplicity of desire that takes place in all-male environments, and which allows for the possibility of new ways of relation to others that is not centred to heteronormative notions of desire and sexuality. My methodology is situated in the interstices of social, sexual, and gendered structures. This paper, moreover, does not argue that there were queers in the YMCA or in the Christian tradition—this has been thoroughly discussed by others and it is the case the queers are everywhere.<sup>5</sup> My arguments attempt to move past the idea that as queer people of faith or queer scholars of religion, we ought to establish a link between queerness on one hand and Christianity on the other.<sup>6</sup> This link has already been well-established by queer scholars and theologians, some of them apologetic and some others subversive. What this paper does is posit the idea that Christianity, Christian institutions, and more specifically the Young Men's Christian Association have been from their inception sites of queerness.<sup>7</sup> In doing so I hope to move away from arguing that Christianity should accept queers, to arguing that Christianity is a queer thing.<sup>8</sup> After having established, quite extensively, the scope and limitations of my methodology, it is now appropriate to discuss the historical context of the YMCA.

### The Young Men's Christian Association: A Very Short Introduction

A contextual analysis of the YMCA requires a discussion of muscular Christianity.

Briefly defined, muscular Christianity is “a Christian commitment to health and manliness.”<sup>9</sup> There was a belief that participation in physical activities could enhance the development of Christian morality, physical health, and manly character.<sup>10</sup> The term arose in nineteenth-century England around the works of two authors and their works: Charles Kingsley's *Two Years Ago* (1857) and Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1856).<sup>11</sup> These two novels, amongst others, arose from the belief that the Victorian culture of effeminacy had somehow weakened the Anglican Church.<sup>12</sup> The two authors also believed that the Church had become overly tolerant of physical weakness.<sup>13</sup> As a result, there was a push to rescue manhood and masculinity from the peril of effeminacy and weakness.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Mark Larrimore, “Introduction,” in *Queer Christianities: Lived Religion in Transgressive Forms*, eds. Kathleen T. Talvacchia, Michel F. Pettinger, and Mark Larrimore (New York: New York U.P., 2015), 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Stuart, quoted in Larrimore, *Queer Christianities*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880–1920* (Cambridge: Harvard U.P., 2001), 11.

<sup>10</sup> Nick J. Watson, “Muscular Christianity in the Modern Age: ‘Wining for Christ’ or ‘Playing for Glory?’” in *Sport and Spirituality: An Introduction*, ed. S. J. Parry (New York: Routledge, 2007), 80.

<sup>11</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 11.

<sup>12</sup> Watson, “Muscular Christianity in the Modern Age,” 80.

<sup>13</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

In response to the fear of effeminacy, there was a push to emphasize Christian manliness. Kingsley equated manliness with godliness, and viewed manliness as “an antidote to the poison of effeminacy [...] which was sapping the vitality of the Anglican Church.”<sup>15</sup> Along the same lines, Hughes emphasized the male-as-hero equation. For him, “a man’s body is given to him to be trained and brought into subjection and then used for the protection of the weak, that advancement of all righteous causes.”<sup>16</sup> Hegemonic masculinity and male bodies became invaluable tools in the construction of proper Christian manhood and the repairing of the Anglican Church. Furthermore, muscular Christianity made a connection between training the body and proper religious behaviour.

It is from this emphasis on the male body that we see the emergence of the YMCA. Historian Clifford Putney writes that “of all the organizations working to bring religion and sport closer together, none was more influential than the Young Men’s Christian Association.”<sup>17</sup> The early years of the YMCA, however, were not centred on sports. The Association was founded in 1844 by George Williams, and in its early years it sought to provide young men who had recently arrived to the city with a home away from home.<sup>18</sup> The YMCA quickly became a spiritual refuge in the city.<sup>19</sup> The Association sponsored Bible study session and prayer circles, thus responding to the spiritual needs of young men. It also provided housing services, as well as employment bureaus, all of which answered physical needs.<sup>20</sup>

A couple of years after the emergence of the YMCA, there was a push, especially in North America, to focus on physical activities. Sports historian William J. Baker argues that in the 1850s, many insisted that the YMCA

ought to add a physical dimension to their existing emphasis on spirituality and morality. This physical dimension would consist of “health-giving activities” and “physical exercise that put muscle on a man.”<sup>21</sup> This movement was successful because by 1890, around four hundred YMCA gymnasiums could be found in North America.<sup>22</sup>

The emphasis on physical exercise had Christian values at its core. Putney argues that there was a new emphasis on character building, which required the “strengthening of the boys so as to ward off degeneracy.”<sup>23</sup> Such character building was premised in the idea that strengthening one’s body and organism would enhance one’s capacity for doing good.<sup>24</sup> The bodies of muscular Christians were to become “a tool for good, an agent to be used on behalf of social progress and world uplift.”<sup>25</sup> These young men were expected to become or remain good, exemplary Christian through the Bible study and circle prayers offered, but also through the physical education programs facilitated by the YMCA. The Association, moreover, positioned itself as the mediator between God and these young men. In the dormitories, gym-

<sup>15</sup> Watson, “Muscular Christianity in the Modern Age,” 80.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>17</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 64.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> John Donald Gustav-Wrathall, *Take the Young Stranger by the Hand: Same-Sex Relations and the YMCA* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 1-2.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>21</sup> William J. Baker, “Praying and Playing in the YMCA,” in *Playing with God: Religion and Modern Sport* (Cambridge: Harvard U.P., 2007), 50.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 67.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

nasiums, and libraries of the YMCA, it would be possible for these boys to find Jesus Christ.<sup>26</sup>

This section has provided a brief history of the development of muscular Christian thought and its influence on the Young Men's Christian Association. It might seem that quite a lot of information is missing from my overview. This is the case, but it has been an intentional omission. The following paragraphs will provide more information on specific characteristics of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century YMCA. These details, coupled with the overarching ideas discussed above and framed in the methodology presented at the beginning of the paper, will encompass the queerness of the YMCA.

#### What's so Queer About the YMCA?

I remember my Cégep philosophy instructor quoting Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, asking "What's in a name?" She would always yell: "everything! Everything is in the name!" She was somehow right. The Young Men's Christian Association was, at least in the early years, a male-centred community. On this, Gustav-Wrathall writes that "the spiritual community created by the YMCA meant that men prayed together, studied together, and worked together, but also ate together, traveled together, and lived together."<sup>27</sup> To this it should be added that towards the late nineteenth century, these men also exercised together, showered together, and changed in and out of their work out clothes together. This atmosphere is an example of instances of homosociality, male bonding, and homoeroticism.

The YMCA, then, became fertile ground for the expression of homosociality and male bonding. Feminist and queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that "homosocial is a word

occasionally used in history and the social sciences, where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex [...]. In fact, it is applied to such activities as 'male bonding' [...]."<sup>28</sup> The bonds formed between men at the YMCA, then, could definitely be understood as homosocial. Such relationships are not necessarily sexual, and in fact the term homosocial stands in sharp contrast with its counterpart, homosexual. Homosocial and homosexual become two ends of a binary opposite.<sup>29</sup>

What happens, however, when one's queer imagination allows the erotic to come into play? The erotic, according to art historian Michael Hatt, is "a representation of the sexual. When applied to, say, an image, it provides a legitimization of the sexual nature or the sexual content of that image."<sup>30</sup> Bringing in a discussion of the erotic breaks down the boundary between homosocial and homoerotic in the YMCA, thus allowing for the possible legitimization of the sexual nature or content of the Association. As someone who has been present in many male-centred situations, as discussed in the methodology, it comes as no surprise that the homosocial character of the YMCA could slip into homoerotic, and perhaps even into homosexual. To think about the homoerotic is nothing but a way of allowing the possibility of male pleasure in the male body

<sup>26</sup> John Donald Gustav-Wrathall, "Provenance as Text: Reading the Silences around Sexuality in Manuscript Collections," *The Journal of American History* 79:1 (June 1992): 169.

<sup>27</sup> Gustav-Wrathall, *Take the Young Stranger by the Hand*, 3.

<sup>28</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1985), 1.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Michael Hatt, "The Male Body in Another Frame," *Journal of Philosophy and the Visual Arts* (1993): 11.

and in male company.<sup>31</sup> It could be said, then, that members of the YMCA found pleasure in seeing and being seen by other men.

Another queer possibility, once again suggested by Sedgwick, is that of a triangulation of desire. It is possible to think that many of the Y men joined the Association out of devotion and in the search for God. Would it be possible, then, that the relationship between members of the Y with other men and God became a sort of erotic triangle? To understand this concept, I quote Sedgwick at length. She writes that through readings of major European fictions in his 1965 *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, literary critic René Girard

*traced a calculus of power that was structured by the relation of rivalry between the two active members of an erotic triangle. What is most interesting for our purposes in his study is its insistence that in any erotic rivalry, the bond between the two rivals is as intense as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved: that the bonds of 'rivalry' and 'love,' different as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many cases equivalent.*<sup>32</sup>

In the case of the YMCA, what is interesting for us is the triangulation of desire between, say, two young men at the YMCA and God or Jesus. The bond that is created and maintained amongst men in the YMCA could be as strong as the bond that ties Christian men to God.

Perhaps, just like a gay man's female best friend, Jesus was a beard, a camouflage that allows the closeted gay boy to pass as heterosexual and avoid being bullied in the corridors of his high school. It is possible that devotion to God is what kept these relationships in the realm of homosociality and prevented authorities from accounting for the erotic.

I am not saying that these young men were not attracted to the YMCA because they were pious Christian boys and wanted to be in a Christian environment. Perhaps they wished to belong to this Christian brotherhood. Taking it further, however, one can imagine that perhaps God served as a surrogate for the desire that these men felt for one another. Perhaps, for some of these boys, desire for other men was projected as desire and devotion on the Ultimate Male (Jesus or God). Perhaps for some others desire to be like Jesus, as the YMCA encouraged them to, became a desire *for* Jesus and, in perhaps a more tangible way, eventually a desire for other men.<sup>33</sup>

The YMCA secretaries are another queer aspect of the nineteenth-century Association. The term secretary refers to the employed general executive of the YMCA.<sup>34</sup> Gustav-Wrathall argues that through the nineteenth century, one-fifth to one-third of these leaders were life-long bachelors who dedicated themselves to the service of the YMCA and its members.<sup>35</sup> Some of them married, but did so significantly later than the men of the general population.<sup>36</sup> These men chose fellowship over marriage, and service to the YMCA became a priority to the

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 21.

<sup>33</sup> Another dimension of homoeroticism and devotion could be analyzed through the relationship between the devout and Christ. I have decided not to include this relationship in my discussion for two main reasons: 1. such discussion would be part of a more theological analysis, and would partly depart from my focus on the YMCA; and 2. this work has been done. See, for instance, Donald L. Boisvert, "The Erotic Christ," in *Sanctity and Male Desire: A Gay Reading of Saints*, 168-182 (Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2004).

<sup>34</sup> Gustav-Wrathall, *Take the Young Stranger by the Hand*, 6.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 70.

extent that they postponed marriage.<sup>37</sup> What is so queer about these bachelors? There is a sense that these men put men before women, comrades before (potential) wives. For these bachelors, service to fellow brothers became more important than marrying and having a family. This is perhaps due because they found in fellow YMCA members the love and companionship marriage would have provided.

These bachelors are queer because they pushed against the (hetero)normative ideals of their time. Gustav-Wrathall writes that modern-day queers might somehow identify an affinity with these bachelors. According to him, “to the extent that these kinds of relationships in the nineteenth century were atypical of society’s mainstream, to the extent that they clearly broke with a dominant pattern of heterosexual marriage and family building, we [queer people] recognize that affinity ever more acutely.”<sup>38</sup> Queers are well aware that our relationships disrupt heteropatriarchal ideals which focus on family, procreative sex, and a house in the suburbs with a green lawn. Historically, these possibilities have been denied to us through laws that punish same-sex relations, churches that condemn homosexuality or homosexual acts, and laws that prohibit the legal union of two persons of the same sex. As a result, queers have lived in or developed new ways of relating to one another, amongst which we find intense friendships, polyamory, open relationships, extramarital and premarital sex, hook-up culture, families of choice, and so on. These queer ways of loving and relating stand in sharp contrast with the ideals set by heteronormativity, which limit sex to monogamous married couples for procreative purposes. These bachelors are queer because their commitment to the YMCA and their preferential option for the young men stood in sharp contrast with societal expectations of the time.

Another queer aspect of bachelorhood is that of celibacy. As a Catholic-raised gay man, the only sexual life that is permitted to me in my Church is celibacy. I can be gay, but I must not have gay sex. Could this experience resonate with the bachelors discussed above? I think, hope perhaps, that these secretaries, well aware of their homoerotic, ‘deviant’ leanings, decided to remain celibate and dedicate their lives to the service of those they loved. Can celibacy be queer? Some might say ‘no’ since it does not involve any sexuality at all. I would disagree. If we understand celibacy as a form of sexuality, we are simply recognizing a wider range of sexual expressions in the open mesh of possibilities that queer is.<sup>39</sup> In doing so, we recognize that perhaps the celibacy of these bachelors produces pleasure in unconventional ways, that perhaps pleasure could be desexualized, which could lead to an understanding that bodily pleasure does not need to emerge solely from sexual pleasure.<sup>40</sup> It is possible, therefore, that these secretaries derived pleasure from serving fellow Christian men, watching them come and go, praying together, and playing together. This pleasure is similar to the pleasure of mindless flirting, the pleasure of courtship, the adrenaline of the hunt. These pleasures would be extended, since for some of these secretaries they would not lead to sexual release. I can only imagine the excitement of watching these young men passing by, exercising, helping each other out, being able to gaze without touching.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Gustav-Wrathall, *Take the Young Stranger by the Hand*, 4.

<sup>39</sup> Petro, “Celibate Politics: Queering the Limits,” in *Queer Christianities: Lived Religion in Transgressive Forms* eds. Kathleen T. Talvacchia, Michel F. Pettinger, and Mark Larrimore (New York: New York U.P., 2015), 39.

<sup>40</sup> Petro, “Celibate Politics: Queering the Limits,” 43.

In this way, the celibacy of these secretaries might have been a rather queer thing.

One last queer aspect of these secretaries is that of men serving the interests of men. Sedgwick writes in *Between Men* that “the adjective ‘homosocial’ as applied to women’s bonds need not be pointedly dichotomized as against ‘homosexual’; it can intelligibly dominate the entire continuum.”<sup>41</sup> Here, Sedgwick identifies female homosociality with “women promoting the interests of women,” and homosexuality with “women loving women.”<sup>42</sup> Although Sedgwick argues that such continuum could not be applied to male-male relationships because of socio-economic and gender difference in our society,<sup>43</sup> I would argue that this model could give us some interesting insight into the relationships of secretaries to members of the YMCA. If ‘women loving women’ needs not be dichotomized against ‘women promoting the interests of women’ then perhaps these secretaries, who fully gave themselves to promote the interests of men in the YMCA need not be dichotomized against ‘men loving men.’ Perhaps for these secretaries their commitment to other men went hand-in-hand with their loving for other men.

Since I set out to research the Young Men’s Christian Association I have been wondering if, perhaps, for these bachelors and other members, the YMCA served the same functions as Althaus-Reid’s salsa bar. to explain the salsa bar, I quote Althaus-Reid at length:

*Suppose that you are feeling lonely and think that the world is not a loving place anymore. Then you decide to go to the bar after praying your novena to your saint, or to the Virgin Mary. Perhaps you are asking San Antonio for a lover and you know that at the door of the bar nobody checks for rosaries or religious stamps in your pocket. The same can be said*

*when you are at the door of the church. They don’t ask you for that old love letter that you still keep in your bag neither do they realize whose hands your loving hands like to hold. Now suppose that in your mind the Church and the Latina bar somehow get mixed up with fragments of memories of the Nicene Creed and of a Christ who died for you sometime ago contesting the fact that nobody seems to be dying of love for you anymore. You are thinking about a religion of courage and you go to the salsa bar where a Latina may be friendly with you. But then, torn between love and rosaries, you may wonder what life would be if you were to love her. [...] you know that in the end, you may pray for God’s forgiveness: ‘Forgive me for loving you the way I do.’ But we also need forgiveness for loving God too.”<sup>44</sup>*

The beauty of Althaus-Reid’s metaphor is the complicated relationship between sexuality, represented by the Latina bar, a place filled with sweaty bodies bumping and rubbing against each other, also a place filled with homosociality and homoeroticism, and religiosity, represented by the Church and the Nicene Creed. This queer person of faith navigates, not without difficulty, the sacred and sexual spaces to which she belongs, and she becomes a limens, a person caught in the middle of sexual and religious discourses.

The life of the Latina at the salsa bar could be compared to that of the single secretary. The secretary is a threshold person, as he navigates the spaces of Christianity and the spaces of same-sex desire. He might go to work or church with a letter from his companion in the pocket of his suit, keeping it close to his heart. We have indeed evidence of correspondence between YMCA men that suggest intense emotional bonds.<sup>45</sup> It could also be possible that after a long day at work, the secretary would meet his lover in the locker room, the shower,



or the dormitories, and still wear his crucifix necklace. The salsa bar, the YMCA, and the church become, in the eyes of Althaus-Reid, sites of radical desire and queerness in which the Latina and the secretary move from interstice to interstice.

The sexual aspect of the YMCA became more 'official' at the turn of the century.

Gustav-Wrathal writes that "yet, even as the YMCA abhorred same-sex erotic inclinations in its sex-education work, it heightened same-sex erotic desire through the gymnasium."<sup>46</sup> The gymnasium, similar to the salsa bar, is a place where sweaty bodies are constantly made available to one's gaze. In the case of the YMCA, these male bodies were made available as an object of consumption for the male gaze. Moreover, the gymnasium, along with the homosocial and homoerotic aspects of the YMCA discussed above, provided physical facilities that were necessary for the flourishing of a male same-sex cruising culture.<sup>47</sup> A contemporary described the large city's YMCA became "gay turf almost as much as the gay bars."<sup>48</sup> The twentieth-century YMCA gymnasium was more conspicuous in its homoerotic and homosexual tendencies than the nineteenth-century YMCA. It became an explicit site where men could explore homoeroticism and connect sexually with other men.

The conspicuous homoeroticism of the YMCA resonates with my own queer experiences.

For me, male-centred places and spaces have always been a guilty pleasure—and yes, I use 'guilt' in a very Catholic term, as even after years of being 'out and proud' I have not been able to get rid of the Catholic stigmatic guilt instilled in my formational years. For seven or eight years, I was involved in competitive swimming teams. Of course, swimming was fun and

staying healthy was a good thing. What really kept me in the team, however, was the sight of guys in tiny speedos, running and swimming around, or working out at the gym, their shirts sticking with sweat to their well-defined bodies. The tons of male bonding in the shower, saunas, and changing rooms, where guys, probably thinking that everyone was heterosexual, would simply change into their clothes in front of everyone else. The assumption that everyone was heterosexual allowed the queers in the room to indulge in the pleasure of both seeing and being seen. This experience is similar to that of another male-centred environment: the Army Cadets. There, we were encouraged to bond with people of the same-sex, and this was made explicit by the fact that during camping trips, we would be assigned to a tent with two other persons of the same sex.

Staying up late at night, talking to your comrades, sharing intimate stories, were part of the homosocial aspect of it all. Sharing dormitories, quick escapades to one another's bed in the late hours of the night, allowed me and other boys to taste the then forbidden pleasures of same-sex desire. To this day, some of them have 'come out' as homosexuals, and some of them identify as heterosexuals. Our experiences as curious young men did not define our future, but certainly opened our eyes to the pleasure of male bonding. I could only assume that this could be the case for many of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century YMCA members and secretaries.

<sup>41</sup> Sedwick, *Between Men*, 2-3.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

<sup>44</sup> Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 1.

<sup>45</sup> Gustav-Wrathal, *Take the Young Stranger by the Hand*, 46.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

## A Personal, Queer Conclusion

The Young Men's Christian Association has been, since its inception, a place of radical queerness, where devotionism and eroticism met and flourished. In many ways, the YMCA reminds me of *retiros espirituales*, spiritual retreats, which were mandatory as part of our education in Colombia. I remember going to a small cottage in the outskirts of the city. As part of this retreat, boys and girls would pray together, eat together, and play together. If you were in high school, however, you would spend the night over at the cottage, and you would of course sleep in a room with a person of the same sex. The year I entered high school, we received news that the retreat would only last one day, as the principal had decided to end the overnight stay.

Today, writing the conclusion to this paper, I can only imagine the reasons why the overnight stay had been canceled. I cannot help but think that perhaps the boys, in their devotion to Christ, would engage in intimate friendships with their roommate, or perhaps having stayed up and praying together they fell asleep in each other arms. I know that back then, that was the kind of experience I was yearning for. I remember spending the retreat with my male buddies, kneeling in church, listening to our priest talk about Saint Augustine and thinking 'am I really supposed to feel this way about my friend?' In a way, I think the *retiro* was my own YMCA, where I walked in with a rosary and a Bible in my hand, only to spend the day thinking about Jesus and also my friend.

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