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“I Hid Not My Face”: An Essay on Women, Their Beards, and the Promise of Isaiah 50:6

Abstract

In this paper I explore the theological potential of the trans*formation of the body in popular culture, more specifically, in the performance of drag artist Conchita Wurst (Tom Neuwirth) at the Eurovision Song Contest finale of 2014. Contrary to Dana International, the first (known) trans* woman to win Eurovision for Israel in 1998, Conchita did not “pass” as either male or female. As a “bearded lady”, she operates on the borderline of the masculine and the feminine, combining the aesthetics of both as she performed the winning song *Rise Like A Phoenix*. In various media, Conchita was read as a contemporary Christ figure. With her parted long hair, kind eyes, dress and beard she does indeed resemble those representations of Jesus Christ that have become dominant in the “religious imagery of visual piety” of Western popular culture. Both the performance of the song and Conchita as a stage character play with themes of misrecognition, suffering and resurrection. Read as a “Christ-like figure” by Eastern Orthodox church leaders, moreover, Conchita was accused of blasphemy. I argue that if we take Conchita seriously as a contemporary Christ figure, she enables us to construct a liberationist theology of uncertainty, in particular the enduring uncertainty of gender-bending. To do so, I will attempt to understand current cross-dressing performances such as Conchita’s from a genealogy of the beard, focusing on the meaning of the beard in biblical times as well as the history of women with facial hair: the archive of the bearded lady. In the Old Testament and in Christian tradition, beards have often been simultaneously one of the most important markers of hegemonic masculinity as well as the site where this masculinity might be jeopardised. In the archive of the bearded lady we find women on the margins of society (funfair “freaks”, witches, old ladies from the countryside) as well as confident queer activists who publicly claim the beard, showing how it fails as the ultimate marker of masculinity.

*I gave my back to those who strike,
and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard;
I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting.
Isaiah 50:6¹*

In 2014, the Austrian Tom Neuwirth won the Eurovision Song Contest with his stage character Conchita Wurst, known in mainstream media as “the woman with the beard”, performing the song *Rise Like A Phoenix*. Wearing a gallant evening dress, long eyelashes and, indeed, a beard, in terms of gender bending Conchita is one of the most controversial artists ever to win Eurovision. In combining the masculine and the feminine in her appearance, refusing to “choose” or “pass”, Conchita’s performance differed considerably from that of Dana International, the first (known) trans woman to win the contest in 1998 for Israel. For the seasoned Eurovision fan, especially the large fan base of gay men, Neuwirth’s narrative of the bullied gay youth who transforms into a confident queer grown-up resonated just like that of many previous “Eurovision underdogs”,² who came out of nowhere to gain fame and glory at the stage of Europe’s largest song contest.³ “It gets better” is the message, even if you are tucked away as the only gay in the village in the land of Edelweiss.

In Western Europe, public discussions of Conchita rapidly incorporated her into LGBT-affirmative discourses. Alongside this, another aspect of her appearance was brought to the fore: her resemblance to Jesus. After the Eurovision finale, Swedish journalist Markus Larsson wondered: how do you ever beat a Jesus in a dress?⁴ German media thought Conchita looked like “a Messiah with a beard”;⁵ British media reported the victory of “a mixture of Katy Perry and Jesus”.⁶ With her long, parted hair, kind eyes and well-groomed

¹ English Standard Version.

² This essay contains a number of expressions that may come across as rather informal “boulevard press” expressions. This is partly due to the fact that this piece is written as an essay, which allows more liberty in terms of style, but it is also a matter of methodology. In my view, playful language is sometimes needed (and will hopefully be welcomed) in order to make queer statements.

³ Singleton, Brian, Karen Fricker and Elena Moreo, “Performing the Queer Network. Fans and Families at the Eurovision Song Contest,” in: *SQS* 2(2) (2007), 12-24.

⁴ Larsson, Markus, “Det går inte slå en Jesus i klänning,” in: *Nöjesbladet*, 11 May 2014.

⁵ Goder, Herhard, “Messias mit Bard,” in: *Der Tagespiegel*, 1 August 2014.

⁶ Lees, Paris, “Is Conchita a drag queen? Trans? Does it matter?” in: *The Guardian*, 13 May 2014.

beard. Conchita does indeed have the iconic look Western visual piety has assigned to Jesus.⁷ I would argue that it was not just the aesthetics but also the politics of Conchita, as you will, that reminded people of Jesus. It was her story of the closeted queer in combination with the act of confident gender-bending that resembled something Christ-like: hers is a story of familiar Christian themes of suffering and resurrection, of sacrifice, transfiguration and glorification.

In this essay I pose the question: what happens when we consider Conchita Wurst as a contemporary Christ figure? What might the gospel according to Conchita Wurst have in store for us, what might the hermeneutics of a bearded lady lead to? In the attempt to explore the theological potential of Conchita as a present-day queer phenomenon, as well as the cultural and religious archives she draws from, I shall apply a perhaps rather uncommon mixture of cultural studies, theology, queer studies, and gender studies. Also, my personal queer concerns, Protestant inclinations and bodily anxieties are likely to filter through. I hope this will make for an interesting read rather than a disciplinary maze. Most of all I hope it may succeed in convincing the reader that in the creation of theology, we need to take seriously the perspective of those who are, as Leonard Cohen sings, "oppressed by the figures of beauty."⁸

The cultural meaning of beards

Beards defy one single meaning or purpose and their cultural implications are as varied as the shapes they take. In his study of the "cultural history of facial hair" Allan Peterkin aptly shows how the beard has a long and interesting history that invests it with layered meanings.⁹ Beards have been cultivated as boundary-markers of masculinity for centuries, emphasising the hierarchies among different groups of men. Within Christianity in particular, beards (and, vice versa, the act of shaving) have set apart clergy from laity, Orthodox from Catholic, and Catholic from Protestant. Beards never automatically denote the aesthetic, social or religious norm of masculinity in Western societies and have different meanings in different timeframes. For example, Jan, Pier, Tjores, and

⁷ Morgan, David, *Visual Piety. A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (University of California Press: Berkeley 1998).

⁸ Cohen, Leonard, "Chelsea Hotel #2," in: *New Skin for the Old Ceremony* (Album) (Columbia Records: New York 1974).

⁹ Peterkin, Allan, *One Thousand Beards. A Cultural History of Facial Hair* (Arsenal Pulp Press: Vancouver 2001).

Corneel, characters in a traditional Dutch folk song, are deemed eligible to sail for the Cape of Good Hope only after having grown beards.¹⁰ The song testifies both to the association of the beard with the "heroic masculinity" of the adventurous sailor in the Golden Age,¹¹ or our invented memory thereof, and to the ways in which this ideal of masculinity ties in with the colonial past of the Netherlands. On the contrary, in present times the beard is sometimes used to construct, as Ruard Ganzevoort argues, a dividing line between Western (shaven) and non-Western / Muslim (bearded) men, for instance through the use of the word *haatbaard* ("hate beard"), pejoratively applied to young traditional Muslim men.¹² Apparently, the "colonial beard" differs considerably from the "post-colonial beard". Beards, then, are grown or shaven in relation to particular views on religion, ethnicity, gender, and class.

Recently, the beard seems to have made a come-back in many European countries, also among non-Muslim men. The urge to "return to nature" that turns people to superfoods and paleo diets also fosters the emergence of the hipster beard on the streets of gentrified neighbourhoods. Yet there is more to the return of the beard than the appreciation of healthy and "organic" nutrition. Metropolitan Kornily of the Russian Orthodox Old Believer Church, growing a long white beard and moustache himself, urged men to stop shaving, since "God created everyone [sic] with a beard." He also believed that the beard would form a "protection from same-sex relationships."¹³ (This particular view raises questions about the clean-shaven face of president Putin, but these are best kept for another time.) Kornily's statement may be viewed as a quirk from a lesser known branch of Russian Orthodoxy, but the come-back of the beard is neither marginal nor exclusively Orthodox. One telling example: when Prince Willem-Alexander was crowned King of the Netherlands in 2013, on social media close to 70,000 people signed a petition that urged him to grow a beard before ascending the throne (*geen baard, geen kroning*).¹⁴ However ludicrous, the online petition conveys the message that

¹⁰ *Al die willen te Kaap'ren varen.*

¹¹ Halberstam, Judith, *Female Masculinity*. (Duke University Press: Durham and London 1998), 1.

¹² Ganzevoort, Ruard. "Haatbaarden, Kleuterneukers en een Pannetje Soep: de Framing van Traditioneel-Religieuze Groepen in het Publieke Domein," in: *Religie en Samenleving* 7(1) (2012), 97-109.

¹³ Torén, Mathilda, "Ruska chefsprästen: 'skägg skyddar dig mot homoseksualitet,'" in: *QX.SE*, posted 21 June 2017. (<https://www.qx.se/samhalle/145329/ryska-chefsprasten-skagg-skyddar-dig-mot-homosexualitet>, 24 June 2017).

¹⁴ "Prins met baard in trek," in: *Telegraaf*, 10 April 2013.

to rule, to exert power, means to stash the razor in a drawer and “man up”. The return of the beard, I argue, signifies among other things a backlash toward authoritative masculinity and traditional family values, including the gender ideology of the complementarity of the male breadwinner and the female caregiver. These values are viewed by many as self-evident and, sometimes, God-given. While the examples mentioned above all testify to the diffuse and contextual meaning of the beard, one meaning remains practically uncontested: that of the marking of the “natural” difference between men and women. Celebrity bearded ladies such as Conchita are therefore a nagging foot in the door that seems to be closing on women’s and transgender persons’ emancipation. And that is good news for people who find themselves caught in the gender binary.

Destabilising the beard

Conchita draws from an extensive archive of bothersome bearded cross-overs: bearded women who throughout history have destabilised the “naturalness” of male beards. A beautiful, in-depth exploration into this world of women with facial hair can be found in the recent study *Beard Fetish in Early Modern England* by Mark Albert Johnston.¹⁵ *Beard Fetish* is illuminating in its discussion of the question why it is, exactly, that bearded women have often caused such a stir. “[T]he insubordinate bearded woman,” argues Johnston, “defies natural law and so constitutes an embodiment of the unnatural, the monstrous, the other.”¹⁶ What Johnston refers to as “literal” bearded women who grow actual facial hair, sometimes overlaps with “allusive”, archetypal bearded ladies: saints, witches and freaks. These archetypes testify to the ways in which being bearded allowed women to inhabit social spaces usually not available to them, but also to the mechanisms that “disciplined” them back into normative structures of gender. Saint Wilgefortis grew a beard and escaped marrying a non-believer but was crucified by her father.¹⁷ Witches existed both as widowed women who were subject to witch hunts as well as literary characters, for instance in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. They were believed to have some form of monstrous power that threatened male dominance which could be undone by shaving them in real life, or by having them “die off” in a

¹⁵ Johnston, Mark A., *Beard Fetish in Modern England. Sex, gender, and the Registers of Value* (Routledge: London 2016).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 179.

play.¹⁸ As public opinion changed, bearded women became regarded as freaks, natural wonders, and as such were exploited by male entrepreneurs as popular objects of exhibition.¹⁹ What these women had in common, a witty observation on the part of Johnston, is that they produced "male hairs instead of male heirs."²⁰ Bearded women destabilised not just the alleged naturalness of God's created distinction between men's and women's appearance, but also the naturalness of the social, cultural and religious values these appearances represent: marriage, reproduction, and male control over female bodies in general.

While some of the disciplining practices of early modern England may seem particularly barbaric to us, these practices may be much more persistent than we would have liked to admit. In present day Western society, a link can easily be made between some women's positions at the social, economic, geographic, and erotic margins, and fantasies about their facial hair. Popular culture is one place where bearded ladies can be found, particularly in places where entities are described that already verge on the non-human. Female dwarfs in *Lord of the Rings* have beards, as do female giants in *Game of Thrones*. In children's books and cartoons, witches still grow hairs from warts on their chins, as do the "nasty aunts" who want to kiss you. These cultural archives extend to the collective imagination of actual women. Elderly women from the countryside are believed to grow moustaches or beards. Likewise, jokes are made about the presumed facial hair of Dutch women of Turkish or Moroccan descent.

A particularly stirring account of the responses women's facial hair may bring about can be found in the narrative of gender studies scholar Wendy Chapkis. Taking the contraceptive pill in the eighties, when its side effects were unclear, Chapkis soon found herself growing facial hair.²¹ In her book *Beauty Secrets* she narrates how this affected her daily life when she lived in Amsterdam (in the collective imagination, the Walhalla of tolerance toward gendered and sexual deviance, especially in those years):

In the tram in Amsterdam, I sit engrossed in a book, on my way to a party. I am dressed up and have even, a few hours earlier, plucked most hairs from my chin.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 186-198.

¹⁹ Johnston here emphasises the exploitation of bearded women by men, but this seems to me a rather one-sided observation that ignores the agency of the women in question. *Ibid.*, 198-199.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 186.

²¹ As accounted by Chapkis at the conference *Trans* Studies. An International Transdisciplinary Conference on Gender, Embodiment, and Sexuality*, Tucson Arizona, 10-09-2016.

I feel beautiful and anonymous. I can pass, fit in, quietly read my book. But gradually I become aware of the three men behind me not just being obnoxiously loud in general, they are hooting with laughter about ME. I glance up as the one closest puts out his hand and rubs my chin: “Is it possible? This is a woman? Look guys – with a moustache and a beard!”²²

Discouraged and upset by harassments such as these, Chapkis turns to other means of ridding herself from her facial hair:

[W]hen I no longer felt able to resist, I chose the most private of solutions, electrolysis. After each “treatment,” I hid my swollen face: keeping my answers as utterly secret as my problem.²³

When confronted with the life story of Wendy Chapkis, I could not help but note the echo of Isaiah 50:6: “I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheek to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting.” From the narrative of Wendy Chapkis, it becomes clear how social pressure can urge bearded women to take recourse to painful methods in order to pass. For Chapkis, this included the removal of her facial hair (“pulling the beard”) as well as choosing solitude (“hiding the face”). Both strategies, I would argue, are painful in their own way. In later life, Chapkis would choose to let her moustache grow rather than removing it. She has now joined bearded activists like Jennifer Miller and bearded celebrities like Conchita in purposefully confronting society with the effects of its norms on gender and beauty. Like most queer people, these bearded women need to constantly calculate the risks that come with non-conformity and negotiate the tension between pulling the beard and letting it grow, between hiding and showing the face, between shame and play. Since this tension is also present in Isaiah 50:6, I suggest we explore this verse a bit more, starting with the “pulling of the beard” and then moving to the “hiding of the face”.

Pulling the beard

What were to happen if we were to read Isaiah 50:6 from the perspective of bearded women? Previous interpretations of this verse by male theologians tend to allegorise the pulling of the beard or read it as foreboding of the exceptionality

²² Chapkis, Wendy, *Beauty Secrets. Women and the Politics of Appearance* (The Women’s Press: London 1986), 1.

²³ *Ibid.*, 3.

of the suffering of Jesus Christ. Calvin, for instance, explains Isaiah 50:6 in terms of a template for leadership for those who hold an office in Church. The "servants of the Word" may expect to encounter insults and slander, he argues, since they are the ones who confidently call opponents to account.²⁴ In a rather similar way, Old Testament scholar Joseph Blenkinsopp reads the passage as a way for the speaker of the text to legitimise his position as a messenger of the Lord and as proof of his self-confidence in the face of opposition: "[...] the speaker offers himself as a victim of abuse and does so as the price to be paid for fulfilling his mission."²⁵ Isaiah 50:6 has further been interpreted, he notes, as a foreboding of the suffering of Christ, and has in that sense been used to "speak of Jesus in important ways, especially in the third Gospel."²⁶ Indeed, in Luke 22:63 it is stated that "[t]he men who were guarding Jesus began mocking and beating him."²⁷ Matthew 26:67 and Mark 14:65 mention spitting and slapping in the face as well. The pulling out of the beard is mentioned nowhere in the Gospels, but some have concluded from this passage in Isaiah that the abuse at the time of Jesus' arrest must have also included this painful mistreatment. In what I take to be more "popular theology", the US-based online commentary *Blue Letter Bible*, a certain pastor David Guzik states that: "from this passage in Isaiah we know it happened. What terrible agony Jesus suffered! It is even more than what the gospel writers explain to us!"²⁸

However many exclamation marks we use, there is no way of knowing for certain whether Jesus even had a beard and if so, whether his beard was pulled out by his captors. In fact, there is no mention at all of beards in the New Testament. From the perspective of the bearded lady however, it is just as interesting to imagine Jesus with a beard as it is imagining him without, and I shall follow up on both presumptions.

First, let us be led into temptation and for the moment give pastor Guzik the benefit of the doubt in his statement that Isaiah 50:6 prophesies a specific

²⁴ See Calvin, Johannes, *Verklaring van de Bijbel. De Profeet Jesaja. Deel Vier* (De Groot Goudriaan: Kampen 1988), Translation by W.A. de Groot and J.W. Wijnhoud of *Ioannis Calvini Commentarii in Isaiam Prophetam (Corpus Reformatorum, Vol. 64)* (Schwetschke et Filium: Brunsvigae 1888), 77.

²⁵ Blenkinsopp, Joseph, *Isaiah 40-55. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Doubleday: New York 2000), 320.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 321.

²⁷ Taken from the New International Version.

²⁸ Guzik, David, "Study Guide for Isaiah 50," *Blue Bible Commentary* (2001). (https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/guzik_david/StudyGuide_Isa/Isa_50.cfm, 27 June 2017)

aspect of Jesus’ suffering. This would of course require a rather simplistic Christological reading that uncritically incorporates Isaiah 50:6 into the Gospel. Still, the specific and very physical experience of the pulling out of facial hair would open up the possibility of understanding the incarnation of God in the human body of Jesus Christ from the perspective of bearded women. The pulling out of the beard, Allan Peterkin does not fail to note, is a particularly female experience. Men shave and have for centuries been developing the technology to do so as painlessly and smoothly as possible, culminating in high-tech devices such as the Gillette Mach3 Turbo®. Shaving devices for women were developed already over a century ago (the Gillette Milady Décolleté in 1915; contrary to what the name suggests targeted at underarm hair).²⁹ When it comes to the face, though, women have been plucking and using other, particularly painful procedures such as microwaves and strips and wax rather than shaving. It is presumed by Peterkin that this is the case because for women, shaving the face is experienced (or, I would say, has been made to be experienced), as humiliating as the growing of facial hair itself.³⁰ If Jesus were to have experienced some pre-Gillette plucking of his beard, this particular abuse would connect him to the experiences of (bearded) women more than to those of men. This may sound trivial and perhaps even a little profane, but I insist that it is not. What may seem to be an exceptional experience of torment from the perspective of a male theologian (“what terrible agony Jesus suffered!”), many women know to be the price they pay daily in order to comply with the norms of beauty. This is especially true for women whose emotional and physical safety depends on their plucking: “bearded women” and transgender women who, in order to pass, need to subject themselves to painful medical procedures to have their facial hair removed. Imagining the plucking of Jesus’ beard fits into the artistic tradition of the “Christas”, female Christ figures, whom Anne-Marie Korte has interpreted as works of art that, in taking the body of suffering women as the point of departure, form a critique on the notion that only the male body can represent the suffering of Jesus Christ.³¹ The pulled beard of Jesus can indeed be read as an invitation to the divine to “incarnate” beyond contemporary conventions: to willingly identify

²⁹ Peterkin, *One Thousand Beards*, 106.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 107-8

³¹ Korte, Anne-Marie, “Madonna’s kruisingingsscène: blasfemie of theologische uitdaging?” In: *Tijdschrift voor Theologie*, 49(2) (2009), 132-153.

with and, be loyal towards, the physical and emotional human suffering of failing or refusing to meet the standards of accepted gender identity.

Returning to the curious vanishing of the beard as a textual reality in the New Testament, let us now explore the possibilities for imagining a beardless Jesus. In order to do so, I accept Calvin's reading of Isaiah 50:6 as a model for leadership. Contrary to Calvin though, I suggest we read the text not as inciting the kind of leadership that is legitimised by opposition, but as the kind that allows this opposition to challenge the prerequisites of religious leadership itself. The Isaian beard is such a prerequisite: even before a single hair was pulled to challenge the speaker's authority, his authority was made possible by having a beard in the first place. The text testifies to the specific connection of Old Testament beards and the position of male (religious) leadership from which the speaker makes his statement.³² Yet, in the text there is also a movement of turning away from this position. The text speaks of actively "giving the cheek" to those who pull out the beard. The speaker of the text partakes in his own de-bearding. If we focus on the complicity of the speaker we can begin to imagine a template of beardless leadership in which the male privilege of being a "servant of the Word" is voluntarily given up. Isaiah 50:6 could indeed be the prophecy of a different kind of leader and new forms of leadership: not the patriarchal father, but the smooth-faced son.

Hiding the face

The history of the bearded lady shows that she has often either been made into a spectacle, or physically or symbolically erased. An interesting example of the mechanisms of the (in this case temporary) hiding of the ambiguously bearded face can be found in 2 Samuel 10: 1-5, and I shall briefly pause to examine it before returning to Isaiah.

In 2 Samuel 10 we read how David, wanting to uphold his good relationship with the Ammonites, sends envoys to give new king Hanun his condolences after his father's death. Hanun, misreading David's intentions, takes the envoys for spies. He shaves off half of each man's beard and "cut[s] off their garments, in the middle, even to their buttocks" before letting them go (v. 4).³³ When David finds out, he sends messengers to meet the envoys, "because the men were greatly ashamed" (v. 5),³⁴ and tells them to stay put in Jericho and

³² Cf. Leviticus 21:5, Psalm 133:2.

³³ King James Bible.

³⁴ Ibid.

let their beards grow back. Apparently, the semi-beard was so troubling that it excluded the men in question from the public space, for rather than returning home, the envoys remain closeted in Jericho until they are once again presentable and, I would suggest, passable, as men.

Two elements strike me in this story. The first is the particular location of Jericho. As a hiding place for the deviant, it may not be the city with the best reputation. It is something of a comfort that the walls that in this story separate the normal from the abnormal are probably the least stable of all the walls in Scripture.³⁵ The second element, more important here, is the way David responds. The shaving of the beards was likely intended to be a personal insult to him and his choice to hide his envoys away temporarily might have been to protect his reputation from further damage. Yet, if anybody had reason to question the self-evident connection between beards, masculinity and leadership, it was the king who, when he himself was still a smooth-faced son, conquered the giant Goliath.³⁶ Perhaps, though, David's choice to have the envoys stay in Jericho for a while was out of sympathy, intending to protect them from further shame by releasing them from their duties. Even if this were the case, a completely different chain of events becomes imaginable if David were to have applied the policy of a de-bearded leader. It would have been a sign of loyalty, a strong queer statement, and probably even more lucrative from the perspective of governance, if David would have stood by his envoys by shaving off half of his own beard and have the rest of his men do the same. Such a 1,000 BC flash mob, a collective "turning of the other cheek" (cf. Matthew 5:39), would have completely reversed the "politics of shame"³⁷ under which Hanun operates and which David, when push comes to shove, confirms.

My initial intuition had been to read Isaiah 50:6 as an invitation to bearded ladies and, for that matter, queer people, to come out of the closet. I had been planning to propose the "I hid not my face" as an incentive to lay a claim to public space, to adopt the phrase as a motto for bearded lady activists, an invitation to bypass the walls of Jericho and continue along the way, head held high. The events from 2 Samuel 10 and narratives such as that of Wendy Chapkis, however, have changed my mind. Both narratives show how much

³⁵ Cf. Joshua 5:13 – 6:27.

³⁶ Cf. 1 Samuel 17.

³⁷ Munt, Sally, *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame* (Ashgate Publishing: Hampshire and Burlington 2008).

bodily norms cling to people's psychology. The story of Wendy Chapkis, in particular, demonstrates how women's facial hair evokes strong responses. It simply should not be there. This is such overwhelming common knowledge that a man on a tram in Amsterdam has no qualms about touching and thereby humiliating a complete stranger, entirely ignoring all boundaries of personal space. I therefore suggest we read the claim "I hid not my face" as an invitation not for queer people, but for cisgender people to come out of the closet, to show where their loyalties lay. To not hide your face means: to not look away. To not hide from injustice, even when it is done to people with whom you may find it hard to identify. To acknowledge the harm that is done to people who do not neatly fit into gender categories. I suggest we read Isaiah 50:6 as a duet of loyalty in which both transgender and cisgender people participate. It would sound like this:

Transgender person: "I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheek to those who pull out the beard."

Cisgender person: "I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting."

For cisgender people to be implied in Isaiah 50:6, to read it as a prophetic call to act up when we see the injustice done to our queer neighbours, is not an easy task. We (we cisgender people) may have no interest in witch hunts or freak shows, and we would probably keep our hands to ourselves when confronted with a moustached woman on the tram. Yet we may still harbour secret fantasies about taking a pair of tweezers from the bathroom cabinet and plucking our way back to normalcy. I am not making a case here against the plucking of facial hair per se. I do want to claim that we need to be aware of the fact that the repulsion of those who do not meet gender norms runs deep and may make it hard for us to hear this specific prophetic call. We may need a queer God to help us out here.

Conclusion

If my observation of the "come-back of the beard" is correct, this may be illustrative of a present-day (re)enforcement of the "rule of Hanun": a rule of the shame of gender non-conformity, of relegating bearded women and other queers to the margins, and of bystanders who are tempted to hide their faces. Set against such sentiments and social arrangements, what does it mean to turn to Conchita as a contemporary Christ figure? Can she even be argued to be such a figure beyond the level of jests by disappointed journalists?

I would argue that it is worthwhile to read Conchita as a present-day Christ figure, but that her performance is only one layer of a more complex image of Christ, which has the potential to uncover the "unstable Deity" Marcella Althaus Reid argued is needed.³⁸ That it was precisely Conchita's gender ambiguity that reminded people of Jesus Christ means that in the collective imagination, certain divine ambiguity is already present. To think of the divine as both male and female, or as "above" gender, is not a new endeavour, and this is one of the reasons why Conchita resonates with popular culture conceptions of Jesus. Conchita becomes an even more interesting entry-point into a more unsettling and unstable Christ, though, when we look beyond her staged performance in the glittery context of the Eurovision Song Contest. Conchita ties in with Sunday school Jesus, and to some extent also with a glorified, majestic Jesus. At the end of the day, however, this resemblance to Christ is based on a performance of the FIGURE of the bearded lady by the BODY of a cisgender male who does not in daily life share in the experiences of actual bearded WOMEN. To Conchita, being a bearded lady is an act in which she combines the most glamorous expressions of masculinity with the most glamorous expressions of femininity, and that leads us to a sweet and rather innocent Jesus. It is therefore not Conchita Wurst, but women like Wendy Chapkis and her foremothers of witches, saints and freaks, who guide us to more exciting and confrontational imaginations in which the divine shares in the experiences, and chooses the side of, bearded ladies and (some) beardless men. They invite God to come out, to not hide his/her/their face from disgrace and spitting. Bearded women like Chapkis show us that we need images of God that are not only "unstable", but uncomfortable, unsettling, estranging, and even repulsive. They are a reminder that if we are talking about a comfortable God, we may not be talking about God at all.³⁹

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³⁸ Althaus-Reid, Marcella, *The Queer God* (Routledge: London 2003).

³⁹ I would like to thank my colleagues at the Intensive Text Reading Seminar "The Challenge of Difference" of the Netherlands School for Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion (NOSTER) for their comments on previous versions of this essay. In particular I would like to thank Rahil Roodsaz for her critical and creative suggestions.

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