Stanford Queerness, Spirituality & Religion

REFUGE SPEAKER SERIES

Winter Quarter 2021

A SEVEN WEEK SPEAKER SERIES FEATURING LGBTQIA+ SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS FROM AROUND THE GLOBE

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All speaker events are on ZOOM, free of charge, and open to the wider Stanford Community.

speaker panel 1
QUEERNESS & ISLAM
JANUARY 24 2021

Mahdia Lynn, Shenaaz Janmohamed, Dr. Mohammed Mertaben, Dr. Aijaz Ahmad Bund

speaker panel 2
QUEERNESS & HINDUISM
JANUARY 31 2021

Sonal Giani, Dr. Raja Bhattar, Harish Iyer

speaker panel 3
QUEERNESS & BUDDHISM
FEBRUARY 7 2021

Kodo Nishimura, Rev. Jisan Tova Green, Dr. Pamela Ayo Yetunde

speaker panel 4
QUEERNESS & HUMANISM
FEBRUARY 13 2021

Diane Burkholder, Chris Stedman

speaker panel 5
QUEERNESS & JUDAISM
FEBRUARY 21 2021

Rabbi Mychal Copeland, Rabbi Reuben Zellman, Rabbi Patricia Karlin-Neumann

speaker panel 6
QUEERNESS & AFRICAN TRADITIONAL AND DIASPORA RELIGIONS
FEBRUARY 27 2021

Amara T. Smith, Zakiya Harris (Sh8pshifter), Professor Roberto Strongman

speaker panel 7
QUEERNESS & CHRISTIANITY
MARCH 7 2021

The Rev. Dr. Pamela Lightsey, The Rev. Dr. Jay Williams, The Rev. Dr. Patrick Cheng
Co-Sponsors

Stanford Department of Religious Studies
Stanford Taube Center for Jewish Studies
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Stanford Queer and Asian

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Asian American Activities Center
Buddhist Community at Stanford
Stanford Zen Society
Black Gender Marginalized Collective
Black and Queer at Stanford
United Campus Christian Ministry at Stanford
...and more to come!
Inaugural Stanford Speaker Series on Queerness, Spirituality, and Religion

Speaker Biographies (subject to change)

Panel 1: Queerness and Islam
  Shenaaz Janmohamed, LCSW
  Mahdia Lynn
  Dr. Mohammed Mertaben, MD
  Dr. Aijaz Ahmad Bund

Panel 2: Queerness and Hinduism
  Sonal Giani
  Harish Iyer
  Dr. Raja Gopal Bhattar

Panel 3: Queerness and Buddhism
  Dr. Pamela Ayo Yetunde, J.D., Th.D.
  Kodo Nishimura
  Jisan Rev. Tova Green

Panel 4: Queerness and Humanism
  Diane Burkholder
  Chris Stedman

Panel 5: Queerness and Judaism
  Rabbi Patricia Karlin-Neumann
  Rabbi Mychal Copeland

Panel 6: Queerness and African Traditional & Diaspora Religions
  Dr. Roberto Strongman, PhD
  Zakiya Harris
  Amara Tabor-Smith

Panel 7: Queerness and Christianity
  The Rev. Dr. Pamela R. Lightsey
  The Rev. Dr. Patrick S. Cheng
  The Rev. Dr. Gerald "Jay" Williams

Panel 1: Queerness and Islam

Shenaaz Janmohamed, LCSW

Shenaaz Janmohamed is the founder and director of Queer Crescent. A healing practitioner of Shia Muslim South Asian ascent, Shenaaz is also a parent of a young wise kiddo, a licensed psychotherapist and cultural worker living on Ohlone Land (Oakland CA).
Mahdia Lynn

Mahdia Lynn the co-founder and director of Masjid al-Rabia, a women-centered LGBTQ affirming mosque, and is a passionate advocate for justice and a vision of Islam where no one is left behind. A prolific writer, educator and public speaker; along with her work with Masjid al-Rabia and her organizing work centering incarceration, abolition and disability justice Mahdia freelances as a writer, educator, leadership coach and public speaker.

Dr. Mohammed Mertaben, MD

Mo is a current Pediatric Hospitalist at Santa Clara Valley Medical Center and Assistant Clinical Professor of Medicine at Stanford School of Medicine. He graduated from UCLA in 2004 where he obtained his bachelor's of science in Psychobiology and a bachelor's of arts in French. He went to medical school at Robert Larner College of Medicine at the University of Vermont and then completed his residency at UCSF in Pediatrics. Mo identifies as gay, Lebanese and Muslim and has attempted to pave a path for acceptance for LGBTQ+ Arabs/Muslims through his work personal social network as well as with Rainbow Street, an organizations that aims to fill the gap by connecting queer and trans Middle Eastern clients with the service providers who can competently and discreetly address the unique needs of queer and trans people, whether that be social, medical, shelter of financial. Historically, Mo was heavily involved in the Muslim Community in Southern California where he served as President of the Muslim Students Association (MSA) at UCLA, the President of MSA-West, and served as a delegate to MSA National. He was on the Board of Directors of the Islamic Institute of Orange County (IIOC), started the Youth Group at the Islamic Center of Irvine (ICOI) and served as a Muslim Youth Camp Counselor for multiple years at the Islamic Center of Southern California in Los Angeles. He is the current father of two little girls, Layelle (13) and Amelie (9) who attend school at San Francisco Unified School District.

Dr. Aijaz Ahmad Bund

Dr. Aijaz Ahmad Bund is LGBTQIA+ Activist. He is founder and Chairperson of Sonzal welfare Trust, an organisation working for the wellbeing of gender and sexual minorities in kashmir.

Panel 2: Queerness and Hinduism

Sonal Giani

"Sonal Giani is an LGBTQ activist and filmmaker. She has been featured on The Better India's list of '8 Inspiring Indian LGBT Individuals', 'Rainbow list of 20 LGBT Role Models' by Cosmopolitan. She is known for her pioneering work in lesbian and bisexual women’s issues as well as LGBTQ youth work. She co-founded one of India’s largest LGBTQ youth initiatives “Yaariyan” and ‘Umag’, an LBT initiative in Mumbai. She has worked on human rights issues and crisis handling of the queer community for about 8 years previously when she was an Advocacy Manager at The Humsafar Trust. This includes Section 377 related violations. She is best known for featuring on ZEE TV's prime-time television show 'Connected Hum Tum', Bollywood film W and documentary 'Purple Skies'."

Harish Iyer

Harish Iyer is an equal rights activist and an active voice for a number of social causes. He is one of the people who
had moved the Indian Supreme Court on Section 377. He is the only Indian national listed in Guardian's world pride
powerlist, a list of 100 most influential lgbt persons across the world. He is a member of the core committee on
LGBT Rights by the National Human Rights Commission. He has two films and one book based on his life.

Dr. Raja Gopal Bhattar
Dr. Raja Gopal Bhattar (pronouns: they/them/their) is a nationally-recognized higher education leader, advocate,
consultant and author. Hailing from a long lineage of Hindu Pandits and scholars, they hold a PhD and Master of
Arts degrees in Higher Education and Organizational Change from UCLA, a Master of Education in Higher
Education and Student Affairs Administration from the University of Vermont and Bachelor’s in Psychology with a
minor in Spanish Literature from Boston University. Raja has been featured in The Advocate Magazine, Huffington
Post, BuzzFeed, India Abroad Magazine, Hinduism Today Magazine, the Vermont Quarterly and many other news
outlets. Dr. Bhattar is a proud queer and gender non-conforming person of color, 1.5 generation immigrant,
first-generation college student and spiritual practitioner. They approach this work with a passion for sustainable
organizational impact and a bold vision of equity and access through social change.

Panel 3: Queerness and Buddhism

Dr. Pamela Ayo Yetunde, J.D., Th.D.
"Pamela Ayo Yetunde, J.D., Th.D. is a pastoral counselor and co-founder of Center of the Heart
(www.centeroftheheart.org). She is the founder of Audre: Spiritual Care for Women with Cancer. Ayo is
the author of ""Black and Buddhist: What Buddhism Can Teach Us About Race, Resilience,
Transformation and Freedom"", ""Buddhist-Christian Dialogue, U.S. Law, and Womanist Theology for
Transgender Spiritual Care”", and ""Object Relations, Buddhism, and Relationality in Womanist Practical
Theology"".

Kodo Nishimura
Kodo Nishimura is a global makeup artist and a certified Buddhist monk. His work experience as makeup
artist include Miss Universe, New York Fashion Week and has done makeup for celebrities and singers.
He recently gave lectures at TEDx and UNFPA HQ in NY. He was also featured in "QUEER EYE” on
NETFLIX in 2019.

Jisan Rev. Towa Green
Rev. Towa Green is a Zen Buddhist priest in residence at San Francisco Zen Center's Beginner's Mind
Temple. She was ordained in 2003 by Eijun Linda Cutts and received dharma transmission (full
authorization to teach) in 2015. Rev. Green co-founded SFZC's Queer Dharma group and is a member of
SFZC's Diversity, Equity, Inclusivity, and Accessibility Committee. She is a poet and cellist.

Panel 4: Queerness and Humanism

Diane Burkholder
Diane Burkholder (she/her) is a cisgender, queer Black mixed-race equity & inclusion consultant and community
organizer focused on issues impacting secular people, young adults, LGBTQIA+ folks, Black and Brown
communities, and individuals living with and affected by HIV/AIDS. Half Midwesterner/half Californian, and rarely fitting into a box, she strives to create spaces where people can show up as their full selves, push boundaries, and experience radical joy.

Chris Stedman

Chris Stedman is the author of IRL: Finding Realness, Meaning, and Belonging in Our Digital Lives (2020) and Faith(e)ist (2012), and has written for publications including The Guardian, The Atlantic, BuzzFeed, Pitchfork, VICE, The LA Review of Books, and The Washington Post. Previously the founding director of the Yale Humanist Community and a fellow at Yale University, Chris also served as a humanist chaplain at Harvard University and currently teaches in the department of religion and philosophy at Augsburg University in Minneapolis, Minnesota. To learn more, visit chrisstedmanwriter.com or irlb.com.

Panel 5: Queerness and Judaism

Rabbi Patricia Karlin-Neumann

Rabbi Patricia Karlin-Neumann is the Senior Associate Dean for Religious Life at Stanford University. She came to Stanford in 1996 as the first University Chaplain from a tradition other than Christianity. Ordained at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, she teaches and speaks widely on Jewish feminism, the relationship between religion and education, rabbincal ethics and social justice. She teaches the one unit course, “Spiritual Well-Being and Religious Encounter”.

Rabbi Mychal Copeland

Mychal Copeland is the rabbi at Congregation Sha’ar Zahav, a Jewish, LGBTQI-normative community in San Francisco. She was previously the rabbi at Hillel at Stanford. Her book, Struggling in Good Faith: LGBTQI Inclusion from 13 American Religious Perspectives (SkyLight Paths, October 2015), grew out of her campus work. Mychal is passionate about opening the doors of Judaism wider and leading people towards a profound spiritual and religious life that embraces all their disparate identities.

Panel 6: Queerness and African Traditional & Diaspora Religions

Dr. Roberto Strongman, PhD

Roberto Strongman is Associate Professor in the Department of Black Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He received his Ph.D. in Literature from the University of California, San Diego in 2003. Dr. Strongman's interdisciplinary approach encompasses the fields of Religion, History, and Sexuality in order to further his main area of research and teaching: Comparative Caribbean Cultural Studies. Dr. Strongman’s first book Queering Black Atlantic Religions: Transcorporeality in Candomblé, Santería and Vodou (Duke 2019) is a Lambda Literary LGBTQ Studies Award finalist. He is currently working on a second book project on Afroamerican religion on the Caribbean coast of Panama.

Zakiya Harris

Zakiya Harris affectionately known as Sh8peshift3r, is a woman who has truly charted her own path in life. A Cultural Architect, she has over 2 decades of experience working at the intersections of Art, Activism and Spiritual Entrepreneurship. Zakiya is the co-founder of nationally recognized projects
Impact Hub Oakland, Grind for the Green and a past Fellow of Green For All and Bold Food. Currently she serves as the Co-Founder + Senior Advisor at Hack the Hood, an award-winning non-profit that introduces low-income youth of color to careers in tech by hiring and training them to build websites for real small businesses in their own communities. Zakiya is the published author of Shapeshift Your Life: The Creative Entrepreneurs Guide to Self Love, Self Mastery and Fearless Self Expression. In addition, she is retained as a consultant by a diverse set of leaders as a coach, trainer and strategist where culturally relevant education and cross sector collaboration are seen as assets. Zakiya’s experience in arts and equal access movements includes a combination of management, education and public speaking . As a successful performance artist she has released two EP’s under the name of Shapeshifter and has toured extensively throughout the country. She is also the company member of Ase Dance Theater Collective and House Full of Black Women. Awards and recognitions include the Ella Baker Center Future Leaders Award, Tutorpedia Foundation Award for Personalizing Education and Nationswell Allstars Finalist. Zakiya holds a B.A. in Political Science and History from Rutgers University, and attended New College of Law before leaving to pursue her lifelong passion of serving community. In 2019, she traveled to Osogbo, Nigeria where she became initiated as a priest of Oya in the West African Spiritual tradition of Isese. In her spare time, you can find her near a body of water, reading Octavia Butler, cooking with her 14 year old daughter.

Amara Tabor-Smith

Amara Tabor-Smith (She/her/we) is a choreographer/performance maker and the artistic director of Deep Waters Dance Theater based on Huichin Lisjan Ohlone occupied land known as Oakland, CA. She describes her work as Conjure Art. Her interdisciplinary site-specific and community responsive performance works utilize Lukumi/Ifá spiritual technologies to address issues of social and environmental justice, race, gender identity, and belonging. Amara creates ritual experiences where audience and performers converge in mutual vulnerability and transformation. Our work is rooted in black, queer, womanist principles, that insist on liberation, joy and well-being. Amara is an artist in residence at Stanford through IDA and TAPS.

Panel 7: Queerness and Christianity

The Rev. Dr. Pamela R. Lightsey

Dr. Pamela R. Lightsey wears several vocational hats. She is VP of Academic Affairs and Associate Professor of Constructive Theology at Meadville Lombard Theological School located in Chicago. Dr. Lightsey is the author of several works including "Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology." She was also the first out African American queer lesbian ordained elder in the United Methodist Church. Her work as an activist began during the Black Power movement and continues with LGBTQ+ rights and the movement for Black Lives.

The Rev. Dr. Patrick S. Cheng

The Rev. Dr. Patrick S. Cheng is an Episcopal priest and a theologian. Currently serving as the Theologian in Residence at Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, Fr. Cheng also teaches as an adjunct professor at the Episcopal Divinity School at Union Theological Seminary. He is the author of three books on contemporary theology, including Rainbow Theology: Bridging Race, Sexuality, and Spirituality. Fr. Cheng holds a B.A. from
Yale College, a J.D. from Harvard Law School, and a Ph.D. in systematic theology from Union Theological Seminary where he studied with the late Dr. James H. Cone.

The Rev. Dr. Gerald "Jay" Williams

Hailing from Buffalo, New York, Jay despises the snow and dreams of life in Wakanda. To wit, he is pretty much obsessed with “Black Panther”—as well as the 1980s cartoon series “The Thundercats.” Rev. Dr. Jay Williams returned to Union as lead pastor on July 1, 2018, having guided this congregation September 2012 – June 2017. An ordained Elder in The United Methodist Church, Jay has served congregations in New York City, Boston, and San Francisco, including Glide Memorial. Williams holds a Master of Divinity with highest honors from Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York (2009) and the Bachelor of Arts magna cum laude from Harvard College (2003). In May 2017, Jay received the Ph.D. in the Study of Religion from the Harvard University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. Dr. Williams’s work explores the meaning of “Spirit” in black cultural discourse at the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality: particularly how spirit-talk has been a marginalizing language of power. The dissertation, entitled “Unholy Ghosts in the Age of Spirit: Identity, Intersectionality, and the Theological Horizons of Black Progress,” develops a constructive theology of spirit that rethinks hope, courage, and vitality, premised on insights from W.E.B. Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, and Howard Thurman. Through his pastoral and academic work, Jay strives to help more disinherit folk find their voices.