

WRESTLING WITH THE ANGELS OF AMBIGUITY:
SCHOLARSHIP IN THE IN-BETWEEN:
QUEER THEOLOGY / PERFORMATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation introduces *performing theology*: a queerly embodied approach to arts-based educational research. This approach utilizes a hybridization of performative autoethnography, queer Christian theological analysis, and post-structural approaches to anti-oppressive education. The written component of the dissertation takes the reader on a journey through scenes, interscenes, and scripts-within-scripts, articulating the theoretical and methodological developments integral to performing theology. The filmic portion of the dissertation—*Intervention*, an original one-act play written and performed by the author—serves as the heart of the dissertation. This unconventional framework provides a space for the creative and theological explorations informing the research as well as for the ambiguities and liminalities inherent to theologically informed queer performative autoethnography. The dissertation aims to take the reader on an artistic journey: one that may, at times, be disruptive or uncomfortable, but hopefully one that will also be provocative and productive.

Act 1 of the dissertation takes the reader-as-audience-member on a script-based journey illuminating emergent theoretical and methodological processes informing the development of *Intervention*. Scene 1 explores the theoretical foundations of earlier iterations of this work, explicating research combining queer Christian theology and participatory theatre. Scene 2 (with audio performance) articulates the journey into a/r/tographic and performative autoethnography, with a particular focus on queer reflexivity as a path into more contemplative forms of scholarly activism. Scene 3 problematizes research ethics by bringing queer and disability theologies into conversation with traditional autoethnographic ethics. Scene 4, written in the form of a script, invites the reader into the development of performative autoethnography as a form of queer contemplative activism. Scene 5, also in

script form, offers an analysis of the socio-cultural, theological, and reflexive issues that emerge within the performative autoethnographic research process.

Finally, the dissertation concludes in Act 2, in video and script form, with the play *Intervention*. The play serves to integrate the contemplative, theoretical, and artistic research approaches from the earlier scenes into the development of a compelling artistic work. In so doing, this dissertation embraces autobiographical vulnerability, as well as performative and theological ambiguity, as instigators of reflection and conversation both within and outside the academy.

PREFACE

This dissertation is an original intellectual product of the author, Kerri Mesner.

Scene One has been published as Mesner, K. A. (2010). Innovations in sexual-theological activism: Queer theology meets theatre of the oppressed. *Theology & Sexuality: The Journal of the Institute for the Study of Christianity & Sexuality*, 16(3), 285-303.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Preface.....	iv
Table of Contents	v
List of Illustrations.....	viii
Acknowledgements.....	ix
Dedication.....	x
Prologue: Artist's Statement.....	1
Performing Theology: Artistic Process	2
Interscene	5
Act One: The Journey	12
Scene One: Innovations In Sexual-Theological Activism: Queer Theology Meets Theatre of the Oppressed.....	12
Queer Theology: Challenging the Lure of the Mainstream.....	15
Theatre of the Oppressed: Praxis-Based Responses in Bridging the Gap.....	21
Queer Theology and Theatre of the Oppressed: Theology and Praxis in Conversation	29
In/Conclusions: Celebrating Ambiguity in Theology and Praxis.....	33
Interscene	36
Scene Two: Whose Voice? Whose Silence?: A/r/tographic Explorations Through Queer Performative Autoethnography.....	38
Setting the Context: Moving Into A/r/tography	38
Academic Voice and Silence	42
Religious Voice and Silence	44

Queer Voice and Silence.....	45
A/r/tography and Autoethnography: Integration and Unanswered Questions	47
Reflexivity and Scholarly Identity	47
Arts-Based Autoethnography as Possibility	49
Autoethnographic Ethics.....	50
Performative Autoethnography as Integration	51
Audio Performance Mp3 and Script.....	52
Script: 'Whose Voice? Whose Silence? An Autoethnographic Exploration'	52
Interscene	60
Scene Three: Outing Autoethnography: An Exploration of Relational Ethics in Queer	
Autoethnographic Research	63
Finding my Way In.....	63
Queering Autoethnographic Ethics	65
Challenging Ethical Privilege	65
Confronting Ethical Violence	68
Arts Based Research As Creative Response	70
Queering Autoethnographic Ethical Certainty	72
Autoethnography, Theology, And Ideological Uncertainty	75
Autoethnography, Theology, And Fear Of The Body	78
Autoethnography, Theology, and Fear Of Ambiguity.....	80
(In) Conclusions: Queering Autoethnographic Ethics: Kenosis Of Privilege And Certainty .	
. . Or, 'Whose Responsibility Is It, Anyways?'	83
Interscene	89
Scene Four: Wrestling with the Angels of Ambiguity: Queer Paths in Contemplative	
Activism.....	91

Joker's Intro	94
AMDA	99
Dear Class.....	104
Bus Stop.....	107
Closing with Thomas.....	112
Interscene	116
Scene Five: Scholarship in the In-Between	118
Interscene	138
Act Two: Intervention.....	140
Epilogue	170
References.....	171

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1	61
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DEDICATION

For Marcella Althaus-Reid

Sylvia Rivera

And queer companions past, present, and future.

PROLOGUE: ARTIST'S STATEMENT

“What does it mean to live in the in-between?”

This question emerged as the central query in my earliest doctoral research.

Throughout the six years of magistral and doctoral research leading to this dissertation, the in-between spaces of my sexual and gender identities, artistic practices, trans-disciplinary academic approaches, mental health, and spirituality recurred as integral themes in my inquiries. My practice as an artist, scholar, and theologian, celebrates these ambiguous, liminal, and sometimes challenging locations. Within the depths of these spaces, my contemplative activism finds its roots, and I hope that the performances and texts that grow from these roots hold potential for prophetic conversation and transformation.

As a theologian and queer minister, I actively seek out the edges, the stories that disrupt, provoke discomfort, and challenge normative discourses. As an artist, I seek the deep, quiet ground of contemplation and reflection that remind me of *whose* I am. As an educator, I seek a specificity and vulnerability in my artistic expression that allows the audience/readers to engage with their own vulnerabilities and lived experiences. I am discovering that the conversations that ensue from this engagement can be transformative—for the performer and the audience/readers.

Through the iterative process of research, reflexivity, artistic inquiry, and contemplation, I have discovered my own theoretical, methodological, and queerly embodied approach to my research and my art: *performing theology*.

Performing Theology: Artistic Proces

I understand the dual threads of autobiographical and theoretical analysis as integral aspects of the preparatory work in my autoethnographic research. To that end, I undertake extensive theoretical research with a wide range of theorists and practitioners in arts-based research methodologies, queer and disability theologies, anti-oppressive educational theory, and performative inquiry and theatre studies.

I interweave these theoretical threads with an in-depth gathering of autobiographical data, field notes, transcriptions of dreams, journals, free-writing notebooks, and archives of personal documents and photos.¹ I strive to gather and analyze my personal autoethnographic data *in conversation* with these theoretical companions. Theoretical analysis—and particularly, queer theological analysis—is a particular lens that I bring to this work as a minister and theologian. I see the interweaving of the personal and the theoretical as critical to the integration of post-structural anti-oppressive educational theory and performative autoethnography. I concur with Spry’s (2011) statement that “engaging in a call to constant disruption of power structures and of our own biases means, identifying and articulating how those power structures and biases are lodged in our bodies and in our everyday practices” (p. 101). Over time, I have come to understand performative autoethnography, at its best, as a form of activism— a means of drawing on autobiographical experiences to illuminate, challenge, and transform social structures.

I utilize self-directed artists’ retreats for the creative development of my theatrical work; in so doing, I hope to create a dedicated space—both physically and chronologically—where I can integrate my theoretical research and move into the creative development of the

¹ See Chang, 2008 for an overview of the use of autobiographical data in autoethnographic research.

theatre pieces. Meditation and prayer, while integral to all of my work as a doctoral student, are particularly significant elements of this retreat time. Collaborative inquiry with a theological/theatrical colleague is another vital strand in the retreat process.

My rehearsal process draws on my training and experience as a professional actor, and staged readings provide me with vital learning, both in terms of the structure and shape of the performance and audience interactions, and also (perhaps even more importantly), in terms of how emotionally, physically, and spiritually demanding it is for me to perform these pieces for an audience.

During performance, I find that I am simultaneously performing and analyzing possible audience response, oftentimes improvising and changing content in the moment as a result of that analysis and co-witnessing. During the performances, I also note the potentials—and the risks involved—in my use of productive discomfort—similar to theatre activist O'Donnell's (2006) use of theatre as “social acupuncture”—the deliberate use of provocative theatre to challenge systemic blockages in the social body, generating both discomfort and learning as a result. Indeed, I continue to wrestle with the question of how far to push these uncomfortable edges in my performative work—both my own and those of my audience.

Finally, I evaluate the performances on multiple levels: artistically, through the viewing of video recordings of my performances, as well as through the integration of audience feedback; theoretically, in ongoing conversation with my prior and emergent scholarly sources; and reflexively, in terms of my own personal artistic, spiritual, and intellectual development. All of these meta-autoethnographic reflections (Ellis, 2009) feed back into further revisions and refinements of the performance pieces. I have chosen to

include some repetition in script excerpts to reflect this process of inquiry, revision, and reflection. As a part of my commitment to disrupting gender normativity, I have also chosen to utilize gender-neutral grammar (e.g. “their” instead of “his/her”) in some instances throughout the dissertation.

An Invitation

I invite you to hold your own in-between space as both reader and audience member as you engage this unconventional dissertation. I encourage you to engage with the material that follows—textual, theatrical, and spiritual, with your body, mind, and spirit. And I enhearten you to notice the places of resonance and of dissonance between my work and your own lived experience, and to engage with me in dialogue—in spirit if not in person . . . I look forward to the mutual learning that will ensue!

INTERSCENE²

Kerri appears downstage right, with bound dissertation in hand, opens it to a bookmarked page near the beginning, looks at the audience, takes a breath, and begins.

Kerri: Let me start with the theoretical framework of this dissertation. This research draws on a unique hybridization of a/r/tographic inquiry, performance studies, and queer theological scholarship, with particular emphases on queer identities, queer embodiment, and queer spiritualities. Despite the historical and political challenges associated with the use of the word ‘queer,’ I deliberately employ queer theory and queer theology as scholarly trajectories particularly suited to the destabilization of normative academic and religious discourses³. Drawing on Adams and Jones (2011), I also note the unique combinatory potential of queer theory’s destabilization of normative theoretical discourse with autoethnography’s potential to disrupt traditional research methodologies.

About halfway through this speech, Joker appears downstage left. Joker’s larger-than-life characterization is represented in her dress, her mannerisms, and her presentation—think loud colors, large gestures, and flamboyant use of tone and tempo in her voice, topped off with an annoyingly brash love of all things musical theatre. She loves being on stage and stirring things up. She takes note of Kerri during this opening speech, listening intently, and becoming agitated as Kerri’s speech goes on.

² Interscene: a scene (as in a motion picture) inserted between portions of the main narrative. Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/interscene>. (Author’s note: In a dissertation focusing on in-between scholarship, it might be argued that the Interscene might be where the most important work occurs...)

³ There continues to be broad and constantly evolving debate around the definitional parameters of language surrounding sexuality and gender identity. For the purposes of this dissertation, “queer” will be utilized as a term that traverses lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex identities, as well as the many other sexual, gender, and relational configurations that do not conform to traditional heteronormative patterns.

Kerri: My research—what might be coined ‘scholarship in the in-between’—articulates an innovative inter-disciplinary approach interweaving theatre, queer theology, and post-structural approaches to anti-oppressive education. Four key theorists that particularly inform my research include queer theologian Althaus-Reid, trauma theologian Rambo, political theatre scholar/practitioner Boal, and performative autoethnographer Spry. I also draw on a wide range of theorists and practitioners from a/r/tography (Irwin & Springgay, 2008), art and spirituality (Bickel, 2010; Snowber, 2004), participatory theatre as articulated in Boal’s “Theatre of the Oppressed” methodologies (Boal, 1985, 1998; Salverson, 2008), and post-structural and decolonizing approaches to anti-oppressive education (Kumashiro, 2002b; Regan, 2010). I draw on autoethnography, combining autobiographical research and cultural analysis (Ellis, 2004; Chang, 2008), with a specific focus on Spry’s (2011) work on performative autoethnography. I analyze Christian theology through the lenses of queer and disability theories (Althaus-Reid, 2001, 2005; Betcher, 2007, 2010; Cornwall, 2008, 2009; Heyward, 2003; Goss, 2002), as well as trauma theology (Rambo, 2010). In drawing on and building from this wide transdisciplinary range of theorists, I aim to offer new contributions to theoretical discourse and research methodology.

Joker can no longer contain herself; she interrupts.

Joker: Uh . . . Hold on . . . hang on Kerri . . . I think you’re getting off track here. Sorry to interrupt but this is not what this dissertation is about at all . . . this isn’t what you’ve been working on for the past four years. Why are you so stuck in your head? Jesus.

Kerri: *(laughs)*

Uh . . . Who are you, and what are you doing in my dissertation?

Joker: Kerri, you know me, you created me. I'm the Joker! I'm the one who asks the questions, who serves as intermediary between you and your audience . . .

Joker startles with a startle of awareness as to who that audience actually is.

. . . Er uh, I mean your readers.

Makes a broad sweeping gesture encompassing all the people reading the dissertation.

Yes . . . you, our readers, are in fact our audience. And I am here to facilitate your engagement with this work! But in the tradition of Boal's (1985) Theatre of the Oppressed Jokers⁴, I'm more than a facilitator . . . I'm a *difficultator*! And you are more than mere readers or spectators . . . You are *spectactors*⁵! We want you to actively engage with this material . . . to find your places of resonance and dissonance, to join us in wrestling with the material!

Joker builds up momentum in this next series of statements, increasing in tempo and intensity—her own enthusiasm gets the better of her to the point where she is oblivious to outside reactions.

But to tell the truth, I'm something more than a Theatre of the Oppressed Joker, too . . . maybe I'm what gay theologian De La Huerta (1999) refers to as the queer catalytic transformer, instigating revolutionary change . . . the holy outsider that exposes and

⁴ “**Joker:** the director/master of ceremonies of a Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) workshop or performance. In Forum Theatre, the joker sets up the rules of the event for the audience, facilitates the spectators' replacement of the protagonist, and sums up the essence of each solution proposed in the interventions. The term derives from the joker (or wild card) in a deck of playing cards: just as the wild card is not tied down to a specific suit or value, neither is the TO joker tied down to an allegiance to performer, spectator, or any one interpretation of events. Also used as a verb, ‘to joke’” (Schutzman & Cohen-Cruz, 1994, p. 237).

⁵ **Spect-actor** is a term from Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) methodologies, and refers to “the activated spectator, the audience member who takes part in the theatrical action. In TO there are meant to be no passive spectators; Boal emphasizes the potential involvement of even those who do not physically participate, and the fact that they at least have the choice” (Schutzman & Cohen-Cruz, 1994, p. 238).

challenges societal limits . . . the sacred shaman and priest . . . and of course the holy clown . . .

Joker is really building up a good head of steam by now.

Joker: I'm the—

A look of recognition crosses Kerri's face as she realizes not only who the Joker is, but just why she has appeared in this moment. Kerri interrupts, with just a hint of sarcasm.

Kerri: Oh. Yes. I remember you now.

Pauses.

Um . . . the thing is, Joker, you're a little early. Remember, we agreed that you have an entire chapter where you could do your thing—that's Chapter 5. Can you come back then, please?

This isn't really the time . . . I need to set up my theoretical structure and the architecture of the dissertation . . .

Joker: Sure, Kerri, but the thing is . . . um . . . how do I say this? You're kinda losing your way here. Look. When you started this dissertation, you were very clear in your intention to approach it as a spiritual discipline, as an expression of your ministerial calling, and eventually you even began to understand it as an artistic endeavour as well. So if you get completely caught up in all this theoretical mumbo-jumbo . . . well . . . you're missing the point.

Kerri: Yeah . . .

Pauses

But the academy requires a framework, some kind of roadmap so that the reader knows why this is a dissertation and where they're headed.

Joker: But where's the wonder in all of that? Where's the mystery? Where's the art? Come on Kerri—I know this is pushing your particular edges around how to meet the expectations of the academy, but let's be honest here. Your entire dissertation journey has been about wrestling with those constraints—or perhaps more accurately—wrestling with your *perception* of those constraints.

Kerri: Are you saying that those limitations are all in my head? Are you honestly suggesting that academic constraints don't exist?

Pauses

Because we both know that's not true.

Joker looks at audience/ readers.

Joker: Audience what do you think?

A long, uncomfortable pause ensues between Kerri and Joker. Clearly, no easy answer is forthcoming.

Joker: Look Kerri, I'm not arguing that there aren't obstacles in the academy. Of course there are. But there's also a tremendous amount of freedom if you're willing to risk it. To break out of the traditional five-chapter thesis . . . What I'm trying to say is that you *have* your dissertation.

Pauses

It's the play.

Suddenly inspired, Joker leaps to centre stage, and gestures with a dramatic flourish clearly intended for the audience's benefit.

“The play's the thing! The play's the thing!”⁶

⁶ Hamlet Act 2, Scene 2, 604

Kerri:

(With a roll of the eyes)

Nice quote. Completely out of context for what we're talking about here. But nice quote.

Joker: Seriously though Kerri. Your play *is* the dissertation. Let the art stand on its own merit. We both know the research that's gone into it. You don't need to legitimize this work with footnotes and structure and architecture . . . you need to let the play speak for itself.

The play *is* the dissertation. Done. Four years of research, praxis, artistic practice, development, evaluation, revision. That's it. That's the dissertation!

Prepares to exit—in Joker's mind, her work here is done.

Kerri: Yeah . . . I don't think I'm quite ready to let my doctoral exam process depend purely on your idealism . . . I have a strong suspicion that my examiners aren't going to be satisfied with just that.

Joker: Tell you what: if you are really feeling *this* uncomfortable—though you know how much I love productive discomfort—if it's really *that* important to you, well, can we at least *focus* on the play? It is the heart of the dissertation. Tell us the journey of the play. Tell us how you *got* here!

Kerri: Really? Just tell the story? Just like that?

Joker looks to audience.

Joker: Audience, are you willing to go there with us? Let's give it a try . . . Audience—er, I mean readers—please put the idea of a traditional dissertation down and join us in this conversation.

Pauses, looks directly at each individual audience member/reader, and delivers this next line in melodramatic style reminiscent of a bad cop movie.

Please. Put. Down. The Dissertation.

Now let's engage. And remember, we are engaging as *spectactors*, not simply spectators today

. . . engaging with this work and what it evokes, provokes, for us . . .

Talk to us, Kerri. Cause clearly you didn't start here four years ago. I mean, when we worked together back then, you were doing a whole different kind of work.

Kerri: Yes . . . (*remembering*) . . . I came into doctoral studies fired up with the possibilities of bringing my ministerial activism, my work as a theatre educator, and my passion for queer theology into this dissertation. Back then, for me, activism really was about putting your body on the line . . . getting out there and getting involved, making a difference in the world. It made sense to me, to my colleagues in ministry. I was on the edge of something new, and it was really exciting!

Joker: Don't just tell me . . . show me.

Kerri: Well, we need to go back about four years . . . shortly after I'd finished my Masters degree. Tell you what—let's look at my article, "Innovations" (Mesner, 2010).

Joker:

Gestures to the audience and also to the next page.

Audience, let's have a look.

ACT ONE: THE JOURNEY

SCENE ONE: INNOVATIONS IN SEXUAL-THEOLOGICAL ACTIVISM: QUEER THEOLOGY MEETS THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED⁷

As I look through the photographic documentation of my masters' thesis project, I'm struck once again by the power of Boal's 'Image Theatre' (2002) in capturing heightened moments of conflict, controversy, and challenge. The images are frozen moments in time—living photographs if you will, shaped by the participants' own bodies and created silently through touch, movement, and non-verbal communication.

I remember one particularly potent image, one wherein each participant shapes their body in response to my suggestion, "how you see the relationship between queerness and the Christian church." For these individuals, the responses are varied: One participant stands facing outward from the group, arms stretched wide, eyes open, indicating a stance of openness and receptivity. Another appears to be in a conversation mid-interrupted, with a lively, engaged facial expression. Two others show with powerful strength their definitive rejection of organized religion: one with arms closed, body turned away from the others, and the second with eyes shut, ears covered, and mouth firmly shut. Yet another participant creates a stance with fist raised, mouth opened as though shouting and an undeniably angry facial expression—a stance that I read as aggressive, even violent. I invite the actors to find their stance, to breath, and to hold their positions.

⁷ This chapter first appeared in Mesner, K. A. (2010). Innovations in sexual-theological activism: Queer theology meets theatre of the oppressed. *Theology & Sexuality: The Journal of the Institute for the Study of Christianity & Sexuality*, 16(3), 285-303.

Then I invite the surrounding group of observers to engage in ‘projections’—Boal’s exercise (2002) where the remaining participants are invited to speak aloud thoughts, feelings, or ideas sparked by this still image as they circle it from all directions. Phrases are called out from the circle of people surrounding the image, some words overlapping one another . . .

“homophobic”

“violent”

“hopeful”

“unnecessary”

“useless”

“part of my history”

“longing”

Finally, I invite the actors to relax and step out of their frozen image. The entire group gathers in a circle to talk about what we’ve just seen and experienced, and suddenly find ourselves in a deep and lively conversation about whether it is possible to be a critical, thoughtful queer student and a Christian. The opinions are divided and varied.

This composite example⁸ touches on my aim (and indeed my struggle), to interweave the varied and sometimes contradictory aspects of my work as a queer minister⁹, a theologian, and an artist (Mesner, 2010). In reflecting on my work as a queer minister, theologian, and arts-based researcher, several questions emerge. I recognize that the language of queer self-naming—with the diverse range of debates, beliefs, scholarship, and activist

⁸ In order to protect the confidentiality of workshop participants and processes, the examples offered in this article are composite examples from a wide range of my experiences as a TO facilitator.

⁹ I am a licensed, ordained minister with Metropolitan Community Churches, a church founded in and reaching beyond the l/g/b/t/q community.

stances that the word ‘queer’ generates—can be seen as a topic of inquiry in and of itself. As a deliberately self-identified queer minister, theologian, and academic, I understand my queerness to include and extend beyond my sexuality, my genderqueerness, and into my framing of my Christian beliefs and praxis. Simultaneously, I recognize that academic framings (or disputing) of queer theory or theology are as diverse as they are multifarious.

My struggles bridge the theoretical and the contextual as well. As a minister, how do I navigate complex theological conversations with colleagues and professors in a predominantly mainstream seminary setting where, for many students, the notion of queer theology¹⁰ is, at best, a new idea—while, at worst, a direct confrontation with dearly held beliefs? As a scholar and activist, how do I navigate my conviction that ministry—and indeed, church—is perhaps most significantly what happens outside the sanctuary on a Sunday morning; that ministry, for me, emerges evocatively within my academic scholarship; that my understanding of ministerial calling compels me to confront the intersections of Christian theology and anti-l/g/b/t/q violence? And as a theatre artist, how do I navigate my desire to keep my sexual body fully engaged in my scholarship . . . to challenge what seems to be an oft-prevailing mind-body dualism in the academy?

This chapter outlines several years of theological/ministerial work that developed in response to these questions, interweaving the voices of queer theologian Althaus-Reid (2001; 2002; 2003; 2005; 2008) and Boal (1985; 1995; 1998; 2002), the originator of the Theatre of the Oppressed theories and methodologies. Both Boal and Althaus-Reid (who, sadly, died within a few months of each other in 2009) shared a prophetic approach to their work, one

¹⁰ For a more detailed exploration of the development of queer theology within broader Christian contexts, see Mesner (2010). See also Bohache, 2003; Cartier, 2004; Cheng, 2011; Cornwall, 2008, 2009, 2010; Goss, 1993, 2002; Heyward, 1989, 2003; Isherwood, 2006; Isherwood & Jordan, 2010; Shore-Goss, Bohache, Cheng, & West, 2013.

that not only valued, but prioritized the marginal voice. I believe that their shared roots in Latin American political contexts and Freirean pedagogies positioned them particularly well in order to engage in this conversation between theology and praxis. At the same time, each brought an important contribution that complemented the other's: Althaus-Reid, the critical analysis of religio-ecclesial oppressions through theological reflection; Boal, the critical engagement of oppressive realities through theatrical praxis.

To explore the potentials in this theological-artistic partnership, we will look at Althaus-Reid's theologies (2001; 2002; 2003; 2005; 2008) as a response to the queer theological dialectic between mainstream acceptance and marginalization. From here, we will turn to Theatre of the Oppressed as a potential artistic partner to queer theology. This effort will culminate in an articulation of a beginning framework for a new queer ministry combining these two voices in theory and praxis.

Queer Theology: Challenging the Lure of the Mainstream

Althaus-Reid served as a primary inspiration in my work, both as a pastor in Edinburgh—where she sometimes joined us at church for worship—and later in my work as a student of theology in Canada. In my prior work as a pastor, and presently as a theologian in academic settings, I noted occasional critiques of Althaus-Reid's scholarship in terms of its lack of (intellectual) accessibility. Some argued that her theological articulation often demonstrated a level of scholarly complexity that seemed to run counter to its commitment to grassroots communities. Conversely however, when she preached at our congregation's l/g/b/t/q Pride Service, her complex, nuanced, and theologically rigorous sermon was one of the most popular during my time in that pastorate. As I reflect on these differing views and

experiences of Althaus-Reid's work, I recognize that, for me, the relationship between queer theological thought and on-the-ground practice was—and is—a complex dialectic.

I would suggest that a noticeable gap has indeed emerged between queer theological thought and lived praxis in much queer theological scholarship. The historical rootedness of queer theologies within the contextual knowledge of the body makes this gap all the more troubling and pronounced. Queer theologies, uniquely positioned to challenge the historical academic and ecclesial mind-body split, run the risk of disconnecting from the embodied realities of the communities for whom they aim to speak. Put plainly, what does it mean to be 'doing' queer theology only from the head up? Further, how might praxis-based approaches help us to put queer theology's more radical statements into practice? I would assert that bringing Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed into conversation with Althaus-Reid's queer theology offers a unique bridge between queer theological thought and queer theological praxis.

Althaus-Reid (2002) offered a prophetic voice that advocated the deliberate "indecenting" of sexualized orthodoxy, theology, cultural normalization, and global economics (p. 78). Althaus-Reid challenged scholars and ecclesial leaders to recognize the need for the

coming out of other discomforts and areas of tensions such as economics and racial structures of suppression of subjectivities, because heterosexual matrices not only provide us with the master narratives for bedtime, but economic epistemologies and social patterns of organization (p. 83).

Through this queering of multiple intersectional issues, as well as its epistemological rooting in the body's knowledge, queer theologies challenge the academy and the church.

The political terrorism of her Argentinean homeland informed Althaus-Reid's unique approach to queer theology, with its emphatic emphasis on the sexual and economic natures of theology. Althaus-Reid (2002) critiqued mainstream theology as "a sexual ideology performed in a sacralising pattern" (p. 87). Traditional theology, she argued, is focused primarily on "a sexual divinised orthodoxy (right sexual dogma) and orthopraxy (right sexual behaviour)" (Althaus-Reid, 2002, p. 87). Althaus-Reid (2003) challenged what she refers to as "T-Theology"—that is,

theology as ideology . . . a totalitarian construction of what is considered "The One and Only Theology" which does not admit discussion or challenges from different perspectives, especially in the area of sexual identity and its close relationship with political and racial issues (p. 172).

She deliberately employed queer sexual hermeneutics within her theology, calling for a "critical bisexuality as a pre-requisite for being Christian" and, further, for "a critical transgender, lesbian, gay, heterosexual-outside-the-closet, that is, full Queer presence, as a requirement for doing theology" (pp. 108-9).

These were not simply rhetorical semantics, however. Althaus-Reid's (2003) transgressive approach resisted the cultural institutionalization of the "decent" as "normal" (p. 114). Through this refusal of normalization, queer theologies resist "current practices of historical formation that make us forget the love which is different" (p. 50). Here, we get to know Althaus-Reid's (2001) queer God of the margins, the God of that "love which is different," and her reminder of the keen difference between a God that *visits* the margins and a God that deliberately *resides* in the margins (p. 33). As Althaus-Reid (2004) put it, "terrible is the fate of theologies from the margin when they want to be accepted by the center!" (p. 3)

These margins were—and are for queer people today—margins of sexual normativity. In explicitly choosing this sexual-theological edge, the queer theologian simultaneously reclaims socio-political agency in the theologian's own queer world making.

One hears echoes of this power of the margins in constructive theologian McFague's (2001) notion of "wild space"—where one does not fit into hegemonic strictures, and as a result, where "our 'failures' to fit the hegemonic image are our opportunities to criticize and revise it" (pp. 48-49). Theologian Fast (1999) also echoes this in her call for a "hermeneutic of foolishness," and in her reminder that "by making the 'fool,' the 'queer,' the transgressive one a part of the mainstream social order, the transformative potential of those who reside on the margins is relinquished." When this happens, Fast reminds us, "liberal apologists can accurately announce that homosexuality is NOT a threat to society" (p. 44).

And yet, it could be argued that the lure of the mainstream remains strong for many queer communities. Queer theorist Halperin (2003) suggests that

there is something odd, suspiciously odd, about the rapidity with which queer theory—whose claim to radical politics derived from its anti-assimilationist posture, from its shocking embrace of the abnormal and the marginal—has been embraced by, canonized by, and absorbed into our (largely heterosexual) institutions of knowledge (p. 341).

While Halperin's claim could certainly be debated within the academy, (and even more so within the theological academy), I believe he nonetheless touches on a significant danger in terms of the potential co-optation of queer theory's more radical roots in the name of acceptability. As a queer minister, I sense troubling hints of this co-optation outside the academy as well.

I would suggest that contemporary queer liberatory movements wrestle with the tension between utilizing a credible voice that can be heard by the mainstream and maintaining a prophetic stance that is willing to challenge those self-same centrist structures. This lure of the mainstream, often motivated by a legitimate desire for effective political agency and legal protections, has led to a troubling normalization of queer theological and political thought. I draw on my own denominational experience with marriage equality debates as one particular example.

As a pastor, I felt both honoured and moved by the many opportunities I had to celebrate queer relationships ceremonially in the context of our churches. In no way would I want to dismiss or minimize the liturgical and pastoral significance of these celebrations. At the same time, I am aware of my own growing unease with the constant focus on same-sex marriage battles within queer activist communities—and indeed within my own denominational tradition. Setting aside my concerns for the variety of relational configurations not recognized within current marriage equality debates—not to mention setting aside my concerns around the (financial) prioritization of marriage over other urgent political issues—my concern within the context of this chapter is primarily a theological one. Simply put, while I recognize the strategic and socio-political value of foregrounding marriage equality as a flagship issue, I simultaneously wonder if this push is not partially—albeit perhaps unconsciously—fuelled by a desire for mainstream acceptance. I would suggest that this lure towards the mainstream runs counter to the subversively challenging potentialities of queer theologies like those Althaus-Reid (2001; 2002; 2003; 2005; 2008) put forward.

Queer theologies, with their particular critical analysis of multiple oppressions, as well as their unique appreciation of the particularities of embodied contributions to theological discourse, run the risk—when mainstreamed—of disconnecting from the socio-political praxes in which they were originally rooted. The increasing normalization and mainstreaming of many queer religious activist movements, while perhaps politically expedient at first, run the risk of losing the critical edge that had been formed in that unique nexus of the sexual, the political, and the spiritual. Only by moving to the sexual, theological, and political margins can a queer theological voice and praxis remain true to its potential for socio-political transformation and the creation of queer life worlds.

Boal's work (1985; 1995; 1998; 2002) offered praxis-based methodologies to explore, debate, and challenge these issues within specific communities working towards this kind of socio-political transformation. Intriguingly, Althaus-Reid (2006) also worked as a Freirean community educator in Buenos Aires and later in Scotland. Althaus-Reid herself alluded to connections with Boal's work. In her article discussing the concrete ramifications of a sexualized global economic order, Althaus-Reid (2008) drew on Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* in her description of "lunchtime crucifixions"—performative acts reminiscent of street theatre, where Argentineans voluntarily tied themselves to crosses in a public park to protest the crucifying violence of external debts (p. 66). Indeed, in my own conversations with Althaus-Reid, she seemed intrigued by the potentialities of the conversation between queer theology and Boal's work. In 2006, Althaus-Reid invited me to present a *Theatre of the Oppressed* workshop at the British Irish Society of Feminist Theologians' Conference in Scotland, where we used theatre to explore the links between bodies, theologies, and our own understandings of erotic power (Mesner, 2006). As we move more deeply into this notion of

queer theological praxis, we turn now to an overview of Boal's methods as they relate to this dialogue.

Theatre of the Oppressed: Praxis-Based Responses in Bridging the Gap

How do we bridge the gap between queer theological thought and theologically rooted queer praxis, between normative and transformative socio-political discourses? Theatre offers one such bridge. However, here we look not to traditional theatre (with a performance in front of a passive audience), the primary goal of which is to stimulate empathetic audience responses to a problematic situation without any ensuing action (Boal, 1985). Rather, we seek theatre that has the potential to bridge the gap between reflection and action, theatre that serves as what theatre activist O'Donnell (2006) identifies as a form of "social acupuncture," and which uses theatre to explore, articulate, and provoke different aspects of the social body. O'Donnell draws metaphorically on acupuncture's ability to stimulate the physical body's energetic flows to encourage greater holistic health. Similarly, O'Donnell suggests that provocative theatre can be used to stimulate the *social body*, suggesting that social blockages created by

classism, racism and sexism can all be read this way . . . social acupuncture offers the opportunity to directly engage with social flows, applying the same principles as real acupuncture, only the terrain is the social body instead of the physical body

[this] will usually generate discomfort, the social equivalent of confusion, a necessary part of any learning process (pp. 47, 49-50).

As we will see, this embrace of productive discomfort is integral to Boal's practices as well.

Boal, a Brazilian actor, playwright, director, and activist, offered one such form of theatrical social acupuncture. *Theatre of the Oppressed*, developed by Boal from the early

1970s until his death in 2009, was inspired by Paulo Freire's (2007) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Boal, like Freire, sought to find explicit ways to activate subjective awareness and a capacity for change in the journey towards liberation. Like Freire, Boal developed his theories and methodologies within the context of a Brazilian political dictatorship, and both men were eventually exiled for their revolutionary work. These shared historical and philosophical roots emerge clearly within Boal's theatrical methodologies. Boal developed a rich and varied set of theatrical methodologies designed not only to break down the separation between actor and audience, but also to bridge the gap between art and activism.

In Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) the audience is challenged to explore multiple possibilities within a given oppressive situation, and to actively engage in the theatrical process in an attempt to overcome that oppression (Boal, 2002, p. 262). This process is not simply limited to verbal or intellectual analysis—action is required as response. Boal shared Freire's belief that without radical transformation, education has not taken place. As Boal wrote in his seminal *Theater of the Oppressed*, the focus is

on the action itself: the spectator delegates no power to the character (or actor) either to act or to think in his place; on the contrary, he himself assumes the protagonic role, changes the dramatic action, tries out solutions, discusses plans for change—in short, trains himself for real action. In this case, perhaps the theatre is not revolutionary in itself, but it is surely a rehearsal for the revolution. The liberated spectator, as a whole person, launches into action. No matter that the action is fiction; what matters is that it is action! (Boal, 1985, p. 122)

Like Freire, Boal (1985) challenged coercive models of education, suggesting that educators should start with strategies arising from the experiences of the participants themselves (p.

127). The use of images was central to Boal's work; he chose to deliberately subvert a traditional reliance on verbal expression, challenging actors instead to find nonverbal means of communication and expression. Paralleling Freire, *intervention* is also critical: through onstage interventions, *spectators* (Boal's term replacing traditionally passive audience spectators) are challenged to actively test out potential responses to oppressive situations rather than simply watching passively as professional actors intervene on their behalf. In *Theatre of the Oppressed*, the *Joker* plays the critical role of facilitator, *problematizer*, *difficultator* (again, terms coined within Boal's practice), and intermediary between the actors and the *spectators*, challenging both groups to create a community of critical dialogue, reflection and action.

While Boal initially developed TO to address systemic oppression within the context of political dictatorships in Brazil and other parts of Latin America, he discovered, particularly during his subsequent exiles in other countries, that its relevance extended to other cultures and contexts. As his work traversed into Western Europe and North America, he also developed additional methodologies that explored internalized oppressions at individual levels, and, over the years, increasingly sophisticated combinations of the various techniques that bridged both individuals and systems—both the personal and the political. Boal's (1985, 1995, 2002) *arsenal*¹¹ of techniques includes *Forum Theater* (where a short play is presented and audience members have opportunities to intervene on stage to try to combat the oppression presented), *Image Theater* (a series of exercises utilizing frozen and then activated images to explore and unpack the many layers of analysis and meaning within a particular nonverbal image), and *Rainbow of Desires* (a complex series of strategies

¹¹ Boal uses the term *arsenal* to refer to his own wide range of theatrical strategies, perhaps as a response to the politically violent context within which they originally were formulated.

designed to make explicit the internalized oppressions experienced at individual and collective levels). More recently, Boal (1998) also developed *Legislative Theater*, whereby TO methods are used to explore and effect political change in local governments; he used these methods successfully to effect legislative change during his tenure as a councilman in Brazil.

Boal's work (1985; 1995; 1998; 2002) has been contextualized internationally in a variety of cultures, communities, and issue foci; its applications are diverse, flexible, and innovative, reflecting the practitioners and communities where those applications are rooted. There is also a growing body of scholarship analyzing TO praxis and theory. Several scholars and practitioners have looked at TO's efficacy as a tool to analyze and address a range of societal issues. Hsiao-Chuan (2006) for example, used TO as praxis-oriented research in literacy work with Southeast Asian 'foreign brides' brought into Taiwan. Heritage (2006) outlines a TO based project in Brazilian prisons aimed to explore human rights issues with inmates and prison staff in prisons across Brazil. In addition to a wide range of projects using TO to address issues of inequity, discrimination, and violence, its use as a qualitative research strategy has been documented, among others, in Dennis' (2009) exploration of cross-cultural anti-bullying research, and Butterwick's (2002) exploration of feminist organizing. As the academic TO field develops, theoretical and praxis-oriented debates are also opened up. Dwyer (2004), for example, has problematized the *Jokering* methodologies through his analysis of the ideological influence of TO facilitators' practices in a Vancouver-based project addressing sexual harassment on a college campus. In exploring the praxis-based approaches instigated in these varying contexts, I can see the potential for Boal's

methodologies to offer an approach that can make Althaus-Reid's (2001; 2002; 2003; 2005; 2008) complex theologies more accessible.

Intriguingly, I have also noted, (anecdotally over the years in my work as a TO *Joker*), a tension within TO practitioner communities around the desire to document and theorize this methodological framework. My sense is that some practitioners fear that the move towards formal TO scholarship, while perhaps fuelled by a desire for wider legitimacy and recognition, may in fact run counter to the grassroots origin of Boal's work. Indeed, we could argue that this desire for mainstream legitimization is similar to the one we explored earlier within queer theological movements. These two potentially competing tensions—between the desire to keep TO as a radical community-fuelled movement and the need for clear analytical and evaluative tools within TO praxis and scholarship—are not easily reconciled, and will likely continue to be at the centre of debate in TO communities in years to come. Just as I am suggesting utilizing participatory theatre to evoke a praxis-based shift in academic theological thought, I suspect we need to find equally radical means of documentation and theorization of this work. For example, while taking a doctoral course on Community Service Learning, I undertook a service-learning placement in an applied arts company that utilizes TO methodologies. For me, this was an opportunity to work towards finding a bridge between the theoretical abstraction of my university context and the on-the-ground realities of this radical activist theatre company. The conversations that ensued in my written analyses—both within the weeklong placement and afterwards—proved generative and provocative. I sense that this kind of interweaving of praxis and analysis may prove essential to academically oriented TO work. Further, as this debate continues to unfold, I

suspect that a key measure of academic approaches to TO will be found in their ability to remain in active dialogue with their researched communities.

As we focus in on Boal's approach, we move to the heart of a key principle in Boal's work—as well as the source of key critiques of his philosophy by many TO scholars: the oppressed/oppressor dichotomy. For both Freire and Boal, careful analysis of the dialectic relationship between oppressor and oppressed is essential: oppressor and oppressed cannot exist without one another. Given this foundational assumption, Freirean and Boalian approaches aim to find explicit ways to activate subjective awareness and capacity for change in the journey towards what Freire (2007) called “conscientization” (p. 35). For Boal, such transformative processes happen through theatre; the wall between audience and actor is dissolved, and communities use Boal's interactive theatre methods to explore and articulate their own responses to oppressive situations within their politically situated realities.

At the heart of Boal's approach is the belief that TO must be focused on the protagonic character or characters experiencing oppression. Interventions (where audience members can replace a protagonic character in a scene) should therefore, in Boal's view, be focused explicitly on means of overcoming that character's particular oppression. Such an approach (and indeed, even the very title of Boal's book and methodological umbrella) relies on the clearly defined category of “oppressed,” and by implication, of that person's “oppressor.” While some TO practitioners view this approach as “pure TO,” others, like Dwyer (2004), see it as a reliance “on outmoded and restrictive binary oppositions between oppressor' and 'oppressed,' between 'antagonist' and 'protagonist'” (p. 160).

Vancouver theatre director Diamond (2007), for instance, challenges the utility of the oppressor-oppressed paradigm. Diamond has developed his own extrapolation of TO called

“Theatre for Living,” integrating systems theory analysis into TO practices. Diamond’s model understands the community as a living system that needs ways of telling and exploring its stories to maintain or return to greater communal health. He strives to look for connections between theatre and systems theory, and to challenge mechanistic/dualistic models—even, for example, in the traditional TO oppressor-oppressed dichotomy. Within his model, Diamond sees both oppressor and oppressed as part of the living community system and as such, believes that the needs of both protagonist and antagonist need to be addressed. He further notes the connections of systems theory to Freire’s work on cyclical nature of oppression, and points to the need to change those systemic patterns in order to avoid recreating oppressions (pp. 46-47).

Similarly, TO practitioner and scholar Schutzman (1994) brings a postmodern perspective to her exploration of the oppressed-oppressor relationship within the context of North American cultures. Schutzman notes that the word oppressor may be a less obviously definable term when politics of identities further complicate the issues of the oppressed-oppressor dichotomy; for instance, she problematizes who the oppressor actually is when multiple identities/issues overlap.

On the other hand, TO practitioner Armstrong (2006) brings a feminist critique to her argument for retaining the simplified oppressor/oppressed relational model first set out by Boal. Armstrong states that, “Boal’s techniques have frequently been criticized for the oversimplification of relationships between the oppressor and the oppressed.” However, Armstrong argues that, “the oppressed-oppressor distinction is crucial (even if it must be made provisionally) in order to fully understand the embodied experiences of a particular

group” (p. 178). Armstrong suggests that this clear demarcation allows for authentic theatrical explorations of particularized experiences of oppression.

Alberta TO and disability arts practitioner Decottignies challenges the move towards eliminating dichotomous language in discussing oppression. Clearly situating her company’s work within anti-oppression theoretical frameworks, Decottignies (2010) notes that

all of the TO jokers who have told us that they don’t use the ‘oppressed/ oppressor’ lingo anymore are in a position of privilege to do so: affluent, well educated, white, heterosexual, Christian, able-bodied men. We’re not saying that they or their choice around language is wrong, but that they have to carefully consider the consequences of their choice on a community to which they do not belong (p. 39).

I share some of Decottingnies’ unease with this theoretical move, and I suspect that TO practitioners and scholars have yet to plumb the depths of the oppressed-oppressor debate.

I wonder too if some of the drive within TO communities to exorcise the oppressed/oppressor dichotomy isn’t rooted in what Kumashiro (2002a) refers to as “detached rationalism,” as he notes that, “what many people consider to be detached rationalism is really the perspective of groups in society whose identities and experiences are considered the mythical norm.” I agree with Kumashiro’s belief that “what is problematic is when educators continue to privilege rationality without questioning ways that it can perpetuate oppressive social relations” (p. 5). Perhaps this debate within TO theory and praxis might pick up on Kumashiro’s (2002b) post-structural approach to anti-oppressive education, and particularly, his call for an embrace of paradox, uncertainty, and non-binary third parties. Wherever a TO practitioner lands in this particular debate, I would suggest that Althaus-Reid’s (2001; 2002; 2003; 2005; 2008) theoretical nuances can offer a critically

important counterbalance to what is sometimes argued as the overly simplistic dichotomous thinking inherent in Boal's frameworks.

Indeed, the integral importance of contradiction, ambiguity, and third spaces resonates both with Althaus-Reid's (2001; 2002; 2003; 2005; 2008) call to theological instability, as well as the potential for deliberate theatrical discomfort within Boalian methodologies. Here, we are inviting the productively destabilizing elements of participatory theatre to engage with the theological uncertainties within queer theology to articulate new approaches to applied theological praxis. In interweaving Althaus-Reid and Boal's voices in conversation, a theologically rooted praxis—or, indeed, a practically applied theology—begins to emerge. To better understand what such praxis might *look* like, we turn now to some concrete examples of this work.

Queer Theology and Theatre of the Oppressed: Theology and Praxis in Conversation

Over the last several years, I began to explore the theoretical and praxis-based implications of this approach, both as a pastor in the UK (where I also had opportunities to work collegially with Althaus-Reid, and to study TO with Boal) and later, as an integrated part of my master's thesis research in Canada. The emergent possibilities were intriguing and varied. For example, in a Lenten workshop series with a local Canadian church, we used TO to explore congregant responses to the recent (and possibly homophobic/anti-religious) vandalism of their gay-friendly church sign. We then took our findings into an interactive theatrical conversation with the congregation within the body of a sermon during their Sunday worship. As I preached the sermon, we paused for the workshop actors to enact their still images portraying both their responses to the current issues as well as the issues' connections to scripture. We then invited the congregation to leave their seats and to

physically interact with the images, and to call out their own verbal responses to what they were seeing. In terms of my own ministry, this was a challenging opportunity for me to re-envision my own homiletical praxis. For many years, I'd intuited that theatre and preaching were very close bedfellows—here was an opportunity to begin to experiment with that relationship! Perhaps more importantly, the congregation's courageous willingness to engage in this way challenged my own assumptions about their ability to embrace these unusual liturgical-theatrical approaches.

In another context, I devised a short dramatic scene with some classmates from my (secular) university classroom to explore the issue of trans/genderqueer related harassment in public bathrooms. We then took our scene into the classroom and I invited the larger class to engage in Forum Theatre exercises to explore the issue of harassment, as well as practical responses for the individuals involved. The exercise was motivated by my own experiences of similar harassment, and the classroom conversations and theatrical interventions that emerged from this deceptively simple exercise were fascinating for me—both personally and academically. I was intrigued, for instance, by the very practical ambiguities that arose—both in terms of attempted theatrical solutions to bathroom harassment as well as in terms of the complex and layered debates that emerged as a result.

In a very different context, at my denomination's international conference in Mexico, I worked with a small group of clerical and lay leaders from around the world to create and rehearse short scenes based on our own experiences with religiously motivated anti-queer violence. We then shared these scenes with a larger workshop audience. As a larger group, we engaged in a forum theatre-based exploration of these complex issues and began to try to name our hopes and visions for different possibilities. Not surprisingly, the limited time of

the workshop allowed us to only begin to touch the surface of these difficult issues—particularly within such a multicultural context.

In these and many other examples of this nascent ministry development, I attempted to challenge the historic dualistic split between theology and praxis—and, indeed, between theological scholarship and active ministry. Drawing on Althaus-Reid and Isherwood's (2007) notion of queer theology as an "I theology" (whilst simultaneously recognizing the inherent instability of a definitive 'I' identity) I sought to bring my own embodied experiences to the work of ministry (p. 308). Indeed, learning how to more explicitly integrate my own lived experiences into this work was challenging for me, and proved an area of personal growth in my own ministerial praxis. In learning to bring the 'I' into my own theological praxis, it was my hope to encourage other participants to do the same thing. In so doing, we hoped to engage in "a disclosure of experiences which have been traditionally silenced in theology" (Althaus-Reid & Isherwood, 2007, p. 308). This included both sexual disclosures ('coming out' in varied forms), and theological disclosures around ecclesial practices and beliefs that have historically been excluded from mainstream and queer theologies.

Drawing on O'Donnell (2006), I hoped to engage in 'social acupuncture' within the corporate bodies of the church and the academy, challenging both, albeit in small ways, "to start engaging with unease and discomfort" (p. 23). Through the deliberately provocative use of embodied theatrical strategies, I endeavoured to expose and challenge the historic ecclesial and academic mind-body split. Whether through the use of Image Theatre or Forum Theatre within the body of a sermon, through the invitation to congregants to move out of their pews and into a theatrical conversation, or through the actual content of the theatrical work that

addresses issues of the physical, the sexual, and the erotic as they relate to our lives in the church, the goal was, quite simply, to bring the sexual body back into the church.

Such a goal brought with it productive discomfort and a lack of familiar ecclesial/theological ground. O'Donnell's (2006) reflections on the theatrical process apply equally well to *Jokering* within theological/ecclesial contexts. He notes that

the social awkwardness and tension it [social acupuncture] generates can feel stupid, the projects seeming to constantly teeter on the brink of embarrassment and failure.

As any system experiences a shift into higher complexity, there will be a time when it feels like there has been a drop in understanding, dexterity or control (p. 50).

Like Kumashiro (2000), I aimed to both instigate and embrace this discomfort as a sign that learning, and, indeed transformation may well be at work.

As a scholar and minister, I also became aware of the limitations and constraints of this emerging ministerial praxis. A particular challenge surfaced around criteria for the evaluation and measurement of this work. For example, while I utilized the (arguably traditional) measurement tools of pre and post project questionnaires within my master's theatre project, I simultaneously struggled with the limitations of these tools in addressing the less easily defined outcomes and findings of the project, as well as what I experienced as modernist constraints of formal written questionnaires. Participatory theatrical conversations offered one strategy to begin to address this challenge, allowing opportunities for more informal participant findings to emerge. I found, for example, that I elicited much more robust and generative feedback from workshop participants when I asked them to create and then discuss a still (theatrical) image encapsulating their experience of the workshop than from the more formal written feedback generated by the traditional pre and post workshop

questionnaires. I consider evaluative measurement as one area for future development for this work. A challenge will be to find a means of rigorous evaluative processes that simultaneously cohere with this approach's commitment to praxis-oriented approaches as well as its appreciation for the ambiguity of less easily defined outcomes. Perhaps this is also a reflection of the ongoing dialectical challenge between queer theology's complex theorizing and practical application of Theatre of the Oppressed.

In/Conclusions: Celebrating Ambiguity in Theology and Praxis

The issues of theological ambiguity and emergent practice continue to be core strengths and challenges in this work. Boal recognized that the dialogical nature of his processes often generated more questions than it answered—and in my own experience training with him, he not only celebrated this, but tried to provoke it in his own Jokering praxis. Queer theologies, in turn, recognize such uncertainties as theological gifts, challenging the theologian's own reflexive processes as well. Althaus-Reid (2003) reminded us that

claiming our right to limbo means to claim our right to Queer holy lives and innocence and by doing that we end up destabilising many powers and principalities by simply refusing to acknowledge their authority in our lives . . . as such, Queer saints are a menace and a subversive force by the sheer act of living in integrity and defiance (p. 166).

Through the application of a queer theological hermeneutic to Freire's (2007) *conscientization* cycle of action—reflection—action, a queer theologian/practitioner continually queers the processes of self reflection, activist praxis, and ensuing reflexive evaluation. Such queer reflexivity engages the practitioner's embodied experience, whilst

simultaneously recognizing and embracing the ambiguities inherent in reflexive evaluation. Indeed, such queer reflexivity might draw on Althaus-Reid's (2002) exploration of the instability of a Bi/Christology, helping "us to discover Christ in our processes of growth, the eventual transformation through unstable categories to be, more than anything else, a Christ of surprises" (p. 120).

This is an area of scholarship and ministry that values theological fluidity and instability—affirming, as Althaus-Reid (2002) did, that it is "a sense of discontinuity which is most valuable" and recognizing that queer theology will likely have a distinctly different face a few years from now, as will queer theology's ministerial applications (p. 4). Queer theology is more than a simple integration of the sexual and the spiritual. It requires us to engage in "indecenting" as a verb—that is, to actively transgress theological, political, and cultural structures (Althaus-Reid, 2002). It involves a deliberate choice to move to the margins of Christian decency, making explicit the interwoven nature of theology, sexuality, politics, and globalization. Boal's strategies, in turn, draw on participatory theatrical strategies to wrestle with these complex questions in dialogical communities of actors and *spectators*.

A determinedly queer theological approach to Theatre of the Oppressed therefore needs to remain deliberately marginal and provocative. By raising the "ceiling of decency" on sexually scripted orthodoxies, theologies, trends towards normalization, and global economics, Althaus-Reid (2002) offered such a voice (p. 167). As we weave Boal's praxis into this conversation, a distinctly queer theological trajectory begins to emerge, one that requires a deep integration of the sexual, the political, the theological, and the economic. This makes theology, as Althaus-Reid (2002) puts it, "something worth the effort" (p. 148).

In conclusion—or perhaps more accurately, *inconclusively*—this chapter has aimed to outline the scope and possibilities for a new ministry model. This ministry recognizes, simultaneously, the profound value of a queer embrace of the changeability and instability of its theological roots and its praxis-oriented applications. In the spirit of Althaus-Reid (2001; 2002; 2003; 2005; 2008) and Boal (1985; 1995; 1998; 2002), this model is offered as a beginning question—to open up further interventions, *queeries*, instabilities, and discoveries inspired by that very “Christ of surprises!” (Althaus-Reid, 2002, p. 120)

INTERSCENE

Kerri:

Watching/listening intently to this last chapter.

Such good work. I loved that work. And yet . . .

Joker: And yet?

Kerri: And yet, by the time I wrote that article, I was tired. Deeply tired.

Joker: Tired from . . .?

Kerri: From years of activism, of fighting on the front lines. But it wasn't just the tiredness that troubled me. The more classes I went to, the more seminars and discussions and debates I engaged in, the more articles I read . . .

Joker: Yes?

Kerri: . . .the more suspicious I became of this notion of objectivity in research. Of the ability of a researcher to detach themselves from their lived, bodied history when engaging in research. I knew this wasn't a new debate—I was entering into a longstanding conversation that went back many years. But I wasn't sure how to find my way into a different paradigm for my own research. And I didn't know if I could dedicate four or more years of my life to disembodied intellectualization.

And I struggled with . . .

Kerri pauses, shakes head

Oh, never mind, we won't go there.

Joker: Oh come on. You can't possibly expect me to let that go now. Go where? You struggled with what?

Kerri: Well, coming out as queer in the academy was no problem whatsoever. In some ways it even helped. It gave me theoretical lenses, sources of community, rich scholarly resources to draw on. But coming out as Christian in the university? That was a whole different animal. I couldn't figure out where I fit as a theologian in a secular university. And I wasn't willing to compartmentalize that part of myself. But I didn't know what to do with it in an educational doctoral program. Until . . .

Joker: Until?

Kerri: Actually, rather than tell you . . .

Joker: . . .Yes! Show me!

Kerri gestures to the audience and to the following page.

Kerri: I love this chapter. It goes to the heart of a turning point in my dissertation journey.

“Whose voice, whose silence . . .”

SCENE TWO: WHOSE VOICE? WHOSE SILENCE?: A/R/TOGRAPHIC
EXPLORATIONS THROUGH QUEER PERFORMATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY¹²

“What a long time it can take to become the person one has always been!” (Palmer, 2000, p. 9).

Setting the Context: Moving Into A/r/tography

In this chapter I describe my artistic, educational, and research-based journey that took place over the course of an academic year, beginning as an initial a/r/tographic exploration, and eventually evolving into a more complex performative autoethnographic journey¹³. I brought an eclectic background to my doctoral studies, including my prior work as a professional musical theatre performer and a community theatre educator, as well as my ongoing work as an ordained minister and Christian theologian; all of these lenses influenced my perspectives as artist, researcher, and teacher. Indeed, while I first engaged in a/r/tographic research in a doctoral course, I soon discovered that much of my prior practice could also fall under the a/r/tographic umbrella, even before I knew to name it as such. In the context of this course, I chose to undertake an a/r/tographic exploration of voice and of silence within various threads of my life: queer voice (as an openly queer scholar and activist), academic voice (as a theologian and an educational scholar), and ecclesial voice (as an ordained minister shifting from pastoral to academic expressions of my ministry). These

¹² This chapter first appeared in Mesner, K. (2013). Whose voice? Whose silence? A/r/tographic and queer performative autoethnographic explorations. *Multi-Disciplinary Research in the Arts: 'A/r/tography and the Literary and Performance Art'* 3 (2) 1-17.

¹³ I recognize that methodological delineations within arts-based research can overlap in complex ways; indeed, autoethnography can be considered as part of the broader framework of research-based theatre. (See, for example, Beck et al., 2011.) I choose, however, to locate my work within performative autoethnography as understood by Spry, (2011) and Adams and Jones (2011). In my own scholarship and praxis, this distinction is an important one in terms of performative autoethnography's particular emphasis on reflexive and sociocultural analysis within autobiographical performance work.

explorations culminated in a performance piece for a university class that combined theatre, liturgy, and audience participation. I coined this combination ‘drama/turgy’ to reflect the interweaving threads of theatrical inquiry and liturgical expression. The following is an excerpt from the introduction of the winter performance, to give a sense of the drama/turgical approach.¹⁴

(The ‘stage’ is the front of the classroom. One classroom table is set with several tea light candles and one regular candle in a candleholder, matches. All candles are unlit. To one side is a chair for the various props, relatively out of sight of the audience. To the other side is an empty chair. Kerri is wearing a clergy shirt without the clerical collar so that it looks like a regular short-sleeved shirt. Kerri takes matches and lights main candle, then puts matches on prop chair.)

I wondered as I worked on this piece, what voice to bring to it. Do I present to you as a queer Christian minister . . .

(Puts on the clerical collar.)

. . . knowing that as I put on this collar clergy collar, your view, your ears, your reception of what I have to say, may be dramatically altered? Or . . .

(pauses, takes off collar and unbuttons one button to give more casual air.)

Do I present to you simply as an actor, an artist, presenting within an academic community . . . this is a piece of theatre engaging the issues of voice and silence?

¹⁴ (A note for the reader: Script excerpts from this piece and other theatrical pieces in later chapters are in Arial font to indicate the script-within-the-script. Stage directions are in brackets).

Is this a lectern? A pulpit? Or simply a stage?

Whose voice?

Whose silence?

Which voices give life?

Which voices kill?

When is silence life giving?

When does silence equal death?

Excerpts from a/r/tographic performance:

‘Whose Voice? Whose Silence?’ Dec. 7, 2010

The piece went on to unpack and explore these six key questions, moving through a series of performative vignettes depicting excerpts from topical media reports and autobiographical stories. My choice to interrogate queer voice and silence in this way was deliberately simple and direct. Despite tremendous socio-political progress within queer communities, my research indicated to me that an explicit exploration of queer voices and silencings was still relevant and timely; this explicit approach directly informed both the script and its performance. As I engaged an interdisciplinary range of scholars as a researcher and as an artist, I found myself on a journey towards a stronger sense of voice—and indeed a more vocal claiming of queer space—within the work itself, and this strength was reflected within the performative inquiry. I would begin to discover, in my a/r/tographic and autoethnographic journeying, a new queer, theological, and artistic voice.

For instance, given the artistic and theological contexts of my own work, I turned to poetic sources, like Leggo’s (1991) problematization of the very question of what constitutes

an ‘authentic’ voice, and his suggestion that it is difficult, if not impossible, to classify ‘voice’ within definitional boundaries (p. 143). To support the spiritual contexts of my work, I also looked to theological scholars, drawing, for example, from theologian Soelle’s (2001) exploration of the qualitative difference between a silence born of poverty and a silence born of abundance. I looked to theatrical researchers like Linds (1999) who investigated the multiple identities that inform his work as a Theatre of the Oppressed facilitator, noting “multiple and fluid identities in my been-being-becoming-imagining as a facilitator in transformative drama - for example, as researcher, facilitator, participant, observer, audience” (p. 3). Butterwick and Selman’s (2003) reflections on the power (both liberatory and oppressive) of silence within popular theatre work also seemed relevant, particularly in their call “to go deeper into them . . . [silences in activist work] to create new spaces for speaking and listening, approaches that challenge the dichotomizing of voice and silence, speaking and listening, and actors and audience” (p. 18). Through my engagement with these poets, theologians, and educators, I found multiple pathways into my own autoethnographic exploration.

My own emphasis on queerly embodied research also drew me to dance researchers. I was intrigued by Ricketts’ use of dance-based research to give voice to traditionally silenced sociocultural experiences, and the resulting reimagination of her own artistic identity (Ricketts, as cited in Ricketts, Irwin, Leggo, Gouzouasis, & Grauer, 2007); I wondered how a similar reimagining of my own artistic and ministerial identities might inform my own piece. I resonated with Snowber’s (2004) exploration of the inextricably intertwined spiritual and embodied voices in her research, as well as her reflections on the place of detours in shaping her life trajectory, and the need for “a spirituality of messiness” in our lives and teaching (p.

134). I concurred with Ricketts' and Snowber's call to integrate embodied, autobiographical processes into the arts-based research process. Certainly, such a call informed my overall topic choice (of voice and silence); it also propelled me towards the integration of autobiographical elements within the finished drama/turgical piece. Informed by the complex interrelationships between personal silence/ings, artistic practice, and autobiography, I decided to explore three rhizomatic threads from my own life: academic, religious, and queer voices, and their respective silences.

Academic Voice and Silence

The struggles inherent in integrating queer, theological, and educational strands of graduate studies were a recurring theme in my a/r/tographic research and its accompanying drama/turgical piece. I researched and performed the paradoxical journeys of coming out as queer within mainstream seminary settings, and, conversely, coming out as Christian within secular university settings. In the former, the challenge lay in integrating my out queer identity with various institutions' understandings of Christian ministry—demonstrating on a daily basis that, in fact, radically queer Christian ministers *do* exist. I understood a part of my arts-based research in seminary as an opportunity to bring embodied artistic (theatrical) praxis into my research through explicitly queer lenses. In the latter, the challenge—and the 'coming out' process—both emerged around the integration of theological and spiritual themes within my doctoral studies. Here, I was called to come out repeatedly as a 'Christian with a brain'—my tongue-in-cheek attempt to play with the subtle (and sometimes more overt) resistance to Christianity, religion, and theological discourse that I encountered within a secular university setting.

I was reminded of the resistance Gosse (in Gosse, Barone, & Kaplan, 2008) encountered in his attempts to incorporate arts-based inquiry as a legitimate form of doctoral research. He stated: ‘I hadn’t fully realized that by breaking silences, I also had to break with academic traditions, which can be rigid and, in my view, contrary to true academic curiosity and inquiry’ (p. 67). In encountering similar resistances in my theological and secular scholarship, I found myself struggling to find—and indeed use—my academic voice. Encouragingly, I unearthed a variety of voices that push towards these educational borderlands. I noted intriguing contiguities between theatre scholar Lind’s (2008) challenge to create space for ‘discomfort, ambiguity, and uncertainty about what we will discover about ourselves through the story that is being explored’ (p. 172), anti-oppressive educator Kumashiro’s (2002b) challenge to investigate beyond heteronormative binaries (p. 170), and a/r/tographer Irwin’s (2004) belief that ‘those who live in the borderlands are re-thinking, re-living, and re-making the terms of their identities . . . living a thirdness, a new third world in which tradition no longer constitutes true identity: instead, there are multiple identities’ (p. 29). At heart, I wondered if what I was wrestling with here was yet another form of resistance to the queering of boundaries—to those places where my educational trajectory did not fit neatly into one category, be it religious/secular, artistic/theoretical, or queer/Christian. To my own surprise, I found the a/r/tographic process immensely helpful in articulating this struggle, as well as (beginning at least) to bring my own academic voice to bear on this resistance. Intriguingly, it was—and continues to be—within a/r/tographic frameworks and communities that I have found a rich space for exploring, articulating, and confronting these third spaces. My growing intuition was that a/r/tography’s explicit embrace of liminalities

and ruptures in turn created an opening for the kind of queer spirituality that was so integral to my own work.

Religious Voice and Silence

In this second rhizomatic thread, I focused on dynamics of voice and silence that were specific to my experiences working as an ordained minister, and more particularly, in my prior work as a congregational pastor. I drew from Creed's (2003) writing on religious tempered radicals: that is, religious leaders challenging traditional beliefs within their communities of professional practice. I was also drawn to Addison's (2008) exploration of authenticity and emotional labour in religious occupations; despite the contextual and theological distance between Addison's context (the highly regimented and conservative Campus Crusade for Christ movement) and my own ministerial framework, I nonetheless found significant points of connection. I particularly resonated with Addison's discussion of the emotional labour inherent in religious occupations, particularly in terms of the dissonance between an employee's felt experience and the emotional life displayed in that person's relationship with self, the religious organization, and God (p. 2). Certainly, this echoed my own experience of the complex tension between a clergyperson's inner life and the demands of their call to congregational ministry. I also noted problematic ethical tensions between autobiographical accuracy in the dramatic work, and the unique issues inherent to pastoral confidentiality. While my initial piece did not cross ethical boundaries by identifying specific church-related people or situations, I nonetheless wrestled with how much of my personal pastoral story was, indeed, mine to tell.

Queer Voice and Silence

A third thread that emerged in my a/r/tographic research was the voice of queer bodies—my own and those of my queer communities. As I was developing this piece in the fall of 2010, my a/r/tographic focus underwent a radical shift as a result of a relentless wave of media reports of suicides by lesbian/ gay/ bisexual/ transgender, or perceived-to-be queer youth. As an a/r/tographer and as a queer minister, I was profoundly impacted by these deaths. Further, I sensed that the widespread media responses had unearthed and made public a collective grief within queer communities. Impelled by these teens' stories, my work took on a much more deliberate and confrontational approach. I worked performatively with an excerpt of the soon-to-become viral YouTube 'It Gets Better' campaign, started by gay columnist Savage (2010), as well as with the debates within the queer community's responses to it. I noted challenges to the campaign like that of an anonymous writer on VelvetPark (Anonymous, 2013) who pointed out that, "seriously, we all know it gets better a lot sooner if you are white, cisgendered¹⁵, and middle class. And for a lot of us it stays pretty hard" (par. 1).

On personal levels, these events also tapped into my own lived experiences of homophobia and heterosexism, experiences that directly informed the a/r/tographic process. Several autobiographical vignettes of homophobia emerged in my initial performance. Additionally, on a professional level, these teen suicides reinforced my long held belief in the critical importance of a fully integrated sexuality and spirituality, as well as a growing sense of urgency to find ways to translate that integration more explicitly into my educational

¹⁵ 'Cisgender' is employed here as a term used by many transgender and queer communities to refer to those who identify within traditional binary gender norms and to challenge the unexamined privilege that accompanies traditional binary gender norms.

praxes. I noted that in much the same way that my denomination has spent four decades calling for a return of the sexual body into the church (Perry, 2004), anti-oppressive educators were calling for an illumination of the sexual body within education (Kumashiro, 2002b). Like Warren and Fassett (2004) however, I noted the integration of the spiritual and the sexual as a dangerously volatile arena for educators, whether or not they self-identify as queer; as the authors put it,

both sexuality and spirituality are controlled, circumscribed, and legislated. To engage sexuality in the classroom, to highlight and explore, is to invoke religious fervor. To engage spirituality, or, perhaps more properly, spiritualities, in the classroom is to invoke secular fervor (p. 22).

In researching this strand, as well as in creating its accompanying drama/turgical threads in my piece, I noted what Kumashiro (2002b) description of citational violence: the repetition of verbally violent discourse that calls up the history of a particular epithet or stereotype, creating a citational production of oppression. I deliberately chose to place two religiously homophobic voices in a pulpit within the piece, not simply because it reflected their sources, but also to dramatically illustrate the power of such citational violence when it is issued from voices of religious authority. Unexpectedly, I experienced citational violence *myself* through the theatrical rehearsal process. I was surprised by the depth of emotional impact that memorizing and enacting such violently homophobic speeches had on my body and spirit. In engaging rehearsal processes I had learned as a professional actor, I memorized the monologue through a variety of oral, aural, and physical techniques until I had the piece integrated into my actor's 'muscle memory.' This meant, however, that I was also incorporating the text's violent discourse *into my body*; I realized, as I did so, that this took

an emotional and spiritual toll. I found that incorporating an element of ritual into the performance (the lighting of candles) also afforded me a moment of pause to release each character's voice (and this violent discourse) before moving on.

Finally, compelled by my preacher's instinct to link the personal, the political, the spiritual, and the communal, at the end of the performance piece itself, I asked the audience to engage the questions of voice and of silence within their own lived experiences. I was deeply moved by my classmates' willingness to fully engage with the piece and with their bravery in engaging with their own moments of voice and silence during this final participatory segment.

A/r/tography and Autoethnography: Integration and Unanswered Questions

Rather unexpectedly, this a/r/tographic exploration of voice and silence was profoundly integrative for me—on both academic and personal levels. And yet, as I continued through the academic year, I was aware that the piece, and indeed the a/r/tographic process, felt unfinished. While I didn't want to simply relegate this work to a dusty file box on my bookshelves, I also knew that it wasn't yet time to share this work more publicly beyond the university classroom. I let the work lie fallow for several months, knowing that I would return to it organically when the creative process called me to do so.

Reflexivity and Scholarly Identity

Around this same time, I also grappled with questions of scholarly identity, torn between my lifelong commitment to activist, anti-oppressive education as a core of my doctoral work, and a growing, undeniable pull towards a more contemplative, reflexive approach to my studies. I also grew increasingly curious about the place of researcher reflexivity and discomfort within anti-oppressive education. I resonated with Kumashiro's

(2002b) belief that “the desire to learn only what is comforting goes hand in hand with a resistance to learning what is discomforting, and this resistance often proves to be a formidable barrier to movements toward social justice” (p. 4). Autoethnographers’ Ellis and Bochner’s (2003) call for a more explicitly reflexive integration of first-person narrative into academic research helped me to contextualize what I experienced as a profound resistance to researcher reflexivity in some of my university classrooms. In articulating an approach to anti-oppressive research, Potts and Brown (2005) highlighted the importance of reflexivity as a critical aspect of the researcher’s own role in such knowledge creation and its resultant power relations. However, they also reminded researchers that the discomfort that arises from reflexive research praxes is both necessary and unavoidable. I was also struck by Regan’s (2010) ground-breaking challenge to take a decolonizing approach to the researcher’s inner work, and to their own complicity in oppressive structures. Regan challenged the researcher not only to develop a more ethically reflexive research approach, but moreover, to shift the responsibility for anti-oppressive learning from the oppressed to the oppressor. These scholars supported my instinctive push towards more reflexive research processes and challenged me to explore how I might incorporate a more rigorously reflexive approach in my own work.

Both inside and outside the academy, I also wrestled with my own understandings of self-care as an artist/researcher/teacher committed to social change. I became aware of a growing internal struggle between my sense of vocational calling to social justice work and an emerging sense of deep soul-tiredness after years of this work. Something new seemed to be pushing its way forth in my academic and spiritual learnings, but as yet it was nebulous, unclear. I wondered . . . if I were to let go of my current understanding of activism, what new

identity, work, capacity, might emerge in this liminal space? I was drawn to Ellis' (2004) notion that a "move inward" could perhaps offer the most effective route towards social change (p. 254). Indeed, in the two years since the creation of the original piece, I noticed a significant shift in my a/r/tographic work towards a more contemplative activism, accompanied by a more complex analysis of the ethics of queer autoethnographic research.

Arts-Based Autoethnography as Possibility

These queries led me towards performative autoethnography, wherein I found a language, an approach, and a methodology that spoke directly to my desire for a more reflexive, embodied approach to educational and theological research. Ellis' (1999; 2004) ground breaking work articulating autoethnographic as method contextualized this approach for me; I was further intrigued by Ellis' (2009) later addition of "meta-autoethnography," wherein she meta-reflected on earlier autoethnographic research. I was encouraged by Ellis' (2002) analysis of autoethnography's potential for creating community through the connective power of narrative storytelling, as well as by her articulating powerful links between personal narratives and social change movements.

Bickel's (2005) arts-based autoethnographic work, exemplifying the deliberate exposition of researcher vulnerability and highlighting "arational" knowing (p.12), and Ricketts' (as cited in Ricketts et al., 2007) a/r/tographic use of dance to explore issues of displacement, cultural silencing, identity, and voice, supported my intuition that I might find a theoretical and artistic home within this area of the academy. Pelias' (2004) and Carver's (2007) calls for more heart-full approaches to scholarship echoed my own deep unease—my sense of a *lack* of heart within the academy—with which I'd been wrestling since beginning my doctoral studies. I was intrigued by Poulos' (2010) explorations of accidental

ethnography, which he understood as an ability to be receptive to moments of significance, breakthrough, or inspiration that can inform ethnographic and narrative crafts. Adams and Jones' (2011) explorations of the intersections of reflexivity, queer theory, and autoethnography provided me with a theoretically and poetically resonant framework. Indeed, in the years that have followed, their approach, as well as that of Spry's (2011) book on performative autoethnography, have significantly shaped the development of my own queer performative autoethnographic methodology. I was beginning to locate my own queer thread within this web of interdisciplinary approaches.

Autoethnographic Ethics

Another topic that remained unresolved for me was around the ethics of autobiographical storytelling. I was aware of a complex mix of feelings around some of the autobiographical stories I'd incorporated into the original performative piece. While I had certainly stayed within the official ethical research guidelines, and while I'd not identified any of the specific people or situations from which these stories had been drawn, I nonetheless felt conflicted about sharing stories that might be recognizable to specific original 'players.' I resonated with Poulos' exploration of the dilemma of relational research ethics within autoethnographic explorations of autobiographical secrets. Like Poulos (2008), I wrestled with the balance between telling these stories in ways that 'do no harm' to specific people in his own life, and his sense that "to tell the story may well be the only ethical thing to do" (p. 65). In response to my ethical struggles, eventually, I reworked certain sections of the original piece to eliminate any such autobiographic identifiers. This was perhaps the most difficult artistic choice for me—between dramatic specificity and a desire not to identify particular people or situations. In the end, I chose to portray characters and situations that

were composites or compilations, trusting that they would still portray the autoethnographic truth of what had happened over time. The complex issue of queer autoethnographic ethics is one that I continue to explore in my research, my pedagogy, my art, and my ministry.

Performative Autoethnography as Integration

Finally, several months after the first a/r/tographic performance, I returned to the piece with the actively questioning lenses of autoethnography and artist/researcher/teacher identity. In response to a professorial challenge, I also looked at how to incorporate dual artistic methodologies: a familiar one (theater), and an unfamiliar one (djembe drumming.) To my surprise, a new performance piece organically (and rapidly) emerged—one that incorporated the heart of the original a/r/tographic piece, whilst simultaneously interweaving an autoethnographic framework. I also felt compelled to incorporate a significant autobiographical experience of anti-queer violence that had happened in more recent months. Even more surprising, however, was the strength of voice—artistic voice, academic voice, and educational voice—that erupted in this new piece of work. I was pleased to find my strength reflected in audience comments after the performance. Somehow, over the months, I had grown into a stronger voice—and indeed a more vocal claiming of queer space—within the work itself, and this strength was reflected within the performative inquiry. I had discovered, in my a/r/tographic and autoethnographic journeying, a new queer, theological, and artistic voice.

As I look back on both this journey and the performance piece that grew out of it, I am struck by its nascent quality—here, I was able to create an artistic marker for an early moment in my autoethnographic journey. As my methodologies and my sociocultural analyses have developed in the ensuing years, I continue to be fascinated by the complexity

of these interweaving threads—theoretically, artistically, and theologically. I close this chapter, then, by sharing that voice through an audio recording and script of this final piece. It offers a condensation of a yearlong journey, and, congruent with that journey, ends with additional questions and liminalities yet to be explored. I invite the reader/listener to reflexively consider their own questions of voice and of silence as they engage with the recording of the performance that follows.

Audio Performance Mp3 and Script

To listen to the audio recording of this performance, please click (or copy and paste) the link below:

<http://bit.ly/1zgwsj6>

Script: ‘Whose Voice? Whose Silence? An Autoethnographic Exploration’

(Stage directions are indicated in brackets.)

(Author stands centre stage with drum on stand right of centre.)

I’m thinking about autoethnography, the notion that our lives, our bodies, are sources of research data . . . of knowledge . . . of wisdom. And that through the lens of culture, the data our bodied lives give us can offer challenge, critique, inspiration, or simply more questions . . .

I’m thinking about the place of art in my life . . . reclaiming the name of artist . . . and then realizing that actually, it is a claiming. Because while I’ve named myself as an actor, a singer, a teacher, minister, I’ve never named myself as an artist. And now that I claim artist, my work, my studies, my knowing change.

I’m thinking about rhythm and movement . . . drumming more than 20 hours last week and loving it . . . discovering that I love to drum . . . and discovering that

drumming allows me to access a different part of my brain . . . to meditate in a way that drops down deeper than my intellect and my dis-ease . . .

(Author moves to drum and demonstrates simple drumming, moving to a faster and more complex rhythm, then stops and moves back to centre stage.)

I'm thinking about art and autoethnography and rhythm as I reflect on a moment a few weeks ago . . .

(Author physically enacts her own and the stranger's characters and voices in the exchange that follows.)

A moment when I'm on my way home from this class actually, waiting for the bus at Howe and Robson. I lean out to look for my bus and as I step back, a woman says "Get your queer ass out of my face."

I think I've misheard but when I look at her she is staring at me with open hostility.

"Excuse me?"

"Get your queer ass out of my face"

This exchange continues . . . and moves into an odd and disturbing direction—where, among other things, she informs me that the army is coming to kill all of us—by whom I assume she means all queer people . . .

When she finally leaves on her bus, I close my eyes and say "bless you" . . .

(Author enacts this moment.)

knowing even as I do that it is more a statement of defiance than of benediction.

As I get onto my own bus soon after, I don't feel at risk, but all the same, I sit near the front . . . just in case.

In remembering her words, there is a part of me that knows this voice well . . . the part of me that sat near the front of the bus that day, just in case, is the same part of me that scopes out a public bathroom for personal safety . . . is the same part of me that checks a church's theology before I set foot in the door . . . is the same part of me that assesses, in a moment or a day or a semester, how safe a space is . . . how much space I can actually take . . . is the same part of me that continues to come out on a daily basis even though I officially 'came out' 17 years ago. It's very close to the part of me that knows that queer autoethnography is no simple method . . . that, like Poulos, (2008) each story I tell holds the potential to out me or someone else . . . to break a silence, to tell a story . . . and, like Poulos, I wonder which stories are mine to tell . . . which stories have no choice but to be told.

This part of me . . . the continually coming out, ethically cautious, personally vigilant part of me, almost wants to thank the woman on Howe and Robson . . . on some level I can appreciate her directness. There's no subtlety whatsoever. 'Get your queer ass out of my face' is pretty unambiguous. And this part of me, the continually coming out part of me, hears in her statement an echo . . . of many other voices, explicit and implicit, that I hear, sense, intuit, every day. Her statement echoes a recurring rhythm.

I remember her words . . . and wonder what they might sound like as rhythm . . .

'Get your queer ass out of my face . . .'

‘Get your queer ass out of my face . . .’

(Author begins to explore the rhythmic qualities of this phrase on the drum. Slowly, the statement becomes a rhythm, and the drum’s rhythm takes over. Author plays this rhythm for a significant chunk of time to allow the audience to hear and feel it.)

I play with the rhythm . . . enjoying my facility with the drum, despite the disturbing source of the rhythm’s original inspiration . . .

(Author pauses from drumming during this last statement. During the next passage, the recorded version of the drumbeat from the chapel is played underneath the spoken words.)

And I wonder, as a queerly bodied person, a queerly spiritual person, how often these rhythms are playing around me, in the world around me, in the people I encounter. How do these rhythms impact my living, my working, my art? I wonder whose voices we hear in those rhythms . . . I wonder whose voices – and whose silences—we hear in resistance to those rhythms . . .

Whose voice? Whose silence?

(Author adds live percussive emphasis each time this phrase is repeated.)

Which voices give life? Which voices kill? When is silence life giving? When does silence equal death?

Whose voice? Whose silence?

(For each of the statements that follow, excerpted from the original a/r/tographic characterizations, Author steps to left of centre, and enacts the specific character with embodiment and voice.)

I hear the voice of turning a blind eye . . .

(enacting Dan Savage's telling of the story)

Billy Lucas, 15, reportedly endured intense bullying at the hands of his classmates—classmates who called him a fag and told him to kill himself. His mother found his body . . . (Savage, 2010)

Whose voice? Whose silence?

I hear the voice of religious bigotry . . .

(enacting the homophobic minister)

Some suppose that they were preset and cannot overcome what they feel are inborn tendencies toward the impure and unnatural. Not so! Why would our heavenly father do that to anybody? (Robinson, 2010)

Whose voice? Whose silence?

I hear the voice of academia . . .

(enacting a composite of various voices of academic authority)

You are welcome here . . . just a thought . . . you might want to think about how to frame your queer studies . . . your theological studies . . . so that your classmates and some of the faculty can understand it, and so that your work will be heard, and well received.

Whose voice? Whose silence?

I hear the voice of unexamined privilege . . .

(enacting a composite of those close to Kerri who have echoed similar words)

So I have to admit, I don't completely get all the gay political talk. It's all pretty mainstream, isn't it? I mean, why are you so angry? Isn't it kind of up to you? I mean what do you expect if you look like that? How do you expect people to react?

Whose voice? Whose silence?

I hear the voice of denial . . .

(enacting a composite of voices who have echoed similar words)

the best way to resolve this –is not to respond to what they're saying about you . . . to maintain a dignified silence. If you don't respond, eventually they will stop.

Whose voice? Whose silence?

I hear the voice of accusation . . .

(enacting homophobic Christian author)

Matthew Shepard wasn't killed because he was a homosexual, it was a matter of robbery. And the robbers obviously weren't Christians. However, the timing was right for the 'gay' scheme, and so Matthew Shepard became the new martyr of the homosexual movement: a symbol of 'gay' victim- hood at the hands of the evil Christians. (Liveley, 2009)

Whose voice? Whose silence?

I hear the voice of silence by omission . . .

(enacting autobiographic statement from Kerri's past)

I don't talk with them about her death. It's too complicated trying to explain who she was to me, what our relationship was, and how deep this loss runs.

Whose voice? Whose silence?

And I hear the voice of resistance . . .

(enacting performance poet/activist)

I am not here to queer it down a little for anybody. I'm here to queer it up for the dykes the sissies the faggots the tomboys the trannies. . . . this is it. This is your chance to be a badass. When someone else calls you a name you're going to say hell yeah and reclaim it. (Shaughnessy, 2010)

Whose voice? Whose silence?

Which voices give life? Which voices kill? When is silence life-giving? When does silence equal death? Whose voice? Whose silence?

(Author begins playing with the recording now)

And I listen for the voice within the rhythm, inside the rhythm, playing it for long stretches of time . . .

(Recording changes to that of the drumming group collectively playing the same rhythm; Author continues to play live with them.)

I even play it with my community of drummers (Harding 2011).

I play . . . knowing that eventually I will find a new way of being in this rhythm, of claiming something stronger and deeper than the violence that created it . . . of transmuting it into something else. Not yet perhaps, but it is coming . . . Whose voice? Whose silence?

Thank-you.¹⁶

¹⁶ References for this script indicate characters that were drawn from specific situations and sources. (These have been cited in italics within the script.) All other characters are composite characters, and, while they reflect the lived experience of the author, are not intended to depict specific individuals. This audio recording, while not of the in-classroom performance, is meant to offer a resonant audio depiction of that performative inquiry as work-in-process.

As a complete novice to audio production techniques, I was intrigued to discover that the audio production of this recording was, in and of itself, an additional a/r/tographic process. Working with professional musician and fellow a/r/tographer Bakan, we strove to create an audio archive that was both true to the final performance and also open to new renderings that emerged through the production process. I am deeply grateful to Bakan (who was also present for the initial a/r/tographic piece last winter) for his generous artistic, technical, and a/r/tographic insight reflected in this recording.

INTERSCENE

Kerri: (watching, listening, and remembering.) Yes! I was in the midst of developing “Whose voice whose silence” when I actually wrote my first Artist’s Statement. I was beginning to put into words this emerging understanding of my own spiritual and artistic scholarship as integral aspects of my ministerial calling. (Kerri pulls out a bound journal and opens it to a handwritten page, reading the statement aloud.)

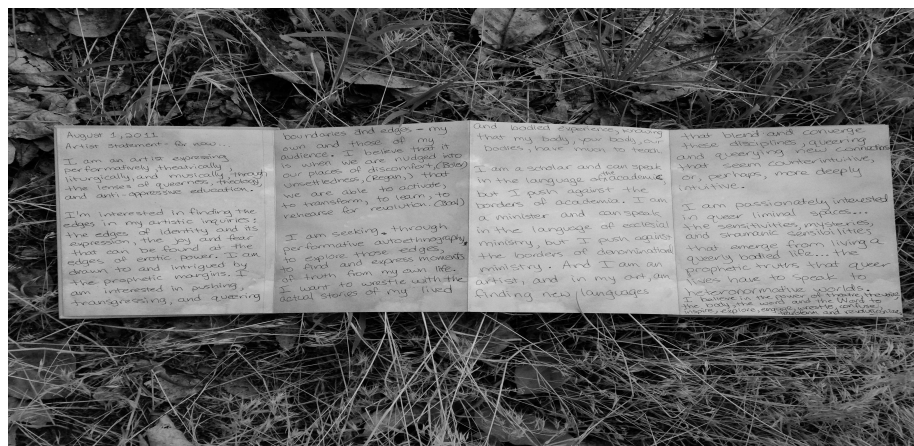


Figure 1

August 1, 2011

I am an artist expressing performatively, theatrically, liturgically, and musically, through the complex lenses of queerness, theology, and anti oppressive education. I understand my art as a form of ministry, education, and activism.

I'm interested in finding the edges in my artistic inquiries: the edges of identity and its expression, the joy and fear that can be found at the edges of erotic power. I am drawn to and intrigued by the prophetic margins, and by the voices and stories, often overlooked, that can be found in those margins. I am interested in pushing, transgressing, and queering

boundaries and edges—my own and those of my audience. I believe that when we are nudged into our places of discomfort (Boler & Zembylas, 2003) and unsettledness (Regan, 2010), we are able to activate, to transform, to learn, to rehearse for revolution (Boal, 1985).

I am seeking through performative autoethnography to explore those edges, to find and express moments of truth from my own life. I want to wrestle with the actual stories of my own lived and bodied experience, knowing that my body, your body, our bodies, have much to teach.

I am a scholar and can speak in the language of the academic, but I push against the borders of academia. I am a minister and can speak in the language of ecclesial ministry, but I push against the borders of denominational ministry. And I am an artist, and in my art, am finding new languages that blend and converge and these disciplines, querying and queering new connections that seem counterintuitive, or, perhaps, more deeply intuitive.

I am passionately interested in queer liminal spaces . . . the sensitivities, mysteries, and shamanic sensibilities that emerge from living a queerly bodied life . . . the prophetic truths that queer lives have to speak to heteronormative worlds. I believe in the power of theatre, the voice, the body, the word and the Word to inspire, explore, engage, question, wrestle, confuse, transform, and revolutionize.

Joker: This was a paradigm shift for you—personally and academically.

Kerri: Yes! As I delved into arts-based educational research, I found a community of scholars working in ways I didn't even know existed. And I knew, at this juncture, that I was parting ways from many of my former scholarly colleagues by choosing to move into these more reflexive, embodied, personal approaches . . .

Joker: Personal—but also drawing on sociocultural analysis . . .

Kerri: Yes, absolutely. I had very little interest in doing autoethnographic research with personal revelation as the primary goal . . . I always wanted to ask, ‘so what?’ about my own stories. But of course moving into my own narratives opened up a whole new can of worms in terms of what stories were mine to tell.

Joker: You know where I land on this one Kerri. Tell the stories. Speak your truth. Coming out is a lifelong process that extends far beyond your sexual orientation.

Kerri: Yes, but we both know it’s never that simple. That as soon as we move into personal stories, other people get implicated.

Pauses

Look, I’m going to have to get a bit theoretical here for just a bit, okay? I don’t think there’s any way to have this part of the conversation without drawing on some of the scholars who have been thinking into these areas. There’s some great analysis going on . . . and I think there are some gaps too. Can you cut me some theoretical-mumbo-jumbo slack for this chapter? I’ll still keep it personal too, I promise.

Joker: Okay . . . I’ll put on my theoretical hat for a bit.

With great flair, magically pulls out a scholar’s hat—whatever that might suggest—and puts it on with a wink and a flourish.

Kerri: *Sighs and chuckles.* You are such a diva. Okay. Let’s look at outing autoethnographic ethics.

SCENE THREE: OUTING AUTOETHNOGRAPHY: AN EXPLORATION OF RELATIONAL ETHICS IN QUEER AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Finding my Way In

This is not an easy chapter for me to write. I want to dive deeply into the ambiguities of autoethnographic ethics. I want to interrogate the places where institutional guidelines support structures of unexamined privilege, where existing procedures serve to censor voices and stories that are already systemically marginalized. And I want to swim in the delicious thinking of queer and disability theologians who have opened up fiery questions around the ambiguities, complexities, and vulnerabilities of our bodies, because I know in my own flesh that these voices bring an important yet missing contribution to this conversation.

But this is not an easy chapter for me to write. Because I realize, almost immediately, that writing it pushes me directly up against a wall in my thinking, in my artistic practice, and in my spirit. Here, I confront, push up against ‘Responsible Kerri’ . . . that part of me, as a minister, with a strong pastoral sensibility—so strong that I will, more often than not, censor my own writing, speaking, creating, for fear of doing (potential) harm to another. I also know that one of the most regular and common manifestations of my lifelong journey with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) is what one long-ago therapist coined ‘responsibility OCD’ . . . that aspect of the disorder that can take me from ethical responsibility to hyper-responsibility- where my worry about the other can become all encompassing—more often than not at my own expense. And perhaps most viscerally, this writing pushes up against an earlier Kerri that grew up in contexts where it’s not even a question of whether or not things are kept secret—that question is never asked. It is simply

assumed knowledge that there are certain stories that never leave the boundaries of that secrecy . . . and this constraint is so inborn in me, so unquestioned, that I no longer know where ingrained childhood ideology ends and personally discerned ethic begins.

It would be easy enough to write a clear, objective, salient chapter outlining the key issues currently under discussion within the field of autoethnographic ethics, articulating key thinkers, instigators, and writers around this vital issue. I could write, for instance, of Ellis (2009) and her groundbreaking work as one of autoethnography's early pioneers, as well as her later meta-autoethnographic work articulating her own evolving relational ethic of care. I could write about Bochner's (2007) work on ethics of memory and his complicating the thicker relations that emerge when we deliberately move from a moral stance to an ethical one. I could spend time in dialogue with Delamont (2009), both resonating with her sense that it is never truly possible to write about others ethically in autoethnography, and also disputing her privileging reflexive ethnography over what she views as autoethnographic narcissism. And I could certainly spend time in conversation, agreement, and debate with Tolich (2010), in his call for a more rigorous approach to ethical frameworks for autoethnographic research, particularly through the use of qualitative research standards foundational to more traditional qualitative inquiry. I could concur with Tolich's questioning the disparity between some autoethnographic researchers' pedagogy and praxis, and with his concern about the question of coercion in seeking retrospective consent from autoethnographic subjects, especially from intimate others. I could bring Tolich's cautions around researcher vulnerability into conversation with Doloriert and Sambrook's (2009) examination of this vulnerability as it impacts the particularity of doctoral students' research.

Indeed, exploring the foundational ethical issues raised by scholars like Ellis (2009), Bochner (2007), Delamont (2009), and Tolich (2010) is a topic of inquiry in and of itself.

And yet, as a queer scholar, theologian, artist, and educator, as, like Wilcox (2010), an academic “freak” who crosses and blurs boundaries between disciplines, (in ways that often cause consternation in the academy), I want to take the discussion in a different direction. In searching for my own voice amidst these issues, I want to *queer* autoethnographic ethics: particularly autoethnographic ethical *privilege*, and autoethnographic ethical *certainty*. In this chapter, I begin by queerly problematizing autoethnographic scholarship by exploring the issues of unexamined privilege, as well as the potential for ethical violence to the researcher. Then, I turn to theological writers to help us to queer our notions of ethical certainty, by challenging our fear of ideological uncertainty, our fear of the body, and our fear of ambiguity. In so doing, I hope to open up new possibilities and trajectories in the ongoing debates about autoethnographic ethics.

Queering Autoethnographic Ethics

Challenging Ethical Privilege

I understand the desire for definitive ethical guidelines for autoethnographers, for a clear framework to guide us when our research includes others in our personal lives. Indeed, like Delamont (2009), I recognize that it is almost impossible to engage in autoethnographic research without implicating others in my life. As an anti-oppressive educator, and in exploring the wide range (and quality) of autoethnographic research now burgeoning in the field, I share Delamont’s concern that without a deeper and more complex ethical analysis—and, I would add without an explicit emphasis on socio-cultural applications—autoethnography runs the risk of narcissism. However, simply applying a universal set of

ethical parameters is an inadequate solution. When I read, for example, Tolich's (2010) concrete suggestions for how to apply ethical guidelines to autoethnography, I experience unease with what I perceive as the unexamined privilege inherent in his position.

Approaching the work from a queer, feminist perspective, I question the viability—and indeed the ethics—of Tolich's call for a researcher to exercise anticipatory detachment (p. 1607). Is it really possible, as Tolich suggests, for a survivor of abuse to anticipate and plan for the reactions and even the consent of their abuser during their research preparations? As Armstrong (2009) queries, “can she anticipate how her intent and her actions will unfold? What indeed can she control or mitigate?” (p. 235). As a survivor of abuse myself, I have to wonder if this (at best) risks silencing an already marginalized voice or (at worst) further perpetuates the violence under examination. Indeed, I wrestled with this issue in very practical ways as I shaped my play—struggling between the desire for candour and my ethical concerns for the perpetrators in specific situations. For me, ultimately, the latter concern held greater sway, and I chose to offer broader performative composites and fictionalizations rather than identifying specific individuals or events. Nonetheless, I was aware, even as I made these choices, that I was risking silencing a significant aspect of my autobiographical voice in the process. Given the complexity of these issues, I would suggest that Tolich's article could benefit from an anti-oppressive theoretical analysis—at the very least in terms of how privilege informs and constrains the issues he discusses.

Given his propensity to issue advice to researchers from historically marginalized populations, I also find myself increasingly uncomfortable with Tolich's (2010) lack of self-positioning in his own article. To be fair, what I might coin as my positional scepticism comes up frequently for me in my academic reading—my scholarly scepticism seems to

increase in inverse proportion to the level of the author's clarity of self-positionality. With this in mind, I am intrigued by Tolich's choice of words in his article's closing paragraph,

Nonetheless, Ellis remained defiant: "The last thing I want is for autoethnography to be tamed" (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 433). Incorporation of the Position Statement and the 10 foundational guidelines discussed throughout this article would not tame autoethnography; rather, it would provide its followers with predictability and a more disciplined base to utilize researchers' autobiographical data to analyze and interpret their cultural assumptions (p. 1608).

I will leave aside, for the moment, the problematic goal of striving for autoethnographic "predictability"—an issue that I will take up later in this chapter. For the purposes of this discussion, as a queer feminist scholar, I cannot help but notice that Tolich's description of Ellis' defiance—is disturbingly reminiscent of adjectives often associated with women who don't play by traditional (academic and other) gender rules. Indeed, I'm intrigued by the role that gender might play in Tolich's arguments. Is it simply coincidence that the three autoethnographers that he critiques in his article are all women and that his arguments seem to offer no space for queer or feminist analysis of agency for the survivors of violence?

While I share some of his concerns about the lack of clarity in autoethnographic ethical guidelines, I suggest that his framework lacks the critical nuances brought by queer and feminist ethical analyses, and by the reflexive awareness of how a researcher's unexamined privilege and positionality influence the shaping of ethical guidelines.

To ground this ethical discussion of systemic marginalization, I return to McIntosh's (1997) "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," a seminal article that

challenges writers (like myself) who benefit from the myriad of unearned, often unexamined, privileges accrued simply by nature of their (white) skin colour. In the 17 years since McIntosh's article, a multitude of other "knapsacks" have sprung up in research and activist circles, exploring areas of systemically sanctioned privilege enforced through ableism, sexism, heteronormativity, cisgenderism, (see, for example Earlham College, 2011; TVox, 2012). Certainly, one of the key tenets of my own work as an anti-oppressive educator is to continue to interrogate the areas of unexamined privilege within my own life and to challenge areas of unearned privilege that seems to inform the world around me. I would suggest that Tolich's article could benefit from an anti-oppressive theoretical analysis—at the very least, in terms of how privilege informs and constrains the issues he discusses.

And it is here—at the nexus of autoethnographic ethics and anti-oppressive analysis of privilege—that I think our conversation is compelled to pick up. Because without factoring in the dynamics of privilege (or lack thereof), our ethical guidelines will be lacking—without them we risk being ethically bankrupt. Simply put, how do we balance ethical concern for implicating relationally intimate others (e.g., family, friends), with a commitment to hearing the stories of traditionally marginalized voices and *othered* bodies? I would suggest that when our academic ethical guidelines miss this commitment, they serve in fact to enforce what Adams (2008) describes as a form of "ethical violence"—both at individual and cultural levels (p. 184).

Confronting Ethical Violence

Adams (2008, p. 184) notes that "ethical norms act on individuals and are en-acted by them in life research" and he calls on us to note "the psychic violence that these norms can have on authors and audiences." Pryer (2009) describes her experience of "narrative erasure"

in her struggle to navigate institutional ethical constraints in addressing her history as an abuse survivor within her dissertation. While issues of consent make situations like Pryer's are particularly complex, the notion of narrative erasure is a significant one. The impact of academic ethics also manifests within the research process itself. Barton (2011) describes her struggles with insider research on the experiences of bible belt gays. She notes the "condition of inarticulation"—the silencing of queer lived realities that she observes in some of her research subjects (p. 439). And intriguingly, even with this awareness during her own research processes, she notes as a lesbian herself, the danger of getting "sucked into the don't-ask don't tell hegemonic undertow" (p. 440). As explored in the opening autoethnographic section of this paper, I continue to wrestle with a similar "hegemonic undertow" in my own research and performance. I appreciate Barton's explicit attention to her own experiences as the researcher, and I wonder, in psychologically volatile research like hers, whether our emphasis on ethical protections of the subject may, in their implicit discounting of the costs to the researcher, actually inflict a form of ethical violence upon the researcher.

This ethical violence functions culturally as well—Poulos (2008) calls for an "ethics of revelation" and suggests that our culture buries traumatic narratives in an effort to avoid the discomfort such narratives will produce (p. 53). As a researcher and an anti-oppressive practitioner, I suspect that this avoidance of discomfort is far more prevalent in the academy than we might like to admit. I resonate here with Buddhist nun Chodron's (2002) suggestion that "uncomfortable feelings are messages that tell us to perk up and lean into a situation when we'd rather cave in and back away" (p. 7). I suspect for many of us in the academy, the strictures of traditional ethical guidelines offer us that easy rationale for backing away. We

might draw fruitfully here from anti-oppressive educator Kumashiro (2002a), who calls on educators to value and utilize the productive potential of discomfort, recognizing that “entering crisis, then, is a required and desired part of learning in anti-oppressive ways” (p. 4).

Even more challengingly, I wonder how our ethical guidelines might be informed—or confronted— by Regan’s (2010) contention that

because radical change is not ultimately in its best interest, the dominant majority is apt to reinforce benevolent imperialism and colonial attitudes, often unconsciously, in ways that are antithetical to decolonization. An unsettling pedagogy is therefore based on the premise that settlers cannot just theorize about decolonizing and liberatory struggle: we must experience it (p. 23).

Putting it more plainly, I wonder whether our current institutional ethical constraints serve to maintain (perhaps unconsciously) a comfortable silencing of non-normative narratives and discourses. Further, I suspect that some institutional guidelines utilize what Poulos (2008) describes as a strategy of silence to maintain an illusion of control. Poulos challenges the cultural imperative to “pass” through the keeping of secrets, and suggests that in some instances, “to tell the story may well be the *only* ethical thing to do” (p. 65). And yet, in so doing, we find ourselves back at the starting point of this ethical circle—grappling with the impact of revelatory narratives on the intimate others implicated in those stories.

Arts Based Research As Creative Response

I find some of the most hopeful responses to this dilemma amidst the communities of arts-based inquirers and queer autoethnographers. I look, for example, to Kirkland and Leggo’s (2008) journey to the “I of the [institutional ethics review] storm” in their article

describing ethical quandaries encountered in Kirkland's dissertation (p. 249). In this work, both doctoral student and supervisor wrestle with multiple ethical layers—not only the complex issues surrounding Kirkland's writing about his own experiences as a survivor of sexual abuse, but also the double taboo of writing about this from the perspective of an openly gay man. In reading Kirkland's journey, I imagine that he had to confront what queer theorists Halperin and Traub (2009) note as the academic tendency to avoid topics that may promote homophobia. While the fallacious link between sexual abuse and homosexuality has long been debunked, the citational violence (Kumashiro, 2002b, pp. 50-53) of this myth still lingers. I have to wonder how the institution's choice to opt for ethical silencing in Kirkland's initial ethics review application might serve to implicitly support these multiple and complex layers of cultural violence that Kirkland was, ironically, aiming to confront. I am heartened, however, by Kirkland and Leggo's (2008) description of a strategic use of artistic methodologies—in this case, mythopoetics, drama, and fairy tale, as a creative path of “spiritual warriorship . . . to circumnavigate the [ethical] boulder in the stream” (p. 250).

I find another clue in queer autoethnographers Adams and Jones' (2011) evocative research combining autoethnography, queer theory, and reflexivity; they argue that this interwoven approach can serve to disrupt traditional academic research and discourse, building towards social change. I particularly resonate with their exploration of the shared commitments between autoethnography and queer theory (and I would add queer theology). Queer theory's (and theology's) ability to disrupt the normative and certain combines well with autoethnography's ability to disrupt traditional modes of research (pp. 110-111). Adams and Jones go directly to the heart of my queering and querying of autoethnographic privilege in their own questions. They ask: “what of the stories we want to tell because they are so

important and enraging and courageous and hopeful but we don't because they aren't ours—alone—to tell? Does *not* telling these stories, or telling a story about all we can't tell, do something in the world?" (p. 109) As a sexual theologian, I am intrigued by their suggestion that "perhaps this is what a reflexively queer autoethnography adds up to, *just* stories, texts that tell and don't tell about 'bodies literally affecting one another: human bodies, discursive bodies, bodies of thought'" (p. 109).

Indeed, I suspect that an explicit and courageous exploration of the uncertain, fluid, queer body is an area that has yet to be engaged within autoethnographic ethics—and indeed constitutes a striking gap. I intuit that queer and disability theologians might help us in this engagement, to queer autoethnographic ethical certainty in some vitally significant ways. It is to these scholars that we now turn.

Queering Autoethnographic Ethical Certainty

I'm excited to be revisiting Heyward's (1989) Touching our Strength within the context of this dissertation. There's something wonderfully full-circle about returning to this seminal queer theological text, all these years later, as I move into new ground in my doctoral research. I open my well-worn copy, full of highlighting and handwritten notes from when I first read it 12 years ago, as a part of my Sexual Theology class with renowned queer theologian Goss (see Goss, 1993; 2002). I read it then as a part of my ordination studies, and I'm excited to see how I reread it now, all these years later.

As I read Heyward's opening poem, about flesh and sex, queerness and God, the feelings that bubble up surprise me. I notice my discomfort with her frank, simple, direct invocation of the connection between her sexual eroticism and her understanding of God. And my discomfort puzzles me . . . I've long been a sex-positive theologian and activist, so

it's certainly not a discomfort with the content, but seems to be something subtler. I also notice a distinct hint of cynicism emerging as I continue to reread the text. It's not that I disagree with Heyward—much of her thinking was and is congruent with my own, and I still see her as a formational theologian in my own shaping as a minister, a sexual activist, and a scholar. And yet, I can't help but notice my discomfort . . . my cynicism . . . my deep, deep soul-tiredness.

*I wonder how much of this soul tiredness is connected to M's death . . . an unresolved grief in my own personal and professional life that continues to leave an aching hole in my spirit. I wonder how much of this cynicism is connected to my professional work . . . where I've seen both the capacity for beautiful communities-of-God, formed around the kind of love interwoven throughout Heyward's pages . . . **and** the capacity for these communities to re-enact upon each other violence similar to that they themselves had experienced. And somehow, in light of this soul-exhaustion, I know, in that deeply embodied way, a deeply theological way, that Heyward's early work may well be more important to me now than it was to me then as a young soon-to-be minister. But I don't know yet how to navigate past the discomfort, the cynicism, the grief, to the active transformative force of her words that still is there.*

I suspect, too, that my soul-tiredness is not unconnected to my earlier struggle—dare I admit to myself, my resistance?—to explicitly incorporate theology into my doctoral writing. As much as I've engaged this PhD as an artist-educator-theologian, and despite my avid commitment to bring theology into the secular academy, I can't help but notice that I'm still sometimes reluctant to go there. Again, this surprises me . . . but when I look at it in light of this soul-tiredness, these deep wounds, it takes on a different tenor. And the importance of

wrestling with the theological content of my work emerges as vital—not for the coveted publications credential but for my own spirit.

As a minister and a former pastor, I have a particular appreciation for the academy's commitment to ethical research parameters. Having studied ethics in seminary, and having applied them to the best of my ability in pastoral ministry, it seems obvious to me that we need to invest significant time, thought, and resources into ethics when our research implicates or impacts others. Indeed, my institution's ethical application process took on almost mythical proportions amongst my graduate student cohort, the completion of an institutional ethics review being a 'holy grail' of our doctoral procedural requirements.

And yet, as I grapple with autoethnographic ethical parameters, my unease encompasses more than the issues of privilege already discussed. The further I move into ethical guidelines, whether those of my own institution, or those of other scholars in the field, the greater that unease grows. Whether in an institutional review process, or in Tolich's (2010) "Critique of Current Practice," what emerges clearly to me is a drive for ethical certainty—a decisive push towards definitive guidelines that will ameliorate the uncertainty inherent in autoethnographic research. And I wonder if we are missing the point here . . . if we are, in fact, asking the wrong questions. Simply put, I wonder if in trying to legislate away ethical uncertainty in autoethnographic research, we are actually avoiding the issue with which we most need to grapple: *uncertainty itself*. Perhaps we need to be shaken up by our uncertainty before we can actually delineate our ethical parameters.

While groundbreaking approaches like Adams and Jones (2011) take a step towards remedying this theoretical gap, autoethnographers have yet to confront, head on, the intrinsic ambiguity of autoethnographic research. Like Wilcox (2010), I see myself as a hybrid scholar

who crosses disciplines that aren't normally mixed; drawing on my own chimerical scholarship that combines theology with the social sciences, I would suggest that queer and disability theologians bring significant offerings to autoethnographic ethics. Queer and disability theologies challenge us to wrestle with our fear of ideological uncertainty, our fear of the body, and our fear of ambiguity. As we move into theological territory, I invite us to explore these ideas not simply as theological concepts safely distanced from our social science models, but as embodied clues towards a more ethically robust approach to autoethnography.

Autoethnography, Theology, And Ideological Uncertainty

Autoethnography has a history of challenging established objectivist models of research and as such is well poised to wrestle with the notion of an attainable certainty in that research. Adams and Jones (2011) remind us that in “a practice of holding seemingly contradictory ways of knowing in tension . . . reflexivity is the means—the action, the movement, the performance—by which we engage a personal and queer scholarship” (p. 108). Perhaps even more importantly, they remind us that

stories can be insurrectionary acts if we make room for our (all of our) selves and their desires, for making trouble and acknowledging the implications of doing so, for embracing the texture of knowing without grabbing on to sure or fast answers. (p. 114)

In many ways, by bringing the ‘I’ back into research—or, more accurately, simply explicitly acknowledging the ‘I’ that was always there, autoethnography has challenged the academy to rethink the desirability—and even the possibility—of objectivity and neutrality in scholarly writing. Not surprisingly, such moves open up a wide range of difficult ethical questions, and

as those questions grow, so does the academy's discomfort with autoethnography's inherent uncertainty. I wonder if the push to regulate autoethnographic ethics is not fuelled by a desire to contain it, constrain it, or at least bring it back a bit closer towards the academic centre.

Problematizing the lure of the normative centre leads us quite naturally to queer theologians. Here, queer theologian Althaus-Reid brings a revitalizing perspective to the conversation. Althaus-Reid (2001) takes the liberation theologian's God of the margins several steps further. While acknowledging the involuntary marginalization of God by hegemonic theological and economic systems, she suggests that a God *at the margins* is a radical step further—towards, in fact, a deliberately “marginal God” (p. 31). She calls for a theology (and I would add here, an ethical framework), “from a real location *outside* central constructions” (p. 33, italics added). Althaus-Reid's God of the margins suggests a radical step outside mainstream theological (and again, I would add *ethical*) constructions. In taking this intentional step *into* the margins ourselves, a new ideological space begins to open up that can directly inform our ethical frameworks.

Queer Asian-American theologian Cheng (2010) offers another important clue in our move towards deliberate ideological unmoorings: transgression as grace. In his queer deconstruction and reconstruction of Christian sin and grace, Cheng suggests that “mindless or blind conformity with the rules of the ruling majority” is in fact a sin (p. 112). He suggests that the grace-filled response is found in transgressive deviance—that is, the “willingness to transgress social, legal, and religious boundaries and norms” (p. 113). While no doubt a troubling question for the academy, I wonder how our ethical practices might be transformed by the researcher's willingness to challenge—and indeed to transgress—the institutional norms. Certainly, I'm not calling for a wholesale rejection of institutional regulatory

standards here; just as Cheng grounds his arguments in his own extensive studies of systematic theology, I would suggest rooting our autoethnographic ‘transgressions’ in the significant foundational work already done by leaders in this field. Nonetheless, I would suggest that the deliberately provocative nature of a transgressive ethical approach might help us move into that vital space of ideological uncertainty, and in so doing, to reimagine our ethical frameworks in transformative ways.

This transgressive, marginal approach also challenges us to deliberately reconsider the *sources* of our ethical authority. Queer theologian Heyward (1989) suggests that trustworthy authority should evoke something already within us, rather than simply imposing a set of external rules (pp. 73-4). Admittedly, our institutional ethical review boards might be a bit unhinged by the notion that “the possibility of relational mutuality [could] be a primordial source for our authority” (p. 75), but I cannot help but wonder how our ethical praxis might change if this were seen as true! Heyward herself recognizes the instability and changeability of such an approach, calling on us to be “vulnerable to the possibilities of transformation,” and to recognizing that “the sources and resources of our spiritual authority—our scripture—[and here I would add *ethical authority*], be open, with us, to change and surprise” (p. 85). Putting it more directly, I wonder, how might our ethical parameters change if we recognized the *self* as a legitimate source of ethical authority?

Indeed, Althaus-Reid’s (2001) move to the margins, Cheng’s (2010) call to transgression, and Heyward’s (1989) invocation of an internal and relational authority, while admittedly unsettling to our traditional ethical standards, might well offer important clues to the ideological uncertainty we need to embrace in autoethnographic research. Taking it a step

further, queer and disability theologians may offer additional clues through their challenge to Christianity's fear of the body.

Autoethnography, Theology, And Fear Of The Body

Cartier's (2004) exploration of theologies of corporeality within historic butch/femme bar cultures articulates the vital theology shaped by this community's corporeal praxis, rooted in a shared erotic heritage. I would suggest that facing directly into Cartier's bold theology of "persistent desire" (p. 179), points autoethnographic ethicists towards a critical—and, I would argue, oft-avoided—aspect of autoethnographic ethics—our collective fear of the body. Here, we are moving into that territory articulated by Althaus-Reid (2005) as the paradoxical space of Jesus as "el Tocado—'the touched one'" (p. 400). Within this dangerous space, Jesus brings together the touchable (in the word become flesh), with the definitively *untouchable*—the contaminated, contagious, and otherwise marginalized bodies. And, like Cartier's (2004) theology of persistent desire, Althaus-Reid's (2005) lifting up of the sexual contradictions of touch/lack thereof in Jesus' own praxis, once again calls us to challenge our understandings of the sexual-spiritual body.

Our fear of the body is not limited to the sexual—to the reign of erotophobia that Heyward, Goss, and other sexual theologians challenge us to dismantle. There is something even more primal at play here—a deep and oftentimes unexamined fear of the wisdom, brokenness, and fallibility of our very human bodies themselves. Here, we are confronted with what disability theologian Betcher (2007) describes as Christianity's "somatic agnosticism" (p. 100). As somatic agnostics, in our ardent *desire* (if I dare use that word—albeit ironically—in this context), to avoid the sheer humanity of our bodied selves, we

prefer to deny our embodied finitude altogether—and in dismissing our bodies’ limits, we simultaneously dismiss our bodies’ wisdom.

Betcher (2010) unpacks this fear with potent honesty, exploring—both from her own lived experiences with disability, and from theological and philosophical foundations—what she calls our societal “fear of falling” (p. 41). Turning the traditional theology of the fall upside down, Betcher suggests that the real issue is our collective “traumatic refusal and objectification of pain” (p. 23). Moving as far away as possible from our “dread fear of the precarious vulnerability of the flesh” (p. 110), we deny our embodied frailties, wounds, and places of brokenness. Within Christian practice, this refusal is often a subtle (though no less insidious) one, and can be found in hymnology, liturgy, ecclesial and theological language (and of course, not insignificantly, within secular language and ideology as well). We find this refusal, even more dangerously, in the (usually unquestioned) prioritization of healing and wholeness within Christian theology, praxis, and dogma. Betcher calls the wholeness/brokenness binary into question, and provocatively asks theologians to reconsider whether healing should be the ultimate aspiration. Betcher (2010) notes the social retaliation afforded to a “somatic heretic” like herself who challenges acceptable binaries, visual frames, and social constructs surrounding disability (p. 94). On a personal note, (while recognizing the potential dangers of parallel comparisons across different lived/bodied experiences), as a queerly bodied and gendered person, I resonate with Betcher’s (2007) statement: “I fell into a zone of vulnerability, the dimensions of which I’m still trying to plot. I can be harassed, stared at, and overlooked simultaneously” (p. 27).

How might our ethical guidelines be changed, I wonder, if we were to fully engage with our fear of the body . . . if we were to bring Althaus-Reid’s (2005) “El Tocado” Jesus

into conversation with Betcher's (2007) unveiling of "somatic agnosticism?" How might our work change if we came face-to-face with this primal fear before trying to ethically legislate our bodies into safely controlled and contained regulatory zones? I would suggest that until autoethnographic researchers fully confront this deeply ingrained and socio-culturally sanctioned fear of queer and broken bodies, any ethical parameters we try to create will be incomplete—and potentially destructive to the very bodies we seek to protect.

Autoethnography, Theology, and Fear Of Ambiguity

As I read more deeply into disability theologies, I once again question my own positionality. Does living with the lifelong condition of OCD allow me to legitimately claim disability—albeit an invisible one—as one of my lived experiences? McRuer (2003), for example, discusses OCD as one of many disabilities in his work exploring the intersections of queered and disabled theories. Nonetheless, I wonder if it might be problematic to try to subsume such a wide range of lived and bodied experiences under one (disability) umbrella. As an anti-oppressive educator, I am always wary of oversimplifications that run the risk of minimizing the complexity of various lived identities and experiences. Even so, I have yet to find a framework other than disability theory/theology that so accurately captures my lived experience of how the language, perception, and indeed, as Betcher (2007) describes it, the "colonizer's gaze" (p. 5), impacts my lived experience as someone with OCD. Further, this sense of societal gaze, of perception, of passing (and not passing), also overlaps with my bodied life as a queerly gendered person. Where does one identity end and another begin? How do I articulate these intersecting experiences if it is simply not that tidy? As much as my OCD has taught me, through years of struggle, to passionately embrace and value uncertainty and ambiguity, how do I write about that kind of fluidity in the academy?

I return here to Betcher's (2007) challenge to the perpetuation of the wholeness/brokenness binary—particularly in light of poststructuralism's call to move beyond binaries. Here, I want to particularly focus in on her suggestion that such binaries are a “violently hierarchizing means of managing difference and suppressing ambiguity” (p. 34), and even more particularly, on our collective discomfort with ambiguity itself. I would suggest that many of the ethical debates in autoethnographic research are rooted in this fear—when ironically, autoethnography thrives at its richest in the complex soils of human ambiguity itself. Rather than trying to legislate this ambiguity away, how might we learn from queer theologians about how to embrace—and indeed learn from—ambiguity itself?

What might autoethnographic ethics learn, for instance, from Cornwall's (2009) exploration of the “unknowingness of transgender” as a lens through which to understand God? Here, Cornwall suggests that the apophatic nature of trans and intersex journeys can teach us about the equally ineffable nature of God. As she puts it,

Given that apophasis fundamentally gives space to *not* know, to have *not* reached our ‘destination’, this allows us to tread a path where such diversity and ‘at-onceness’—such apparent contradiction- does not immediately have to be resolved.

Apophasis reinforces the provisionality of all human gender constructs, shedding light on an aspect of the Christian tradition which can be read as profoundly valuing process over *telos*, journey over arrival (pp. 36-7).

I wonder how our ethical requirements would change were we to apply such apophatic provisionality to our ethical frameworks . . . is such a state of unresolved ethical ambiguity even possible?

Our willingness to sit with the ineffable also requires us to sit with the discomfiting ambiguity of our day-to-day lives, requiring what religious scholars Lassiter and Tucker (2010) describe as a queer pedagogical call to hold contradictory ideas within the same space, to play with that which does not fit, to pay particular attention to “incoherence and ambivalence” (pp. 24-26). Sitting with ambiguity requires a willingness to blur the boundaries in chimerical scholarship (Wilcox, 2010), to be willing to run the risk of being an academic “freak and queer” in order to push the boundaries of our certain and (ostensibly) containable knowledge (pp. 4-5). Sitting with ambiguity challenges us to learn from what theologian Reay (2009) describes as a liminal space that emerges in a particular way from the lived, bodied experiences of transgender peoples (p. 153). Sitting with ambiguity also means being willing to stay with our not-knowing . . . to re-examine that which we knew as fact, especially when confronted by an idea that challenges our root beliefs. If, for example, we were to subscribe to Quero’s (2008) notion of a transgender “God-to-Goddess/Goddess-to-God... God-in-transition” (p. 117), how might such a provocatively ambiguous notion of God change our ethical worldview in turn?

I wonder how the vital questions raised by a range of disability and queer theologians might subvert our ethical parameters in ways that can powerfully enrich the intellectual life of the academy. Further, if we are willing to challenge our ethical certainties, to challenge our fears of the body, and to challenge our discomfort with ambiguity, how might this transform our understanding of the core issue of ethical responsibility?

**(In) Conclusions: Queering Autoethnographic Ethics: Kenosis Of Privilege And
Certainty ... Or, 'Whose Responsibility Is It, Anyways?'**

I am Jokering a short forum theatre piece in a (secular) critical sexuality studies class. The piece has illustrated a scene of the typical discomfort/harassment faced by a gender non-conforming person in a public bathroom, and is based both on my own personal experiences as well as those of my collaborative group of student-actors. Students have engaged in forum theatre style 'interventions' where audience members can choose to replace different characters onstage to try different responses to change the outcome of the scene. In one such intervention, an audience volunteer steps into the scene as the gender non-conforming protagonist and tries a much more confrontative approach with the others in the scene. Afterwards, we discuss this intervention. To my surprise, the group veers into a discussion of how this confrontation might be viewed as oppressive to the instigator of the harassment.

I'm at a bit of a loss in knowing how to respond. While I want to open up a space for full and free discussion of the range of issues—especially in a class like this one—it's pretty clear to me, politically and theoretically, that the levels of oppression of the two characters are not parallel or equal. It reminds me a little of the reverse-racism argument employed by disgruntled white individuals—and makes me similarly uneasy. At the same time, I'm also aware of my own personal investment in this scene, and I don't want to sway the discussion with my viewpoint when my task is to serve as a neutral Joker/facilitator. And yet . . . I've been aware for some time of my growing sense of unease with my attempts to be a blank-slate facilitator—if I am working from an anti-oppressive perspective, surely it's relevant

and appropriate for me to bring my personal experiences of oppression into the work as well. Or is it?

This is just one example of the many times my personal and professional identities have collided within my educational practice. As a facilitator and trained mediator the practitioner value of neutrality is high in my own praxis. As I move more into explicitly autoethnographic and autobiographic work, however, I find it harder and harder to separate my lived experiences in the name of what starts to feel like an *artifice* of neutrality. I resonate with Wilcox's (2003) pedagogical choice to privilege voices in her classroom that have been systemically marginalized or silenced (p. 102). Like Wilcox, given historical disparities in access to systemic power for specific communities, I wonder if everyone *should* receive equal treatment. At the heart of this struggle (and if I'm honest, at the heart of a good deal of my activist anger/passion), is my intuitive sense that somehow, we have gotten off track in our discussions about ethics and responsibility. Something is missing for me in activist discourse when we discuss various *isms* and systems of unexamined privilege, but still continue to expect those without societal power to do all the work of effecting systemic change. Regan's (2010) unsettling pedagogy speaks strongly to me in terms of her call to those of us with colonizer identities/privileges to take responsibility for our complicity in and ability to work towards change in structures of colonial dominance.

Indeed, as a queer minister, I have felt a long-time unease with the open and affirming movements in many mainstream Christian denominations. While I applaud their attempts to move forward on issues of l/g/b/t/q human rights, somehow the notion of someone else deciding to bless me with their acceptance—or worse, with their tolerance—grates in a visceral way. Betcher (2007) points out that such tolerance or inclusion does not

require self-examination from the person or group benevolently offering said tolerance or inclusion (pp. 106-7), and, I would argue, such tolerance does not go far enough. Perhaps part of what is at issue here is disability theorist Siebers' (2011) notion of "aesthetic disqualification"—that (often violent) reaction that comes from someone's ostensibly involuntary aesthetic reaction to a disability or difference (p. 1). What if that reaction isn't involuntary? Putting it even more directly, what if, we shift the responsibility back to the person doing the including/excluding—or, as performer/writer Bergman (2009) puts it, to the person doing the (bodily) reading? Bergman suggests:

that we put the burden where it belongs: on the observer. Imagine a construction of language that, rather than reinforcing an idea of transgender or transsexual people as creating a falsehood, supported the notion that our genders are perfectly natural and inherently truthful. For that to be the case, however, some blame needs to be assigned in cases of disagreement (and no one will allow me to just blame the media culture and its great love affair with the binary, regrettably). I say we assign it to the cisgendered. Rather than talking about who *passes*, let us instead talk about who *reads* (p. 110).

Again, queer theology offers a clarifying—and challenging—voice to the discussion. I turn here to Cornwall's (2008) work on kenotic theology through the lens of intersex theory. Cornwall suggests that rather than continuing to expect intersex individuals to do the work of socio-cultural change, that perhaps *the rest of us* ought to kenotically renounce our own privilege. Rather than having to prove the viability of intersex identities, Cornwall asks, "why not make it that *everyone else* cedes the 'honour' attached to unambiguously sexed status?" (p. 188) Cornwall is calling on us to relinquish our hold on "theologies only of the

privileged” (p. 196). Admittedly, this is not an easy task . . . but she argues that in so doing, our theological imaginings will be far richer as a result.

I wonder, then, how our autoethnographic ethics would be changed—even reversed—were the academy to kenotically relinquish ethical privilege in a similar way. How would this speak back to (and indeed contradict) the minimization of the ethical rights of marginalized researchers? For instance, how might Cornwall’s approach contradict Tolich’s claim that the researcher must prioritize her abuser’s ethical needs in research planning? From a kenotic sensibility, might we not argue that the first priority should be for the health, safety, and well-being of the researcher, rather than for their abuser? Even more nebulously—though arguably equally importantly—how might a kenotic sensibility challenge us to relinquish our adherence to ethical certainty, to allow for greater spaces of uncertainty and ambiguity? How might our ethical parameters change if we were to give up the comfort of definitive answers and move deliberately into a space of discomfort—in the interests of working towards a deeper, more complex ethical framework?

This is not easy work. Admittedly, it can be extremely difficult—and at times academically and politically dangerous. And yet, the ground-breaking scholars explored in this chapter offer us a diverse range of tools and strategies to help us in navigating these difficult waters. Autoethnographers call us to listen “to and for the silences and stories we can’t tell—not fully, not clearly, not yet; returning, again and again, to the river of story accepting what you can never fully, never unquestionably know” (Adams & Jones, 2011, pp. 112-113). I find challenge and hope in their call to bring forth the stories and voices that have been discounted, ignored, or actively silenced, and to embrace the inherent mystery of first person narratives. Arts based researchers remind us to

think about a spirituality of messiness: to let our classrooms get messy enough to delve into life, delve into paint, delve into the body; . . . to live with incongruence; to let our hearts be open enough to hold the inconsistencies that many spiritual practices and religions offer . . . to migrate to our own life (Snowber, 2004, p. 134).

I am encouraged by this frank embrace of the disruptively untidy wisdom found in embodied artistic praxes. Queer theologians remind us that even—perhaps especially!—within the seemingly ordered frames of Christian theology, we can find powerful challenges to seemingly sacred order. As Althaus-Reid (2005) provocatively queries,

Is Jesus a graffiti of God that needs to be reread in the rush and fear of the authority of the law it disrupts and contaminates? If Jesus (the logos) belongs to a different kind of scripture, then the messiah should be thought of as a category crisis of an extreme order, the transgressor of all law (p. 397).

As a clergyperson, I am inspired by the notion that queering Christianity might offer us a radically subversive approach to our ethical “laws,” indeed, that queer lenses make of theology, as Althaus-Reid (2002) puts it, something “worth the effort” (p. 148). Disability theologians remind us of the prophetic power of “the body in pain [that] now speaks back . . . as a culture critic,” noting that within Christianity “the body crucified at the juxtaposition of social forces . . . [is] its central icon” (Betcher, 2007, p. 134). As an artist, I am energized by this call to an embodied ethic of socio-cultural critique—a tenet I understand as central to performative autoethnography.

Indeed, I suspect that this kind of prophetic critique, as exemplified by a range of theologians, arts-based researchers, and autoethnographers, is critical to our lived understandings of academic rigour. Further, I would suggest that it is only by wrestling

deeply—using our intellect, our bodies, and our spirits—with the ethical questions raised by these scholars, that we will truly redefine ethical autoethnographic frameworks. Without a doubt, this poses significant challenges to autoethnographic researchers, and to the wider academy. I suspect however—albeit with some *uncertainty*— that the results will indeed prove to be eminently worth the effort.

INTERSCENE

Kerri:

Looks over at Joker, who is looking a bit glazed.

You still with me, old friend?

Joker: Of course. I get the theory . . . I just don't want us to get lost in it.

Kerri: *(with just a hint of defensiveness.)* I'm not getting lost in the theory.

Joker: Maybe not. But let's be honest. You move back into that multisyllabic space pretty darned easily.

Kerri: Your point being . . .?

Joker: My point being that sometimes, in your academic work, I think you're more comfortable in the world of theoretical speak than in the world of your body, your inner life . . .

Kerri: I have an incredibly rich inner life! You know that! Hell, your presence here in this dissertation is proof of that!

Joker: I know you have a rich interior life. No argument here. But I also think that you continue to do this dance between your longing to bring your more contemplative self into your academic work, and your fear . . .

Kerri: *(pauses)* . . . my fear that if I do, I won't be seen or heard in the academy.

Joker: Yes . . .

Kerri: I know . . . this is a familiar conversation for you and I. Remember our chapter, "Wrestling with the angels" . . .?

Joker: *(sings this as a line from the musical Gigi)*

“Ah yes, I remember it well.”¹⁷

Kerri sighs, shakes her head in bemusement, and gestures to the next chapter.

¹⁷ Minnelli, V. (dir.).(1958). *Gigi*. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Productions

SCENE FOUR: WRESTLING WITH THE ANGELS OF AMBIGUITY: QUEER PATHS
IN CONTEMPLATIVE ACTIVISM

The stage is set simply. There is a lecturer's podium downstage left, and a small prop table and chair upstage centre.

Kerri appears downstage left at the lecturer's podium, arranges notes, adjusts glasses.

Kerri: This chapter investigates how a theologically informed queer performative autoethnography explores the liminalities, ambiguities, challenges, and gifts that arise in the intersections of multiple academic identities and disciplines. Through performative autoethnography, I explore aspects of queer sexual and gender identities, as well as lived experiences of homophobia and transphobia inherent to those identities. I also delve into the intersections (and sometimes collisions) of my ministerial, educational, and theological identities within the academy. This research is informed by scholarship in the areas of queer theory and queer theology, transgender and intersex theology, disability theory and theology, performative autoethnography, and theatre as social acupuncture.

Joker appears downstage right, but not actually on the stage itself—somewhere halfway between the stage and the audience's seating area.

Joker: Whew! That's a mouthful: "theologically informed queer performative autoethnography . . ."

Kerri: Sorry, but once again, old friend, you're coming in a little early here. The actual scene, "Joker's intro," is a little later in this particular script. I need to lay my theoretical foundations here.

Kerri continues, while the Joker is actively paying attention to both Kerri and the audience during what follows.

While I view rigorous theological and theoretical analysis as integral to my autoethnographic research, I concurrently hold a passionate commitment to the value of performative research as equally valid and productive. My autoethnographic research process includes contemplative work (through prayer, meditation, and artists' retreats), theoretical scholarship (through trans-disciplinary research in queer theory, theology, arts-based research, a/r/tography, and anti-oppressive education), and theatrical craft (through improvisation, script development, rehearsal, and collaborative artistic direction). It is an iterative process, wherein each of these threads influences, informs, and transforms the others.

Joker: Okay . . . I'm confused . . . I thought this was supposed to be a chapter on contemplative and artistic practices, but this is sounding heavy on the academese here. Audience . . . your thoughts?

Joker looks to the audience of readers. A pause ensues. Then, a longer pause. Kerri gives a quick but perceptibly uncomfortable look to the Joker.

Kerri: Look, just let me get through the academic-speak here so we can get into the real art, okay?

Joker visibly takes note of this last choice of words, looking to audience for their reaction as well.

Kerri: Right. As I was saying, to illustrate this process, I draw on performance excerpts from the script of "Living in the In-Between," an autoethnographic performance piece I created and performed at the American Educational Researchers' Association 2012 conference (Mesner, 2012). Whilst acknowledging the limitations of a textual representation of what was

originally an embodied and interactive performance, this chapter offers an overview of this emerging work with an interwoven compilation of performance excerpts and theoretical ‘wonderings’: reflexive accounts of theoretical and theological influences and questions that emerge for me in this work.

Joker: But, Kerri, why include this in a book on contemplative and artistic scholarship?

What makes this any different from the process of writing a traditional academic paper . . . or crafting a traditional piece of theatre?

Kerri: A good question. Contemplative artistic practices were at core of the development of the scripts that follow. In addition to more traditional textual research that informs the critical analyses in my autoethnographic research, I engage in a range of contemplative practices that aim to take me deeper into the intellectual, artistic, and spiritual contents of this work.

Prayer, sitting and walking meditation, and spirit-centred dialogue with collaborative partners are a few examples of these processes. I find it fascinating—though not surprising—that some of my clearest intellectual and artistic insights have emerged either while walking the labyrinth, or during periods of deep meditation. Indeed, given the challenges inherent in utilizing what Spry refers to as a “practiced vulnerability” (2011, p. 159), a deep rootedness in my own contemplative practices is what sustains me in this work.

Joker: Hmm . . . Can you *show* us what this engagement looks like? Look . . . can I help a little here? You’ve written me an intro in this piece, after all.

Kerri: Okay then . . . take it away . . . you’re kind of on a roll.

Joker: Ah. Here we are . . . this is more my arena . . . The “Joker’s Intro” from “Living in the In-Between” (Mesner, 2012).

Joker's Intro

(A note to the reader: As part of the performative in-betweenness of this piece, Kerri also plays the Joker in this vignette.)

Kerri as Joker: Let me tell you a story about living in the in-between.

What does it mean to live in the in-between?

It means embracing and confronting.

Confronting the wounds that are inflicted because I don't fit in either . . .

. . . or . . .

It means embracing knowing . . .

Or more accurately embracing the not-knowing that comes from wrestling with the angel of ambiguity.

It means never being sure . . .

It means never being sure.

It means discovering that deep terrifying wonderful space of spirit in the in-between .

. .

A spirit that is too shy or maybe even disdains living in the more certain lands.

There are plenty of knowledges and frames

boxes and ways of knowing

proven methods and approved religions

in the land of certainty.

This is something other.

And when you have wrestled with the angel of ambiguity, you recognize this place in your spirit.

It's a gift.

It's terrifying, but you wouldn't trade it for any certainty.

Living in the in-between as a scholar, and as a person of faith . . . demonstrating daily that yes, I am a 'Christian with a brain.'

As a Christian and as a queer person . . . coming out to Christian communities as queer and coming out to queer communities as Christian.

As a woman and a genderqueer person . . . someone who never takes for granted the unexamined privilege that comes with traditional binary gender norms.

As someone living between academic and ecclesial closets where we don't talk about mental health . . . and the unique gifts these challenges bring.

As a pastor and an ex-pastor . . . who has seen firsthand the shadow side of congregational life.

Growing up in communities where violence was routine . . . where I was—maybe am—too queer to fit . . . too honest to pass . . . the black sheep . . .

. . .

Let me tell you a story about living in the in-between . . .

I meet you in this story today as an educator, an artist, and a theologian . . . knowing that the spaces between education, art, and theology are liminal spaces . . . and that navigating those spaces can be tricky at times. Knowing, for instance, that I feel called to use Christian scripture somewhere within this piece. Not so much because it's required or essential in some way, but rather, as a deliberate challenge to an academic culture that seems to vigorously separate out 'theological' and 'educational' research.

And in my biblical wanderings, I find my way back to that wonderfully controversial Gospel of Thomas (which has never made its way into the official bible). Here, we have a delightfully ambiguous Jesus who says . . .

Those who seek should not stop seeking until they find. When they find, they will be disturbed. When they are disturbed, they will wonder . . . If you bring forth what is within you, what you have will save you. What you do not have within you will kill you. (Patterson and Meyer, 1992, Lines 2, 70).

And yet, though I spend hours and even days with this passage, I can't quite make it fit . . . I need to play with the words . . . to make them my own somehow. Call me a heretic . . . or simply a creative collaborator, but I need to reclaim these words in my own language . . . And so, eventually, I do, finding my own creative paraphrase.

(pauses)

We seek until we find, and it unsettles us . . . what unsettles us can lead us to a place of wonder . . . When we communicate what is within us, it gives us life.

When we don't know what is within us, it can kill us.

And suddenly, I hear in these words what could very well be an autoethnographer's call . . . Because today, I also meet you in this story as a performative autoethnographer . . . as someone who believes that our lives, our bodies, are sources of research data . . . of knowledge . . . of wisdom . . . and, through the lens of culture, they are also sources of challenge and critique.

And I meet you in this story as a Joker—Boal's (1985) Theatre of the Oppressed facilitator who is intermediary, connector, facilitator and difficultator . . . between the actors and the audience . . . who is neither here nor there, but both here and there,

simultaneously . . . that is somehow, perplexingly, in-between (Schutzman & Cohen-Cruz, 1994, p. 237).

And so, as your Joker, I invite you . . . together, let us move into an in-between space. Let us explore some of the difficulties and the gifts that are found in that in-between space.

But like all good Jokers, I need to remind you that there are no spectators . . . yes, you get to watch the performance for now, but afterwards, we draw on Boal's notion of the "spectator" . . . no passive audience here . . . you get to engage with the theatre! (Schutzman & Cohen-Cruz, 1994, p. 238).

Don't worry . . . I won't ask you to do anything that'll make you uncomfortable . . . or if I do, it'll only be once or twice.

Just joking.

But seriously, there are many ways to engage, to participate, to *spectact*.

By doing and responding. By witnessing. By looking for a question, an idea, a point of disagreement, a spark—that you might take somewhere else . . . by engaging with your own reflections and adding to this inquiry.

Because in the end, if it's just about me up here, I believe passionately—that we've completely missed the point.

Pause

No joke.

Kerri returns to notes.

Kerri: This first piece, the "Joker's Intro," aims to situate and contextualize this work; as an anti-oppressive educator, I believe that researchers bear a reflexive responsibility to name

and situate their own positionality within their research. Multiple perspectives inform my positionality: my sexuality, my gender identity, my calling as a queer Christian minister, and my academic identity as what Wilcox (2010) refers to as a “chimerical scholar”—a scholar who deliberately crosses disciplinary boundaries in transgressive ways (p. 5). As a queer theologian, I aim to resist cultural and ecclesial normativity, to explore the liminal edges of theological and performative scholarship, recognizing, like Althaus-Reid (2001; 2002), that some of the richest spiritual and theoretical ground can be found outside mainstream constructions. I look particularly to Spry’s (2011) explication of performative autoethnography, noting its deep congruence with anti-oppressive educational approaches, and Adams and Jones’ (2011) work integrating autoethnography, reflexivity, and queer theory.

Joker: Alright. I’m confused again. Seems like we’re veering back into theoretical-speak. What I want to know is how you propose exploring these liminal spaces, without leaving your body behind? What about arational knowing (Bickel, 2005), seeking out a messy spirituality (Snowber, 2004), poetic research (Leggo, 2006)?

With a look over to Kerri.

Yes, Kerri, Jokers can cite academic sources too!

Kerri: Thanks for that.

Joker: Look, I know it’s a cliché, but a useful one . . . don’t tell us, *show us*.

Kerri: You’re talking about AMDA?

Joker: I’m talking about AMDA.

AMDA

(All the stage directions written in italics for this next scene are spoken aloud as a part of the script. Stage directions in brackets are not spoken.)

(Kerri lights a candle.)

Kerri: What does it mean to live in the in-between? *We seek until we find, and it unsettles us . . . When we communicate what is within us, it gives us life . . .*

(Kerri sits and begins lacing shoes.)

Curtain rises on Kerri frantically getting her dance shoes laced—she appears to be running late.

I'm 25 and I'm at theater school—

(Kerri stands.)

Musical theater school in New York City. It's amazing and overwhelming . . .

And just as a side note I have to say that coming out in a musical theater school in New York City—highly recommended.

Anyways, on top of learning how to be an actor singer dancer . . .

Sorry . . . I *am* trying to perform with a degree of honesty here.

And to *be* honest, at the American Musical and Dramatic Academy—AMDA—where we all strive to become triple threats who can sing, dance, and act; there are actor-singers who dance, actor-singers who move well, and actor-singers who move. I am an actor-singer who moves. Oh God, I'm late!

(Kerri moves to centre stage, facing audience, looking at the 'mirror' directly over the audience's heads. This is the same position taken for each dance studio scene that follows.)

Black out. Light comes up on a dance studio classroom. Kerri and 14 other students are lined up facing the mirror, doing a slow, deliberate dance exercise under the sharp eyes of Mr. Woodson.

Kerri: Okay. Basic routine. Body awareness, discipline, focus.

Kerri demonstrates the arm extension/posture exercise while talking through it.

1 2 arms extended, 3 4 abdomen in, 5 6 head floating, 7 8 shoulders relaxed. But don't slouch. He always catches us when we slouch—even for a moment.

(Kerri starts to yawn and visibly 'swallows' the yawn.)

For God's sake, Kerri, don't yawn! Remember Mr. Woodson says to swallow your yawns . . . if he sees them then so do the people behind the audition table. 1 2 Arms extended, 3 4 abdomen in . . .

Black out. Lights shift to a first year acting class. Kerri and Donald are rehearsing a seduction scene from Tennessee Williams' ¹⁸ Summer and Smoke. This is their fourth attempt on the scene in front of their acting class that day.

Kerri: (to Donald, reading from script). "All rooms are lonely, where there is only one person."¹⁹

Whew. Yeah, Donald, I think it's coming. Can we take just a quick break?

(Kerri turns away; this next line is an aside to self.)

Bloody hell. If I have to run this excruciating scene with Donald one more time, I'm gonna freakin' scream. Mr. Smith keeps talking about finding the sexual subtext . . .

"let it smoulder." I don't know how to smoulder. And clearly Donald doesn't either.

Why in the hell did Mr. Smith choose this scene for us?

¹⁸ Williams (1948).

¹⁹ Williams (1948) p. 77.

Kerri (back to Donald). Okay! Let's try this again!

Black out. Lights pan back to the dance studio.

(Kerri is continuing the 'basic body routine' exercise, as before.)

Kerri: 1 2 Arms extended, 3 4 abdomen in . . .

I don't know. It's not like my family ever talked about homosexuality. I mean there was cousin Matt—who we never really talked about, but who was 'different' somehow. But other than that, far as I knew the gays were all at 'that bar' in downtown Victoria, or in San Francisco. That's where the gays went. And we weren't exactly a churchgoing family . . . I think we stopped going when I was about 8. So I don't know how I picked it up . . . maybe cultural osmosis or something . . . but I knew. Gays and lesbians burned in hell. That was a fact.

(Time arm exercise so that this statement ends with arms extended to side in cross-position.)

Black out. Lights come up on Kerri's residence room in the AMDA apartment building. Kerri's sitting on the bed, and her friend Joe is sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall, facing her. It's such a small room that they're only a few feet apart. It's about 11:30 at night; the lights are low.

Kerri: Joe . . . I'm not sure about this. I've been trying to figure this out for quite a while, and I'm really not sure. I'm just kind of exploring it, but I think maybe, just maybe, I might be a lesbian. Joe . . . do you think gays and lesbians go to hell?

Black out. Lights come back up in dance studio.

(Kerri is continuing the 'basic body routine' exercise, as before.)

1 2 Arms extended, 3 4 . . .

Am I ready to get out there . . . and . . . date a woman? Oh God no! This is a spiritual process right now, that's all!

(A pause, exercise continuing while Kerri thinks about it.)

No, I'm not over-thinking it. I just think I need to understand fully the complexity of what's going on internally and spiritually before I act upon it. Yeah. I've got this under control.

Black out. Lights pan to residence common room. Kerri and Valerie are seated on the couch, watching TV.

Kerri: *sigh* . . . What a brutal day!

(Kerri chooses a show on the manual TV controls.)

Oh, Star Trek! Is this okay? Oh you're a Trekkie too? Fantastic . . .

(Kerri really notices Valerie as Valerie introduces herself.)

Valerie? Hi. I'm Kerri. Nice to meet you.

(Kerri turns with a look of excitement/terror that only the audience sees.)

Blackout . . . and SCENE.

Joker: Okay. Now we're getting somewhere. Audience, what questions does this vignette raise for you? Kerri . . . what questions did it raise for you in the writing? In the performing? In the act of 'performing' it just now in this chapter?

Kerri: Well, as a performative autoethnographer researching autobiographically, I wrestle with the ethics of this work. As a queerly bodied person, coming out narratives are integral to my spiritual, sexual, and ethical lives; I understand the call to come out as an integral aspect of my Christian call to ministry, to justice-making, and to right relationship.

Joker: Well yes. You're talking here about activism . . . putting our bodies on the line out in the world to effect social change. Activism . . . I understand!

Kerri: Yes . . . but a significant part of this journey for me has been around rethinking what I understand as 'activism.' For so many years, I understood activism solely as the work I do in the external world . . . social justice work, community organizing, civil disobedience. My inner life was the private place I returned to in order to renew and restore my spirit to do that all-important outer work.

Joker: Yup, with you so far . . .

Kerri: What I've come to understand through the integrative work of contemplative artistic scholarship, however, is that these delineations between inner and outer aren't so clear. Even more significantly, I've been discovering that some of my most potent and impactful activist work has emerged out of my deeply reflexive contemplative, meditative, and prayerful practices. I'm coming to understand this as a deep, ongoing commitment to what I have come to understand as "contemplative activism"—a form of scholarship and artistic creation that aims to engage the intersections between the inner world of contemplative practices, and the outer expressions that emerge from those practices. It would naturally follow, then, that my performative research would embrace this activist—or in Judeo-Christian terms—prophetic voice.

Joker: Prophetic? Tell me more . . .

Kerri: Here, I look to the Hebrew Biblical example of prophetic characters who were called to speak their truths, to challenge the status quo, to put themselves on the line in their commitment to building a more just world. As a minister, I understand Christianity, and Jesus' teaching and praxis, as being inherently prophetic. And so I try to bring that prophetic

commitment to my academic work, highlighting, as an artist and a scholar, aspects of traditionally silenced stories. I'm particularly interested in the ways in which anti-oppressive educational theory helps us to hear the stories of systemically marginalized voices and 'othered' bodies that lack access to systemic privilege.

Joker: Hmm . . . can you unpack this a little more in terms of the academy?

Kerri: Sure . . . have a look . . .

Dear Class . . .

Kerri lights a candle.

Kerri: What does it mean to live in the in-between? *When we communicate what is within us, it can give us life.*

(Kerri picks up glasses.)

Kerri: Living in the in-between in the academy . . . The stories are similar enough that this could be a number of my classrooms in the seminary or the university . . .

(Kerri puts on glasses; speaks from Professor's position on edge of stage, indicating audience as class.)

Kerri as Professor: Great point! Thank-you Kerri. I appreciate your sharing so honestly. It's not something that I've had as much experience with, though of course I have several friends who are gay or lesbian. But you bring such an important perspective to our discussions. There's so much we can learn from you as a class.

(Kerri takes off glasses, sits in chair and speaks to the professor.)

Kerri: Thank you. I think it's really important for all of us to learn from each other's stories. So yeah, if you have questions, please ask. It's great when we can have these conversations . . . it's all about dialogue.

(Kerri freezes; Kerri, holding this freeze, turns head to audience and says the next line.)

Kerri's Inner Self: Internal Monologue.

(Kerri stands)

"It's all about dialogue." (Sighs) Queer 101 again. Alright . . . Here we go.

I am so tired of having to go back to the beginning. Of coming out over and over and over again.

I think I'm even more tired of the depth of surprise and revelation that each person I come out to expresses as though this is the first time I've ever done this. It's exhausting.

I've gotta wonder, is it my responsibility to educate, to build bridges? Do I want to push up against the assumptions and unexamined privilege in the room? To deal with other people's learning curves around my queer content?

And before you

(points at professor)

tell me how valuable that is for the class, let me assure you that I get it. Hell, as an anti-oppressive educator, I've learned loads from others who are willing to educate me.

But sometimes it's exhausting to be the educator-as-student, and sometimes it's just downright unwise . . . Hell, some of this stuff can start to feel an awful lot like being a poster child.

And the assumption that I want to do that educating or that I should do it . . . well it's an assumption born out of your own privilege.

(Sits back into the position of the earlier freeze.)

Yeah . . . it's great when we can have these conversations . . . it's all about dialogue.

Joker: Ahh . . . now we're getting into my territory . . . in-between as discomfort! I like it!

We're talking about rigorous reflexivity here, aren't we . . . for all of us . . . the researcher, the performer, the audience members, the educator, the student . . .

Kerri: Yes . . . like Kumashiro (2002b), I recognize that we are “constantly learning . . . of our own complicity with oppression . . . We resist anti-oppressive practices because they trouble how we think and feel about not only the Other but also ourselves” (p. 57). If I hope to engage a prophetically challenging performative voice, then I must first engage in a process of rigorous self-examination as a foundation to my autoethnographic research. I work hard to identify my own areas of privilege—as a white North American with access to university education, to name just a few. Looking at privilege is uncomfortable work, but, like Kumashiro (2002a), I value the place of discomfort, crisis, and the unknowable, in education—both for me as scholar/performer and for my audience/readers. I note intriguing connections here between the personal and the systemic with Regan's (2010) contention that because radical change is not ultimately in its best interest, the dominant majority is apt to reinforce benevolent imperialism and colonial attitudes, often unconsciously, in ways that are antithetical to decolonization. An unsettling pedagogy is therefore based on the premise that settlers cannot just theorize about decolonizing and liberatory struggle: we must *experience* it (p. 23, italics added).

And, again, contemplative practices support me in actively engaging with these places of uncertainty and discomfort. Buddhist nun Chödrön reminds us that in meditation, our

“uncomfortable feelings are messages that tell us to perk up and lean into a situation when we’d rather cave in and back away” (2002, p. 7).

Joker: So what you’re aiming for here is not so different from my work . . . seeking to utilize discomfort as a learning tool.

Kerri: Yes . . . it’s what we discussed earlier, with O’Donnell’s (2006) notion of “social acupuncture” . . . remember he talked about discomfort as integral to the learning process.

Joker: So, theologically informed queer performative autoethnography aims to discomfort, to challenge, to instigate the work of social change. Audience, your thoughts? What does this next scene instigate, evoke, problematize . . . for you?

Bus Stop

(Kerri lights a candle.)

Kerri: What does it mean to live in the in-between? *When we communicate what is within us, it gives us life . . .*

(Kerri looks for bus from downstage centre.)

Kerri: Downtown Vancouver. On my way home from class, waiting for my bus at Howe and Robson. I lean out to look for my bus, and as I step back, a woman behind me says,

Kerri as woman: Get your queer ass out of my face.

Kerri: I think I’ve misheard, but when I look at her she is staring at me with open hostility.

Kerri as self: Excuse me?

Kerri as woman: Get your queer ass out of my face.

Kerri: This exchange continues . . . and moves into an odd and disturbing direction—where, among other things, she informs me that the army is coming to kill all of us—by whom I assume she means all queer people . . .

When she finally leaves on her bus, as she glares angrily at me out the bus window, I look at her; I close my eyes, and say “bless you . . .”

Knowing even as I do that it is more a statement of defiance than of benediction.

As I get onto my own bus soon after, I don’t feel at risk, but all the same, I sit near the front . . . just in case.

There is a part of me that knows her voice well . . . the part of me that sat near the front of the bus that day, just in case, is the same part of me that scopes out a public bathroom for personal safety . . . is the same part of me that checks a church’s theology before I set foot in the door . . . is the same part of me that continues to come out on a daily basis whether I want to or not. It’s very close to the part of me that knows that queer autoethnography is no simple method . . . that each story I tell holds the potential to out me or someone else . . . and I wonder which stories are mine to tell.

This part of me . . . the continually coming out, ethically cautious, personally vigilant part of me, almost wants to thank the woman on Howe and Robson . . . on some level I can appreciate her directness. There’s no subtlety whatsoever. “Get your queer ass out of my face” is pretty unambiguous. And this part of me, the continually coming out part of me, hears in her statement an echo . . . of many other voices, explicit and implicit, that I hear, sense, intuit, every day . . . living in the in-between.

Joker: In-between as taking up the body . . . Kerri, your queer body is clearly central to this last piece. How did your body inform the process of creating this piece?

Kerri: “Bus Stop” emerged out of my embodied experience of a verbal queer bashing on the ostensibly safe city streets of downtown Vancouver. As I reflected on this experience in the months that followed, I found that one of the most effective tools to articulate this experience artistically was my djembe drum (Mesner, 2013). Somehow, moving from words to body, from intellect to viscera, I discovered another layer in my autoethnographic research. In retrospect, it’s unsurprising to me, as a queerly bodied person, that I would find embodied expression essential to making sense of one of my many experiences of anti-queer violence. As a theologian, however, I suggest that a noticeable gap has emerged between queer theological thought and lived praxis. The historical rootedness of queer theologies within the contextual knowledge of the body makes this gap all the more troubling and pronounced. Queer theologies, uniquely positioned to challenge the historical academic and ecclesial mind-body split, run the risk of disconnecting from the embodied realities of the communities for whom those theologies aim to speak. Put plainly, what does it mean if we are ‘doing’ queer theology only from the head up? My autoethnographic work aims to challenge this dualism by explicitly taking up the body in my work.

Joker: Hmm. Theorizing about the over intellectualization of the body. Careful . . .you’re on that intellectual-experiential tightrope again . . .

Kerri: I know, but this stuff is so integral to how I frame my art and my performance . . . not to mention my understanding of the Christian notion of the Holy Spirit and how that Spirit interacts with contemplative practices. I’m so inspired by queer Christian theologians who forge new theological ground through a uniquely queer lens—for example, in the theological

exploration of the profound intersections between sexuality, gender transgression, and global economic systems. Althaus-Reid (2002) suggests that queer theology involves the deep recognition that “theology is a sexual ideology performed in a sacralizing pattern: it is a sexual divinized orthodoxy (right sexual dogma) and orthopraxy (right sexual behavior)” (p. 87). I want to explore how queer theology can re-invigorate research, praxis, and performance.

Joker: Yes . . . but

Kerri: I know . . .

Joker and Kerri *together*: The body . . .

Kerri: Look, it’s a tricky one. We’ve talked about this . . . remember the notion of our “dread fear of the precarious vulnerability of the flesh” (Betcher, 2010, p. 110)? The body gets left behind in academia and in ecclesia . . . I do want to challenge that disavowal.

Joker: Yes . . . what happens when we allow that kind of fleshy vulnerability into the academy? Into our art within the academy?

Kerri: Betcher (2010) also notes the social retaliation afforded to a “somatic heretic” like herself who challenges acceptable binaries, visual frames, and social constructs surrounding disability (p. 94). On a personal note (while recognizing the potential dangers of parallel comparisons across different lived/bodied experiences), as a queerly bodied and gendered person, I resonate with Betcher’s (2007) statement: “I fell into a zone of vulnerability, the dimensions of which I’m still trying to plot. I can be harassed, stared at, and overlooked simultaneously” (p. 27).

Joker: The violence of the anti-queer gaze . . . ?

Kerri: Yes.

Kerri pauses, really hearing what they both have just said.

Joker: You still with us?

Kerri: Yes.

Kerri visibly regroups a bit.

Kerri: The challenge in this research methodology, then, is to weave the theological and anti-oppressive analyses of homophobia and transphobia together with the development of bodied artistic expressions arising from and with these analyses. Contemplative praxes are central to this research—for me, the performative inquiry process is an embodied contemplative practice. Moreover, my spiritual-contemplative practices provide me with an essential grounding from which to do this challenging work, and a wellspring to which I return throughout the research and performance processes. For me, all of this weaves together into an emergent form of contemplative activism: a deeply spiritual and personal artistic and scholarly practice that simultaneously seeks to make a prophetic difference in the world.

Joker: Contemplative activism. I can work with that. Finding that space where art, spirit, theory, and working towards change meet.

With a look at the audience

And I get, in this context, that theory is an important piece of the puzzle. Though just as an aside, Kerri, you've got to admit, as the writer here, that it's been a bit cheeky of you to use my character to help unpack your theory. That's not really the Joker's function, and you know that.

With a wink to the audience

But we'll allow a bit of dramatic license, I guess.

But seriously, I can see that you want to mark a clear delineation between performance just for its own sake and performance as sociocultural critique. I get that. It's a tough line you're trying to balance here though, between theory and apophatic unknowing (Cornwall, 2009).

Kerri: Yes. I think I'm with Fels (1999) here in thinking that "practitioners of performative inquiry understand that the focus of their research lies not in finding answers, but in realizing possible spaces for exploration" (p. 91) and in valuing "the tension of ambiguity and the not-yet-known" (Fels, 2004, p. 78). I value—and indeed seek out—those not-yet-known places in my own work. Indeed, in this deliciously uncomfortable, delightfully uncertain space of unanswered questions and disruptive connections, I find myself where I began.

Closing with Thomas

(Kerri lights final candle in silence.)

Kerri: Let me tell you a story about living in the in-between.

. . .

There are plenty of knowledges and frames

boxes and ways of knowing

proven methods and approved religions

in the land of certainty . . .

This is something other.

And when you have wrestled with the angel of ambiguity you recognize this place in your spirit . . .

It's a gift.

It's terrifying but you wouldn't trade it for any certainty.

. . .

What does it mean to live in the in-between?

(The following sequence is a dramatic 'recap' with Kerri re-enacting the lines from each character from the prior vignettes. The paraphrases from the Gospel of Thomas are delivered centre stage, directly facing the audience; each character is delivered on an angle and with the physicality/voice of that particular character to help delineate each separate character's recap moment.)

We seek until we find, and it unsettles us . . . (shift)

What unsettles us can lead us to a place of wonder . . . (shift)

5,6 head floating. 7,8 shoulders relaxed. (shift)

I don't know how to smoulder. (shift)

. . .

When we don't know what is within us, it can kill us. (shift)

How do you expect people to respond if you look like that? (shift)

Do you think gays and lesbians go to hell? (shift)

. . .

When we communicate what is within us, it gives us life. (shift)

Is it my responsibility to build bridges? (shift)

It is more a statement of defiance than of benediction. (shift)

(On each of these next four lines, Kerri takes two lit candles and gives them to audience members. Focus is on the candles rather than on eye contact with the audience.)

We seek until we find, and it unsettles us. (gives two candles)

What unsettles us can lead us to a place of wonder. (gives two candles)

When we communicate what is within us, it gives us life. (gives two candles)

When we don't know what is within us, it can kill us. (gives two candles)

(Kerri picks up remaining candle and stands downstage centre, facing audience.)

What if this is our call, as researchers, not simply to seek knowledge, but to seek out that which unsettles us . . . that which moves us to wonder . . . to move deliberately into those places of mystery and unnameability, of confusion and spirit, of joy and terror?

What if the autoethnographers, the a/r/tographers, the actors and poets and dancers, the artists and writers . . . are helping us to realize that if we do not bring forth what is within us, we die? That if we don't bring forth what is within us, the academy dies?

What is calling to you from the in-between today? What do you need to bring forth, to communicate? What unsettles you?

Let's discuss.

Actually, no. Better yet . . .

(. . . pause . . .)

Let's simply wonder.

As the last vignette ends, there is a long pause. Maybe even an uncomfortable one. Then

Kerri says to the Joker, as an aside that the audience overhears.

Kerri: Okay, moment of transparency here. I feel like I'm supposed to wrap this up with a neat, tidy academese-fluent closing paragraph. You know, summarize all my key theoretical touchstones while still keeping a link to the narrative voice. Ending somehow with a great, inspiring conclusion. Can you give me a hand here?

Joker: You know what, Kerri?

Looks to Kerri, pauses, looks to the audience of readers, takes a long pause. Then, speaking to the audience of readers and to Kerri:

Let's not let go of those angels of ambiguity just yet.

Let's simply wonder.

INTERSCENE

Joker: Ah, you and I did such good work together on that one! Wrestling with the angels of ambiguity . . . I love that . . .

Struck by a moment of sudden inspiration

Ohhhh! How about ‘dancing with the angels of ambiguity’ . . .

Revelling in her own creativity, begins singing from “The King and I,” sweeping Kerri up in an impromptu dance across the stage as she does so.

“Shall we dance? Shall we dance? Shall we dance!” ²⁰

Kerri: *(stumbling a bit in this awkward attempt at a grand moment of dance. Breaks free of Joker, laughing.)*

Hold on! *(continuing to laugh . . .)* I’m all over this whole mystery-in-scholarship thing but I have to draw the line at dancing for my examiners. I already told you, I’m an actor who moves, not a dancer!

Joker: It’s such a delicious dance though! Dancing with third space, with in-betweenness, with ambiguity . . .

Speaking to an invisible lighting technician

Could I have a warm spotlight, downstage left please!

Joker continues to dance on her own, getting carried away with her thoughts and the accompanying movement. Kerri watches, growing visibly uncomfortable.

Kerri: Um . . . listen.

Looks to audience furtively, then back to Joker, who continues dancing, blissfully unaware.

²⁰ Lang, W. (dir.) (1956). *The King and I*. Twentieth Century Fox Productions

Kerri: *(shouting)* Listen!

Joker: *(startled, stops dancing and looks at Kerri.)*

Sorry . . . am I upstaging you?

Kerri: No, it's not that. I mean you are, it's in your nature . . . you're a diva, but it's not that.

Look. Can we just pause for a second?

Joker: What's wrong?

Kerri: I just . . . look. Come here.

Motions Joker over to downstage left. The exchange that follows is in the tradition of a theatrical 'aside' where both characters are unaware that the audience overhears the entire thing.

Kerri: *(whispers)* Look. I'm feeling a little exposed here, especially in this context.

Joker: What do you mean?

Kerri: It's just . . . I'm having second thoughts. About this whole dissertation. The play. The process, the self-revelation, what it might mean for me as a scholar and a minister . . . I'm not sure this kind of vulnerability is such a good idea in the academy.

Joker:

Pauses, looks closely at Kerri. Motions them both over to two chairs downstage left.

Sit.

They sit facing one another for the conversation that follows.

SCENE FIVE: SCHOLARSHIP IN THE IN-BETWEEN

Joker: Look. You know as well as I do that your work is more than simply naming those liminal spaces that you embody in your academic, professional, and personal lives. Your work is an explicit effort to articulate and perform aspects of your lived experience that may make readers/audience members—and you!—uncomfortable. And yes, some of these self-disclosures might carry very real risks to you academically and personally, but you have to embrace this vulnerability as a deliberate and critically reflexive act. As Spry (2011) puts it, “practiced vulnerability is a purposeful movement into the liminality— the betwixt and betweenness— of the critical creative process of moving from person to person” . . . it’s the sense of “being vulnerable to living in one’s body when that body may be viewed as abject, abnormal, unsociable, unruly” (167, 170).

Kerri: I guess so . . . I mean I’ve tried to do that in the play . . . like the way I tackle the issue of living with OCD. I think that mental health issues, and particularly misunderstood and badly represented conditions like OCD, still constitute a rarely discussed aspect of the abject body in the academy. As well, by highlighting religio-spiritual aspects of OCD, I hope to attend to more nuanced complexities of OCD than the popularized images of hand washing and hyper-organization. I mean, as a young adult, I was both shocked and relieved to discover that there is a specific type of OCD, Scrupulosity, linked to religion and matters of faith. I later learnt that the types of religious questions the young me asks in the play were paradigmatic of Scrupulosity. (Ciarrocchi, 1995; Penzel, 2014.)

Joker: That’s a perfect example. When we talk about performing the abject body, we’re looking for the edges— your own personal edges of vulnerability as an

artist/researcher/teacher, and the socio-cultural edges of current academic discourses.

Inhabiting these marginal spaces is an explicit choice; as Pryer (2004) puts it, “true liminars will continue to abandon the centre, choosing instead to speak from the margins, regularly shifting locations, roles, and voices, continuing always to challenge the dominant culture all around them.” (p. 208). It’s an opportunity as Spry (2011) suggests to uncover “the transformative force of experiencing the language of her body, experiencing the language she chose to ethically represent her body’s communions and collisions with others in culture” (p. 157).

Kerri: I do feel those collisions sometimes. I feel like I’m pushing up against my own edges in this work. I mean, articulating my queer ‘in-betweennesses’ was almost the easier part of this work . . . I’ve been out about my sexual and gender queerness for almost two decades; I understand my ongoing commitment to coming out as part of my calling as a minister. I resonate with Spry’s (2011) sense that “embodied performance can be a liberation song within the violence, loss, and confusion of our personal/ political lives when engaged as a studied praxis of research, meaning, language, and pain” (p. 165). But I have to say that some of the edges I bumped up against in the academy surprise me.

Joker: How so?

Kerri: Well, while I have had no difficulty living out my lesbian identity within the academy, I found some surprisingly transphobic resistance towards my genderqueerness in more than one academic institution. Part of what I try to capture in my performative work is the cumulative toll that day-to-day transphobic and homophobic moments take on queer bodies. It’s what Peel (2001) identifies as “mundane heterosexism”— the multiple smaller occurrences of homophobic and transphobic *isms* that queer folks navigate daily. I hint at this

kind of “microaggression” in the Mr. Dean and the YVR vignettes in the play (Fordham University, 2014). I try to name aspects of queerly bodied safety that most normative gendered people take for granted, for example, in terms of being able (as the former online campaign so aptly named it) to be “safe to pee” (safe2pee). And yet, whilst identifying my own genderqueerness, I simultaneously acknowledge my own privilege in navigating this identity; for many of my friends and colleagues, the day to day stakes of living in transphobic society are much higher— as are the costs (see, for example: Spade, 2006; Sylvia Rivera Law Project).

Joker: What about your Christian identity in the academy? You’ve said that’s been tricky.

Kerri: Well, yes. Being out as Christian in the academy is surprisingly difficult sometimes. I often joke, with university colleagues, that I’m a ‘Christian with a brain.’ Despite my jokes I often encounter what Poplin (2011) refers to as the “hegemony of secularism” in terms of resistance to Christian discourse within the secular academy, which is not surprising given Christianity’s troubled history (pp. 60-1). As a queer Christian theologian, however, I understand Christian theological discourse as an integral thread to my work as a critically thoughtful scholar. And while I acknowledge (and often challenge) the hegemony of Christian influences in academic and broader societal contexts, I can’t believe . . . well . . .

Joker: In throwing out the Christian baby with the bathwater?

Kerri: Err . . . yeah.

Pauses, clears throat.

Nice metaphor.

Joker: It’s like Poplin says:

there is great risk in sharing personal spiritual phenomenon such as this but greater risk comes from ignoring it. Our resistance to engaging the spiritual leaves higher education bound in a secular imperative that limits our minds, separates our hearts and souls from our work, diminishes our lives, stultifies our search for truth and progress, and reduces our philosophies, theories, and research to the lowest common denominator (Poplin, 2011, p 51).

Kerri: Yes! I want to offer more than the lowest common denominator—as a scholar and as a minister! Scripture was— and continues to be— a potent source of story and metaphor for my creative and scholarly work, whether drawing a connection between my notion of wrestling with the angel of ambiguity and the Genesis account of Jacob’s wrestling with the angel (Genesis 32: 24-31, New Revised Standard Edition), or in my midrashic explorations of the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas in an earlier performance piece. Scripture fuels my understanding of the prophetic call within Christian theological discourse . . . but it also feeds my deep frustration with the apparent refusal of many mainline denominations to go beyond what I might refer to as gay and Christian 101.

Joker: Meaning . . . ?

Kerri: Well, when more conservatively identified Christians first learn that I’m an ordained queer minister, I’m often asked to explain—

Joker: You mean defend—

Kerri: Yes . . . to defend how it is possible to reconcile queer sexuality with biblical texts. I’m definitively not interested in undertaking Christian apologetics for sexual and gender diversity within my own research; there are a multitude of gifted scholars who have already tackled these issues at length (See Cheng 2011 for an excellent overview). I’m much more

interested in joining other seminal queer theologians in pushing the edges of Christian discourse and praxis. I hold a profound commitment to the work of what Althaus-Reid (2002) would describe as “indecenting” our theology, our ecclesiology, and, I would add, of indecenting our educational discourse and praxis. Or, as Bohache (2013) put it, “A disreputable ecclesiology is not repelled by what the world judges indecent but is drawn to it and utilizes it as a hermeneutical key for understanding the promiscuous love of God” (p. 77). Theological rigour is more than an intellectual exercise, however; I argue that our theological beliefs (either examined or unconscious) underpin many (if not all) aspects of anti-queer violence that we hear about on a daily basis.

Kerri pauses with this next thought.

Drawing on both textual research and anecdotal experiences in my own ecumenical pastoral work, I suggest that Christian religious homophobia often gets a *bye* in sociopolitical contexts.

Joker: How do you mean?

Kerri: Well, frankly, I’m concerned that homophobic and transphobic violence is often minimized, excused, or ignored because of its roots in an individual or a community’s deeply held beliefs. At the risk of oversimplifying the issue, I wondered if the deferral to religious belief is simply a Christian excuse at best or a Christian condoning of homophobic / transphobic violence at worst. Challenging this kind of deeply embedded religious homophobia and transphobia is volatile and sensitive work though.

Joker: Which may be where the arts based researchers can help us. As Spry (2011) put it, “engaging knowledge as collaborative pushes and pulls us into the liminal inbetweenness of meaning making with others” (p. 66); we are “engaging in a call to constant disruption of

power structures and of our own biases means identifying and articulating how those power structures and biases are lodged in our bodies and in our everyday practices of living” (p. 101).

Kerri: Yes, I think Spry is on target here. I experience this personally too; dislodging and disrupting through our bodies is difficult work. You know, I think the pastoral section in this play was the toughest to research, to write, and to rehearse.

Pauses, remembering.

Joker: Why is that?

Kerri: I think it was the most emotionally charged for me . . . I knew, even early on, that I was dipping into the territory of trauma here, of my own experiences with organizational trauma. I felt called to move into that territory, but at the same time . . .

Joker: It was risky . . .

Kerri:

Remembering

It was risky. I remember about halfway through this piece of work . . . I’d done the research, the initial scriptwriting, rehearsal, and then performed it as a work-in-progress in a seminary setting. The performance was a delight, and the conversations that followed were intriguing. And then . . .

Joker: And then?

Kerri: And then . . . I wept for three days. It completely took me by surprise how deep this piece of performative autoethnographic work went. I had to really look carefully at my choices to engage in this kind of research and performance, to revisit the wisdom of doing this kind of work.

Joker: I know that hindsight is 20/20, but looking at it now, why are you deciding to engage this part of your story?

Kerri:

Deep in thought.

Well, I want to explore specific aspects of my queer ministerial identity in those in-between spaces. I want to try to uncover and explore issues around horizontal psychological and spiritual violence within queer communities of faith—particularly as that violence impacts the pastor. I’m drawing from my own experiences as a congregational pastor, as well as from extensive research across a range of writings on congregational pastoral ministry (e.g., Greenfield, 2005; Randall, 1998; Rediger, 1997; Robinson, 2004).

I’m also curious how ministerial identity intersects with the question of pastoral confidentiality. In the end, I’ve chosen not to narrate specific biographical or autobiographical scenarios that would identify specific communities or individuals. Rather, drawing on over 10 years of ordained ministry experience, I aim to make use of creative arts-based research strategies to create a fictional piece that—while not specific to people or situations—nonetheless articulates a performative experience that is resonant to my own (and hopefully others’) lived experiences.

Joker: Hmm . . . I don’t know Kerri. I can’t help but wonder how pastoral confidentiality—and, indeed, the pastoral role itself— might contribute to that “condition of inarticulation” (Barton, 2011, p 439). How do you explore these stories in a way that respects pastoral boundaries as well as your own integrity? Kerri, how do you know if a reluctance to discuss a particular story is an appropriate caution, or when it might instead be a pattern inherent to your prior pastoral roles—or indeed—inherent to your own childhood learnings?

Don't get me wrong. I'm not arguing as to the vital importance of the sacred covenant of pastoral trust—it lies at the heart of ministerial work. And yet, I wonder if there are not times when the pastoral mantle subsumes the individual minister's needs, expression, and ultimately, health. Ministers are taught—both explicitly and implicitly—to prioritize the needs of the congregation over their own needs; one might argue that a willingness to prioritize the collective good is central to ministerial calling. I wonder, though, if sometimes those communal needs serve to silence the pastor— if the cost of keeping the Christian peace is paid in the pastor's own integrity.

Kerri: It's a good question. Addison (2008) describes the toll that emotional labour can take for the minister whose personal emotional life conflicts with the communal expectations of that minister. I suspect that this emotional labour is further compounded by the heightened spiritual sensitivity inherent to ministerial leadership. Sensitivity can be a gift; pastor-turned-professor Taylor (2006), reminiscing about consecrating communion after having left pulpit ministry, describes it as "being a lightning rod, conducting all that heat and light not only from heaven to earth but also from person to person" (p. 161). This sensitivity, however, also sometimes transmutes into a vulnerability that renders the minister particularly susceptible to spiritual toxicities. Wuellner (1998) explores the importance, in congregational leadership, of cultivating spiritual protection in the face of toxic relationships, noting that, "the more one becomes open and sensitively intuitive through prayer, the more one also becomes open to the deep, unspoken levels of others' needs, expectations, projections, and darkness" (p. 142). I'm curious about the connections between this kind of emotional labour and clergy mental health. Randall (1998) discusses the particular nuances of clergy depression and the factors unique to clergy vocations that predispose them to clinical depression. There are an

increasing number of studies emerging citing the disproportionate number of clergy struggling with a range of mental health issues (see, for example, Proeschold-Bell et al., 2013).

Joker: Perhaps pastors are predisposed, by nature of their work, to what Barton (2011) calls a “condition of inarticulation” (p. 439), that is, being unable to openly discuss their own ministry circumstances. Despite the vital importance of confidentiality during times of congregational conflict, I wondered if the pastor is implicitly (and sometimes even explicitly) silenced by these requirements. If, for example, a church conflict devolves to the point of public critique and defamation of the pastor (an occurrence surprisingly common in contemporary pastoral literature), is there a point where the pastor should choose to break that silence and to speak back on their own behalf? I wondered, too, how our long history of prioritizing the careful, gentle, inoffensive side of our faith might preclude us from telling the truth. I suspected that the unspoken value of Christian nice prevented pastors from self-advocacy—and even self-preservation. Perhaps this is another version of what Barton describes as a “hegemonic don’t ask-don’t tell undertow” (p. 440). Putting it more bluntly, I wonder if sometimes, in our passionate desire to be radically inclusive Christians, if we inadvertently allow—and even condone—acts of violence within our church communities.

Kerri: And all of that said, there are profound aspects of my Christian heritage that inform this section of the play in beautiful ways.

Joker: Like communion?

Kerri: Yes! The communion metaphor gives me a ternary rhythm: the three phrases in the *Sersum Corda*²¹, the three chronological parts to the piece itself, and of course the trinitarian notions central to traditional Christian theology.

Joker: And of course communion as central metaphor is particularly fitting in this context, given the centrality of communion to Metropolitan Community church's²² worship, theology, and praxis (see Shore-Goss, Bohache, Cheng, & West, 2013). For many queer folks coming to MCC for the first time, the experiential realization of a radically open and inclusive communion table is an epiphanic one; newcomers being moved to tears during the communion liturgy is a familiar story to many MCC pastors.

Kerri: Myself included . . . both as the newcomer and the pastor.

Joker: This history, both personal and theological, makes the communion table/liturgy a particularly potent and laden metaphor from which to work artistically.

Kerri: (*remembering*) You know, while I was writing the communion section of the play at a retreat centre, I was asked to lead the daily communion service as a part of my work exchange there. This intriguing rhythm formed between the work I was doing artistically and theoretically and my daily embodied work of consecrating and offering communion to the retreat community. Given that I was focusing deeply on some of the problematic aspects of communion and church community, I was grateful for this simple incarnational reminder of the sacramental heart of this aspect of my ministry.

Joker: Let's talk about this notion of overcoming-through-faith that comes up near the end of the play.

²¹ "Sersum Corda" (Latin for "lift up your hearts") refers to the opening call and response passage spoken by the celebrant and the congregants at the beginning of the communion liturgy.

²² Metropolitan Community Churches is an international Christian denomination founded in and reaching beyond lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/queer communities. See www.mcccchurch.org.

Kerri: Yes... originally, I'd hoped to use a song for that segment that illustrates this idea really beautifully.

Joker: Why didn't you?

Kerri: Well, the Christian music production company that owns the rights to the song asked me not to use it in my play or my dissertation, so I'm able to reference it for academic research use only.

Joker: It's interesting though. The song, "This is how we overcome" (Morgan, 1999) exemplifies for me some of the tremendous beauty and power of praise-style worship, whilst simultaneously highlighting problematic theological elements. Like many praise and worship songs, this song emphasizes the might and strength of God. What happens if we bring these songs into dialogue with what Caputo (2006) would refer to as the "weakness of God?" Even if we leave aside theodicean questions around why an all-powerful God allows suffering to occur, Caputo's work challenges us to rethink our most basic understandings of the Divine. How does it impact our understanding of ministry and of church— not to mention our own humanity— if God is not, in fact, indomitable?

Kerri:

Lost in thought, recollecting.

Yes, but at the same time, this kind of overcoming theology—the notion of praying through or overcoming obstacles—served a critical function in my ministerial journey. Knowing what I know now about how trauma can cause personal fragmentation, I'm not certain I would have maintained a coherent sense of self through those periods of ministry without that kind of faith. And yet . . .

Joker: Yes?

Kerri: Well, I wonder if strength, might, and overcoming should be the desired goals in Christian theology and liturgy? What does it mean when we don't succeed in overcoming, in pushing our way through by sheer force of will? And what conceptualizations of God, church, ourselves—are we reinforcing with this kind of will-filled Christianity? I found myself confronted with a "stop moment" (Fels, 2010) when I came face to face with my awareness that there are some challenges that cannot be overcome through sheer will or force of faith. I encountered the painful realization that as much as I believed in my pastoral calling, in this instance, that calling was not enough to resolve or overcome such extreme conflicts. This stop moment, in its disruption, forced me to finally face and answer the question, 'when is it time to leave?'

Kerri pauses, deep in thought. Joker waits with Kerri, then quietly asks,

Joker: What else?

Kerri:

Kerri glances up at Joker and at audience, regroups for a moment.

Well, I wonder—theoretically and theologically—about lateral violence.

Joker: To be clear, we're talking across denominational lines now (Rediger, 1997; Robinson, 2004).

Kerri: Yes. Returning to Freire's (2007) seminal analysis has been especially helpful in making sense of these dynamics; Freire notes this cyclical propensity for marginalized communities to inflict lateral oppression, similar to what they themselves have experienced, upon those around them. I also turn to Wineman's (2003) innovative work around "power under"—the "tendency for traumatized people to internalize the experience of powerlessness . . . to engage in desperate efforts at self-protection that are driven from that place of

subjective powerlessness (p. 14). Wineman's analysis helps me to come to terms with possible motivations for individuals' violent behaviour, and resonates powerfully with my own experiences in lesbian/ gay/ bisexual/ transgender/ queer activist and faith communities.

He reminds me that

traumatic rage is both valid and inevitable, and identifying as the victim of oppression is an absolutely essential step in the political awakening of any oppressed person. But when people become entrenched in victim status and in the expression or acting out of power-under, traumatic rage defeats social change (p. 173).

He also reminds me that "systemic oppression is in itself traumatizing . . ." that oppressive systems create a "totality of these messages can be chronically traumatizing to the extent that they repeatedly create experiences of violation and powerlessness among oppressed people" (43). His analysis decries simplistic oppositional framings, suggesting that our "tendency to dichotomize and to see the world in terms of identified victims and enemies, or as neatly divided into oppressed people and oppressors, is significantly compounded by the effects of trauma" (180).

Joker: Yes, the binaries are not that simple anymore.

Kerri: Exactly. And not just the oppressed-oppressor binary. Theological binaries aren't as simple anymore either.

Joker: Tell me more?

Kerri: Well, I was, and am, an ardent pacifist, and I generally shun theologies languaged in terms of warfare, good/evil, sin/redemption, and similar binaries. And yet . . .

Remembering

. . . during these periods of extreme, heightened conflict in my pastoral ministries, I did indeed sense something going on that ran deeper than specific personalities and situations, even deeper than socio-political or systemic patterns. Pastoral writers like Robinson (2004) and Rediger (1997) have explored the possibilities of evil forces at work in pathological church conflicts. While I don't think we should simplistically reduce these questions to a binary of good and evil, I have to admit that there were many resonances between my lived spiritual experiences and the kinds that these writers described. And while I have yet, as a minister or a theologian, to find a tidy conclusion to these questions, it certainly challenges me to expand my notions of good, evil, personal and communal sin in unexpected ways. Indeed, the issue of communal culpability also emerges in my experience of denominational dynamics as well. It reminds me . . .

Pauses, remembering . . .

Joker: Go on?

Kerri: Well, many months after writing this section, I was at my denomination's triennial gathering where we conducted business and engaged in professional development. The worship services were expansive, celebratory, and challenging as we engaged with new visions of denominational ministry. The music was exceptional, the readers were convincing, and the preachers brought an impressive range of homiletic and ministerial experience to the pulpits each night. And yet . . .

Pauses

Joker: Yes?

Kerri: And yet somehow, in the midst of this larger-than-life celebration by a denomination that has survived despite tremendous odds, in the midst of heartfelt singing and impassioned

prayers, surrounded by hundreds of others delighting in this rare opportunity to gather in this global community, I felt strangely disconnected. Something wasn't ringing true for me—some kind of critical key connection wasn't being made. I sensed a spiritual-emotional undercurrent that wasn't being discussed . . . it almost felt like there was a pocket—or perhaps more accurately an ocean—of pain that wasn't being addressed. And for me, without that honest conversation, all of our shared celebrations, songs, sermons, and indeed theology—felt hollow.

Joker: Trauma theologian Rambo's (2010) work, rethinking of Christian theology through the lens of trauma theory, might speak to this theological dilemma. I am particularly struck by her statement that

redemptive narratives can serve to elide differences, covering over the complex realities of human experiences. The narratives of victorious new life following death have often served to silence stories that attest to the less victorious realities of ongoing violence and suffering (p. 116).

Kerri: Yes. I wonder if this was what I was intuiting at the conference . . . the unspoken stories of suffering that were glossed over in our “rush to resurrection.” To be fair, I believed that queer Christians need to celebrate in a culture where many of us have been taught for generations that our sexual and gender identities are at best welcomed (as though we need permission to enter the door), tolerated (which I would argue is worse in some ways than outright rejection), or met with violence or disgust. I believe, passionately, that we need to lift up worship that highlights the life-giving aspects of our lives and faiths.

Pauses

And yet . . . and yet . . .

Joker: I love that phrase, “and yet” when we’re talking about theology. Somehow, “and yet . . .” allows for the spaces, the gaps in what we don’t know yet.

Kerri: Yes, exactly. While I know we need to celebrate, I also sense, from my own pastoral experience in our churches, that there are also many, many stories that are being elided in our rush to celebratory narratives. I wonder about congregational stories of conflicts that grow beyond ordinary church developmental issues into something far more pathological. I wonder about pastors who quietly leave churches after devastating periods of acrimonious conflict—conflict that in another context would be seen as violence. I wonder about the clergy who are advised to work on their own psychological issues that might be contributing to such a conflict—or indeed contributing to their desire to leave.

Don’t get me wrong. I am deeply committed (personally and professionally) to the importance of clergy engaging in lifelong processes of psychological and spiritual health, which often includes therapy and spiritual direction. At the same time, I am curious how this (arguably western) notion of working out our own stuff—a kind of pulling up one’s psychological bootstraps—also ties into the overcoming/pushing through theology as discussed earlier. Perhaps more importantly though, wonder if this kind of emphasis on the pastor’s personal psychological patterns might mask a reluctance for many church communities and denominations to discuss, honestly and transparently, the lack of spiritual health in those communities. And I wonder if, even more dangerously, these elisions might also show up as theological and ecclesial policies and practices—that while rooted in the biblical tenets of love, compassion, and inclusion, somehow instead end up condoning and enabling that violence.

Joker: I wonder how our stories and worship might be different if we were to slow down and take some time for these other narratives. I wondered what we might learn by lingering in what Rambo (2010) called an “inarticulable terrain of middleness” (p. 120).

Kerri: Which is so different from Barton’s (2011) “condition of inarticulation” discussed earlier (p. 439).

Joker: Yes. Rambo speaks of a divine Spirit that embodies remaining . . . remaining in the middle spaces between life and death, between triumphant resurrection stories and the rupture of the crucifixion. How might our understandings of congregational and denominational life, of theology, and of pastoral identity, change if we were to embrace the unknown of these middle spaces, the places of remaining with the suffering rather than trying to too-quickly resolve it? Pastor Saniuk (2013) speaks to the importance of engaging that “uncomfortable place between safety and reengagement . . .” in reflecting on pastoral care in queer communities, Saniuk notes that “we have done more to celebrate and agitate than to facilitate grief and mourning of what we have lost in coming out, in separation from families and churches of origin, or through violence and discrimination. We neglect this grief at our peril . . .” (pp. 334-335).

Kerri: It’s such difficult work. But perhaps one of the greatest challenges and the greatest gifts of this work is how it nudges, cajoles, and sometimes impels me to articulate my own evolving theology. There’s a steely strength, a wisdom that comes from these trials by fire . . . these trials *in* the fire.

Joker: Tell me more.

Kerri: Well, a significant aspect of this work involves, for me, taking very seriously the realities of trauma and its impact. Personally, it involved many years of working with

professionals experienced with trauma recovery and organizational trauma to make sense of my own experiences. At a very fundamental level, this included embodying the psalmist's call to "walk through the valley of the shadow of death" (Psalm 23, New American Standard Bible) by facing into loss, ending, and the death of my pastoral innocence.

Intellectually, it involves searching for theological articulations that helped me to reframe and understand these experiences in the context of broader sociocultural contexts. Rambo's (2010) work in—shall we say—articulating trauma's inarticulability proves foundational in this process for me. She reminds me that trauma theory is deconstructive, testifying to uncontainable truths, and that trauma itself "speaks to 'what is not fully masterable by cognition'" (Caruth & Esch, as cited in Rambo (2010), p. 29). Trauma forces us into a "middle territory between death and life," a "perplexing space of survival" (pp. 7, 25). Rambo encourages me to remain in this uncomfortable in-between space, to learn from this inarticulable space, calling for a "theology of the Spirit birthed from the middle rather than one birthed from the resurrection event" (p.13).

As a contemplative artist, I am intrigued by Rambo's (2010) suggestion that "theology does not need to turn outside to respond to the challenges of trauma but, rather, turn within to discover a language of remaining" (p. 17). She notes that, "trauma is the crisis of what remains after a radical ending . . . what persists beyond its end . . . it is precisely in this remaining that life is redefined" (p.109). I find provocative connections to my performative autoethnographic work in her suggestion that "Breath wraps around words (rhythm), disrupts them (stutters and gasps), and contains the weight of words (silences). Breath cannot be reduced to words, but it can reconnect body and word" (p. 125). Indeed, in performative

autoethnography, I discover an embodied language that helped me begin to breath into, reconnect, and make sense of these experiences.

Joker: It sounds like this work leads you back to that recurring landscape of in-betweenness . . . although this time the call is clearly to remain in the in-between.

Kerri: Yes . . . there's a personal congruence in this return to liminal terrain—maybe my research never left that terrain. But as I continue to articulate my theological scholarship and my artistic expression, new understandings of this in-between space continues to emerge. It's what I might describe as a quieter theology—one that particularly values and seeks out silence, slowing down, and contemplation. I find myself living into a deepened and more embodied appreciation of limitations as I concurrently find myself moving into a quieter, subtler understanding of my own ministerial identity. I resonate with Palmer's (2000) conviction that:

the human self also has a nature, limits as well as potentials. If you seek vocation without understanding the material you are working with, what you build with your life will be ungainly and may well put lives in peril, your own and some of those around you. 'Faking it' in the service of high values is no virtue and has nothing to do with vocation. It is an ignorant, sometimes arrogant, attempt to override one's nature, and it will always fail (p. 16).

As I face into my own limitations, I find myself grieving the accompanying losses, but I also find myself journeying into new capacities. My own scholarship, praxis, and identity are deepening into an emerging and organic form of contemplative activism as discussed earlier. In trying to make sense of the complex interweaving of inner and outer work, I find Lipsky's (2009) work on "trauma stewardship" helpful. She suggests that,

if we are to truly care for ourselves in a sustainable way, let alone anyone else— if we are to thrive—then something greater is required of us. We must discover an awareness of what allows us to live, moment by moment, from a centered place, from an awakened heart (p. 229).

Drawing on her years of work with trauma survivors and those dealing with secondary trauma exposure, Lipsky (2009) reminds me that:

being present is a radical act. It allows us to soften the impact of trauma, interrupt the forces of oppression, and set the stage of healing and transformation. Best of all, our quality of presence is something we can cultivate, moment by moment. It permits us to greet what arises in our lives with our most enlightened selves, thereby allowing us to have the best chance of truly repairing the world (p. 245).

My wondering . . . perhaps my hope . . . is that in cultivating a present-ness in the middle spaces of not-knowing that emerge from traumatic experiences, a new space for ministry, scholarship, and art, can emerge. And that, as the pastoral section of the play concludes, “it is enough.”

INTERSCENE

Joker, aware of the audience, nudges Kerri, who is still deep in thought. Kerri looks up, and they both stand, and move back to centre stage.

Joker: So where does all this leave you? Still having second thoughts about the dissertation? Still want to cut and run?

Kerri: Actually no. I'm realizing, in this conversation, that something integrative has taken place. In the writing, rehearsing, performing, and *embodying* of the play, I've realized, much to my surprise, that I am now able to tell these stories with a tangible sense of wholeness, of integration. It's pretty profound.

Joker: And what's your sense of the play as a whole now, looking back on the journey?

Kerri: You know, performing this play really has been an experiment in incarnational work . . . in *performing theology*. I've now shared it with multiple audiences, each with their own unique responses. Each performance, and each ensuing conversation, helps me to develop the play more deeply, to move *into* the play more deeply. I guess I'm realizing, after four years of research and writing, field notes and documentation, creative process and meta-autoethnographic reflection, evaluation and discussion . . . that in the end, the play was . . . the play *is* . . . the dissertation.

Joker: Uh, Kerri?

Gives Kerri a pointed look, then a long pause.

Kerri: Yeah, yeah, I know. We're right back where we began.

Joker: Maybe that's appropriate.

Kerri: And maybe it's a good place to end. And to begin.

Joker: Audience . . . let's have a look!

ACT TWO: INTERVENTION

An original one-act play

written and performed by Kerri Mesner

Wade Lifton, Collaboration and Co-direction

Funding for the videotape recording was provided by Joe Norris' Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council 2011 Insight Development Grant: Generating, mediating, and disseminating social science research and arts-based performance genres through digital media.

Anne Harris: Filming; Brad McDonald and Joe Norris: Filming and Editing.

Filmed at the Freddy Wood Theatre, University of British Columbia

Vancouver, B.C., Canada

April 17, 2014

Click (or copy and paste) link to view video of *Intervention*:

<https://vimeo.com/101258687>

(Stage is set with two chairs facing each other at centre stage. Upstage right we see clergy vestments hung in a visible way, as well as a portable table with altar cloth, candle, and communion elements displayed. Suitcase, prop textbook, and prop script are discreetly placed upstage right as well. Upstage centre we see a djembe drum on a stand, and a guitar also on a stand.)

(Kerri enters to downstage centre, Ipad in hand, clearly in a rush).

Kerri:

Okay . . . so sorry I'm late everyone.

Yes, today I'm here to talk with you about my research in new forms of performative autoethnography and queer theology. I'm hoping we can have a fruitful discussion exploring the theoretical and praxis based applications of this innovative approach, and then if we have time we'll move into

(A pause as Kerri looks over, and for the first time, sees someone sitting in the chair left of centre. This individual is only visible to Kerri throughout the play. In all the conversations that ensue, there are pauses for each response from this unseen personage.)

Wait a minute. What are YOU doing here? This is not the time.

I don't want to talk to you right now. This is not the time for a conversation! I'm trying to give a presentation here. Now where was I?

(Returns to Ipad notes. Reads them, scrolls through frantically, visibly upset.)

What is this? What the hell have you done with my presentation notes?

No, I'm not going to read THIS. (A beat, Kerri and this individual are clearly facing off).

Look if I read this, will you let me get on with my presentation? FINE.

(Reading from the Ipad).

“Kerri, I know you think you’re here to give a presentation. The truth is I brought you here so that we could have a long overdue conversation. And I knew that if I told you the truth, you wouldn’t have come. Kerri, I’m worried about you and I’m worried about us.”

(A pause, a moment of realization, as Kerri looks around carefully at the audience members gathered.)

Wait a minute. all these people . . .

what’s going on?

wait a minute . . .

You didn’t just ask me to come here for conversation . . .

This is a *conversation*-

This is a- oh my God

You’re staging an intervention.

Seriously? An official intervention? With the whole confrontation, and the heartfelt letters that we read to each other and the whole nine yards?

Seriously? An INTERVENTION?

(A pause.)

Oh- pardon me— a ``relational intervention`` —

Really— for us? You and me? Really? I think we are pretty far beyond an intervention at this point, don’t you? I don’t know that there’s a whole lot left in this relationship for you and I to ‘intervene’ with, do you?

Do you really want to go there in front of all these people? Really?

Cause let me be clear . . . once you open this door, that's it . . . we're doing this.

We're having this conversation.

Do you really want to do this?

(Kerri gestures with this next line from self to the invisible personage, making it clear to the audience who it is.)

You and me . . . God and Kerri . . . are you ready to risk ending our relationship?

Cause that's what's at stake here.

(Sighs)

Alright. You want to go there God? Let's go there.

Yeah, yeah I mean let's go there—interventions are all about getting specific about the problems in the relationship right? Cause specificity and clarity have never exactly been your greatest strengths with us now have they? I've never known where I stand with you. God, you're so into the mystery, ambiguity . . . letting the relationship 'unfold . . .' That's always been your thing, hasn't it?

Fuck your mystery . . . just for once, I would love if you and I could find a little bit of concreteness, of certainty.

Seriously. If ambiguity is so fucking great, how do you explain OCD?

DAD WHAT IF

(Kerri moves away from the chair and the conversation with God and into this scene.)

I often hear people casually, unconsciously throw words around about OCD, not realizing that OCD is as familiar to me as- well- my own skin.

Phrases like “oh, Susan, you are so OCD about keeping your house clean . . .” Or “I am just obsessed with . . . fill in the blank.”

And I suspect for a lot of people, their caricature of OCD comes from movies . . . like *As Good as it Gets*²³ you know, Jack Nicholson’s character Melvin, with his abrupt, hand washing, crotchety anti-social behaviour . . . or even worse, *The Aviator*²⁴, with Leonardo Dicaprio’s Howard Hughes, and his hidden, disturbing madness.

But oftentimes OCD is a much quieter, subtler condition. It’s all about living with uncertainty . . . living in the in-between.

It brings particular gifts, different ways of seeing and understanding the world. At the same time, those of us with OCD know how much energy and thought and emotion it requires just to navigate in our day to day lives.

It means embracing doubt and ambiguity . . .not something that comes naturally to those of us with OCD. There’s a very good reason that they call it “the doubting disease.”²⁵ In my experience, OCD tends to take that which is most significant, most important, most vulnerable, to an individual, and to plant seeds of doubt within that arena.

For me, that’s often been spirituality, matters of faith and belief.

And one of my earliest memories of my OCD centres around just that.

(Sits in chair, folds hands and closes eyes in intense prayer.)

For thine is the power and the glory. Forever and ever-- (Starts again). Forever and ever—(Pause, deep breath).. Forever and ever, Amen.

²³ Brooks, 1997, Scorsese, 2004

²⁵ Ciarrochi, 1995.

I'm 10. It's late in the evening, well past my bedtime. Dad's watching his night-time shows downstairs. All the other kids are asleep, but I can't sleep. I'm worried. Not about that test at school tomorrow, not about that stupid argument with my brother today . . .

But about whether I can possibly be right with God. I don't know where this has come from. We don't go to church all that often. But I can't help it. I just keep wondering if maybe, possibly, I've done something wrong . . . something unforgiveable . . . and that I might not be able to make it right with God.

I don't know what it is I might have done- I can't think of anything no matter how hard I try . . . but I just feel worried about it. What if I've done something God can't forgive?

(Stands, comes downstage to speak directly to audience. A glance back to the chair, then speaks.)

The adult me knows now, of course, that actually spiritual worries like these are a remarkably common theme for many people living with OCD. For those of us religiously inclined, OCD can bring unique challenges to the spiritual journey. But back then, I didn't even know what OCD was . . . and to me, this question about God was an urgent one I needed to answer.

(Moves downstage left, back to 10-year-old character.)

And so I decide to go downstairs and talk to my Dad.

(Crosses stage to indicate this passage through the house.)

My Dad and I talk. I don't know if I ever come out and just say it to him . . . what if I lose God on this one . . . ? But that's my fear. (Turns chair to face audience straight on. Sits, resting hands on knees, as Dad.)

My Dad looks right at me.

"Kerri, there's nothing you can do that would make God leave you. God loves all of us, always. The only thing God can't forgive is us turning away from Him."

(Stands, return to physicality of Kerri telling the story.)

And so after we finish talking, (sits, shifting chair back on angle at same time.) I head back to bed. I'm relieved . . . and kind of glad at this moment that my Dad was a minister before he became a teacher. I like this idea of a God who will always love me, no matter what. (Sitting back on chair as bed, a sigh of relief.) Wow. What a relief.

(Leans back as though to sleep. Pauses. Then sits upright with moment of realization.)

But wait. Dad said . . . the one thing God couldn't forgive is us turning away from Him. Oh crap. What if I turned away from God and I don't even realize it? Oh man . . . I can't sleep. Maybe I should pray again.

(Moves back into prayer stance from start of scene, and holds.)

(Kerri returns to the intervention space.)

I was ten. In what possible world is it okay for a ten year old to wonder if she's going to lose God? No, I mean it. I really thought that I might lose you. I didn't really know what that meant, but I sure as hell knew I couldn't live without you. You let me try to figure that out by myself?

Yeah, sure. Good learnings that shape me now, ability to tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity as a spiritual gift . . . yada yada yada. I read Pema Chodron. I get it. But when you take the bullshit Pollyanna-looking-for-the-silver-lining stuff out of it, what are you left with?

A ten year old— *hell*, a 46 year old— who wrestles daily with self doubt . . . This isn't just the day to day uncertainties that we all struggle with . . . this is existential doubt that leaves me utterly and absolutely stuck. I thought I was crazy. I still do sometimes.

And if that's not enough, let's throw a little queerness into *that* childhood picture . . .

MR DEAN

Mr. Dean returns to his sixth grade classroom after his lunch break.

(Kerri as Mr. Dean: to audience as classroom of students.)

Okay folks . . . science books out please- let's get back to chapter three . . .

(Mr. Dean pauses as he notices Mary.)

Mary, is there something you want to share with the class? No? Let's get to work then . . ."

And then, while my class is digging out their textbooks, I see what Mary and a couple of her friends are giggling about . . .they're trying their best not to look over at the window, but they can't help themselves. Neither can the rest of the class- everyone's staring. There, on the condensation on the window, someone has written a giant heart, and inside it, "KM + KM."

I look over at Kerri—the only person in our class with those initials—and she looks mortified- and a bit confused, like she knows that this is at her expense, but can't understand why she's been singled out, or what the joke even means.

(Pauses)

I've watched this unfolding for several weeks now . . . Mary and her group sense something different in Kerri . . . I don't know if *they* even know what it is . . . but they don't like it. I'm not sure how to address it without making the situation worse.

(Pauses, deep in thought. Looks over at the window again, and then directs this next comment to the class as a group.)

Someone needs to erase that immediately.

Okay, let's get back to chapter 3 where we left off yesterday.

(Kerri returns to the intervention space)

They knew something was different about me . . . / knew something was different about me. Had no idea what . . . just that all of a sudden, school was hell.

(Pause.)

I mean yeah . . . eventually I started to like my differentness . . . I started to appreciate that I had a different way of seeing the world than a lot of the people around me. It took a long time though.

Time . . . (pause) and musical theatre.

AMDA

(Kerri moves away from the conversation space and into the scene, bringing chair to centre stage. All the stage directions written in *italics* for this next scene are spoken aloud as a part of the script.)

(Sits and begins lacing shoes.)

Curtain rises on Kerri frantically getting her dance shoes laced—she appears to be running late.

I'm 25 and I'm at theater school—

(Stands)

Musical theater school in New York City. It's amazing and overwhelming . . .

And just as a side note I have to say that coming out in a musical theater school in New York City— highly recommended.

Anyways, on top of learning how to be an actor singer dancer . . .

Sorry . . . I *am* trying to perform with a degree of honesty here.

And to *be* honest, at the American Musical and Dramatic Academy, where we all strive to become triple threats- who can sing, dance, and act, there are actor/singers who dance, actor-singers who move well, and actor-singers who move. I am an actor-singer who moves. Oh God I'm late!

Black out. Light comes up on a dance studio classroom. Kerri and 14 other students are lined up facing the mirror, doing a slow, deliberate dance exercise under the sharp eyes of Mr. Woodson.

Okay. Basic routine. Body awareness, discipline, focus.

(Demonstrates the arm extension/posture exercise while talking through it.)

1 2 Arms extended, 3 4 abdomen in, 5 6 head floating, 7 8 shoulders relaxed. But don't slouch. He always catches us when we slouch—even for a moment.

(Starts to yawn and visibly 'swallows' the yawn.)

For God's sake, Kerri, don't yawn! Remember Mr. Woodson says to swallow your yawns- if he sees them then so do the people behind the audition table. 1 2 Arms extended, 3 4 abdomen in . . .

Black out. Lights shift to a first year acting class. Kerri and Donald are rehearsing a seduction scene from Tennessee Williams' Summer and Smoke²⁶. This is their fourth attempt on the scene in front of their acting class that day.

(To Donald, reading from script.)

"All rooms are lonely, where there is only one person."²⁷ (Sets down script)

Whew. Yeah, Donald, I think it's coming. Can we take just a quick break?

(Turns aside, cross, aside to self.)

Bloody hell. If I have to run this excruciating scene with him one more time, I'm gonna scream. Mr. Smith keeps talking about (as Smith) "finding the sexual subtext . . . let it smoulder." I don't know how to smoulder. And clearly Donald doesn't either.

Why in the hell did Mr. Smith choose this scene for us?

(Crosses back to Donald. Picks up script again.)

Okay! Let's try this again!

Black out. Lights pan back to the dance studio.

(Kerri is continuing the 'basic body routine' exercise, as before.)

I don't know. It's not like my family ever talked about homosexuality. I mean there was cousin Matt—who we never really talked about, but who was 'different' somehow. But other than that, far as I knew the gays were all at 'that bar' in downtown Victoria- or in San Francisco—cause that's where the gays went. And we

²⁶ Williams, 1948.

²⁷ Williams, 1948, p. 77).

weren't exactly a churchgoing family- I think we stopped going when I was about 8. So I don't know how I picked it up . . . maybe cultural osmosis or something . . . but I knew. Gays and lesbians burned in hell. That was fact. (Time arm exercise so that this statement ends with arms extended to side in cross position.)

Black out.

Lights come up on Kerri's residence room in the AMDA apartment building. Kerri's sitting on the bed, and her friend Joe is sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall, facing her. It's such a small room that they're only a few feet apart. It's about 11:30 at night; the lights are low.

Joe . . . I'm not sure about this I've been trying to figure this out for quite a while and I'm really not sure . . . but I think maybe just maybe I might be a lesbian. Joe . . . do you think gays and lesbians go to hell?

Black out. Lights come back up in dance studio.

(Kerri is continuing the 'basic body routine' exercise, as before.)

Am I ready to get out there . . . and . . . date a woman? Oh God no! This is a spiritual process right now, that's all!

(A pause, exercise continuing while Kerri thinks about it.)

No, I'm not over-thinking it. I just think I need to understand fully the complexity of what's going on internally and spiritually before I act upon it. Yeah. I've got this under control.

Black out. Lights pan to residence common room. Kerri and Valerie are seated on the couch, watching TV.

(Sighs) . . . what a brutal day! (Chooses a show on the manual TV controls.)

Oh, Star Trek! Is this okay? Oh you're a Trekkie too? Fantastic . . .

(Really notices Valerie as Valerie introduces herself.)

Valerie? Hi. I'm Kerri. Nice to meet you.

(Turns with a look of excitement/terror that only the audience sees.) *Blackout . . . and SCENE.*

(Kerri returns to the intervention space)

Okay, so I'll admit that wasn't all bad. God, I've gotta give you props for musical theatre . . .

And for Valerie . . . ah . . . Valerie . . . (Reminiscing).

And yeah . . . coming out really *was* a spiritual process. I mean I wouldn't be a minister now without my queerness. My queerness and my Christianity are inseparable. And I wouldn't trade that for anything. You gave me my calling.

And I found my people. I didn't even know I was looking for them until I found them. My people.

(Pauses to absorb this.)

I've gotta give you credit for that. I mean, queer community is an amazing thing.

We share something in queer community . . . in our bodies.

Like that time I'm in the airport security line . . .

YVR

(This entire vignette takes place with Kerri moving back and forth across the stage through an imaginary security line-up, suitcase in tow. The monologue is, as much as possible, one long run-on sentence. Kerri takes suitcase and moves to downstage centre.)

Flights to the US security clearance yup that's my line.

Kind of a long one but I should have time. Good thing I got here early.

What to wear today bra no bra not wearing one is not particularly a feminist statement for me or a railing against feminine standards it's just that I find them so damned uncomfortable and it's time to shave my head again but they do read me as queerer when my head is freshly shaved like that woman at guitar camp who said she was surprised that I performed such a tender sensitive song when she saw my hairdo . . .

And is it up to me to try to present in a way that I can be clearly and coherently read or should I just be me and let the world read me as it will but when I get misread I have that guy following me into the lady's bathroom in a truck stop because he thinks I'm a guy stalking the women and I have that older lady shrilling at me in the lady's loo in the theatre and I have that colleague in seminary shrieking in surprise because she thinks I'm a man in the wrong bathroom so that even if it's their misreading I seem to be the one who's navigating the consequences . . .

And the workshops and sessions and surveys where I am asked to choose the male or female tick box and yes I am a woman and yes I am female and I have no problem with that identity but what I do have a problem with is the many assumptions that are immediately attached as soon as I check that box and yes it is a choice to claim my genderqueerness to place myself out there in the world like that whereas for some of my dearest loved ones who are trans it is not a choice they have to be who they are in order to survive it really is life and death for them and I

struggle with my privilege and wonder if maybe I'm not just whining about the challenges of being genderqueer . . .

But then again even if I were to try to present in a more readable way would it really make any difference or would people still be genderfucked by me and what is it about me that reads as male anyways is it my height my hair my stance my energy and why is it so different when children are trying to figure me out and in fact sometimes I even welcome their curiosity I guess it's because their questions and wonderings don't have the other stuff attached the "you must be a man in the women's bathroom and so you are a stalker or a pervert or worse . . ." and the "you are putting me at risk" not to mention the "you must be really stupid if you haven't realized after 10 minutes in line that this is not the men's bathroom" and of course the "I'm not giving up my women's bathroom for something unisex, that wouldn't feel safe to me!"

Shoes off belt off any bits of metal coin where's my laptop no liquids above 15 mls . . .

I fuckin hate this gauntlet of the airport security will they stop me will I set off the scanner or just raise their eyebrows or just be the random one chosen for an extra check make sure I remove every possible bit of metal try to pass try to pass oh fuck me the irony of that and if they do stop me are they going to know I am a woman or will they get it wrong and assign a male security guard to pat me down maybe I should emphasize what little breasts I have to try to make it more obvious what I am

. . .

And oh God this is an international airport do they have those new scanners and am I going to run into trouble with that it could be worse I could be one of my trans friends who's had surgery and the scanner shows up discrepancies to what the security staff expect to see and my friends have to do transgender education 101 with the security staff . . .

And then walking down the street at night I sometimes feel at risk because I am queer and I know that my friends have gotten bashed and in fact I've been verbally bashed myself in a safe progressive city whatever progressive means but then I also feel at risk as a woman and I'm glad I have my rape whistle from UBC but then again most people don't read me as female especially when I walk with my New Yorker energy and so does that mean they think I'm a man and if so am I benefiting from male privilege that I don't even want and if I am walking behind a woman on the street should I go to the other side of the street because maybe she thinks I am a man and is nervous but why the fuck should I have to do that to make her feel at ease because of her misreading me but then again I know how it is to always feel your body is at risk so if I can ease a bit of that for her isn't it worth crossing the street or maybe I am just trying to avoid my own discomfort with her discomfort with me . . .

And yet even though I claim my genderqueerness with great pride and great fierceness sometimes when I am correctly read as a woman something in me is very moved by that what's that about . . .

And then of course the classroom discussions let's not forget the classroom discussions do I want to out myself as genderqueer in this discussion and this is the

fourth time this class that that professor has referred to me as he and how do I correct him without putting more of a spotlight on myself and without making him feel like an asshole and without becoming genderqueer 101 poster child fuck me . . .

And maybe what is really at the crux of this is that in the end I know my body isn't safe in public whether it's because I am queer or genderqueer or both there is something about me that reads to other people and I am fiercely proud of that and at the same time I know it puts me at risk and it is really hard to explain to someone in a cisgendered body – a gender normative body— what it feels like to live with that level of risk in my body every single day so that when I am in spaces with lots of trans folks and genderqueer folks and beautiful butch lesbians I suddenly realize (pauses for the first time in this entire vignette, and takes a deep breath)

that I am breathing more deeply and a part of me feels teary and I realize it is because I am safe and—for a moment—can let go of that constant sense of my body at risk.

(Sees the security guard motioning for her to step forward.)

My turn. Here I go. (Moves briskly with the suitcase to downstage right and leaves suitcase there. Moves back to conversation space. This next line is to God.)

Yes . . . it's true . . . we do share something in queer community, in our bodies. I mean it also reminds me of that time in downtown Vancouver . . .

DRUMBEATS

I'm on my way home from class, waiting for the bus at Howe and Robson. I lean out to look for my bus and as I step back, a woman says

(Kerri plays both characters in the exchange that follows.)

“Get your queer ass out of my face.”

I think I’ve misheard but when I look at her she is staring at me with open hostility.

“Excuse me?”

“Get your queer ass out of my face . . . You know, the army is coming to kill all of you.”

When she finally leaves on her bus, as she glares at me out the window of the bus, I close my eyes and say, “bless you . . .”

Knowing even as I do that it is more a statement of defiance than of benediction.

As I get onto my own bus soon after, I don’t feel at risk, but all the same, I sit near the front . . . just in case.

You know, a part of me that can almost appreciate this woman on Howe and Robson . . . on some level I can appreciate her directness. There’s no subtlety whatsoever. “Get your queer ass out of my face” is pretty unambiguous.

And a part of me finds myself wondering . . . (looks back to the djembe during this line, and brings it downstage centre.)

. . . what her words might sound like as rhythm . . .

“Get your queer ass out of my face . . .” (Kerri gradually finds the drumming rhythm that corresponds with these. Plays the beat for awhile.)

And I hear in this rhythm, Christian voices (Drumming continues over recording of Christian voices montage. As montage fades, this next line.)

And I play this rhythm as litany for young queer lives lost:

Tyler Clementi

Justin Aaberg

Billy Lucas

Samantha Johnson

Seth Walsh

Asher Brown

Raymond Chase

Zach Harrington

Lance Lundsten

Carlos Vigil

Cody J. Barker

Harrison Chase Brown

Felix Sacco

Haylee Fentress

Caleb Nolt

Brandon Elizares

Nicholas

Jean-Phillipe

Carl Joseph Walker Hoover

Paige Moravetz

Jaheem Harerra

Bill Clayton

Robbie Kirkland

Bruce David Michales

Jacob Laurence Orosco

Marcus Wayman

Brandon Bitner

James Rodemeyer

James Hubley

Dominic Crouch

Jacob Rogers

Jeffrey Fair

Eric James Borges

Phillip Parker

Rafael Morelos

Jack Denton Reese

Jay Corey Jones

Josh Pacheco

Jaydin Bell

Kenneth James Weishuhn Jr.,

Ayden Keenan-Olson

Alexander "AJ" Betts Jr.²⁸

(Christian voices montage begins again underneath this litany, gradually increasing in volume until Kerri is shouting and drumming full voice over top. When the montage finishes, Kerri adds one final emphatic drumbeat.)²⁹

²⁸ For web-based sources of these youth suicides please see Daily Mail Reporter. (2011, July 27). Erdely, S. R. (2012, February 2); Hibbard, L. (2012, June 14); Lynn, G. (n.d.); neotropic9's channel; North, A. (2010, January 11; Pape-Green, K. (2010, October 4); Peepless, J. (2013, July 16); SuchIsLifeVideos. (2011, August 31).

(Kerri returns to the intervention space.)

You know, God, sometimes, when I'm facing into that kind of violence . . . It sounds strange but sometimes I find life in humor . . . in laughter . . . In a kind of defiant joy.

(Snaps fingers.)

Cue musical theatre number!

SERIOUS LESBIAN FOLKSONG³⁰

Dark of night

Candle lit

Tea brewing

Cat purring

The time is right

The stage is set

My heart is full

I'm ready to sing and yet

I don't know how to begin

There's only one thing I can sing

A Serious Lesbian Folksong

Sung in a minor key

With heart and depth and earnestness

And ending with a heartfelt plea

²⁹ For web-based sources for the audio recordings used in Christian voices montage, please see SuchIsLifeVideos. (2011, August 31); theEFCca. (2011, October 12); Vote4MarriageNC. (2012, April 24); lapk. (2011, December 7); honk4me69. (2014, March 11)

³⁰ This song was originally written for and first performed in White and Burrows (2014).

If I'm really honest with you as I'm singing to you friend
 I'd tell you in confidence between you and me
 That I'm not too sure just what it is I'm trying to communicate
 But I know I have to do it with the utmost of intensity

For intensity lies at the heart of . . .

A Serious Lesbian Folksong

Sung in a minor key
 With heart and depth and earnestness
 And ending with a heartfelt plea

Now of course dear friend we can't forget the place of passion in this song
 I'm talking here of passion in the bed and in the street- I see that
 Look of terror in your eyes, dear friend, but trust me if you'd take a
 Leap you might discover that the taste of passion can be sweet

For passion lies at the heart of . . .

A Serious Lesbian Folksong

Sung in a minor key
 With heart and depth and earnestness
 And ending with a heartfelt plea

(If audience isn't applauding, encourage it. Then, to God)

You know what? *You* don't get to laugh here. You don't get to take any credit for
 this. Yeah no kidding I'm angry.

I'm sorry what? Intervention letters? Seriously? Oh, come on! That's so fucking cliché! You've been watching Dr. Drew again.

Besides. I haven't got one written.

(Pause)

You wouldn't want to hear what I have to say, anyways.

Alright God . . . Here's my 'letter.' (Kerri is speaking this letter off the cuff.)

Dear God . . . I feel like I've never gotten it right with you. I still feel like that ten year old who is trying to figure you out . . . and who is afraid that if I don't get it right, like I'm going to lose you. Do you know what it's like to live with that, every day? That fear that I'm going to lose this relationship?

And here's the thing God. I loved you more than anyone. I believed in you. And even more dangerously, I believed that you believed in me. When you pulled me through the violence as a kid. When you got me through high school, when something in you kept me going even when I'd given up on life. I even believed in you when you taught me that my body and my queerness are your gifts to me. That you wanted me to offer those gifts as my ministry, as my work in this world. That you wanted me to speak up. To stand up. To put my body on the line.

But people are getting beaten up, legislated, killed. If these are your churches, why don't *you* do something?

So here's the thing God. I'm done. Done with this intervention, done with you. I'm leaving. I'm out!

(Kerri starts to leave but God stops her. We see this in Kerri's reaction.)

Why am I really angry? You know exactly why! We've had this conversation!

When I really needed you most, you were silent. You still are.

If you really were the one who called me, if this was really *your* ministry, then *where were you?*

SANCTUARY IS SILENT

(Kerri puts on robe and stole, lights candle).

Psalm 42: These things I remember as I pour out my soul how I went with the throng and led them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival³¹

Hi God,

I'm so excited to get started with this church. This call has taken so long to come together . . . the finances, the vote, the move . . . and now finally here we are.

God, I know they've had a rough time here . . . the last minister left because of it, but I think I can make a difference!

God it's so good to be a minister, to be at this table and to feel your presence with us . . . I love that I can bring my whole self to this work. What an amazing gift. Thank-you.

(Kisses stole, puts it on. This first call and response is open and joyful. The responses are an audio recording of a congregational response.)

God is with you

And also with you

³¹ Psalm 42: 4, NRSV

Let us open our hearts

We open them to God

Let us give God thanks and praise

It is a good and joyful thing to do

(Kerri lifts bread in blessing, then lifts juice in blessing and place back on table.

Steps back from table in reflection. Removes stole.)

God I look back and I can't believe that was only a year ago. So much has changed.

God I will never again have that innocence.

Ephesians 6: Put on the whole armour of God . . . Take the shield of faith . . .³²

(This second call and response is more hesitant and uncertain, for Kerri and the congregation.)

God is with you

and also with you

Let us open our hearts

We open them to God

Let us give God thanks and praise

It is a good and joyful thing to do

(Kerri breaks the bread and freezes with it up in air. Kerri places bread on plate, then steps back and to one side, moving into a circle of voices around an imaginary Kerri still standing at the altar.)

Kerri, I'd suggest just ignoring the comments . . . we are a Christian community. This will all blow over soon.

³² Eph 6: 11, 16, NRSV

Anonymous complaint on behalf of concerned congregants.

I formally submit my resignation as choir leader, effective immediately. I cannot in good conscience continue.

Churchgoer745 tweets: our pastor is getting rid of the leadership she doesn't like so she can take charge. # power hungry out of control.

Pastor, please stop ignoring my voicemails. This is urgent.

Silenced44 tweets: I am one of the many people who has been abused by her.
#anonymous but not silent.

Reverend my sister died this morning. Please call me.

Request for formal investigation.

Perceptive99tweets: I think she slept her way into this pulpit. # conflict of interest

Please ensure that you complete the incident documentation by end of week so that we have a clear paper trail in case charges are filed against you.

Pastor, I'm wondering if you could bring me communion in hospital this afternoon?

Petition for suspension of minister.

Kerri, please take the time to carefully examine why you are considering leaving. I just want you to be sure that you're not repeating your own old patterns.

(Kerri returns to freeze from beginning of this segment.)

God, I feel like I'm in a battle zone. Like I'm a lightning rod or something. That people believe I'm capable of the lies being told about me?

I know I am called to work with wounded people . . . but what happens when a community's wounds run so deep that we can't seem to help but to hurt each other?

And I'm not sure now if pastoral confidentiality is serving this community or simply silencing me. I'm silenced by my role. And it's like my denomination has hung me out to dry.

God, it's like my church is under attack . . . my soul is under attack . . . or both . . .

(Regrouping a bit)

And yet God, my faith carries me through, even now.

(Kerri closes eyes, praying with intention).

God, we can find our way through this. if I pray deeply enough... if I believe deeply enough... yes, God, you and I, we can overcome this! We can do this... we—

(Stops abruptly, opens eyes, pauses in a moment of sudden realization.)

God, I can't overcome this.

(Picks up bread)

It's time to leave.

(Kerri takes off alb and lays it on chair. This next call and response is deeply reflective, and is met with silence.)

God is with you.

(silence)

Let us open our hearts.

(silence)

Let us give God thanks and praise.

(silence)

God, the sanctuary is silent.

I've laid down my pastor's robes.

I close my eyes and I can feel the pull of their stories,

Their anger, their needs.

But I can also feel their kindness. Their love.

And I open my eyes

And the sanctuary is silent.

God, maybe silence is the only breathe deep enough to give voice to what I know now.

It's like a glass wall inside my heart between me and church.

I'm between the death of a chapter of ministry, and something new . . .

And yet I don't want to rush to resurrection

I want to practice a spirit of remaining . . . ³³

Remaining in this strange place that trauma survivors know well

A Holy Saturday kind of place . . . a waiting kind of place

With a Spirit that will not answer me, or triumph, or redeem this experience . . .

But instead a Spirit that simply remains with me

And I breathe. I breath and am breathed with.

And the breath opens a space and names something without words.

And it is enough.

(Blows out candle).

³³ Rambo (2010)

Okay.

Okay, God.

We're here.

You and I.

You're *with me*, here.

So . . . what now?

I don't know- who we are in this place.

Besides. I pretty much walked out a few minutes ago. Kind of lost my chance with this relationship, didn't I?

(Pause)

Your letter? Sure. I'll read it. I owe you that much before we call it quits, right?

(Picks up letter that was pre-set on the side of God's chair.)

Out loud, really?

(Reads the letter out loud.)

"Kerri, what if you can't lose this relationship?"

Wow. Well . . . I don't know who I am. I don't know what I am.

I just feel like I'm in-between . . . everything.

But I wonder if this in-between place is where you and I meet? Where we rest together? And where I find my voice?

Okay God.

(Pulls chair over and sits down close to God, facing God directly.)

Let's talk.

(Blackout.)

EPILOGUE

Joker:

Looks very directly at each individual audience member/reader.

Audience? Err, I mean, readers? Your thoughts?

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