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Honoring Presence

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We dedicate this book to the many artists, teachers, and spiritual leaders, young and old, who have guided our paths. May Earth's sentient beings live well together.

9 Lectio Four

the creation of this scarf has become
    a contemplative practice of
knitting my way to wonder
embedded in the reverence for
the imperfect a (w)holy irreverence
    I am being formed reformed transformed
through each stitch it is in
movement that I am slowed down
enough to still the busyness
of my mind here I am cracked
open to the silent beauties of
how each turn in life
is knitted into meaning

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10 Wrestling With the Angels of Ambiguity

Queer Paths in Contemplative Activism

Kerri Mesner

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

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 you're coming in a little early here. The Joker's intro is a little later in the script. This is an academic book we're contributing to; I need to lay the 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 form an integral core to 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-centered 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 (2011) refers to as a "practiced vulnerability" (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 a 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 marvel . . . 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 & 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—Augusto 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).

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 Augusto Boal's notion of the "spect*actor*" . . . 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.

Joker: Right. Before we dive in, just a couple of working definitions . . . and we're acknowledging that they are just that . . . these definitions, and the communities from which they arise, are constantly evolving. *Genderqueer*: A gender-variant person whose

gender identity is neither male nor female, is between or beyond genders, is some combination of genders or who refuses gender altogether. Often includes a political agenda to challenge gender stereotypes and the gender binary system (UBC, 2011). *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 binary gender normativity and its accompanying privilege.

With a look over to Kerri.

Yes, Kerri, Jokers can cite academic sources too!

Kerri: Thanks for that.

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's (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), a poetic research (Leggo, 2006)? 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 brackets for this next scene are spoken aloud as a part of the script. Italicized stage directions 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 center 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's (1948) *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" (Williams, 1948, p. 77).
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?

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 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 the 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's teaching and praxis, as being inherently prophetic. And so I try to bring that prophetic commitment to my academic work, highlighting, as artist and scholar, aspects of traditionally silenced stories.

And yet, the theological call to prophetic honesty often comes into direct conflict with ethical constraints dictated by university and ecclesial bodies. In doing this work, I wonder, how do I utilize my prophetic voice whilst balancing the ethical demands of university ethics review structures, ministerial guidelines for pastoral confidentiality, and personal ethical boundaries with regards to intimate others (Ellis, 2007)? While I explore this tension of ethics in more depth in my dissertation writing, I would suggest that this ethical debate needs to include an anti-oppressive analysis of privilege—that without doing so, our ethical guidelines will be lacking—possibly 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 systemically marginalized voices and "othered" bodies that lack access to systemic privilege? I would suggest that when our ethical guidelines miss this commitment, they serve in fact to enforce what Adams (2011) describes as a form of "ethical violence"—both at individual and cultural levels (p. 184).

Joker: So, anti-oppressive educational theory challenges us to reexamine the implicit ways that privilege informs our educational systems and processes? Can you unpack this a little more in terms of the academy?

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." *sigh* 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 (2002), 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 (2002), 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 Pema 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 resonant with O'Donnell's (2006) notion of "social acupuncture"—using 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. He suggests 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).

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 center.

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 an embodied experience of 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 overintellectualization 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 sacralising pattern: it is a sexual divinised orthodoxy (right sexual dogma) and orthopraxy (right sexual behaviour)" (p. 87). I want to explore how queer theology can reinvigorate research, praxis, and performance.[1]

Joker: Yes . . . but

Kerri: I know . . .

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

Kerri: Look, it's a tricky one. The body gets left behind in academia and in ecclesia . . . I do want to challenge that disavowal. I suspect that disability theologian Betcher (2007) is right here, 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" (Betcher, 2010, p. 110), we deny our embodied frailties, wounds, and places of brokenness. Betcher calls the wholeness/brokenness binary into question, and provocatively asks theologians to reconsider whether healing should be the ultimate sought-after good.

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 center 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 center, 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, 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.

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NOTE

1. While Althaus-Reid's (2001; 2002) work is the primary theological focus of this work, additional examples of preeminent queer theologians include Cheng, Ellison, Shore-Goss, Heyward, Isherwood, Jordan, Bohache, and West, among many others.

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11 Lectio Five

restorative learning returns
an organic or radical relatedness
to time, space, body, and relationships
and once restored
the learner reclaims
self care and recognizes
one's connection to the community
and the larger world

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