

## Innovations in Sexual-Theological Activism: Queer Theology Meets Theatre of the Oppressed

Kerri A. Mesner<sup>1</sup>

Centre for Cross-Faculty Inquiry In Education  
Faculty of Education  
The University of British Columbia  
2125 Main Mall  
Vancouver, B.C. Canada V6T 1Z4  
revkerri@yahoo.com

### ABSTRACT

Despite extraordinary strides in queer religious activism in recent decades, religiously motivated anti-queer violence continues to be both prevalent and inadequately addressed. Forms of subtle and outright homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia are among the few remaining forms of societal discrimination that still have an air of acceptability. This discrimination appears to be further exacerbated both by complacency within queer communities, and an increasing normalization and mainstreaming of queer religious activist movements.

This article introduces a new body of work combining queer theologies and Theatre of the Oppressed to develop strategic interventions in addressing religiously motivated anti-queer violence. The paper brings into conversation queer theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid with Theatre of the Oppressed creator, Augusto Boal; in so doing, this new area of ministry aims to bridge the gap between academic and activist approaches to sexual-theological activism.

Keywords: Althaus-Reid; Boal; queer; theatre; theology.

### *Introduction*

*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" in capturing heightened moments of conflict, controversy, and challenge. The images are frozen moments in time—living*

1. Reverend Kerri Mesner is a doctoral student and Liu Scholar in the Centre for Cross Faculty Inquiry in Education at the University of British Columbia, and a minister with Metropolitan Community Churches.

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, wherein each participant has shaped 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.

Then I invite the surrounding group of observers to engage in "projections"—Boal's exercise 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's possible to be a critically thoughtful queer student and a Christian. The opinions are divided and varied.

This composite example<sup>2</sup> touches on my aim (and indeed my struggle), to interweave the varied and sometimes contradictory aspects of my work as a queer minister, a theologian, and an artist (Mesner: 2009). In reflecting on my work as a queer minister, theologian and arts-based researcher, several questions emerge. The language of such a “queer” self-naming, in and of itself, with the diverse range of debates, beliefs, scholarship, and activist stances that the word “queer” generates, could inform an entire article 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 theology” is, at best, a new idea, and 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 church building on a Sunday morning, that ministry, for me, emerges evocatively within my academic scholarship...and, moreover, that my understanding of ministerial calling compels me to confront the intersections of Christian theology and anti-lgbtq 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 article outlines several years of theological/ministerial work that developed in response to these questions, interweaving the voices of queer theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid, and Augusto Boal, 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 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 to engage in this conversation between theology and praxis. At the same time, each brought an important contribution that complemented one other: Althaus-Reid, the critical analysis of reli-

2. 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 T.O. facilitator.

gio-ecclesial oppressions through theological reflection, and 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 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, culminating 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 MCC for worship, and, later, in my work as a theological student in Canada. In my prior work as a pastor, and presently, as a theologian in academic settings, I also wrestled with 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 LGBT 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 in much queer theological scholarship, a noticeable gap has indeed 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 they aim to speak. Put plainly, what does it mean if we are “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 Augusto 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.

Marcella Althaus-Reid offered a prophetic voice that advocated the deliberate “indecenting” of sexualized orthodoxy, theology, cultural

normalization, and global economics (Althaus-Reid 2002). 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 organisation” (Althaus-Reid 2002: 83). Through this queering of multiple intersectional issues, as well as its epistemological rooting in the body’s knowledge, queer theologies offer a prophetic challenge to 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. In *Indecent Theology*, Althaus-Reid critiqued mainstream theology as “a sexual ideology performed in a sacralising pattern.” Traditional theology, she argued, is focused primarily on “a sexual divinised orthodoxy (right sexual dogma) and orthopraxy (right sexual behaviour)” (Althaus-Reid 2002: 87). Althaus-Reid 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” (Althaus-Reid 2003: 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” (Althaus-Reid 2003: 108–109).

These were not simply rhetorical semantics, however. Althaus-Reid’s transgressive approach resisted the cultural institutionalization of the “decent” as “normal.” Through this refusal of normalization, queer theologies resist “current practices of historical formation that make us forget the love which is different” (Althaus-Reid 2003: 50, 114). Here, we get to know Althaus-Reid’s 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 (Althaus-Reid 2001: 33). As she frankly put it, “terrible is the fate of theologies from the margin when they want to be accepted by the centre!” (Althaus-Reid 2004: 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 Sallie McFague's notion of "wild space," the 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" (McFague 2001: 48–49). Theologian Anita Fast 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" (Fast 1999: 44).

And yet, it could be argued that the lure of the mainstream remains strong for many queer communities. Queer theorist David Halperin 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" (Halperin 2003: 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 our church contexts. I would in no way want to dismiss or minimize the liturgical and pastoral significance of these celebrations. And at the same time, I'm 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, and indeed, setting aside my concerns

around the (financial) prioritization of marriage over other urgent political issues, my concern within the context of this article 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. This lure towards the mainstream runs counter, I would suggest, to the subversively challenging potentialities of queer theologies like those Althaus-Reid 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 initially politically expedient, run the risk of losing their critical edge which 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 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 also worked as a Freirean community educator in Buenos Aires and later in Scotland (Althaus-Reid 2006). 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 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 (Althaus-Reid 2008: 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 then, 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, we look here 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 which carries the potential to bridge the gap between reflection and action, theatre that serves as what theatre activist Daniel O'Donnell identifies as a form of "social acupuncture" 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" (O'Donnell 2006: 47, 49–50). As we will see, this embrace of productive discomfort is integral to Boal's practices as well.

Augusto 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 *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2007). Boal, like Freire, sought to find explicit ways to activate subjective awareness and capacity for change in the journey towards liberation. Like Freire, Boal developed his theories and methodologies within the context of Brazilian political dictatorship; and both men were also 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*, (hereafter, "T.O."), the audience is challenged to explore multiple possibilities within a given oppressive situation, and to actively engage in the theatrical process to attempt to overcome that oppression (Boal 2002: 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, edu-

cation 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: 122).

Like Freire, Boal challenged coercive models of education, suggesting that educators should start with strategies arising from the experiences of the participants themselves (Boal 1985: 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, *spectactors* (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 *spectactors*, challenging both groups to create a community of critical dialogue, reflection and action.

While Boal initially developed T.O. 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 *arsenal*<sup>3</sup> 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

3. 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.

image), and *Rainbow of Desires* (a complex series of strategies designed to make explicit the internalized oppressions experienced at individual and collective levels) (Boal 1985: 126; Boal 2002; Boal 1995). More recently, Boal also developed *Legislative Theater*, whereby T.O. 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 1998).

Boal's work 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 T.O. praxis and theory. Several scholars and practitioners have looked at T.O.'s efficacy as a tool to analyze and address a range of societal issues. Hsia Hsiao-Chuan, for example, used T.O. as praxis-oriented research in literacy work with Southeast Asian "foreign brides" brought into Taiwan (2006). Paul Heritage outlines a T.O. based project in Brazilian prisons, aimed to explore human rights issues with inmates and prison staff in prisons across Brazil (2006). In addition to a wide range of projects using T.O. to address issues of inequity, discrimination, and violence, its use as a qualitative research strategy has been documented, among others, in Barbara Dennis' exploration of cross-cultural anti-bullying research, and Shauna Butterwick's exploration of feminist organizing (Dennis 2009; Butterwick 2002). As the academic T.O. field develops, theoretical and praxis-oriented debates are also opened up. Paul Dwyer, for example, has problematized the *Joking* methodologies through his analysis of the ideological influence of T.O. facilitators' practices in a Vancouver-based project addressing sexual harassment on a college campus (2004). In exploring the praxis-based approaches instigated in these varying contexts, we can see the potential for Boal's methodologies to offer an approach that can make Althaus-Reid's complex theologies more accessible.

Intriguingly, I have also noted, (anecdotally over the years in my work as a T.O. *Joker*), a tension within T.O. practitioner communities around the desire to document and theorize this methodological framework. My sense is that some practitioners fear that the move towards formal T.O. scholarship, while perhaps fuelled by a desire for wider legitimacy and recognition, may in fact run counter to the grassroots origin of Boal's own 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 T.O. as a radical community-fuelled movement, and the need for clear analytical and evaluative tools

within T.O. praxis and scholarship, are not easily reconciled, and will likely continue to form a central debate in T.O. communities in years to come. Just as I am suggesting utilizing participatory theatre to evoke 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 T.O. 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—both within the weeklong placement—and afterwards, in my written analyses, were provocatively generative. I sense that this kind of interweaving of praxis and analysis may prove essential to academically oriented T.O. work. Further, as this debate continues to unfold, I suspect that a key measure of academic approaches to T.O. 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 T.O. 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 *conscientization* (Freire 2007: 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 T.O. 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 T.O. practitioners view this approach as "pure T.O.," others see it as a reliance "on outmoded and restrictive binary oppositions between 'oppressor' and 'oppressed', between 'antagonist' and 'protagonist'" (Dwyer 2004: 160).

Vancouver theatre director David Diamond, for instance, challenges the utility of the oppressor-oppressed paradigm. Diamond has developed his own extrapolation of T.O. called "Theatre for Living," integrating systems theory analysis into T.O. practises. 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 T.O. 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 (2007: 46–47).

Similarly, T.O. practitioner and scholar Mady Schutzman brings a postmodern perspective in 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; she problematizes, for instance, who the oppressor actually is when multiple identities/issues overlap (1994: 138–41).

On the other hand, T.O. Practitioner Ann Armstrong 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" (2006: 178). Armstrong suggests that this clear demarcation allows for authentic theatrical explorations of particularized experiences of oppression.

Alberta T.O. and disability arts practitioner Michele Decottignies challenges the move towards eliminating dichotomous language in discussing oppression. Clearly situating her company's work within anti-oppression theoretical frameworks, Decottignies notes that "all of the T.O. 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" (Decottignies 2010: 39). I share

some of Decottignies' unease with this theoretical move, and I suspect that T.O. practitioners and scholars have yet to plumb the depths of the oppressed-oppressor debate.

I wonder, too, if some of the drive within T.O. communities to exorcise the oppressed/oppressor dichotomy isn't rooted in what Kumashiro 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" (2002: 5). Perhaps this debate within T.O. theory and praxis might pick up on Kumashiro's post-structural approach to anti-oppressive education, and particularly, his call for an embrace of paradox, uncertainty, and non-binary third parties (2002: 170). Wherever a T.O. practitioner lands in this particular debate, I would suggest that Althaus-Reid's 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 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's and Boal's voices in conversation, a theologically rooted praxis—or, indeed, a practically applied theology—begins to emerge. To better understand what such a 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 T.O. with Boal), and later, as an integrated part of my masters' thesis research in Canada. The emergent possibilities were intriguingly varied. For example, in a Lenten workshop series with a local Canadian church, we used T.O. 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 various 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, and, moreover, 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 of 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 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 (Althaus-Reid and Isherwood 2007: 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. My hope, in learning to bring the “I” into my own theological praxis, was to encourage other participants to do the same. In so doing, we hoped to engage in “a disclosure of experiences which have been traditionally silenced in theology” (Althaus-Reid and Isherwood 2007: 308). This included both sexual disclosures (“coming out” in varied forms), and theological disclosures around ecclesial practices and beliefs historically excluded from mainstream and queer theologies.

Drawing on O’Donnell, 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” (O’Donnell 2006: 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 reflections on the theatrical process apply equally well to *Joking* 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” (2006: 50). Like Kumashiro, I aimed to both instigate and embrace this discomfort as a sign that learning, and, indeed transformation may well be at work (2000).

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 Masters’ 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. Group “interviews” — through 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. Evaluative measurement is clearly 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 Theatre of the Oppressed’s practical application.

*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. Certainly, 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 *Joking praxis*. Queer theologies, in turn, recognize such uncertainties as theological gifts, challenging the theologian’s own reflexive processes as well. Althaus-Reid 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” (Althaus-Reid 2003: 166). Through the application of a queer theological hermeneutic to Freire’s *conscientization* cycle of action — reflection — action, a queer theologian/practitioner continually queers the processes of self reflection, activist praxis, and ensuing reflexive evaluation (Freire 2007). 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 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” (Althaus-Reid 2002: 120).

This is an area of scholarship and ministry that values theological fluidity and instability—affirming, as Althaus-Reid 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 (Althaus-Reid 2002: 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. 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 offered such a voice (Althaus-Reid 2002: 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 of theology, as Althaus-Reid puts it, “something worth the effort” (Althaus-Reid 2002: 148).

In conclusion—or perhaps more accurately, *inconclusively*—this article 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 Marcella Althaus-Reid and Augusto Boal, this model is offered as a beginning question—to open up further interventions, *queeries*, instabilities, and discoveries inspired by that very “Christ of surprises!”

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