

This chimes with Althaus-Reid's call for theologies from the bottom of the sexual pyramid developed by Rubin, discussed earlier.

Yip's own sexual story can be found in the introduction to his book *Gay Male Christian Couples* (1997a) in which he narrates his coming out story as a gay man through the lens of his sister's response in 1994. Yip had informed his sister that he was in partnership with a man, she had only met once called Noel (1997a, p. 1). In her letter to Yip, she admits to her previously distorted view of gays, 'like their being "sissy", or perhaps being sick or abnormal' (1997a, p. 2) but her view changes when gay sexuality becomes no longer abstract but part of the identity of her close sibling. Her reply to Yip is heart-warming and worth quoting in full:

In any case, I want to tell you that I fully accept you as you are. You are my brother, a very dear human to me and I love you: gay or not gay. You and your friends, gay or not gay, are always welcome to my home ... The important point is I hope you are happy now. (Yip's sister, 1997a, p. 2)

As Althaus-Reid was calling for alternative stories from sexual dissidents from a theological background, Yip was underway conducting extensive fieldwork to seek life stories from gay males. It is staggering to note that despite their heavy contribution to non-normative theology which emerged in tandem in sociological and theological arenas, Althaus-Reid makes no reference to Yip in any of her published texts, and Yip only makes bracketed reference to Althaus-Reid noting her contribution to theology from a non-European context (2005, p. 60). This could be a result of academic boundaries and differences, because of their distinct disciplines: sociology and theology.

In light of the above discussion, it is clear that the trajectory of sexual theology and queer theology contain many cross-fertilizing elements to consider. The sharing of sexual stories makes an important contribution to the fields of theology and sexuality. Therefore, responding to Althaus-Reid's injunction for sexual stories and viewing Yip's research as a useful forbear to my work, attention now turns to the contribution sexual stories can make in terms practical theology.

Perverting Practical Theology

I use the term 'pervert' as a shorthand for all the stigmatized sexual orientations. It used to cover male and female homosexuality as well but as these become less disreputable, the term has increasingly referred to the other 'deviations.' Terms such as 'pervert' and 'deviant' have, in general use, a connotation of disapproval, disgust, and dislike. I am using these terms in a denotative fashion, and do not intend them to convey any disapproval on my part. (Rubin, 1984, p. 36)

Practical theology needs perverting. By perverting, I borrow Althaus-Reid's notion of 'per/versions', meaning that alternative interpretations and points of view exist aside from the dominant hegemony (2004b, p. 107). Although Althaus-Reid described her work as contextual, liberalational, queer and indecent, she never claimed to be a practical theologian. Yet Riet Bons-Storm describes her work in such terms:

[Althaus-Reid's] point of departure is the understanding that every theology implies a conscious or unconscious sexual and political praxis based on the assumptions of the theologian about embodiment. So the challenge is to find out the theologian's (half) conscious suppositions about the gendered body and its possibilities while doing and practicing practical theology. (2013, p. 66)

Althaus-Reid's 'per/versions' allow us to see 'a different version or understanding' (2004b, p. 107). When considering a queer understanding of practical theology, it becomes apparent there is a dearth of contributors, yet my journey through practical theology

exposes the potentiality of sexuality to be part of the purpose and praxis of practical theology.

Therefore, critical engagement with sexual stories from non-normative lives is an act of practical theology. With the aim of que(e)rying the relationship of practical theology with sexual theology, I argue that a critical examination of the work of theologian Ruud Ganzevoort allows a more fruitful interpretation of practical theology for the purposes of exploring biographies and beliefs from sexual pervers, using the term in the same sense as Rubin, above.

Undoing Theology with Perverts

Viviane Namaste queries the validity of discussions about the complex nature of gender while the researcher occupies a safe place within academic ivory towers. She advocates a grounded research methodology in which the participants set the agenda for research production and knowledge transfer. Her title is a deliberate play on Butler's book *Undoing Gender* (2004) and criticizes academics who write about 'the Transgender Question' from a theoretical position without 'a detailed contextual analysis of the different ways social relations of race, labor, and gender intersect' (2009, p. 2). She argues that 'the theoretical and political task at hand, then, is not one of undoing gender. What is required is nothing short of undoing theory' (2009, p. 28).

Within her article, Namaste makes explicit references to previous research conducted with indigenous communities, thus providing a framework for knowledge-production through effective collaborative research which benefits the individuals or communities who participate in the research (rather than being researched). Her three key principles of relevance, equity in partnership and ownership which should be considered in the production of practical theology when engaging with individual life stories.

The life stories of the protagonists document the undoing of theology for the individuals who offer their narratives. Yet, unlike previous life-story research, it is necessary to move beyond idealized notions that this task will 'provide a voice' for stories to be heard, as this can be misleading and raises questions to whose voice is

being heard. Indeed, 'claims to voice are inadequate, perhaps even misleading' (Bullough and Pinnegar, 2001, p. 17).

Althaus-Reid expresses a similar concern to Namaste but in relation to queer theologies as they 'are sometimes accused of being ungrounded, or not from the people' (2001a, p. 60). In addition to responding to Althaus-Reid's injunction to uncover sexual stories, it is important to follow Namaste's principle that 'feminist theory would be well served by actually speaking with everyday women about their lives' (2009, p. 27), as attending attentively to the stories of non-normative people is a practical theological task. A perversion of practical theology thus attends to the distinctive stories of those who have experienced the cumulative impact of heteronormative religious practice.

Althaus-Reid's 'perv's theology of ethics' (2004b, p. 106) invites us to imagine alternative sexual options on which we can base our theologies. Althaus-Reid, like Namaste, reminds us of the importance of partnership which is applicable to practical theological enquiry. She adopts the terminology of 'consensuality' as her first per/version and reminds us that 'queer theology is a theology of alliances in agreement with their own diversity' (2004b, p. 107). In her second per/version, Althaus-Reid reiterates her call for theologians to find the alternative sexual stories as a basis for forming theology:

We start our reflections from our own sexual stories. We lift God's skirts after having lifted our own first. In lifting our skirts we remind ourselves of our own identity at the moment of doing theology while we remain committed to theological honesty. It is from an alliance of sexual epistemologies in disagreement with heterosexual ideology and not vice versa that we reflect on grace, redemption and salvation. (2004b, p. 107)

Part One: Queering Practical Theology

Practical theology is especially suited to make contributions to church thought and practice by engaging in debates about sexuality and gender arising out of queer theory and practice. (Hoef, 2012, p. 412)

Jeanne Hoefft's citation above is a rare example of how practical theology has engaged with sexuality. By rare, I am pointing to the dearth of discussions of sex and/or queer studies within practical theological literature. Hoefft's chapter entitled 'Gender, Sexism and Heterosexism' (2012) is a unique contribution to the field of pastoral theology, as she traces the theological lineage of (mostly) gender and (briefly) sexuality from feminist roots. Concerning herself with gender and sexual difference, she posits ways of '*doing gender*' [her emphasis] which are in keeping with Christian values (2012, p. 416). She notes how intersex-identifying individuals problematize simplistic categories of gender, and she observes how practical theology has shied away from a discussion of LGBT sexualities. Hoefft observes that 'there have been almost no queer identified texts from a practical or contextual perspective besides Althaus-Reid's' (2012, p. 419) as she encourages practical theologians to engage in discussions of sexuality and gender. Yet, her chapter raises an awareness of the issues of gender and sexuality, but she offers neither a methodology nor a response to how practical theology can serve to address such issues. Her conclusion serves solely to set out a gauntlet for others:

Practical theologians must take up these questions and seek answers that account for the real people who struggle to find an authentic and meaningful life on the boundaries of church and society. (2012, p. 419)

Hoefft theorizes practical theology, but leaves it to others to deal with the messy task of investigating life stories. In this context, the praxis and methods of sexual storytelling is part of practical theology. Moreover, I claim that the objective and purpose of all theology is to make a difference; therefore, all theology should be based on *praxis*.

One further isolated example which documents the potentiality of practical theology to explore sexualized lives emerges in an essay from Kathleen Talvacchia (2015). Talvacchia questions the theory-practice divide for those who seek to gain an understanding of the theological and religious lived experiences of queer lives. Her essay explores an approach where theology is not a theoretical task, but

one which also engages in a practical discovery of living religious experience. She notes:

Practical theology done from a queer perspective ... has the potential to intentionally disrupt the binary of theory and practice in order to create an integrated approach in which the practices of queer religious communities and the theorizing about those practices can be more deeply in conversation with each other. (2015, p. 186)

Although critically congruent with the task of exploring non-normative lives in such terms, Talvacchia's approach is similar to Hoefft's. Within both essays the recognition of the potency of exploring non-normative experience as an act of practical theology is signposted. Nevertheless, both Talvacchia and Hoefft's positions are uncritically informed and neither provide concrete examples of how theological reflection on the lives of others could occur. Indeed, Talvacchia's own grounding of her practical theological approach is autobiographical, as she explores her own spiritual and sexual lives from a reflective theological lens. Thus, her method of theological reflection becomes an act of auto-theology, and arguably self-serving. Her theory-practical binary is only disruptive/disrupted in terms of making her own private self-reflections theologically public. Furthermore, as a trained academic theologian, her inclusion of autobiographical practical theology does not engage with the lives at the margins on a grassroots level, which is a necessary injunction for practical theology.

Therefore, a critical reading of practical theology serves to argue its potentiality for an exploration of sexual and theological praxis. To date, work on gender (almost exclusively from a feminist perspective²) can be found in practical theological literature, but practical theology has largely shied away from discussions of desire and intimacy, even within normative and heterosexual contexts. A paradigm shift within practical theology would enable it to realign itself with other important theoretical developments elsewhere in academic discourse.

Practical theologian Ruard Ganzevoort acknowledges and appreciates the large contribution feminist and pro-feminist

theologians have made to gender studies within practical theology, yet he asks 'Adam, where are you?' (2011a, p. 1), puzzling as to where are the men contributing to gender studies in practical theology. Ganzevoort notes how Adam is absent, or mute, due to the fact that Adam is patriarchal and hegemonic. Outing Adam as a marked category of gender is just as important in challenging the dominant ideology and the sexual binary. Ganzevoort asks:

Does [practical theology] still reflect the old structure of patriarchy in which only women (and maybe gay men) were supposed to have a gender, because men were the hegemonic and thus standard group who didn't have to reflect on their gender status? And where transgenders are invisible because they don't fit the binary? Just like 'people of color' includes people of all colors except the hegemonic white. Or like 'sexual diversity' seems to apply to all sexual varieties except heterosexuality. (2011a, p. 1)

Ganzevoort does not wish to dilute the work of feminist theology; rather he would like the spotlight to shine equally on other players including men, heterosexuals, transgender and the sexually adventurous of all orientations and inclinations. In his one brief mention of queer theology, Ganzevoort states that this endeavour must seek to explore 'underprivileged or subjugated groups and aim at their emancipation' (2011a, p. 3). Interestingly, Ganzevoort extends this by pointing to an exploration of the biographies of such individuals as a 'starting point in the acknowledgment of subjectivity' (2011a, p. 3).

Theology is done by embodied human beings, and embodiment is gendered and sexual. A sexual practical theology will use these gendered and sexual subjectivities as a starting point for Christians who have experienced shame and fear because of their sexual desires and practices. Embedded Christian imaginings of God are thus problematized as we examine our own bodies and experiences as a starting point to be suspicious of the dominant Christian tradition.

So, what would this perverted practical theology look like? Fulkerson, citing Charles Winquist, speaks of practical theology as 'a response to a wound' (2007, p. 2). Non-normative sexualities

are scarred with the fallout from hegemonic understandings of compulsory heterosexuality. Leanne Tigert (1999) discusses how non-normative sexualities are often perceived as a scar, and that there is a trauma of homophobia in the lives of those who identify as non-heterosexual. This notion of trauma should also be extended to all non-normative lives, not just non-heterosexuals: identifying and staying in or coming out as non-normative can be a traumatic experience, one which can be painful. A perversion of practical theology would be to discuss openly sexual experiences in relation to one's self and faith understanding. It serves as a response to dominant ideologies from powerful Christian groups, such as churches. It is unlikely that sex is what Elaine Graham has in mind as she states, 'the task of practical theology itself is facilitating a creative dialogue between tradition and experience, theology and practice' (2013, p. 163), yet the tenets of practical theology do allow for the inclusion of all sexualities. Graham credits practical theologians as 'bearers of "living Christian tradition" which evolves in dialogue with contemporary experience' (2013, p. 163). As such, non-normative theologians form a discipleship:

Practical theologians working within an action research paradigm commit themselves to nurturing ordinary people's autonomous and lived apprehensions of God as the well-spring of practical discipleship. (Graham, 2013, p. 177)

Sadly, Graham does not qualify what she means by 'ordinary' here. Yet, practical theology would not demand a significant shift in its praxis to widen its parameters to include non-ordinary people. Its praxis remains the same, yet its principles are extended to those on the margins. Attending to those on the margins of a traditional Christian understanding of sexuality is an entirely appropriate task for theology. What such a move will mean in practice can be seen in the contribution Ruud Ganzevoort has made to practical theology, as he advocates life stories as part of its praxis.

Ruard Ganzevoort: *Life Stories as Practical Theology*

The work of Ruard Ganzevoort has been instrumental in the development of a narrative approach to practical theology. Having published widely on life stories as a foundational starting point to theological discussions, he locates life stories within practical theology and acknowledges religion as part of lived experience. It is significant to note that his earlier work originates at the same time queer theory was emerging from academic closets, although he makes no reference to this in his work.

Ganzevoort's work on life stories is largely influenced by Anton Boisen's notion of the 'living human document'. Boisen said, 'we need to learn to read human documents as well as books' (1936, p. 10), which according to Ganzevoort signifies that the written narrative of a person's life can be 'studied in similar ways to the written documents of the Bible and ancient texts' (Ganzevoort, 1993, p. 285). This hermeneutical approach can be readily adopted by theologians and biblical scholars, who are already trained in literary and structural exegesis, according to Ganzevoort. He states that it is the 'expertise of theologians as interpreters of the stories in which the most fundamental questions of faith and meaning may come to the fore' (1993, p. 286).

Ganzevoort articulates the notion of storytelling as hermeneutics of self: 'a story is not just a way of conveying information, it is a way of interpreting facts' (1993, p. 277). He rightly defines life stories as 'narrative patterns of interpretation whereby we seek to discover the sense, meaning and value of life and of the events occurring in it' (1993, p. 278). Ganzevoort sees identity as a product of our own self-interpretation. He states, 'we do not just have a personal narrative, we are a narrative identity' (1993, p. 281).

How life stories can connect to practical theology relies on hermeneutics. For Ganzevoort, praxis and interpretation are intertwined. Simply, hermeneutics do not engage with biblical texts solely from the perspective of a believer. Theologians without any commitment or allegiance to Christianity are still investigating God and experiences of God, as 'whatever practical theologians may investigate, it is always connected in some way to human discourse in relation to God' (2002, p. 39). Theological thought thus

emerges out of reflections and interpretations of human actions and interactions.

We have always interpreted our world through the stories we tell. In the production of a life story, Ganzevoort notes, 'certain events are experienced at an unconscious level, and afterwards are being interpreted and given a place in a narrative system' (1993, pp. 277–8). Therefore, life stories also contain one's self-understanding, one's sense of self and meaning of the events narrated. He makes an important observation in the production of 'living human texts', that once a story is told 'the narrative becomes text, in a certain sense detached from a person' (1993, p. 279). That is to say that in telling a story, there is a self-editing process in which an individual decides what to share and what to keep hidden. He observes that a 'shared story is not the same as the inner story. In telling the personal narrative, the narrator modifies the story' (1993, p. 278).

Elizabeth Spelman (1988) has famously argued that (women's) identities are not like 'pop-beads' with variables such as class, sexuality, race, disability and gender strung together, where each bead can be 'popped off' for an analysis that suits the hypothesis of the researcher. Equally, narratives cannot be seen as separate items, similar to Spelman's 'pop-beads'. Stories can be told and heard in isolation, but it must be remembered that they always intertwine with other narratives. Narratives relate to one another because both the events they recall and the actors within the plot are shared across the production of other narratives:

We do not write the personal narrative in a relational vacuum. For every individual there is a range of relationships within the social context. The personal narrative touches the narratives of others. We play a role in each other's story, and we contribute to a 'shared story' (especially in a community of faith). (Ganzevoort, 1993, p. 278)

This connects Ganzevoort's work on narrative with Judith Butler's perspective: that narratives are not just self-created or self-fashioned, but identity is also placed upon us. The dichotomy of internal narrative and external narrative (that is narrative identities we are called to create and produce) are not easily extrapolated.

Bonnie Miller-McLemore follows this basic principle of reading 'living human documents' but offers an additional point for consideration. Writing from a space which does not engage critically with Ganzevoort, she suggests a move away from studying individuals as living human documents and offers a significant new paradigm shift in which individuals are no longer read, but listened to, as part of a 'living human web' (1996). This, according to Miller-McLemore, stresses the 'interconnectivity of selfhood' (1996, p. 7). The matrix for human stories is relational and contextual. No one tells a story of their life with themselves as the only character. The interpretation of one's location within the 'living human web' is central to one's positionality and emerging identity. Accordingly, Ganzevoort states that life stories are both 'polyphonic' (2001, p. 46) and 'a multi-conversational discipline' (2002, p. 34).

I follow Ganzevoort who asserts that 'practical theology's possibilities and challenges lie in the specific conversations it engages in' (2002, p. 35). Stephen Pattison goes further than this, stating that critical conversations are a form of practical theology. In establishing a concrete model for such critical conversations to take place, he states:

Practical theology can then be thought of as a critical conversation between aspects and interpretations of (a) one's own ideas, beliefs, experiences, feelings, perceptions and assumptions; (b) the beliefs, perceptions and assumptions arising from the Christian community and tradition (c) the contemporary situation, practice or event which is under consideration; and (d) relative insights, methods and findings that emerge from non-theological disciplines. (2000, pp. 9–10)

Pattison's model is a useful theoretical starting point to describe the critical conversations that emerge from sexual stories as an act of practical theology. To subject sexual experiences to a practical theological enquiry is to engage in a critical conversation between what is known and understood as contemporary sexual practices and experiences, alongside relevant aspects of Christian theology and tradition. Practical theology is therefore interdisciplinary. If practical theology has been blind to sexual stories and especially

those from sexual migrants, then its possibilities have been severely constrained by its failure to engage in critical conversations. It is time for practical theology to stop shying away from talking about sex.

Narrative approaches, according to Ganzevoort, are thus performative rather than representative. Echoing Judith Butler's famous assertion that gender is performative, Ganzevoort highlights the inner-construction of identity which is performed once we engage in the production of life storytelling. Butler's position helps to highlight the complexities of life-story research, as she is 'permanently troubled by identity categories, consider[ing] them to be invariable stumbling blocks, [she] understand[s] them, even to promote[s] them, as sites of necessary trouble' (Butler, 1991, p. 14). As gender is interwoven with narrative, Butler is not quite right to separate the pop-bead identity category of gender as performative. There are various other markers of identity that are performative when exposed through self-narration, just as religious identity can be equally performative.

Trauma and Theology

A further discussion of the nature of practical theology, informed by Ganzevoort, is based around his work on religious coping and trauma (1998a; 1998b; 2008), particularly in his earlier studies on sexually abused men. As noted earlier, non-normative 'outing' or even the internalization of non-normative sexual practice can be traumatic to the individual. This follows Tigert's notion of homophobia as traumatic and builds on the idea that practical theology is the response to a wound, or scar. Ganzevoort articulates a 'theology of trauma' (2008, p. 19). He reminds us that it is not a significant event in our lives which is traumatic, but the impact this event has on the individual: 'trauma [is] essentially a threat to identity. The central issue here is that traumatization interrupts the person's life course' (2008, p. 21).

In her publication of *Undoing Gender*, Butler links loss, and trauma and the effect this has on one's self-narrative. She states, 'trauma takes its toll on narrativity' (2004, p. 138). But, despite

this interruption and toll, Ganzevoort notes how traumatic events 'define our identity' (2008, p. 24).

For non-normative sexual migrants, the scar of the alien landscape of vanilla heteronormativity is worn as a symbol of resistance. Resistance to heteronormative discourse has always been a feature of queer theory, with its intent to challenge assimilation politics in terms of sexuality. In such terms, Goss observes 'a gay/lesbian liberation theology begins with resistance and moves to political insurrection' (1993, p. xvii). It is therefore the work of practical theology to attend to the wounds of individuals who are marginalized because of whom they choose to love and how they choose to express their love. These marginalized voices are, in turn, empowered because a purpose is given to tell their stories to readers. These 'local stories ... challenge the dominant logic of an oppressive society' (Ganzevoort, 2011b, p. 218) and the hegemonic, heteronormative interpretation of religion held by traditional theology.

Attending to One Another

For every theology is always a sexual theology and it is necessary to uncover not just the gender codes but the sexual (ideological) assumptions of Christian theology, ecclesiology and the methods of theological inquiry which have pervaded our understanding of Christianity. (Althaus-Reid, 2004a, p. 4)

Although described as 'a practical theologian' by Bons-Storm (2013, p. 66), Althaus-Reid's contribution to theology based on sexuality, poverty and exclusion can be deduced from her notion of theology as a 'walk' or '*caminata*'. This *caminata* involves the community and the locality. It is not a walk in isolation, but a walk in dialogue, which 'comes from the desire to have a coherent, liberative praxis in our thinking/doing of theology' (Althaus-Reid, 2004a, p. 14). For Althaus-Reid, this praxis of theology does not promote 'a hierarchy of knowledge' (2004a, p. 14) and does not bear witness to "professional theologians" versus "people's theology" (2004a, p. 14). There is no existent hierarchy between grassroots theology and

academic theology, both are mutually complementary.

John Rowan's chapter 'The Humanistic Approach to Action Research' (2005) explores the spiritual undertaking of exploring one's own experience. He states, 'this is the basic attitude of the mystic in all religious traditions – to get inside one's own experience, to commit oneself to one's own experience, to trust one's own experience' (2005, p. 108). In the context of theology, rather than the social sciences, the sharing of experience can be essentially a spiritual undertaking. This is, however, nothing new. Previously, Pierre Bourdieu had described the ethics of listening as 'intellectual love' (1999, p. 614). Barbara McClure (2008) developed the motif of 'attending to one another' as a basis for pastoral theology. This attention relies on a committed vocation of listening and waiting in order to hear fully another's story. McClure describes 'attending' as creating 'temporal space for God, truth, mystery, the sacred, to present itself. It presupposes the possibilities of new realities breaking forth' (2008, p. 191). Elaine Graham, extending McClure's approach, states:

'attending' is a matter of both action *and* reflection. It synthesizes a pastoral role of being present and mindful of the needs and well-being of the other, with an openness to new insights that transcend functional consideration. (2013, p. 176)

In the matter of attending to one another, Eileen Campbell-Reid and Christian Scharen offer a rationale 'for making use of silence as a key aspect of theological ethnography' (2013, p. 232). Their article, 'Ethnography on Holy Ground: How Qualitative Interviewing is Practical Theological Work', describes the interview space in theological action research as a 'safe and holy space' (2013, p. 243). Telling their own stories in the space allowed 'God's creative and graceful presence to be discovered' (2013, p. 254). So, for the Christian narrators who share them, God is creatively revealed in the process of telling them.

Campbell-Reid and Scharen adopt the metaphor of the graceful conduct of exchanging life stories as 'holding a small bird' (2013, p. 245), describing a potential space in which participants mutually hold one another, thus participating in 'the sacred character of

making space for being seen, heard and recognized' (2013, p. 247). This space seeks to engender trust while acknowledging the fragility of human relationships. It prioritizes 'the intimacy and empathy of genuinely attending to one another' (2013, p. 245). Attending to one another represents the respect and honour one gives to others: their stories, their time and their beliefs.

From a counselling perspective, to adopt the principle of 'attending to one another' without undercurrents of power differentials, the idea of 'being with' is an important model within a person-centred approach to therapy. Therefore, the analogy of holding a small bird could seem patronizing to the narrator and this also raises the questions of relationship dynamics between storyteller and listener. Therefore, moving away from this ornithological analogy, it is more helpful to consider an attitude of unconditional positive regard towards the narrator. Mark Harrison reflects on the concept of 'being with' and a non-directive approach to attending to others, and he relates this directly to the passion of Christ. He asks, 'in his "being-with" those who crucified him, did Jesus show the greatest acceptance of the "serious harm" that would then occur?' (2012, p. 23). This unconditional positive regard for one another is exemplified by Harrison within Jesus's own actions in 'being with' those around him, attending to them and preparing them for what was to come after Jesus's final hours.

On Giving and Receiving

The metaphor of giving and receiving can be a sexual one, largely based on sanctioned and sanctified heterosexual practices where the male gives and the female receives. Binaries of activism/passivism, top/bottom and giver/receiver are pairings that sterilize the notion of sex as mutually fulfilling, irrespective of the assigned roles of either participant. I mentioned previously that it is important to avoid categorizations, and this too applies to a consideration of the role of storyteller as 'giver' or listener as 'receiver'. I appreciate Clifford Geertz's adoption of a sexual metaphor in relation to the sharing of oneself, 'you don't exactly penetrate another culture, as the masculinist image would have it. You put yourself in its way and

it bodies forth and enmeshes you' (1995, p. 44). The researcher here is more open and reflexive than one who seeks to adopt a position which is ontologically stable and objective.

It is vital to remember that the production of sexual stories as a form of theology is dependent on the help of others. There must be a strong sense of trust to be able to share and explore the intricacies of a person's life. Jamie Heckert narrates his own feelings of exploitation when conducting what he terms 'queer research' with others:

I was often more concerned with giving than receiving. I have a memory of expressing concern to one of my research partners that I might be exploiting them by taking their stories. She reminded me that by listening, I was giving something as well. Giving and receiving, receiving and giving: an anarchist economics of research and a compassionate queering of borders between self and other. (2010, p. 51)

Perverting practical theology adopts the method of '*caminata*, of 'being with' or 'going with' participants as they share their experiences. It is a relationship process which can be described as similar to sexual practices with another individual. It involves attending to one another with sensitivity and intuition. It embraces intimacy, creating a relationship based on mutual respect and a sacred reverence of one another. It is consensual, in which boundaries are negotiated and roles are mutually fulfilling. Can such a perverted practical theology be considered a sexual encounter? It is an encounter between minds channelled through the sharing of stories and experiences which is certainly based on the relationality of sex.

Part Two: 'Undoing' Queer Theory

The Queer I/Eye

Martin Stringer states 'all writers on sexual matters have to contextualize themselves and their writing' (1997, p. 27). The need to

provide personal demographic information emerges from feminist scholarship, in what Nancy Miller terms as 'the obligatory dance cards of representivity' (1991, p. 121). Miller notes the introduction to such contextualization often begins with 'the waltz of the *as a*' (1991, p. 121), as scholars prefix their self-representation with 'as a ...'. Accordingly, here I consider my personal stake in this work, including my own questioning of the validity of queer research.

My first concern relates to the task of utilizing sexual storytelling as a theological framework. Deryn Guest observes how an exploration of personal testimonies 'can be dismissed as "labours of love" or an unnecessary "baring of the soul" that is slightly embarrassing and best left to the private sphere' (2005, pp. 235–6). Similarly, Robert Goss additionally observes the threat of such work being sidelined:

Queer postmodern theologians are marginalized because they threaten the very gender and sexual codes upon which those master religious narratives have been constructed. (1999, p. 48)

Guest revisits this idea of queer as academically marginalized and an indulgence in her later work (2012). She reassures queerists that it 'is not about adopting a cool, hip, academic identity; it is about embarking upon serious, detailed work on heteronormativity and the heterosexual imaginary' (2012, p. 161).

My second concern is that, although queer is marginalized, as noted by Guest, its impact as a theory must be mobilized in order for it to have import beyond the academy. This is also taken up by Guest who notes how queer theory 'will prove to be an elitist discourse, hardly accessible to the lay person or in touch with the lived realities of the grassroots communities' (2005, p. 51). Guest's concern is that queer theory may not engage with the realities of lives and experiences of those who identify as non-normative. She notes how 'the level of political engagement here is worryingly low' (2005, p. 48), and she is not alone in sharing such unease around the use of *queer*. Indeed, Guest's references to Rich (1980), Escoffier (1990) and Malinowitz (1993) exemplify further examples of discomfort. Five years later, Sally Munt holds on to the same concern:

So, the extraordinary and creative queer theory of universities,

which values discomfort and disruption, and that valenced term 'unhinged', often has limited applicability when perceived by non-academic LGBTQI people. (2010, p. 23)

What these concerned scholars rightly identify as disquiet around the term *queer* actually highlights the importance of conducting queer research on the ground. Encouraging people to share their stories enables us to uncover and examine the religious, social and political oppression faced by individuals and groups that have historically been marginalized. This, in turn, serves to challenge Christian theological traditions and to counter the discriminatory doctrines, dogmas and theologians that produced them.

That said, academic theorizing remains an important component to the project, not only as its starting point, but to ensure the required intellectual rigour and credibility. Queer theology has not always successfully engaged with critical queer theory, as observed by Susannah Cornwall, which has resulted in its less credible status as an academic discipline:

Interestingly queer theologians have often not engaged explicitly in their writing with Butler, Foucault and the other theorists whose work underlines queer theory ... if queer theologians do not use the term in the same way that queer critical theorists do, this may make queer theology less credible as an intellectual discourse. (2011, p. 24)

So, there needs to be balance between using the academic tools of queer theory, while remaining accountable to the primary constituents it originally served, especially those who identify as non-normative. This project explores how non-normative sexualities can serve as a basis to theologize from an experiential perspective. Moreover, I move beyond minoritized sexualities and genders to encompass straight-identified individuals who engage in 'queer' sexual practices. In order to achieve this, I focus attention on how queer is a transformational force.

The queer 'I' is a prominent feature of my understanding of self-as-researcher. Althaus-Reid and Isherwood encourage first person discourse: 'as a genre, queer theology partakes of the irony, humour

and self-disclosure type of discourse ... Queer theology is an "I" theology' (2004, p. 6). Koosed agrees, 'by using autobiographical language ("I"), the text poses as an interface between the author and the reader' (2006, p. 342). This queer 'I' therefore embraces and advocates the use of personal testimonies as a significant part of queer theological discourse.

Positioning of Self

It is therefore appropriate now for me to disclose my location and self-understanding. In addition to the opening tale of my childhood which introduced this book, I offer the following self-description. I am a cis-gendered male, who was assigned male at birth, and I am in a monogamous civil partnership with another male. Although my work seeks to evade categories of identity, I do self-identify as a gay man. Indeed, in seeking to avoid binary categorizations of identity, there may seem an inherent contraction in stating I am a gay male. This contradiction is not unique to me. Koosed notes the complexities and inconsistencies of locating oneself: 'I see the inconsistencies of my own identity; the contradictions of my own sexed and gendered self' (2006, p. 342). Notwithstanding, my work welcomes those who prefer not to be limited by binary gender categorizations. To some extent, the self-disclosure of my sexuality influences, informs and arguably provides a catalyst for my identity as a queer sexual theologian.

However, the queer 'I' and the queer 'eye' recognize different locations and positions: the sharing of sexual stories is a personal undertaking, and attending to those stories can be equally personal. I acknowledge that I can never fully adopt the position of 'insider' to others' stories (Merton, 1972). On the one hand, I could be treated as an insider, my sexuality is non-normative and therefore I am somewhat of an ally to others' stories of deviance. However, on the other hand, I am also an outsider, as others' experiences are unique to them. Throughout my research, I am both observer (eye) and personally intertwined (I).

Concerning my religious identity, this is more a fluid and hybrid

status which is a challenge to define. Happy is the religious mongrel who needs not select a category of identification! Biographically, I grew up in a large Roman Catholic family in the north of England and was educated within comprehensive Catholic schooling until the age of 18. In addition to a long, passionate yet broken relationship with Catholicism, I have flirted with atheism, Methodism and Pentecostalism, and I have been known to frequent Church of England services too. I do not practise any religion formally, though I do pray occasionally. I adore my numerous Buddha statues at home and appreciate my partner's creative 'dragging' up of Catholic iconic statues that adorn our home.

Jennie Barnsley advocates the use of gender-neutral pronouns, using 'per' to replace what in binary terms has served as the third person possessive pronouns 'his/her'. In per unpublished PhD thesis, Jennie Barnsley describes herself as 'non-Christian' as 'the description non-Christian does not situate [per] outside of Christian theology, since Christianity is at the very heart of [per] non-Christian theologising' (2013, p. 87). My own personal heritage is Christian, and my experiences are situated within Christian beliefs, doctrines and practices, yet my theologies are not traditional Christian teachings, therefore I could situate myself along the spectrum between identifying as non-Christian and post-Christian. Sally Munt describes post-Christian discourse and rhetoric as 'no longer rooted in the languages and assumptions of Christianity' (2010, p. 9). It is arguably the constraints of heteronormativity within my Christian experiences which empower me to theologize queerly and to go in search of non-normative life stories to enable others to do the same. Such constraints provide a catalyst for theological activism.

This subjective autobiographical account of my position as researcher is not an indulgent self-promoting narrative. Ross Mooney's pioneering text about the importance of the researcher's viewpoint reminds us that research is hardly ever a neutral process: 'research is a personal venture which, quite aside from its social benefits, is worth doing for its direct contribution to one's own self-realization' (1957, p. 155). More recently, Bullough and Pinnegar summarize this idea judiciously: 'who a researcher is, is central to what a researcher does' (2001, p. 13).

Queer Theory and Theology

In his chapter, 'Queer Theory, Hermeneutics and the Limits of Libertarianism' (2010) Graham Ward's commendation of Althaus-Reid's impact on theology leaves an unexpected twist. Ward leaves queerists aghast with his assertion 'we still await a queer theory' (2010, p. 168). His reasoning for such a statement is that 'queering' does not allow for the theoretical standpoint; it does not permit a methodology' (2010, p. 168). He is among thinkers who argue it cannot be permitted to have a methodology or standpoint precisely because it would then no longer be 'queer' – it has to be nomadic, fluid, unclassifiable, or it is assimilated and de-clawed. It is interesting Ward makes this comment in the same year as Browne and Nash publish their volume entitled *Queer Methods and Methodologies* (2010). Browne and Nash state:

Many scholars who use queer theorisations can use undefined notions of what they mean by 'queer research' and rarely undertake a sustained consideration of how queer approaches might sit with (particularly social scientific) methodological choices. In research deemed 'queer', the methods we use often let us speak to or interact with people, usually on the basis of sexual/gender identities and within anti-normative frameworks. (2010, p. 1)

In seeking to uncover the kinship of quasi-queer methodologies, I first look at two examples based on the work of Althaus-Reid and Karen E. Macke.

First, Althaus-Reid would see *outing theology* as a methodology that produces queer theology: 'queer theology is a process of Outing Theology as a method for action and reflection' (2001a, p. 60). 'Outing' functions as a verb often associated with making hypocrites visible, with its roots in homophobic pronouncements from people who have engaged in same-sex activities. Here, however, Althaus-Reid is referring to voluntary outing. Such *outing*, she argues, depends upon the sharing of sexual narratives: 'in Queer Theology, coming out as a hermeneutical circle works well by telling sexual

stories as a base of doing a popular Queer theology' (2001a, pp. 64–5).

Second, Karen E. Macke distinguishes between 'queering' and 'que(e)rying': 'where "queering" is more usefully seen as a goal of inquiry driven by queer theory, "que(e)rying" denotes a methodology, or a strategy driving qualitative research' (2014, p. 16). Within Macke's approach, queer research based on 'que(e)rying' will always be anchored in methodology, a methodology that requires us to define our research and erect boundaries, frameworks and other scientific tools to impose rigour. This is problematic for the queer researcher. Thankfully, Jamie Heckert's more fluid approach of 'becoming-queer' permits the researcher to work with what emerges organically.

On 'Becoming-Queer'

How honest, how daring, could I be...? How queer can one be in a university? (Heckert, 2010, p. 42)

Heckert's own research paradigm signposts an unorthodox methodology in qualitative research, which he describes as 'becoming-queer' (2010, p. 43). Much ink has been spilt in discussing the term 'queer', yet Heckert's term 'becoming-queer'

sidesteps any efforts to make queer into a new disciplinary category. It takes the power out of the voices asking 'am I queer enough? Is she really queer?' No one IS queer. Anyone might be becoming-queer. (2010, p. 43)

Heckert details how a 'becoming-queer' methodology relinquishes control of hypotheses, or rigid methodological plans. This follows the path paved by postmodernist theory in antagonizing academic norms. With reference to postmodernist scholarship, Heckert draws on the work of Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1994; 1999; 2000). Heckert narrates his own research journey, where he investigated sexual orientation and the erosion of identity labels, and he describes the issues and emotions he experienced when

conducting qualitative research for his doctoral studies. In one example, he writes:

I have a memory of my supervisor asking me why I was so sure these stories would be suitable for my research. I wasn't sure and I couldn't explain to him why I wanted to do this. Listening to my own intuition, I was making a queer methodological choice. (2010, p. 45)

He describes his approach as one where 'the theoretical development of the work, not simply as illustrations of high theory, but as theoretically sophisticated in themselves' (2010, p. 48). This is contrary to traditional theory-led investigations. Heckert's 'becoming-queer' methodology is one which – although aware of binary borders: theory/data; researcher/researched; hetero/homo; right/wrong (2010, p. 43) – the lines are blurred. This 'becoming-queer' methodology has principles I embrace, yet I suggest a shift in nomenclature based on the work of Judith Butler.

Judith Butler: Doing and Undoing

During the 1990s, Butler pioneered a critical shift within the domain of gender and sexual theory, with the publication of *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993). Her significant contribution to queer theory enabled an understanding of gender as a performative identity. She sees the norms which govern gendered identity as a social construct:

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity of locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts* [*sic*]. (Butler, 1990, p. 191)

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.

A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender. (1990, p. 45)

Put in less opaque terms, gender can be viewed as culturally enforced and driven by compulsory heterosexuality. Such gender norms are powerful only because they have been established and are repeated. Thus, gendered identity is brought about and perpetuated through its own repetition. Gender performativity is not simply putting on a conscious identity on a day-to-day basis, but there is compunction about it, and the individual becomes gendered through this (un)conscious repetition of gendered accessories and behaviours. Butler labels this performativity as compulsive because individuals subconsciously seek to conform because it is practically impossible to break free entirely:

Performativity describes this relation of being implicated in that which one opposes, the turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power. (1993, p. 241)

Butler warns that performativity should not be confused with performance. Whereas the latter is dramatic, light-hearted and entertaining, the former is compulsory and forced upon individuals through 'the forces of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death' (1993, p. 95). She continues, noting how performative signifiers are not under individual control, rather they form part of a collective significance:

The reach of their signifiability cannot be controlled by the one who utters or writes, since such productions are not owned by the one who utters them. They continue to signify in spite of their authors, and sometimes against their authors' most precious intentions. (1993, p. 241)

To expose such signifiers as arbitrary constructs, Butler asserts that we must subvert such gendered norms in order to break the power

of repetition. Thus, in suggesting that gender is an unstable concept, she observes that within the performativity there is also an inbuilt interval between the compulsory, repetitive re-enactments that create and maintain the illusions of identity, and this is the potential site of disruption. Ken Stone summarizes this neatly, noting how the repeated acts of gender are '(re)installed as norms; and they come to seem quite solid and substantial. Yet there are differences, gaps, moments of confusion, and multiple possibilities for meaning among these citations' (2007, p. 192).

To illustrate the act of subversion of gender norms, Butler uses the example of a drag queen to highlight the performative nature of gender. She argues how this exposes the instability of gender and the performative nature of identities which are interpreted in binary terms as masculine or feminine. Essentially, drag queens parody gender, mimicking normative assumptions about gender. Drag exposes and disrupts the arbitrary foundations on which social and cultural gender assumptions are made.

One of Butler's most significant claims was her argument about the arbitrary foundations on which heterosexuality is constructed, as gender and heterosexuality are arguably firmly grounded on a social level. Daniel Warner simplifies the notion of the performativity of gender:

Consider this: of all the men you interact with on a daily basis, how many of their penises have you ever really inspected for biological authenticity? Do we not usually just presume their existence and move on from there? In practice, judgements of gender identity are based on public performances, not private parts. (2004, p. 324)

In *Undoing Gender* Butler describes the *doing* of gender, before calling for its *undoing*:

If gender is a kind of a doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one's knowing and without one's willing, it is not for that reason automatic or mechanical. On the contrary, it is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint. Moreover, one does not 'do' one's gender alone. One is always 'doing' with

or for another, even if the other is only imaginary. (2004, p. 1)

To consider oneself as an individual agent is false, according to Butler. To be human is to be entwined in relations with others, as noted in my account of Miller-McLemore's 'living human web' in Part One of this chapter. Our connections with others are involuntary; we have no choice in our susceptibility to others: 'Let's face it, we're undone by each other. And if we are not, we're missing something' (Butler, 2004, p. 19).

Although put in rather negative terms, remaining within the complexity of Butler's understanding of human relations is significant in order to articulate a platform for 'undoing' theology. Butler substantiates the notion of 'undoing' in acknowledging the 'doing': 'we must be undone in order to do ourselves: we must be part of a larger social fabric of existence in order to create who we are' (2004, pp. 100–01). As we acknowledge that our identities and life stories are relationally produced, Butler wants us to consider in what ways we are 'undone'. To whom do we have attachments, responsibilities, connections?

Butler cites grief and desire as two of the factors by which we are connected and vulnerable towards others (2004, p. 19). Although Butler does not refer directly to any desire for connectivity with the divine, her notions of creation, existence and social relationality discussed above can be translated into theological terms. Desiring God and desire for engaging in non-normative sexual practices are processes by which my participants are 'undone'. Therefore, a Butlerian approach would require theology to be 'undone' too.

Breaking the Habits: Unbecoming and Undoing

E. L. McCallum and Mikka Tuhkanen substantiate Heckert's advocacy of a queer-becoming: 'if queer theorists have agreed on anything, it is that, for queer thought to have any specificity at all, it must be classified by becoming, the constant breaking of habits' (2011, p. 10). This idea of a 'constant breaking of habits' suggests an interruption to the repetition of acts. A theory of 'becoming-

queer' attempts to subvert the repetition of acts: it breaks the cycle, the norms, and this rupture becomes uncategorizable. Yet, to cite 'becoming' as a queer process suggests an established model of queer, introducing its own cycle and norms. Once an attempt to reify how to 'do' queer has been explained, it actually no longer becomes queer. It no longer recognizes the need to break habits and repetition; dangerously, it attempts to categorize queer. McCallum and Tuhkanen point out that 'becoming becomes notably un-queer, describing an orthodox relation between subject and its context: queer is nothing if not improper, unfitting, unsuitable' (2011, p. 10).

Therefore, in building upon Heckert's 'becoming-queer' stance, I argue that we must equally balance this with a conscious 'unbecoming' too. McCallum and Tuhkanen acknowledge the real personal challenges queer work presents:

Butler opens up the space to think queer becoming as unbecoming, as a question of the lack of fit, the difficulties of interpretation, the moments of textual resistance or of unintelligibility that scholars ... wrestle with in their work. (2011, p. 10)

This raises the argument that it is perhaps un-queer to classify Heckert's 'becoming-queer' approach as a methodology. Methodology, as a systematic description of academic undertaking, is a word that smacks of order, rigour and process. Butler herself states, 'passions for foundations and methods sometimes get in the way of an analysis of contemporary political culture' (2004, p. 181), and this is true for queer practical theology.

Acknowledging 'becoming-queer' as a process of unbecoming too is therefore not so much a method, but a tapestry, interwoven and yet unthreaded. 'Becoming-queer' is connoted by a process where subjects constantly or performatively rework and reinvent their lack of fit while remaining embedded and conscious of the hegemonic binary. Thus, there are potential pitfalls to both Butler and Heckert's theorizing, which employs vocabulary that can be challenged by their antonyms such as 'becoming/unbecoming' 'queer/un-queer'. Antonymic couplings always point to the existence of binary positions which queer has attempted to subvert.

Butler's pivotal theorizing on *undoing* has methodological

considerations for the sharing of sexual stories as a source for undoing theology. There cannot be claims to 'do' theology in this way, as it requires to be 'undone'.

Queer Failure: Concern About Not Being 'Serious' Enough

The temporary totalization performed by identity categories is a necessary error. And if identity is a necessary error, then the assertion of 'queer' will be necessary as a term of affiliation, but it will not fully describe those it purports to represent. As a result, it will be necessary to affirm the contingency of the term: to let it be vanquished by those who are excluded by the term but who justifiably expect representation by it. (Butler, 1993, p. 230)

According to Butler, as soon as queer is claimed to be representative of one group with a shared or collective identity, it excludes others. Each time it is claimed as representative of that group, it fails to be able to resist normativity. She talks about 'necessary failures' (1990, p. 199) due to 'a variety of incoherent configurations that in their multiplicity exceed and defy the injunction by which they are generated' (1990, p. 199). Similarly, Cornwall notes how queer is aware of its own shortcomings; 'failure, inadequacy and obsolescence are built into queer from the start' (2011, p. 15).

Thus, the notion of failure when 'undoing theology' based on queer paradigms is one which needs to be addressed. In *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), Judith Halberstam recognizes the failings of queer and goes in search of some alternatives. The premise of her text is put in simple terms:

Under certain circumstances, failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world. (2011, pp. 2–3)

The notion of queerness could therefore be built on conscious failure: a failure to conform or to belong. Halberstam's position is that queer should not be remoulded in order for us to seek to adapt

to the model which fits all but none at the same time, but rather that we should accept failure willingly and enthusiastically, as it offers elements of surprise. Halberstam therefore offers 'low theory' to explore alternatives and to look for a way out of the usual traps and impasses of binary formulations' (2011, p. 2). The use of low theory serves as a critique to queer formulations which have claimed to break new ground but held on tight to conventional methods. Halberstam continues, 'low theory tries to locate all the in-between spaces that save us from being snared by the hooks of hegemony and speared by the seductions of the gift shop' (2011, p. 2).

Mobilizing low theory exposes itself to the possibility of not being credible or serious enough. Yet this is Halberstam's intention:

Being taken seriously means missing out on the chance to be frivolous, promiscuous, and irrelevant. The desire to be taken seriously is precisely what compels people to follow the tried and true paths of knowledge production around which I would like to map a few detours. Indeed terms like *serious* and *rigorous* tend to be code words, in academia as well as other contexts, for disciplinary correctness; they signal a form of training and learning that confirms what is already known according to approved methods of knowing, but they do not allow for visionary insights or flights of fancy. (2011, p. 6)

Halberstam continues, 'Training of any kind, in fact ... is about staying in well-lit territories and about knowing exactly which way to go before you set out. Like many others before me, I propose that instead the goal is to lose one's way' (2011, p. 6).

Accordingly, I express my desire to subvert the *doing* of theology by describing the sharing of sexual stories as part of a queer paradigm: an undoing of traditional theology. Fully aware of the inescapable binary of 'doing' and 'undoing', this form of theology subverts traditional approaches by undoing them, thus remaining a queer enterprise. By not following rigid processes with distinctive lines of enquiry, an undoing of theology is unbound and creative. It does not create or follow rules, nor search for concrete models. Butler states that the theoretical and political task at hand is one of *undoing gender*, Viviane Namaste states that the theoretical and

political task is one of *undoing theory*. In combining both views here, I state that the task is *undoing theology*. In the three narrative chapters which follow, this task is accomplished through the sharing of intimate stories.