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### Queering Empathy

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# QUEERING EMPATHY

by

Bobby Wesner

Presented in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Dance

Hollins University  
Roanoke, Virginia  
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dedicated to

my parents who have taught me unconditional love

my siblings who have learned shared and exemplified mom and dad's love in ways i couldn't have dreamed

my children

my ex-wife

my lover justin

my friends and peers who have inspired encouraged admonished and patiently nudged and prodded me with love and dignity

your lives love and challenges have made me better

thank you



Figure 1 *strings attached*, 29x60, tissue paper, acrylic, pastel, watercolor, crayon, marker, pen, string, on canvas. Bobby Wesner, 2022/23



Figure 2 *letters*, 24x36, handwritten letters and envelopes, pastel, marker, on canvas.  
Bobby Wesner, 2023



*/boys/*

i was in the seventh grade. he was in the eighth. he still had a layer under his skin from childhood. i never had much baby fat. they'd call me a scrawny little kid. he kept his hair tight to his head. i don't know how long it was. very curly and tight. mine was shaggy. like a skater-dude. i was wearing my older sisters ripped of guess jeans and t-shirts in those days. the boxers would hang over the waistline and through the holes. i've never touched a black person's hair. until then i don't think he had touched a white boy's hair with the tenderness he touched mine. i had never kissed a boy. or touched or hugged or sucked or jerked. it was our first time and we were both nervous. i was sleeping over. we slept in his living room. his parents were upstairs. his brother was off to college. it started with just a touch then a touch that lasted a little longer. a look. then one that didn't end. a kiss. we figured out that we knew. the risk he faced as a black boy wasn't on my radar. risks for people of color weren't seen or heard around our parts. it was mid-1980's and he was one of only five or six black and brown people at our school. i don't know his risks. i don't think he knew mine back then either. we were exploring ourselves as much as we were one another's bodies. boys that found out queer was possible.

the living room must've sat just above their furnace. it kicked on and was loud and i wondered if his parents could hear it. concerned but not stopping we kept one eye open towards the stairway. i noticed he had more pubic hair than i did. his body had a different odor than mine too. there's a scent that boys make when they sweat-for-sex. a certain sweet that sticks to your skin. a brand new one when it's mixed with your own. i fell asleep that night sniffing my fingers. i could smell his balls and cock. sometimes i still can. the next day we sucked each other again in his bedroom. his mom was right downstairs. the fear was so real that after we came i froze. the

fear became shame and guilt. i put that discomfort between he and i. it filled the next few years with a lot of silence.

the layout of the house is still clear. the kitchen and the living room sitting room and the wooden archways connecting them. the dark woodwork. the small winding staircase with his room directly to the left of the landing. the kitchen and breakfast nook right below. i could hear the footsteps on the floor. easy to know where people were. it was the same as mine. an old farmhouse with a coal furnace. it would only heat the first floor and Ohio winter winds blow hard. moms crocheted blankets and grandmas' quilts blocked the drafts. his place might have been the first place i'd ever heard a furnace turn on before. his home was cozy. warm. his were different than mine. for a moment the surroundings. smells. touch. listening. baked the sensations altogether. a memory. maybe it doesn't matter how much of its true anymore. he and i have changed a lot since then and truth doesn't seem as important as connection.

i was ready to leave. packed up and uncomfortably waiting for my mom to show up. the euphoria of feeling seen and seeing one another started to wane. the incoming tide was of fear guilt shame anxiety and homophobia. his mom could see me. see us. see what we did. assuming she knew but assuring myself she didn't was paralyzing and confusing. it wasn't so much that i was afraid of what we did. i had already dreamt about those things since sex was a memory. those things felt as normal and easy as any awkward 7th and 8th grader trying to avoid each other's braces. it was the fear of being shamed bullied abused isolated outcast. of bringing shame or disappointment to my mom and dad. or worse...talk about my sexuality to either of them. mom showed up. in the car I thought she could smell the sex. my fingers lift to my nose. inhale our scent. later that afternoon, in my own bedroom. in private. i relived the fantasy of finally being seen. feeling seen. i laid there alone jerking off. new sweat. spit. cum. we were still

together in my mind. his beautiful soft lips and the smoothness of his skin. the skin of his dick was so soft. even when he was hard. up until then his hands were the softest i had ever touched. a few years after high school i held hands with a few of my grandparents on their death beds. the softness, gentleness, and the way in which we held each other meshed beauty and connection. maybe love.

the apprehension was tender. in those moments the gentlest touch embeds the memories. as do the rarity. the closeness of life and the tenderness of death. i know why i connect experiences between death and queer. a jungian shadow-like-casserole. queer presence then and now. now and then. around.

some residual roadblocks. some freedoms. the spaces and the people in between keep telling stories. keep telling stories.

*/end/boys/*



Figure 3 *untitled sculpture #1*, 8x8 canvas, acrylic, watercolor, marker, crayon, copper wire. Bobby Wesner, 2022.

I did this research, mostly, for myself. At first, to get a job. Then to start over. Then to learn how to live queer. Then how to do so within practices of personal utopia. Prior to starting the research, I would have left Queer as an uncapitalized queer. I still vacillate between the two. The realities are layered. No one is only one thing. I accept my queer even when sometimes we want to do Queer. They are in conversation. The traumas from closeted queer life in a hostile world

have cracked a bit. As did the gatherings of some sacred bits and pieces of my past life to reilluminate Queer life differently.

Celebrating the cracks, and what came out of them, gave way to identifying myself within the structures of dominant power. It gave way to imagining a world without them.<sup>1</sup> A personal journey to dismantle normative assumptions about power structures suddenly cast a wider net than intended. If I had made assumptions about my own past, I had made them about everyone. All the systems that sustained my traumas also sustain marginalized communities' trauma. I sought for how marginalized experiences were similar or different within Queer, Crip, Black, Brown, Indigenous, and Feminist communities. That process abstracted an autonomy and agency I was looking for to pursue Queer utopia. A hope. A possibility of connection and growing solidarity with a group of people to create change. I needed information beyond my lived experiences to help unveil the impact of white supremacy, imperialism, capitalism, and the patriarchy. Information to reveal the mechanisms in place that uphold their power. Information to expose their propaganda that creates division amongst marginalized groups such as so-called journalist intentionally lying to constituents for the advancement of a political agenda.<sup>2</sup> Utopian practices have made me curious to investigate the vulnerabilities of these power structures. I wonder if it isn't the act of imagining life without them that may be their greatest vulnerability? A world of growing comradery and collective action.

Personal utopia is fluid. It changes. It flops. Repeatedly it flops until the flopping is the answer. The failures can and often are the beginnings. It is creating a world outside of presuppositional idea that a flop is a flop. A failure a failure. To get away from a presupposed

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 89.

<sup>2</sup> "Rupert Murdoch Says Fox Stars 'endorsed' Lies about 2020. He Chose Not to Stop Them," *NPR* (NPR, February 28, 2023), <https://www.npr.org/transcript/1159819849>.

approach I tried to nurture the failures and create space for them. In the introduction of *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam brings up Michael Arndt, screenwriter for *Little Miss Sunshine*.<sup>3</sup> Arndt's inspiration for the film served as a counter to a statement made by then Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger of California: "if there is one thing in this world that I despise, it's losers!"<sup>4</sup> Of Arndt's central character Halberstam writes, "Olive is destined to fail, and to fail spectacularly," and of the entire production he comments "(it)...produces shade and light in equal measure and knows that the meaning of one always depends upon the meaning of the other."<sup>5</sup>

The artwork through this written work account for new creative methods to search for a more deeply layered self. They exposed in me a need to play. To use the wrong mediums. To aim for one thing, then change. To make choices or not. To work with essence without fearing the result might be less than an aesthetic or meaning. It meant a little more when the results came from the unpredictable. Surprise made new connections to some very old material.

The manifestation performance featured technical "failures" from the rear projector. The ending result was a marriage of unknowns and immediacy. The unknowns were how to react. The immediacy was the decision to be. The reaction was to absorb, stay present, and enjoy.

Personal utopia is a mindset to reinvent the world in which I live by some means of:

- Ideation:
  - An imagining of one's future apart from one's current reality. Breathing into Discoveries.
- Activation

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<sup>3</sup> Halberstam, "Introduction: Low Theory," in *The Queer Art of Failure* (Tantor, 2019), 4–5, Audible Book.

<sup>4</sup> Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*.

<sup>5</sup> Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*.

- Manifestations. Creativity. Meditations. Art making.
- Restoration
  - Restoration began by expanding my understandings of my white privilege, mining for my assumptions, and questioning why I have them. Assumptions born out of my privileges as well as the marginalization I experienced as a Queer person raised in poverty, differently abled, and creative. Both privilege and marginalization have meshed this life together. As I seek to liberate my biggest and best Queer self, yielding space, and actively promoting space, place, and peace for those marginalized by race and color is important. By doing so provided an evolution to my work. Scrutinizing my past, my working practices, and my process revealed that liberation and oppression is not in a vacuum. It is in tandem with a broad, creative, and diverse community. One that happens across generations. Later I will reference the impact of “horizontal oppression” or, as Suzanne Pharr calls, “horizontal hostility” in her article “The Common Elements of Oppression.”<sup>6</sup> Pharr writes, “It is safer to express hostility toward other oppressed peoples than toward the oppressor.” Restoration is investing in a new way of building life.
- Retaliation
  - Retaliation has an air of uprising to it. To get somewhere we must align and enact vision. It is an urgency for a collective of marginalized peoples, in solidarity, to take long term tactical action. The final summer of my MFA studies we were a body of cohorts marginalized by race, color, hair, poverty, immigration

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<sup>6</sup> Suzanne Pharr, *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism* (Berkeley, Chardon Press, 1997), 53–64.

status, body, gender, sexuality, ableness, heritage, nationality, political affiliations, religious beliefs, etc. Each of us related to levels of oppressions differently. It created a microcosm for living and experiencing a negotiation of how points of entry left deference to one another's unique intersection(s) within the spectrum of marginalization. I use the term *spectrum* later in these writings as a reference to the Wheel of Power/Privilege by Sylvia Duckworth based upon Kimberlé Crenshaw's writings of Intersectionality.<sup>7</sup> Spectrum, used in this sense, offers me a word to connect with the multi-dimensional, trans-temporal approach of my practices. It also ads access for a better vantage point, or color, of the spaces marginalized people hold, those they should hold, and my ability to learn and see the importance of holding space for more than myself or those just like me.

*/friends/*

if I could smell love, would it be a robust fragrance like a friend who stood up for me? would it hover like a demand for someone's freedoms? would it be the new scent of mixing different minds and spirits together?  
if I could smell love, would i smell the lingering of hugs. the end of performances?  
*/friends/*

Personal utopia must retaliate as an expression of united discontent against systemic, dominating power structures. It must gain a strength from uniting with others. A strength born of humility and willingness to own ones fuckery.

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<sup>7</sup> Kimberly Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1.



fuckery: the likelihood to fuck something up. often reflecting a positive connotation like, “to fuck-shit-up.”

to fail and flop are to fuckery as to perfect and succeed are to adhere.

- Revolution
  - Art making is always connected to movements of change. Art provides reflections of the movement, symbolism that unites a collective people, and expressive rebellions to highlight the purpose of the movement and sharing it with others.

Personal utopia is not a denial of a collective utopia. There is no room for dualism outside of analogical-scenario-based work right now. A world alongside of another world will have different landscapes. And each world, each person’s unique experiences, host microcosmic communities within them and all-around them. They’ve all given shape to the here and now of each person and potential interaction with another. Each world, known or unknown, give shape to the future. It is a timeless, ephemeral, transtemporal existence free from the confines of the squelching, imposed, positionings of normative/ableist standards throughout our “straight time” culture. José Muñoz discusses a term he likes, “Queer utopian memory,” as such: “memory is most certainly constructed and more important, always political.... (with) world-making potentialities.”<sup>8</sup> Memory, as a temporal tool, taken, and Queered, becomes bent toward transitioning one thing into another. Trans, as a means of defining the next historical era, reclaims and sets a recourse of the fascist uprising. Trans defines societal shift.<sup>9</sup> A great shift is happening and transtemporal ideations feel very important. Judith Halberstam writes:

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<sup>8</sup> Jose Esteban Munoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Utopia* (New York City: NYU Press, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Mikhail Epstein, ed., *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Late Soviet and Post-Soviet Culture*, (Providence, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1998), [http://www.focusing.org/apm\\_papers/epstein.html](http://www.focusing.org/apm_papers/epstein.html).

“Queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of the conventional forward-moving narratives of birth, marriage, reproduction, and death. It is usual in the study of gender and sexuality to use the term "queer" to refer simply to "sexual minorities." And while "queer" certainly takes on this meaning in my study, it can also be defined here as an outcome of temporality, life scheduling, and eccentric economic practices.”<sup>10</sup>

Queer Utopian memory. Transtemporal time. Queer time. Queering/bending Trans’ing of space, presence, past, and futures are strong arguments to work toward Queer fluidity as a means of understanding a multiplicity of individuals and collectives. Within the Trans era (a title of the current era, or age, that I suggest is needed (aka: classical era, modern era, post-modern era, etc.)) dualism will die, along with its failures to produce cohesive arguments...i.e., one thing will equate another. It is not fully so. Effect will certainly leave a mark on an age/era, but with a fuller understanding of queer time, assumed power, or innate knowledge of an issue effect is only a small part of the argument. A fuller argument negates that a single cause may create a single effect. There is no room within a multiplicity to state one equals another in terms of causation. None can say, complicitly, that within historical, social, and political structures that a single idea has transitioned, or had implications of, civilizations and cultural, normative behaviors. We are of too many times, places, spaces, and histories to definitively claim anything. The argument, as I defend throughout this writing, is that we are one, and yet, separate. All without reason to believe we can walk in another person’s shoes with possibility to believe there

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<sup>10</sup> Judith Halberstam, “What’s That Smell?: Queer Temporalities and Subcultural Lives,” *The Barnard Center for Research on Women*, Public Sentiment, no. 2.1 (Summer 2003), <https://sfoonline.barnard.edu/ps/printjha.htm>.

is a common thread of experience that connects us. All, but not all, wanting to move forward, collectively for the betterment of our world. Some, estranged yet longing, want for empathy and understanding to combine our voices, and our communities, to take a deep dive into what is possible outside of the constraints of systemic dominating forces framed to divide us. Some, not all, feel primed to sit together and discover the right paths of empathy that do not disregard the plights of the marginalization's unknown to them directly. This sum sits ready to discover their place and space to better serve the persons aligned with them despite the color, creed, credentials, or colony from which they came. People with a growing awareness that our enemies are not one another, but the systems in which we came from that have pitted us against one another. We are one. With one, there is empathy. And anything added unto that without empathy is a lie.



Figure 4 Photo of film projected onto the hay, marley, and straw bales. Bobby Wesner, May 2023. Original film, September 2022.

*/persona/person/prescription/*

i sometimes thought of the theatres as tombs. a place I could feel the performers there before me and live within their stories. i remember their ghosts. i wanted to feel them and would hang around for the moment they arrived. imaginatively or otherwise. it was a practice that left a deep reverence and connection to the people I dreamed existed in the space before me. dreams influenced by my exposure to history books. old western movies that my father loves. a set of

world atlas encyclopedias my mom had on our bookshelf. the idealization of anna pavlova travelling to old stagecoach opera houses through small-town-America. i felt a haunting that gave life and connection to the previous players. they were old shotgun towns turned vintage-chic like preston, flagstaff, and jerome, arizona. they were rustbelt towns like ashland, mansfield, and findlay, ohio investing in arts to revitalize economic impact in downtown areas. larger communities like akron, cleveland, and phoenix also played the revitalization game with federal and state dollars. the midwest and the wild west each provided rigged backstage systems of times past that gave good shelter to contemporary work despite the antiquated hemp rope rail systems dirt floor basements and raked stages. the hauntings were more real. more weighted. more personal. other aspiring and impressive venues fell short. but larger audiences and higher profile gigs paid a lot of people. they also gave access to new elements of depth width two- and three-dimensional visual effects and refining/curating technical effects content sound and lighting. creating/sustaining dance to match required financial impact sucked. the need to prove your visibility. community impact. reaching targeted audiences. the larger venues provided a greater financial equity. investors grantors and collaborators wanted to share community within these spaces more than the weighted felt experiences of the dirt-floor-raked-staged venues. the work surrounding the ancient spaces would evoke a nostalgia. an unknown type of nostalgia that went deeper than actual memories. that's why I call them ancient. they have ancient memories to hear. They were a venue to expose the ghosts with those I loved and wanted to be loved by. family. friends. peers. people i somehow connected. those venues mirror my ghosts. the silent understanding of what was present, yet unseen, became a tactic to exist in a culture i had very little in common with. audiences seemed to like the disruption to my average theatrical events. eventually there was an anticipation about it. i was aware of the secrets i kept and leaned into

them as a mechanism to maintain space for myself. hidden spaces. nooks and crannies. oddities from normative expectations left private agencies i took for me to survive.

some theatres were places of convening for civic and school organizations. town hall meetings. community fundraisers. bake sales. quilt showcases. 4-h meetings. in terms of gathering places they could be treated like church basements or local lodges like the elks. masonic. eagles. or vfw posts. the ghost-filled-spaces gentrified into the outreach portion of our programming. the token places. the larger venues paid the bills to sustain us. the artists. their families. they were connected to institution that could expand future engagements. visibility and networking became overwhelmingly important. i failed to keep integral aspects of myself together.

i entered a place beyond the dirt floor theatres with hard work. bootstraps. assumed power. by some measurables provided by the sources of support i/we were doing okay.

hard work. bootstraps. assumed power.

i forgive me of these things now. mostly.

searching for understanding doesn't stop. white privilege and queerness mix and mingle throughout my relationship and responsibilities to allies of marginalized people.

*/end/persona/person/prescription/*



Figure 5 Photo of film projected onto the hay, marley, and straw bales. Bobby Wesner, May 2023. Original film, February 2023.

Exploring my white privilege, my queer self, and my relationships and responsibilities to allies within the Queer, Crip, Black, Brown, Indigenous, and Feminist (QCBBIF) communities provoked the following questions and influences:

- White privilege:
  - White supremacy has controlled these spaces built upon land that was stolen. The history of them in the education system teaches a glorifying white, heteronormative, patriarchal, hierarchal principal meant to demonize, exoticize, and demoralize indigenous peoples. It is done to further a propaganda justifying committing genocide to accumulate land mass from Sea to Shining Sea. It erases the slave trade advocated, endorsed, and entrenched in the lives of the American

founders and generations to follow. American's public education system exploits histories of Black rights, the Emancipation Proclamation, Civil Rights movement, and in current times and public/media events. Currently state education systems and the Supreme Court are increasing efforts to erase histories and reassert white domination over QCBIB communities.

- To this I ask:
  - “Where can I be an empath?”
  - “Where can I apply it with practical allied effect?”
- Queer self: the past, present, and futurity of my personal utopia. What, when, where, and how.
  - What was/is pleasure driven? When did it reveal itself in the past? Where and when were queer experiences an expression of desperation? How do my ideations of sexual freedom, agency, and pleasure-driven experiences continue to wrestle with previous embodied practices of sexual deprivations, confusions, religious and Christian Nationalist-influenced tactics to become their picture of a more perfect holy self? Born in 1975, I identified with, and accepted the normalized, politicized, cultural movement in the early 1980's of the queer/death/fear mongering government and media. Like pouring vinegar on an open, queer flesh wound, I enrolled, trained, accepted, lived by, and reared children in reverence to the allotted amount of fear, shame, and condemnation for oneself, one's unique and beautiful rarity. Anything natural or worldly undermined the teachings of a non-denominational, independent, reformed presbyterian and southern Baptist influenced belief system. We were to spite ourselves, our longings, our desires,



and recognize them as necessary sacrifices for the glory of god, his son, and the promise of his holy spirit among us. A supernatural spirit sent as a guide toward greater earthly purity and, ultimately, heavenly perfection for eternity.<sup>11</sup>

Unpacking, assessing, evaluating, exploring, reassigning, and claiming new agencies to move myself away from the brainwashing and backwards patriarchal, imperialist, heteronormative, normalized religiosity will take much more to overcome than a single paper and public manifestation. As will the embodied practices of physical and mental dysmorphias accrued while doing so. Those ideas will resonate with me throughout the journey of finding my own location. One amidst the subcultural worlds of underserved and oppressed peoples by systems of domination.

- Grappling with what is beyond the trauma; lying, hiding, fear, and shame continue to inform the present. What is out there. What from my past practices can I shed? What remains and why? Again, much of these are questions for projects after this written work. Regardless, they offer perspectives of past, assessments of present, and opportunity to walk into the future with a greater sense of agency and self.
- What is an imaginative practitioner of utopia and why is it relative to defend the existence of such beyond the obvious challenges presented with scholarly, or academic papers. Why is it important to me? What of it informs me, and the scholarly community, what I need as a queer, nonnormative, antiracist, anticapitalistic, antipatriarchal, antiimperialist person? I want a more rational,

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Vlack, “Dispensational Theology (Concise Theological Series, April 9, 2020), <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/dispensational-theology/>.

cultural, societal surrounding that is inclusive of people? Why is that valid context for this writing and how does it relate to a greater, personal utopia? Is it a path for a greater, collective utopia?

- To this I ask:
  - “Where is my queer self as an expression of joy?”
  - “How do I receive empathy?”
- My placement, location, or intersection within a spectrum of marginalized, dominated, dehumanized, oppressed peoples’, victims of imperialism, white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy.
  - How does my white privilege comply with, and/or what does it imply from, the advantages I have today concerning gender and race over those that are non-white and non-cisgender conforming?
  - What has developed, evolved, and changed within my practice and research to exclaim a personal utopian existence/practice that gives myself license to be an advocate for, a respectful representative ally, and an empath to marginalized peoples?
  - How is my current creative work embodying and owning my white privilege? My cisgendered-ness? My extreme past Christ-centeredness, heteronormativity, husbandry, fatherhood, poverty, artistry, lack of formal higher education, or closeted queer self? Is it handling those past stories with the reverence due to them while offering the acceptance, love, and self-empathy due to myself? Does it do so for all those that intersect with dominant, oppressive forces?

- How can I embrace a process that centers the hidden, unspoken, secretive, covered-up, by meeting them with unconditional joy? With a celebration?

In the outline above under white privileges, I ask, “how do I be an empath?” Identifying my placement and location within the spectrum of marginalized groups, a collective of us under dominant forces, I ask “How can I embrace process...?” Stated differently I could ask, “how do I enact empathy for more people?” Both sentiments are requests. Questions that ask for direction, or clarification, and may lack intuition. Both sentiments could incur critique for not showing up with a more informed self, placing the burden of my education unto the labor of people I intend to lift. In this I realize my limitations. Potential pitfalls to engage in “horizontal oppressions.”<sup>12</sup> Balancing the shadow-spaces between wanting to show up as an ally, and needing more information to do so, require me to stand still and listen while nurturing an agency and urgency to act. A tempered, eager self, presented and prepared to observe, investigate, learn, and respect is not enough. Empathy is defining itself beyond a two-fold process of identifying place and moving into action. Within the spectrum of marginalized communities, one must infiltrate their individual creative voice with information about what connects them to others. Connections, at a minimum, that help us see the world in which we are located. As bell hooks prescribes, in an interview with Ken Paulson, “...when we honestly locate ourselves, we form the basis of meeting with other people and being able to establish trust.”<sup>13</sup> But location is not enough. A deeper relationship with members of the spectrum establishes a role of solidarity. Hopefully trust. Trust and solidarity require me to pursue acts of ideation, activation, reparation, retaliation, and revolution. I ask how to be an empath while considering my whiteness and the limitations of

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<sup>12</sup> Pharr, *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism*, 53–64.

<sup>13</sup> bell hooks, "Speaking Freely: bell hooks, interview by Ken Paulson," YouTube, 2002, S03 E25, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2bmnwehlpA&t=1286s>.

connecting with marginalized peoples outside of the Queer world I embody. bell hooks suggests considering one's place within the four points of cultural power systems: imperialism, white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy.<sup>14</sup> hooks opinion is that the term Intersectionality is too digestible, rather, they challenge us to use the systems by name.<sup>15</sup>

Above, in the bullet point, My Queer Self, I ask for help. "How do I receive empathy?" My own oppressed histories accept the fluidity of unfolding transtemporal qualities. The vulnerability of both my privilege and oppressions. I ask to receive empathy outside of a timeline or pre-determined order of events. This personal act of utopian practice places my world into the worlds of others that, like me, are oppressed, as well as others unlike me, yet also oppressed.

When I recall my first queer sexual experience, what did he and I share mutually? How was his experience different than mine because of our race? How was it similar because of our queerness? Our societal class? How did I feel a great weight off my shoulders finally having queer comradeship while shouldering a pillory of shame and fear? The challenge to answer these questions came with a series of deconstructing exercises and practices throughout this research.

A brief respite of queer, outward living in my early twenties, and an amount of time as a performative, out, gay persona, a retreat to pillory status came easily and freely. The findings became, and remain, a clearer picture of the paradox I participated in. One that absorbed a conflated view of my young gay love scenarios and a rejection of its value and authenticity. One that, once shed, led to a processing of familial traits of depression, anxiety, suicide, and a personal history of practicing modern-American-Christian dogma. The result, a dualistic rationality, an archetype, led to accepting Jesus as the presented savior. Upon acceptance of

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<sup>14</sup> Helena, "All About bell hooks: A Visionary Feminist," *Disorient*, December 2, 2020. <https://disorient.co/bell-hooks/#relationship-to-intersectionality-theory>.

<sup>15</sup> Katy Stenmetz, "She Coined the Term 'Intersectionality' Over 30 Years Ago. Here's What It Means to Her Today," *time.com*, February 20, 2020, <https://time.com/5786710/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality/>.

Christianity as the reasonable, rational, and enlightened way forward I practiced a mantra of self-annihilation. Now, moving away from these understandings, and the accompanying lifestyle, I approach the question, “How do I receive empathy?” with a great sense of honesty. In part, and currently embedded in this research, that is a question of how to consider the importance of multiplicity within oneself, and within the paradigm of spectrum. A multifaceted, non-linear spectrum of entry and departure into worlds of those, queer, like me, and oppressed, and those unlike me, marginalized, and oppressed.



Figure 6 Studio/barn, cleaned, wired for projectors' electric requirements, prepared for recording dance, and re-recording dance-on-film projected onto the local environment. Bobby Wesner 2023

*/farm/boys/*

*/farm/boys/*

my dad had a lot of jobs doing a lot of different things. i'll always think of him as a pig farmer even though he farmed crops. corn, soybeans, wheat. he was also a hunter. we had hound dogs, kept in kennels at our farm. one of the dogs, banker ii, won the grand national championship wild coon hunt. he was a ukc grand champion coon dog. other farmers would contract dad, the farm hands, and the equipment to plant and harvest their crops. like a sharecrop, but not. he was a provider to us, mom, brother (the oldest), three sisters, and me. i was the youngest.

it's the open spaces outlined by tree lines and fence rows. it's the deer's perking their ears up, freezing. seeing their white tails wag as they dart across the soybean fields toward the trees and tall grass.

*/farm/boys/*

they float. pounce. bound their way to safety.  
i see silos good for climbing or playing inside of. if you stand right in the middle of the round, metal, grain bins, the ones with augers coming to and from the silos, you can sing.

it echoes. reverberates. vibrating the body with pitch and waves.

sometimes the waves wouldn't match.

it became dissident. quaking. shuddering. shaking bones and blood.

i would spend forever in places like that around the farm. knowing people might hear me made me suspicious. i wanted it all for me, by me, in me, of me, around me.

to play.

that's a memory of knowing i was alive. i existed there. in the grain bins the songs echoed.

they still echo.

my.body.can't.forget.and.my.ears.can't.unhear.

dance and music became a substitute.

a nice partner.

*/farm/boys/*

i would also sing in the farrowing house. momma hogs would have their piglets there. i spent a lot of time in there cleaning the shit out of it. mama hogs were on elevated crates so the shit would fall through. it'd land on the concrete below. i would get a hoe and pull the shit out onto the aisleway. the aisle was in the middle of the barn and ran from one garage door to another. dad or my brother would push it out with the white tractor. it had a frontend loader. the side aisles had to be pushed out by hand. i would prop the end handle of the hoe up against my pubic bone to leverage my body weight. i could push as much out as possible that way.

sometimes it slipped.

sometimes it hit the walls of the side aisles, or the concrete. i'd be covered in a mixture of shit and piss. sometimes, when we'd remove the testicles from newborn piglets, they'd become part of the mix. same with blood and placenta. that didn't gross me out. i was never really embarrassed about having to do it. the piglets were cute.

I could smell it for days. the shit concoction baked into my skin. hair. fingernails. nose hairs. in the summer dogdays i would wear next to nothing. a tiny pair of torn up levi or wrangler jean shorts. i'd clean the walls and ceiling first so I could ricochet clean water back onto me. like a shower.

I like being alone.

i would jerk off there too. careful not to be caught. i wanted it for me, by me, in me, of me, and around me. isolated spaces felt safe.

dance and art offered isolation too. i took them up on it. along with a scent of musty studios and sweaty artist. it's been a good relationship. a friendship. i find it's been more than i thought it would be. the thing i wanted for me is the thing i needed it to be so i could become more of me, and be more of me, for others.

a source  
cover  
voice  
comfort

*/end/farm/boys/*





Figure 7 *untitled sculpture #2*, work in progress, 33x21x6, tissue paper, acrylic, watercolor, adhesive, on canvas, and wooden frame. Bobby Wesner, March 2020 – January 2023



Figure 8 *Photo*, left recording session of improvisation with *untitled sculpture #2*; right: re-recording session of improvisation with *untitled sculpture #2* projected onto straw bales. Bobby Wesner, May 2023

My history with religion continues to influence the world I see around me. The following reasons are the challenges I have faced, and continue to work with, concerning my recent swing toward progressive thinking and entering active practices to understand and implement agency and autonomy:

- It serves as a counterbalance, emotionally and philosophically, to previous Christian, politically conservative, Republican influences. Perhaps it is a type of tit-for-tat? Or that I use it as a tradeoff to provide myself with assurances. Am I okay without the god of my youth? Is the practice leading toward a vision without, and despite, systems of imperialism, capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy here in the US and internationally.
- I am newly researching and practicing a personal utopian space for myself. In it I unpack my privilege more easily and the oppressive ideations of my past begin to deconstruct. My experience of transitioning into a Queer lifestyle offers me hope. A Queer, fluid, futurity inspiring change for myself, alongside alliances with QCBBIF communities that believe in, and can align with, a shared statement that a greater liberation, and justice, is, and should be, for all. Those held within the margins of society have power in a shared collective to manifest and create change. Subcultural subjugations, protests, and proclamations have inspired radical reimagining's of personal and collective agency. This writing, and thesis manifestation, is the first project in which I am engaging with these concepts. There is an aspect of 'imposter syndrome' that comes along with its newness.
- My history has a swinging emotional and philosophical past (familial, political, social, religious, or otherwise), and the newness of transition into queer, outward living, offer more questions, at times, than provide answers.

The creative practices during this research countered these challenges in a few different ways:

- Rambling writings exploring past queer futurity
- Layering of artwork abstracted, and then abstracted again with video and projected effects
- Dance on film abstracted, and then abstracted again with video and projected effects.

They became base materials I see as a working toolbox. A collection of handcrafted materials to give the questioning and insecurities a validation and space within process. The framework I looked toward was the editing process itself. The doing, undoing, connecting, and separating of the pieces and parts became a reality of how my life has also been a process of doing, undoing, connecting, and separating. How the materials interject, intersect, and add value to the aesthetics of the work was one aspect. Another, as abstractions, they remain full of my inward intentions, while giving those intentions away into the piece. Their assemblies were not guided by time or place. They were, for the audience/viewer, a place their own voices could attach to. Or not. By giving myself away into the piece, I am mostly referring to the editing. Working the material into abstractions while connecting it with the live aspects of the performance (dancing, music, film, lights, environment, etc.). They were mine to mold and sculpt, to give or take, but also hold space for others.

Bill T. Jones spoke with Bill Moyers during an interview and expanded this idea of the abstraction, the use of theatre and effects, and how useful it is to express oneself:

...with abstract movement. And how-- that's why I defend the way in which I use text, because you see a person doing one thing, and you hear something, and once again this notion of association-- you will make a connection. Now, we push it a little bit with sound effects and so on, and Janet Wong's projection of a 19th century gathering of men and women and the dancing man. But it is nothing more than an abstract gesture, heated up in the crucible of our association. It's useful for people to do that exercise. See

something horrible through a formal lens. It's almost like the Greeks used to say, that you had to wear a mask to talk about something tragic. Because if the mask allowed you to talk about the most horrible things back here, and because of the naked face, they said, everyone could see themselves too easily. But the mask, which was the form of the play, and in this respect the abstraction, will allow you to go even deeper in what it could possibly mean.<sup>16</sup>

Somewhere within that curiosity is how I trust the artmaking process. The visual art and dance on film I created leading up to the manifestation meant to serve both as a partner onstage and throughout the practice. They give reference to the layers of myself to explore assumed internal relationships (code switching between various subliminal personas based on trauma and violence as a queer person raised in the 1980's in Midwest America). Layers, with symbolism of past, present, and future, that intersect with different perspectives about my assumed history, my calling to communicate beyond the rational self (artmaking), and ways to connect experiences to create a greater, more emphatic, working process. To embrace empathy for people who have been marginalized, I have begun excavating the ways I have felt marginalized, or forced underground, into secrecy. By assuming my real Queer self, I am better able to advocate for and ally with others.

I think this is important to me because I'm an asshole to myself. I bang the fucking keys on the laptop like I'm trying to build calluses. I just had a pedicure and then dug holes in clay, mixed in good soil, shoveled it altogether, and planted about 200 flowers, perennials, and whatever else was needed. It was a type of cross training as a dancer. I feel tight, but good. Embodied, but waiting for the connection that dance gives to the experience. My hopeful self: encouraging, entrepreneurial, brightest scenario, everything's coming up roses. My defeated self: nothing. How does one consider the glimpses of their past experiences, albeit potential futurities,

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<sup>16</sup> Bill T. Jones, *Bill Moyers Journal*, Bill T. Jones Interview Transcript, December 9, 2009, <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/12252009/watch.html>.

of utopia? Does it require prophet status? No. I believe it is trusting the self to assess their identities within place and space. Trusting our connections to their authenticity, and the ability to subjugate our lived histories/experiences freely, to turn the places and spaces into utopic scores and prompts.

I am multi-faceted. The world around me, and those that share and influence it, provide the spectrum of connectivity. These points of connection wax and wane between live, or present moments, the past, and a growing understanding of those within the spectrum itself.

Narrowing the scope to unearth my lived experiences as a queer person in the 1980's, 90's, much of which was "in the closet," reflect or deflect queer theories, queer artists/artwork, and queer subcultures in my lifetime. The arche of connecting my lived experiences to a period of queer studies and new advocacies reveal cultural norms, political leanings, and religious traumas refuted authentic living amongst queers and marginalized communities. Activating a futurity of queer utopia exposes the fluidity of my queerness. From a cultural perspective queer subculture provide a window of its development in the shadows of systemic oppression. The vantage point of futurity, from within these subcultures, give connective tissue to my queer relationship to the arts and the arts community. Dance and creative processes in general, highlight experiences with different perspectives that are not white, normative, Mid-west, or rural. Yet it is in these systems that my lived experiences coalesce. The journey of crossing between those lines visually impacts the manifestation. The onstage experience abstracts the discourse between what is accepted as cultural norms and a growing queer subculture. It frames the multiplicity, or multi-faceted approach of my performative self/selves. All of which, the selves, and multiple resources of self, choreograph and improvise reaction to, and in reverence of, observing, and being with, the self. It constructs those spaces from a personal context to

exemplify a queering of the experience. It signifies change and a subjugation of personal and collective perspectives.

A multitude of political implications arose from the late seventies and continued throughout the next decade as queers experienced bigotry and prejudice at a heightened level due to the international AIDS epidemic. AIDS, alongside a new political movement that formed alliances between the GOP and American evangelical religions, created a wave of Christian Nationalism that continues to perpetrate alienating, oppressive, and divisive cultural practices today. Fear, shame, hate, and violence emboldened the newly conjured religious right and anyone “other-than-normal” was less-than. Despite the new faces of oppression, acts of liberation became more prevalent and offered voice and vision to queer futurity.<sup>17</sup> The ideas of these liberatory acts, their performativity, and the conflicts/discourse they created culturally impact my world and my creative work. The impact gives a greater understanding of my intersectionality, responsibility, and ability to dialogue with my own Queer authenticity as the basis of the thesis manifestation.

A dualistic, archetypal projection of religion onto my life, and prevailing in U.S. culture and politics, influence the research, writings, and manifestation as well. Being steeply indoctrinated into an extremely Christian conservative camp from 2000 to 2020 my queerness found expression in secret liberatory acts of sex and art making. Previously, for a brief period in the 1990’s, and without the secrecy of the life I led throughout the 2000’s, I manifested moments of queer utopia extending from my life as a dancer as well as my sexual and relational personhood. The contradiction between the life lived out loud and the life lived in the closet created its own subset of personal intersections and multiplicities. There is an imagination there

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<sup>17</sup> *Without You I'm Nothing*, directed by John Boskovich (New Line Cinema ,1990), <https://tubitv.com/movies/579196/without-you-i-m-nothing>.

that has become a current anchor in which the framework of deconstructing my life is based. It is a representation of a dualistic/reactionary-self based upon a religious/cultural/political construct now investigated through a lens of multiplicity. Leaning into how religious oppression influences the frameworks of the conversation, rather than moving away from it, clarifies details concerning its effect on my queer identity. It also “keeps the enemy close” as I attempt to dismantle the familial, physical, and psychological effects those constructs have brought to fruition presently. Judith Halberstam writes of Judith Butler in “What’s that Smell?: Queer Temporalities and Subcultural Lives.” They share, “The power of Judith Butler's work, here and elsewhere, lies in her ability to show how much has been excluded, rejected, abjected in the formation of human community and what toll those exclusions take upon particular subjects.”<sup>18</sup> The toll in which they discuss, as spoken of, and generalized, in this research refers to trauma from marginalization under dominant forces. Halberstam continues,

“... queer subcultures.... can provide material evidence for lives lived "otherwise," outside of the conventional life narratives of family and reproduction, but it can also point to those modes of resistance which survive the encounter between marginal subjects and dominant culture.”

“Queer subcultures.... tend to form in relation to place as much as in relation to a genre of cultural expression and, ultimately, they oppose not only the hegemony of dominant culture but also the mainstreaming of gay and lesbian culture.”

The manifestation is dimensional height, depth, width, digital duplications, sounds, texts, film, and artwork to exemplify the dualistic discourse and its inescapable attachments to my performative self. As I am either abstracted from, deconstructed within, or influenced by such constructs, the work I produce will be as well. A layering of various mediums through the complexities of technology and theatrical capabilities gives space to express the place I exist, the backdrop under which I view myself, and the queer futurity I represent.

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<sup>18</sup> Halberstam, “What’s That Smell?: Queer Temporalities and Subcultural Lives.”

*/ends/means/discoveries/*

the process broke a lot. i wasn't prepared to feel so empowered or engaged. i wasn't ready to learn and listen through the artwork itself. to trust it. me. i didn't expect myself to show up nor did i consider asking. in many ways i didn't have much identity at all to invite to the party.

glimpses. a glance. history. shadows.

i saw beyond time. i saw it was mine to rearrange. i had never fully acknowledged that before. maybe there's more to acknowledge. falling into unknowns.

dumb. ok. penetrably numb.

i acknowledged aspects of myself, to myself, that became key moments of research and manifestation. i said, "you're beyond masculine and feminine. you are both. and more." there is no duality in identity. it is the act of queering that is the undoing of such cause-and-effect literalism. the spectrum is wider than one cause. it is never one cause. and the effects are never measurable. it is the act of queering that is - the doing - of bending toward new and unknown things.

new time.

trans time.

trans generation.

queering is a time warp through the practice. it draws new lines to see the mess connect differently.

the beginning. naked. journeying. finding.

the garment. the costume. the underwear. the shame. the microphone. the classical urgencies. the unmet expectations of putting on the right dress. of hitting the right notes.



vacancy. want. failure. aggression.

a retelling of time. a reclaiming. time recorded reflected repeated into infinity with light and space. in, on, around, of, and through me. like the vibrations from the grain bin. the acceptance of purpose and existence. i do.

i started this with little clarity about identity and its role in creating meaningful art. centering a work around myself, about myself, and for myself made sense. having the practice inform myself about who i am reinforced a trust that i am the entirety of my lived experience. there is no more authenticity to what i can bring to the work then what i can bring. the archival dig to unearth authenticity liberated me to shed obligatory normative deliverables. the gotta-have-a-gimmick, how-does-my-art-impact-the-most-amount-of-people, guilt ridden, sales driven, approach of the United States non-profit funding systems lost effect.

beauty i feel found space to have a voice.

ugly beauty. pain beauty. pleasure beauty. broken beauty.

new beauty.

vulnerable beauty.

their voices started to resonate with one another. with the other voices.

sometimes dissonant.

they started to quiver bones and blood again.

there was only one episode left before the epilogue. the nakedness. the flesh. the pictures.

the moving pictures. the stage.

i had danced. i was dancing standing still.

one more retrograde. a glimpse. a depth of perception we haven't talked about. an ancient lighting trick to drive the shadows behind the tabled stage turned. repurposed for the rewind. the

timestamps of layered life and work edited to close. i made a full circle within the physical experience. ending with all the beginnings. personal utopia made it outside the idea of full circle.

a looking glass of painted, hand wrenched canvas sewn together with thread. that's the thing i found to keep a lookout for Queer. this time. the journey is long. i'll find more things that  
lookout for Queer. the next queering.

*/end/ends/means/discoveries/*



Figure 9 photography, artists unknown, model Bobby Wesner, 1998

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