

# Take a(nother) Left at the Valley of the Shadow of Death: Revisiting the Queer Crossroads of Art, Religion, and Education of Big Gay Church

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## Abstract

In this excerpt from a chapter originally published in McNeil et al (2017), five queer art educators interrogate the intersections of religion, education, the arts, and LGBTQ identities through an annual performance session called “Big Gay Church” (BGC).

*Keywords:* Queer, Performance, Queer Theory, Pedagogy, Art Education

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## Prologue

While “Big Gay Church” is the formal conference session title, its enactment is much queerer than the name might imply. We use gay deliberately in the title for audience familiarity and appeal. We use the word “gay,” but our intent is to be inclusive of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, two-spirit, and other marginalized gender and sexuality identities and as a palatable and playful stand-in for “queer” (Sanders, 2007).

The event itself, and its theoretical underpinning, aligns with queer theory and pedagogies. With Big Gay Church we are less concerned with “getting identities right” and using academically appropriate terms, and more concerned with exposing and refusing “the insufficiencies of identity” and the inequities these produce (Britzman, 1998, p. 94). We want to create places and events “that encourage the proliferation of pleasures, desires, voices, interests, modes of individuation and democratization” (Seidman 1993, quoted in Sanders, 2007, p. 106). Through a subversive use of the familiar term “gay” we not only intend to “queer” church, but to “queer” the conference itself. We strive to construct “a place to question, explore, and seek alternative explanations rather than a place where knowledge means “certainty, authority and stability” (Britzman, 2000, p. 51). We want to provide educators with tools and maps to “help create very real changes not only in our schools but in the larger world” (Zacko-Smith & Smith, 2010, p. 8). To these ends, we deliberately collapse terms, queering the term “gay,” and turning language back on itself.

## PART I: Big Gay Church

### Prelude

A song unexpectedly fills a dim, cavernous, near-empty conference room early Sunday morning on the last day of the National Art Education Association’s annual conference—a typical staid and sterile academic setting. The small troupe of inconspicuous academics enters the space, arms loaded with props and costumes. They simultaneously transform themselves. One member, Sister Sanders, taking inspiration from San Francisco’s Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, dons a nun’s habit and masks his face in clownish white makeup. His silvery beard is accentuated by the makeup, which

is intended for campy, faux concealment. His wimple, tenuously gripping his shaved head, will provide comic relief throughout the morning as it slips and slides over his shiny dome.

Another member, Miss Jeanette, channels her childhood Sunday School teachers in a shapeless, barely-blue denim jumper, gray cat-eye glasses, a wig (possibly stolen from one of *The Golden Girls*), and her mostly hidden combat boots. Two other members become ushers and attendants, opening bottles of wine, left over from the previous evening's parties, and filling plastic cups for communion, offering them casually as people enter. Deacon Wolfgang tunes her ukulele, humming to warm her voice for the upcoming hymns. The Right Reverend Rhoades dons her black robe, places a Bible on the lectern, and prepares presentation technology as congregants file in and find their seats, not quite sure what to expect. Big Gay Church begins.

### **Welcome and Scripture Reading by Reverend Rhoades**

The music fades and Reverend Rhoades smiles, raises her hands in a gesture of inclusiveness, and says: "Welcome to Big Gay Church! We begin, as always, with a moment for fellowship, please turn to your neighbors and welcome one and all. While you show each other some love, I'll share a passage of scripture from First Corinthians":

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered; it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.

And these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.

### **Opening Prayer: Projected and Recited by Reverend Rhoades**

#### *The Higher Principle of Love*

Grant that the resources that we have will be used to do good—the great resources of education, the resources of wealth—and that we will be able to move into this new world, a world in which people will live together lovingly. A world in which people no longer take necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes. A world in which we throw down the sword and live by the higher principle of love. At this time we shall be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man's inhumanity to man into the bright and glittering daylight of freedom and justice. There will be a time we will be able to stand before the universe and celebrate this love with joy.

—Adapted from Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

### **Hymn Led by Deacon "Brother Love" Wolfgang**

Following our opening prayer, our roving songstress, Deacon "Brother Love" Wolfgang, stands, ukulele ready, and leads our first song. Lyrics are projected with a bouncing ball so congregants can participate at their comfort level.

All God's Children Got a Place in the Choir (chorus)

All God's creatures got a place in the choir

Some sing low

Some sing higher

Some sing out on the telephone wire

Some clap their hands or paws or anything they've got now! (Staines)

The congregation makes a joyful noise, singing along and clapping. A look of slight embarrassment soon fades and is replaced with one of delight and amusement. It is clear that our “congregants” have decided to play along with us. Next, Sister Sanders takes the stage to deliver a Sunday School lesson like none before.

### **Adult Sunday School Lesson by Sister Sanders**

Sister Sanders opens the lesson, entitled “A (Queer) Reading from the Old Testament of the Church, Art, and Art Education,” with a video of his muses, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7kv2PoetiQw>:

Call and Response:

I, Sister [state name], as a member of the Order of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, dedicate myself to public service, social activism, and spiritual enlightenment.

—Pledge of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence

Sister Sanders opens with the above video clip and then delivers the most traditional academic component of our session complete with a slide deck. She does it, however, as a nun caught in an awkward, constant, and doomed struggle to maintain her headgear against the laws of physics and friction. The impeccable slides offer the image-rich, theory-dense academic content common in conference circles as it queerly subverts their paradigms. Slide-by-slide, Sanders insistently recognizes: queer artists and their contributions to religious art and cultural production; queers serving the Church, often closeted, as clergy and congregants; and queer theory as a valid framework for critically exploring the intersections of (visual) culture, religion, art, art history, and art education. Our sister proudly proclaims the presence, needs, and value of queer citizens. Sister Sanders references historically successful queer acts of outrage as arts-based methods of political and social critique that create interventions, such as the Stonewall Riot (1968), the carnivalesque San Francisco Cockettes who were active in the late 1960s/early 1970s, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP) in the early 1990s, as well as older traditions of drag king/queen performances and their campier updates, contemporary Pride Parades and significant arts and pop culture representation.

### **Children’s Sunday School Lesson with Miss Jeanette**

Miss Jeanette shuffles onto the stage to a cascade of laughter from the congregation. Adjusting her glasses and wig, she begins her lesson: a digital take on the traditional Sunday School flannel board story. Miss Jeanette uses cartoon characters of her own creation to tell the story of how journalist Rachel Maddow exposed “The Family,” a group of American politicians and so-called religious leaders who were behind the “Kill the Gays” law in Uganda and many other hateful acts (Sharlet, 2009). Miss Jeanette declares The Family’s members to be “false prophets” as they appear on the screen: Senator James Inhofe, Pastor Rick Warren, and anti-gay extremist Scott Lively among others.

### **Sermon by the Right Reverend Rhoades**

As art educators grappling with issues of representation, interpretation, translation, and identity, this discrepancy between the thing itself and multiple contradictory or complicated interpretations and enactments of it may sound a familiar chord. Why—when we look for diverse interpretations and associations as a form of richness—in art-making, art criticism, and writing as and about art do we continue to insist on singular interpretations of biblical texts and a pure, unadulterated holy truth? Why would everyone interpret a text the same exact way? Don’t we see the impossibility of complete consensus? Don’t we recognize, when returning to texts—religious or otherwise—that they mean different things to us in each encounter or remembrance or enactment?

Reverend King believed it is people like us who can make a difference. He insisted, “The question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. . . . The nation and

the world are in dire need of creative extremists.” He adds, “Almost always, the creative dedicated minority has made the world better.” Not only can we do this, he believes we *should* do this. This stands in direct contradiction to many of the messages we receive socially and culturally about being LGBTQ, particularly as people continue to vote for our rights as complete citizens

—excerpts from the iDo sermon (Big Gay Church, 2012).

### Testimony with Deacon Mel

Deacon Mel introduces a short video interview of a lesbian growing up in, coming out to, and being excommunicated by her church. Marie’s story is emblematic of the longstanding conflict between southern fundamentalist evangelical churches and LGBTQ people. Deacon Mel frames an argument in light of Marie’s story: Since most Americans are raised in families professing a religion, and because LGBTQ people are born into families of all faiths (LeVay & Nonas, 1995), it is fair to assume that most LGBTQ people in the United States “were raised in the context of some religion” (Schuck & Liddle, 2001, pp. 63-64). Religious families disowning their LGBTQ members, particularly parents disowning their children, present God as a very fickle, intolerant father figure, not a loving protector. Mel says, “Big Gay Church aims to reclaim and refocus this story.”

### Offering

The Big Gay Church offering is as queer as a three-dollar bill. From our first service in 2009, we upended the flow of the traditional church offering. Instead of congregants giving a financial contribution to Big Gay Church, we offer gifts to our congregation. Miss Jeanette always distributes a Holy Card that is connected to her lesson. Other offerings have ranged from small handcrafted artworks to a pair of officially blessed and sanctioned “Loved” and “Forgiven” cards, to emblazoned kazoos for making a joyful noise.

### Open Prayer and Meditation: Holding Us in the Light

Miss Jeanette opens our communal call to prayer. Explaining the Quaker tradition of prayer, she invites the congregation to name people they would like us to “hold up to the light.” This seems the most precarious part, asking professional colleagues to participate wholeheartedly, becoming vulnerable by sharing personal concerns in such a public venue, a place for us to acknowledge our love and our fears—our connections—personally and professionally. Big Gay Church constructed a time and place to love, be loved, and emanate love out into the wider world.

We close the service and invite the congregation to continue their fellowship in our Big Gay Sanctuary until the next session, as it transforms back into the nondescript, intentionally standardized conference room. Our pews fade into seats locked in lines, our wine replaced by sweaty silver pitchers and glasses for water. Our altar, a stage again. Our alter egos disappear, pulled off and packed away in suitcases for travel home with the homos, to be stored and ready for our next service. We hug, shoving final items into our bags, saying our goodbyes, and speaking of meetings to make plans. We walk out the church doors and into the convention center halls, out of the temple and into the marketplace.

## PART II: A Queer Intersection: Conservative Christianity, Education, Arts, and Activism

### American Christianity and Queerness: The Fastest Route to Here from There

Aren’t you beginning to at least get a glimpse of why God commands governments to put homosexuals to death (Lev. 20:13)? Or are you still foolishly closing your eyes, ears and hearts to the truth?

—Society for the Practical Establishment and Perpetuation of the Ten Commandments

We look at the struggle for LGBT/queer rights in relation to efforts by conservative Christians to curtail them and condemn us. For that reason, throughout this section, we will use the term “queer”

instead of LGBTQ, given conservative Christianity's tendencies to conflate and condemn queerness. Great strides are being made in the United States concerning certain aspects of queer life. As the quote above suggests, however, a backlash in the name of God is also afoot. There is much to be learned through the study of this contradiction. Although there are many controversies and problems with the Bible and its translation across languages over millennia and around the globe, it remains a primary sacred text globally. Therefore, even though the concept of homosexuality did not exist in biblical times (Foucault, 1980), interpretations of what the Bible ostensibly says greatly influence the treatment of queer people in Judeo-Christian societies. Troublingly, these interpretations are based not on divine dictates, as so many believe to be true, but insinuated into biblical translations during Europe's cultural shift against homosexuality. Consequently, early European colonists imported this punitive, condemnatory attitude toward homosexuals.

Many U.S. fundamentalist and conservative Christian churches continue to adhere to anti-homosexual beliefs and practices. This contemporary crusade began in earnest in the late 1970s as conservative Christians entered the political arena with a vengeance. In 1978, religious leaders unsuccessfully supported California's Proposition 6 to legalize discrimination and force the firing of all homosexual teachers (Wolff & Himes, 2010). Jerry Falwell founded the Moral Majority in the late '70s and declared HIV/AIDS to be "God's punishment for gays." The 1986 Helms Amendment, named for rabid homophobe Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina, banned federal taxes for AIDS research and prevention efforts in schools. The Moral Majority supported the 1986 California Proposition 64 to quarantine HIV-positive gay men as a threat to society (Wolff & Himes, 2010). Focus on the Family's Dr. James Dobson supported the Boy Scouts' ban on gay scout leaders, calling gay men dangerous pedophiles (Wolff & Himes, 2010). In 2008, California's Proposition 8 to prevent (LGBTQ) marriage equality was "primarily funded by Mormon, Catholic, and Evangelical churches" (Wolff & Himes, 2010; see also Cowan & Greenstreet, 2010). Big Gay Church asserts a different idea of God and faith, one that sees hateful acts against the moral minority as a grave sin.

Catholicism's antihomosexual doctrine was formally codified in a 1975 official pronouncement that "incurable homosexuals should be treated kindly" but "homosexual behavior can never be justified" (as quoted in Lynch, 2005, pp. 387–388), what became colloquially "Love the sinner, hate the sin" (Callaghan, 2010, p. 85). Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) shifted this tone, condemning homosexuals as inherently evil, disordered people who provoke and deserve punishment for their wicked ways (Buchanan et al., 2001; Callaghan, 2010), advocating discrimination against homosexuals as foster/adoptive parents, teachers, coaches, or soldiers. In 2002, U.S. Vatican spokesperson Joaquin Navarro-Vails attempted to blame gay priests for the exploding clerical child sexual abuse scandal (Lynch, 2005).

The Catholic Church is struggling to balance historically nurtured attitudes of disgust and condemnation with contemporary impulses toward respect, sensitivity, and love (Candrea, 2006). Pope Francis, who was called a "global spiritual rockstar" in *The Huffington Post*, rocked many with his simple yet powerful question: "If someone is gay and he searches for the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge?" (Gehring, 2013). Even before this groundbreaking query, some American bishops sought to help parents and families of queer people negotiate the church directive to condemn homosexual behavior with the biblical directive to love your children as gifts from God. Other more conservative bishops and Vatican officials countered, insisting Christian morality justifies religious condemnation and legalized discrimination against homosexuals (Lynch, 2005).

Many American protestant denominations have followed a similar trajectory. While some denominations and congregations have made progress toward LGBTQ tolerance, others continue their crusade against queer people. Conservative Christianity still retains great cultural, political, and legal influence in the United States, perhaps most visibly in what H. L. Menken termed the "Bible Belt" of the South. Several fundamentalist Christian denominations, with large congregations and outsized influence—including Southern Baptists, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Mormons—maintain very hardline positions against homosexuals, lobbying for continued legal oppression and penalization. In Big Gay Church, we seek to expose contradictions and hypocrisy but without wholesale condemnation of other churches. We understand that faith is a complex fluid, and mysterious thing. One might even call it queer.

## The Why of Big Gay Church

You Are Here Because [homosexuality] is such a great curse to humanity, the God who created humans says put homosexuals to death (Leviticus 20:13)! They ought not to be allowed to live!

—Society for the Practical Establishment and Perpetuation of the Ten Commandments

Big Gay Church operates against this complicated, conflicted backdrop of religions' relationships with queer people. More specifically, Big Gay Church's core members have extensive experience growing up and living in conservative and religious cities, small towns, and communities across the Bible Belt. As queer youth, and now as adults, we are sensitive to the power of Christian-influenced discourse around sexuality, and morality in family and civic life.

Most Americans (including us queers) grew up in families subscribing to some religious faith (LeVay & Nonas, 1995; Schuck & Liddle, 2001). In many of these situations, queers face a "pervasive and potentially annihilating Christian discourse" (Schuck & Liddle, 2001, p. 310) that precipitates near-constant fear of being outcast, harassed, or even physically injured. These fears can create or exacerbate self-loathing and low self-esteem (Schwartz, 2010). Many queers express a desperate desire for congregational acceptance, to "go to church sometimes, and not be afraid of just being told what a horrible person you are" (Barton, 2010, p. 466). It is an understanding of this desire that led us to create Big Gay Church.

Some queers from conservative faiths undertake a futile struggle to overcome or cure their nonnormative sexual identity, and when this fails, they believe they have forfeited their "faith, God, their church, or their fellow believers" (Ganzevoort et al., 2011, p. 218). In some cases, queers (and their congregations) believe that if they are unable to change their sexuality, accepting it comes at "the price of abandoning God," that "[a]postasy then may not be a choice, but an unavoidable conclusion" (p. 220).

In Big Gay Church services we confront conservative Christianity's condemnation of queers and examine how their prevalence and power can create oppressive living conditions for queer people, undergirding homophobic laws, tolerating discrimination and harassment, and even promoting violence (Brooke, 2005; Cianciatto & Cahill, 2006; Dennis, 2003; Williams, 2005). We've shed light on the ways some conservative Christian congregations, pastoral leaders, and parents/guardians force queer minors into "conversion therapies" aimed at fixing a person's sexuality that more likely "result in psychological harm and are not effective" (American Psychological Association, 2018; Wolff & Himes, 2010, p. 443). Our congregants, many of whom are not queer themselves, learn of these damaging therapies as well as the hopeful message that some states are increasingly outlawing the medically debunked practice.

It is against the backdrop of this lingering conservative, religion-based persecution that members of the Big Gay Church troupe coalesced, bonding over mutual first-hand experiences in conservative churches and so-called "God-fearing" communities. We shared ways the church still affected our lives and how it shaped us as artists, educators, citizens, and activists. For us, every discussion of injustice eventually conjured the church, implicating it as the prime source of friction around sexuality in education. We acknowledge the chilling impact this has on teachers, students, and education.

We considered ways this chill creeps up in higher education to impact our research, publication options, teaching, professional standing, job options, and tenure. For some of us, pervasive conservative values have dictated our marginalization and contributed to resistance to queer ideas in our scholarship and teaching. Each of us has experienced some shock to realize that art education, which we presumed to be more liberal, also presented challenges, from minor restrictions and self-censoring to penalizing unauthorized perspectives in higher education. Collectively, we wondered what our lives—and those of our students, colleagues, and community members—would be like if religion *didn't* demonize queer people? What if instead of rejecting all things queer,



churches embraced and celebrated us in all our complicated, contradictory, and convoluted glory? What if we created our own alternate universe where queer people ran a church in which everyone was welcome and loved? We longed for a church that was fun and welcomed camp. Big Gay Church was born.

We began considering ways to productively and queerly explore these possibilities by asking how we could *queer* church. We wanted to go further than the gay-friendly and welcoming churches, such as the Metropolitan Community Church and Unitarian Universalists, and more tolerant congregations within larger denominations like the Dignity Roman Catholics or the Baptist Peace Fellowship. We sought to create a religious community that explicitly embraces all sexualities, celebrates and theorizes the transgression of gender binaries, and perhaps even embraces our own contradictions.

We wanted to disrupt the normative constraints around queer issues in art education by disrupting the conventional expectations for standard conference presentations. Instead of a symposium, we imagined a service; instead of a cathedral, we imagined transforming a conference room; instead of condemning, we imagined communing. We proposed inserting queers into religion to create a “gay church,” and then inserting those queers into academic contexts and using this disruption to coalesce as a group to then question, challenge, and hopefully provoke change in participants’ thinking, teaching, and daily lives.

### **Art + Activism = Artivism**

At no point in American history have there been proper laws against the existence of gays. If any society foolishly allows them to live, they will gradually endeavor to shape society in such a fashion to legitimize their evil and extend to themselves the same rights that society should only extend to worthy citizens. If allowed to live, they will seek to be educated. If allowed to be educated, they will seek employment in key fields of society and positions of public trust so as to enable them to promote their evil and nasty agenda. They will become doctors, psychologists, scientists, senators, congressmen, judges, etc.

—Society for the Practical Establishment and Perpetuation of the Ten Commandments

Our troupe is currently working on combining and deploying what youth development scholars Shawn Ginwright and Julio Cammarota (2007) call *critical civic praxis* (CCP) and what Chela Sandoval and Guisela Latorre (2008) call *artivism*. Such strategies provide productive ways for us to analyze, share, and apply arts-based educational research and pedagogies. For Ginwright and Cammarota, CCP prompts marginalized populations to collective action. CCP combines: recognizing current and potential political activism; awareness of sociocultural inequities; a strong sense of community; collective action; transformation of learners to educators; and opportunities to imagine, design, and implement creative social justice-oriented responses and interventions, into a strong roadmap for guiding collaborative learning and activist work (Ginwright et al., 2005).

Sandoval and Latorre’s (2008) concept of artivism moves CCP into the world of arts and visual culture. Sandoval and Latorre define artivism as a hybridization of artistic production and activism that harnesses their symbiosis for transformational purposes. Artivism recognizes what Chicana artist and lesbian Judy Baca stresses are “unprecedented means for young people to represent themselves outside of adult control,” and for minorities to represent themselves outside of mainstream control (Sandoval & Latorre, 2008, p. 86). Like CCP, artivism enacts pedagogy that recognizes the “persisting exclusions” of the arts and visual culture, yet builds on their “liberatory potential” and collective cultural capital, emphasizing ways “creativity can be channeled, augmented, and empowered” through “real-world and on-the-ground” arts-based strategies (p. 84). In a sense, artivism is creative critical civic praxis.

For Big Gay Church, CCP allows us to interrogate oppressive stereotypical institutional and interpersonal power dynamics and artivism allows us to present things differently through works of the imagination, to open negative aspects of the church to possibilities of change, and to help

others transform from marginalized victims into agents (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; Sandoval & Latorre, 2008). With Big Gay Church, we take an activist approach on several fronts simultaneously. Since schools and education often derail nonheterosexual and/or genderqueer identities and discourses, we make space for queer people and voices. Since many churches make efforts to condemn, exclude, or “repair” queer folks, we find a way to turn our church into a place that recognizes the power of diverse sexualities and gender identities. Since these conservative, fundamentalist religious discourses impact public policy and the civil rights of queer people, we must find ways to use our pulpit to move queer people and allies to interrupt the status quo and work toward a more just world.

### **Big Gay Church and Performance Pedagogy/Studies**

Once [gays] attain key positions, they will seek to remove all stigma against homosexuality and seek to redefine, reeducate (deceive) and reshape society to accept their depravity.

—Society for the Practical Establishment and Perpetuation of the Ten Commandments

Big Gay Church works at the intersection of several fields in education including critical pedagogy, performance studies, and dramatic inquiry. In this way, Big Gay Church is both performance and pedagogy. During services, we become what McLaren (1999) calls the “researcher-as-performer,” engaging fully in the political, kinetic, destructive, and transcendental aspects of presenting, performing, and creating. We interrupt the program, using performance and its liminal spaces for encountering culture, politics, and education (Garoain & Gaudelius, 2008). We are queering and re-purposing the academy as a vital site for resistance and autonomy, a place for collective participatory action by critical citizens acting in concert. Through the performative, we hope to facilitate participants’ connection to the personal and the pedagogical (Giroux, 2000). What can we learn from ourselves?

Embracing critical performance pedagogies as research, teaching, and learning paradigms emphasizes their potential educational, political, cultural, and societal benefits (Denzin, 2009). For Dwight Conquergood (1998), “Performance is a way of knowing, a way of showing, a way of interpreting and a method for building shared understanding. Performance is immediate, partial, always incomplete and always processual” (p. 29). For us, Big Gay Church requires research and teaching as we include rigorous academic content. It also requires us, as presenters/performers, to model “a communitarian dialogical ethic of care and responsibility” where everyone treats “persons and their cares and concerns with dignity and respect (Denzin, 2007, p. 133). We use these pedagogies to construct a “civic, participatory and collaborative project” where “members of the community, as cultural workers and co-performers in theatres of resistance, create empowering performance texts and performance events” (Denzin, 2009, p. 263). We want Big Gay Church to be an example of a:

radical democratic pedagogy [that] requires citizens and citizen-scholars committed to taking risks; persons willing to act in situations where the outcome cannot be predicted in advance. . . . [I]n these pedagogical spaces there are not leaders and followers; there are only co-participants, persons jointly working together to develop new lines of action, new stories, new narratives in a collaborative effort. (Bishop, 1998, p. 207)

According to Conquergood (1998), such critical, risk-taking citizen-scholars must also possess the “energy, imagination, courage, and commitment to create” new, more liberating texts and discourses (p. 10). Critical performance pedagogies require criticism and action.

Big Gay Church, as Denzin (2009) advocates, uses performative pedagogies to embrace queer studies, transforming a traditional academic conference session into a “sacred aesthetic place” and time (p. 133). It provides “a way of acting on the world in order to change it” (p. 267). Big Gay Church is a site of intervention, struggle, and “transgressive achievement” (Conquergood, 1998, p. 32). It is a “concrete situation . . . being transformed through acts of resistance” (Denzin, 2007, p. 135). This resistance occurs simultaneously in multiple ways (as in Brechtian theatre). The performance becomes the vehicle for moving persons, subjects, performers, and audience members, into



new, critical, political spaces. The performance gives the audience, and the performers, “equipment for [this] journey: empathy and intellect, passion and critique.” (Denzin, 2009, p. 265).

Big Gay Church exists in a hyperactive, open-ended intersection of performance as imagination and action. As performers, we embody characters that may ordinarily represent a culture of exclusion and punishment of queer people. In our performance, we not only imagine what it might be like if these stereotypes were false, but we become these characters and enact this revision. The audience becomes a supportive congregation, participating in the performance (Denzin, 2007). We try to reclaim concepts like church, family, values, and Christianity from hate-based religious doctrines and practices. Where “the performative and the political intersect on the terrain of a praxis-based ethic,” we use performance pedagogy to “embody love, hope, care, and compassion,” attempting to use Big Gay Church “to change the world” (Denzin, 2007, p. 129).

## On the Road

Big Gay Church stakes a territory within the academy, in art education, in our national organization and annual conference, and now in the scholarly record. We have also laid a claim to church and religion, challenging the overwhelming negative history concerning queer people, and forming our own flock. We seek to critically confront conservative Christian church doctrines, their positioning and treatment of LGBTQ people, and the overwhelming influence their beliefs have on cultural beliefs, acceptable behavior, and public policy. We force a confrontation between our learned beliefs and identities, our occupations, and our culture. We confront tough questions, asking how has church shaped us and how can we (re)shape it? How does recognizing, accepting, and supporting queer people, culture, values, presence, and contributions to the church change the church? Change queer people? Change our political, educational, and sociocultural climate? We interrogate the ways conservative Christian churches and queer people impact each other and explore analyses and possible revisions to these relationships. We have the power to redraw the boundaries, make contact, build bridges, and connect. Big Gay Church shows there are ways to hold such seeming contradictions in tension, to forgo resolution for exploration, rejection for consideration of possibilities, of what was and what *might be*.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Following the original publication of this chapter, an archive of the first decade of Big Gay Church actions/performances was published in Visual Arts Research in 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Original publication title: Take a left at the Valley of the Shadow of Death: Exploring the queer crossroads of art, religion, culture, and education through Big Gay Church.