Performing the sacred archive: Discourses on reconstruction, documentation and biblical interpretation

ABSTRACT

This article explores the intersections between the dance, biblical studies and performance praxis. It articulates the possible kinds of knowledge(s) that are at the intersection between movement as a performance practice and biblical research. By looking at Adrian Howells’s work Foot Washing For The Sole (2009) as a prototype for Kinaesthetic Hermeneutics, this exploration suggests that Howells’s embodied reading of Luke 7:37–83 provides a methodology for interpreting scripture through the body. This article ultimately seeks to answer the question can the body be a site for biblical exegesis?

Several scholars have written about the complexity of the body in performance documentation and its stake in the archive (Taylor 2003; Schneider 2001; Phelan 2004). I would like to extend this discourse into arguably the most used ‘archive’ in western history, the Bible: I read the Bible
as an archive, the recollection/collection of insignificant and significant performances within a certain time frame. Someone performed an act; some observed the act and some attempted to document the act. In this analysis, the Bible reads as an archive of small performances strung together. One work that has approached the use of the archive in such a way that proposes new questions for both biblical studies and performance studies is Foot Washing for the Sole (2009) by Adrian Howells. Howells’s Foot Washing for the Sole (2009) is a one-to-one performance in which Howells washes, anoints and kisses the feet of the participant. The work crosses several ideological and cultural boundaries. This piece is known to be profoundly intimate and, as Howells performs it, a moment for healing.

Foot Washing for the Sole (2009) interprets through the body a scriptural understanding that is not tied to exactitude, but is worked through in performance. Live art and performance studies have been concerned with concepts such as tracing, archiving and reconstruction. These questions are not only relevant for performance studies but they are also a concern for biblical studies.

There is a connection between biblical studies and performance studies that reframes the religious body in performance as a cultural product. I am aware that I approach ‘religiosity of the performing body’ from the position of a choreographer who is mostly interested in corporeality that reflects and interprets biblical concerns. The question that live art puts forward is about a particular relationship that live bodies have to text(s) that is not particularly, in the first instance, concerned with representation, but with experimentations that reframes relationships between bodies and audiences in performance.

Howells is a performance artist. His decision to work with foot washing as a performance practice is an invitation to take Luke 7: 37–83 and John 13: 5, 12–15 as a serious endeavour. This work also asks what are the possible relationships between the body and scripture, both outside and inside of the Christian tradition? What other relationships are possible between sacred texts and enactments?

It is important for me to chart the theorists who have influenced my writings on performance and biblical studies, even though for the most part, due to brevity, they are not cited in this article. My approach, Biblical Performance Criticism, arises out of the work of theologians working with the body (namely James B. Nelson, Lisa Isherwood, Marcella Althaus-Reid and Sarah Coakly). These biblical theorists question the assumption of white male heterosexual normative bodies as the prototype and subject for biblical discourse. This thinking about the body as ‘other’ is also influenced further by the work of Kimerer LaMothe, who set out to articulate the intersections between dance and religion specifically in the work Between Dancing and Writing: The Practice of Religious Studies (2004). There are also a growing number of theologians who are using performance as a metaphor to explain biblical concepts (Samuel Wells and David Rhoads are examples). The work that I am investigating in this article is based on the work of these authors who have written before me. This investigation seeks to look not just at religious studies in general, but specifically the Christian tradition, and to see the performance as a meaning-making practice and not a metaphor to explain a biblical concept.
HOWELLS’S METHODOLOGY AND PROCESS

In an effort to describe Howells’s work and its effect on participants and on the performer, I will consult three sources. The first is the article that Howells submitted about his process, documenting his methodology and the materials of this performance, *Foot Washing for the Sole* (2010). Second, we have the interview that Howells participated in, *Adrian Howells Interview | Foot Washing for the Sole* (10/14/2010), which included Howells describing performing the work in different geographic locations. Finally, we have a review of the work from a participant. Between the interview, the artist’s statements about the work, and a participant’s review, I will attempt to construct this performance and its effect on both the performer and the participants. In the article *Foot Washing for the Sole* (2010), Howells takes the first step in articulating his practice and its origins. He describes his work in the following terms:

> In the one-on-one performance piece that ensued, I simply washed, dried, anointed with oils, massaged and kissed the participant’s feet. Intimacy was engendered not only through the touching of the feet but also through the silence and stillness that surrounded the performance, as well as through my supposed ‘act of servility’. (Howells 2012: 131)

Howells allowed the participant to enter the space; he then showed the participant to a space, which had a chair coupled with a water basin. He then proceeded to wash and anoint the participant’s feet. This process occurs in silence. Howells is reflective about its connection to John 13: 5, 12–15. He recalls that he saw the rite performed as a part of Catholic liturgy. Howells expressed his disappointment with the symbolism of the priest, claiming that:

> In preparation I attended the traditional Maundy Thursday foot-washing ceremony in a Roman Catholic church in Glasgow … I felt cheated … the priest didn’t really wash the feet of the twelve people from the congregation. He only concerned himself with one bare foot … merely poured a trickle of water on it and then dabbed it with a ‘napkin’ handed to him by an attendant. (2012: 128)

It would appear from Howells’s perspective that the rite did not embody the act of the foot washing fully, that there was a ‘representation’, but not experimentation or enactment of his ability. Howells speaks about his performance of the rite outside of liturgy; he seems aware of the purposeful way in which he approaches his practice. Howells is seeking dialogue with the body; he is not simply interested in performing a symbolic act, but he is interested in the human interaction. He writes: ‘Two bodies in close, physical and touching proximity have the potential to engage in an often self-revelatory, but silent, conversation. So, I wanted to explore specifically whether my hands could be “in dialogue” with another’s feet’ (Howells 2012: 128). Howells articulates a careful and detailed methodology, which includes choosing which kinds of oils to use on the participant’s feet and the way in which the performance will unfold, both the silence and the opportunity for verbal exchange.

Joe Nawaz, a writer for Culture Northern Ireland, writes about his experience of the foot washing. He writes, ‘I walk out pretty much the same. I’m
2. Whether he really did this or not is irrelevant to the argument, but for the sake of the argument let us assume he did.

3. Depending on the tradition – Christianity is a varied organism.

not different, a better or less uptight person, but there is a sense of having partaken in something lovely. My feet thank me for it and my heart thanks me just a little …’ (Nawaz 2010).

In the interview Howells articulates that there is a usual exchange where he speaks of the humility that is bought about by this ‘act of servility’. He speaks about it as a qualitative experience, that the act of handling feet is an encounter with ‘intimacy’. In his interview, he states that people were specifically going to see his work in particular, knowing that touch would be a part of this work. When I consider both the artefacts that are left over from Howells’s performance, I see a situation where an artist is both in ritual and in performance simultaneously. Howells articulates this work as a performance. He acknowledges its origins, and yet he does not articulate this practice as religious; he articulates the work as a ‘performance’.

From both participants and the performer, it is clear that the performance is moving, that it is intimate and that it allows for a bodily communication. It is clear to me that there are various ways to take this type of intimacy. This work raises questions for me. Is this ritual or performance, and does it matter? It is clear to me that Howells has constructed this performance with great care, that his approach is busy and specific. It was a moment of intimacy and of human-to-human care.

RECONSTRUCTIONS (HOW FOOT WASHING TRAVELLED)

This work suggests three things. First, it articulates the possibility of biblical research developed in practice (performance). Second, it shows how non-representative performance provides a schema for a new relationship with sacred text and third, this work provides an example of how to engage scripture in culture outside of liturgy.

I would like to take this opportunity to recite and reframe the statement I presented in the introduction:

I read the Bible as an archive, the recollection/collection of insignificant and significant performances within a certain timeframe. If the ideas of what constitutes a performance have grown to encompass events that only involve one person, then I am left to say that every event in the Bible (as well as the Torah and Koran) is a small performance. Someone performed an act; some observed the act and some attempted to document the act. In this analysis, the Bible reads as an archive of small performances strung together.

The Bible is not the event; it is a documentation of the event. When Jesus walked on water, raised the dead or healed the sick, it was an embodied act. These events happened between bodies, between flesh: person-to-person transmissions if you will. What we have in the Christian tradition(s) is failure to let go of our obsession with the document as the primary and often the only litmus test for proof. This is coupled with tradition coming in as a close second, which functions as both a reaching back and a reaching forward. What Foot Washing for the Sole (2009) does is ask us to consider our relationship with the biblical text, and that perhaps that other kinds of embodied relationship can develop. The Bible and the events that it archives are not the same thing; they do not share the same exact ontology. It was Peggy Phelan who argued in the seminal work Unmarked (1993) that in ‘Performance’s only life is in the present.
Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so it becomes something other than performance’ (Phelan 1993: 146). The written narrative that Luke archives is not the event: it is a form of documentation. I will extend this same theorizing of documentation to include the performance practice of Howells. How does Howells approach performance making, when the only exciting record of such an event is in Luke? Howells approaches the foot washing through the body, with the emphasis being on experience over text.

Howells’s work questions in what ways the biblical text is placed outside of liturgy and how performance can help us understand the nature of body based research. I would argue that certain performances have the ability to expand on what we ‘know’, that the expansion in knowledge comes from an exegesis of sorts, but starts with physical engagement with the text and then reflection. It is important for this argument that I briefly separate the ontologies of performance into first-, second- and third-order performances.

When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee house she brought an alabaster jar of perfume and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them …. (Luke 7: 37–83, *New International Version*).

After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, ‘Lord, are you going to wash my feet?’ Jesus replied, ‘You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand’. ‘No’, said Peter, ‘you shall never wash my feet’. Jesus answered, ‘Unless I wash you, you have no part with me’. ‘Then, Lord’, Simon Peter replied, ‘not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!’ … When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. ‘Do you understand what I have done for you?’ he asked them. ‘You call me “Teacher” and “Lord,” and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you’ (John 13: 5–15, *New International Version*).

A first-order performance would be when the woman washed Jesus’s feet in that first instance, the first moment of human interaction. Someone performed an act and it was observed. When this event was told ‘orally’ it became a second-order performance, that performance being the retelling of the story, not the event itself. When this event was recorded it became a third-order event; the writing of this event becomes the documentation, an archive of the event, but not the event itself. It is important to note that I am using an ordering not to denote importance but to suggest, if possible, a linear evolution of how these events came to be sacred archive.

As noted from the above verses, what started as a cultural practice was transformed into an act of repentance and then, later, into a sacrament of humility by Christ. Howells has adapted this ancient rite into an explicit performance work … ‘concepts are not fixed. They travel between disciplines, between individual scholars, between historical periods, and between geographically dispersed academic communities. Between disciplines their meaning, reach, and operational value differ. These processes need to be assessed before, during and after each trip’ (Bal 2002: 24).

The concept of foot washing as an act of hospitality was transformed by the woman at Jesus’ feet into an act of repentance using her body as a representation for items needed for a cultural foot washing: a towel, oil and
water, etc. This hospitable act of foot washing simultaneously became an act of repentance, which provided a new context for a common cultural practice, a practice that is culturally specific to people in this particular geographic region, irrespective of faith. Later, Jesus, the Christ, introduces foot washing as a sacrament of humility. He, who had experienced foot washing as a cultural necessity and an act of repentance, transforms it yet again into a sacrament and urges the early Christians to continue to perform this act for and to each other. Howells reframes this same act into a performance for one audience member as a way of developing a deep human connection. What started off as a way to keep one’s home clean has become a medium for performance.

In ‘Presence in absentia: Experiencing performance as documentation’ (1997), performance artist Amelia Jones goes on to articulate her practice of performing works by artists that she has never met and works that she has never seen ‘in person’. Jones describes the difficulty of performing works such as these as logistical, not hermeneutic (1997: 11). She articulates her practice of having to look at photographs, films and reviews as traces of the event and reconstructing that event. Jones argues that ‘there is no unmediated relationship to any kind of cultural product’. She suggests that ‘being there’ should not be privileged over the specificity of knowledge(s) that develops in relation to documentary traces of the event (11). I am arguing for a slightly different sort of framework on which to engage Howells’s work. I would argue that the foot washing that was documented in Luke occurred between bodies. In fact the best way to test this knowledge(s) is to follow, in some respects, the methodology that Howells is laying out.

This involves not only reading the story in Luke with a sort of ocular precision, with the aim of understanding the author’s intention, but reconstructing this event as an experiment in body readings that I would term Kinetic Hermeneutics, or reading through the body, which might provide access that allows one to uncover, to dig deeper; to gain deeper knowledge is to find alternative ways of engaging with scripture or to not so simply … ‘do this’.

Phelan raises a point, which I agree with, but the question of whether all performance documentation of events just documents, or whether documents ever perform, is worth raising. In ‘The performativity of performance documentation’ (2006), Philip Auslander has suggested that there are cases in which documentation performs. His writing is primarily about the photography of performance (performance for the camera). He articulates that photography of performance falls into two categories: documentary and theatrical. The documentary category represents the general way that photography of performance has been used, which is to provide a record through which the particular performance can be reconstructed. In essence the document becomes the proof that the event occurred.

This suggests that performance documents are not analogous to constitutives but to performatives: in other words, the act of documenting an event, as a performance, is what constitutes it as such. Documentation does not simply generate images/statements that describe an autonomous performance and state that it occurred; it produces an event as a performance and, as Frazer Ward suggests, the performer as ‘artist’ (Auslander 2006: 5).

I address the concept of performance and documentation further on in this article, but Auslander is asking a different question than that of the ontology of performance documentation. He is questioning whether the representation can stand in for the event. The second category of performance documentation, he argues, is for performances that have been created
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for the camera. The point that Auslander makes in the end is that for the observer, one cannot differentiate between the two: there are documentations that perform and that have no ontology in relation to a previous performance. Auslander writes:

These are cases in which performances were staged solely to be photographed or filmed and had no meaningful prior existence as autonomous events presented to audiences. The space of the document (whether visual or audiovisual) thus becomes the only space in which the performance occurs.

(Auslander 2006: 2)

I use Auslander’s question about the performativity of documentation as suggested by his theorizing on the biblical text itself. I have challenged the canon in other ways; the biblical text is a document that in many ways ‘performs’. The struggle is to look at the text’s performativity and to seek out the gaze that allows us to challenge the way in which texts are understood and deployed, but we investigate how the text itself performs to the credit of theologian David Rhoads, who argues:

The New Testament writings were either written ‘transcriptions’ of oral narratives composed in performance or they were composed in writing (perhaps orally by dictation) for use in oral performance. These compositions were presented orally. Always there was a performer or storyteller. Always the performances were heard/experienced rather than read. Always there was a communal audience. Always there was a physical location and a socio-historical circumstance that shaped the performance and the reception.

(Rhoads 2006: 1)

I would argue that the event recorded in Luke (7: 37–38) falls under the first category that Auslander suggests. Its function is to provide proof that an event occurred. But I would also argue that Howells’s enactment of foot washing is also a kind of documentation. It has a clear tie to the first-order performance, but it also has a different ontology to that documentation found in Luke. If performances cannot be saved then perhaps they can become themselves by their (re)appearance. This is the argument that Rebecca Schneider has picked up on in Performance Remains (2001): she articulates, albeit in a slightly different way from Phelan, that performances cannot be saved, but perhaps they ‘live on’ differently through body-to-body transmission, that perhaps these remains are not isolated to documents but are also found in bodies, in ‘Acts of transfer’ (see Diana Taylor). That in fact, residues of performances, be it second- or third-order performance, are ways in which event remains. Schneider writes:

To read ‘history’ as a set of sedimented acts which are not the historical acts themselves but the act of securing any incident backward – the repeated act of seeming memory – is to rethink the site of history in ritual repetition. This is not to say that we have reached the ‘end of history’, neither is it to say that history didn’t happen, or that to access it is impossible. It is rather to insinuate the site of any knowing as body-to-body transmission. Whether that ritual repetition is
the attendance to documents in the library (the acts of acquisition, the acts of reading, writing, education) or the family oral tales of lineage (think of the African American descendants of Thomas Jefferson), or the myriad traumatic re-enactments engaged in both consciously and unconsciously, we refigure history onto body-to-body transmission.

(2011: 104)

The Christian Tradition(s), in the various compositions, would find solace in Schneider’s articulation of body-to-body transmission. Communion, and the habitual observance of Christ’s return to the church through consumption of his body, is tied to such an event, an event where tradition aids the archive in both allowing a connection to Christ through his performance of the last supper. We see how ‘tradition’ often functions as a code word for ‘bodily practices’. Christ remains in the present, but this remaining is tied to both a textual reading and a ‘practice’ of observance. Christ can be found both in the wanting and in the waiting, the acts of communion that connect Christians to a history that goes back to the Jewish Passover and forward to communities who will take communion in the future.

**BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION**

In ‘Bibles that matter: Biblical theology and queer performativity’, theologian Ken Stone suggests that we (re)educate our minds in the ways in which we read scripture, and through this reflective process of engaging scripture, one might also critique the way in which a specific reading is deployed. I am not only interested in how Howells reads and interprets scripture, but how *Foot Washing for the Sole* (2009) gestures towards the kinetic (body) reading of scripture. This body practice and the interpretation that arises out of it precede an identity subject, which is itself formed by such a practice of ‘reading’ and thus this concept of reading might extend to the practice of body reading. Howells understands the connection that his work has to the scripture (2010: 128). I would argue that I read Howells’s work differently than he may have intended, in that Howells, through practice, is able to not only position his life and the experiences of his life into scripture, he does so not by acting out Jesus, in the foot washing, nor does he play a character, he simply, or not so simply, does so by setting up the space in such a way that it creates an opportunity experience, a moment of human-to-human interaction. By enacting scripture, by being deliberate with practice, by being embodied and present, Howells offers us a physical reading of Luke, Howells ‘enacts scripture’.

I would like to reflect back on the performance scholars who I consulted earlier in the article (Phelan, Schneider and Auslander). Their argument about the ontology of performance, and its possible lives in documentations, becomes important for me not only for suggesting that the text should not be the only singular authority, but to what place the body has in reading. Reading the narrative of the foot washing in Luke will of course provide scholars with a certain amount of information, but this information is partial. I would argue that to really understand the narrative in Luke, to complicate that understanding, is to ‘enact that very narrative’: it is to participate in it. I would argue timidly, but argue nonetheless, that Howells’s experience of that foot washing goes beyond understanding ‘humility’ as an abstract concept; he understands in his body what it means to draw close and
enact foot washing. He has in essence participated in the same activity that Christ did. At that time I would argue that Howells has a connection not only to the participant but also to the history that is foot washing. What Phelan, Schneider and Auslander offer is an opportunity to take bodily experience seriously, to take the moment of human-to-human transmission and not its various documentations as the event.

In the article ‘Biblical interpretation as a technology of the self: Gay men and the ethics of reading’, Stone offers an exciting proposition by suggesting that the act of biblical interpretation creates ‘[gay] male subjectivity’ and that identity is not just produced by such readings but emerges from the practice of reading. He starts this trajectory by examining liberation theory, which argues that a reader has certain responsibility for his or her own biblical interpretations. Namely, that the act of interpretation has both political and ethical consequences (see Boff 2005; Fiorenza 1988; Boff and Boff 1987). This focus on ‘ethical’ interpretations finds its roots in various liberation theory models (queer, black, feminist and native) that question heteronormative and hegemonic interpretations of the Bible.

It is in these liberation models that marginalized readers start to question their place in the text or rather question dominant readings that support an oppressive status quo. One issue that Stone raises, early in the work, and rightfully so, is the danger of essentialism. For example, that one woman’s interpretation of scripture represents a reading for all women. He identifies the dangers in saying that one can read as ‘a woman’ and that this kind of essentialism might seek to exclude women who do not agree with a proposed interpretation. Just as one interpretation seeks to stand in opposition to a normative assumption, another ‘norm’ is created and takes its place, or better yet another voice is silenced by an ever imposing ‘us’. The problem with us versus them is that one can never be sure of who ‘us’ is exactly. Stone does not suggest this, but the idea of a singular experience needs to be expanded, in that a reading can be feminist and be singular. I would suggest that one could look at a woman’s readings as a part of a constellation of feminist activities. One of many interpretations that are positioned in context of others’ stories and experiences can form a feminist perspective. An ‘us’, if it can be called that, emerges from collective difference.

There are two points of interest when examining the practice of interpretation, which is the main focus of Stone’s work. First, how are gay men making use of the technologies of the self to create gay subjectivity? Second, what part does the concept of ‘practice’ play in this equation? To begin, I will define technology of the self in this article as specific practices by which subjects (re)create themselves within and through systems of power and that often seem to be either ‘natural’ or imposed from outside the subject. Gay men when interpreting, as described by Stone, are using a form of combination play; that personal experience is being combined with the knowledge gained through textual reasoning, and between the textual knowledge and personal experience, an embodied knowledge emerges. I return to dance scholar Karen Barbour, who suggested:

That in engaging ourselves in an embodied way of knowing we are creatively searching for and judging potential new combinations and juxtapositions of familiar and perhaps seemingly unrelated knowledge and experiences; what Einstein (1953) called ‘combination play’ (Abra
1970; Gardner & Dempster 1900; Fraser 2004). Insight and intelligence are required for engagement in accommodating internal representations in relation to experience in the world (Stinson 1985) and to understand a wide range of sources of existing knowledge. (Barbour 2004)

Why the turn to dance scholarship? This is where the concept of the body in performance (as Stone argues) becomes suggestive. What Stone does not articulate in depth is the role that ‘embodied knowledge’ plays in the production or creation of queer subjectivity through reading. One could argue that the body and its experiences are at stake, and thus the information gained from bodily experience informs such a reading. It is a spatial meeting between the ‘know how’ and ‘know that’. Bodily performance as a reading is an extension of this idea because ‘practice’ is primarily a bodily discourse.

As Howells offers to perform this reconstruction as a part of his practice, using the story in Luke as a prototype, he experienced not only the change that one would from just reading the text but also during the performance of this intimate act (a physical reading of Luke 7: 37–38) allows for a second change, a relational change between the person receiving the foot washing and Howells. Howells identifies with a woman and Jesus in the text, and in many ways is able, through the foot washing, to synthesize a moment of humility and healing for himself and the participant. It is not that Howells is ‘performing’ (being the woman) in Luke: no, Howells is not a character per se, but this foot washing as a physical reading opens up a space so that he can reconstruct himself and the text during the process. Stone suggests that new experiences are created in the reading and that this reading is built around interactions. Does this semiotic activity that Stone has articulated extend to physical readings and ocular ones? Stone writes:

Biblical interpretation, as one type of semiotic activity, is a technology of the self inasmuch as it is one route by which new experiences of self are created and recreated, ‘contingently and continuously’, as de Lauretis insists. It is one of the practices through which we constitute ourselves as ethical subjects, not necessarily in the sense that we must listen to biblical texts for ethical admonitions, ‘a code of rules’ but, rather, in senses that our very existence as ethical subjects can be effected and modified through variable interactions with texts which have, for better and for worse, assumed such a powerful position in our culture. (2008: 149)

If Stone is concerned with other readings that extend from the inside out, readings that change the ‘very existence as ethical subjects can be effected and modified through variable interactions with texts’ (Stone 2008: 149), then an examination into experience is warranted. Even if one reads from our own experiences, it is helpful to understand that these experiences are not fixed but are constantly being shaped by relational practices. Stone writes: ‘Comstock, like an increasing number of biblical scholars, claims to approach the biblical texts ‘from the point of view of my own experience’ (1997: 4). Yet such a claim, while important, needs to be reconciled with the sugges-
tion of Teresa de Lauretis that ‘experience shifts and is reformed continually, for each subject, with her or his continuous engagement in social reality ...’ (1987: 18).

If such engagement includes the practice of reading, then a theory of biblical interpretation must account for experience in a manner that does not simply posit stable experience acting upon the interpretive process. Such a theory must also recognise that experience is often the result of reading, and that human consciousness and subjectivity can be formed and reformed, in part, through the practice of reading.

(Stone 2008: 150)

**PHYSICAL READINGS**

To argue the case for an embodied reading, it might be helpful to look at what the foot washing actually did. Yes, it was a moment of intimacy; yes, it is special for both the participant and the performer. But to look at scripture against Howells’s performance again we have two foot washing events: we have the foot washing of the ‘woman caught in sin’ and we have the foot washing by Jesus for the disciples.

Howells’s interpretation of *Foot Washing for the Sole* interprets the scripture in a more detailed way than he gives himself credit for. When Jesus washes the disciples’ feet we see that it is not only a reversal of roles; we see the foot washing become a sacrament for Christ. Christ temporarily took on the position of a slave; it was a slave starting to wash the feet of visitors. It would have been appropriate for the disciple to have washed Jesus’ feet, but the role reversal proves problematic, specifically for Peter (Luke 15:8). Jesus realizes that it is scandalous and mystic, and he articulates, ‘you do not understand what I’m doing but you will later’. Jesus is articulating, through the use of his body, a bodily practice of humility of servitude by initiating foot washing as a sacrament, saying, ‘Now that I’m your teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you’.

Christ is creating community and a connection through the use of his body in connection with the bodies of others. We note that in Luke when the one who was a sinner washed the feet of Christ, the Pharisees commented, ‘This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that touch him she is a sinner’. Christ allows her to wash his feet with her tears and dry his feet with her hair, not only disregarding purity laws (Leviticus) that regulate what kinds of bodies can be touched, when and by whom but Christ also accepts it as a gesture of thanks. Christ replies to her at the end of her foot washing ‘that her faith has to save her’ (Luke 7: 36–50).

I would argue at this point that the Howells’s reading of *Foot Washing for the Sole* is closer in ontology to the first-order accounts of foot washing found in Luke and John. It is closer to the actual foot washing that occurred there (first order). The interpretation is based on scripture and we see that Howells’s physical interpretation is incredibly close to scripture; he creates community before asking people to have that experience of intimacy and somehow status is alleviated. Servants become leaders and leaders become servers and it seems to be in line with Howells’s performance of the foot
washing, both his account of it in his interview and those who have written about it as a review.

**BIBLICAL RESEARCH AND THE PERFORMATIVE**

In ‘The problem of knowledge’, performance scholar Robin Nelson argues that the concept of ‘practice’ lies between practitioner knowledge, conceptual frameworks and critical reflections. It involves recognizing the opposing framework that is traditional biblical discourse, and second understanding an embodied queerness (lived queerness). He must also possess the ability to critically reflect between an academic knowledge – ‘know that’ – and an embodied knowledge – ‘know how’.

Howells reproaches the foot washing perhaps with his whole bodily experience. In his article, he described knowing the textual reference for the foot washing, and, having experienced an example of it, sought to improve on its execution: ‘he felt cheated’ when he saw the foot washing inside of liturgy. Thus, Howells’s work asks the questions: when is performance research biblical research and when is performance biblical interpretation? I would argue that performance functions both as evidence and interpretation when one knows more about the subject/object than they did at the start. Howells approached this practice of foot washing with a clear research objective, ‘I wanted to explore specifically whether my hands could be “in dialogue” with another’s feet’ (128).

Through this performance Howells understood humility in a way that is lost during just a textual reading. He would have gained information from touching the participant’s feet; he would have felt things in the silence. It would have been a moment that taught him about humility: the concept of coming to serve and not to be served was a framework set up by Christ. Here I refer back to Alva Noe’s concept of Sensorimotor Knowledge. One could look to bodies as a form of authentic communication and, as suggested in part by Alva Noe, a producer of knowledge. Lisa Isherwood goes on to speculate about the place of body practice as it relates to community, stating that:

> An alternate community needs to be witnessed as having shape or actions that cannot be dismissed as those of crazy individuals. In terms of the church an alternate ecclesiology needs to be visible. This would be fully embodied rather than the product of abstract thought to which members comply; this would fly in the face of transgression. The embodied nature of the emerging transgressive church leaves it open to the possibilities of change as called forth by the demands of the situation. Of course, the embodiment also lies in the bodies of those who are breaking boundaries just by their very existence and the exploration of what may be possible through those bodies.

(Isherwood 2001: 252)

This possible bodily reading that I am proposing can suffer from and be subject to the same scrutiny that any interpretation of a text could be. The author Stanley Fisher suggests a term that I find extremely useful: ‘community of interpretation’. Fisher challenges the concept that text alone has agency by suggesting that in any text that has a ‘voice’ projected on to it, we read what we are prepared to read. ‘The self does not exist apart from the
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communal or conventional categories of thought that enable its operations (of thinking, seeing, reading)’ (Fisher 1984: 13). He goes on further to argue that these communities of interpretation set up the structures in which a reading is done: “‘community of interpretation’ is made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions’ (Fisher 1984: 13). There is more to this than simply living in various particular relationships (though that is part of it). People do things together and the things they do have common patterns: the patterns of buying and selling, taking meals together, praying, et cetera. So there are common forms in their lives, practices, ways of life, habits and so on. Life in a community is very intentionally patterned in these many ways; there is a vast network of shared living pursued in shared ways.

The weave of these shared ‘ways’ and practices is dense, multiply threaded and intricately layered. Within the ways and weaves of life that we call ‘faiths’ we can draw out such bundles of practices as these:

- Liturgies where distinctive kinds of performances bear special meanings (and provide space for a wide range of experiences)
- Private and public prayer and/or meditation
- Ways of forming personal lives: ‘ethical’ ways
- Patterns for relationships, for social groups, institutions, practices; for political groups, institutions, practices
- Beliefs and patterns for seeing and understanding things: people, lives, the natural world and so on

All this is part of ‘a faith’, and in the nature of it these forms cannot be followed simply by individuals (although individuals do follow them); they are forms of activity of the community. One can see through Partridge’s examination of bodily practices that tradition is composed of continually changing life practices, that the concept of tradition is not static and that it can change. As practices change so does tradition and it is better to look at traditions as slowly evolving organisms that morph over time and that are highly dependent on community.

**BODILY PERFORMANCE AND THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE**

After examining Howells *Foot Washing for the Sole*, questions that could be asked include: what is the specific knowledge being produced? Is the body indeed capable of producing knowledge? What is that knowledge? I would suggest that it would be person-specific; the information is gleaned and understood from an event. In the case of Adrian Howells, I might suggest that he knows a little bit more about the human connection and humility of the woman mentioned in Luke 7: 37–38. In ‘Embodied engagement in arts research’, dance artist Karen Barbour writes about how embodied knowledge is a combination play with body-based knowledge and the knowledge that exists outside of the body.

It seems to me that in engaging ourselves in an embodied way of knowing we are creatively searching for and judging potential new combinations and juxtapositions of familiar and perhaps seemingly unrelated knowledge and experiences, what Einstein (1953) called
‘combination play’ (Abra 1970; Gardner & Dempster 1900; Fraser 2004). Insight and intelligence are required for engagement in accommodating internal representations in relation to experience in the world (Stinson 1985) and to understand a wide range of sources of existing knowledge.

(Barbour 2004)

Barbour’s article starts with a citation of Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, but what she does not describe is what happens when the embodied knowledge has to cross fields/disciplines. It is at this moment where Barbour and I are suggesting similar things, but with different ends. My goal is to speculate on a theologizing body, or a body that is capable of God talk. Theologian Elaine Graham, who articulated embodiment’s place in theological tradition, states:

I will propose that embodiment is more than an ‘issue’ exciting our compassion; rather, it points to the performative, incarnation nature of all theology. I want to argue that bodily practice is the agent and the vehicle of divine disclosure; and the faithful practices of the Body of Christ are ‘sacraments’ of suffering and redemption.

(Graham 1999: 109)

Through this article I am trying to do two things, which may be two too many, but in the first instance set the stage for a more diverse understanding of the place of bodily practice in theology and then to suggest a specific bodily practice of interpretation. In ‘Action is the life of all: The praxis-based epistemology of liberation theology’ Zoe Bennett goes on to question the body’s place in theological practice, a concept that brings the possibility of the body reading culture and scripture to light. As articulated above by other theologians, liberation theology has a particular focus on practice. Bennett charts a model for theological reflection, which is Praxis-Reflect-Praxis. He continues to highlight that this focus on practice is specifically geared to changing systematic oppression. I am under no false illusion as an arts practitioner that the concept of practice changes between disciplines, yet the primacy of practice in meaning making remains important even as it is articulated differently between arts/theological communities. When I suggest the necessity of practice (arts-based) and praxis (theology-based) that Zoe Bennett or even the praxis method that has been articulated by Boff in *Theology and Praxis* (1987) are the same, I mean the questioning comes to a similar fork in the road, and that is: what might we know through the body?

**WITNESS AND RISK**

How do we judge the validity of these bodily readings? Theologian Zoe Bennett lays out a convincing argument in her suggestion of ‘Witness and Risk’. I would also suggest that one does not know in full that even the strongholds of faith are the products of a particular kind of looking. So how do I find validation in the performance work of Howells? This presentation of the body is risky and as Bennett has articulated

Risk allows us to trust with due suspicion. It involves the kind of commitment and moving forward in faith which trust implies: an
acknowledgement that all trust is fraught with the danger that we may have trusted inappropriately; that things may be more complicated than we at first believed. Witness allows us to say what we have found to be the truth, to say it with personal conviction and commitment, but to say it without claiming that it is universal, full or incorrigible truth.

(2006:333)

One could say, ‘but in the case studies you have cited the performers declare a particular surety of the knowledge’. This is where risk comes in, they have risked by opening their interpretation up for discussion and for body-to-body debate. In fact, I would go on to agree with Green when he writes:

There are no facts – that is no theory neutral foundation in which to measure interpretations because facts are themselves a function of interpretation. We can continue to appeal to facts to aim for truth beyond our own subjectivity, as long as we remember all theoretical concepts, even the concepts of facts, are paradigm dependent.

(2000: 17)

I am left to do two things to open up my bodily reading to be tested by others or might I suggest again to returning my bodily gaze to the text (Bible) to create a community of citation who might have a different piece of knowledge. One could argue for a suspicion in one’s own knowledge. In an attempt to move beyond the suspicion/trust polarity, there are two concepts I find particularly helpful: witness and risk. Witness and risk both arise from, and imply, immersion in action and reflection: the actions of the believing community and also the action of engagement with others who are ‘strangers’ to us (Green 2000: 33). I would not suggest that bodily readings replace more traditional reading strategies, but instead present complementary alternatives. I would suggest that the foot washing of Adrian Howells offers us another way of thinking about the body’s involvement in religious discourse. I would stress again the need for critical correlation, a way to say that other types of knowledge are out there and we should test their validity through community – not only communities in agreement, but communities who do not agree. I would argue that to bring a bodily reading to another community would clarify, provoke and ultimately produce more well-rounded information.

FLIRTING WITH THE POSSIBILITY OF A THEOLOGIZING BODY

At this point I would like to investigate the potential pitfalls of this Kinaesthetic Hermeneutics; the critiques would be similar if not the same critiques of liberation theology. I titled this section ‘Flirting’ with the possibility of a theologizing body because, although flirting has a connection with a lack of sincerity, as I understand it flirting describes a sense of unsurety or questioning. Flirting is a place of not being sure, or should I say not overly sure. This anti-surety guides how I propose this concept of Kinaesthetic Hermeneutics and how one might imagine criticisms of it. One criticism of liberation theology is its overfocused relationship with praxis, a relationship that lacks spirituality and can be described as ‘this worldly’. Sobrino’s argument (1996: 132) that ‘The Christian scriptures testify that existential faith has priority over
formulations of faith, and that the former is expressed more radically as praxis of faith...’ is typical of liberation theologians who find biblical justification for their theological beliefs. Since critics of liberation theology have failed to note the existence of alternative situations for doing theology, they do not recognize alternative ways of testing theological truth. An argument directed against the validity of a proposed bodily Kinaesthetic Hermeneutics could possibly be present in John Swinton’s book Practical Theology and Qualitative Research (2006). Swinton articulates a stance on human experience in light of scripture:

Taking human experience seriously does not imply that experience is a source of revelation. Experience and human reason cannot lead us, for example, to an understanding of the cross and resurrection – rather, in taking experience seriously, practical theology seeks to explore the implications of the proposition that faith is a performative and embodied act and that human experience is a place where the gospel is grounded, embodied, interpreted and lived out.

(Swinton and Mowat 2006: 10)

The body as a knowledge-producing site has to also be a site for revelation, and I mean it in the original meaning as an unrevealing. What I have been suggesting is an opening up of our imaginative body, to use our bodies as sites for a biblical ‘unrevealing’, that this unrevealing is not necessarily presented to challenge the authority of scripture, or tradition as a critic might suggest, but to challenge how we read scripture. This concept of reading opens up possibilities. My grandmother used to say that God is the same today, tomorrow and forever, but I would suggest that we may know him differently from time to time.

REFERENCES
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**SUGGESTED CITATION**


**CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS**

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