
# Bob Flanagan's Crip Catholicism, Transgression, and Form in Lived Religion

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# BOB FLANAGAN'S CRIP CATHOLICISM, TRANSGRESSION, AND FORM IN LIVED RELIGION

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**Abstract**

*This essay considers the role of transgression in the work of performance artist Bob Flanagan and his partner Sheree Rose, asking what religious forms give it shape, make it legible, or allow it to resonate. It presents two claims. First, Catholic forms offered both a context against which—and a style through which—Flanagan and Rose transgressed religious and ableist norms, forming what I call Flanagan's "crip Catholicism." Second, this example of performance work by Flanagan and Rose suggests the purchase of analyzing "forms" in studies of religion and secularism and of lived religion more generally, asking how attention to Catholic, religious, or other kinds of form might expand our analytic resources, especially those drawn from ethnographic and historical inquiry. This essay proposes that attention to forms may help loosen methodological investments away from the seductive lure of interiority, belief, or agency toward other ways for understanding the shapes religion takes and the work that it does.*

Keywords: lived religion, disability, Catholic, sexuality, secularism, performance

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# EL CATOLOCISMO *CRIP*, LA TRANSGRESIÓN Y LA FORMA DE BOB FLANAGAN EN LA RELIGIÓN VIVIDA

**Resumen**

*Este ensayo toma en cuenta el papel de la transgresión en la obra del artista de performance Bob Flanagan y su compañera Sheree Rose, buscando explicar qué formas religiosas le dan cuerpo, hacen que sea legible o le permiten resonar. Se postulan dos afirmaciones. En primer lugar, las formas católicas ofrecieron tanto un contexto contra el cual—como un estilo a través del cual—Flanagan y Rose transgredieron las normas religiosas y las de discrimen contra los descapacitados, dando lugar a lo que denomino "el catolicismo crip." En segundo lugar, el ejemplo de la performance de Flanagan y Rose implica los beneficios del análisis de "formas" en estudios de la religión y del secularismo y, más generalmente, de la religión vivida, buscando explicar cómo la atención dada a las formas católicas, religiosas, entre otras, puede ampliar nuestros recursos analíticos, especialmente aquellos extraídos de la indagación etnográfica e histórica. Este ensayo postula que la atención a las formas puede ayudar a librar la inversión metodológica del encanto seductivo de la interioridad, la creencia o la agencia hacia otras maneras de entender el cuerpo que toma la religión y el trabajo que ésta hace.*

Palabras clave: religión vivida, discapacidad, católico, sexualidad, secularismo, performance

Bob Flanagan is something of a poster boy for transgression, especially in studies of disability and performance. Kirby Dick's 1997 documentary *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist* cemented this position and brought national attention to Flanagan's work as a performance artist. He had served as an actual poster child for the North Orange County chapter of the National Cystic Fibrosis Research Foundation, so the attention wasn't altogether new.[1]

My thanks to the two anonymous reviewers of this essay for rich, generative feedback; to Patrick McKelvey, Talia Dan Cohen, and Samira Mehta discussing drafts; and to Molly Farneth for inviting me to present an earlier form of this work as a talk at Haverford College. My thanks also go to the wonderful staff at the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives at the USC Libraries, where the Rose/Flanagan Collection is housed. My work for this article was supported by the Fund for Historical Studies at the Institute for Advanced Study.

1 Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 187.

Born in 1952, Flanagan grew up with cystic fibrosis, a genetic disorder that most acutely affects the lungs. Few people with cystic fibrosis lived past their teenage years. Flanagan thus never expected to live into adulthood and was one of the oldest living people with cystic fibrosis before he died in 1996 at the age of 44. He explained on several occasions how childhood and adolescent experiences with cystic fibrosis, including frequent encounters with painful medical tests, shaped his taste for sexual masochism.

For many people, cystic fibrosis impacts eating and digestion, making it difficult to keep on weight and causing chronic stomach pain. In a 1990 interview, Flanagan recalls experiencing terrible stomach aches: "one way of alleviating pain was rubbing my stomach up against the sheets, which turned into masturbating, which connected pain and sexual relief. Added to that, when you're sick alot, all these doctors probe you, and there's a lot of humiliation. There are issues of authority, there's piercing thrown in, and so on."[2] Here Flanagan narrates how sexual acts, especially when combined with self-inflicted pain—his examples would include beating himself with a paddle and suspending himself from a ceiling—offered a way to take back power from this disease and from the medical establishment. Such acts became erotic rituals of self-control. In his adulthood, and with his partner, the photographer and performance artist Sheree Rose, they also became the basis for a series of public performances that thematized the intersections of disability, pain, and eroticism. These performances also displayed the power of transgression through which Flanagan would subvert the poster boy image, becoming, as Robert McRuer puts it, "the poster child from hell."[3] In this essay, I want to consider how Flanagan's work as a writer and artist might also make him a good poster boy for conversations about how we study religion, what we take the work of religion to do, and how it figures into modern forms of transgression.

In her canonical essay "Seeing the Disabled: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography," Rosemarie Garland-Thomson notes how, in perhaps the crux of transgressive acts, Flanagan "became famous for pounding a nail through his penis in one of his performances."[4] Nail in hand, he takes center stage in Garland-Thomson's important discussion of modes of disability representation, serving as the exemplum for what she calls the "exotic" or at times "transgressive"

2 Bob Flanagan, Interview with Raymond Foye, "13 October 1990 Chelsea Hotel Raymond Foye interviews Bob Flanagan," p5, Box #3, *Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose Collection*, ONE Archives, USC Libraries. This archive collection was only partly processed when I visited, but I include as much identifying information as possible in my citations here.

3 McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 194.

4 Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Seeing the Disabled: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography," in *The New Disability History*, eds. Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umanski (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 358.

form of representation. Robert McRuer extends this discussion in his field-defining book *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, elevating the queer political potential of Flanagan's transgressive "crip" stylings.[5] Garland-Thomson and McRuer are both powerfully attuned to juxtapositions of disability and sexuality in Flanagan's work. For now, I want to note their agreement: that Flanagan's public performance art, much of it in partnership with Rose, enacts a form of transgression and participates in histories of disability representation under the sign of transgression. What he transgresses in these analyses are the heteronormative and ableist norms of contemporary US culture, especially as those norms have been shaped by longer histories of Christian moralism. Indeed, Christian rhetoric has long been taken up in US culture to stigmatize physical and cognitive difference and to denounce forms of sexual practice and desire that stand outside the bounds of heterosexual coupling.[6] This point perhaps makes all the more surprising the forms through which Flanagan enacts transgression: he enacts transgression not only against Christian norms but also through them. This leads to questions about how Christian forms might become central to performance work that conventionally falls under the umbrella of the secular.[7] We might start to respond to such questions by looking to how Flanagan and his partner Sheree Rose describe their own relationships to religion (fig. 1).[8]

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5 McRuer, *Crip Theory*, see especially 171–198.

6 See, for instance, Robert Orsi, "'Mildred, Is It Fun to Be A Cripple?' The Culture of Suffering in Mid-Twentieth Century American Catholicism," in *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005): 19-47; Paula M. Kane, "'She Offered Herself Up': The Victim Soul and Victim Spirituality in Catholicism," *Church History* 71, no. 1 (2002): 80–119; Lynne Gerber, *Seeking the Straight and Narrow: Weight Loss and Sexual Reorientation in Evangelical America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Love the Sin: Regulation and the Limits of Tolerance* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2004); and Anthony Petro, *After the Wrath of God: AIDS, Sexuality, and American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) and "Disability Studies and Religion" in *Embodied Religion*, ed. Kent Brintnall (Farmington Hills, MI: MacMillan, 2016): 359-376.

7 This discussion of religious forms, and their operation across ostensible historical breaks between the religious and the secular, is of course indebted to the work of Michel Foucault, whose ghost likewise haunts the longer discussions of contemporary approaches to taking up "form" that I describe later in this essay. Perhaps a different way to express this debt is to say that Foucault, despite his influence, still remains under-utilized as a theorist of religion and secularism.

8 Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose. Exhibition: 9/23/1994-12/31/1994, Work: 1992-94. Exhibition: Visiting Hours: An Installation by Bob Flanagan in collaboration with Sheree Rose, Hospital room interior. Installation. https://library.artstor.org/asset/ANEWMUSEUM_10310358448.

Figure 1: Flanagan and Rose.

In a short unpublished essay, Sheree Rose describes her relationship with Flanagan like this: "Bob and I were an unlikely pair. He was 27 years old when we met. I was ten years older. He was Catholic; I, a Jew."[9] Another version found in their archive revises that last sentence: "He was a *lapsed* Catholic. I was a *cultural* Jew."[10] I want to note the revision. The movement signals some ambivalence about identification with being Catholic and Jewish. They are not *not* Catholic and Jewish, but rather certain kinds of Catholic and Jewish. There is a playfulness here, emerging even alongside the ambivalence, that carries into their engagements with sadomasochist (S/M) performance.

In a 1990 interview, Flanagan narrates his S/M practice in distinctly religious terms. "For me," he explains, "S&M is more than a sexual thing, it has a religious component. It's about transcendence. It's that really crazy thing, where the lower you go the higher you get. There's a line in the slave sonnets: 'Each reduction makes me all the more huge.' It's an out-of-the-body experience."[11] Here,

9 Sheree Rose, "In Sickness and In Health: Bluring the Boundaries in Pre-Millenial Relationships" (sic); (10/11/1996 printed at top of paper), PAPERS Box 1 (note books), Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose Collection, ONE Archives, USC Libraries.

10 Sheree Rose, "In Semi-Sickness and In So-Called Health" (10/11/1996 printed at top of paper), Box 3, Folder: Writings, Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose Collection, ONE Archives, USC Libraries (italics mine).

11 Bob Flanagan, Interview with Raymond Foye "13 October 1990 Chelsea Hotel Raymond Foye interviews Bob Flanagan," 6, Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose Collection,

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Flanagan finds the language to describe his S/M work as "more" than sexual in religion—specifically, in apophatic religious language that we often reserve for mystical or ecstatic religious experiences.

A somewhat different, but not altogether contradictory, picture emerges in a 1994 conversation in the magazine *Artforum* with Bob Flanagan, Sheree Rose, and art editor and writer Deborah Drier.

Rose remarks, "There's definitely a spiritual thing going on in Bob's works."

Flanagan responds, "Well, for the general population I think it's easier to enter the spiritual realm—it's something they're familiar with. But I'm not comfortable with it."

Rose follows up: "Yes, Bob likes to deny the spiritual side, but for me the idea of him lying on the bed of nails and me symbolically cutting his penis [by cutting the birthday cake that lay on his lower stomach] was spiritually significant. Part of what we've always done together is the subjugation of the male by the female. So my original idea was to have the cake, dripping with cream and raspberry jam, made in the shape of a phallus, and people would be given pieces of it to eat. You could say that was a symbolic castration, or a symbolic eating of the body of Christ. It was a joke, too—we weren't saying you were going to be saved, not at all. But there was that spiritual structure, which I enjoyed playing with."[12]

Note the movements of the conversation: Flanagan does not deny a spiritual or religious aspect to his work but says he's not comfortable with it. Then Rose layers onto the mystical or ecstatic dimensions that Flanagan had noted earlier the liturgical dimensions of their work, the "spiritual structure" that draws from Catholic ritual, even as it plays with it. This play with ritual—this performance of ritual—begins to mark out the place of this performance art in secular times, a place that is saturated with religious forms. But more: with Catholic ones.

This essay queries what religious forms Flanagan's transgression takes, what forms give it shape, make it legible, allow it to "resonate."[13] It offers two arguments. First, I want to demonstrate the Catholic forms through which Flanagan and Rose enact much of their work and suggest that Catholicism, in this way, becomes both a context against which—and a style through which—they perform.[14] Here,

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ONE Archives, USC Libraries. His reference to the sonnets is about his book of poetry called *Slave Sonnets* (Los Angeles: Cold Calm Press, 1986).

12 The conversation appears in Dennis Cooper. "Bob's thing. (artist Bob Flanagan) (includes a 1994 interview)." *Artforum International*, Apr 1996, 74:9.

13 Wai Chee Dimock, "A Theory of Resonance," *PMLA* 112, no. 5 (Oct 1997): 1060-1071.

14 My analysis of Flanagan in this essay is necessarily partial—elsewhere, I will draw more attention to his work with Sheree Rose, including her commitments to Judaism and how that shaped their work together. Much more could be said, too, about the histories

Flanagan's play with Catholicism, disability, sexuality, and transgression offers a useful lens for considering religion and secularism without privileging the registers of interiority or belief. Second, I want to use this archive to consider the analysis of forms in the study of lived religion, asking how attention to Catholic, religious, or other kinds of form might expand our analytic resources, especially those drawn from ethnographic and historical inquiry. How might attention to forms take pressure off of the often humanist and, at times, sentimental practice of revealing our subjects in all their expressive, creative, and resistant glory?[15] I begin with a discussion of this approach, in order to understand how an analysis of forms proves instructive here, before returning in the second half of this essay to a fuller engagement with Flanagan's work.

## FORM IN LIVED RELIGION

According to literary scholar Thomas Ferraro, writing in the introduction to the edited volume *Catholic Lives, Contemporary America*, "Catholics in the United States have gravitated into the arts more easily than into the academy."[16] This is partly a consequence of anti-Catholicism in secular academia, he notes. But it is also "because populist forms of Catholic knowing reside more in *gesture* than in explication." These "forms of Catholic knowing" appear "more in public theaters

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of ethnicity and race at play in this work, including the links between these forms of body mortification and interest in tattooing arts and "primitivist" movements. I should also underline the importance of taking up this work as performance and considering its place within performance studies—directions that one could push further than I'm able to do in this essay. As Diana Taylor writes, "performances function as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity" through repeated behavior. See *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 2. Here, I want to emphasize that performance works within the social, not outside it. For an excellent guide to reading for the importance of representation and the remains of performance, also see Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

15 To be clear, my claim is not that we must oppose a sentimental take to a more serious, rigorous one, but that a sentimental humanism seems at times to have become hegemonic, indeed, *too* effective. If we must endure the ironies of a sentimental earnestness, at least let us have some guilt in doing so. But more: we could also expand the range of affective responses that attend to our analyses. My guide here, as in many things, is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid and Reparative Reading, Or, You're So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 123–152.

16 Thomas J. Ferarro, "Not-Just-Cultural Catholics," in *Catholic Lives, Contemporary Lives*, ed. Thomas J. Ferraro (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 9.

of aesthetic transformation than in the sequestered libraries of its preservation."[17] This introduction, with the volume as a whole, asks what it means to have been raised Catholic and to live through what we might call "Catholic forms" outside the official bounds of, and sometimes in direct conflict with, the church hierarchy. Ferraro opens space to consider what it means to study "cultural Catholics." He offers an important proviso, one that informs my work here. "To me," he insists, "*cultural* as a qualifier to *Catholicism* does not necessarily mean dilution or dissolution—a draining of the religious imagination into banal secularity—but can in fact signify the opposite, a form of transfigurative reenvisioning that refuses to quarantine the sacred."[18]

Ferraro provides a framework for interpreting what art critic Eleanor Heartney calls the "incarnational consciousness" that informs a number of contemporary visual and performance artists, "postmodern heretics" ranging from Andy Warhol and Linda Montano to Karen Finley and Félix González-Torres.[19] As Ferraro and Heartney suggest, it is not merely accidental that Catholic themes saturate so much artistic practice in the post-1960s US, nor that the artists producing these works would, by and large, remain in tension with Roman Catholic church leaders. Yet to dismiss such work as secular, if not anti-Catholic, risks missing the shape that Catholic forms—gestures, styles, rituals—give to this artistic work and to public life, forms neither "officially" Catholic nor merely secular. Attention to forms, an approach that has regained currency in literary studies, offers an analytic language that helps us to understand this in-between terrain.

Needless to say, the study of form enjoys a long and not altogether positive history. In fact, the term itself has come under fire for its almost boundless (if therein ironic) elasticity. Literary scholar Angela Leighton puts it well when she writes, "Form, which seems self-sufficient and self-defining, is restless, tendentious, a noun lying in wait for its object."[20] Raymond Williams opens his chapter on form in *Marxism and Literature* by explaining how it "acquired two major senses: a visible or outward shape, and an inherent shaping impulse."[21]

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17 Ferarro, 9 (emphasis mine).

18 Ibid.

19 Eleanor Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics: Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2004). S. Brent Plate's *Blasphemy: Art that Offends* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2006), while not focused specifically on Catholicism or the US, also discusses much of this history, placing "offensive" art in broader religious and art historical contexts.

20 Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1.

21 Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 186.

Form, in other words, can describe the very essence of something or gesture to its superficiality; it can serve as a determining force or a mere container.[22] The various opposites cast alongside form demonstrate its chameleonlike ability. Over its career, as Leighton writes, form has combined with three powerful counterparts, including "form and matter, form and content, form and formlessness."[23] When made into a method, one that has largely fallen out of favor, formalism tends to read literary or artistic texts with little to no attention to context. Historicist readings, in contrast, reduce form to context—which could mean social or political setting, historical or contemporary—often obliterating the boundaries that form any given text and distinguish it from others. Given this fraught inheritance, one might do well to ask: why bother with form at all?[24]

One reason is that form offers a conceptual tool to capture something otherwise missed. Another is that scholars of US religion already draw upon the language of forms to very useful ends. Consider four brief examples. In *Being Muslim*, Sylvia Chan-Malik combines lived religion with the study of "racial-religious form" to understand the lives of Muslim women. She tracks three key instances of these racial-religious forms—the Islamic Terrorist, the Poor Muslim Woman, and the Radical Black Muslim—which, combined with her attention

22 See also Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 2.

23 Leighton, *On Forms*, 2.

24 My comments in this paragraph, but also my inclination to think about US religion through attention to forms, are very much indebted to recent work in literary and cultural studies that has sought to find new ways to analyze texts, ways that neither dissolve texts into "context" nor jump immediately to "symptomatic readings," by which most authors mean readings that reproduce a hermeneutics of suspicion, seeking to uncover deep, secret meanings waiting behind texts, usually by drawing upon psychoanalysis and Marxism. I do not think the study of US religion has suffered in the same ways from the burden of producing symptomatic readings—indeed, the field has made enormous gains by attending to other concerns—but I would say the field has had its own deep attachments, especially to assumptions about human agency, creativity, resistance, and the power of narrative, that cannot be separated from normative definitions of religion as a form of deep, sincere, authentic identification. It is in naming and finding alternatives to these types of normativities that I find attention to forms quite useful. In addition to Caroline Levine's work, discussed in more detail in this essay, see also Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 1-21; Heather Love, "Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn," *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 371-391; Rita Felski, "'Context Stinks!'" *New Literary History* 42, no. 4 (Autumn 2011): 573-591, which also appears in her book *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

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to practice, begin to articulate the conditions of "being Muslim" in the US.[25] In *Spirit in the Dark*, Josef Sorett shows how religion shaped the African American literary visions of writers in the early to mid 20th century. His brilliant analysis shows how "the spiritual grammar cultivated in African American literature" remained in a relationship of ambivalence to Afro-Protestantism, as "a celebratory ambivalence apparent across the history of racial aesthetics took the form of a frequent pairing of church and spirit."[26] In "Seeing the Invisible," Hillary Kaell calls our attention to the "new forms" that religion takes in a "secularizing place like Quebec" in her provocative analysis of wayside crosses—a particular material and aesthetic form of religion that becomes "ambient," shifting between "marked" and "unmarked" in Quebec's secularizing public culture.[27] In "Altars of Ammo," John Seitz examines how "Catholic forms such as clerical robes, altars, Eucharistic hosts, and crucifixes, as well as Catholic ritual postures and persons, such as the priest's elevation of arms and host at the high point of mass" provided a rich visual vocabulary through which "wartime image-makers" during World War II could "interject holiness into wartime settings."[28] These Catholic forms signaled "protest or lamentation" for lives lost and helped Americans accept the pains of modern warfare.[29] In each of these cases, and one could add many more, the language of form offers a way to advance our understanding of how religious histories and material cultures work on and through the people and texts we study.[30] Now seems a good time to bring more concerted attention to the theoretical work that this specific term—form—does or might do in our attempts to understand religion.

Indeed, attention to form helps us to do better work under the umbrella of lived religion. Perhaps best represented in David Hall's indispensable edited volume *Lived Religion in America*, this approach moved the normative sites for American religion from religious leaders and churches to the everyday worlds of

25 Sylvia Chan-Malik, *Being Muslim: A Culture History of Women of Color in American Islam* (New York: New York Universtiy Press, 2018), 23.

26 Josef Sorett, *Spirit in the Dark: A Religious History of Racial Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 9.

27 Hillary Kaell, "Seeing the Invisible: Ambient Catholicism on the Side of the Road," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 85, no. 1 (March 2017): 139.

28 John Seitz, "Altars of Ammo: Catholic Materiality and the Visual Culture of World War II," *Material Religion* 15, no. 4 (2019): 403.

29 Ibid., 404.

30 My contention is not that these scholars all use form to the same exact ends or as part of an intentional shift in our analytic vocabulary. Rather, I find the resonance of form as an analytic category across these examples to be a sign that we might explore further its purchase for future research.

religious followers and the variety of spaces they might inhabit, from temples and churches to kitchens and public streets. In his contribution "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion," Robert Orsi writes that the essays in this volume "invite a redirection of religious scholarship away from traditions—the great hybridized constructs of 'Protestantism,' 'Catholicism,' and so on—and likewise away from the denominational focus that has so preoccupied scholars of American religions, toward a study of how particular people, in particular places and times, live in, with, through, and against the religious idioms available to them in culture—*all* the idioms, including (often enough) those not explicitly their 'own.'"[31] Orsi recognizes the importance of lived religion as a site of resistance to cultural discipline or social power, a point that he notes is emphasized in every contribution to this volume. As lived religion has developed over time, becoming one of the dominant approaches in American religion, this focus on resistance, subversion, and creativity has thrived, bringing to the field a new generation of scholarship attentive to the myriad ways that people negotiate their religious lives. These studies have been so successful, in fact, that we might pause to worry if we have overplayed the hand of resistance, creativity, and subversion at the expense of understanding the myriad social forces that delimit this play of creativity and that shape disciplines of practice. If it has become passé to talk about something like "ideology" or "false consciousness," and with good reason, our frustrations with such determinant approaches need not take us to the place of finding (as if we worried we wouldn't) and celebrating all manners of human agency.[32]

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31 Robert Orsi, "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion," in *Lived Religion in America*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 7.

32 Such a tendency would not be unique to work in lived religion and likely says more about the political and theoretical trends of scholarship since the 1980s and 1990s that (importantly and productively) pushed against the totalizing and reductive analyses of some forms of Marxist and poststructuralist critique. Feminist anthropologists have in my mind convincingly criticized the "romance of resistance" and presumptions of a volitional, liberal subject at the center of much scholarly and feminist work that celebrates resistance and agency. See Lila Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women," *American Ethnologist*, 17, no. 1 (Feb 1990): 41-55 and Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). There are too many titles in North American religion to list in full that, I think, do an excellent job keeping the power of social forces in view, but some examples would include Robert A. Orsi, *Thank You, St. Jude: Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996); R. Marie Griffith, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Henry Goldschmidt, *Race and Religion among the Chosen People of Crown Heights* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006); Samira K. Mehta, *Beyond Chrismukkah: The Christian-Jewish*

To be sure, Orsi already recognized this: "It is not enough to speak of religious subversion and resistance unless one also speaks of how these movements of opposition may be at the same time idioms of discipline."[33] He calls for an approach "that embeds the religious person and community in history and culture not as something that religious persons are 'in' but as media through which they fundamentally are, and that also understands the power of cultural structures and inherited idioms—what Pierre Bourdieu has named the 'habitus'—both to shape and discipline thought and as well to give rise to religious creativity and improvisation."[34] I want to suggest that scholars of US religion writing in the vein of lived religion have paid much more attention to the latter than to the former, to the cultural and religious structures that shape thought and practice. The focus on forms proposed here is not an exhaustive or all-engrossing response to this tendency. And it moves in a somewhat different direction than might an approach to habitus following Bourdieu. I do not see these necessarily as competing approaches but want to suggest that attention to forms might be one important way both to expand and to shape our methodological thinking. Analyzing forms provides one way to get at these "idioms of discipline." Indeed, the strongest version of this approach would be fully anti-humanist, but one need not go so far in considering an analysis of forms in studies of religion.

## APPROACHING FORMS

So how do we study forms? To begin, I want to insist that we not consider form to name something essential or unchanging. And it's helpful to think about forms in the plural. In both cases, I follow literary theorist Caroline Levine, whose recent book *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* charts a path for scholars of literary and cultural studies to analyze forms as connected to historical and political contexts, to bring together the usually separate strains of analysis that treat aesthetic forms and political forms. Levine defines form very broadly to mean "all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference."[35] Two components of her argument about forms are especially helpful for the present inquiry. First, she notes how forms work: they constrain, they differ, they overlap and intersect, they travel, and they "do political work in

*Interfaith Family in the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018); and Katharine Gerbner, *Christian Slavery: Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

33 Orsi, "Everyday Miracles," 15.

34 Ibid., 16.

35 Levine, *Forms*, 3.

historical contexts."[36] Second, drawing from design theory, Levine emphasizes the "affordances" of forms, by which she means the "potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs."[37] Forms, in this casting, are both iterable and portable—they can persist over time or reappear at various moments and in numerous contexts. Forms can be more or less malleable or durable. The iterative quality of forms means that, if they are to persist, they cannot persist without difference.[38] Yet there is something to certain forms that take shape over long periods of time, that give shape to continuing ways of living, ways of being, ways of doing religion, of doing politics, of doing racism or sexism.

Here I am especially interested in religious forms—and what I think we can even call Catholic forms—in the work of Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose. But we need not presume that religious forms exist apart from non-religious forms or that calling a form religious imputes any intrinsic quality. Rather, it could be as simple as a shape—say, a cross—that reappears on a storefront church, in the Quebecois fields, on a highway billboard, in the logo of the American Red Cross, or in the photography of Andres Serrano. What are the affordances of this particular form? How should we understand not only its appearance in particular locations but also its patterns of recurrence? Approaching the cross as an iterable form allows us to see the persistence of religious forms across conventionally secular and religious contexts and yet does not ask us to reduce its appearance to the terms of one or the other.

The study of religious forms allows space to isolate certain patterns or shapes, to note their persistence across times or places, while insisting upon interpreting these forms within particular, lived contexts. It holds space for the finely textured accounts of habitus in Bourdieu's practice theory, while also prompting us to consider the persistence of certain forms across time, especially as they criss cross aesthetic and political registers. Attention to forms gives us a language to think about the persistence or resilience of certain kinds of practice over time. It pushes against a radical historicism that would limit certain practices to a specific context, or reduce them to a particular, ungeneralizable context, by reminding us to consider their different valences or resonances when taken up in new places or across time. This attention to religious forms thus accents a different current within lived religion, as it emphasizes how religious practices, even at their most

36 Ibid., 4-5.

37 Ibid., 6.

38 This is the point Jacques Derrida makes about the structure of iterability in "Signature, Event, Context," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 307-330. See also Amy Hollywood, "Performativity, Citationality, Ritualization," *History of Religions* 42, no. 2 (Nov 2002): 93-115.

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creative or subversive, do not spring sui generis from minds or bodies but instead draw from other practices, from older practices. Paying attention to forms, specifically, expands how we understand histories of social power and discipline that shape practice by taking up the shapes and patterns that both delimit and provide the space for engagement. This approach, I hope to show, also allows us to examine the interplay of religious and secular forms without prodding us to answer the question of whether something is or is not religious or secular—this approach comes at that division askance, even disinterested, in that its primary ontological commitment is to the shifting presence and absence of forms themselves.

If Ferraro is right that Catholic ways of knowing reside more in gestures than in explication, more in public theaters of aesthetic transformation than in academic libraries, then attention to forms gives us a more precise analytic language to account for gestures, for the forms that gestures take, how they travel, how they give shape to Catholic aesthetics and ways of being in the world. To suggest the purchase of this method, I want to return to the example of Bob Flanagan. Here is my question: What would it mean to take up Catholicism not as a context Flanagan works against but rather as a form or set of forms he works through?

This essay considers how Flanagan creates his public persona, that is, how he performs himself in public, often with Rose by his side, and how they work through Catholic forms in doing so. I explore how this work centers form and representation, both forming and dis-forming Catholic tropes of suffering, incarnation, humor, and confession. In discussing this work, I want to emphasize that I am more interested in testing the limits of thinking through Flanagan's work as Catholic than in taking up Flanagan as *a* Catholic in any conventional sense, in the sense in which we fold religious identity into a longer list of possible identity markers. Much can be said about this point, but I am trying to get at something a little different here, and the language of forms helps get us there. His work offers a privileged site for envisioning particular kinds of formation and dis-formation, for thinking about the forms through which religion, sex, and disability work.

## REPRESENTING DISABILITY, FORMING FLANAGAN

My analysis of Flanagan starts by returning to his place within representations of disability and within scholarship in disability studies, which proves enormously useful for attending both to the contexts in which Flanagan became visible and to how attention to religious forms revises some of this work.[39] In "Seeing

39 There is a robust and growing body of scholarship on disability, including its intersections with gender, sexuality, religion, race, and performance. While I focus here on Garland-Thomson and McRuer, two of the most important figures in the development

the Disabled," Rosemarie Garland-Thomson shows how the development of photography in the 1830s and 1840s led to a new emphasis in the modern period on visual forms of representation.[40] This shift had an enormous impact on representations of disability. Long hidden from public view, disabled bodies could now be photographed for much broader public consumption. Americans were deeply ambivalent about the disabled body. On the one hand, as a largely Christian nation, they had a long tradition of venerating the weak, disfigured body of Christ. But there was also a deep-seated discomfort about such images that was "emblemized," Garland-Thomson suggests, "in the wounded Christ being removed from the Protestant cross."[41] This ambivalence inherited from Christian and especially Protestant American culture shaped dominant modes of representation.

Garland-Thomson offers four broad categories to capture how Americans have viewed disability in visual imagery, moving from the wondrous, to the sentimental, to the exotic, to the realist. The "wondrous" refers to images of people with disabilities performing surprising tasks. Imagine, for example, a surgical resident overcoming autism—and fending off would be doubters—to save the life a young boy after a very unlikely accident at an airport (this is the opening scene and main conceit of the hit TV series *The Good Doctor*). The "sentimental" representation depicts the disabled person as helpless or pitiable, such as the poster boys and girls for organizations like the March of Dimes or Jerry Lewis telethons or the infamous plight of *A Christmas Carol*'s Tiny Tim. The "exotic" representation shows people with disabilities as "freakish" objects for viewers to gawk at, such as images of conjoined twins or of the Elephant Man. The final

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of critical disability studies and crip theory, my thinking is also shaped by Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); Ellen Samuels, *Fantasies of Identification: Disability, Gender, Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Darla Schumm and Michael Stoltzfus, eds., *Disability in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: Sacred Texts, Historical Traditions, and Social Analysis* (New York: Palgrave, 2011); Christopher M. Bell, *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2012); Patrick McKelvey, "Ron Whyte's 'Disemployment': Prosthetic Performance and Theatrical Labor," *Theatre Survey* 57, no. 3 (September 2016): 314-335; Julie Passanante Elman, *Chronic Youth: Disability, Sexuality, and US Media Cultures of Rehabilitation* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); and Sarah Imhoff, "Why Disability Studies Needs to Take Religion Seriously," *Religions* 8, no. 9 (Sept 2017): 186, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel8090186.

40 Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Seeing the Disabled: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography," in *The New Disability History*, ed. Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umanski, (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 335-374.

41 Ibid., 338.

visual category is "realism." These images avoid making the disabled person seem different from imagined "normal" viewers. This genre of disability representation allows viewers to trade places with the object of the image, to put themselves in the place—mostly so, at least—of the disabled person it depicts. This mode may seem more "truthful" than the others, Garland-Thomson warns us, but realism is also governed by the rules of its genre.[42]

Within this taxonomy of visual rhetoric, Garland-Thomson reads Flanagan's body of work as an example of exotic representation, though it is also a case in which the disabled person himself performs or crafts that very representation. "Creating a profane parody that fuses the cultural figures of the invisible superman, the porn star, and the sick person," she writes, "he combines cape, chains, piercings, and the oxygen mask characteristic of cystic fibrosis to discomfort viewers."[43] Despite the work that Flanagan's image does to trouble cultural expectations about disability, Garland-Thompson concludes her analysis by suggesting that the "realistic mode" is the one "most likely to encourage the work the Disability Rights movement began," precisely because it depicts disability as ordinary or typical rather than unusual.[44] In *Crip Theory*, Robert McRuer appreciates the power of Garland-Thomson's taxonomy but also pushes against it—and her reading of Flanagan in particular—to the extent that her taxonomy creates something of a progress narrative, even if unwittingly, that works through a succession of representative forms to arrive, in the end, with the ostensibly better "realistic" mode of representation. For McRuer, realism as a genre too easily collapses into realistic portrayal, which then serves as the normative political horizon for disability representation. If the realist mode remains a genre for Garland-Thomson, he argues, it is one that still enacts hope for a particular future in which normalization—indexed in the ability for substitution, for mimesis—remains an under-questioned political goal.

McRuer wants to return us to the potential "crip" work of the transgressive, that is, to "call back the transgressive to consider whether it might be considered otherwise."[45] McRuer finds Flanagan a better exemplar for disability politics than does Garland-Thomson—even, in his words, "critically queer, and radically crip." In his reading, Flanagan's performance art "inhabits and explodes both the poster child and the dead-already mythologies, in some ways literally fucking the compulsory future that both portend."[46] McRuer wants to marshal the transgressive

42 Ibid., 339-344.
43 Ibid., 358.
44 Ibid., 372.
45 McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 181.
46 Ibid., 183, 188.

aspects of Flanagan's performance and writing toward a crip politics, one that resists the normalizing constraints of mainstream disability politics and of lesbian and gay politics in kind. He reads Flanagan's body of images for the myth-making work, following Roland Barthes, of which they become a part. While these images might at times "suggest little more than 'Bob Flanagan's sick,'" McRuer argues, given the right moment, "'some future person' or collectivity might detect in that sick message the seemingly incomprehensible way to survive, and survive well, at the margins of time, space, and representation (they might, in fact, detect that surviving well can paradoxically mean surviving sick)."[47] Or, to build on this, they might find that surviving well might involve surviving as (culturally) Catholic, or at the edges of Catholicism, at the limits of Catholic forms, at the pleasures of their affordances.

Both Garland-Thomson and McRuer offer rich lenses to analyze the politics of disability representation and performance, frameworks that are indeed indispensable. What I am struck by is how the languages of the religious both enter and do not enter into their readings. We might ask, for instance, how the transgressive aspects of Flanagan's work are both structured and fractured by what some scholars have called a "Catholic imagination," through a specifically Catholic mode of boundary-making and a Catholic erotics of transgression (and a Catholic erotics of boundaries).[48] We might explore what readings open up if we take transgression not as some essential form of offense against law or rule but instead as a stylized response to a particular cultural situation. Doing so would push us to ask more questions, both about the specificity of the historical or cultural context and also about the stylizations of the transgressive acts themselves. For Flanagan, I want to suggest, mid-twentieth century white, Irish-American, US Catholicism provides a framework both for the cultural norms he transgresses and for the forms through which his transgression is performed—through which his performance becomes transgressive.[49]

47 Ibid., 183.

48 The language of simultaneous structuring and fracturing comes from Eve Sedgwick's canonical descriptions of the power of the homo/hetero binary in the modern West in *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 1. Amelia Jones comes closer to what I'm arguing, noting how "Flanagan ritualized his pain through performances that borrow from and transgress the flamboyant fetishization of suffering and martyrdom in the Catholic tradition," Jones, *Body Art / Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 229-230.

49 We might also read Flanagan's interest in S/M performance alongside the long history of body mortification in Catholicism and the history of sexuality. See Niklaus Largier, *In Praise of the Whip: A Cultural History of Arousal* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2007).

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Roman Catholicism has a long history of dealing with disability and illness. In *Between Heaven and Earth*, Robert Orsi captures a segment of this history in narrating the story of his uncle Sal, who had cerebral palsy, a disability that affects muscle movement. Orsi draws upon the story of his uncle to illustrate the power of American Catholic ways of thinking about disability in the mid-twentieth century US, the same period when Flanagan was born and raised.[50] Approaching this topic, these Catholic ways of thinking, requires scholars to think in complicated ways about religious tradition, including what a religion such as "Catholicism" is. For scholars of lived religion, it is important to understand the history of the movement and the official theology of the church. But it is just as important to examine what they sometimes call "popular devotion," which is the way that everyday people work out the relationships between their lives, their families and broader culture, and the divine. This approach helps in bringing together representation and practice. Orsi's account of his uncle is thus instructive both in terms of method and for understanding some of Flanagan's own Catholic history.

Sal kept on his desk the image of a saint—Blessed Margaret of Castello—which sat alongside pictures of his family members. Born in 1287, Margaret was small and blind and had a twisted foot and a hunched back. Catholics devoted to her often say that she would not have been born today, with modern medical advances. For this reason, she has been proposed as the patron saint of the unborn and unwanted.[51] Catholic culture in the mid-twentieth century identified sickness with sin and moral corruption. But it also upheld the devotional benefits of suffering and sickness, Orsi explains, which took on "the character of a sacrament," an act that could bring one closer to salvation. He even describes the feeling as an "erotic" of suffering. Pain could be a sign of corruption, but it also could signal spiritual glory. This was especially true for people born with physical disabilities, who were considered "innocent"—sometimes called the "fortunate unfortunates."[52]

Devotional literature in this period called for the sick to suffer in silence and to suffer cheerfully. For those who were not suffering, the "happy handicapped," as they were sometimes named in popular literature, could function as intermediaries to the divine. They were what historian Paula Kane describes as "victim souls," an idea that emerged in the late nineteenth century.[53] People with disabilities became spiritual heroes, and their devotees regarded their suffering as an act of God that could help others. In this sense, Catholic culture in the mid-

50 Orsi, "'Mildred,'" *Between Heaven and Earth*, 19-47.
51 Ibid., 36.
52 Ibid., 24-25.
53 Kane, "'She Offered Herself Up,'" 80–119.

twentieth century represented disability as a sign of sin, but also as an occasion for deep holiness so long as the disabled person remained cheerful. This culture of Catholicism was formative for Flanagan, who worked within and against these Catholic devotions to suffering as much as he did Catholic disciplines of sex.

## NARRATING FLANAGAN

Flanagan's story offers up a narrative about his escape from the guilt and sexual shame imposed by his Roman Catholic upbringing. This narrative frames the 1993 collection *Bob Flanagan: Supermasochist*, assembled by Andrea Juno and V Vale, which contains several interviews and photographs of Flanagan and Rose's work. Their co-authored introduction presents a common secularist story about overturning religious repression. Juno and Vale write, "We are still under the tight, insidious grip of the past thousand years of Judeo-Christian brainwashing that runs like an unconscious river through all of our myths and belief systems."[54] Against the onslaught of this repressive religious system stands Flanagan, whose performances, they continue, "force seldom-expressed conflicts such as these into discussion." "Particularly noteworthy," they insist, "is his attitude of fully living his life in the present, accepting the body he was given, and not only accepting all his desires but *owning* and *living* them."[55]

In such accounts, Flanagan's public performances refuse the sexual shame and guilt attached to Christian teachings about sexuality. This is a liberation narrative—and an important one. But we can ask still other questions about Flanagan's sexual practices, his artistic work, and his Catholicism or anti-Catholicism. His body of works renders alternative readings, or additional readings, including some that take Catholicism as more than a source of repression, or as an external domination to overcome—whether in reference to sex or to disability. Such readings might start with the records of Flanagan's explicit references to Catholicism.

*With biographical details*—Flanagan describes in one interview how he "got to experience Catholic guilt and confession, the Stations of the Cross, and the saintliness of suffering." He continues: "I think I related my suffering and illness to the suffering of Jesus on the cross—the idea that suffering in some way was kind of holy."[56]

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54 Andrea Juno and V. Vale, "Introduction," *Bob Flanagan: Supermasochist* (San Francisco: Re/Search, 1993), 6.

55 Ibid.

56 Bob Flanagan, "Interview One," *Bob Flanagan: Supermasochist* (San Francisco: RE/Search, 1993), 10-29.

*With a bit of humor*—Flanagan on various occasions joked that Jesus was the first super-masochist.[57] He modeled his public personae in this mold, one that might cause Mel Gibson's Christ to blush.

*With testimony*—in his 1985 poem "Why?," one of his most well-known works, Flanagan recites a litany of reasons for his enjoyment of sexual masochism: "Because it feels good, because it gives me an erection, […] because I was humiliated by nuns, because of Christ and the crucifixion, […] because I'm a Catholic, because I still love Lent and I love my penis and in spite of it all I have no guilt, […] because of the cross, […] because my parents loved me even more when I was suffering, […] because spare the rod and spoil the child."[58] Here, Flanagan brings together a style of Catholic prayer with the autobiographical details of life.

We should add to this already dense record images from his performance art. Take two examples. Flanagan often experimented with piercings, with running needles through his skin, especially the skin of his genitals. On at least two occasions, including one captured in Kirby Dick's documentary about Flanagan and raised as an example of the exotic in Garland-Thomson's essay, he would drive a nail through the flesh of his penis and into a wooden board. As if his flesh needed to be punished. As if no one's done that before. As if resurrection depended upon it.

The second example comes from Flanagan and Rose's performance piece *Visiting Hours*, which first opened at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in December of 1992. In 1993, they were invited to show it at the New Museum in New York City and then later at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. The New York exhibition featured what Rose describes as "a very elaborate coffin like you would see in a Catholic funeral."[59] It was made up so that Flanagan appeared to be laying in the coffin, though in place of his actual head sat a monitor displaying his face. Running around the monitor was a Latin inscription, which meant, in translation, "what you are, I once was, what I am, you will become." As an audience member got closer to read it, a camera hidden in the flowers should project their face onto the screen, making the coffin their own. Here is how Rose described it: "So if you stood three feet away, you'd see Bob lying in the coffin. You had to be curious enough to want to go closer, maybe to read those Latin words, and as soon as you did that, you were caught! So it had

57 See *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist*, directed by Kirby Dick (1997), DVD.

58 Flanagan, "Why," reproduced in *Bob Flanagan: Supermasochist*, 64-65.

59 Quoted in Klare Scarborough, "Coffins and Cameras: A Conversation with Sheree Rose," *Performance Research*, 15, no. 1 (2010): 123.

a jokey element, like 'we got you.' We wanted to show that Bob was as human as anybody else, a person with a great sense of humour, even about death."[60]

During another segment of *Visiting Hours*, Flanagan sat in a hospital bed and greeted visitors from within a makeshift hospital room, chatting with them about a range of topics (fig. 2).[61] One goal of the piece was to familiarize audience members with the hospital room itself and with a sick patient. The piece worked to de-stigmatize the space of the hospital and to humanize its inhabitants. It also functioned as a confessional space. Rose described the atmosphere it created for visitors: "Some of them were crying. They had kids who had cystic fibrosis, or they had somebody who had died, and it was like a confessional." "People would come in and just open up their hearts," she continued: "There was a psychiatrist who came back three or four times. People would come back and just sit and hang out with Bob."[62]

From inside, this hospital room appeared conventional. But glimpsed from the outside, one could see the external wall painted to look like a blue sky with a few wispy clouds. Periodically, usually twice a day, Rose would turn a lever behind the exhibition's main room. It tightened a strap attached to Flanagan's ankles, eventually elevating him above the backdrop of the blue sky. They called this scene "The Ascension" (fig. 3).[63]

The scene above conjures the general vision of Jesus's resurrection but also a specific scene of Christian and theatrical history. The idea came from depictions of the death of the character Little Eva in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.[64] In the novel, the white child Little Eva falls terminally ill. Before her death, she experiences a vision of heaven, which prompts other characters to turn toward the light. Early theatrical productions often supplemented the very short descriptions Stowe gives of Little Eva's vision and death with a much more dramatic scene. The vision is restaged in the style of a dramatic

60 Quoted in Ibid., 124.

61 Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose. Exhibition: 9/23/1994-12/31/1994, Work: 1994. Exhibition: Visiting Hours: An Installation by Bob Flanagan in collaboration with Sheree Rose, Hospital room entryway wall installation. Installation. https://library.artstor.org/asset/ANEWMUSEUM_10310361648.

62 Sheree Rose, interview with Shira Tarrant, "Ouch! I Love You. Bob Flanagan/Sheree Rose: Life and Art Together," unpublished transcript, PAPER Box #2 Folder: Sheree Rose Interview (1988), 30.

63 Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose. Exhibition: 9/23/1994-12/31/1994. Exhibition: Visiting Hours: An Installation by Bob Flanagan in collaboration with Sheree Rose, Hospital room entryway wall installation, 1994; Sick Superman, 1992; Visible Man, 1992. Gallery View. https://library.artstor.org/asset/ANEWMUSEUM_10310358438.

64 Rose describes this scene in Scarborough, "Coffins and Cameras," 123.

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Figure 2: Flanagan with a visitor.

Figure 3: Flanagan hanging above the exhibit.

martyrdom and, after her death, Little Eva would be elevated above stage using fishing wire, representing her ascension to heaven. Flanagan and Rose playfully recreate this scene, with the woman, Rose, doing all the real physical labor off stage, while Flanagan ascends naked and upside down. Flanagan's rebirth into heaven is breeched. But, like Peter, who Catholic tradition tells us was martyred upside down, he ascends nonetheless.

## CONFESSING BODIES

These examples draw our attention to how Catholic forms animate Flanagan's life and work, even as they perhaps raise more questions than answers. What might we learn about religion from the modes through which Flanagan performs himself in public, especially how he performs his disability and sexuality? What do we learn from the confessional gestures in his interviews, where he delights to talk at length about his sexual practices, or from the affordances of his poem, "Why?," which reproduces the cadence of prayer, a litany, or a confession?

The Christian form of confession, and of public confession in particular, takes on a special importance in Flanagan's work. In a series of lectures delivered at Dartmouth College, Michel Foucault distinguished various meanings of Christian confession.[65] Mark Jordan helpfully describes these two meanings as "the confession of faith and the confession of who one is, of one's state."[66] Foucault's interest turns to the latter, which historically has taken two forms. One is better known to Catholics today—it is the confession of one's sins, usually by speaking them into the ears of a priest. The other kind of confession is less familiar to modern Catholics. It takes the form of a public ritual and is accomplished not through speech but through the body. It is characterized, Jordan writes, by a "dramatization" or "theatricalization." Foucault's key example recounts the tragic history of the 4th century Roman matron Fabiola, who escaped a physically abusive husband and married another man. Upon the death of her second husband, Fabiola repents for her sins. It is how she repents that matters here: she does so through an ostentatious act of public penance, which includes beating her face, an act that represents physically the sins she had committed. This form

65 Michael Foucault, *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Lectures at Dartmouth College, 1980*, trans. Graham Burchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

66 Mark Jordan, *Convulsing Bodies: Religion and Resistance in Foucault* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 135.

of confession is likened to martyrdom, Jordan explains, to the refusal of self, a refusal inscribed upon the flesh.[67]

This is the form of confession that animates Flanagan's performance work. As with the example of Fabiola, it raises questions about the work of theatricalization, as Foucault saw it, in this older form of Christian confession. Foucault's perverse enjoyment—his fascination with the dramatized ritual of Fabiola—recalls for Jordan the possibilities of queer camp for offering different stylizations of the body, different relations to excess, and different uses for theatricalization. We could add: different relations to religion and different uses of religious forms.[68]

This reading, however provocative or incomplete, opens space here for considering Flanagan's genital crucifixion, or his poem, or the performance of the ascension in *Visiting Hours*, as instances of Catholic forms taken up through the mode of theatricalization. Catholicism provides the forms, the styles, through which this work operates, offering both the occasion for humor and irony as well as the performative force of religious forms themselves. Reading for Catholic forms opens the range of work that religious references do in Flanagan's writing and performance. One of the key ironies of this work is that Flanagan enacts so many of these Catholic forms under the sign of "performance," the convention that primes viewers to read this work as insincere, acted out, or fake. A mere performance of religious forms. Of course, when Rose pierces his skin, he really does bleed. When she smacks him, he really does feel pain. When she hoists him into the sky, he enacts a long history of ascension.

Consider again how McRuer describes the work of religion in Flanagan's poem "Why?" when he remarks on Flanagan's reference to "Christ and the crucifixion." McRuer writes that Flanagan's "earnest insistence that 'Christ and the crucifixion' were responsible is offset by what comes next—it's difficult to sustain the importance of being earnest when Christ cavorts with Porky Pig."[69] But why should McRuer think this line to be earnest? And whose earnestness is it? The

67 Jordan, *Convulsing Bodies*, 142–151. I discuss Jordan's reading in "Reading Bodies, Writing Bodies," *GLQ* 24, no. 1 (2018): 151-153; Foucault, *About the Beginning*, 59–60.
68 Jordan takes up Catholic camp in fascinating ways in *Silence of Sodom: Homosexuality in Modern Catholicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). Ann Pellegrini considers Jewish camp in "After Sontag: Future Notes on Camp," in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, eds. George E Haggerty and Molly McGarry (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 168–93; I also describe uses of camp in Anthony Petro, "Ray Navarro's Jesus Camp, AIDS Activist Video, and the 'New Anti-Catholicism,'" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 85, no. 4 (December 2017): 920-956 and Melissa Wilcox offers a fascinating account in *Queer Nuns: Religion, Activism, and Serious Parody* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).
69 McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 186.

author's? The reader's? The poem's? If religion, or at least normative religion, takes the form of earnestness in much of contemporary American life—an inheritance from the secularization of Protestant sincerity, as some have argued—then reading Flanagan's deployment of religious forms works against this. His use of religious forms is theatrical, playful, campy. They work on the surface, resisting the usual substance of deep religious meaning, if by deep we mean sincere or authentic attachment or modern forms of identity. These are not his forms.

What I want to stress here is that Flanagan's relationship to Catholicism is not simply one of rejection, liberation, or mockery, nor is it the site for religious earnestness juxtaposed to the humor of a stuttering pig. We might read it instead as a stylization, as a particular deployment of Catholic forms, that need not be attached to the sincerity too often assumed to attend to modern religion. Following Jordan, we might read Flanagan's use of Catholic forms as a kind of camp performance that seeks to make fun and subvert meaning. In doing so, this performance works against normative definitions of religion while also serving as a useful example of the work of form in lived religion. Camp works through habits of attachment. It works, somewhat ironically, by obeying rules, by venerating aesthetics, by exalting forms. If anything, it might be accused of putting too much faith in forms. On one reading, perhaps what Flanagan is transgressing isn't merely social norms regarding disability and sexuality, but also those social norms that define him as secular and in opposition to religion, in opposition to something so lousy as mere form.

On this reading, Flanagan's relationship to Catholicism in his performance work is not merely one of identity or belonging any more than one of transgressive liberation, but rather one of stylization. We can read his body and performance as shaped by religious power yet also as sites through which Catholic forms become stylized, stylized toward incredible and resistant ends—which is to say, in other words, of course, toward older and newer Catholic forms, including crip Catholic forms. And if this is so, what new critiques of power—of sexual moralism, ableism, sexism, religious oppression—can these stylizations perform, not through the overthrow of power, but through its enactment otherwise? Flanagan was right: any religious or spiritual reading of his work should make us uncomfortable. Most new forms of pedagogy do.