

Desirous Transformations: Writing Theologically/Theological Writing with Paul Tillich
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Dr. Hannah L. Hofheinz

Our writing of knowledge (that is, the ways in which we write down our processes of knowing) is located. Knowledge is positional; writing is positional. And all texts betray the importance of where they were written, just as they betray the importance of who wrote them. The characteristics of a place—characteristics such as its languages and epistemological economies—shape the writing.

But it should also be said that writing transcends the particularity of any location. Once written, texts open toward diverse interpretive possibilities of reading communities—communities who will read the same text to find a range of meanings in different times and different places. Indeed, for many, this openness for interpretation is what underwrites the liberative potential of writing.

I am immensely grateful to have been welcomed into this panel with an explicit invitation to offer even an unrecognizable Tillich. And in many ways, what I offer here today takes advantage of hermeneutical openness. Rather than talk *about* Tillich, his ideas, or his theology—I want to share a moment of my thinking *with* him. Though it often goes unnamed, Tillich's theology moves beside mine and mine moves beside him. I have made him my dance partner. He is my teacher and my theological conversation partner.

But, to be sure, I do not intend this dance as an explanation or analysis of his thinking. Nor do I seek to extend *or* to reread it. Something else happens when we make our intimacies manifest: there can be a liberating creativity of meaning. This I will suggest is very much needed in our theological writing today.

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Now geographic, spatial metaphors saturate language for approaching and transmitting knowledge. “The *boundary* is the best place for acquiring knowledge,” Tillich tells us.¹ Donna Haraway “situates” and “embodies” knowledge. Enrique Dussel teaches us to think from the *underside* of history, while liberationists of all stripes proclaim the importance of theological knowledge located *within* communities of suffering and struggle. Queer theorists invite knowledge *out of the closets* and *into our boudoirs*.

Surveying the contexts of and for theologies, tracing social locations, and drawing epistemological maps exposes biases that render some groups—groups such as poor women from “peripheral” parts of the globe—invisible, silent or disposable and disproportionately affected by the suffering, violence, and harm of the world. We have located (and relocated) knowledge to embrace those who have been excluded. The political and theological importance of this continuing work is clear.

Yet for a moment here (though, honestly, probably only for a moment here), I want to do something different and turn away from these metaphors — even from the languages of borders, boundaries, and margins.

My work troubles the sufficiency of geographical metaphors, because we need to broaden our imaginations. I want us to consider writing knowledge positioned by *intimacy*. If I were my other teacher, Marcella Althaus-Reid, I would say it this way: We need to think about the intimate positions of knowledge — sexual, erotic, loving, indecent, relational positions of knowledge. We need to think about how we write the intimate closeness of the world, ourselves, and God. We especially need to think about how we write intimate embraces of those who are excluded and suffering.

¹ Paul Tillich, *On the Boundary* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1966), 13.

There is epistemological significance to the ever-shifting positions that our bodies find in the intimacies of being a human grasped by God. As Jennifer Cooke writes in *Scenes of Intimacy, Reading, Writing, and Theorizing Contemporary Culture*: “The ways we write and the forms in which we choose to write about our most intimate states...are capable of altering our conceptions of them.”² Intimacy reveals the fundamental instability of identities because it accompanies us even to where our identities fail us and each other. Intimacy troubles our constructed organizations of space. In Kathlyn Breazeale’s words: “intimacy [is] a process of knowing and being known through the practice of relational power.”³ Intimacy, I suggest, allows us to share in God’s eternal Word without losing the particularity of individualized and contextual knowledge.

Using more directly Tillichian language: Writing intimacies manifests one approach to writing “our cognitive participation in that which is essentially human.”⁴ Here I turn (admittedly somewhat arbitrarily) to Tillich’s short essay “Participation and Knowledge.” I could take us many other places in his texts, but this offers clear parallels and so I use it.

Knowledge, Tillich reminds, occurs in the meeting or encounter of subject and object. Like everything finite, knowledge navigates the polarities of existence. It manifests in the openness of the knower and the known to receive one another—to participate in a common situation — while remaining distinctly separate and detached from one another.⁵ Otherwise, Tillich continues, the knower would “invade and destroy” that which the knower seeks to

² Jennifer Cooke (ed.), *Scenes of Intimacy, Reading, Writing, and Theorizing Contemporary Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 12.

³ Kathlyn A. Breazeales, *Mutual Empowerment: A Theology of Marriage, Intimacy, and Redemption* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 4.

⁴ Paul Tillich, “Participation and Knowledge: Problems of an Ontology of Cognition” in *Philosophical Writings* ed. by Gunther Wenz (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1989), 387.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 383.

know. The polarity of individualization and participation, which accords to all aspects of being, pertains to knowledge. It, likewise, (I add) pertains to writing.

“Controlling knowledge” occurs when the pole of separation has the upper hand; “existential knowledge” when the pole of participation rises to the fore. As Tillich notes, we need the unification of the polarity, a unification that *love* makes potential.

Yet a majority of our theological writing moves on one side or the other of this polarity. Academic genres of writing tend to privilege, prioritize, and reward persuasive articulations of controlling knowledge. The object of the author’s and therewith the text’s concern is held at a distance so that it can be rendered and communicated as “something” worth knowing and “something” known. In essence, so much of our academic writing tends to uncritically exercise the “methodological imperialism” that Tillich warns of and by which “cognitive commitment and existential knowledge [become] meaningless concepts.”⁶

This is particularly dire for theology. I’ll let Tillich’s quintessential words from *Systematic Theology* speak for themselves: Theologians are “not detached from [our] object but [are] involved in it. [We] look at [our] object (which transcends the character of being an object) with passion, fear, and love.... [We are] involved – with the whole of [our] existence, with [our] finitude and [our] anxiety, with [our] self-contradictions and [our] despair, with the healing forces in [us] and in [our] social situation... [We] theologians, in short, [are] determined by [our] faith.”⁷

Our writing — our practices of writing, the techniques of writing, our writerly *praxis*— cannot be held apart from our involvement with ultimate concern, *if* we want our writings to participate in or to contribute to theological knowledge.

⁶ Ibid., 388.

⁷ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* vol. 1 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 22-23.

We need ways to write “the truth which possesses us, but which we do not possess.”⁸
We need ways to write—and not just write about—the intimacy at the foundation of our reality, our relationships, and our activities.

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Marcella Althaus-Reid taught that “theology is...an art and a sexual art in the sense that it is mainly preoccupied with the location, the quantity, and the qualitative degrees of intimacy between God and humanity.”⁹ But theology has become too accustomed to speaking *about* our intimacy with God instead of speaking the intimacy.

Rather than writing *about* theology, we need to write our theology. Our words touch the world; our words are touched *by* the world. Moreover, words themselves touch and are touched by God.

We need to write the intimacy of divine caresses that shake, shatter, and bring to ruin the foundations of our broken world.

We need to write the intimacy we share with the ground of our Being.

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Althaus-Reid steals Roland Barthes’ distinction in *Mythologies* to demarcate writing *about* intimacy from the task of *writing our intimacy* with God. I’ll take just a few sentences to quickly review his metaphor. Take the figure of a woodcutter. When he cuts a tree, it may be that he finds himself naming the tree. In this instance, when he speaks the tree, he speaks what he acts. In Barthes’ words: the “language is operational, transitively linked to its object; between the tree and [the woodcutter] there is nothing but [his] labor, that is to say, an action.” This is political language: “It represents nature for ... only inasmuch as [the speaker is] going to

⁸ Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953), 125.

⁹ Marcella Althaus-Reid, “Feetishism: The Scent of Latin American Body Theology” in *Toward a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline* ed. by Virginia Burrus and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 135-136.

transform it.”¹⁰ When we no longer want to preserve reality as an image, but instead speak to transform it, our language becomes ‘functionally absorbed’ by ‘the revolution.’ Political language, as part of the revolution, makes the world; it does not tell stories about it.

Althaus-Reid grasps firmly onto the transformative effects of Barthes’ political speech. We need theology that makes the world, she teaches, not that tells stories about it.

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When I write of Tillich, I write the continuing intimacy of my relationship with his theology. I do *not* write *about* Tillich. To write about him would empty my words of significant potential for a range of theological or political import. Similarly, theological writing should not seek to preserve or to freeze textual images of being grasped by ultimate concern. It is the grasping that matters—it is our confrontation and encounter with the abyss and ground of our being that matters—not any finite language about this encounter. Indeed, when we confuse these priorities, when we mistakenly center writing *about* theology, we mistake the finite for the infinite, with all the consequences that mistake entails.

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Tillich understood the importance of genre for the communication of theological meaning. For instance, he accepted that the texts of his sermons might provide an easier entry to the existential import of his theological thinking than his systematic theology. Thus he published them. He also understood that for those who come from outside of the Christian circle, we need language to express human experience other than biblical and ecclesiastical languages.

To write our intimacies, then — not to write *about* our intimacies, *but to write our intimacies* — is to engage a sort of political language that participates in Divine activity.

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* trans. by Annette Lavers (New York: The Noonday Press, 1972), 146.

Regardless of whether the substance of the writing can be traced back to our dance partner or whether it can be analytically justified, the activity of writing intimately—and the written texts that result from this activity—matter. In a world that hurts as much as ours currently hurts, it matters a great deal.

We desperately need to find alternatives for writing transformative theologies in our current milieu where the tentacles of economic neoliberal ideology teaches us over and over again that there are no viable alternatives for either the structure or substance of our thinking. Yet, we continue know differently while holding our child's hand or when walking the long road around the island of Lesbos with the refugees who had the fortune to make it safely to shore. The desire that I have to transform the writing of theology by positioning it in intimate encounters with the world grows in the midst of my sustained relationship with Tillich to extend in far reaching directions.

I do not have time here to expand the political edges of intimate writing in today's world and the accompanying liberative possibilities of knowledge, but let me gesture quickly with the hope that we can expand these thoughts together at another time: God is closer to us than we are to ourselves. God walks with the refugees. God lies with the young girl shot and killed by police snipers in Cizre, Turkey just as God lies strangled on the street of New York wheezing "I can't breathe." God tingles with the tangled limbs of young gay love— forbidden love—in Alabama *and* in Nigeria. We do not need to write about the ground of being in these contexts. What we need is theological writing of their intimacy with God; writing that participates in the God's transformative grasping of our painful, violent world.

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