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## Recovering My Creativity After Life in a Cult

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RECOVERING MY CREATIVITY AFTER LIFE IN A CULT:

A PERFORMATIVE INQUIRY

by

Todd M. Brown

M.Div., Union Theological Seminary, 1993

A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Master of Arts Degree

School of Communication Studies  
in the Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
August 2022

RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

RECOVERING MY CREATIVITY AFTER LIFE IN A  
CULT: A PERFORMATIVE INQUIRY

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Approved by:

Craig Gingrich-Philbrook, Chair

Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
July 6, 2022

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## PREFACE

### Preface to the Final Draft

6.4.22

The story you are about to read has many layers. Framing these layers is a chronicle of how a local news outlet quashed a series of articles about a cult and its tyrannical leader. At this writing, they have still not been published. Survivors of the group are working collectively to narrate their own experiences and share them publicly. I wrote the following section, the “Preface to the First Draft,” when the articles’ fate was still unfolding.

### Preface to the First Draft

2.18.22

I’m trying to write this research paper, and articles about the cult I was in for twenty-three years are coming out in the local paper this Thursday or Sunday. They will radically change everything. I don’t know much about what the articles contain. I know the journalists interviewed fifty people for the articles. “Murshid,” who is the “guru” in the story, has been contacted for comments; now he’s cornered, with no way of stopping the publication of the materials and interviews the reporters have gathered. I don’t have access to what the reporters have found; I only know my own story.

*Murshid* (Arabic for “guide” or “teacher”) has spent years creating a world for himself, grooming the local leadership and conning everybody. Now, in just a few days, as I write, his entire web of lies is going to be exposed. People here are going to open the newspaper and see a seven-part series, which includes audio and video segments, detailing the secret life we led—and that Murshid continues to lead with his remaining devotees.

What is so difficult is this: I am trying to tell the story, and, in the meantime, my day-to-

day experience is fraught with terror. I am driving down the road while recording this on my iPhone. Here I am in this little town, still, and I'm just a three-minute drive from the people in these stories.

*There* is the place where it happened. I am looking at it from the window of my car.

Everything is spilling out, just as I need a clear thesis, argument, and conclusion. For months now, in preparation for this project, I have been amassing autoethnographic methodologies and theories about cults. Now, all these ideas are running out of me like water through a sieve.

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## INTRODUCTION

I quit graduate school and joined a religious group when I was twenty-nine. I was idealistic and hopeful, and I came to believe in the group's tenets. I thought I had found my people. Twenty-three years later, at fifty-two, I quit the group with my family—the person I met and married in the group, and the child we had and raised there. Since leaving, I have come to believe that the group is a cult.

I have been trying to figure out how to tell a difficult story, a tale of a long-term traumatic relationship, in words. The story cannot exist solely on the page, but it must come to life there. It must manifest spatially, with aural, visual, and somatic dimensions. It needs a structure that allows for explorations and digressions, stops and starts. I need help to find the words, the language, the structure for showing something so complex in an academic paper. How can I describe this to you? How can I describe it to myself?

The paper is divided into four parts. First, I describe the methodological approaches (autoethnography and specifically introspective, performative, and poetic approaches to it) that shaped this research report. Second, I provide a dramaturgical context, exploring concepts related to my cult experience, and some more specific strategies for writing about it. The third part uses the methodological approaches to give shape to my cult experiences in the form of a script for performance, with poetry, narrative, and action-based descriptors, to put my particular story into words and action. The script tells my story of surviving a cult through the lens of a particular set of narratives about my experience in a band that was part of the group. I cannot tell the story of twenty-three years in a paper, so I take one thread within those years (the band) and weave it into scenes that illuminate the whole. Finally, in the fourth part, I conclude with a brief reflection upon the value of poetic and performative autoethnography for

survivors of cult experiences.

## CHAPTER 1

### METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

In order to conceptualize this project, I consider two groups of scholars who have helped me shape this script. The first group of autoethnographers gives a big-picture, conceptual orientation to the telling of the story. They have created the atmosphere in which the words can breathe. The second group (who have developed especially poetic methods of autoethnography) carves more specific routes, like canyons, through which the story can flow. They make maps that chart the courses I follow.

#### *Atmosphere*

In my research, I encountered several scholars whose performative bent inspired the scope of this project. Kitrina Douglas and David Carless, UK-based social psychologists, describe a coalescing of aesthetic and performative research, an intertwining of artistic expression and qualitative inquiry into a depiction of lived experience. In their article “Engaging in Arts-Based Research: A Story in Three Parts,” they tell a story of a dinner with an academic colleague at which they began the evening with the question, ““Can we share some of our research with you?”” Carless proceeded to “share the research” through a song – a gut-wrenching melody – which resulted in their colleague breaking into tears (157). What they had communicated through the song struck such a deep cord with their colleague that, when the emotional impact subsided, she announced, regarding the topic at hand, ““That is exactly what it’s like and no-one understands”” (157). The aesthetic expression of research and knowledge, according to Douglas and Carless, allows for the possibility of knowledge that transcends language, particularly traditional academic writing. These modes of communication might be especially suited to the depiction of traumatic experiences. Douglas and Carless speak directly to

the ways scholars have shown that bodies “remember” events that are not consciously available to a person (see Kolk). Instead, a person becomes conscious of difficult events later, over time. The authors suggest that this process might reflect how memory works in general, not just traumatic memory. Based on this position, they suggest the appropriateness of multi-modal expressions of human experience within social-scientific research. Songs, poems, and other aesthetic methodologies might capture difficult and fragmented phenomena with more multi-dimensional accuracy (162). Performance-based engagement can provide a means to find words for what goes unsaid, while stretching the borders for what can be spoken at all (158).

Dwight Conquergood, like Douglas and Carless, encourages artistic modalities in academic discourse. More specifically, Conquergood suggests the appropriateness of performance studies as an avenue for exactly this kind of intimate inquiry. “[Performance studies embraces] both written scholarship and creative work, papers and performances; different voices, worldviews, value systems, and beliefs so that they can have a conversation with one another. It is this kind of performance that resists conclusions” (151). Conquergood imbues the complex nature of my experience with legitimacy and suggests that its depiction can be complicated and complicating. The academic binaries of action vs. analysis, or theory vs. practice, are cast in a suspicious light. Performance studies scholars search for muddy, middle grounds, modes that challenge the academic milieu and “cut to the root of how knowledge is organized in the academy” (146). Traditionally, what counts as “real knowledge” in the academy is “anchored in paradigm and secured in print” (146). For this project, Conquergood’s questions allow me to ask whether I can incorporate “unsecure” media, genres, and modalities. This kind of knowledge, in the performance studies community, is “anchored in practice and circulated within a performance community, but is ephemeral” (146).

Performance's ephemerality, as Conquergood posits it, leads me to D. Soyini Madison's description of the place where theory and performance intersect. Madison speaks more specifically to the impact of performance on thinking and knowing about something, about yourself. Performance is an embodied curiosity, located not on a page, or within conceptual or virtual spaces, but in a body that enacts and commands that we move "across the hard-edged maps into spaces where I must go" (108). Where Douglas and Carless show me possibilities for aesthetic expression, and Conquergood bravely illuminates the theoretical justifications for performance, Madison amplifies the marginalized voices that compel performative engagement.

Performance helps me see. It illumines like good theory. It orders the world and it lets the world loose. It is a top spun out of control that spins its way back to its beginning. Like good theory, performance is a blur of meaning, language, and a bit of pain. Whirling past, faster than I can catch up. Testing me, often refuting me, pulling away and moving toward me. I'm almost there with it. I hold on. I keep my hands on the performance and my eyes on the theory. I am playful, but I am not playing. I do not appreciate carelessness. I pay attention. (108)

Madison reminds us that self-reflexive and three-dimensional inquiry in performative modes supports the fleshing-out of experiences that are pre- or even anti-verbal.

Finally, Shelby Swafford's *To Be a (M)other: Abortion, Liminality, and Performative Autoethnography* is enormously influential in this paper's formulation. Her multi-layered, personal exposition of her abortion invites me into a private experience as told in an exploratory style. Describing memory's non-linear nature, particularly in the context of traumatic experience, Swafford states that the "very truthfulness of [her] account relies on ruptured temporal, narrative, and relational structures" (11). Intentional breakage of genre mirrors her personal experience of her abortion, illuminating the lengths to which she would go to write her "body onto the page" (60). Because our bodies *are* our stories, the narratives they create are

multi-voiced. “[It’s] like your story is actually a lot of stories,” writes Swafford, “and your self is actually a lot of selves, and your body lives in a lot of different places at once” (104). In short, read this research report as a performance piece. Douglas and Carless, Conquergood, Madison, and Swafford give me permission to investigate the subtleties and fine points of my multi-layered experiences in the cult.

### *Maps*

Complementing the conceptual and methodological work of these scholars above, other practitioners have helped me shape the specific ways I will tell the story. A handful of these thinkers have attempted to portray their own personal trauma in academic environments and have found a variety of ways to do so. These authors tell stories about traumatic and personal experiences and how to put them on a page. Each creates a current into which I gently glide.

Carol Rambo Ronai, a sociologist by training, has taken on the monumental task of depicting her experience of childhood sexual abuse in an academic forum. Traditional social science might question the “objectivity” of such an account, but Ronai raises the essential point that her own personal experience of something so intimate is “the only type of participant observation that can be done on the topic” (421). Said more directly, private moments of intimate, relational abuse are meant (by the abuser) to be private; we simply aren’t supposed to speak about them, or even report them. In this context, to illuminate them is to fight them, to dispel their mystery. To tell her story, Ronai develops what she calls a *layered account*, which she describes as both method and expression (396). The term “layered,” as a descriptor, allows for varied media, modalities, or even genres; we come at a phenomenon from a variety of angles in an attempt to capture its varied dimensions.

In my personal experience as a sexual abuse survivor, memories of personal trauma can

be spotty, incongruous, even pre- or anti-verbal. A layered account, according to Ronai, is a way of understanding both consciousness and memory, while also being a method of reporting. The layering allows the writer the freedom to choose from a variety of modalities, including fantasies, methods, abstractions, and statistics (397). For a person who survived someone stealing their agency – and the words to describe the experience – a layered account offers “an alternate form of writing that is even more liberating in a script, play, performance, or poem” (420). These modes incorporate “intuitive leaps, false starts, mistakes, loose ends, and happy accidents that comprise the investigative experience” (421). Finally, the layered account prioritizes the personhood of the researcher over and above the academy’s hegemonic systems of knowledge production, which hide the researcher and their agendas. Ronai’s strategies have helped me formulate an approach to this story that makes sense to my own thinking, honoring the fragmented memory and the dissonance inherent in the situation I survived (421).

Given Ronai’s valuing of poetry as one potential component of the layered account, I turned to Sandra Faulkner’s *Poetry as Method* to better understand the role of poetry in qualitative research. Faulkner’s work is central and foundational to such poetic approaches as legitimate methods for describing marginalized realities. As a means of understanding a phenomenon, poetry can “resist clear, undemanding interpretations” and “question traditional representations of marginalized identities” (Faulkner, *Poetry* 16). For the purposes of this paper, I rely on her assertion that poetic representation can “approximate living” (*Poetry* 29). My cult experience was immersive, one in which the guru and other members communicated in ways that institutionally hampered my cognition and feeling; my telling of this story is necessarily disjointed, circular, fragmented, and incomplete. In Faulkner’s view, poetry may lend itself to a more accurate depiction of the process of recovering traumatic memory, particularly at these

early stages of recovery. It has been only two years since I escaped, so a time-impervious, paragraph-resistant methodology is arguably a more “objective” representation of an experience that is only slowly crawling out of the muck. Further, including poetry in a research paper is a means to connect with readers, which could, Faulkner suggests, provide courage to other survivors (*Poetry* 51) through its concrete immediacy (*Poetry* 110). In “Crank up the Feminism,” Faulkner further refines her use of poetry in feminist scholarship. “Poetic inquiry and feminist poetry,” writes Faulkner, “are examples of how we can engage in embodied inquiry to emphasize the importance of storytelling and narrative in the representation of knowledge and everyday experience” (“Crank” 5). Like Swafford, above, Faulkner challenges academic mind/body dualism by placing our bodies in the center of our narratives. Poetry, she asserts, is a necessary tool for incarnating linguistic symbolism: “Poetry lets us come in through the backdoor with the feeling, the emotion, the experience” (“Crank” 5).

While Faulkner’s poetic approach centers the survivor’s narrative while also granting them agency in the way it is told, an uncritical use of her approach might obscure the survivor’s choice-making within the experience. Ragan Fox challenges autoethnographers to consider their role in traumatizing environments. In “Dirty,” he uses the phrase “dirty work” as a way of describing a methodological stance that intends to “(1) name an autoethnographer’s willingness to self-implicate and (2) highlight the partiality of their claims” (252). Fox uses this “dirty” method to describe his own experience of childhood sexual abuse, painfully engaging the private, personal, secret, and fragmented memory of such experiences. In depicting childhood sexual abuse, he intentionally seeks to narrate without citation and “extraneous methodological asides” which might pull us away from encountering the weight of the stories (251). Like childhood sexual abuse, living in a cult is inexpressible, private, and complex, while resisting

simple, leveled, and eroded narrative. Fox's approach always implicates our own collusion and power-over; in a cult, members scapegoat and gaslight others while they are working out their own survival. We hurt others as we jostle toward safety, and Fox asks us to inscribe those moments of complicity in our stories. Fox always advocates for an agency in our own storytelling. Having survived a situation in which our voices were silenced, and our bodies delegitimized, a "dirty" approach enables us to choose from a range of expressions (254). Additionally, Fox's call for self-implication points to the possibility that our fragmented and dissociated states of memory might be more accurately portrayed as split, fractured, and randomly illuminated and clear.

In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick La Capra provides a historian's approach to creating narrative which depicts traumatic stories. La Capra challenges history's canonized methods by suggesting that traumatic experiences – particularly those that are recent – might be better documented through modalities that allow for the "feel" of experience of emotion (13). La Capra suggests that trauma causes "tenses to implode" (21), and "cannot be localized in terms of a discrete, dated experience" (186). Objectivist narratives marginalize "undecidability and unregulated difference, threatening to disarticulate relations, confuse self and other, and collapse all distinctions, including that between present and past" (21). In essence, La Capra advocates for the loosening of traditional academic approaches to depict difficult, personal realities.

To summarize, Ronai's and Fox's personal and private experience with childhood sexual abuse, in combination with their academic training as social scientists and artists, encourages models of self-reflective and method-busting layered and dirty accounts. Faulkner centralizes poetic phrasing as essential for marginalized voices. Finally, La Capra's historiography allows for the collapse of narrative and temporal expectations in depicting memory and documentation

regarding lived trauma, particularly in its most personally devastating forms. Each of these approaches is essential for a saturated and fulfilling depiction of my cult experience. These authors allow me to take a moment, unplug from traditional expectations of the language scholars employ, and revisit how, when—and even whether—I want to tell my story.

The story itself developed out of these scholars' previously carved canyons. Their words and actions created spaces for me to situate my words. What follows then, is a layered account: it is theoretical, personal, and political, using academic and informal language. It is “dirty,” in the sense that it self-implicates, resisting painting myself as a victim – at times directly stating my own role in gaslighting myself and others. It uses poetic language when prose is too stiff or structured, in order to define the undefinable, in order to paint the hard-to-reach corners. Finally, it refuses a linear temporality, winding in on itself to represent the experience of living in a cult and how it disperses time and feeling.

With a conceptual atmosphere derived from Douglas and Carless, Conquergood, Madison, and Swafford, and methodological maps from Ronai, Faulkner, Fox, and La Capra, I now approach scholars who write about cults. These autoethnographic tools will help me choose which direction to take in a confounding and clouded setting. In the following section, I will outline cult-related scholarship and the writers doing the work. This will help readers understand how I got involved with the cult and how I left, and will provide context for the performance script that follows.

## CHAPTER 2

### DRAMATURGY

COVID-19 liberated me. The cult-owned business that I had worked for twenty years was suddenly closed, and our relentless schedule was derailed. My family was able to have some physical space from the endless community-focused lifestyle we had been leading for years. In March 2020, I sent an email to Murshid and his wives briefly explaining our withdrawal from the group.

Just a few weeks after sending this email, I started to study cults and how people left them. I found Margaret Singer's 1995 *Cults in our Midst*. Singer's work was among the initial scholarly efforts to define the word "cult" – a difficult and unwieldy term. It was also a loaded concept because cultic groups do not want to be defined as such, so the word's use in media often provokes negative reactions. Singer's definition, then, was essential for the word's integration into academic parlance. Singer uses the terms *cult* and *cultic group* "to refer to any one of a large number of groups that have sprung up in our society and that are similar in the way they originate, their power structure, and their governance" (xxii). According to Singer, groups and relationships that are cultic in nature have remarkable similarities, and survivors of these groups find commonalities in their experiences despite the enormous variety among the groups with which such survivors were associated.

Mysterious and coercive organizations have been in the spotlight over the last few years. A business and personality development group called NXIVM is depicted in the Starz channel's *Seduced* and in *The Vow* on HBO. Will Allen describes his twenty-two years in a sexually abusive California-based meditation group in his film *Holy Hell*. Multi-level marketing companies are taken to task in films like Amazon's *LuLaRich*. Narratives focused on grisly

survival tales are found in all media: podcasts, memoirs, YouTube channels, and multi-season exposés like Leah Remini’s *Scientology and the Aftermath*. Additionally, Twitter feeds and Reddit posts are replete with descriptions of “narcissism” (a trait often associated with cult leaders) in family systems, religious groups, intimate partner violence, and theatre troupes. In general, a cultural awareness of coercion and how it operates in groups and relationships has come to saturate popular culture and media.

Janja Lalich, sociologist and cult survivor, in her essential cult-studies reader *Bounded Choice*, defines a cult as “either a sharply bounded social group or a diffusely bounded social movement” which is held together through a variety of mechanisms, which she divides into four broad categories: 1) charismatic authority, 2) transcendent belief system, 3) systems of control, and 4) systems of influence (5). Lalich also theorized the phenomenon for which her book is named – “bounded choice” – which describes the limited decision-making that cult members experience while in the group.

Daniel Shaw, psychoanalyst and cult survivor, focuses his work on the characteristics of the typical cult leader, whom he calls a “traumatizing narcissist.” In Shaw’s view, the leader’s driving force is the reason the group exists, and he (usually) is responsible for the experiences of its members. Shaw describes at length and in detail the various behaviors and thoughts that the guru or master demands (49-50).

Similarly, Alexandra Stein, a social psychologist and cult survivor, draws attention to relationship dynamics between cult leaders and followers, and in interrelationships between group members. Cultic groups compel members to adopt what she calls “disabling critical thought.” Stein calls cultic groups “totalist,” in the sense that these groups position themselves as providing all answers and fulfilling all needs, thereby precluding a member’s need to seek

outside the group for anything at all (12).

Finally, Robert Jay Lifton's work attempts to ground the term "brainwashing" through personal interviews with survivors of Chinese prisons in the 1950s. Lifton encountered numerous Chinese Nationals and Western Europeans who had been released in Hong Kong after being imprisoned and tortured in indescribably brutal thought-reform programs. Through prolonged interviews with a variety of survivors from diverse cultures, Lifton developed the phrase "thought reform" and the descriptor "totalist" as the aptest for capturing the environment which is required for "brainwashing" to be—or at least appear to be—successful. The lasting effect of Lifton's study is his development of eight social-psychological categories that describe totalist thought reform. Each of these descriptors captures a slightly different component that is present in totalist environments.

It was alarming for me to read Lifton's discussion of structural principles extracted from survivors of communist prisons and recognize that they corresponded precisely to my own experiences in a cult. I was not imprisoned, and neither are most cult survivors; we entered voluntarily into an environment that held promise and seemed to reflect our own ideals.

Nevertheless, Lifton's principles and the narratives he uses to exemplify and explain them accurately reflect my personal experience. For this reason, I have chosen to use Lifton as the primary source of understanding for the purposes of this report.

Lifton calls the categories he devised from his interviews with former prisoners "psychological themes" (419) that undergird the ideological totalism of thought-reform programs in cultic groups or environments. These eight themes have qualities of absolutism and totalism, and each "mobilizes certain individual emotional tendencies, mostly of a polarizing nature" (420). Even as I describe these, the emotions that they invoke tug, flatten, and electrify me. The

words he uses seem to exactly reflect an experience that was too private to be articulable, whose nature I hid even from myself.

Nevertheless, I did my best to put it into words. Just six weeks after leaving the cult, I started to record myself speaking about my experiences in the group. I was trying to figure out what happened during those years, and I documented the process on a public YouTube channel. The videos came in fits and starts. As insights and memories arose, I spoke them, seeking some kind of sense, a narrative arc of any kind.

Just one year later, I found performance studies and autoethnography because it is my natural inclination to publicly display, perform, and describe my life experiences. Last spring, in my first semester as a performance studies student, I set out to create an autoethnographic performance whose focus was my experience in the cult. I quickly discovered that I could not yet depict any part of such recent trauma. I didn't know where to start. It was so huge, so immersive and demoralizing, that I had no easy entry into describing it.

Rather than a direct exploration of my experience in a totalist group, I developed a performance called *Naked Stories*, which depicted my youth and adolescence, specifically what it was like to grow up as a gay kid in the 1980s. My later cult experience is only implied in this story: *Naked Stories* portrays my early relationships with men (my grandfather, a coach, and various pop stars) which led me into vulnerable adult relationships with powerful and charismatic men.

Now, a year after *Naked Stories*, with enough distance to start to wend my way through my years in the cult, I still needed a specific starting point, a focus. This paper is a first attempt to understand my experience, but through a particular lens: my creativity. The most concrete example of how life in a cult affected my creativity is the experience of playing drums and

writing songs for the cult band, the lead singer and guitarist for which was the “guru,” or Murshid.

In this group, I was subject to verbal, emotional, and spiritual abuse, but I would not stop trying to create, because it is who I am. Instead, I adapted my creative expression to patterns that would enable me to survive the environment, always with the hope that I would “succeed” along the way. What I didn’t know at the time was that there was nothing I could do to succeed. I would fail because success was impossible.

In telling the story, then, I seek to do so in a way that reflects (1) my “failure” during those twenty-three years, and (2) how trauma operates in my memory: fragmented, split, dissonant, but also strategic. I will attempt, in this layered, dirty, poetic project, to reflect the reality of surviving the environment in the way I write, remember, portray, depict, and express my experience.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE PERFORMANCE SCRIPT: NOTHING ABOUT THIS IS YOU

#### Cast of Characters

T: Me as myself.

Robert Jay Lifton: A Harvard psychologist as himself.

Alainna: My friend, as herself.

#### ACT I: GRACE'S CHILD

AT RISE: (The lights come up on a bare stage except for a piano at center stage right. T is sitting at the piano. There is a metronome on the piano, and one book. He is concentrating, staring at the keyboard, but not playing anything. After a few moments of evident frustration, he opens and starts the metronome. It begins to click.)

T

One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four.

(T gets increasingly frustrated. He goes back to the keyboard and tries another chord. He angrily stands up and walks to the front of the stage)

The thing is, I can't concentrate. I can't write anything. I used to write songs – like, a lot of songs. All the time. Since I was thirteen. I've written probably three hundred songs in my life. All kinds. And now I can't write anything. I don't have the patience. Or something.

(T lets out a big sigh.)

Okay. It's complicated. I guess there are reasons. Maybe I should tell you some of them so that you understand better.

(Pacing, maybe. He doesn't want to tell, but he must.)

You see, I was in a religious group until a few months ago. For twenty-three years. A really intense one. And when COVID started, I quit the group. I just emailed them and said that my family and I would be "backing off community life" for a while. And since then, I've been trying to figure it out, I guess – like, what happened. I'm trying to figure out if it was a cult. It may have been.

(T picks up the book.)

Well, I bought a book. It's by a guy named Robert Jay Lifton. Some dude on the Cult 101 Facebook page recommended it to me. 'Start here,' he said. 'Okay,' I thought. And I ordered it. And here it is. But it's too scary to open, I guess, so it's just sitting here. I thought I would try to write a song or something, but I just can't, because this book is just staring at me. Oh, the book is called *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*. Robert Jay Lifton is a psychologist and he taught and researched at Harvard. Yeah, so I guess he's smart. The only thing is I can't open

the book, just like I can't write a song. I just want to write a song.

(LIFTON enters on the stage USL, slowly, sneakily, and stands to the side, behind T)

Um.... LIFTON

What the fuck? T

Hi. LIFTON

Jesus. You scared the shit out of me. T

Sorry about that. I didn't mean to. LIFTON

Okay. T

Yeah, well. I'm Robert Jay Lifton. You can call me Dr. Lifton. LIFTON

How intimate. Why are you here? Actually – *how* are you here? T

It's theater. You wrote me in. LIFTON

Oh. What a creepy idea. T

Yeah, like, I'm not even sure I want to be here. But I'm game. LIFTON

That's good. I mean, it's good that you're game. T

I didn't really have a choice. LIFTON

That sucks. But I guess I can relate. I didn't feel like I had a choice for the last 23 years. T

LIFTON

Oh! You were in a cult. *That's* why I'm here. This happened in 1994 once.

T

You were, like, conjured?

LIFTON

Yeah. I guess I'm here to explain things to you.

T

I just want to write a song.

LIFTON

And you can't.

T

Yeah

LIFTON

Okay. And you have my book.

T

I have to admit that I haven't cracked it yet.

LIFTON

The title is intimidating.

T

Actually, it is.

LIFTON

So, I'm going to walk you through it a bit.

T

I might vomit.

LIFTON

That's pretty normal.

T

Cool. Can I sit at the piano?

LIFTON

Sure. Wherever you feel most comfortable.

T

I don't feel comfortable anywhere.

LIFTON

Okay. (pause). Can we start now?

T

Yeah, I guess.

LIFTON

Okay, cause then I can get home.

T

Oh. Then, yeah, go.

LIFTON

Okay, so my book. I'll tell you how I came to write the damn thing, I guess. In the late 50s, I was interested in something called "brainwashing." I'm a psychiatrist by training, and I found myself in Hong Kong. About that time, folks from all over the world were being held against their will in Chinese prisons. They were being held in these prisons because they were believed to be enemies of the state. What happened to them while they were in these prisons is very difficult to describe. In a word, it was horrible. But they lived to tell the stories – to me, that is. I collected interviews with these men. They were all men.

I learned a lot. After hours and hours of talking to them, I started to see some patterns. I decided to call what they experienced "thought control," because brainwashing was a loaded word, and it sounded a bit metaphorical. Also, I landed on calling the groups or governments that implement "thought control" programs "totalist." Finally, I created eight psycho-social categories for describing these "thought reform" programs as they are developed and implemented by "totalist" groups.

T

Well, that sounds amazing, but I was in a kind of hippie-ish religious group in Illinois in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, so I really doubt that these psycho-social categories will apply to my experience, and I just want to write a song. I wasn't in a communist prison.

LIFTON

Okay, yeah. I get why you should think that. But let me just go through them, and you can see if they fit your experience. Just think about it.

T

Okay.

LIFTON

I believe that these concepts will help you understand the intensity and the consequences of this sort of experience.

T

Okay.

LIFTON

First, there is something that I call “milieu control.” You see, “totalist groups strive to control all human communication. The goal for controlling external communication is to eventually instill this communication into the subject’s internal world. The constrained lines of knowledge will be mirrored in the cult member’s own cognitive life (420).

T

Wait, what? Hold on. Holy fuck. Wait, wait, wait.

(T runs to the piano and opens the piano bench. He takes out a notebook and a piece of paper. He sits back down on the bench and starts to write.)

“The cult member’s own cognitive life.”

LIFTON

Yeah.

(Slower, because T is taking notes.)

“Administrators of such an environment intend to be engineers of the human soul. A person who is living under this kind of coercive control is deprived of the combination of external information and inner reflection which anyone requires to test the realities of his environment and to maintain a measure of identity separate from it” (421).

T

He wanted to be everything, the guru did. He *said* that he would be everything and that our life with him would be everything.

LIFTON

So what does this have to do with music? You said you wanted to write a song.

T

Oh my god, the MINUTE he found out I played the drums, he took me in his car. He hardly ever gave me any attention at all, so I was totally surprised. But he's like, “Come on, let's go,” – reluctantly. He was always reluctant with me. We drove to the music store, and he bought a used drum set. For me. We took it and set it up in another devotee’s rented house. Within a few minutes, I was playing the drums again. I hadn’t played in years.

(ALAINNA enters behind LIFTON and taps him on the shoulder. LIFTON looks at her, shrugs, and exits. She stands where he stood before. T doesn’t see this.)

T

I remember thinking that this was my big chance to be close to him. I’ll write songs and he’ll love me. Or something. Something like that.

ALAINNA

(She has a stack of papers in her hands. She is reading from it.)

February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022. I sent an urgent letter to the reporters telling them that the survivors are in distress. We are in distress. We need information and we need it ongoingly because the emotional weight of carrying ourselves around without knowing what's happening is too much. It's too much. They told us the articles were coming out today, and they have not.

T

Alainna?

ALAINNA

Hi, T.

T

What are you doing here?

ALAINNA

I'm reading some things you wrote. You wrote this. Listen: As I am walking, I feel a slowly releasing pressure after all those years of having to be at the right place at the right time. Now I walk in the ice and the snow. I sit down and turn my alarm off. I think about what I want to do, what I want to enjoy. I write sentences that sound good to me. I write songs and poems that feel right. I invent and reinvent moments of joy and bliss. I love my lover. I think about the things we'll do together, the places we'll go.

T

Why are you reading things I wrote?

ALAINNA

Because you need to hear them. (To audience) They need to hear them. Here is something else you wrote: February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2022. I'm sitting here in the dark, in a neighbor's house. It's the dead of winter. Well, it's not quite the dead of winter. It's almost March and there's kind of a remarkable freezing rain. It must be around thirty-two degrees, and rain is pouring down. It can't decide what it is. I've got a kitty on my lap. It's dark and I'm alone, which is nice. I can't quite calm down. It's very difficult for me these days to simply just sit and breathe. I need something artificial to help me do that. No, not artificial – something sensory. For example, I can take a bath and that recharges me a little bit, but I can't stay in there for very long.

T

(Scribbling in notepad.)

Is there more?

ALAINNA

Yes – hold on. (Turns page.) I'm reading the legal documents from the US Labor Department court case against the cult I used to work for. Why am I doing this? The recovery process is dangerous. Everywhere I go there are open sockets – live, dangerous things – and I can stick my finger in them if I want to. Mostly, I do. I can't help myself. The articles were supposed to come

out today, but they didn't, and I don't know why.

T

Wait. What articles?

ALAINNA

Hold on. (Continues to read.) The cult sees me as a rageful, unhinged, vengeful, horrible human. They see themselves as being misunderstood, misrepresented. They're going to be faced with allegations: sex abuse, all the typical stuff. Murshid just simply dismisses it out of hand as bullshit. He doesn't even address it. To him, it's just "cancel culture." I look back and, honestly, I always hated it. But I felt like I had to. I felt like I had to. How do I understand that? How do I make sense of it? I don't know. I honestly don't know. There's no easy conclusion there. There's no simple way of understanding it. It's been almost two years since I left the group, but I still have this horrific experience to sort out in myself. This is the little prologue, or this is the interlude of this story, which I'm supposed to try to write logically, coherently, with method and reflection. T, they were writing articles, the journalists for the Southern. They were supposed to come out today.

T

Articles about what?

ALAINNA

The cult. They interviewed both of us.

T

The newspaper publishing articles about the cult? I don't even know if it was a cult.

ALAINNA

Oh, right. You're still trying to figure that out.

T

This is from the future?

ALAINNA

Just two years. Not much.

T

Dr. Lifton says you start internalizing all of the thought control, and that it's called "milieu control."

ALAINNA

Yeah – they control everything. They even start controlling the way you think about yourself. That's why you can't write a song.

T

I can't even respond with words. (pause) Do you remember any of my songs?

ALAINNA

Totally!

T

Do you remember the song “Grace’s Child”?

ALAINNA

Yes, totally. I loved that! I remember you singing it in the mosque at a talent show!

T

I remember writing “Grace’s Child”. We rehearsed and I felt excited, like I always did when we had a talent show. The talent show was *carnival* for me. It gave me a chance to act outlandish, to take a risk. By the way, I was still gay at the time when I wrote “Grace’s Child”.

ALAINNA

You were still gay? How does that work?

T

Yeah, it’s complicated. I performed “Grace’s Child” at a talent show we held in the basement of our main house, which we called the *tekke*. I also had a room there. I remember writing this song. It had a cool little groove to it, which was pretty nerdy, or gayish, or nerdy queerish. It had a goofy backup vocal line, too, but the song’s contents, its themes, were spiritually driven, but not heavy and dark. It started with a vocal line that was cute and up-tempo.

(T sits down at the piano, plays, and sings).

T

Grace's child rushes in  
wondering where the hell you've been  
wasting precious time  
trying to unwind this tangled web  
smiling faces all around  
telling you to settle down  
there was never any doubt  
you would never figure out this tangled web

ALAINNA

The lyrics suggest that when we come into the group, we are unnerved, unkempt, unclear, disorganized, and trapped in a kind in the secular world. After all of those futile attempts at making it on our own, it is now our responsibility to stop trying to figure it out. We can just settle in and enjoy and trust.

T

Milieu control, right? Then there's the bridge where the backup vocalists sing, in unison:

We got resistance

We got persistence  
But we got your mercy and your forgiveness

ALAINNA

Resistance was the code word for the parts of us that didn't want to submit to the guru. We resist what is best for us, we were taught. We resist because of our bad habits, our "attachments." But aren't we sweet about it? It's all fine though because he will ultimately forgive us as he is merciful.

(During the next dialogue, ALAINNA exits, quietly.)

T

The last part of the song was a repetition of the phrase, "Kill that thing in me that's killing me." It had become my job to put myself, in a sense, on his operating table, on his chiropractic adjustment stand, completely splayed out and vulnerable. Our aim was to be like a corpse in his arms. He is washing us, preparing us. We should be that flaccid, that flexible, that open, that trusting.

(T starts the metronome, sits down at the piano again)

One, two, three, four. "Grace's Child" was simple yet semi-complex and unpredictable -- sort of a set of catchy phrases and musical sing-songy moments. The lyrics began to display my own desire to do what I was told, which was to surrender to him. But it was still ME. I thought that he would respond positively. Ultimately, the reaction I got was tacit approval – I mean, he didn't stop me, which he often did in other situations. He noted it, in a sense. He noted from my talents how he could use me.

(Notes ALAINNA is gone.)

Hey. Where did you go?

(LIFTON enters where ALAINNA exited. T sees him.)

T

Oh, hi. I don't really understand milieu control, by the way.

LIFTON

I like the song.

T

Oh, thanks. It was so – innocent. I wanted him to like it, but he ignored it. I think he saw in me something to utilize, to mine, to exploit. That's when I started to give him everything. It's like I poured my heart out in the song, and then his response taught me what was acceptable and what wasn't. If it got his attention, I needed to do more of it. I knew he didn't like the gayness of the song, its magical, sing-song quality. But that was just his taste. So, his own personal taste started to be imbued with this mystical, spiritual meaning.

LIFTON

That's the second category, which I call "mystical manipulation."

T

I still don't understand how Chinese prison torture is relevant to my experience.

LIFTON

Just listen to this.

T

Okay.

LIFTON

Mystical manipulation, according to me, describes how the cult leader provokes thinking and behavior in such a way that it appears to the practitioner to arise from a mystical realm or a pre-determined series of events. Coincidental occurrences take on karmic meaning (422).

T

(T starts to write in the notebook again)

Wait!

LIFTON

“Gurus” are privy to this secret knowledge and imply -- or state outright -- that divine wisdom guides them, or at least that they are the unique recipients of its beneficence. They become guardians of these secrets and are responsible for carrying them out. This exalted status leads naturally to the fundamental justification of any action: everything the guru does is only in service to the inevitable truth, and if followers have a problem with it then they are trapped in a limited view. This point of view results in the follower developing what I call “the psychology of the pawn” (422).

T

Okay. Yes. He taught us that everything he did was divinely inspired and therefore justified and unquestionable. But what does that have to do with my songwriting?

LIFTON

Listen to this: “Feeling himself unable to escape from forces more powerful than himself, he subordinates everything to adapting himself to them. He becomes sensitive to all kinds of cues, expert at anticipating environmental pressures, and skillful and riding them in such a way that his psychological energies merge with the tide rather than turn painfully against himself” (422).

T

That's exactly what I just described. I learned to track him with intense hypervigilance. And when I wrote anything in the band – his response guided everything. He would approve or disapprove, scold or chide or shame me. And I would adapt. So, my songwriting changed over time, and I kept writing to try to catch his love and approval, which never came. Mystical manipulation helped conjure a feeling that everything has significance beyond time and space. Our efforts together in the group had mystical meaning because of the stories we know about the prophets Muhammad, Jesus, and Moses. Just like Jesus, we were doing this hard work today because we were committed to humanity's future. We live in a time of desperate need, of

alienation from self, of debauchery. It is our responsibility to be a light on the hill. We are one in a million, perhaps in a billion. The past predicted us, and the future needs us. It is our destiny.

(ALAINNA enters again and taps Lifton on the shoulder. He is surprised but exits.)

Hey, T.  
ALAINNA

Oh. hi.  
T

There's more.  
ALAINNA

More of what?  
T

ALAINNA  
It's weird, but I guess it's from the future. It's from 2022. More stuff you wrote about the articles coming out.

I'm having trouble keeping track of this.  
T

I know. You have trauma brain.  
ALAINNA

Okay. Read on, I guess.  
T

ALAINNA  
(Reading from paper)  
February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2022. I am sitting in a café in Champaign, where my kid goes to school. (To T.)  
The "I" is you, remember?

Oh, yeah.  
T

ALAINNA  
My stomach hurts and my head hurts. I didn't have coffee this morning because I had a weird acid-reflex thing all night. They delayed the articles again. I am living in a totally smeared, glitched moment, waiting for something huge which may or not be something huge but will have some kind of impact in some way. Will you be relieved when the articles come out, they asked?  
No way. No way.

T

So, we told our stories to the newspaper, and they are interested?

ALAINNA

Yeah. They wrote seven articles, and they were supposed to come out, but they didn't.

T

Why?

ALAINNA

We don't know. I told my story, too.

T

Oh. What's your story?

ALAINNA

Um...I'll tell you in a bit. You're still working your shit out.

T

Yeah – I'm trying to write a song.

ALAINNA

Show me what you got so far.

T

I got nothing. I can't...commit to anything, I guess. I can't land anywhere. There are no melodies, no themes, no stories to tell.

ALAINNA

I see.

T

I have some poems though.

ALAINNA

Read me one.

T

K. Here's one I just wrote.

(He reads from his notebook.)

I am not an ornithologist  
 But I imagine that if you were to take a falcon  
 Tether it  
 Its natural gifts would be redacted

Its expansive vision and refined hearing  
 Magnified  
 Its perception would make enormous  
 The pressure in captivity  
 Every tiny jostling

It would forget about Soaring  
 Loosen its grasp on Homestead  
 The one from which it heaved its first flight

If you feed it  
 Sometimes  
 It will forget that it forgot

ALAINNA

Cool. Like you're a falcon and you've been tethered. I'll bet you're trying to soar. But you've been tethered for so long.

(While T is speaking, ALAINNA exits)

T

Yeah. I'm so angry. "Grace's Child" was too gay, and it died on the vine. When something I created was too, you know, queer, he would simply ignore it. He didn't ask me to sing it because I was a little too gay in my singing -- too free, too feminine, too flamboyant. He would not have used those words or described it in that way, but that was the relationship: I needed to be quiet, and I needed to stop it. I needed to learn to discipline myself. Once, when we were traveling in Europe, I was really upset. I was uncomfortable and stressed, and I started crying. He came up to me in the middle of a zoo trip, and he yelled at me, "Quit being such a bitch!" But that's not the saddest part. Then sad part is that I joked about that for years. "Remember when you called me a bitch?" I would say. And we would all laugh. We laughed.

(Notices that A left.)

Oh, you left again. Why do you keep doing that?

(LIFTON reenters)

T

Oh. You're here again.

LIFTON

Yeah. I'll be here at least eight times.

T

Okay. How long is this show?

LIFTON

I have no idea. I didn't write it. I liked your poem, by the way.

T

I can only communicate in fits and starts these days. Poems are like little word moments, strung together, for me. Poems are like – like I broke a huge punch bowl in the kitchen and keep finding pieces months later.

LIFTON

I like that. Let's review.

T

Okay. You've described two aspects of cults: milieu control and mystical manipulation.

LIFTON

Right. Like a cult controls all communication, both external and, eventually, internal. And everything takes on special, exalted, spiritual meaning, especially anything coming from the leader.

T

Like everything he does and says is imbued with goodness. Everything is a lesson.

LIFTON

Yeah, like that. And then there is the dynamic which I call "the demand of purity." Ideas of "good" and "pure" are introduced fundamentally as behavior-related concepts which fall in line with the group leader's ideology. The follower's obligation is to self-regulate toward the end of disallowing all impure thoughts and actions. This obligation never ceases and inevitably produces an experience of failure because success is impossible. The self-relationship which arises from this dilemma is pervaded with shame and guilt, and followers operating from this basis learn to expect (and even desire) punishment from the leader (424).

T

Fuck. Me.

LIFTON

So you keep trying and trying and trying endlessly to become better.

T

Because he and the group set up a dynamic where everything is my fault, and all discomfort that I might feel is something I need to work on in myself. My job is to submit to something better, something bigger than myself. Like in "Grace's Child", the idea of purity is in the lyrics. Its rhythms and sensitivities are already impure because it represents my queer aesthetic, which bounced and moved its hips and its arms in unmanly ways. It was vulnerable and unsure. As I was, by definition, queer because I wanted to be close to the guru in a queer way -- as in, without boundaries; as in, I will do whatever the guru wants without limit. I am queer, splayed out, spread-eagled, bottoming, penetrable.

LIFTON

And if you're uncomfortable about anything, then, it's a moral and spiritual failing on your part.

T

God. My gayness was the most impure thing. I remember about that time I had a huge crush on the truck driver who delivered to the cult's store every week. That was SO impure. I wasn't supposed to be gay anymore, but of course, I was. I worked for our store, and when the truck came every Tuesday morning, so did the truck driver. I desired him, and there was nowhere for me to "put" that.

Wait: Is this a song?

(T runs to the piano and starts to try to play something.)

No. It's a poem. It's just a memory fragment (stops playing).

(Projected and spoken)

Ruddy hands  
round calves  
His soft Indiana twang embraced me  
A writhing knot of gym odors

He wheeled in the bags of sugar  
*Hello how are you how is your day going*  
He takes a moment to answer  
*Why is he... Oh, never mind.*

We exchanged numbers because  
"What if he's late sometimes"  
He texted me on New Year's Eve:  
*Happy New Year, Todd*

And my frozen hands knew  
That if I answered I might  
Drive away and never return

*there is a hotel between here and there  
in a little town maybe Princeton*

and we will meet there without saying what we're  
doing maybe eggs in the diner and a coffee and

*I've never done this before  
that's okay because I will show you*

and for so long I had kept the cats away  
from the birds but now there he is  
flying, gadding about and  
I am the hunter playing with his  
food before consuming it

No. It's not a song. I can't do it.

(ALAINNA returns and speaks compassionately. Lifton exits.)

ALAINNA

That was kinda hot.

T

Cool, but that isn't necessarily the point.

ALAINNA

I think it is, actually. This was the beginning of you showing yourself and everyone around you that you would keep your vow to the guru no matter what, that you could handle whatever came your way. You were strong enough to withstand this desire, your desire. You could "rise above" your gayness. This was a performance of your commitment to justice, truth, and to God. Your public humiliation at the hands of the "teacher" was a mystical manipulation to give yourself to God.

T

My ability to resist my attraction was my strength. Yes. My songs, over time, because public displays of my loyalty to the principles. Further, my role as scapegoat solidified my public performance of "I can take it." This is what Ragan Fox called "dirty." Fox said that a "dirty" approach to telling a story is to implicate yourself, to tell the whole truth. *This* is how my survival mechanisms hurt others. My public displays of obedience and submission in the face of verbal abuse shamed everybody else if they avoided those situations. I set a high bar for being a victim. This has a violent gaslighting effect on the witnesses.

[projected, scrolling]

Why are you crying  
 Why are you crying  
 Why are you crying  
 Why are you crying

ALAINNA

Why *are* you crying?

(T sits at the piano, crying, and begins to pound on it. There is no melody. T gradually calms down, takes some deep breaths, and hits a major chord. He starts the metronome and counts. Lights go down on ALAINNA, but she is still there.)

T

One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four. I learned quickly that Murshid was a simplistic guitarist. He was uninterested in learning complicated things or rehearsing like musicians. You know, repeating a phrase again and again until we get it right, collaboratively,

constructively. When I introduced a song, it was like preparing a meal where I had to serve him a plate of food with a maximum of three things on it. These items had to be recognizable so that he would want to eat them, but also so that he would be physically able to eat them. If he couldn't handle the meal, he would discard it, dismiss, minimize, or mock it. So, I started to write songs that were simple musically. However, they also needed to have the right devotional tone. I couldn't just write a love song to a person, like "I love you, baby." It had to be translatable into spiritual terms: God, guru, the prophets. If it didn't fit that model, he would simply change it so that it did. I came up with a tune and I called it "Holy Man." "This is good," I thought to myself. I don't even know where the tune came from, but it was in my head. I remember standing in the Middle Eastern restaurant the cult owned. I was the maître d'.

(T stands up to pretend he's the host of a restaurant.)

One night he walked in with his friends. He was always grooming people, developing friendships with powerful men to attend to him. That night, I pulled him aside: "I have a song. Do you want to hear it?" I knew it was good, so I felt very brave. As I sang, he stood still and listened with his eyes staring into mine. He pondered and finally commented, looking at the ground, "Um... All right," as if I had completed a task that I was already obligated to do. He finally said, "Maybe we'll play it at band practice on Tuesday." Over the years, we played "Holy Man" a least a thousand times. We had a wonderful singer who could really belt it. It had a great bridge: verse, verse, bridge, verse – so tasty and fun to play. I used to bang the shit out of the drums, driving, pushing, pummeling...

(T looks around for LIFTON, then becomes impatient.)

Dr. Lifton, please help me! One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four.

(LIFTON comes running onto stage)

LIFTON

Sorry!

T

I have questions!

LIFTON

Yeah, sorry. You're not the only person in this situation, you know. People all over are clamoring for information.

T

Okay. So, what's next, then?

LIFTON

Number four: the cult of confession. Yeah, it's time for you to learn to admit how you've failed. The demand for purity creates an impossible struggle against the self. This struggle needs a release valve, an intentional structure for keeping people invested in it. Public confession, based on the fundamental assumption that nothing is private (which would be selfish), becomes an essential component of totalist culture. It is a public display of submission, or "symbolic self-surrender" which provides temporary relief (425). Within the public display is the approval of the leadership and the power structure, but also an ecstatic sense of being connected and seen by

others trapped in the same system. It is the reaching for relief – being seen by the narcissist -- in competition with others who are trying to do the same (426).

T

Jesus. We actually had a meeting every Saturday called “check-in” where you were expected to talk about your “process.” (T makes finger quotes) Your spiritual process. But it became a time when everybody was “called out,” or where big decisions were made in front of everyone. Once, we decided on the spot that we would sell our house and move in with two other families.

(T goes back to the piano)

I was just starting to talk about “Holy Man.” I was telling the story.

LIFTON

Should I call Alainna out? She seems to be better at the emotional stuff. I’m a psychiatrist from the 1950s, although I am, miraculously, still alive.

T

It’s amazing that you’re still alive. I don’t have to call Alainna. She’ll come when she’s needed.

LIFTON

Before we go into *Holy Man*, though, I have a concern.

T

Uh-oh.

LIFTON

Have you heard of Dwight Conquergood?

T

Oh my God, yes. The people around here won’t stop talking about him.

LIFTON

Please be careful to avoid what he calls the “Curator’s Exhibitionism” (“Moral” 7) That’s a thing that he made up. Sorta. Conquergood, that is. He describes four different traps into which a researcher can stumble when describing a cultural phenomenon ethnographically.

T

Right. You’re warning me to try to stay close to my real experience so that this story doesn’t become a spectacle for the external gaze, for tourists, for gawkers.

LIFTON

It’s a good warning. Don’t make yourself out to be some sort of spectacular victim of a super unusual experience.

T

Yeah, okay. Because this happens all over all the time?

LIFTON

Yeah, like that. It does.

T

That's both terrifying and healing.

LIFTON

Yeah. So that means, for you right now, to just tell the story and try not to over-dramatize it. Be truthful.

T

Okay. Will you remind me if I go off the rails?

LIFTON

I'll try.

T

So, I'm starting over with the "Holy Man" story. The band had lost most of its members, but at some point – maybe around 2012 – we got the band back together. We didn't have the woman who sang "Holy Man" anymore. She had left the group. We were looking through our catalog to see which songs we could possibly perform, and when we discussed doing "Holy Man", Murshid asked, "Well, who's gonna sing it?" He tried to have his second wife sing it, but she could not hold a melody even though she was a relatively soulful singer. She tried to be, but she didn't have it in her. I offered, tentatively, "Well, I could try singing it." "Um...okay," he grumbled. We start to play the song. I began to sing the first verse, and I was giving it my all: I closed my eyes, and I was playing the drums at the same time. I am singing it with my whole heart, soulfully, and it felt good.

Oh, Holy Man, can you get me out of trouble?  
 Oh, Holy Man, tuck me into my own bed  
 Oh, Holy Man, can you heal me on the double?

He shouted, accusingly, "What are you doing?" He looked disgusted. "Why -- before you *even know the song* – are you, you know, riffing and trying to make it all fancy? Just sing the song as it is. Why don't you learn to sing the song?"

[projected]

He was so angry =

Inside myself: "Okay, you're right"

*No, you don't even know the song/You don't know it*

*You don't know the story/you don't know the feeling/you know nothing*

T

(T turns on the metronome.)

One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four.

LIFTON

(Interrupting)

T. T! T!

(T stops counting.)

It wasn't your fault.

T

Is this curator's exhibitionism? Is it too dramatic? Am I making a spectacle of myself?

LIFTON

Ooph, okay. I'll cure that by talking about Sacred Science, which every cult has, then you can talk about "Holy Man" some more.

T

Okay. Tell us.

LIFTON

Every totalist group presents itself as having a "sacred science", a complete science of life that has an "aura of sacredness." This "science" must be an ultimate moral vision true for all people throughout time and regardless of culture or language. Because of its transcendent status, questioning its basic assumptions is discouraged in many ways. Its sacred nature requires a reverence for the science itself as well as for those people who carry and communicate its essence and parameters. It transcends logic, but also asserts itself with "scientific precision," suggesting that those who question it are not only heretical but unscientific. Devotees begin to self-censor or feel guilty if they fail to do so, leading again to confession. Being presented with all the answers by people who own access to truth through their position as perfect humans forces the followers into a closed system in which they are hampered from true scientific, critical thinking. Their creativity and openness to information are shut down, locked (428).

T

Their creativity and openness to information is shut down, locked  
 (Sung, randomly, some chords played on piano.)  
 Their creativity and openness to information are shut down, locked.

(ALAINNA reenters)

ALAINNA

(singing, dissonant)

Their creativity and openness to information are shut down, locked. Their creativity and openness to information are shut down, locked.

(ALAINNA dances around, having a blast. LIFTON looks awkwardly at her. T gets up and starts dancing.)

T

Okay, I'm ready.

ALAINNA  
Ready for what?

T  
To sing it.

ALAINNA  
It's not very catchy.

T  
No, something else.

ALAINNA  
Can I ask you something first?

T  
Yeah.

ALAINNA  
Can I just stay on stage now? Cause I'm not actually doing anything back there.

T  
Um, okay. Yeah, I guess.

ALAINNA  
Are you sure you're ready?  
(She goes over to the piano, picks up the metronome, and starts it.  
It starts to click.)

Murshid told you to practice with a metronome so that you would land on a steady rhythm. Because he always blamed you for any rhythm problems, because you were the timekeeper, the drummer. According to a metronomic approach to music, there is a rhythm, a fundamental simplicity, a "sacred science" – thanks, Dr. Lifton – of musicality and its structure. This is the sacred science.

T  
But it was even more than that. The way we played, the style of music I wrote, was a part of his sacred science, which excluded queerness, which believed that women were women and men were men.

ALAINNA  
And he abused that intensely.

T  
(spoken and projected)  
Unmoving, immobile, static & binary

two waters:

one pure, the other impure  
never can they touch

one drop of the second destroys the first  
one drop of the second destroys the first

(spoken only)

The song must have a blues sound that is decidedly heterosexual – like it's from the 70s but NOT disco. It must have a clean guitar sound that is funky but not shimmering and not screaming and not angry or conflicted. The guitar part must be repetitive and predictable and not *too* anything. It's not about you, T. T is ultimately destroyed, now alone on the stage. Everyone is gone.

(sung)

Oh, Holy Man, can you get me out of trouble?  
Oh, Holy Man, tuck me into my own bed  
Oh, Holy Man, can you heal me on the double?  
Cause I'm hitting bottom, yeah, I'm hanging on by a thread

(PROJECTED)

I am fundamentally flawed, failing, falling behind, afraid.  
I am in deficit, deflated.

T

(sung)

Oh, Holy Man, give me shelter from the thunder  
Oh, Holy Man, yeah, my soul is filled with dread  
Oh, Holy Man, can you break the spell I'm under  
'Cause I'm losing strength and I'm hanging on by a thread

(PROJECTED)

There are foreboding clouds,  
the future is doomed without you,  
and I am barely alive,  
so please save me from myself

T

(sung)

You see this crazy road I'm traveling  
It's chased me half of all the way to dead  
I know you know this rope's unraveling  
If I let it go, will you be there instead?

(PROJECTED)

Why am I here, doing this crazy thing?

T

(sung)

Oh, Holy Man, I see your arms stretched out below me  
 Oh, Holy Man, I know your heaven's just ahead  
 Oh, Holy Man, I feel your guiding lights around me  
 So why the hell am I still hanging on to that thread?

(spoken to ALAINNA)

He hurt you, didn't he? Did he touch you?

ALAINNA

(projected and spoken)

Bridges are the scariest thing  
 Little two-lane rickety metal grates  
 Tell me you once skydived with a Ziploc  
 The noise: falling, careening, drowning

Remember *the Legacy*?

A woman is swimming in a pool  
 And she comes up for air but the surface is glass  
*Her eyes then*

Something on top of you  
 Too big to move  
 That moment of giving up

T

Will you tell me?

ALAINNA

(avoiding eye contact)

And if I tried to avoid this kind of public confrontation, I could only conclude that there was something wrong with me. My will and my ego were "driving the train." If I felt hurt or afraid, it was a reflection of my self-centered weakness. I should have been *wanting* him to show me what was right and true, and desiring him to continue to "teach" me unceasingly.

(ALAINNA turns her back on the audience)

(PROJECTED)

Yes, I will tell you.

(There is a long, awkward silence, where T is watching ALAINNA, and ALAINNA is standing still, simply breathing in long, slow breaths.)

LIFTON

(tentatively, awkwardly breaking the silence)

Um...hello? Should I just...? Okay. I guess I'll just (turning to the audience), go on then. Sometimes cult recovery is really intense, as you can see. So, I'll just go on, I guess. The sixth

category that I came up with about thought- reform in totalist groups is called “Loading the Language.” In a cult, words are limited and constrained. Complex phenomena are not processed, discussed, collaboratively constructed, but instead are answered through the “thought-terminating cliché.” Totalist language is “repetitiously centered on all-encompassing jargon, prematurely abstract, highly categorical, relentlessly judging, and to anyone but its most devoted advocate, deadly dull.” Because there is no definable separation between our use of language and our experience of self, constrained language is a tool for narrowing our feeling and thinking. A believer may at first encounter this limitation as a sort of security blanket, but over time it cancels out the part of our personhood that reflects and questions. This conflict may produce public and private displays of conscious adherence, repeating and enforcing the very cliches which believers are struggling to uphold. The person trapped in this totalism will feel more and more separate from their own complicated, subtle, and personal relationship with themselves and the world around them.

T

When Alainna left the group – long before me – she simply disappeared. I knew nothing about her. We knew nothing about each other.

ALAINNA

That was horrible.

T

Were you there when we went to the Peach Festival with Murshid?

ALAINNA

I...think so?

T

I’m embarrassed just thinking about it. We went with Murshid to the Peach Festival in the next town and my father and brother happened to be visiting. They witnessed me following Murshid from one ride to another, then to the snack shed, then to another ride. All my attention was on him. I was supposed to be obedient to him, to follow him in all things. This meant even at a county fair I waited for him; I ate what he ate. I didn’t wander off and do my own thing. Ever.

(PROJECTED)

That memory is a Jello mold of shame  
 fruit cocktail is the lights  
 the reigns were deep  
 literally tethered to my tongue  
 like a corpse in his arms  
 wash us, adorn us with beautiful roses  
 – seasonal and local, of course –  
 and then when we died we would all be  
 together quiet, close, for eternity,  
 at peace because our efforts were pure.

ALAINNA

That's what he asked of me, to be a corpse in his arms.

T

But you were a woman, and I was not.

ALAINNA

Yes, so he literally touched my body.

T

I'm so sorry.

ALAINNA

He assaulted me, then blamed me for it.

T

I'm so sorry.

ALAINNA

I was ashamed for twenty years.

T

Have we won yet?

ALAINNA

What do you mean?

T

Have we exposed him? Have the articles come out?

ALAINNA

No, T. They haven't.

(T walks dejectedly back to the piano and starts to pound out "Black Ship.")

T

Would you mind...

ALAINNA

Doing the talking?

T

Yeah, cause....

ALAINNA

Yeah, I get it.

(T is still playing)

ALAINNA

(To the audience)

“Black Ship” is a song he wrote much later. When it first came to him, it had a heavy guitar groove, something that sounded like it was from the 90s, heavier than he was used to writing. It was a risk, but he had hopes that he could continue to push the band towards something that would be more musically challenging. But that was an illusion. Because Murshid couldn’t latch onto the groove. He didn’t have groove in him, a riff that would infect us, each of us bobbing our heads simultaneously, side-eyeing each other with joy. He could not conjure that, however hard he hammered us. His arms and legs moved awkwardly, without rhythm, clunkily.

T

(T stops playing, recites)

With every phrase  
I am jacking up this shit car

It shivers, quakes  
Where will I even go/ If I fix this thing

Words and thoughts move  
The images and the stories need layers:  
I repaint a wall

Ripping the paper and finding the studs,  
Caressing the bare planks

First coat is opaque and weak  
“Oh, that's enough”

But no  
You need a second, third, fourth

(T turns on the metronome)

One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four.

ALAINNA

It was a good song, you thought. You were excited to bring it to band practice, excited to show it to Murshid. It was simple, but it caught a sound that you also liked, and it was rare for those two things to crossover. And the lyrics were dark, too, darker than you thought he would go for. But you were ready to risk it.

LIFTON

Do you mind if I...

T

Oh my god what.

ALAINNA

T, don't be rude. He's trying to explain us to ourselves.

T

I'm sorry, I'm just...tired. So tired.

LIFTON

I'm trying to help.

T

It's just hard to hear and digest.

LIFTON

I'm almost done.

T

I'm just trying to write a song.

ALAINNA

You'll have a moment soon. And you'll be freer because you'll understand better.

T

(sighs, heavily)

Okay. Okay.

LIFTON

I call this seventh theme "Doctrine over Person." The belief system and its sacred science are true no matter the individual's reality or experience and takes precedence not only in detail but also in its priority over a person's individuality. Your uniqueness is invalidated in its wake, and you are trained primarily to ignore yourself and your needs. This leads to the erasure of conflicts, diversity, contradiction, difficult truths, and ultimately what makes you you (431).

ALAINNA

I'll be you now, okay?

T

Okay. That makes sense, I guess.

ALAINNA

And you be him.

T

Weird, but yeah.

ALAINNA

(lightly imitating T)

I brought a song in, Murshid, if there's time, and if you have any interest.

(T moves over to a pedestal, a chair, and sits, miming that he is playing a guitar. He doesn't look up.)

T

(As Murshid)

What is it?

ALAINNA

(To audience)

We had already brought out all of his equipment before his arrival, which was always later than the rest of us. We were not allowed to be late. We had the key to the band equipment closet, and for each rehearsal, we set up everything, and we tried to have his guitar and amp ready for him.

(To T as Murshid)

It's pretty good, Murshid, I think. We started warming up. We played the same songs for years for warm-ups, and these were always whatever he desired. Our job was to be ready for whatever he wanted to play and to be certain of what we had rehearsed last week. As the drummer, my job was to follow him no matter what, to be prepared for anything.

(During the following, A moves toward the Upstage Center as the drummer, and T moved toward the front, "playing guitar.")

He stared at me, once, at a gig, on stage, and he started to speed up, and I stared back, and I felt the deep spiritual upliftment, because of his reliance on me, my love for him, his eyes staring back at me, were a sign of our unification. He turned toward me, and I was at the back of the stage because I was a drummer. The other seven musicians in the band disappeared. He stared, sweating, angry, determined, loving.

(Projected, scrolling)

*mine*

*I am his*

T

One! Two! Three! Four! One! Two! Three! Four!

(T speeds up, repeating, and increasingly loud. This lasts for an awkwardly long time. Gradually, T becomes himself again, suddenly, turning to the audience and then approaching downstage. When ALAINNA sees this, she comes and stands beside him).

He hardly ever played at a consistent tempo, which was terrifying for me because at any moment he might scold me for this very thing. It was my intention and my obligation to follow his lead. I locked eyes and tempos, and we slowly sped up and increased our volume, and we built in tempo and volume. Two hours into rehearsal we were still trying to nail down one of his songs despite his assertion that we were failing. We never got the songs he wrote right, even after rehearsing them for literally years. He sprayed us with a firehose of disapproval and blamed us for getting wet. I guess I'm me now again.

ALAINNA

Yeah, okay.

(ALAINNA takes the position of Murshid. Her voice changes into an imitation of Murshid's.)

So, you have a song.

(T goes back and sits at the "drums." T is speechless, quiet, stumped. ALAINNA sees this, speaking for him again.)

Um...

LIFTON

I think I can explain.

ALAINNA

Okay. Yes.

LIFTON

Because you had to wait for him to speak it, to offer it, and if you reminded him, it would be insulting, so you could only be prepared, with copies of the lyrics and the chords.

T

Yes.

ALAINNA

So, you stood up from behind the drums and passed the music out to everyone, ready to teach and be flexible.

(T "passes out the music")

You taught everyone the chords and the groove, and then you started singing it. When he heard the words, his face distorted in confusion and disdain. He repeated the lyrics aloud, in a mocking tone.

T

(T stands up, as Murshid)

"You'll never be satisfied"? "Black Ship"? That sounds dark. So why in the world does it sound like an 80s pop song?

(Mocking, scoffing laughter.)

ALAINNA

He moved his hips suggestively while singing the groove in such a way that proved his point: the words were dark and definitive, but the music was gay, playful, and effeminate. These didn't match, which should be obvious to anyone.

(Projected)

He should be ashamed.

LIFTON

Then he went to work on it. Over the next forty-five minutes he changed the feel of the song, its groove, into something slowly and dirge-y. It was your job – and the job of those who were in attendance – to publicly confirm how right he was in his instincts – both musical and interpersonal.

ALAINNA

Then everybody in the audience, all the other devotees started saying, “God, it’s so much better, isn’t it?” they said.

T

Yes, it is. Of course, it is, Murshid.

(T, ALAINNA AND LIFTON move to the front of the stage and stand in a line)

Look at my beautiful harness, Jesus.

ALAINNA

I cannot let myself be weak, I said.

LIFTON

The ripple in my shoulder.

ALL

I am so sad that you cannot feel sad.

I am so angry that you only feel trapped.

I am so ashamed that I only scratch your skin

You are

LIFTON

Quietly

ALAINNA

Smuggling

T

Love in a stolen, locked briefcase (pause).

LIFTON

As “Black Ship” became part of your repertoire, he gradually changed the words into his own, because he was the singer. He loved singing it.

ALAINNA

Now, the original words are gone. You cannot find them. Only the version that he wrote and re-wrote, whose words are clunky and clumsy in ways that you cannot fathom.

T

I displayed my ability to hand over my music to him “without attachment.” I give this to you,

Murshid. You don't even need to ask for it. I belong to you. Ragan Fox, this is what you call "dirty."

(T starts singing.)

Black Ship on the water,  
Setting sail for misery.  
A Black Ship on the ocean,  
With sails set for misery.

ALAINNA

T, those aren't your words.

T

(defiantly, singing)

Black Car on the highway,  
No, you can't get away... get away from me.  
A big Black Car on the roadway,  
Gonna take you to the cemetery.

ALAINNA

T, he changed your words!

T

(eludes her, keeps singing)

Black Gold deep in the desert,  
All you wanna do is pump it dry  
Black Gold under the sand,  
Everybody wants to get some, but everybody's gonna cry.

ALAINNA

T, stop it! You did not write these words. These aren't your words.

T

Black Spot on your forehead,  
You can never wash it off.  
A big Black Mark is on your heart,  
You think you know,  
but you're not that smart.

Black Spot on your forehead,  
You cain't never [cringe] wash it off.  
A big Black Mark is on your heart,  
Enough's enough, but it ain't enough.

No, you'll never be satisfied until you die.

ALAINNA

T, nothing about this is you!!!

T

I DID IT! I STAYED! I LET HIM HUMILIATE ME! I WAS TOO SCARED TO STOP HIM!

(ALAINNA runs to him. T collapses into her arms.  
ALAINNA pauses while he catches his breath.)

LIFTON

Um...this is pretty dramatic, T. Okay.... The Dispensing of Existence. Number 8. This theme is perhaps the most devastating, summed up by suggesting that your individual nature is irrelevant, depriving the believer of “all that is subtle and imaginative.” The totalist system attempts to erase the very complexities which make us human. It is this very ideology that leans toward extremism, because a small group of individuals comes to think of itself as outside and separate from the flow of humanity’s evolution.

ALAINNA

He literally exchanged your words for his.

T

There is a drain.  
It isn’t just a calming lunar undulation  
Tiffany’s glamorous staircase  
That One Gown over gentle plush

It’s beneath you  
Both an entrance and an exit  
Both a channel and a medium  
Where the sound escapes  
And hides under women without skin

Turn your inner ear and  
Bring balance to  
Your caving in  
Lie flat underneath fifty mattresses  
And disguise yourself as a pea

ALL

Lie flat underneath fifty mattresses  
And disguise yourself as a pea

ALAINNA

(Bringing out some more papers.)

I want to read something you wrote.

T

Okay.

ALAINNA

March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022. I'm at the store. I'm at Aldi. I can't even begin to explain this. For all those years, I shopped at our own little store. This shows you the world-canceling of it all. Here I am at Aldi, and I don't even know what to do. I have huge anxiety. I go to get the cart and I put the quarter in, and I get the cart. Most people are still masked here. I buy simple things like pre-prepped macaroni and cheese. This is me becoming normal again, but through the grocery store. The anxiety comes from, like, *someone's gonna know. They're gonna see that I don't know what I'm doing.* I'm ruminating on how many times I witnessed Murshid bad-mouthing people who left the group and who were doing other things. Like shopping at Aldi's. The analogy with music is that I was living in this constrained world. But now I'm experimenting: Hey, what do I want? And what do I want to eat? What do I want to hear? And even as I'm writing this paper, I'm thinking, "What voice should I use? How do I want to say it? How do I tell the story of going into an Aldi and being completely overwhelmed -- literally, like I-can't-breathe kind of overwhelmed?" I go to write this and it's a blank piece of paper. I am intending to pour the story of the band I was in, but I lose track of what is an accurate way to do it, or a good way to do it. Then I am colluding with, or constrained by, the traditions of academic writing. But I'm also aware at this point of academic prose's functions, its purposes, and its benefits. The benefits of academic writing are that it is a method that people recognize, a style that communicates a certain explicable and understood language so that when an academic person -- from our field particularly -- encounters it, they think, "Oh, that's what this is." And by using this language you show an understanding of, and a kind of allegiance to, a tradition and how it does things. So here I am, in the car, writing my paper aloud. And from that, I'll collect something that makes sense. Now I've just learned that there's a delay on our articles. So now I'm gonna live through that kind of thick muck of time. Somebody said to me, "Isn't [the article] going to be a giant relief?"

T

No, I don't think so. Today I don't know what to do with myself. I'm taking this food back home from Aldi. Maybe I'll warm up some macaroni and cheese. Maybe I'll warm up some macaroni n' cheese.

ALL

I am only these weak bones  
 And a dying wish  
 That all things should be fair and beautiful  
 Maybe now that I've given up on  
 What should be

I take a piece of trash  
 (The one you left here)  
 And write words on it

Ten thousand years from now  
 They will dig it up

Imbue it with tradition and habit  
Ritual and belief

You'll try to explain yourself to  
the one sitting beside you  
Holding you in their arms

Then you'll discard it for a moment  
Look into their eyes  
There and see yourself  
Memory is a circle

#### ALAINNA

March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2022. The communication changed. The journalists started ghosting us. The deadlines weren't met, and from that moment the communication turned cold, vague, and professional. After a week of this we started to fear that Murshid had thrown up obstacles, perhaps threatened litigation – anything to try to stop it. We sent very direct and angry letters to the newspaper, suggesting that we might withdraw our names from the articles unless they were more forthright with us.

#### T

Goddammit, it feels like we were betrayed again, taken into somebody's confidence whose interest was ultimately only their own – in this case, the interest of the journalists, their careers, their sense of efficacy. They leave us high and dry, waiting to hear.

#### ALAINNA

March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2022. The journalists have stopped communicating with us. I feel so violated. I guess I learned something. It helped me to stop focusing so intensely on the articles. Now I'm off social media and I'm spending more time creating, thinking, writing, and dreaming. My work will benefit.

#### ALL

My stomach wants to move north  
Into the Cold  
Where nothing moves this time of year  
Save the slowest glacial fissures cracking

Its corrosive digits crawl  
Into my throat  
It acts like a lever  
Finds the smallest rifts  
And cast itself within it  
Spreads its arms to make room for  
A crowded marketplace

It ruins the test of everything

Coughs a covid rhythm into  
Public spaces  
And I place my hands around my own neck  
Worry the neighbors  
Between apples and oranges  
They ask am I okay

T

But I am definitely not okay.

ALAINNA

March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2022. Today is the day of the ultimatum. Either you tell us what the hell is happening, or we withdraw our participation in your articles. Delete our names, please.

T

Our mental health is more important than your readership.

ALAINNA

March 17, 2022. It's done. We withdrew our names. Now I can work on my Research Report in peace. I feel focused on loving you, loving us. Loving you, loving us. I don't have to fight anymore.

LIFTON

They never published the articles.

T

They never did.

ALAINNA

T, he sexually assaulted me.

T

I know. I'm so sorry.

ALAINNA

He's still out there living his life.

T

Doing whatever he wants.

LIFTON

Cults gonna cult.

T

So, what have we accomplished with all this?

ALAINNA  
You can write a song now.

LIFTON  
Even if it's rudimentary. Simple.

ALAINNA  
Basic. It doesn't have to be the best thing ever.

LIFTON  
It doesn't have to make sense.

ALAINNA  
It doesn't have to be meaningful.

LIFTON  
It doesn't have to be about cults or trauma or prisons or manipulation.

ALAINNA  
Or anger or shame or humiliation.

LIFTON  
Or anything.

ALAINNA  
Right. It doesn't have to be about anything.

T  
Okay. But you've just told us that he sexually assaulted you.

ALAINNA  
Yeah, but I'm mostly okay. I've been integrating this for twenty years.

T  
Okay. Are you sure?

ALAINNA  
Yeah.

(T starts to play a simple, major chord while singing. He turns on the metronome.)

T  
One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four. (Struggling.)  
One, two, three, four.

(ALAINNA walks over and turns off the metronome. T gasps gently. LIFTON walks over behind T and gently pats him on the shoulder.)

LIFTON

Let me know if you need me.

T

I will.

LIFTON

I'm literally just here in the book. All the time.

T

I'm still in total shock that a book about Chinese prison torture helps me understand my life.

LIFTON

The dynamics are the same.

T

Yeah. Okay. Thank you for spelling it all out for me. (LIFTON leaves)

ALAINNA

I am absolutely here anytime you need me. T I know. I love you.

ALAINNA

I love you, too. (Leaves.)

T

(T starts to play again)

One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four.

(He experiments, gently, conservatively, with different chords, different numbers, and different colors, but doesn't get far. He calls out into the ether)

Dr. Conquergood? Are you there? Ha. You are – somewhere. I just – I hope I'm not sitting on a museum wall somewhere. I hope this is immersive enough for you. I hope you're here, sitting next to me, cheering me on. Ragan – you're actually alive somewhere. I hope I haven't put myself on a pedestal, above anyone, underneath anyone else. I still can't write a song. And that's okay.

(Lights out)

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

In this brief conclusion, my goal is to circle back and address how the eight scholars outlined in the introduction influenced my creation of the script. These scholars, in distinct ways, interpret and express elements of the autoethnographic tradition. How do these unique analyses appear in the script that I created? Also, how do these interpretations inform, by means of the performance the script might make possible, my understanding of my experience living in a cult?

Looking back  
 Forces  
 Calls bluffs  
 Sends to the table  
 Your blank check  
 What you said you wouldn't be caught dead  
 doing Untie-able bows  
 Impossible feats of emotional engineering  
 Failed patents  
 Poisoned water  
 Lied-about  
 emissions Gaslit  
 allegations

Dominick La Capra suggests that “traumatic experiences – particularly those that are recent – might be better served through modalities that allow for the ‘feel’ of experience of emotion” (13). I re-cite La Capra here because as I set out to write this conclusion, I encounter emotional barricades. In the performance script above, I capture, in real time, the dissolution of the media’s coverage of our cult experiences. Journalists made a promise that they couldn’t keep, and we were devastated, again. This is where the script ends. I proceed from this point unsure of my own abilities to complete the task at hand. I do have the power and time to edit these concluding thoughts so that they look right; but I’m not sure that’s the point.

I could just let it lie as it currently stands—broken, cyclic, and unfinished.

This writing is a deep and difficult slog through nearly impenetrable swamps. It is literally fog. I cannot form sentences, paragraphs, thoughts, or communication events (although, ironically, I seem to be doing that). I do not know if I can construct paragraphs that carry any meaning. La Capra's theories about writing trauma question whether a first-hand historian of recent traumatic events should be expected to work within academic language.

[1, 2, 3, 4]

The script's recurring theme of metronomic tempo (which has both visual and audio elements) creates the backdrop of structure, timing, and counting. This tempo(rizing) represents an effort, coercively placed on my subjecthood: *be precise, stay in rhythm, organize, separate, count, count, count, count*. Douglass and Carless encourage aesthetic presentations of complicated narratives, and this metronomic evenness underlies the chaotic remembrance playing out on its surface. The script's inability and unwillingness to stay within the temporal lines is also an example of Shelby Swafford's "rupturing of the temporal," represented by the many diversions in voice, perspective, and genre.

Madison's assertion that performance is an essential method for diverse and marginalized perspectives is foregrounded in my own utilization of Robert J. Lifton, both as a scholar and as a character in the performance. Lifton's theories serve as a structural principle for understanding my experience in a cult, while his physical presence grounds his theory as he interacts on stage and posits – in relationship to the story – his expertise in the first person. Lifton's embodiment in the script is central to the story in two ways: 1) it shows his book's enormous effect on me in my recovery from the cult, and 2) it lends a structure that allows the emotional chaos to live in a way that is anchored and bounded.

The "character" of the metronome serves as a touchstone for the stories of the three

songs. Each of these stories suggest my own performance as a drummer—in time, on book, memorized, straining to please the chaotic and despotic leadership. Douglass and Carless encourage performance as method of inquiry, and through the presence of the metronome and my own performance as timekeeper, I witness the impossibility of living in relationship with an insatiable tyrant. I am “counted out,” doled, and portioned.

Lifton’s presence is also informed by Ronai’s “layered account,” in which various genres, voices, and points of view work together to present a more “accurate” depiction of a difficult narrative. The present tense story of my trips to Aldi while grappling with the journalists, in conjunction with poetry, stories of the songs, and transcriptions of videologues – all with temporal and spatial disjunctures -- allow for first-person descriptions of penetrating traumatic environments.

Conquergood’s description of performance studies parallels the narrative of the newspaper quashing the articles. Conquergood states that performance-oriented inquiry lends itself to indefinite, cloudy processes without conclusions. His descriptions of the “curator’s exhibitionism” (“Moral” 7) challenges the desire to “astonish rather than understand” (“Moral” 7). Cult survivors, in the current cultural climate, are fascinating, and it would be an easy trap to sensationalize rather than complicate this story. A performance script is a three-dimensional method for delivering a self-implicating depiction of such a complicated story.

A performance text is like an electric socket that may or not be live. Ronai’s layered account allows for a unique set of responses depending on the level of charge – and a live response to it: sometimes the light flashes across the sky, at other times the current flows obediently through a structured, predictable powerline, already laid, grounded.

Interspersed expression of present-tense physical and emotional experience is an

expression of Ronai's embodied, layered scholarship. "Distant," academic paragraphs cannot be separated from the anxiety I feel when producing them, the stress that spills out from within their confined spaces.

Ronai's influence is present in the content here. Ronai's depiction of her own personal experience of childhood sexual abuse challenges academic research methodologies which require sample sizes. Academic knowledge needs methods that honor the first, tiny, isolated, shattered story over and against an entire institutional power structure.

In writing this conclusion – in going back and revisiting the performance script and asking how I used these scholars – I learned how each of them opened doors for me, gave permission. They said, "come through here, it's safe." And I did.

Faulkner's influence is obvious in the poetic form, whenever it appears. Faulkner posits poetic expression as research enterprise.

The aspect of this story that is perhaps the most difficult to digest is the underlying anti-queerness. In short, my gayness (with my own collusion) slowly disappeared from my aesthetic – in this case – my songwriting.

My body forms around the first song in the performance, "Grace's Child." The lyrics, in Fox's "dirty" mode, ask that the audience deny its confusion and "let go" into the "love and light" in our new, cultic world. Fox's "dirty" appears fundamentally when I come clean about the way in which my public performance of submission was a "model" for others. In other words, I showed in my relationship with him how others "should" behave as well, and if they failed to do so, they weren't as "submitted" as I was. I was always gaslighting others who wouldn't put themselves in that position.

It is painful to face my slow, general succumbing to an anti-queer rhetoric and aesthetic.

It happened. It happened to me. I did it. I accomplished it, and it almost killed me. The word “painful” doesn’t adequately depict it. These words are inadequate. I wonder if, as La Capra suggests, telling the story is even possible? Was I even there to experience what I experienced? Where was I?

Themes, patterns, categories emerge in performative writing, particularly when they involve personal, private experiences. I posit that many personal, private experiences – especially those with traumatic, coercive, or otherwise shocking characteristics – do not present with easy, public narratives. In other words, such experiences are not often represented in media, which means the narratives we create are, to some extent, novel and original, untheorized. This is especially true when we are fighting against an aggressive and threatening power structure which actively seeks our silencing.

The ongoing emergence of theories related to surviving cultic experience will eventually be completed with qualitative and even quantitative research methodologies. For now, however, these stories need to have a performative and autoethnographic component. From these narratives we build truths, divisions, layers, and component parts.

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