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My Body is Where I Exist: Poverty, Disability, and Embodied Resistance as a Theology of Practice

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Abstract: This paper explores embodiment as a locus for theological practices of addressing socio-economic inequality, focusing particularly on the intersections of disability and poverty. Engaging the work of Sharon Betcher and Mayra Rivera, the paper explores the relationship between spirit and flesh, and highlights the need for theologies to engage with and learn from unruly, excluded bodies. The paper constructs three poetic accounts from a collaborative project with UK activists to highlight embodied practices of navigating and resisting inequality, and the creative, sensory knowledges necessary for developing critiques of oppressive systems.

Keywords: Creative methods, inequality, activism

Zusammenfassung: Die Studie basiert auf einem Kunstprojekt mit britischen Aktivist*innen, die sich für die Rechte von Menschen mit chronischen Erkrankungen und Behinderungen einsetzen. Aus deren poetischen Tagebüchern arbeitet der Aufsatz heraus, welches Widerstandspotenzial das alltägliche „embodied knowledge“ von Menschen birgt, die aufgrund ihrer Körper Exklusionserfahrungen machen, und wie dieses in eine (praktisch-)theologische Kritik an strukturellen Problemen der Benachteiligung und Ungleichheit einfließen kann.

Stichwörter: Kreativität, Ungleichheit, Aktivismus

This paper explores embodiment as a locus for theological practices of addressing socio-economic inequality, focusing particularly on the intersections of disability and poverty. Framing my engagement through contemporary discussions of the relationship between spirit and flesh, I offer accounts of specific corporeal experiences of navigating inequality drawn from collaborative research with UK activists, charting where such accounts provoke possibilities for everyday embodied resis-
tance as a theology of practice. First, I discuss the work of Sharon Betcher and Mayra Rivera to attend to ‘flesh’ as at once social, material, mundane, and sacred. I then offer three poetic accounts constructed from creative journals in which activists reflected on their bodily experiences, taking these accounts not only as description, but also as analysis and central argument. From this, I highlight the embodied knowledges shaping and shaped by everyday practices of contesting inequality in the UK context as important for justice-oriented practical theologies. Central to this work is foregrounding the creativity and critical knowledges emerging from the lived experiences of disabled people experiencing poverty as theologically and politically significant; whilst also acknowledging the risks and ambivalences in working in this way.¹ Such an approach is, in itself, a theological practice.²

Activism is still predominantly depicted through traditional political lenses, as involving campaigning, organising, and protesting in public spaces. Yet, queer disabled activists of colour critique such framing as exclusionary as it fails to account for the political nature of mundane acts, the way “the talking and the meds-sharing and the scheming and the life support” not only counts as activism but is also “transforming traditional notions of what activism was to make it over in our owncripped out images”.³ Liberation and justice-orientated theologies have highlighted the potentially radical political nature of ecclesial practices, or have discussed the theological aspects of political movements and protests; practical theologians have also begun to focus on mundane materiality as a site of revelation and encounter.⁴ Yet, less attention in practical theology has been paid to the informal everyday practices of marginalised groups in surviving and resisting inequality as political and theological, as offering a basis for theologies of practice.

I take embodiment and inequality as critical theological concerns, aware that theological praxis in these areas has often been harmful and there is still much to be done in addressing colonising and paternalistic approaches to poverty and disability. This includes extractive research practices that consume, appropriate, or silence people’s experiences, particularly those of pain and oppression, in ways that reinforce rather than challenge power structures. Embodiment, in all its complexity, has sometimes been separated out from approaches to socio-economic inequality, even in theologies that aim to be liberative. Deborah Creamer notes that feminist and

¹ Whilst there is discussion around using identity-first or person-first language, I use ‘disabled people’ here, in keeping with many of the disability-led movements in the UK.
body theologies still often assume that the non-disabled body is normative.\(^5\) Marcel-la Althaus-Reid critiqued liberation theologies that erased the specific material conditions of people living in poverty—including aspects of gender and sexuality—in constructing the category of ‘the poor’ in theological discourse. She states: “poverty becomes an ideology in theology when the bodies of the poor (including their bodies of knowledge) disappear from theological reflection”\(^6\). When bodies are too easily placed within political and theological categories, disorderly bodies that exceed and disrupt such categorisations are neglected as the generative locus through which we do our theological reflecting.

‘Disability’ is a contested category, with conflicts between different models of disability; this paper notes the difficulties in how these models influence people’s lives. Unlike medical and individual models that define disability in terms of individual deficit, the social model recognises the structural and public nature of disabled people’s oppression and identifies societal barriers to be removed, differentiating between ‘impairment’ and ‘disability’; however, ‘strong’ social models fail to account for pain and limitation.\(^7\) Various impairments and health conditions have different impacts, and attending to differences requires recognising that individuals and communities do not always identify with the term ‘disabled’ preferring, for example, ‘D/deaf’ or ‘living with a mental health condition’, or reclaimed terms such as crip, mad, or cyborg. Here, I examine participants’ reflections on chronic health conditions and mental health conditions, including those resulting from traumatic experiences; my intention is not to bring all conditions neatly under the banner of ‘disability’, but to foreground different bodily experiences and navigation of social systems in ways that highlight the very “instability of the category of ‘disability’”.\(^8\) I work broadly with a feminist materialist approach that attends to ‘misfits’ between body and environment, with this misfitting being both a source of inequality and a site of critical subjugated knowledge.\(^9\)

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8 Creamer, *Disability* (n. 5), 7

Disabled people encounter a higher cost of living in the UK, and poverty often compounds health inequalities, for example, through a lack of access to healthcare or being unable to afford foods that reduce symptoms of chronic illness or being unable to afford food at all. Beginning in 2009, austerity cuts to welfare and services in the UK targeted disabled people, accompanied by political rhetoric framing disabled people as ‘burdens’ and ‘frauds’, pushing many disabled people further into poverty. Such framings also reinforce ideas around disabled people and people living in poverty as having less valid knowledges, and ultimately being disbelieved about their own experiences, including bodily experiences. Covid and the current ‘cost of living crisis’ have re-entrenched these inequalities. Gender, race, class, sexuality, and global location interact with and co-construct experiences of disability, and broader capitalist mechanisms debilitate already disadvantaged communities; for example, no action being taken on environmental pollutants in low-income communities or physically demanding low-pay work that injures and degrades bodies. Engaging with disability and poverty together requires asking why certain populations are treated as ‘disposable’ by the state, and are thus “continually subjected to austerity regimes, violent institutionalisation, and debilitation”. As such, liberative theologies must look beyond recognition within or inclusion into existing political and economic structures.

**Troubling Embodiment**

Even when reflecting on bodies, the specific materiality of bodies sometimes disappears from theological accounts, meaning that normative ideals around embodiment are reinforced. Theologians may “talk a lot about embodied theology or embodied knowing but less so about the body itself or what it means to know in and through material bodies. Ironically, the term embodied seems impaled on the very dualism between flesh and spirit, body and soul, body and culture that many scholars hoped to disrupt using this term”. Recognising that bodies “make our reflections possible” and influence how “each of us knows the world in particular and unique ways”, emphasises the specific contextual knowledges that emerge with and through bodies. Theological accounts of embodiment require not just thinking

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10 Radford, *Lived Experiences* (n. 2).
13 Creamer, *Disability* (n. 5), 57.
‘about’ bodies, but actively engaging in sensory and perceptive bodily encounters, the way “bodies and experiences situate us in the world”. Yet, it is also to acknowledge the limits of theological practices; to work with rather than against the way bodies always exceed our grasp.

Theological understandings of embodiment seeking to disrupt these dualisms may draw on notions of the incarnation, or the immanence of the spirit, yet a key question remains of how such approaches engage with the particularity of bodies. Betcher argues that feminist theology’s embrace of the body through attention to the incarnation and immanence still tends to reject the complexity of materiality. By failing to challenge desires for whole, stable, and productive bodies emerging in Western societies, Betcher suggests this has created theologies in which spirit is only related to bodies that maintain this sense of wholeness. Theologies have much to learn from bodies that have been ‘made abject’, and she quotes Eiesland’s assertion that theologians need to represent bodies through “flesh and blood, bones and braces”. For Betcher, theologians may be better served by engaging with ‘flesh’, to work with the “dynamic fluid physics of embodiment”, articulating spirit as less interested in “wholeness” as in “passion”. Betcher does not simply replace ‘body’ with ‘flesh’ but suggests flesh is “unable to hide the wounds, tears, disfigurements, and desires that a more abstract language of embodiment often can”. Developing a notion of “social flesh” as our mutual corporeal interdependence, she articulates that flesh “is a plane on which bodies encounter one another and become entangled”, admitting “our exposure and vulnerability to one another”. Yet, this social element of ‘flesh’ does not “relieve us of the sacred”, and she considers spirit, and spiritual practices, as ways of living with pain and instability in society.

Working from a different set of sources, Rivera also discusses the relation between unruly flesh and spirit. Engaging Latinx theological, theoretical, and poetic writings, Rivera considers rejected and fragmented bodies as challenging theological emphasis on myths of “original wholeness, homogeneous subjectivity, unambi-

14 Heike Peckruhn, Meaning in Our Bodies: Sensory Experiences as Constructive Theological Imagination (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 256.
17 Betcher, “Becoming” (n. 15), 108.
19 Betcher, Spirit (n. 18), 158, 155.
uous identifications, the illusions of purity and visual certainties”.\textsuperscript{20} Separating spirit and flesh tends to distance the incarnation from “our ordinary bodies” and everyday experiences, resulting in the incarnation being seen as a “one-time event that proves the rule of an otherwise disembodied deity”.\textsuperscript{21} Rivera is clear that spirit materialising in the flesh is more than an ‘exceptional event’, and instead as an inherent dimension of corporeality. Yet, she argues that “attending to the spirit in the flesh of rejected, disorderly bodies is hardly to dismiss Jesus’ body. Instead, we read his body—a material, finite, stigmatized, vulnerable body—as revealing the scandal of divinity in the flesh [...] the divine \textit{becoming} flesh”.\textsuperscript{22} This orientation to the incarnation requires an “openness to learn from real, finite bodies” in particular how complex, unruly bodies “have the ability to experience several things at once, and thus hold together pain and joy, failure and hope” and, states Rivera, the potential to “creatively transform those experiences”.\textsuperscript{23}

Throughout her work, Rivera affirms that the relation between spirit and flesh does not neaten the borders of our being. She writes: “the spirit does not eliminate the ambiguities of our corporeality: ephemeral and tangible, fragmented and manifold, neither whole nor deficient. Pain, difficulty, and failure are not antithetical to the movements of the spirit; we do not dream of pneumatic bodies liberated from flesh”.\textsuperscript{24} Rivera also engages with flesh as the exposure to social relations in the world, reflecting on how particular bodies are located within oppressive systems. Such embodied social relations are ambivalent; although interconnections can be beneficial, they can also be harmful, especially for people whose bodies and visible attributes can expose them to violence, intolerance, and oppression.\textsuperscript{25} Rivera is attentive to the way “social myths and stories” are not abstract but have continuous and contentious impacts on materiality; for example, policies and laws regulating whether specific people can move across borders, or where more ‘indirect discourses’ “teach us day after day what bodily features are significant” and how “we act according to that knowledge”.\textsuperscript{26} As such, embracing embodiment in practical

\textsuperscript{21} Rivera, “Thinking” (n. 20), 221.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid. Italics original.
\textsuperscript{24} Rivera, “Unsettling” (n. 23), 123.
\textsuperscript{26} Rivera, \textit{Poetics} (n. 25), 113.
theology requires ongoing reflection on power dynamics in social relations, and how both stigma and material inequalities influence specific embodiments.

In this view, flesh attends to the complex overlaps between spiritual, material, and social, seeing these not as opposites to be neatly combined, but as always constituting and re-constituting one another. Working with these approaches raises the question of how our theologies of addressing inequality might become more accountable to these paradoxes of embodiment, to the spirit in unruly flesh. Where might more consciously working through ‘flesh and blood, bones and braces’ and learning from ‘real, finite, stigmatised bodies’ enable us to engage with practices of resistance enacted by marginalised communities?

Constructing Embodiment

In this section, I present accounts of embodiment from a collaborative project with anti-poverty activists that explored everyday experiences of inequality through creative journaling and reflective workshops. The focus of the research emerged through my ongoing involvement with a UK anti-poverty activist network in which people share their lived experiences of poverty with one another, with civic leaders, and with wider publics to create change. The research was designed in collaboration with a steering group of network members from Glasgow and Manchester; together we considered ethical and practical issues of doing participatory research during a pandemic. We decided on journaling methods, and I posted creative journaling packs to ten participants for them to draw, collage, write, or voice record as they chose in response to prompts. This was accompanied by group reflective workshops taking place in two cycles of eight sessions; in these sessions I encouraged participants to reflect on a specific prompt, before facilitating discussion from their creative responses. At the close of the project, we worked to develop a creative book that presented digital reworkings of images and text from the journals and workshop discussions, for the group to use in their ongoing activism.27

Journaling methods foreground participants’ construction of meaning by enabling space for recording events, thoughts, feelings, and the process of reflection on these. Solicited journals can “provide participants with a space of embodied and emotional self-reflection”, a way of documenting mundane experiences that may be difficult to recall in other research settings.28 When combined with visual and crea-

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27 A digital version of this is available to view at lincolntheologicalinstitute.com/filled-to-the-brim
tive methods such as photography, drawing, and collage, journaling can centre embodied and sensory knowledges. Creative approaches highlighting participants’ construction of various meanings in the process of research and the relational nature in which knowledge is constructed between participants and researcher.

I also kept a research journal during this time, at the request of research collaborators. Research journaling is a method of becoming accountable to how our material, social, and spiritual embodiments frame, limit, and make possible our research. In offering extracts, I highlight how my own embodied experiences locate me, but also my concerns in theological research. An early entry reads:

Two letters arrived today, within minutes of each other. One from the ethics board. One from the doctors. A coincidence, of course, but useful for researchers invested in the connections between the bodily and social, the structural and mundane.

From the doctors: dates for hospital appointments, the latest barrage of increasingly invasive procedures. We go through this diagnostic dance every few months, sometimes delayed by doctors sceptical of chronic illness. I know the steps well: a series of tests; trials of new medications; inconclusive results; the request from doctors to see how much pain I can live with; instructions to return only when my body becomes unmanageable, inconvenient. It’s hard to know where that line between acceptance and resistance is when all I’ve known is this body as my place of dwelling in the world. I try to live within this frame. My sense of self, my theological work, forms between the swing and sway of medical waiting room doors. And here we are again. My heart beats heavy. Might something more conclusive be possible this time, after over two decades? My eyes blur for a moment with the dream of the things I’d do with a single pain-free day—a dream I don’t even really believe in—then I stuff the letter in a dark drawer.

From the ethics board: clearance to proceed. After intensive questions about participants’ ‘capacities’ and ‘vulnerabilities’, I can now invite people to join. I feel nervous, muscles tight—I always do with new projects. How can I gently hold this process without flattening the unruly responses that come about in collaboration? What if someone shares or creates something that is too important not to honour, but too unmanageable to make sense of within the limited frames of research? What if this time it is impossible to say anything about the delicately woven things that people share? How can I resist academic pressure to make ‘something’ of the complexity of lives? A flush of heat and a twist in the stomach, then I file the letter in the archive on my laptop.

Between the journals being sent out and returned, I underwent another medical procedure: Consent forms, already in flimsy tied gown, fumble pen weakly, mark agreeing to risks. Wheeled through corridor maze, turn, visualise moves of embodiment theory, turn, dissociative trick, turn, step away from pain, anxiety, body. Countdown anaesthetic... ten, nine, eight, sev...Blink. Blink, blink. Blurry ceiling tiles. Soft
sobs behind curtain separating beds. Radio turned up somewhere. Not this song, this voice, not now. ‘And I-I had a feeling that I belonged. I-I had a feeling I could be someone, be someone, be someone.’ Over three days body—and all that it holds, all that it persists in being, becoming—comes back to me, or I to body; hot tears at the return, at having been someone...someone else...for a while.

In presenting journals from Jill, Rose, and Ash (pseudonyms chosen by participants), I adopt a poetic methodology that attends to specificity, whilst also aware that the process of creating such accounts is not merely describing reality but is constructive and analytic.29 This approach seeks to recognise not only the value of people’s lived experiences but also their own creative and critical knowledges from and about their lives. Yet, this is not without risks, either of seeing people’s experiences as raw data to be interpreted elsewhere or as holding disabled people living in poverty up as ‘inspirational’.30 Romanticising or ‘sacralising’ such experiences can take away from people’s own sense of their lives and everyday realities, as well as creating further distance between those reading and hearing such accounts. Creative and poetic approaches offer a reminder that all theological research is aesthetic, imaginative, and constructive, and enable reflection on the power of researchers in representing participants’ lives.31 Although I focus on three participants, this allows for greater engagement with participants’ sensory meaning-making in the journaling process. I frame the accounts as my own encounter with the journals, reflexively recognising how knowledge is mediated through my own embodiments and readings rather than research texts providing ‘objective’ account of transparent selves to be grasped by the reader.32 Each section was returned to participants for feedback, changes, and approval as part of the collaborative process.

Jill

Two strong aromas emerge from the journal as I unwrap it from the thick postage paper. A dense smell of smoke; in one journal entry Jill writes about her fear of the fire that claimed her neighbour’s flat, and the lasting smell in the building. The

30 Radford, Lived Experiences (n. 2).
32 Zoë Bennett et al., Invitation to Research in Practical Theology (Routledge, 2018), 34–56.
other is a strong floral scent, filing my face with hazy memories I can’t pin down, a fragrance she has used to try and cover the smoke. The scents mingle, one cannot be inhaled without the other.

Such contradictions run throughout the journal. There is a page of a beautiful expressive image of tulips in greens and reds that Jill has painted, with the words ‘I can flourish when I paint pictures. Feel good, achieved something’. Turning the page, I find it covered with grey scribbles and repeating the word ‘hopeless’ and a deluge of frowning faces, with the words ‘my life’ in large capitals. In another instance, she has created a colourful collage, depicting time with her grandchildren, writing ‘amazing happy day, fun with grandchildren, mini picnic, missed these guys so much my heart was breaking when I saw them again.’ Shiny, glittery stickers of the word ‘happy’ are repeated across the page, along with stars and smiley faces. The next page over, the contrast in colours is stark. The background is greys and blues, scribbled with a sense of frustration. Rigid bars have been drawn, with the words ‘caged in and no escape’. She has written: ‘the growth in foodbanks demonstrate the social security net is failing in its basic duty to ensure that families have access to sufficient income to feed themselves adequately’.

Throughout the journal she creates collages with images and text from free newspapers and catalogues alongside writing about being unable to afford food and going to a community project’s food pantry, noting that foodbanks rarely understand she cannot eat certain foods due to living with Crohn’s disease. I read her reflections on the impact of this in her life, describing Crohn’s as ‘heavy agony’ and the reason she cannot work, also influencing her participation in various activist groups. She notes that she often excuses herself to use the toilet often every half hour, and that this leaves her ‘tired, weak, pain, sick, no appetite, drained’. Even in activist spaces where people should be more sensitive, people comment on this, and she states, ‘it’s upsetting having to explain’. In one entry she writes about ‘embarrassment, stress, and upset’, saying that the pandemic means that she is no longer out at community meetings during the day, and cannot afford the extra toilet rolls at home, so must borrow from her neighbours. She has collaged in an advert for an extra soft brand of toilet roll, writing ‘if I win the lottery, this will be the first thing I buy!’, a display of her characteristic humour.

Jill describes positive days of using her experiences in disability and anti-poverty advocacy, including with the Scottish Government’s consultation on disability welfare payments, stating ‘was good to be involved with this as disabled people know what’s best for them and their health conditions’. On another page Jill has

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33 The UK government is responsible for disability welfare however pilot schemes for devolving some disability benefits to the Scottish Government are taking place 2021–22.
created a cemetery, with a headstone reading ‘RIP person with disabilities’ and collaged on phrases: ‘for whom the bell tolls; death by disability benefit; 1/3 disabled people refused this benefit; trapped by stricter rules’. She comments on her involvement in activist groups around disability, poverty, and food justice, reflecting the importance of using her experiences to ‘tackle the underlying causes and fighting for the structural changes needed.’

Exploring complex health concerns through the journal, Jill reflects on influence these have on her senses and engagement with the world. After the fire, she notes it is a ‘day of smells’ in still smelling the smoke, and so does gardening with a neighbour, smelling the earth and the flowers instead. She writes about a friend sending her lavender wax melts: ‘amazing how smells can relax your body, mind, and soul. Need to use my senses more often.’ On another page she has collaged an image of a person soaking in a bath, with the text: ‘my idea of heaven, but too much cost in hot water’. She writes about her gradual loss of sight, and the periods when she cannot see at all. On one page she has drawn her eyes, crossed out, writing ‘I hate my eyes, hate it when I go blind, am always scared when that happens outside. Having to ask people for help, how will I manage when it totally goes altogether. Get upset thinking about it.’ She describes her glasses as a ‘life-saver’, including a bright drawing of them, with a description of trying to get broken glasses fixed at the opticians, and feeling ‘upset, depressed, and marginalised’ because she was not able to pay £10 upfront to get them fixed. Yet Jill also highlights painting as providing calm and a sense of creative expression, and she has an incredible way of capturing colour and movement in her pieces. As well as noting that she flourishes when she paints, she mentions giving a painting to her neighbour and the joy in seeing her neighbour’s happiness at the painting. As I close the journal, I notice that my fingers are lightly smudged with oil pastels from the artwork she has attached to the front cover.

**Rose**

The cover of the journal is torn apart at the edges, binding ripped off and coming loose. It has a handmade tissue paper flower taped to the remainder of the cover. It smells strongly of lavender, lemon verbena, and...wet dog? On the inside cover, Rose has written that her dog has chewed up the journal but that it ‘kinda illustrates nicely that there are still pieces of me that remain destroyed. But there are enough pieces left intact for the reader to see who [Rose] is’. I pause, breathing deeply.

The strong smells come from a page in which she has pressed different oils that she uses to decrease anxiety and stress, using them in massage on herself and others. She has drawn various flowers and plants, adding drops of rosemary, lemon
verbena, lavender, and rose oil, writing ‘smell, absorb, heal’. On another page, she notes that using scent and touch enables her to be more ‘compassion focused in my inner dialogue, open a window of tolerance’. There are also several pages with fresh flowers and plants, slightly decaying under the tape, but otherwise well preserved, soft, gentle to the touch.

Throughout the journal there are pressed leaves and photos of nature, and Rose has written ‘nature heals the scars for me, the beauty and the colour, meditating on the magnificence of God’s creation, renews my faith, it gives me such a beautiful, calm, and peaceful feeling, being out of the world and in nature. This is where I heal my wounds.’ These images and nature collages come on pages in between the narrative about the events that have left Rose with complex PTSD, with memories of a childhood sexual abuse triggered by incidents of sexual abuse as an adult; in the resulting mental breakdown she was retraumatised by being restrained, stripped, and criminalised by police, rather than being given medical care. She details being beaten by police when in custody, resulting in pregnancy loss; and the long-term legal struggle for justice. Yet, between this narrative she creates colourful pages with flowers, writing:

‘Sitting out
My back garden
On my sunlounger
I momentarily feel safe
If I cultivate gratitude, I sometimes feel better
I’m glad I’ve lived through the tormenting trauma
I’m learning to be kind to myself
I’m learning to process the brutality, rejection, anger, neglect, humiliation, abandonment, loneliness and betrayal.
I’m learning.’

Thus, alongside this traumatic, painful story, she has created for herself spaces within the journal and her life to find some sense of respite, peace, and kindness.

In one of the workshops sessions, she described her voluntary work in supporting people going through the criminal justice system, detailing how she tries to manage dissociation and flashbacks when with sitting with someone at the bus stop or in the courtroom. On one page she has drawn an abstract figure with red and orange shocks coming from the hunched shoulders and a large eye with tears. She has written in big, colourful letters ‘flashbacks, dissociation, hyperfocus, hypervigilance’ and below this: ‘these are the words used by the system to describe what and how my body feels. Yet it fails to recognise who my body is, ‘it’ doesn’t know who my body is, it doesn’t know the scars it left by brutality, and it doesn’t want to know. But I know what and who my body is. I’m finding out’.
On other pages, she has created colourful backgrounds or borders and used quotes from her own research around trauma and the use of restraint in police and psychiatric custody. She writes about imagining a different society in which people and institutions understand trauma, a society that offers ‘justice rather than judgement’. She details her plans to offer trauma-informed trainings to various institutions from her background as a social worker. The journal contains so much: so much trauma, so much imagination, so much hurt, so much heart, so much possibility. Whilst she has written ‘I wish people knew that the smile that I wear holds a whole lot of pain’, the journal communicates her struggle alongside moments of reprieve, which she describes as ‘the dense blanket over all my life has again lifted’. After a few blank pages toward the back of the journal, she writes on the back cover, which is also chewed and falling apart, a mirror of her writing on the front cover: ‘immense creativity to navigate through my illness, through my trauma’.

**Ash**

Ash sends back two journals marked volumes one and two, writing over 15,000 words. They comment on an initial page about enjoying the feel of the journal, writing ‘the paper in the journal feels so nice and smooth; my recent sketchbooks have had quite rough paper, so this is a nice change.’ The pages are covered in abstract swirls and patterns, as well as photographs of items enabling Ash to manage chronic illness and pain: blankets, hot water bottles, and small fidget toys. One image is of a Hello Kitty pillbox, with writing about the importance it plays: ‘for many years I have been on and off various meds, for various conditions. Due to this I began to resent having to take so many tablets and became lax about taking my medication.’ They detail finding the box as they love the character Hello Kitty, and the positive impact this has on managing medication. Ash describes the pillbox as a ‘ritual object’ in her everyday life, part of the contested space of navigating stigma, alongside the ‘frustrating, mentally draining, austerity-inducing, boring, repetitive, robotic’ nature of life with ADHD and multiple chronic illness, including fibromyalgia.

Ash describes an ordinary day, stating ‘from the moment I open my eyes in the morning, until I eventually fall asleep, my body decides what I do, when I do it and for how long I do it.’ She goes on to note her frustrations at ‘not being able to taste, see, hear, feel, experience, live, and believe’ the things she wants to, particularly

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34 ‘Ash’ uses both she/her and they/them pronouns and in discussion with the participant, I have alternated between the two to reflect this.
through sensory overload, pain, and limited energy. They write, ‘this is only one aspect of my health I have to manage as soon as I open my eyes’, listing pain levels, lack of sleep, nausea, and digestive problems, before saying ‘there’s more, but I’ll leave it there for now as my hand is sore from writing, the irony!’ Later she states: ‘not made it back to my journal yet; have needed to rest, still. Trying to be gentle and understanding with my body, instead of feeling stuck or frustrated’. Alongside this they create a colourful page with bright words: ‘patience is a virtue and rest is under-rated’.

Over the course of several weeks, she describes trying to get more support from the doctor, and then being taken to hospital due to pain and breathing problems but being refused further treatment in both instances: ‘I am human, I do not lie about my health or pain levels. I am fed up of systematically induced trauma and racism. I need medical treatment as much as anyone else does’. They write about racism influencing treatment from medical professionals, describing themself as ‘a person of colour with mixed immigrant heritages’. Similarly, they detail being denied further disability welfare payments by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) having been told that they didn’t qualify under the new assessments brought in by the UK government under austerity cuts to welfare and public services. She notes that although she has appealed the decision in the past, she has recently felt that ‘my physical and emotional health were both in very difficult places and the thought of adding to that with having to PROVE to the DWP that I’m telling the TRUTH ABOUT MY HEALTH ISSUES was just too much to bear’. They also describe how over the past four years police have repeatedly failed to address the racist and ableist abuse received from a neighbour, which escalates during the period of keeping the journal.

Responding to these events, Ash wrote the following poem in one of the workshops:

My body knows the truth, so it does  
The truth that others can’t bear  
The truth that I am in pain every day, even if you can’t actually see where  
My body knows it is ignored by those who help and heal  
And just because they love to deny, it doesn’t make my burden any less real  
My body knows that I weep for her as I only want what’s best  
Yet the DWP holds no hope for me  
There’s a good chance I wouldn’t even pass their test  
My body knows it is not free to live and dance and play  
Yet my body is where I exist on this earth, every freaking day

Reflecting on discussing these topics in the group workshops, she notes enjoying talking with others about these issues, and that we can laugh together about difficulties with welfare and healthcare. They glued in a picture of a woodland path used in one of the workshops, commenting ‘how the chaos is what builds the beauty,
all those different plant shapes, colours, growing patterns, all layered together, make a calm, serene, and beautiful scene [...] this is how I feel every day, like the chaos of my health enforced lifestyle can still actually be built up to have moments of true beauty, calm, and peacefulness around them.’ Reflecting that art and creativity are their ‘natural language’, they write that journaling has helped them to see their artistic and activist practice has so far been subconsciously about disability and illness, noting wanting to make this a clearer, more conscious theme. When we speak again, they comment that the journal became a ‘sanctuary space’ to feel and name bodily experiences.

**My Body is Where I Exist**

What, then, do these accounts provoke for a theology of practice? Here I want to raise three interrelated points that highlight the everyday embodied practices of navigating inequality that shape and are shaped by critical embodied knowledges. Firstly, each account noted various everyday practices responsive both to bodily symptoms and to wider social and political systems. Jill experiencing positives of activist spaces where she can share her insights, and ‘flourishing’ when she paints, or borrowing, lending, and giving with a neighbour. Rose meditating on creation and finding moments of peace through smell and touch, and volunteering and plans for trauma-informed trainings. Ash’s Hello Kitty pillbox and other ‘ritual objects’ for living with illness and pain, and broader artistic-activist practice. These are all invested in and related to the corporeality of other bodies, nature, objects. The above discussions highlighted flesh as the site of the material, social, and spiritual reshaping and flowing into one another, and this continual reshaping presenting possibilities for corporeal practices being able to create change in the material-discursive nature of inequality. Rivera describes that “theology-in-the-flesh also complicates and implicates the divine in these corporeal processes [...] the transfigurations of corporeal wounds and social relations”, with these transfigurations taking place in the ordinary and material.\(^{35}\) This is not to romanticise such practices as always positive, nor to romanticise poverty and disability more broadly, as the journals and workshop discussions highlighted the frustration and exhaustion in needing to perform these practices to function, to keep going each day. A key point of agreement in one workshop was feeling that other people don’t understand how much it takes simply to get through each day.

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\(^{35}\) Rivera, “Thinking” (n. 20), 222.
Secondly, the accounts made clear that these practices take place as part of the relationship between personal corporeality and wider socio-political systems. The journals framed what Rivera and Betcher articulate as the discourses that stigmatise and abject certain bodies, as well as how this shapes access to material resources. Participants named the negative impact of police, welfare systems and disability assessments, and healthcare; these need further discussion in practical theology beyond what can be mentioned here, particularly in how policing and psychiatric systems harm people of colour, disabled people, and people experiencing poverty. Participants critiqued the system of welfare assessments, which rely on functional notions of disability that do not account for pain, fluctuating conditions, or mental health conditions, and focus on a person’s physical and mental capacity to theoretically do some form of labour. Ash noted that this held ‘no hope for me’, and Jill’s image of the graveyard highlighted that this system of assessments has created a dire situation for disabled people; in 2017 the UN reported that the UK’s austerity measures had created a ‘human catastrophe’ for disabled people.36 Similarly, Rose and Ash reflected on negative interactions with healthcare models for understanding trauma and chronic conditions, particularly problems with delayed diagnosis and refusals of further treatment when living with long-term conditions. Although I noted similar in my own journal, looking across the accounts highlights how aspects of gender, race, and poverty influence access and treatment and are necessary in our analysis of these systems and of practices of activism and social change. Equally, whilst Jill’s account highlighted a positive relationship with her neighbour, for Ash this was a source of racist and ableist harm. Furthermore, my own journal noted the power of researchers and research systems, including ethical approval mechanisms, in framing and representing participants; responsibility for this power is not diminished by collaborative practices nor through claims of identification due to my own similar health issues.

These all highlight the clash between medical, welfare, and even research models of ‘disability’ and how different people experience their bodies in the world. Yet, Rose and Ash created powerful statements about bodies knowing truths that cannot be comprehended by welfare, medical, psychiatric, and policing systems. This was not knowledge as control or mastery over their bodies, as there was recognition that bodily responses and symptoms could dominate their days and influence how they know the world. As with my own journal, this presented a gradual, often frustrated, sense of coming to terms with the complexity of bodies as our places of being in the

world. Working with such conflicts and contrasts—and such ambivalent and transient forms of bodily knowledges—presents a challenge to disciplinary practices in practical theology that often prioritises fixed, secure forms of knowing.\textsuperscript{37} However, it also offers possibilities for refusing the finality of oppressive systems’ claims to know bodies and lives.

This then links to the final point, that these embodied practices shape and are shaped by alternative, critical sensory knowledges. There is a profound creativity in how participants engaged with their journals, and in how they approach their lives. The journals offer a record of participants’ ordinary meaning-making—the critical, embodied knowledges that participants exercise in situations they face daily\textsuperscript{38}—and highlight how the journals themselves became a particular practice for reflection and shaping meaning. Participants engaged various sensory perceptions in their journals: recording sight, smell, touch, pain, fatigue, hunger, dissociation, and in the corporeal acts of collage, drawing, and using oils, perfumes, or plants to create scent and texture. Rose worked with the unexpected material change of her journal being torn apart, making a moving statement of exploring her own embodiment. Yet, questions remain about recording and interpreting sensory experiences, turning them into textual signs for theological analysis, even as I promote this approach. Although these vignettes attended to the significance of embodied knowing, they cannot do justice to the way holding these creative pieces in one’s hand, mixed with the smells, textures, and images, was to sit with the complex particularity of embodiment; nor do they fully contain or convey each person’s embodiment. Rather than presenting ordered, linear narratives of overcoming, each journal worked with and through the persistent bodily impacts of pain, trauma, and oppressive systems and the everyday struggle of against these realities. In paying attention to such mundane activities, practical theology can emphasise where bodies need not be free of pain, trauma, or limit to enact and incite resistance and creativity, nor to implicate the divine in corporeality.

\section*{Conclusion}

In this article I have shown possibilities of constructing collaborative poetic accounts with and through ordinary bodies that highlight both the impact of inequality and practices of navigating and resisting inequality. Borrowing toilet roll from


neighbours, holding ritual objects for taking medication, and observing flowers and
smelling oils, and sitting with people at the bus stop may be considered too mundane, too flippant, too bodily, even too ‘practical’ to take as a basis for practical theological reflection; but if we overlook such everyday practices in our theologies then we also ignore the lived realities of inequality and the practices navigating it, and the critical creative embodied knowledges enmeshed in such practices. Enacting justice in our own theological meaning-making practices requires embracing and learning through alternative sensory, creative, embodied knowledges from marginalised communities, which may challenge some existing certainties and approaches. I have highlighted how attention to specific embodiments is not at odds with more structural and systemic critique but can provide a basis for developing a critical approach to structural inequalities without skipping over bodily limits and complexities nor the sacred in the mundane. In these accounts that testify to how participants construct their embodied knowledges, there is no sense of bodily wholeness, no stability or certainty but ambiguous embodiments under the pressure of systems that distort, deny, and oppress. There is a witness to what ‘remains destroyed’, to the persistent impacts of multiple forms of inequality, to the struggle to make it through each day. There is space for the tensions of pain, hope, exhaustion, frustration, compassion, trauma, gratitude, and love, and the everyday practices of creatively working with all these contradictions in an embodied resistance.