

Sacred Reckonings with the Doctrine of Discovery's Betrayal: What Queerness Teaches Us About Strategies of Resistance, Embodied Joy, and Acts of Reparation

Georgia Harkness Lecture

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Rev. Dr. Rebecca Voelkel

Introduction and Thank Yous

As we begin, I need to first thank Dr. Bernie Schlager and Rev. Dr. Roland Stringfellow for the initial invitation to share with you today. Both Bernie and Roland have been long time friends and kindred sacred trouble-makers and my life is better and more faithful for the work we've shared. Thank you and thank you for the honor of speaking today.

I also need to say that I was supposed to share these reflections in the Fall of 2023. But on Sept 1, 2023, my family and I were hit head on at 55 mph in an accident that killed the driver who hit us. All four of us who were in our car survived but we all sustained injuries, mine were quite serious. I need to tell you just a bit about that as we begin.

After the impact, I was conscious through the forty-five minutes it took to cut off the back of my seat, the door, and the roof to get me out. And I distinctly remember two things: wondering if I was dying, and the hands that held me.

As I've reflected on that life-changing forty-five minutes and the thirteen months of healing thus far, I return again and again to the deep sense of calm I felt the whole time. It was as if the answer to my wondering about dying was the hands that held me, and treated me, and began my healing journey.

I now know that it was Dean and Julia's hands. It was Dean who literally had my back with both of his large, strong hands after they cut the back of my seat off. He held me for most of those forty-five minutes, speaking calmly and explaining what was happening. And it was Julia who was able to reach over, calmly describing what she was doing, and place a tourniquet on both of my legs which saved my life.

I begin in this place because I want you to know that it didn't have to be thus. I nearly died. But my life was literally saved and I have been prayed to life in concrete, palpable ways by the power of spiritual community- many of you on this webinar- every day since. And I stand before you having experienced an embodied, incarnated resurrection.

In some ways, my story is a bit of a digression from why I was invited to be here today. But, in other ways, it is at the heart of what I would like to convey: namely that in the midst of virulent white nationalism, violent white and Christian supremacy, there remains revolutionary, life-giving power in spiritual communities and queer movements gathered around the promise of bodacious life, outrageous love, transformative healing, and embodied justice. And the fact that I get to continue to live amidst us is a gift for which I give thanks every day.

I also need to say that since the accident, my heart and my whole nervous system seem to be more sensitive to both the pain, and the touch and healing that life is rife with. As I worked on my testimony and sharing today, I was overwhelmed by how many peoples' wisdom is woven through what I will share; and how many peoples' care and teaching and praying and love have brought me to today. I'm also ridiculously nervous because I respect so many of you on this webinar. So, pray for me, would you? That the words about to be spoken and the words about to be heard might be in the service of justice and love.

[pause]

Our Dreaming: Truth-telling About the World God Desires

Sometimes as we engage in religiously-rooted justice work, we make the mistake of solely focusing on all that is wrong, that needs to be dismantled, torn down, thrown on the compost heap. Don't get me wrong, deconstructive work is critical. And the rage and grief that compel us against which we resist, can be sacred and holy.

But I would contend that to be justice- and love-makers for the long haul, we must know what our dreams are for a transformed world. We must know what our constructive vision of God's kin-dom tastes, looks, and feels like. We must know

what we are fighting FOR as well as what we're fighting AGAINST if we are going to be able to do this generational work. What world do you think God dreams for creation? What are the Sacred's deepest desires for the stars, the planets, and all the company of creation?

[pause]

In the beginning were Desire and Longing:

Desire for ecstasy and connection, longing for the deepest of communions.

And Desire and Longing were with God.

And Desire and Longing were God.

Desire and Longing were with God in the beginning.

*In fact, they were the animators, the prodders, the relentless whispers
which propelled the explosion of creativity:*

*stars and planets and the whole company of creation. These all came into
being out*

*of that Desire and Longing and not one thing would have been without
the promise of ecstasy, connection and communion.*

*And then, as now, Desire and Longing were threatening to the forces of
destruction, dis-connection, dis-memberment and death.*

*But then, as now, these did not prevail and what came into being because of and
through*

Desire and Longing

were

Life, and Life abundant.¹

I want to argue that God has carnal knowledge of all of creation. As Creator, God draws from God's own essence and places part of God's self within creation. God knows intimately creation's embodiment. God understands, and is in deep

¹ Rebecca Voelkel, "For God So Loved" in *Unsettling the Word: Biblical Experiments in Decolonization*, ed. Steve Heinrichs, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019), 216.

relationship with, our flesh and bones and that of every living being. God creates in order to be in passionate relationship with creation. ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness,’ is one way God expresses this carnal relationship.² And, in a related way, humanity has carnal knowledge of God—for how could we not, being embodied? We can have some understanding of God’s body, God’s longings, God’s desires because of how God created us.³

Further, and especially in the context of the Georgia Harkness lecture, I want to affirm that God in the world is love and lover; our response to God in the world, to one another and to creation is as lover. While, on the one hand, this is a common understanding of God and of humanity, the use of the word “lover” adds an explicitly sexual connotation. Moreover, it introduces an underlying precept of many queer and feminist theologians that embodiment and sexuality are at the foundation of God’s good act in creation.

As we begin our encounter with the Doctrine of Discovery and its triplet offspring of White supremacy, Christian supremacy and extractive capitalism, we do so knowing that God desires connection, communion, and longs for a creation that revels in celebrating the ecstasy of life. These connections and communions are horizontally oriented: power-with, sharing of resources, abundance.

Out of this clarity of what we value and are fighting FOR, we move into truth-telling about the hegemonies and systems of oppression, colonization, and death-dealing that seek to control our bodies, our thinking, and our economies.

The Doctrine of Discovery’s Betrayals

There are many points throughout history in which the connection, intimacy, and communion between the Creator and creation have been attempted to be severed. Forces of Empire, exploitative power, and oppression have reared their ugly heads in most historical periods. But for our liberation movements in the US, particularly the LGBTQ+ movements, the Doctrine of Discovery is one of the most important because of its destructive and insidious nature. Its legacy continues yet

² Genesis 1:26 (New Revised Standard Version).

³ Rebecca Voelkel, *Carnal Knowledge of God: Embodied Love and the Movement for Justice*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), 10

today in the forms of the New Apostolic Reformation and its Seven Mountains Mandate of Christian Dominionism, Project 2025, Climate Change denial, immigrant scape-goating, and all the other forces of Christian and White Supremacy with which we are all quite familiar. As we engage all of these today, telling the truth about the betrayals of the Doctrine of Discovery so that we might dismantle it, is critically important.

So let me spend just a little bit of time talking about the Doctrine of Discovery (or as Steve Newcomb, an Indigenous scholar and filmmaker calls it, the Doctrine of Christian Dominance.)

Terra Nullius- In 1095, at the beginning of the European Crusades, Pope Urban II issued an edict-the Papal Bull Terra Nullius. It gave the kings and princes of Europe the right to "discover" or claim land in non-Christian areas. Literally meaning, "empty land," terra nullius claimed that unless White European Christians were living somewhere, the land was empty and not only open for White European Christian conquest, but in need of it.

This theological understanding that unless there were European Christians living somewhere, there were not any human beings there, was foundational to what became the Doctrine of Discovery.

The Doctrine of Discovery was a series of letters from several popes to different European monarchs. They were written between 1452 and 1517 and, collectively, they are known as the Doctrine of Discovery. The first letter, Dum Diversas was written by Pope Nicolas V to Portuguese King Afonso V. It reads in part:

Dum Diversas (Papal Bull 1452 by Pope Nicolas V)

"We grant you by these present documents, with our Apostolic Authority, full and free permission to invade, search out, capture, and subjugate the Saracens [Muslims] and pagans and any other unbelievers and enemies of Christ wherever they may be, as well as their kingdoms, duchies, counties, principalities, and other property [...] and to reduce their persons into perpetual servitude."

In 1493, after Christopher Columbus made his voyage, Pope Alexander VI issued a similar letter to the King and Queen of Spain called "Inter Caetera." The Bull stated that any land in the Americas not inhabited by Christians was available to be "discovered," claimed, and exploited by Christian rulers and declared that "the Catholic faith and the Christian religion be exalted and be everywhere increased and spread...that barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith itself."

The Doctrine of Discovery has several critically important assertions:

1. In order to be human, one had to be European and Christian
2. Power is primarily power-over. God created many "proper" hierarchies, rooted in dominance and submission, that dictate how the world is to be ordered. God rules over humanity, Men rule over women, humans (who are by definition, European Christians) rule over everything.
3. In order to create and maintain these proper hierarchies of dominance and submission, violence is justified and should be used whenever necessary.

As we look at the Doctrine of Discovery through the lens of queer intersectional movements, it is important to name the role that sexuality and gender played and plays in the Doctrine of Discovery. As *Queer (In)justice: The Criminalization of LGBT People in the United States* argues: early conquistadors and later religious and civil authorities use sexual practices and gender expression to differentiate between that which is Christian and that which is savage or heathen. A Christian, and therefore a human being, is one who participates in a rigid man/woman binary in which the man has power over the woman. The man is dominant and the woman is submissive in sex and in all other forms of relationship. Embedded in this sexual binary is a gender one. There are only two biological sexes and, therefore, only two genders. Embedded in the logic of European Christian superiority is virulent misogyny and violent homo-, bi-, and transphobia. And they are all mutually reinforcing: how do we know that someone is human, they practice rigid binaries of dominance and submission. How do we know that multiplicity of gender expression is sinful, because only heathens and savages practice it? Etc.

One of the oldest pieces of European art from the Americas is an etching of Vasco Nunez de Balboa and several Cuna people indigenous to Panama. While Balboa

was exploring and conquering Panama's coast, he came upon a Cuna village. After killing the chief, he entered the village. According to a 1530 account, "Balboa discovered that the village was stained by the foulest vice. The king's brother and a number of other courtiers were dressed as women, and according to the accounts of the neighbors shared the same passion. Vasco ordered forty of them to be torn to pieces by dogs."

The Cuna were not human because they did not participate in proper hierarchies. Their gender and sexual expression were not rooted in binaries of dominance and submission. Because the Cuna and other Native American and Native African peoples violated the divinely-created binaries, implicit in the Doctrine of Discovery, the subjugation, torture, exploitation and genocide that European Christian colonizers perpetrated against them was literally baptized and justified because the colonizers were establishing the Holy Faith and the Christian religion.

It is out of these religiously baptized binaries of Christian vs. savage or heathen that Whiteness emerges. Christian, and therefore human, slowly becomes White; and savage and heathen, and therefore non-human, become people of color.

Christian supremacy and White supremacy are inexorably woven together. And queerness of sexuality and gender remain markers of that which is outside of that which is human.

One side note. Over the years, I've come to realize that the hatred and pushback I've had to coming out is rooted in the fact that by being lesbian, I am being a bad white woman. White womanhood is connected to a kind of submission to White manhood. And my lesbian identity transgresses those lines of what is proper Whiteness and proper womanhood. Lesbian transgresses the God-ordained hierarchies. (I would also contend that this transgression has been one of the most important ways I've hearkened to God's voice in my life. It is the source of faithfulness, solidarity, and joy.)

In contrast to the transgressive nature of coming out, I want to share a story of Mary Boykin Chesnut. Mary was married to a man in Confederate President Jefferson Davis' cabinet. She was a passionate supporter of the Confederate cause.

In her diaries, however, she articulates the dissociation and disembodiment that passive non-resistance to the Doctrine of Discovery requires. Upon witnessing a slave auction, she reports the “tragedy” she observed.

A mad woman taken from her husband and children. Of course she was mad, or she would not have given her grief words in that public place. Her keepers were along. What she said was rational enough, pathetic at times, at times heart-rending. It excited me so I quietly took opium. It enabled me to retain every particle of mind or sense or brains I have, so quiets my nerves that I can calmly reason and take rational views of things otherwise maddening.⁴

Boykin Chesnut has a moment of empathy, of connection, of feeling her heart rend. But, in order to function within the Doctrine of Discovery and the horror that is chattel slavery, she takes opium to counteract feeling. She must “quiet” her nerves and “retain every particle of mind” in order to “calmly reason and take rational views of things otherwise maddening.” The deadening, numbing effect of opium serves to disembody her. It allows her to dissociate and no longer feel the pain that her empathy produced.

This is a critically important note: while the Doctrine of Discovery seemingly benefits White Christian people, the supremacist logic of rigid hierarchal binaries of dominance and submission are antithetical to the flourishing of life. It crushes those it dominates: heathen, savage, woman, queer, the planet, etc. But it also crushes, albeit it differently, most of those it purports to benefit.

[pause]

I have been trying to be careful about my verb tenses in what I’ve shared about the Doctrine of Discovery because this is not only an historical conversation. In 1823, the US Supreme Court decided the Johnson v. McIntosh case in a unanimous decision that ‘a European power gains radical title (also known as sovereignty) to the land it discovers. As a corollary, the “discovering” power gains the exclusive right to extinguish the “right of occupancy” of the Indigenous occupants.’ In other

⁴ Mary Boykin Chesnut in Mab Segrest, *Born to Belonging: Writings on Spirit and Justice* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 140.

words, the Doctrine of Discovery, and its implicit theologies, became the law of the United States. As recently as 2005, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg cites the *Johnson v. McIntosh* decision to rule against Native nations.

There is so much to be said about the Doctrine of Discovery and (I would urge you to learn as much as you can about it, particularly as people who care about queer people.) But this point about the power and sway that the Doctrine of Discovery and its triplet children of Christian and White Supremacy and extractive capitalism currently hold over our nation should never be underestimated. It is one of the primary reasons that almost all Indigenous organizing that is happening in the US and around the world today, starts with the demand that the Pope, other Christian denominations, and national governments repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery.

One of the central organizing moments during the Oceti Sakowin action against the Dakota Access Pipeline on the Lakota Standing Rock reservation in North Dakota in 2016 was a gathering of over 525 clergy from dozens of denominations and religious groups who participated in a sacred ritual of repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery and then taking coals from the sacred fire and burning copies of *Dum Diversas* and *Inter Caetera*. While this was a deeply powerful and symbolic action, it is also brilliant organizing. The White and Christian supremacy and extractive capitalism that threaten our survival as a species continues to be baptized in the theologies of the Doctrine of Discovery. Unless we repudiate the Empire theology of dominance and submission—between humans and between humans and the planet, we will not survive.

We can also look around today to find the Doctrine of Discovery's ongoing potency. I want to return to the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR), Project 2025, and the rise of Christian White Supremacist movements.

In a recent training on Project 2025 hosted by the Proctor Institute, gay, African American Bishop Joseph Tolton of TFAM Global talked about the theological underpinnings of Project 2025 and concluded, that Project 2025 is “simply the modern re-articulation of the Doctrine of Discovery.” And, in a recent episode of the radio program *Reveal* entitled “In God We Vote,” Rev. Dr. Naomi Washington-Leaphart, an African American lesbian pastor, professor, and activist describes the

New Apostolic Reformation, “the idea is that Christians and specific Christians should take complete control over these seven pillars for the good of the whole society. So we want all of our business leaders, [our political leaders, school boards, education leaders, and leaders in all areas of society] to believe in Dominionist ideologies.”

In the New Apostolic Reformation in general and Project 2025 in particular, the re-establishment of proper hierarchies, of God-ordained order which has White, Christian, Straight, Cisgender men holding power over the so-called “enemies of Christ” is the goal. This is terrifying and deeply disturbing prospect. In its way are projects of shared power; multifaith, multiracial democracy; multiplicities of gender, sexuality, racial identity; bodily autonomy, and the affirmations of the integrity and worth of the planet and all of its inhabitants.

OK, that is a lot about the betrayals of the Doctrine of Discovery. But I believe that in order to do the work of religiously-rooted justice and love, we must start with an honest description of the world as it is.

I would invite us to take just a few deep breaths... this kind of truth-speaking evokes grief... and anger... and can be overwhelming.

Even as we name the world as it is, we cannot stop there. We must also fashion resistance and joy and transformation—for our selves and our beautiful and hurting planet. So, what shall we say? Let me start with this:

The truth is that no matter how vicious and violent and deadly the Doctrine of Discovery had been, it has never been completely successful. In every generation, there have been cracks in its attempted hegemony and oppression.

The fact that this very lecture is dedicated to lesbian woman theologian, Georgia Harkness, is a reminder of this powerful fact: Indigenous Europeans on whom the Doctrine of Terra Nullius was first perpetrated, Indigenous Africans, Indigenous Americans, and gender and sexual outlaws throughout the centuries have always been here, even amidst attempted genocides. And they are visiting us in our

dreams, whispering to us in the trees, and singing with us every time we choose solidarity and sharing, justice and joy.

I would like to point to our queer ancestors and kindred as one example of how we might continue to theologize, organize, resist, and thrive.

What Queerness Teaches Us About Strategies of Resistance and Embodied Joy

I hope that I have done a good job of naming that God's dream of connection, communion, and ecstasy are deeply intersectional. I also hope that I have shown how the Doctrine of Discovery seeks to crucify all it deems "enemies of Christ," which are manifold. Christian and White Supremacy and Extractive Capitalism's logic is toxic for all of us and it is literally killing the planet. Our strategies of resistance, embodied joy, and acts of reparation must also be intersectional.

Here are six examples of what our queer theological ancestors and activist kindred have taught me about how we might do it:

1. Camp as Eschatological Practice—In 1991, I participated in the March on Washington against the First Gulf War. I had been out as a lesbian for about two years at that point and chose to march with Queer Nation. 1991 was a year of many deaths from AIDS and throughout the march we did periodic die-ins. We also employed some fabulous Queer Camp. We chanted "fish nets, not fighter jets, bring the girls home." And, perhaps my favorite all time chant: "Fags suck cock, dykes lick labia, US out of Saudi Arabia!" It was joyous and hilarious and powerful and filled us with hope. And it functioned as a kind of eschatological claiming of our own humanity, of resistance to the spilling of blood for oil and a kind of embodying the realm of God here and now. One of the most powerful tools of the Doctrine of Discovery is its invocation of despair. Camp claims revolutionary hope.

What camp does this moment ask of us? How can we embody revolutionary hope?

2. Non-violent direct action/ethical spectacle

When Sen. Jesse Helms of North Carolina died in 2008, Peter Staley told this story:

On September 5th, 1991, I put a giant condom over Jesse Helms' house.

Why? Because, as the condom said, "Helms is deadlier than a virus." Senator Jesse Helms was one of the chief architects of AIDS-related stigma in the U.S. He fought against any federal spending on HIV research, treatment or prevention. He once said, referring to homosexuals, "it's their deliberate, disgusting, revolting conduct that is responsible for the disease." He proposed and passed laws that enshrined this stigma as official government policy.

In the summer of 1991, it was bugging me that gay and AIDS activists had largely left Helms alone...

We made sure the house was empty. The last thing we wanted was to spend our lives in jail for giving a senator a heart attack.

CNN and all the local TV stations were contacted in advance, and only told we'd be putting a condom on a politician's house. They were to meet us at our Arlington motel early that morning, and follow our rented U-Haul truck.

We had... [all kinds of supplies].

The condom was made of parachute material. We unfurled it on the roof, connected it to the blower, and prayed the cops took at least five minutes to get there.

As it began to rise, all the guy wires were quickly staked into the lawn on all four sides of the house.

The first cop car arrived just as the reservoir nipple was beginning to rise. We had done it! I actually saw one of the cops chuckling when he got out of his car.

All we got was a parking ticket for parking the truck in the wrong direction. We were free to go, and could take the condom with us. It's now in Los Angeles at the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives.

That night, local TV stations around the country played short funny clips of the action. Senator Helms complained about it on the floor of the Senate a week later, calling us "radical homosexuals."

He never proposed or passed another life-threatening AIDS amendment.⁵

One other short story...Georgia Harkness was Methodist but her grandfather was Quaker. Apparently, when he started dating her grandmother he took her to the Quaker meeting and they were scandalized by her red coat, it was far too "worldly" and asked her to take it off. She refused and he supported her decision, which got him shunned. To this day, graduates at Garrett-Evangelical Seminary (where Georgia taught for several years) wear red shoes in honor of Georgia's grandmother.

What ethical spectacles are we embodying right now? Where are you wearing red shoes?

3. Promiscuous Incarnation: Lesbian theologian Laurel Schneider suggests, the Incarnation is promiscuous. Promiscuous means that God is not forming a covenant with just one individual, or for that matter just one race or nation. God desires to have many covenant partners, not only individuals but whole communities, too. God in the person of Jesus seeks to love many at the same time.

This promiscuity of God's embodiment and love interrupts competition, jealousy and exceptionalism. God's attention and resources are boundless and extravagant. What one person or community "gets" does not diminish or take away from the depth of relationship and carnal connection between God and another, nor does God's love and covenant with one person or

⁵ Peter Staley, *In Memory of Jesse Helms, and The Condom On His House* in POZ Magazine, July 8, 2008. <https://www.poz.com/blog/in-memory-of-je> Accessed 3.2.18.

people mean that they are chosen or more important than others. There is enough of God's love to go around with an abundance left over. God's faithfulness is not a matter of God's having no other partners but us, but in God's reliability in being for us and supportive of us and creatively engaged with us. God is worthy of our trust, not because God loves only us but because God loves us fully and abundantly.

How are we articulating and embodying God's Promiscuous Incarnation?

4. Power-with/Solidarity/Followership- The largely Black queer femme-founded movement, Black Lives Matter/Movement for Black Lives was instrumental in organizing in Minnesota following the murder at the hands of police of Michael Brown, Jamar Clark and, later, George Floyd. Police killing of unarmed Black and Native people is another of the Doctrine of Discovery's modern expression. And the way that BLM analyzed and used power in response remain as models. At the die-in at the Mall of America in 2014 in which 3000 people participated, it was those closest to the pain who held the planning and leadership power and those closest to systemic power practiced followership and solidarity. During the occupation of the 4th precinct police station, this looked like Native and Black folks speaking to the press, planning and leading cultural events, sharing food and teaching, and non-Native, non-Black folks putting our bodies between police and other protestors.

What kind of power analysis are we doing to determine our own social location and then acting accordingly?

5. Coming Out/Vulnerability/Authenticity
If the core of the Doctrine of Discovery is the weaving of power-over, invulnerability, and violence which keeps people in their proper places; coming out, claiming our authentic selves: whether they be our queer selves, our disabled selves, our neuro-divergent selves, is transgressive and liberatory. And the claiming of vulnerability undermines oppressive power.

Coming out, claiming authenticity and being willing to be vulnerable are strategies for both personal and systemic transformation. Harvey Milk talked about the power of coming out by saying: "I have tasted freedom. I will not give up that which I have tasted."

But coming out is also powerful because it is a deeply spiritual process which demands honesty with ourselves, about the multiplicity of our identities, and it demands of us a kind of examination: of our families and our ancestral legacies. Coming out invites us into a more mature and complex relationship with our people and helps us clarify who and what deserve our loyalty. And it can prime us to act in solidarity with others who have chosen authenticity and vulnerability and who live in complex and mature relationships with their people and loyalties.

How has coming out demanded of you truth-telling- about yourself and the systems in which we live? How has tasting freedom made you less tolerant of living with oppression?

6. Engagement with the systems/Movement Building

The only way to repudiate and dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery is to organize and build organizations and movements of joy and justice. This systemic transformation work is often tedious and filled with setbacks, but it is critical and crucial work.

My friends, the Doctrine of Discovery is ferociously championed. There is no denying it. And this moment is rife with its toxic power. But we are invited to hold fast to connection, communion, and bodacious love. Don't forget to wear some red shoes, and play with camp and revolutionary hope. Think about how you're using your power as a follower or a co-conspirator. And maybe ask, what condoms need to be put on politicians' homes? What outrageous, intersectional chants are we called to shout? What organizations and movements are we giving our hearts and souls to building? Where and how are we called to claim authenticity and vulnerability? And how are we loving wastefully and promiscuously?

We can repair this world. Let's get to it.