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Writing the Spirit: Testimony and the Unauthorised Voice in the Queer Spiritual Memoir

Abstract

In this article I will use excerpts from my memoir, *The Boy in the Yellow Dress*, as a departure point to discuss some of the issues I have faced as a queer man learning how to deal with the spiritual urgency of *being* – the yearning for what Carl Jung called the *Unio Mystica*, or what I sometimes call ‘the urge to merge’. This challenge has been lived out in the context of a culture in many ways hostile to my very existence; a ‘culture of insult’ (Eribon 2004) in which the deeply toxic attitudes of homophobia, authorised by religious teachings, aided and abetted by the normative discourse of psychological medicine, have tried to drive a shameful wedge between me and my sexuality.

Introduction: The contexts of power

The moral and ethical universe enshrined in the society of my early upbringing required that my 'type' be cast as a religious pariah (Hebrew *toevah*) and/or a psychopathological specimen (deviant, homosexual, etc.). In order for that epistemic universe to remain stable and retain its power over me, I would have had to remain an obedient subject of the ruling discourses that held it together. These discourses from medicine and religion produced hostile narratives that positioned me as 'other', a fugitive outsider to their clearly marked territory of moral and 'natural' rightness, and they mitigated against the very healing that would resolve the social and internal, psychic split caused by my indoctrination; that is, of course, unless I would be prepared to repudiate my 'sinfulness' and/or be guided, spiritually or psychotherapeutically, back to normal.

Finding it necessary to respond to a deeper spiritual need than offered in these limited visions, as a *disobedient* subject I instinctively rejected those hostile constructions of the meaning of my life. For it *was* my very life that was at stake, and the impulse towards self-destruction, when there seemed to be no other way on offer to provide an opening into more and more life, was ever present. My search for alternative spaces where my spirit could breathe, where I could make use of more life-affirming 'technologies of selfhood' (Foucault 2000,177), produced what Judith Butler calls 'moments in which the subject exceeds the terms that constitute him/her' (Salih/Butler 2004, 10). Writing autobiographically has allowed me – as a moral outcaste, legal outlaw and general ontological misfit – the freedom to recognise and recuperate the more positive potential energies that had always been working in my psyche, and also to reconfigure the meaning of my experience in ways that have

been life-enhancing, rather than self-destructive; to stage (once again in Butler's words) otherwise 'unforeseen and unsanctioned' possibilities of identity (Salih/Butler 2004, 10).

Felicity Nussbaum writes that 'marginalized and unauthorized discourse... holds the power to disrupt authorized versions of experience, even, perhaps to reveal what might be called the randomness and arbitrariness of the authoritative and public constructs of reality' (Nussbaum 1988, 136) and this has been my experience as I have responded to the call of my queer spirit and sought out the tools and the knowledge it has required to come to fulfilment.

Looking back, I recognise several interlocking forces that operated to alienate a nonconformist such as myself from the paradigms encoded in the social systems dominant in Australia during the latter half of the 20th Century. But I have also been able to recover concurrent traces of an alternative way of being in the world – and in my own body/mind – traces kindly laid, like Ariadne's thread, to rescue me from the labyrinth of confusion I encountered as I entered hostile territory in my early years.

This first excerpt, 'Child's Play', comes from the opening of my memoir. It is the earliest event I can recall, and it occurred when I was between three and four years old.

Child's play

In the formal sitting room, the curtains are drawn. Thick carpet and upholstered furniture muffle all sound. The boy seeks out this place to be alone. But first, he goes to the room across the hall, to the wardrobe where his mother's dresses hang, awaiting their brief moments of coming to life (all fullness and motion, then).

He climbs up into the wardrobe to reach for one of these, which is special to him. It's dappled yellow gold and green, and it glows. He clammers down from the cupboard and slips the gown over his head. Hanging loose around him, its folds cascade lengthily onto the floor. Silky texture is cool where it skims his skin.

Women's voices murmur in the kitchen.

Suitably attired, the boy returns to the hush of the sitting room, where he twirls in the half light, gazing down at the skirt as it rises around him. Entranced by the golden glow, he settles down to sit on his heels and spreads the ample folds of fabric in a perfect circle around him on the floor.

Eyes closed, he rests in peace, ears singing in the silence. Dust motes float, lazy, in the light.

Sometime later, the dress is returned to its waiting place.

But one day when he reaches into the wardrobe the cool fabric isn't there to meet his touch. He wants to catch the magic feeling—wrap it around him, disappear. He tries the cupboard again, but even the most careful iteration of his actions fails to make the dress appear. A heavy feeling pangs in his chest.

Another day: he is playing in the wash-house, in the back yard. A copper tub squats above a fireplace where water is boiled to clean the clothes, on Mondays. Sifting through the ashes, he finds the charred remains of the dress... this lovely thing banished to dust in his hands.

In the fowl run, a hen murmurs cluck cluck, slow. The heavy feeling returns to roost in him as, inside the house, a door clicks shut.

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What is the meaning of this child's play? Perhaps you would expect this to become the life story of a 'transvestite', which does not, in fact, become the case. You would be right if you assumed that having the dress so thoroughly banished from his playmaking, the boy will be left with a sense of loss; but what *is* it that he loses, and what will it take to restore him to wholeness? (And what atavistic impulse leads a boy to re-create a ritual more common in Siberian shamanism than in the placid, conformist suburbs of 1950s Western Australia?)

At school, he is drawn to intricate games with skipping ropes but, ears red with the shaming cry of 'sissy', he is shooed away, in the strictly segregated playground, to the *boys'* area, to be tortured by the bruising bounce of a cricket ball. Sex has not reared its ugly head yet (whatever Sigmund Freud might say). Gender has, certainly, but rather than wanting to transform himself into a girl, or developing a fetish for dresses, what he yearns for, I see now, is the state of undifferentiated unity – that he had been able to access so easily – which preceded this either/or bifurcation. Boys don't do that kind of thing.

Being with the light was his instinctive technique for returning to the root of being: of being/consciousness/bliss, in fact (Sanskrit 'satchitanand'); resting with his 'home self', as Christopher Isherwood might call it (1971, 285). But in this incident with the dress, and later brutal fittings into the gender strait-jacket, his dislocation from that place of peace – his 'homeland' – has begun.

I propose that in this remembrance, unity is the primary state of awareness. Gender could be described, then, as a secondary development, with sexuality a far distant

third. What is 'queer' about the sissy boy is his perverse recall of, and yearning for, the lost spaces of the self that the forces of cultural conditioning are configured precisely to make him forget. As the narrative unfolds, he will re-locate that space, not by creating rituals with a fetish substitute for the yellow dress, nor through regressive techniques of psychotherapy, but via certain meditation practices in which he will be trained by his guru—a hugely influential figure who will appear in his late twenties.

Before that salvation comes, and the restorative cycle of return begins, he must learn to hide his real self—a difficult practice to sustain when puberty strikes, for instance. The first signs are only mildly unsettling:

Wake-up call

It's morning. 7.47 a.m. in fact. He can tell the time, to the minute, from the sound of the traffic on the highway out in front of the family house. Everyone else is up. Mum is in the kitchen, getting breakfast together. David, his roommate brother, who is fifteen, is already dressed to head off to school at Kent Street High, across town in Victoria Park. Father is installed in his stinking library, slowly working his way through the morning paper, and sister Val is whining that she can't use the loo.

He's in the seventh grade and his school is close by. He lies in bed, listening to the traffic, calculating how long he has to linger in the cosy bed warmth, before rousing himself at the last possible minute to take his turn in the shower, where he luxuriates in the steaming water, washing scudding foam from hot pink skin.

Something catches his eye. A dark intruder has snuck under the covers of his dreaming and he looks down. Is that a spider?

A black hair gleaming through the suds, close against his skin. Just one—or is it two?—near the little appendage that scarcely attracts attention on an average day. Black? The hair on his head is blond, slowly turning brown. Why that? There? Now? He wants to push this discovery away, as if he has a choice. His body, inhabited without reflection up until now, is insisting on its own agenda, betraying him from below. He feels a tremor, almost panics, sensing something will soon be lost. In the days following, panic shifts into resentment—does this mean he will have to become like all the others, this weird tribe he has learned to live among? Reluctant to surrender, he lapses briefly into depression.

By the time he has his first wet dream – a mix of fear (have I wet the bed?) and other strong, inchoate, feelings – it is clear that this alien state of being is not going to evaporate; its sheer inevitability threatens a sense of freedom that he has been unconscious of, before. He doesn't yet associate the phenomenon with any sensual pleasure that might compensate for the niggling sense of dread.

He finds he can run quite fast. His legs start to thicken, and the hairs on them curl and shine. He's good at the sprint distances, exhilarated by the strength the sinews of his body can produce, as he pulls the finish line towards him in determined, pounding strides.

In the back yard, a friend of his brother chortles lewdly, squirting water from the garden hose in spurts: 'Hah! What does that remind you of?' David hushes him with a glare, not knowing that jerky rhythm is a message his young brother can decode already. Snigger words like 'stiff' and 'fat' leap out of conversations. At school, he blushes, awkward at girls' attentions. Helen Jemetz wants to polish his schoolroom desk.

David never hesitated to accept his invitation to adulthood. Unlike his pansy brother, he just can't wait to get into everything. Already, David wants to leave school – a horrific prospect to the younger boy – and is desperate to own his own car. He slicks his black hair back with Brylcreem, flicking a kiss curl forward over his forehead, like Elvis Presley. David really likes girls, and it's clear they like him back. With a car, the opportunities for mischief will multiply and he sneaks a visit to the legendary 'Snake Pit' in Scarborough, where 'bodgies' and 'widgies' hang out and dance to the new rock and roll music. David disparages the 'Neddy boys', those soft types from the other side of the river—places like Crawley, Nedlands, Peppermint Grove, where the private schools and the university are located, not knowing that's the type his young brother will be drawn to.

He discusses the possibilities of penetration with another boy his age. Bill lives a few houses further up the road and wants to know a lot more about it than he is comfortable with. He has pet rabbits, a cat, and a cage with budgerigars, all breeding, but if he is becoming curious about animal sexual behaviour he's still a prissy boy when it comes to people. Girls have two holes, one at the back and one underneath. He remembers that. It must go in the front hole, they decide, and he puts off thinking about it as long as he can.

It will be a couple more years before his own longing finds a form to fixate upon, and Terence Johnson's well-turned limbs briefly inhabit the contours of his desire. He hasn't quite put the two together, yet: that 'sissy', or 'homo', equals what he will feel for Terence. Humiliation has not yet become his caustic counsellor.

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What's secret doesn't stay that way for long. As puberty makes it increasingly difficult to disguise his real interests – from himself and from others – his sister provides his next initiation into the hall of shame:

Sticks and Stones

He and a friend – his name is Daniel – have started sneaking out at night to prowl the local lovers' lane, on the sandy tracks down near the river. On a Friday or Saturday they can be sure to come across a few cars snuggled under the low, scrubby paper-bark trees. The two thirteen year olds hope to find out exactly what goes on between men and women there but are afraid to trigger pursuit by hostile young men, angry at having their coitus interrupted. Reluctant to actually peer inside the steamy car windows, he and Daniel are left to their own imaginations as to what kinds of acts might be underway.

One Saturday night they find a discarded condom and take it home. He knows that it's called a 'prophylactic' – commonly a 'franger', or 'French letter' – and that it's used to guard against disease as well as impregnation. They take the rubber back to his place, wash it out in the bathroom sink, then roll it in some paper towels to dry, before his pubescent friend decides to try it on for size.

Daniel is a short boy with an inordinately large penis that, he soon discovers, features a fleshy, purple head. When it gets hard, its large hole drips with sticky fluid. At thirteen, these are mysteries for which they have only rudimentary instruction. They haven't worked out that they could masturbate yet, so their fumbling repertoire consists of looking and touching and whispered debates about what they can do.

*One afternoon, his sister catches them, comparing notes in the room off the back verandah—nothing hard-core, but they do have their dicks out. Valerie turns on her heel and storms through the house screaming ‘HOMOSEXUAL’ at the top of her lungs. Not all compressed, as it reads on the page, but rolled out, syllable by outraged syllable: HO - MO - **SECKS** - SHOO - ALL, with the emphasis bunched up on the third syllable, like she wants the forbidden fact to splatter onto the walls and hang there dripping for days, so no one can fail to recognise what he is reluctant to have anyone, even Daniel, see. He sits shivering, like that time in Vic. Park, huddled on the cold black treadle under the Singer sewing machine, after his mother interrupted him and a complicit friend in the laneway behind the house. He cringes, dreading the imminent discovery in which denial will be unmasked and he will be caught in shame's glaring headlights.*

Daniel slinks out the side door.

Val knows she has something on him. There's no one else home but she might tell them later, so the threat hangs ready to unload whenever it finds its mark, like the ‘sissy boy’, ‘fairy’, ‘pansy’, ‘poofter’, ‘queer’ darts he has ducked until now, hoping they won't home in on him.

The next few days are fraught with caution. His phone calls to Daniel's house meet with a frosty reception—his mother won't even call him to the phone. What has Daniel said to her? Does he suspect that he is more into these games than he is? Now that his friend has caught a whiff of what this might imply about his own manliness, he withdraws completely from their pre-love games. Vic is popular in school, and active in sports, so to a degree he is shielded from suspicion, but he fears his cover has thinned.

It isn't as if the word is foreign, exactly. If Val already knows what it means at ten, he must too, at thirteen. 'Homo' is the short form and, even though he has been avoiding it, somewhere along the line he has learned not only that its nastiness applies to him, but now, especially as the physical aspect is starting to manifest, what it might mean. It has never landed so squarely on its target like this before, let alone in (semi-)public. EEEEEEEEEEE—YOOOWWW! Like a fighter plane in one of those war comics, diving in to deposit its deadly cargo. SCHPLATT!

*That name. It casts him in a role in a script that has already been written. 'Places, please'. When had he auditioned for **this** part? And has he missed the segue, when something he might like to do, if he ever gets the chance, becomes a whole identity, placing him precisely in a taxonomy of types, like an insect impaled on a pin in some dusty zoological museum?*

If 'this', it tells him, then certainly not 'that'. A supporting role at best, his story will be written only on the margins of the page, a life lived outside the mainstream where the real people do their business.

His Yankee grandmother has a Webster's on a stand. The entry after 'Ho.mo.sa.pi.ens' ('the scientific name for the only living species of the genus Homo') is:

ho.mo.sex.u.al adj. of or characterized by sexual desire for those of the same sex.
n. a homosexual individual. Opposed to heterosexual.

This identity seems ready-made, and he suspects it's loathsome. Will he become one of those invidious caricatures who mince across the screen occasionally, at the pictures? No handsome leading man takes another man into his arms for a kiss, or more.

He does some furtive research in a public library, uncovering the term in a volume by Krafft-Ebing, a book so grim it ought to be enough to drag him from his wayward path back onto the straight (and narrow). This is what he has to go on:

von Krafft-Ebing, R. 1924. *Psychopathia Sexualis, with especial reference to the Antipathic Sexual Instinct*. A Medico-Forensic Study. Only authorised English adaptation of the Twelfth German Edition. New York: Physicians and Surgeons Book Company.

He flips to the index at the back: p. 616. There he is, right after 'Hermaphroditism, psychical':

Homosexuality (vide Antipathic sexuality), p. 286

Homosexual feeling as an abnormal congenital manifestation

followed closely by:

hysteria

then:

ideal sadism, 118

Impotence, 13

Immorality, 502

Incest, 612

Injury to women, 105

and

Insanity among the Scythians, 302.

So that's the company he keeps. A little further on, right after a lengthy entry on 'masochism', is the dreaded:

Masturbation, consequences of, 286.

Then follows a lengthy entry on 'pederasty', and various references regarding:

pathology, special, 462

and

psychopathological cases, 554

under:

sexual instinct, homosexual, 282

---perversions of, 79, 462

He must be seriously sick. Flicking back to the listings for 'sodomy', he goes to page 561, where the German expert has listed kindly for his perusal:

7. Unnatural Abuse (Sodomy).

Sub-section 7 (a) records information on:

Violation of Animals (Bestiality).

So this is his condition—a ‘mental condition’; in fact, an ‘abnormal perversion’. He is not so much a legal problem, he sees, as he is a specimen for the scientific study of ‘Inverts’. His sister has spoken with more authority than she knew. If she and her scientific allies already know him better than he knows himself, are they telling his future, too? On page 573, he finds that for ‘many neuropathic individuals’ (and ‘Urnings’ are almost always ‘neuropathic’):

Before them lies mental despair,—even insanity and suicide,—at the very least, nervous disease; behind them, shame, loss of position, etc.

Nothing to look forward to but despair, insanity and suicide... He searches out ‘neurasthenic’ in the index, and flips through some case studies. For example, the one on 144:

hysteria gravis

... there was no amnesia. Thoroughly virile. Decent appearance. Genitals normal. Short imprisonment.

Imprisonment! But you said he was not a criminal, he was an ‘irresponsible insane person’. From being a psycho-medical disorder, he has achieved the status of criminal offender: a sexual, medical and social outlaw. Moreover, Victor Marsh, aged thirteen, living in a suburb of Perth, the capital of Western Australia, in 1959, has already found his way onto the path to perdition, for on page 447, he reads:

puberty teaches the youthful sinner to know his true sex soon enough... the homosexual act committed after puberty has set in, is the decisive step in the wrong direction.

Even the scientist names him as sinner.

There were a lot of messages folded in his sister's accusation: this is shameful; you had better hide; there is danger in this becoming public knowledge; there are other people who don't need to hide; that you're sick, you're 'one of nature's mistakes'. The naming project is part of a wider conspiracy to call him into line. He knows he is a boy, not a girl. He has been warned not to gush. He shouldn't use his hands when he talks. In fact, it is advisable not to be too 'expressive'; too 'theatrical'. He should be careful not to flap his wrists, nor to stand with his hands on hips (that's a dead giveaway). His brother recommends that if you clench your teeth, the muscles make your jaw look stronger. The size of your biceps matters. There's a way to walk like a man does, but he is not getting that right, in fact he's a little 'loose in his loafers'. And the way your voice goes up at the end of the sentence? You need to bring it down, level it out. Train it into a lower register. Better still, don't talk so much. In fact, it would be better if you dumped all that... enthusiasm... altogether.

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So, the script has been written for him. He has been cast – to play some kind of villain, apparently – and he is already on stage!

Much later, he will start to question: Who is a 'homosexual' when he is not having sex? Certainly, the appellation refers to something he cannot deny about the pulses of desire coursing through him, but how adequately does such type-casting represent his being, and to what extent does it dictate his becoming and de-limit its field of possibilities? He tries to wriggle free of the feeling of suffocation it engenders, but an encounter with the French Existentialists, while at college, will force him to

acknowledge what he is; to own it, rather than push it away. He will have to 'come out' to himself and, at the same time, find a way to detoxify his 'condition' – if that is what it is – of the shame that comes in its wake. Integration will be difficult to achieve without the right tools (more on that, later).

Interpellation – the name game

In my theoretical work I tend to problematise the usage of such taxonomic terms as 'homosexual' as an (in)adequate basis for the construction of identity, drawing on Judith Butler's (1993) use of the concept of 'interpellation', described earlier by Louis Althusser (1972), in which 'subjects' of a discourse are trained to respond to the naming, or interpellation, that produces them as subjects, and positions them according to the ideological values embedded in the dominant discourses of the economy of power that operate in their societies (including, it should be recognized, the heteronormative constructions authorized by religion). Althusser (1972) broached the ideological significance of the 'subject' with his description of 'the process through which the human being is constituted as a subject through its relation to the ideological practices of society', as Mowitt restates it. (Mowitt 1988, xiii). (In the original essay, Althusser defined ideology as 'the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence' (Althusser 1972, 162). Interpellation invites people to see themselves as the addressees of these ideological discourses, in a 'hailing' that 'incites human beings', Mowitt puts it, 'to identify their self-experience with the image of that experience that comes to them in the discourses emanating from the ideological state apparatuses.' Clearly, this is not a question of intellectual manipulation, for as Mowitt puts it: 'The identification with an image of oneself is constitutive of that self, and this constitution is the structural precondition

for any manipulation at the level of ideas' (xiii). That is not as complicated as it might appear on first reading. More simply put: 'Hey you!' calls the policeman, and the 'guilty' subject turns back in response to the call.

Interpellation depends both upon the supposed authority of the discourse (be it legal, medical, scientific, religious, or whatever—the 'policeman') and the interpellation of the subject as an object upon which this discourse can be 'operated'. That is, it requires the subject to recognise him/herself in the naming—'Hey you!' A whole set of attitudes come trailing with the naming. So, to apply this to my own narrative, if I accept 'homosexual', or a bogus identification according to any other typology, I must necessarily accept a very precise placement in the social, political, epistemological and moral universe that is constructed, policed and maintained by the prevailing discourses.

Butler goes beyond Louis Althusser's discussion of the process by questioning the subject's willingness to participate in the operation; hence, the existence of what she calls 'failed' interpellations—'there are any number of ways of turning around and responding to the call of the law' (Salih/Butler, 212). Relating this back to her interrogations of gender, Butler identifies a 'repetition of norms' that necessarily precedes the emergence of the subject, and interpellates – or, as she terms it, 'initiates' – the subject into the symbolic order, which, for Butler, is constituted by the dominant norms circulating in society. According to her model, in order to remain viable within a hegemonic system following the initial interpellation, however, the subject must, in its turn, 'cite and mime' the very norms that created its 'intelligibility' in the first place (hence her idea of the re-iterative 'performativity' of gender).

According to Butler, 'subject formation is dependent on the prior operation of legitimating norms' (*Bodies that Matter*, 232).

If hegemonic models of identity are understood to be normative, and if the subject's identification, as a subject, is dependent on reproducing already existing gender norms, then identifying with, or acceding to these norms, in her model, actually 'compels' bodies to act in ways that strive to act out, even embody the 'fantasy' of a coherent and 'natural' gender core, in order to borrow legitimacy. But subjects can resist that compulsion.

This work by Butler has seldom been applied to the interrogation of the subject positionings produced by religious discourse. How may this be applied, then?

When Peter Berger raised the issue of secularisation in the early 1960s, he claimed that religion itself was becoming marginalised. He was later to regret the way the secularisation thesis was being deployed but, in his *A Rumour of Angels* (1969), he identified this as happening not so much to social institutions – given the increasing separation between church and state – but as applying 'to processes inside the human mind, i.e. a secularization of consciousness' (Berger 1969, 16). At that time, Berger felt that the expansion of the state meant that religion was losing its primary role as the 'legitimater' of social life, and this was producing a trend towards pluralisation of beliefs and practices. Berger claimed this was predicted as early as 1915 by Max Weber, who foresaw that capitalism would produce a rational (and scientific) worldview leading to secularisation and the 'disenchantment' of the world. When 'church religion' was undergoing a noticeable membership decline, Berger's colleague Thomas Luckmann wrote (in *The Invisible Religion*) that religion itself had moved to the margins of society because 'the internalisation of the symbolic reality of

traditional religion is neither enforced nor, in the typical case, favoured by the social structure of contemporary society' (Luckmann 1967, 37). This dis-location of religious discourse from the privileged centre of social value systems has produced outcomes too complex to be analysed here, but in my opinion, it is still difficult to quarantine prevailing moral and ethical norms on sexuality from traditional religious teachings.

I read 'religion' as referring to a sociological phenomenon, entailing inclusion in/exclusion from socially and politically valorised faith communities that produce and support what Berger terms the 'plausibility structures' which anchor the sense of belonging in community. (I use the term 'spirituality', in contrast, to refer to a process of searching inquiry into the nature of being, which may or may not occur within 'religious' contexts.) 'One of the fundamental propositions of the sociology of knowledge', writes Berger in *A Rumour of Angels*, is that the 'plausibility' of views of reality 'depends upon the social support these receive' (Berger 1969, 50). According to his analysis, 'we obtain our notions of the world originally from other human beings, and these notions continue to be plausible to us in very large measure because others continue to affirm them' (50).

'Plausibility structures' are produced by networks of people 'in conversation', as Berger puts it, who hold to a common world-view and set of moral commitments that help to maintain belief. Berger acknowledges that 'it is possible to go against the social consensus that surrounds us', but reminds us that there are 'powerful pressures (which manifest themselves as psychological pressures within our own consciousness) to conform to the views and beliefs of our fellow men' (50).

Hans Mol writes from a related perspective, discussing various propositions with regard to theories of identity that define it not as an individual thing alone but also as strongly social. Mol cites Erik Erikson's work, in which identity connotes 'both a persistent sameness within oneself and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others' (Mol 1976, 57) and notes Berger and Luckmann's construction that identity is 'a phenomenon that emerges from the dialectic between individual and society' (Berger & Luckmann, 174). Mol also cites Soddy's earlier (1957) definition of identity working 'as an anchorage of the self to the social matrix' (qtd. in Mol 1976, 58) to argue that religion provides the mechanism 'by means of which on the level of symbol systems certain patterns acquire a taken for granted, stable, eternal, quality', thus 'sacralizing' identity (Mol, 5). (See Carden, 2006, for a fuller discussion of this.)

For a sub-set of queer men who experience a disturbing cognitive dissonance vis-à-vis the religion of their upbringing, the 'plausibility structures' – these anchorage points to the social matrix – whether held together by ritual, mythic and symbolic functions, or as institutionalised discourses of meaning and power (in Foucault's analysis) are not inclusive of them unless they repudiate their sexuality.

The normalising functions of social cohesiveness and 'sacralized' identity that create a web of belonging and cohesiveness for some people, then, work to position others 'outside the fold' of the blessed. Also, it is sometimes argued, the normative structuring of meaning constructed in religious discourse actually *requires* such a demonised, abominable 'other' in order for its universe of meaning to remain intact. Forms of knowledge available through religious praxis are rendered unavailable to

such outcasts, to be reserved strictly and exclusively for those who operate within religion's heteronormatively constructed boundaries.

Alienated from dominant cultural and political models, the queer self – destabilised by its bruising encounters with homophobic 'cultures of insult' (Eribon, 2004) – may be forced into ontological doubt. Such subjects have often turned to 'technologies of the self' (Foucault 2000, 177) available from alternative, even 'alien' religious traditions. In effect, and even literally, queer intelligence may be involved with a crossing of borders – geographical, cultural, ideological, epistemological, ontological borders – to seek out techniques of transformation and reconnect the alienated self within an integrative *Weltanschauung*. In a kind of reverse colonisation, British writer Christopher Isherwood (1904 – 1986), for example, was an early exemplar of the turn to the 'East', abjuring his Anglican Christian early training and accessing another culture's religious praxis, by taking a guru (a Swami in the Ramakrishna Order of monks) on his move to California in 1939. Isherwood was seeking out practical technologies of introspection to research the roots of self (see Marsh, *Mr Isherwood Changes Trains*, 2010, for a full discussion of Isherwood's neglected religious life). Edward Carpenter (1844 – 1929), the sandal-wearing British socialist visionary had earlier pointed the way. Marco Pallis (1895 – 1989) researched Tibetan Buddhism. In our times, Andrew Harvey (born 1952) has found pathways for growth beyond the boundaries of conventional Christian religious prescriptions.

First-person testimony, in the form of memoir and other autobiographical texts, challenges the 'discursive colonization' (Stone-Mediatore, 122) that would position queer folk at the margins of a full humanity, and re-configures the myths that sustain the hegemonic control of dominant and homophobic religious ideologies.

Autobiographical acts (literally writing the life, yourself!) provide multiple sites of resistance to dominant prevailing myths. Instead of following pre-ordained scripts that would reserve spiritual research exclusively to folk privileged by heteronormative models, non-conformists feeling the 'urge to merge' have written new scripts, re-writing the life in texts that wrest control of culturally prescribed narratives to become new sites of resistance to religious homophobia, producing affirmative narratives that reconfigure the meaning of queer experience as it is lived and written to open up new fields of knowledge and awareness, for people previously regarded as 'beyond the pale'.

Self-authored life narratives de-stabilise normative epistemic constructions of what it is possible for a 'homosexual' to know, and wrest free the possibility of spiritual knowledge from its exclusivist framing within traditional religious teachings, then. Without a voice, such knowledge would be swallowed up by silence. Literary theorists Sidone Smith and Julia Watson identify autobiographical narrative as a 'performative' display and describe 'the many means by which models of acceptable identity are circulated and renewed in society', analyzing 'how state, church, school, corporation, government and the advertising industry secure normative subjects in acceptable social relationships' (1996, 12). Yet, in specific situations, Smith and Watson say, people may 'choose not to narrate the stories that are prescribed for them', opting instead to 'reframe the present by bringing it into a new alignment of meaning with the past' (12).

Smith and Watson's theory gains further support from more recent work done by another leading theorist of autobiography, Paul John Eakin. In the late 1980s, Eakin had argued (in *Fictions in Autobiography*) for an autobiographical truth that is not a

fixed and stable content, but a complicated process of self-discovery and self-creation, recognising that the 'self' of all narrative autobiography is necessarily a fictitious construct, and that the 'I' that the autobiographer inscribes is no longer himself, but someone with the same name, though another age, surrounded by other circumstances, immersed in other activities and of a different appearance (I thank Isabel Duran, 2003, for this summary). But Eakin, one of the late twentieth century's foremost scholars of autobiography, has moved the theory on from that earlier position to develop the notion of self as narrative. In a seminal article (2004) that moved beyond his previous work, Eakin went on to tackle the narrative identity thesis that is central to my own discussion: viz., 'that we are or could be said to be a story of some kind'. 'Autobiography', he writes:

[I]s not merely something we read in a book; rather as a discourse of identity, delivered bit by bit in the stories we tell ourselves day in and day out, autobiography structures our living (Eakin 2004, 122).

Eakin is prompted to pursue the line of enquiry into the equivalence between narrative and identity by a case study from the neurologist Oliver Sacks, and he uses a quotation from Sacks as the epigraph for his article: It might be said that each of us constructs and lives a 'narrative', and that this narrative *is* us, our identities (Qtd. Eakin, 121). Working in the social sciences, Jerome Bruner uses the same notion, writing that: 'the self is a perpetually rewritten story...in the end we *become* the autobiographical narratives we tell about our lives' (Bruner 1987, 15).

In this regard, 'narrative' has become a useful tool in many disciplines, including psychology for, if 'self' is a 'story', it can be told differently, and psychotherapists have exploited the therapeutic potential of such re-narrativisation work. The

Australian psychologist Michael White recognised the therapeutic potential of the narrative approach to self and developed what has become known as 'narrative therapy' wherein the narrative therapist works to assist the client in locating 'alternative life narratives'. Susan Nicholson says this is a 'deconstructive' process by which 'the dominant restraining narrative is unmasked and re-examined from a new angle' (1995, 24).

So it follows, then, that writing autobiographically may become a resistant strategy for re-narrativising the self. 'Seizing the occasion and telling the story', say Smith and Watson, 'turns speakers into subjects of narrative who can exercise some control over the meaning of their lives' and this assertion, they say, is 'particularly compelling for those whose personal histories include stories that have been culturally unspeakable' (13-14).

We are familiar with the use of first-person memoir writing inscribing certain aspects of queer life narratives – sexual awakening, coming out, and so on, are familiar tropes – but to maintain the bogus tradition that queer men cannot engage with spirituality would require ignoring a growing body of texts that recount the many ways in which queer men have seriously engaged with such research. Christopher Buren Stewart (2002) has identified a discrete literary sub-genre for such texts, in fact, namely: 'queer spiritual autobiography'.

Life writing texts on such themes that have been virtually ignored heretofore may now be revisited as sites for potential disruption of western hegemonic religious discourses. Such texts model an approach to writing autobiographically as a resistant strategy for re-narrativising the self, an assertive recontextualisation that recovers meaning from the toxic narratives buried within hostile discourses. In such

texts the 'subject' changes place—from being the marginalised product of a discourse of subjugation into an assertive agent of self-signification, in effect 'talking back' to dominant systems of prescribed meaning. 'For us, true speaking is not solely an expression of creative power,' writes bell hooks, 'it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges the politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless' (hooks 1990, 338).

This new approach confronts the standard views of what is possible for a 'homosexual' to know and speak, especially in relation to the religious life. For, by withholding from non-conformists the possibility of an engagement with 'the divine', certain strands within conventional Western religious discourse operate within what Foucault calls 'regimes of truth' — power/knowledge relations that constitute 'a set of rules by which truth is produced':

Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanism and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true ('Truth and Power' 1980; in Rabinow 1984, 51-75).

The operations of power and their authorising discourses produce subjectivities, or identity positions, that prescribe and proscribe the possibilities of knowing, for 'knowledge' is produced within the same economy of power. As J.F. Lyotard insists: '[K]nowledge and power are simply two sides of the same question: who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs to be decided?' (Lyotard 1986, 9)

Both psychological medicine and conventional religion operate within this economy of power, restricting diverse possibilities for exploration and expression in contemporary culture. The authorised forms that identity – and meaning itself – may take, are prescribed by a dominant, privileged class in order to ‘normalise’ its majoritarian practices and shore up the shared beliefs that provide the foundation for complex interlocking systems of domination.

Let me bring this back now to the recovery of my own personal story. I should say that, throughout my life I have been blessed (or cursed) with an urge to reconnect with this something that I felt I had lost, and my journey has been punctuated by moments of synchronous intrusion into mundane awareness by certain events which shifted me into what might be termed ‘altered states’, like a ‘tap on the shoulder’ reminding me: there’s something more. The incident with the yellow dress was only the first of these. However, instead of learning to value such insights, I was taught shame, and there was nothing in my cultural milieu that would assist me to recognize them their value and meaning. Writing the life has been a process of recuperation, reclaiming the lost parts of self silenced by dominant cultural forces.

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Citation: Marsh, V. 2010. 'Writing the Spirit: Testimony and the Unauthorised Voice in the Queer Spiritual Memoir'. *Polari Journal*, 2 (October 2010), www.polarijournal.com/resources/Marsh-Writing-the-Spirit.pdf (accessed <insert date>).