

BEING AND BECOMING
ANALYZING THE NEGOTIATION OF
SPIRITUAL, RELIGIOUS, AND SEXUAL IDENTITIES
IN NONHETEROSEXUAL BRITISH AND AMERICAN YOUNG PEOPLE
THROUGH THE LENS OF QUEER THEORY

by

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Abstract

Despite the large amount of research on religious young people, and research on the formation of young people's sexual identity, there is little research addressing the bearing that religion plays on identity construction in young people. Helping to fill this gap in the research, this paper investigates how young people simultaneously negotiate religious, spiritual, and sexual identities. Utilizing first-hand accounts from religious and spiritual young people from projects in the United Kingdom and the United States, this paper explores nonheterosexual youth as a site of liminality through the lens of queer theory. Participants in the studies demonstrated different approaches to the negotiation of multiple identities, including tension and conflict, compartmentalization, and integration, as well as differing levels of awareness of relevant concepts such as performativity and heteronormativity.

Key words: *identity, queer theory, spirituality, religiosity, youth*

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This paper is concerned with analyzing the negotiation of spiritual, religious, and sexual identities in nonheterosexual¹ young people through the lens of queer theory. Focusing on American and British samples of nonheterosexual Christian and Muslim individuals, *Being and Becoming* examines qualitative data from several projects that have gathered the stories of religious and spiritual young people. Specifically this paper will ask what new insights about individuals' negotiation of religious/spiritual and sexual identities are gained through the use of queer theory. What new insights into the relationship between the two might queer theory uncover?

Using material from Donna Freitas' *Sex and the Soul*, and from projects by Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip, this paper will seek, as well, to uncover presumptions of heteronormativity, investigate the notion of performativity, and discuss liminality. Above all, the use of qualitative, narrative data in preference to quantitative data will focus attention "on what youth do and say rather than on defining who youth are...." (Driver, 2008, p. 9). I also investigate the often assumed dichotomization of spiritual/religious identity and sexual identity, and propose that queer theory offers a way for young people to see the two as not as binary opposites, but as capable of being integrated.

¹ I use the term nonheterosexual to avoid the accusation of categorizing and reifying identities by using acronyms such as LGBT, and because "queer" is often argued to be a term used more in academia than in lived experience.

Identity, in this context, is taken to be a developmental phenomenon (Kroger, 2000, p. 8) that recognizes, for example, gender, sexual orientation, and religion (as well as race, ethnicity, nationality and disability) as socially and culturally constructed aspects that are constitutive of identity as self-definition. As Kroger (2000) phrases it, “[r]ather than being a collection of static traits, identity is conceptualized by developmental approaches as a structural organization [of the self]” (p. 8). As such, sexuality (how people define, perform, and think about themselves as sexual beings, including sexual orientation), religiosity (how individuals manage the numerous aspects of religious activity, dedication, and belief), and spirituality (as “all the beliefs and activities by which individuals attempt to relate their lives to God or to a divine being or some other conception of a transcendent reality” Wuthnow, 1998, p. xviii) can be seen as aspects of how individuals attempt to construct a sense of self.

However, far from assuming that identity exists as a collection of separate identity categories subsisting as static traits, this paper proposes through the use of queer theory that these categories do not exist, at least not as discrete, essentialized entities, but that they are fluid, always in production and integrated with one another (Hutchins, 2006; Jagose, 1996; Sullivan, 2005; W. B. Turner, 2000). Such a view contests the way in which traditions like Christianity and Islam have tended to divorce sexuality from religious (and spiritual) identity.

Importantly, Kroger (2000) informs us that: “In some way, shape, or form, identity invariably gets defined (at various stages of the life-cycle) as a balance between

that which is taken to be self and that considered to be other” (p. 8). This view is relevant to this paper as the relationship between sex(uality) and religion is often perceived as one of uneasiness and antagonism, particularly in the case of nonheterosexual sexualities (Gross, 2008; Hunt, 2009; Yip, 2011). While nonheterosexual behaviours and identities continue to be pathologized, the perception of Western culture as “increasingly secular and sexualized” (Yip, Keenan & Page, 2011, p. 6) assists in the construction and reinforcement of a popular view that religions are opposed to sex (outside of heteronormative marriage), and disinterested in sexuality. That is to say, some forms of religions can be seen to impose a sense of self that *others* sexuality. This can result in tension and conflict, with important ramifications in terms of social, psychological and spiritual wellbeing, especially for nonheterosexual young people exploring notions of identity in this milieu.

Despite this commonplace assumed tension between sexuality and religion, we recognize that both “tap basic drives” (Regnerus, 2007, p. 6) and contribute to the journey of human selfhood, which is constituted by a continuous attempt to make sense of our lives (Taylor, 1992). To adapt Giroux’s (1999) statement, religion plays “a central role in producing narratives, metaphors and images that exercise a powerful pedagogical force over how people think of themselves and their relationships to others” (p. 2) and intrinsic to our understanding of religion is our recognition of the importance of agency within it (Lawson, 2007, p. 83). Indeed, as Sinha and Sinha (1978) have suggested, religion “provides a frame of reference for individual’s [*sic*] self-expression.... [And] by

providing individuals with an interpretation of existence, performs the invaluable task of resolving the problem of meaning” (p. 134). That is to say, religion can be a source of identity for many young people (Hunt, 2005; Shepherd, 2010). Yet if some behaviours, meanings, and identities associated with sexuality in general are considered appropriate by some religious groups, and others are seen as objectionable and deviant, how do young people negotiate their religious and sexual identities?

Questions such as this are important as there has been little research addressing the bearing that religion plays on identity construction in general in young people; sexuality either tends to be disregarded in the case of research on religious young adults, or in other cases is prioritized at the expense of investigating the role of religion (Cooksey & Dooms, 2010; Hunt, 2009; Yip et al., 2011). As such, even though there has been a certain amount of theorizing about the intersection of religion and sexuality in everyday life, Regnerus (2007) admits to us that in reality, this relationship in terms of lived experience is often not well understood (p. 5).

The focus on nonheterosexual religious young people can be explained by Mark Lipton’s (2008) accurate observation that “[q]ueer people have trouble being active participants in mass popular culture because they are not included in society’s view of the ‘mass’” (p. 172). The application of queer theory to the negotiation of intersecting identities offers possibilities of relationships and identities not yet fully understood or endorsed, and not of guaranteeing identity or knowledge about identity (Driver, 2007, p. 43). As Foucault (1997a) said: “Let’s escape as much as possible from the type of

relations that society proposes for us and try to create in the empty space where we are new relational possibilities” (p. 160). This approach is endorsed, for example, by Hutchins (2006) who suggests that the most effective way of destabilizing the hegemonic assumptions that underlie identity politics is to fully emphasize the fluidity of identity, and the “nonconforming” and “unconventional” aspects of queer (p. 140).

This stands in marked contrast to identity politics, which has been used by various sexual minority groups as a way of gaining political support, as Sullivan (2003) puts it, “based on the assumption that sexual inclinations, practices, and desires are the expression of a person’s core identity” (p. 81). More positively, identity politics has given visibility, recognition and a sense of hope (that new possibilities and ways of doing things exist) to nonheterosexual people who have routinely suffered widespread homophobia, victimization, and oppression. Identity politics has furnished nonheterosexuals with a sense of collective consciousness, which has accommodated the psychological desire to belong to a community.

Further, as Yip (2011) has stated, in the context of religion and sexuality, “identity politics is more than a human political strategy for resistance. It also has salient spiritual significance and symbolism” (p. 16). However, whereas identity politics arguably replicates the identity categories created by heteronormativity, this paper marks a turn towards an ambiguous politics that contests the reification of sexual, spiritual, and religious identities.

1.1 Organization of *Being and Becoming*

Chapter 2 examines the views and theories of the progenitors of queer theory including Foucault, Sedgwick, and Butler. A review of the main concepts of queer theory reveals its anti-essentialist argument. It will be suggested that religions act as sites of construction of heteronormativity; because of this it is important to consider the impact of young people's religious and spiritual identities in relationship to sexual identity.

Chapter 3 discusses the concept of queer youth and queering youth. This chapter introduces the concept of youth culture as non-normative (not merely a stage on the journey to adulthood), resulting in a range of possibilities not available in normative patterns of development. Performativity, heteronormativity and liminality will be explored further as features that will be highlighted in the discussions of the young people's narratives.

Chapter 4 examines some narratives of nonheterosexual Christian and Muslim youth from recent projects in the UK and USA through the lens of queer theory, taking into account the concepts of performativity and liminality. Further, this analysis, rather than attempting to "delimit exactly who is queer or what constitutes their queerness," analyzes "the ways heteronormative knowledges work to naturalize and dichotomize differences" (Driver, 2008, p. 10). Participants adopt different strategies for coping with intersecting identities, including compartmentalization, tension and conflict, and integration.

Chapter 5 concludes this paper and claims that using queer theory to analyze intersecting identities offers us the opportunity to see processes of deconstruction and

resistance that may be masked by traditional youth studies. It is acknowledged, however, that identity politics remains useful for some people and that, as Driver (2007) reminds us: “There is a risk of using queer theory to generalize the malleability of youth identity. This move is both tempting and troubling as it erases the struggles of particular queer youth as they articulate their desires and relations against cultural assumptions of sameness” (p. 97). It is suggested that queer theory can be used as a framework to endorse young people’s liminal status and for young people to negotiate the assumed divide between sexual and religious identities and recognize their sexual and spiritual identities as integrated and not as binary opposites.

Chapter 2

Overview of theoretical framework

The early 1990s saw what is commonly referred to as queer theory emerge as an attempt to think through the politics of sexuality and gender in light of major developments in feminist theory, LGBT studies, and poststructuralism during the previous twenty years (W. B. Turner, 2004, p. 481). A critique of the universal homogeneous and essentialized identity of gender/sexuality categories, its accelerated rise as a critical force since then demonstrates the important impact it has had on understandings of cultural formations, interpretations and intersections of sex, sexuality, gender and identity. However this adoption of *queer* as a critical lens has also ironically led in some respects to its institutionalization. This process has tended to obfuscate the fact that, according to Jagose (2005), “insofar as it espouses no systemic set of principles, has no foundational logic, or consistent character—queer theory is not really a theory at all” (p. 1981). Similarly, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner noted relatively early on in the emergence of queer theory, that owing to the fact it “cannot be assimilated to a single discourse, let alone a propositional program ... it is not useful to consider queer theory a thing” (1995, p. 343).

Yet the indeterminacy, the elasticity and the refusal to specify itself has largely been considered queer theory’s main advantage (Jagose 1996, pp. 1–3). Thus, the temptation to write this (brief) genealogy as unified and coherent, is frustrated by the subject matter itself, such that Jagose (1996) suggests in *Queer Theory: An Introduction*,

that to even attempt to write a genealogy would seem “counter-intuitive, even futile” (p. 1).

Despite the fact that the term queer is necessarily indeterminate, and its associated meanings are often multiple and/or contradictory, there are some characteristics of queer theory that it is possible to tease from this complex fabric. The principal characteristic of queer is its opposition to the normative. Thus, as a process, queer theory accrues the potential to constantly reinvent itself and challenge dominant understandings of sexuality. Queer, though, is not solely concerned with passively challenging norms, but also with actively transgressing boundaries. Queer refuses to be categorized and refuses to reinforce processes of categorization and normalization.

Indeed, Halperin (1995) proposed that queer should be seen as: “an ongoing process of self-constitution and self-transformation—a queer politics anchored in the perilous and shifting sands of non-identity, positionality, discursive reversibility and collective self-invention” (p. 122). As such, queer can be said to observe a critical distance from the identity-based categories of modern sexuality, instead foregrounding “category permeability and speculative open-ness” (Beasley, 2005, p. 108). As W. B. Turner (2000) phrases it, “the basic approach, central to queer theory, is the investigation of foundational, seemingly indisputable concepts, such as ‘matter’” (p. 3). That is to say, for example, that instead of working on the assumption that identity is the starting point for political action, queer theory holds that identity is a result of social, political, and cultural processes.

Specifically, queer theory is concerned with the “mixing up” of traditional assumptions regarding supposedly inevitable combinations of essential attributes of the self to do with gender, sex, and sexuality (for example in the way that masculine gender is inevitably associated with men, male anatomical sex, desire for “the opposite sex”, and desire for the feminine gender; Beasley, 2005, p. 108). Crucially, recent developments in queer theory and queer studies have started to examine more fully the way in which aspects such as race and class are integrated into the way in which we conceive of sex, sexuality and gender, while simultaneously seeking to problematize these very categories.

This development is different from the way in which *queering* has been used to challenge norms other than sexuality, such as race and class, as isolated objects of inquiry. Sexual identity, then, is being redefined as more than universalized sexual acts, while socio-cultural-political forces are also being examined more frequently. Thus, much like feminist movements since the 1960s, sexuality, properly understood, is conceived of as both an area for liberation (in terms of emancipation from sexual categorization, and by extension, an area of subversion of societal control) and at the same time, a crucial vector of oppression.

Such a stance, however, still leaves queer theorists in the position of having to explain the paradox of how identities, created in what are generally portrayed as oppressive regimes, are then able to challenge these structures. Rather than being regarded as an anti-identity politics, though, Jagose (1996) suggests that “it is more accurate to represent [queer theory] as ceaselessly interrogating both the preconditions of

identity and its effects” (pp. 131–132). As such, it may be valuable to consider that there is no “product” occasioning from queer theory, and any “results” are to be found within the process of queering itself.²

But what is queering? Whereas lesbian and gay studies attempt to use existing disciplinary lenses (e.g., history, political science, or literature) to look at gays, lesbians and sexual orientation in a more positive light, queer theory attempts to highlight how these disciplines can be observed and read as non-normative. That is, queer theory seeks to change these disciplines by rooting out the deep heterosexist and heteronormative biases within them (W. B. Turner, 2000, pp. 31–32). This project involves the destabilizing of any and all identity categories. As Kirsch (2000) states, “Queer theory becomes separate from past gay and lesbian politics by dismissing ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ as categories as containing subjects” (p. 35).

Commonly associated with rights for nonheterosexuals, identity politics could be said to be based on the assumption that a person’s core identity is expressed through sexual inclinations, practices, and desires (Sullivan, 2005, p. 81). Identity politics has also, as a result, been said to have become the new essentialism (Halberstam, 2005, p. 20). This has given rise to the accusation that identity politics commits violence against queers in its complicitness in the structures of meaning that it aims to challenge (Jagose, 1996, p. 131). As Butler puts it, “identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory

² The conception of queer (such as that given by Halperin) as self-constituting has also been critiqued as being incompatible with a deconstructivist approach.

regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures, or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression” (1990, p. 13–14).

We can see that queer theory also includes the subversion of those categories advocated for by mainstream feminist theory, which include *woman* and *lesbian*, both of which can be seen to reinscribe notions of an essentialist identity and “categories as containing subjects.” As W. B. Turner (2000) importantly points out: “The conditions of possibility for queer theory involve not only resistance to prevailing definitions of sexual identity but—equally and antecedently—resistance to prevailing definitions of gender identity as well” (p. 11).

“To queer”, then, is to render *normal* sexuality and gender as strange and unsettled, to challenge heterosexuality as a naturalized social-sexual norm, and to promote the notion of *non-straightness* and the performative,³ provisional, and contingent nature of identity, instead of any eternal sense of the term. Indeed terms as familiar as *man* and *woman* are interrogated for their heterosexist assumptions—i.e. the type of foundational concepts invoked earlier—in a postmodern critique of the metanarratives of identity.

Thus, queer theory expands the scope of its analysis to all kinds of behaviours, including those that are *gender-bending*, as well as those that involve queer forms of sexuality. Queer theory asserts that all sexual behaviours, and all categories of normative and deviant sexualities are social constructs, that are sets of signifiers that create certain

³ A concept introduced by Judith Butler, which will be examined shortly.

types of social meaning. These codes interact to shape the ideas of what is normative and what is deviant at any particular moment, and then operate under the category of what is *natural* or *essential*. Wilcox (2003) highlights the fact that it should be recognized that the role of religion as one of these codes is also highly relevant, as the self-image of many participants is shaped by religious beliefs (p. 16–17).

Essentialist notions of identity, including homosexuality and heterosexuality, and any intrinsic relationship between gender and sexuality, are challenged by queer theorists in the context of shifting boundaries, ambivalences, and constructions that change depending on the historical and cultural context.⁴ As Halperin (1995) phrases it:

Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. ‘Queer’ then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative (p. 62).

Often used as an umbrella term for nonheterosexual individuals, queer frequently emphasizes solidarity and affinity over identity, although there is a lack of clarity in the way the term is used. W. B. Turner (2004) notes that some queer theorists deploy the term queer as distinct from the terms *gay* and *lesbian*, which are sometimes seen as being less radical, less transgressive, and indicative of the type of essentialized identities that queer seeks to challenge (p. 481), forming “a minority to the heterosexual essence of humanity” (Scherer, 2010, p. 1).

⁴ Yet the critique of the connection between the two terms constantly gives rise to references to gender as well as sex(uality).

The suggestion here is that queer always includes gay and lesbian (properly understood), but that the opposite is not true (indicating that in fact heterosexuals are capable of being queer). Some of these different uses reflect a tension between queer studies and gay and lesbian studies, where the queer critique of lesbian and gay identity specifically challenges the insistence on sexual orientation as the most important designator of a person's being. In this regard queer theory can be seen to be resistant, not just against heteronormativity, but against any gay hegemonic discourse, or *homonormativity*. Yet others still use queer as a perfectly acceptable metonym for gay and lesbian, or as a distinction between what Jagose (2005) maintains are “old-style lesbians and gays and new-style sexual outlaws” (p. 1981).

Queer theory as an academic term is commonly accepted as first occurring in print in the 1991 special issue of *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*.⁵ Introduced by the guest editor and film theorist, Teresa de Lauretis, in her article *Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities*, it has been argued that the addition of the word theory to queer legitimized its place in academia (Jagose, 2005, p. 1981). The use of the term, though, did not refer to a preexisting theory. As Halperin (1995) states, “Queer theory was ... a placeholder for a hypothetical knowledge-practice not yet in existence” (p. 340). However de Lauretis did indicate that she intended the term to refer to three interrelated projects: (a) a critique of heterosexism; (b) a deconstructionist approach to gay and lesbian identities as homogenous, and; (c) an attendance to the way in which race

⁵ De Lauretis (1991) states that: “The term ‘queer’ was suggested [at] a conference in [1990]”, p. xiv.

impacts sexual subjectivities. These three projects, de Lauretis suggested, could act as “another discursive horizon, another way of thinking the sexual”⁶ (1991, p. iv).

As a body of literature, commentary and criticism grew from this ‘outing’, queer theory’s pedigree was simultaneously established; that is to say queer theory “had to be invented after the fact” (Halperin, 1995, p. 341). Dominant genealogies of queer theory identified several texts as queer theory *avant le lettre*. In particular Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), and Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990) have been retroactively identified by the majority of mainstream academics as being queer theory’s foundational texts.⁷ Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality: Volume One* (1976/1978),⁸ and Gayle Rubin’s essay *The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex* have also been ‘credited’ as being highly influential on Butler and Sedgwick.⁹

Foucault (1926–1984) is a key poststructuralist influence on the development of queer theory. Concerned with the construction and production of sexuality, Foucault (1976/1978) sought to denaturalize common assumptions associated with the term, and sought to portray sexual identity as non-essentialist: “Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover” (p. 103). However instead of portraying

⁶ Although de Lauretis was to abandon the term only three years later (Jagose 1996, 129).

⁷ Berlant and Warner criticize what they call the ‘star system’ in *What Does Queer Theory Teach Us About X?*

⁸ Also known as *The Will to Knowledge*.

⁹ *Gender Trouble*, as well as dealing with Foucault, looked at Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Sigmund Freud Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Monique Wittig.

power as repressive, and destructive, Foucault characterizes it as productive, and generative (pp. 86–92). In fact this is given by Foucault (1976/1978) as his working hypothesis.

The society that emerged in the nineteenth century—bourgeois, capitalist, or industrial society, call it what you will—did not confront sex with a fundamental refusal of recognition. On the contrary, it put into operation an entire machinery for producing true discourses concerning it. Not only did it speak of sex and compel everyone to do so; it also set out to formulate the uniform truth of sex (p. 69).

As such in this model, truth and sex are conflated. However, Foucault refutes the idea that sexuality can be authoritatively defined. Instead, according to Foucault (1976/1978), sexuality is an historical construct (p. 103) and is produced by institutions of the medical community, church, and state through discourses of power. As the discourses come to constitute the sexual subject, they act as a form of social control (p. 123). Foucault demonstrates this with particular reference to the construction of ‘the homosexual’, through discourse, incited by a will to know.¹⁰ This will to know produced the subjectivities of deviants and so-called perverts. In doing so, it identified these subjectivities with certain sexual practices, and charted the different characterizations and conceptualizations of the category until its emergence as a species unto itself (Foucault, 1978, p. 43). It is this link between discourse and identity that queer theory takes up.

Another key argument that Foucault makes is with regard to how resistance should operate. Resistance is not some monolithic entity that can be pinned down, but

¹⁰ Discourse is “a set of rules for the constitution of conceptual objects and the production of statements about those objects” (W. B. Turner, 2000, p. 51).

exists in multiple formations. Indeed, Foucault (1976/1978) argues that resistance exists where there is power, and that in fact the existence of power relationships depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance (p. 95). Resistance, as we have seen, is ‘odd’, ‘irregular’, ‘spontaneous’, ‘plural’ (p. 96), and, we might deduce from this intrinsically (if such a thing can be claimed) queer. Understood as such, resistance speaks to the paradox raised earlier, that calls into question the ability of identities constructed in these discourses of power to challenge these very processes.¹¹

In *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Sedgwick (1950–2009) saw Foucault’s ‘machinery’ for producing the truth of sex as replicated in the closet. The closet, according to Sedgwick, was a site that shaped and gave consistency to gay identity and culture, and by extension became “inexhaustibly productive of modern Western culture and history at large” (1990, p. 68). Perhaps more importantly for our purposes, Sedgwick thus saw the closet as “the defining structure for gay oppression in this century” (1990, p. 71). Situating the closet as the site both of the production of queer identities (although she did not use this term) and, simultaneously as generative of non-queer identities, Sedgwick demonstrated that queer identities helped to define the entire system of cultural meanings.

Sedgwick also pointed to “the multiple, unstable ways in which people may or may not be different to each other” (1990, p. 23). In doing so, Sedgwick (1990)

¹¹ Jagose (1996) explains this further, by positing that: “Given the extent of its commitment to denaturalization, queer itself [cannot have] a consistent set of characteristics.... [Q]ueer opts for denaturalization as its primary strategy.... By refusing to crystallize in any specific form, queer maintains a relation of resistance to whatever constitutes the normal” (pp. 96-99).

contested the “chronic ... endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition” (p. 1) as fundamentally incoherent and diminished the importance of authoritative categories in favour of individual self-perception in the creation and maintenance of sexual practice and identity (p. 22-27).

The project of denaturalizing (then) current understandings of sexuality was furthered by Sedgwick in *Tendencies* (1993) when she claimed that queer can refer to:

the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t be* made) to signify monolithically (1993, p. 7).

Sedgwick’s insistence, on the multiple ways that gender and sexuality can be considered, frustrated the binary of homosexuality-heterosexuality. It also highlighted sexual identities as non-essentialist (paying homage to Foucault’s poststructuralist, deconstructivist influence) and has been a key motif in the queer theoretical project that works against normalizing discourses.

Following on from Butler’s interest in performativity, Sedgwick (1993) also spoke of queer as “hing[ing] much more radically and explicitly on a person’s undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation” (p. 8). This notion of identity as performative was first suggested by Butler (1956–) in a 1988 article in *Theatre Journal*. Taking Simone de Beauvoir’s now famous quote “one is not born, but, rather, *becomes* a woman,” as her inspiration, Butler argued that “gender is in no way a stable identity ... rather it is an identity constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (p. 519).

Importantly, Butler (1988) does not conceive of the performativity of ‘gender’ as indicative of some ‘interior self.’ Instead, she explicitly states that “Gender reality is performative which means ... that it is real only to the extent that it is performed... [G]ender is an ‘act,’ broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority” (p. 527–528). That is to say, any notion we have of gender being intrinsic to our being is an illusion. But it is, as Butler proposes, “*a compelling illusion*” (my emphasis) and “object of *belief*” (p. 520). Crucially, it must be understood that Butler does not think of people *per se* as queer, but that gender performance is queer. That is, the multiple ways in which people *act* and constitute their performance as real, are queer, but the fact that there are multiple ways of being, in and of itself, is normal. The queer thing is the way that normalcy is dependent on certain types of sexuality, and that “we” attempt to define, categorize, and identify these act/ processes as “things.” In this way queer can be seen to be not just about people but the performance and the discourse(s) that surround them.

In Butler’s model, the gendered body “enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives” (1988, p. 526). That is to say, gender is not fully chosen, but neither is it inscribed upon the individual. Butler offers a way of understanding the tension in identity that some may feel by highlighting the way in which “gender is made to comply with a model of truth and falsity which ... contradicts its own performative fluidity” (p. 528). Gesturing towards the lived experience of those who identify as queer, she demonstrates the way the performativity of gender results in the construction of

regulations that are socially controlled, and the attendant punishments that accrue for performing gender incorrectly.

While Butler's theory arguably presents as abstract, there are very real implications of the performativity of gender. In *Gender Trouble*,¹² Butler (1990) expands on this concept, for example, by stating that notions of an essential sex are created as a result of the performed *gender reality*. This is interesting for at least two reasons. Firstly, Butler extends the idea of gender being socially constructed to the notion of sex; secondly, sex is seen as necessitated by gender, which disrupts normative understandings of the relationship between the two terms. So while the idea of some sort of essentialized sex can be seen as "part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative character" (p. 180), in reality sex is socially constructed, just as gender is.

Importantly, the idea of an essential sex (which is reinforced by the process of repetitive social performances) limits the expression of different sex and gender compositions; instead, heterosexuality is rendered as the default and the primary location of power. In a nod to Foucault, however, Butler suggests that "it is only *within* the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible" (p. 185). Specifically, the site of the construction of these illusory essentialized notions of sex and gender is also the site of resistance, demonstrating (as Foucault argued) that resistance resides in power.

¹² *Gender Trouble*, it should be remembered, is offered as a feminist text.

2.1 Why religion?

Queer theory expresses a revolutionary challenge “not only to compulsory heterosexuality but to the entire panoply of heterosexist fundamentalism still underlying almost all societal and political discourse in the 21st century” (Scherer 2010, p. 2). As sites of the construction of heterosexist fundamentalism and heteronormativity religious traditions must be interrogated as discourses that impact the lives of millions of people across the globe, whether they are practitioners or not. As Yip (2010) has noted there is a great deal of truth in the prevailing view that organized religions lag behind the secular sphere in embracing sexual diversity as a social reality, a point that is particularly germane when considering the intrasection of religious and sexual identity/identities.

Yet despite the comparatively large array of religious discourse concerning sexuality Jordan (2007) has suggested that there is a relative absence of religion in queer theory itself (p. 563–654). He has criticized this state of affairs by arguing that motives based on the suspicion of religious traditions as *the enemy* “cannot justify neglecting religion at a moment when queer lives in many places are instructed and surrounded by it” (p. 563). Armour has supported this view mostly recently in 2010, by arguing that queer theory must engage with religion given, for example, the current controversy over homosexuality within Christianity, which as a global religion has worldwide ramifications and threatens the wellbeing of nonheterosexual persons (Armour, 2010, p. 108).

And just as queer theory disrupts the nonheterosexual/straight binary, so does it offer a way of examining the dichotomy that is presumed to exist between sexuality and

spirituality. While Hunt (2005) suggests that religion can be a strong source of identity for people in a late-modern world, providing ethical and personal narratives (p. 35), Gross and Yip (2010) also highlight that while this is the case, “religiosity/spirituality and sexuality mutually inform, enrich, and indeed empower and *constrain* each other in the management of meaningful identities and lives” (p. 42, my emphasis). Rahman (2010) defends this overlap and potential for dissonance in identity negotiation as a prime reason for using queer theory.

Thus it is precisely because of this connection that Rahman has suggested, “queer theory can help us think about these issues of researching intersectionality precisely because it is focused on the uncertainties of identity categories” (p. 944). Indeed Hutchins (2006) raises the question as to what (and who) essentialism “obscures, invisibilizes, and excludes” (p. 124). As she warns: “When a person is asked to define herself by a single, defined category, such as ‘lesbian’, ... she is being asked to choose *between* parts of herself, to claim that one identifying characteristic or behaviour, such as sexual orientation is more *essential* to her being than another” (p. 124). Rahman (2010) extends this idea by highlighting the fact that “the lived experiences ... of gay Muslims illuminates their identities as always ontologically deferred from the dominant identities of ‘gay’ and ‘Muslim’” (p. 946).

Nonheterosexual Muslims, Rahman suggests, are seen as occupying an impossible identity. Yet the disruption of identity, he claims, comes “in challenging the ontological coherence of these dominant identity narratives” (p. 952). As such, and as an

echo of Foucault, there are never *true* selves, only *possible* selves (Rahman, 2010, p. 954).¹³ Queer theory, as a way of doing things differently, as a process of disruption of normativity acts as a source of imagination. I would argue that it is this interest in new possibilities, in a queer imagination, that leads Hutchins to ask: “Is it possible that we are constraining ourselves *politically* and *religiously*, as well as personally, by allowing acceptance to revolve around biological essentialism rather than a more creative way of being human?” (p. 125). The following chapters explore how these processes of religious and personal constraint operate, but also how young religious people in the UK and America are finding new ways of being and becoming.

¹³ As Butler (2001) states: “[T]he identity we say we are cannot possibly capture us, and marks immediately an excess and opacity which falls outside the terms of identity itself... any effort we make ‘to give an account of oneself’ will fail in order to approach being true. And as we ask to know the other, or ask that the other say, finally, who he or she is, it will be important that we do not expect an answer that will ever satisfy. And by not pursuing we let the other live, offering a recognition that is not based on knowledge, but on its limits” (p. 28).

Chapter 3

Queer/ing Youth

Halberstam (2005) holds that “[q]ueer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of the conventional forward-moving narratives of birth, marriage, reproduction, and death” (p. 27). As such, instead of seeing youth culture as generic, and as a stage on the way to adulthood, queer youth and queer youth culture can be seen to offer an opportunity to leave behind the (hetero)normative transition to adulthood (Halberstam, 2005, p. 44).

Driver (2008) claims this is important because youth culture narratives are generally constructed by adults, with the result that the very mechanisms that are supposed to “render queer youth intelligible and unified create pathos toward sexual minority youth ... at the same time undermin[e] possibilities for questioning the very terms of normality that abject queer youth differences in the first place” (p. 4). Talburt corroborates this position in stating that “adults position youth as essentially passive actors in a narrative of adult design” (p. 23). Crucially this “future-oriented narrative,” Talburt tells us, is designed to look out for “abnormalities that might inhibit proper progress” (p. 23).

So instead of thinking of youth as contingently driven by unchecked hormones and unintelligible (i.e. deviant, wrong) to adults, queer youth and queer youth culture deviate from the normative representations of youth (Filax, 2006, p. 37). Queering youth

culture allows us to understand youth and the institutions they inhabit as productive of identities and differences (Rasmussen, Rofes & Talburt, 2004, p. 3). And thus, in lieu of assuming youth to be generic, it recognizes that any given individual is comprised of multiple different overlapping and overlaying axes of influence, impression, and identity, which are considered not as abnormal, but as normally queer.

Some of the questions for which the following chapter will provide some insight, have already been raised by Talburt (2004):

How might we avoid repeating identities? How can we encourage practices that do not depend on the intelligibility that dominant adult narratives might presume to be necessary? How might adults come to see the identities we and youth adopt as creative rather than as evolving copies? (p. 35)

In order to be able to answer these questions, and analyze the development of intersecting identities, it is important to consider three themes found in queer theory that can often be applied to nonheterosexual experience.

3.1 Heteronormativity

Berlant and Warner define heteronormativity as “the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality not only coherent—that is, organized as a sexuality—but also privileged” (1998, p. 565, n.2); this dominant social construction of gender and sexuality can be critiqued by queer theory in three ways.

Firstly, heteronormativity dichotomizes heterosexuality and nonheterosexuality. Although heteronormativity is never absolutely coherent in that it sometimes takes contradictory forms (Sullivan, 2005, p. 132), it maintains an identifiable characteristic of

depicting heterosexuality as the privileged norm and nonheterosexuality as deviant, as defined by its distance from the normative.

Secondly, Clarke, Ellis, Peel & Riggs (2010) show us that by creating such a stark binary, heteronormativity homogenizes nonheterosexuality into one essentialized group (p. 119), with nonheterosexual persons defined as the *Other* in this process.

Lastly, the privileging of heterosexuality obfuscates Foucault's (1976/1978) description of the creation of medicalized sexual orientations and gender through discourses of power. This critique of heterosexuality reveals how its hegemony is rendered virtually invisible, while at the same time it disguises its cultural construction as natural, and thus compelled and licensed to police all sexuality.

We are told by Abes and Kasch (2007) that queer theory provides a framework for resisting heteronormativity (p. 621). However, as Gloria Filax (2006) rightly points out, "Because heteronormativity permeates all social institutions (family, religion, work, leisure, law, education), challenging or queering this order has the effect of challenging common sense ideology pertaining to what it means to be a human being" (p. xv).

3.2 Performativity

The notion of performativity as suggested by Butler calls into question the idea of essentialism which challenges, as Hickey-Moody, Rasmussen and Harwood (2008) suggest, "the law of heterosexual coherence" (p. 126), and thus, as Rahman (2010) observes, our ontological status. Butler (1990) speculates that identity is always performative, by which she means it is constantly in the process of "constituting the

identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender [and sexual orientation] is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (p. 25). In this model, agency is a result of the fact that, because identity is performance, continuously reiterated, it is open to contestation. That is to say, performativity acknowledges that actions create identity, and are not the product of a preexisting identity.

Particularly germane to this paper, because “reiterations are never simply replicas of the same” (Butler, 1993, p. 226), performativity recognizes that identity is constantly in flux. And, as Hickey-Moody et al. (2008, p. 127) have correctly asked, “If gender and sexuality are configured through experiential relations then connections between certain ideas of self and associated or ensuing feelings, emotional affects and logical systems, it is important to consider how such ideas of self may be constantly reconfigured....” Repetition, however, can also have the effect of creating a sense of stable identity, which comes about through the “sedimentation” of repetitions over time (Butler, 1993, p. 15).

3.3 Liminality

Borrowed from the Latin *limen*, meaning threshold, the term *liminality* was first brought into use by van Gennep, and later developed by Victor Turner. Sometimes thought of as being a neutral in-between (liminal) phase between different stages, liminal in this context refers to an active, transitional period of instability (van Gennep, 1960). That is to say, liminality represents a state of flux between two distinct and stable stages of being, and can be understood to represent a period that is, as we have suggested with

queer youth culture, “lived ‘otherwise,’ outside of the conventional life narratives of family and reproduction” (Halberstam, 2008, p. 28). Indeed, as Victor Turner (2002) claims, in a nod towards the deliberate *deviance* of nonheterosexual people and in recognition of identities as culturally constructed that:

[t]he attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* (“threshold people”) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these people elude or slip through the networks of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial (p. 359).

In terms of the lived experience of young people, Abes and Kasch (2007) highlight that this idea of liminality is crucial to understanding how heteronormativity and performativity manifest themselves (p. 621). With regard to heteronormativity, which as we have seen presents heterosexuality and nonheterosexuality as dimorphic, liminality acts as a strategy of resistance. Liminality integrates aspects of both heterosexuality and nonheterosexuality in an identity that is “betwixt and between” and cannot be classified by any preexisting normative definitions of sexuality.

Given that liminality allows for the performativity of gender and sexuality, it is not a state of being, but a state of doing, or rather, because it is transitional, liminality is a process of becoming. Abes and Kasch (2007) develop this idea by stating that “[t]he ‘becoming’ quality of liminality emphasizes the unstable meaning of gender and sexuality, reflecting queer theory’s resistance to stable identities” (p. 622). That is to say, an understanding of liminality thus allows us to consider a nuanced conception of the performative self, working in resistance against heteronormativity.

Chapter 4

Religious, Spiritual, and Sexual Identity Negotiation

Driver (2008) cautions that: “The continual use of statistics to frame the experiences of queer youth ends up constructing them as subjects in crisis needing to be rescued and cared for by others.” As such, the data that is presented in this chapter is largely qualitative and narrative in nature. Using this type of data acknowledges the complexities of religious young peoples’ lives, and embraces the challenges of growing up with contradictions, while contesting the need for intelligibility that dominant adult narratives might presume to be necessary (Talbert, 2004, p. 34). In the following pages, the narratives of four young nonheterosexual people from the UK and USA share how they negotiate their religious and sexual identities. While the participants have the ability to define what religion, spirituality, and sexuality mean to them, it is perhaps worth offering what is, or could be, suggested by the terms religion and spirituality as a framework for discussion.

For the purposes of this paper, the definition of religion will be taken from a sociological standpoint, as presented by Munt (2010) in *Queer Spiritual Spaces*:

[Religion] usually operat[es] through the prism of theism or approved deities, proscribes [*sic*] morality and a way of life, imposes cultural norms and traditions and even ethnic identity. Religion is habitually understood as the outward, organised expression of an inner spirituality, but it can also be read as *opposed* to spirituality and criticised for being obdurate, institutionalised and chiefly archived in ritual customs preserved inside archaic, designated and patriarchal sacred spaces (p. 9).

This definition is useful for us as it points towards the potential for heteronormativity within religions, the way in which religions can be seen as antithetical to spirituality, and how religions operate across time, space, and multiple intersecting types (e.g. ethnic).

Until relatively recently the term spirituality was used to refer to the *interior* dimension of *traditional* religion. Yet particularly in the context of young people, spirituality is now often depicted as diametrically opposed to religion, in the sense of *spiritual-but-not-religious* (Freitas, 2008; Fuller, 2001; Regnerus, 2007). As a personal construction, Wuthnow (1998) as previously observed, suggests to us that spirituality:

at its core consists of all the beliefs and activities by which individuals attempt to relate their lives to God or to a divine being or some other conception of a transcendent reality.... [S]tatus is attained through negotiation. A person does not have an ascribed identity or attain an achieved identity but creates an identity by negotiating among a wide range of materials (pp. viii–9).

According to Yip (2002), there are two fundamental parts to religiosity, which manifest themselves as firstly “the adherence to doctrines and beliefs, propagated by the religious authority structures” and secondly as “the observance of rituals and practices, led by such structures, within a communal religious context” (p. 206). Spirituality, in contrast, Yip informs us, depicts Wuthnow’s process of negotiation as “an internal journey of exploration and discovery of the divine, steered by the self, with emphasis on personal lived experiences” (p. 206).

4.1 Donna Freitas: Sex and the Soul

The accounts in *Sex and the Soul* are taken from the study ‘Sexuality and Spirituality in American College Life’, based on 111 face-to-face interviews over the period of a year,

across seven campuses falling into the categories of Evangelical, Catholic, nonreligious private, and public. Freitas' conception of sexuality tends towards what is (or is not) done physically, which as Wilcox (2003) has argued narrows nonheterosexual people's sexual orientations from identities to acts. However, several nonheterosexual students articulate their struggle in negotiating sexual and religious/spiritual identities in ways that go beyond this constricted view.

4.1.1 Molly

Molly is identified as a born-again Christian, at an Evangelical college, who is also a liberal, a feminist, and a bisexual (Freitas, 2008, p. 59). Freitas writes that Molly "found it impossible to talk about [her] religious identity without talking about her sexual identity" (p. 190):

I've had a lot of doubt in my faith and in my struggles [but in social justice movements] is where I felt accepted in having those struggles and felt like I didn't necessarily have to fix everything tomorrow. You know what I mean: I don't have to come to any solid conclusions tomorrow because there are so many people, who, well, we call each other the "Heretics Anonymous".... We believe heretical things, but we're still Christians and very strong Christians in some ways, but without ascribing to *all* of the doctrines.... I know that there is a presence in my life, a good and affirming presence and as long as that's there I don't have to worry about the letter of the law. I need to worry about practicing and loving, and that's where a lot of us find ourselves. We're like, "OK. Let's love God and love each other.... I'm not out here because quite frankly I'd rather people see me as just Molly instead of as bisexual Molly.... It's not something I feel compelled to tell people because it's something I'm still not sure about.... It's kind of all soupy and amorphous.... I think when you get closer to other people, I think you get closer to God too (pp. 59–62, p. 189).

Molly's liminal status is indicated by her "amorphous" sexuality and her "heretical" religiosity. Instead of concentrating on *being* an identity (as some type of finished

article), Molly recognizes the value of doing, of becoming, in her need “to worry about practicing and loving.” In this way Molly completes what Jakobsen (1998) suggests is “the Foucauldian move from human being to human doing” (p. 516). Instead of considering her nonheterosexual selfhood as a noun (as a static identity), Molly sees it as a verb—of action (Sullivan, 2003, p. 50)—and in this way reminds us of Fuss (1991) who stated that: “sexual identity may be less a function of knowledge than performance, or, in Foucauldian terms, less a matter of final discovery than perpetual invention” (pp. 6–7).

Intrinsic to her understanding of self is Molly’s prioritizing of experience above identity. In this way, Molly demonstrates the performativity of identity by constructing identity as true to experience, as opposed to experience predicated on some preexisting identity. Her confidence that “[things don’t] have to be fixed tomorrow” indicates that she is comfortable in this liminal stage, resisting the normative drive to some sort of *full* adulthood.

Molly connects her sexual identity to her religious identity primarily through the motifs of love and relationship. She tells us that she and her friends “love God and love each other,” and that “when you get closer to other people, I think you get closer to God too.” Yet despite the fact that Molly is a (literally) card-carrying member of Heretics Anonymous, and manages to maintain a confidence that God is there for her even she does not stick to the letter of the law, this does not seem to transfer over to her sexual identity. Part of the reason for this may be the heteronormative assumption present on many Evangelical college campuses (Freitas, 2008, p. 118) that her bisexuality is passing

phase, which Freitas communicates by telling us that Molly “believes that, like most of her Christian friends, she will marry a man eventually” (p. 189).

Christian theology, it is argued by some, is unable to hold the discourse of *ambiguity* (Carrette, 2004, p. 218); something that Molly perhaps understands. Specifically, Carrette suggests that the discourse surrounding sexuality has privileged a singular sexual identity (heterosexuality), which mimics and has been cultivated by the hegemonic Christian discourse of a singular religious identity (monotheism). As such, the possibility of diversity is denied; and in this way Christianity can be seen as a means of legitimizing and policing sexual behaviours/identities, meaning that sexual identity is actually wrapped up in religious identity, and vice versa (p. 218). By alluding to her bisexual identity, Molly disrupts this narrative of singularity, with the effect that a queering of her sexual identity simultaneously queers her spiritual identity (displaying their interrelatedness), and questions the idea of a fixed truth (p. 227).

Interestingly, Molly’s reference to a compulsion to tell, reminds us of the Christian imperative to confess. The discourse of confession also reminds us that, for young religious people, it can often occur in a power dynamic with adults. As Foucault (1976/1978) contends:

[O]ne does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile; a ritual in which the truth is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to be formulated (pp. 61–62).

Foucault's point is that through the confessional, sexuality has become identified with the whole truth about a person and therefore occupies a strategic site for the regulation of individuals and populations. While Molly does not reject her bisexuality—she contends that “it is important to be open, comfortable and affirming about being a ‘sexual being’” (p. 189)—she does compartmentalize her religious and sexual identities (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Yip, 2011). However, this can be read perhaps as a form of resistance. As Halberstam (2008) points out: “Partial identities can be carried forward into adulthood in terms of a politics of refusal—the refusal to grow up and enter the heteronormative adulthoods implied by these concepts of progress and maturity” (p. 47). By choosing not to publicly confess her sexuality, Molly privileges unintelligibility while she simultaneously resists “the will to know.”

4.1.2 Steven

Freitas reports that Steven, an Evangelical college student who considers himself as spiritual but not religious, is “intensely ambivalent about sex and about his sexual orientation” (2008, p. 187):

I always thought it was bad. But I mean, like, the sexual experience[s] I've had are masturbating with [other boys], but that was only a couple [of] times. And definitely, I mean, I would *never* want to do that again. I think it was wrong, and I felt it was wrong. I think it, the problem, is on my head.... But I'm obviously normal as a human being. I mean, I have sexual desires ... but the homosexual thing, I think, that, um, I don't know. I don't think I'm biologically homosexual. I think it's something that maybe, I don't know what caused it when I was in middle school, but it's just something I messed with. And, um, maybe it's related to my experience [of] trying to ignore my sexuality for most of my life.... I used to see God in everything, and now I just see chance.... But mostly, for me personally... I'm always reading the Bible, but now when I read the Bible ... I

find contradictions.... I'm assuming there's something wrong with the logic *I'm using* (pp. 187–188).

Steven's story, and comment that "I don't think I'm biologically homosexual" highlights how heteronormativity has privileged heterosexuality in his eyes as the 'natural,' and appropriate default. It also draws attention to common discourses within Abrahamic religions that suggest homosexuality is simply behavioural and something one has learned in the past and can unlearn in the future (Wilcox, 2003, p. 325). Further, an analysis using queer theory makes apparent that Steven's desire to be 'normal' demonstrates how homosexuality is 'othered' through heteronormativity and normative sexual attractions, without revealing that heterosexuality is also a cultural construct. Instead of embracing his liminality as Molly did, Steven appears ill at ease with his situation, which we observe in his comment "I'm assuming there's something wrong with the logic *I'm using*." A queer analysis of Steven's experience brings to the foreground how power structures have shaped his narrative.

While Steven's understanding of God and his faith depend on his understanding of his sexuality (given that the dissonance that Steven observes in his sexual identity is mirroring itself in his spiritual identity) he is unable to reconcile his intersecting spiritual and sexual identities, unlike Molly who it appears has made a deliberate choice not to. The dissonance he feels, Steven suggests, is in part because he tried to ignore sexuality for most of his life, which Yip (2011) characterizes as the "suppression of one's sexuality in order not to undermine belonging to a religious community" (p. 8) as a form of rejection of sexual identity. This suppression highlights the impact on psychological

well-being that this type of identity negotiation can have. As Gross (2008) contends, “Hiding one’s homosexuality may result in a lot of suffering related to feeling guilty because of one’s transgressive sexuality, but also one’s lack of authenticity” (p. 98).

Moreover, Helminiak (2006) suggests that the ramifications can be spiritual as well: “[I]f people are uncomfortable with their sexuality, including homosexuality, they cannot achieve spiritual insight or transforming spiritual experience” (p. 35). In Steven’s eyes his sexual orientation precludes his religious identity and vice versa, demonstrating the tension and conflict that many young religious and spiritual people experience.

4.2 Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip: Stories from the UK

Yip has led and participated in a number of projects in the UK that have collected quantitative and qualitative data about the lived experiences of both nonheterosexual and heterosexual religious people of a variety of ages. The projects that this paper uses are the recent *Religion, Youth and Sexuality*, and *Queer Spiritual Spaces*.

4.2.1 Alyson

Alyson’s transcribed video journal is extracted from the *Religion, Youth and Sexuality* project, and has been edited for continuity:

I suppose I’ve grown up compartmentalizing bits of my life.... because I just divide things into compartments like my girlfriends and my parents, they don’t meet.... And in some ways my gay friends and [straight friends].... At one point I was in the Catholic students group.... Catholic Students’ Society and the LGBT Society and I had these two completely [different] set of friends and they never met. And I’m quite good at that and I don’t think it is necessarily a good thing.... For 10 years I was keeping bits of my life completely separate.... I had a queer life, I had a queer community in [city] and for a year I moved back with my parents.... But where we live there is not really any kind of gay community and I

think that in some ways I really, really miss that. Just having the assumption that not everyone here is straight.... And anyway, it was just this very isolated experience really and I think in some ways that had made me realize that actually I do want these parts of my life to be connected together, and for things to be less disjointed and less isolated and less compartmentalized (Yip, 2011, p. 7).

Unlike Molly or Steven, Alyson openly declares the way that she has compartmentalized her sexual and religious identities, situating her firmly “betwixt and between” her spiritual and sexual identities. In other words Alyson’s life appears to be one “lived ‘otherwise,’ outside of the conventional life narratives of family and reproduction” as Halberstam (2005, p. 28) phrases it. However, despite the isolation Alyson mentions, her experience can on one level be seen to be a generative experience which has called into question the dominance of heteronormative binaries.

Particularly relevant to Alyson’s case is Warner’s claim (1993) that notions of community and culture are, in fact, problematic for nonheterosexual people: “Much of lesbian and gay history is about noncommunity, and ... dispersal rather than localization continues to be that definitive of queer understanding” (p. xxv). As Filax (2006) maintains: “The location of queer people—the diasporic space—is often the closet” (p. xvi).¹⁴

Despite Alyson’s previous compartmentalization of her identities, her final comments suggest movement towards integration and a fuller understanding that multiple instances of identity do not have to exist dichotomously, but are capable of being

¹⁴ The notions of space and economic status in relation to identity negotiation and queer theory are both prominent in Alyson’s narrative, and present opportunities for further research but are beyond the scope of this paper.

interwoven, fused. This enables us to understand Abes and Kasch's (2007) claim that if we start "from the perspective that [young people's] identities are fused [it] prompts a focus on how heteronormativity contributes to [their] perceptions of identity dimensions as distinct" (p. 633).

4.2.2 Jemimah

I think there are particular gifts that come by being in a sexual minority and having to remake your spirituality outside of the mainstream of a faith. I think the gift in that is that we have to learn to love and to practise our faith in a different way, and we have to consider what purpose creation might have in having created us. I think there is always a gift in being marginalised and that gift is always a way of transforming the notion of identity altogether into something higher, it's actually to transcend stuff. And I think it is interesting, that people that are very often held up as models are people like Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela. And the reason why they are held up as icons is because people see them as having transcended the conditions that produced their struggle. Although that is a bit clichéd, I think there is some truth in that; that every time you are marginalised, it is an opportunity actually from a spiritual point of view to loosen your partial identification as something or other; and have a higher goal, a higher identity.... We experience exclusion both in the way scripture is understood and expounded and in the way that religious worship and faith practice is actually set up. There is no blueprint for our participation in those things and sometimes we are excluded or executed or eliminated explicitly and sometimes implicitly. And that is the story of queer sexuality anyway in society at large [so] why should it be any different in religion? It's more acute in religion because people think they've got the word of god behind them.... So actually the identity of being a lesbian or the lived experience of being a lesbian or the combination of the two has made me search for a more inclusive spiritual path in part that has been an influence, as well as being a woman had been an influence because I would obviously never accept anything that says I was less than a man in terms of my relationship to god (Yip, 2011, p. 12).

One of the key points that Jemimah's story shows is that sexuality and spirituality are not necessarily antagonistic, but that on the contrary, they are "complementary, interdependent, and inseparable" (Helminiak, 2006, p. 35). From a queer perspective, we

observe that Jemimah is reconstructing external authority by resisting the binary either/or logic of heteronormativity and destabilizing structures it creates. In declaring her sexual minority status as a “gift,” Jemimah enacts an identity that has redefined her own identity perceptions in relationship to external influences (i.e. developing toward self-authorship), as she simultaneously redefines the meaning of those same external influences (i.e., deconstructing and reconstructing the power structures that have produced her “struggle”).

Interestingly, Jemimah differentiates between the notion of lesbian identity and lived experience, alluding to Butler’s concept of performativity, and of the lived experience as the “stylized repetition of acts” and her identity resulting from a process of sedimentation. Specifically, Jemimah states that “every time you are marginalised, it is an opportunity actually from a spiritual point of view to loosen your partial identification as something or other.” She seems to recognize the violence that essentialism can cause, and the way in which having to foreground one identity over another forces people to choose a particular identity, to choose “*between* parts of herself, to claim that one identifying characteristic or behaviour, such as sexual orientation is more *essential* to her being than another” (Hutchins, 2006, p. 124).

In general Jemimah’s negotiation of religious identity is indicative of religious individualism, which is corroborated by Hunt (2005) as well as Dufour (2000) who compares the use of religion as a resource to a process of ‘sifting’:

Sifting is a process by which many people construct cohesive non-conflicted identities out of potentially conflicted ones. This process involves trying-on [*sic*]

various practices and attitudes of a given reference group, evaluating them based on one's personal values, needs, or feelings, and then either identifying them or 'screening them out' of one's identity (p. 104).

Alexander and Yescavage (2009) remind us that: "We have in the past struggled with how to 'identify', having bought into the socio-cultural pressure to 'have' an identity. More recently, though, we have enjoyed the *play* of identities, seeing identity as something 'under construction'" (p. 56) Instead of seeing her outsider sexual status in binary opposition to her religious identity, Jemimah has rearticulated what this outlaw position means *within* her faith, as a form of serious play. As Yip (2007) phrases it, Jemimah has "relocate[d] interpretive authority from religious authority structures to [her] self" (p. 84), and is playing "'with' and 'in' the mechanisms or motions by which categorical identity is established, instituted, and circumscribed" (Hutchins, 2006, p. 132), consequently demonstrating the possibility of integrating religious and sexual identities. And her description of her identity work as transcendental alludes to the way in which nonheterosexual identity can be said to "exceed the limits of ... categorization" and contain "something of the beyond of human experience" (Munt, 2010, p. 17).

4.3 Discussion

Sexual identity, we have seen, can develop while religious identity is also taking shape, and this co-development can create a potential conflict for young people who hear competing claims about identity and behaviour. As Wexler (1992) observed of young people he studied in schools: "They were not struggling to become nobody, some high postmodernist definition of a decentered self. They wanted to be somebody, a real and

presentable self, and one anchored in the verifying eyes of the friends whom they came to school to meet” (as cited in Rasmussen et al., 2004, p. 6). To a greater or lesser extent, this is no different to the young people whose experiences we have just read.

Particularly important is that far from seeing their sexual and spiritual/religious identities in binary opposition, Steven, Molly, Alyson, and Jemimah see them, in different ways, as intimately connected. A result of this fluidity both in sexual identity and spiritual/religious identity is that, as Bartoli and Gillem (2008) explain: “Depending on how one’s religious and sexual identities intersect at different points in time, both the essence of the conflict and its resolution might look rather different. At times, the conflict may arise partly from the fact that neither identity has been allowed to flourish sufficiently” (p. 205). As such, how the young people negotiate these intersecting identities takes different forms.

Regales (2008) states that “[i]dentity construction is especially painful and awkward to negotiate when also navigating the tricks and turns of another facet of your identity [and] when the differing facets may come into conflict” (p. 93); this is particularly true of Steven’s story from the Evangelical college. Steven demonstrates the way in which for some young people the relationship between the two is one of tension and conflict. As Yip et al. (2011) highlight, those who experience tension and conflict “[are] painfully aware of the gap between the dominant sexual norms perpetuated in their religious communities and the choices they made in this respect” (p. 14). By deliberately

ignoring his sexuality, Steven also exhibits how some young people compartmentalize their religious and sexual identities, foregrounding one at the expense of the other.

Molly also displays a tendency towards compartmentalization, although in her case this choice seems to be more considered than Steven's. One of the reasons that may be attributed to Molly's stance is that deliberately choosing compartmentalization reduced the potential for conflict, as may occur if she 'came out' as bisexual.

In Alyson's case, her compartmentalization appears to have occurred because she did not know how else to manage and is neither a deliberate, positive choice as it is for Molly, nor borne out of desperation as in Steven's case. Jemimah is the only participant to have achieved harmony between her spiritual and sexual identities; in fact, Jemimah uses her sexual minority status to inform her spiritual identity.

Importantly, the differing ways in which the four young people negotiate their identities also reveal how the liminality, heteronormativity, and performativity impact their lives and choices. It would seem that how the young people react to the dominance of heteronormativity depends on how they perceive performativity and liminality (even if they do not express it in these terms).

Steven's reaction to any divergence from heterosexuality is one of confusion. His attempts to understand who he is and what is happening are governed by his appeal to logic. He is unable to reconcile any nonheterosexual behaviour with his spiritual identity as he has previously divorced *any* sexual identity from his spiritual practice.

Steven appears not to regard his liminality as a positive, but as something that has disrupted his state of *being*. A process of *becoming* seems not to make sense as it cannot be analyzed fully with logic and stands against his spiritual and religious experience that has told him how and who to *be*. That is to say, Steven's experience of heteronormativity in a religious setting has coalesced his spiritual performativity as something real and essential, and in turn this has delegitimized the liminal process as a way of exploring different ways of becoming.

Molly has chosen to challenge heterosexuality and heteronormativity by self-identifying as bisexual. Her desire not to be labeled, however, reveals that she is not interested in replicating Foucault's machinery of truth, or with complying with the compulsion to confess. As has been mentioned previously, performativity recognizes that identity is constantly in flux, and Molly appears to recognize and embrace this by talking about her sexual identity as "soupy and amorphous". In acknowledging her performativity, Molly is able to embrace her liminality and thus challenges heteronormativity and identity categories.

Alyson appears to be heading towards some sort of accommodation in her spiritual and sexual identities. In doing so Alyson is challenging heterosexuality as a naturalized social-sexual norm. Instead, Alyson is promoting the notion of non-straightness and the performative, provisional, and contingent nature of identity, as opposed to any eternal sense of the term.

Jemimah has embraced her liminality and performativity, and has set them to work in contesting heteronormativity. Indeed, Jemimah has used performativity as a site of resistance in this struggle against heteronormativity and has made this possible by acknowledging the uncertainty and process of *becoming* that her liminality has afforded her. That is to say, instead of rejecting the unintelligible as a negative, Jemimah has adopted it as a way of disrupting heteronormative assumptions.

Common to all four young people is the way in which the basis of their faith is, as Yip (2002) highlights, “predicated on the employment of *their* own human reason, in *their* interpretation ... within the framework of *their* personal experience” (p. 207). For Steven this is manifested in his appeal to logic. In Molly’s case, despite the fact that she appears as a born-again Christian to be *religious* and does not identify as spiritual, the way in which she claims to be part of Heretics Anonymous displays the way in which creates an identity by negotiating among a wide range of materials; that is, achieving status through negotiation. In a similar way Alyson, in moving towards the integration of her sexual and spiritual identities, demonstrates how identity can be negotiated, as does Jemimah who sees her sexual identity as specifically influencing her spiritual practice. Indeed, in describing her sexual minority status as a gift, Jemimah portrays her sexual identity as inseparable from her spirituality. This type of identity formation calls into question the way in which religions prescribe “morality and a way of life” (Munt, 2010, p. 9). Specifically it demonstrates that for these young people, “[r]eligious authority

structures are weak and insignificant in ... the construction of ... faith, identity, and practice” (Yip, 2002, p. 209).

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Jemimah's story is particularly useful as it establishes best the link between queer theory and liminality, and ways in which heteronormativity can be resisted. Her liminal status accords directly with primary conceptions of how queer theory operates: as an on-going process of self-constitution, espousing no systematic set of principles, and as displaying a sort of counter-intuitiveness working against dominant modes of how people are supposed to be intelligible and thus *understandable*. This suggests that liminality, in its uncertainty, is at odds with what adult narratives of *being* propose and expect.

In particular, the different ways that the young people in this paper have explored their liminality, and sexual, spiritual, and religious identities reminds us of, “the multiple, unstable ways in which people may or may not be different to each other” (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 23). Specifically, liminality does not guarantee any measure of similarity in the people experiencing it, but like queer theory, it exists in opposition to the normative, it is ambiguous, and it is constantly reinventing itself. In this way the potential exists to prevent the repetition of essentialized identities by challenging identity categories. And by encouraging the positive aspects of liminality it is possible to encourage unintelligibility, which does not depend on the “intelligibility that dominant adult narratives presume to be necessary” (Talbut, 2004, p. 35). The point is that applying queer theory to liminal young people does not guarantee what the endpoint will be, but rather accentuates resistance to heteronormativity.

In addition, this focus attempts to reorient our thinking from “This is what we are” to “What might we *become*?” as a range of shifting possibilities not constrained by discourses of power that compel us to confess the truth of our existence as somehow fixed and coherent. As Foucault (1997c) puts it: “[T]he experience of the self is not a discovering of a truth hidden inside the self but an attempt to determine what one can and cannot do with one’s available freedom” (p. 276). So while for some it would seem that young people are searching for meaning and an ideology to which they can commit themselves (Yarhouse & Tan, 2005, p. 531), to move from a period of storm and stress, tension and conflict towards a unified identity as a precursor to adulthood (Moore and Rosenthal, 1995; Breger, 2009), queer theory interrupts this narrative.

As Driver (2007) points out: “The indeterminacy of young selfhood, in the process of formation, calls forth a theoretical focus on instability and change” (p. 97). This focus, along with the application of queer theory, allows us to read differently stories that may on the surface appear intelligible in the context of dominant adult narratives of youth. For example Molly’s choice not to label her sexuality/come out as nonheterosexual could be read as a result of her being ‘confused’—and this may well be the case. A queer re-reading, however, illuminates this choice as a strategy of resistance relative to possibilities not understood or endorsed by dominant narratives. What is perhaps even queerer is the way in which all of the young people, in different ways, want to reconcile their spiritual and sexual identities, while the religious traditions of which they are apart do not seem to facilitate this (at least not in the eyes of the young people).

In particular, whether it is through tension and conflict, compartmentalization, or integration, the young people in this paper have (to varying degrees) “prioritized personal experience against institutional authority” (Yip, 2007, p. 91). In doing so, these young people have demonstrated that they perceive their sexual selves and spiritual selves as inseparable.

Thus, young people’s understanding of their sexuality and spirituality as linked identities, even if irreconcilable (Freitas, 2008, p. 216), gives rise to an important consequence of young people queering their sexuality—it subsequently leads to a queering of spirituality and religion (Carrette, 2004; Yip, 2007) whether acknowledged or unacknowledged.

Talbert (2004) warns that:

It is possible to put resources, role models, curricular representations, or safe spaces to creative uses. However, educators and youth workers should not unequivocally support these changes as solutions or even necessary steps to “progress.” While these resources may be enabling for some, even many, I am concerned that their means and ends are based on singular narratives that repeat dominant narratives and exclude others (p. 33).

Championing resources or safe spaces as, for example, places for young people to *find themselves* is problematic. This is because encouraging this type of activity suggests that either (a) one *must* leave liminality (must often on a schedule associated with dominant adult narratives), (b) that the process of *becoming* is subordinate to the end goal of *being*, or (c) that there is an identifiable, intelligible, *true* self to be discovered, and thus, as Halperin (1995) phrased it, “a ‘self’ that constitutes the ‘truth’ of the person and functions as an object both of social regulation and of personal administration” (p. 95). Three

consequences of this last point are that (a) intelligibility is better than unintelligibility, (b) identities are repeated, and (c) dominant narratives of being and doing are preserved.

What liminality, the resistance of heteronormativity, and queer theory offer is not any material thing. Rather, queer theory as a way of articulating liminality—both of which can resist heteronormativity through performativity—offer young people the freedom *not to be*. That is not to say that this implies some sort of non-existence, but that together these concepts can open up a temporal space for young people to exist in, in a state of becoming.

Liminal existence, understood in terms of queer theory, resists “the will to know.” As a space and a process that is both uncertain and fluid, a queer liminality offers an extended scope of possibilities not yet endorsed to be realized (the imagination). It provides for ways of doing and being to be reconceptualized, outside of the boundaries of heteronormativity, not as a matter of final discovery but of perpetual invention. In doing so, a queer understanding of liminality can allow young people to negotiate the assumed divide between spiritual and sexual identities; and recognize the potential for sexual and spiritual identities to be mutually integrative in a dynamic, unstable matrix or “mesh of possibilities” as opposed to existing in static, binary opposition.

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