

We Pray What Our Bodies Know

Having been born and raised in Holiness Pentecostalism of the Deep South, I have know an experience of the Bible Belt panopticon described by Barton in her work.¹ Raised thirty miles East of here, I spent my home-schooled youth attending church camps, church revivals, and Bible Quiz meets where we competed on our comprehensive knowledge of entire books of the New Testament. As the then-closeted, Gay son of parents who were lay youth ministers in the Atlanta area, coming back to *this* place to speak on *this* topic is a pilgrimage that is, of course, fraught with the somatic recollections of a formative culture of persistent trauma. As a Gay child of the USAmerican Deep South, I grew up receiving cultural messages of religiously enforced homophobia and heteronormativity from church, family, and society.

To suggest that the South is merely “Christ haunted” is, to me, more than a bit absurd. Instead, the corporeal persistence of Christendom has been, in my experience, an inescapable presence to be reckoned with in the external world of my childhood and encoded in the formation of my internal structures of meaning making. The deep cultural contours of my own understanding of self, spirituality, personhood, and community are inextricably Southern and Christian. In this context, I internalized implicit and explicit messages that who I am in my body is not okay. Here, I learned how to pray to a god who was sending me to hell, and how to project an image of acceptable straight masculinity in attempt to survive. I hold up my own experience alongside the chorus of

¹ Bernadette Barton, *Pray the Gay Away: The Extraordinary Lives of Bible Belt Gays* (New York University Press: New York, 2012), Kindle Edition, Location 501.

voices brought to us by Barton, to suggest that there is something deeply formative about how we Bible Belt Gays are impacted by the alignment of cultural, religious, and familial attachments that form a dangerous belonging. More simply, we soak into our bodies the cultural messages in which we are steeped.

The category of the Panopticon, introduced by Barton, offers a way of understanding the dual bind of visibility and invisibility experienced by closeted LGBTIQA people.² Where one grows up under the external policing of acceptability, it is a quickly adopted strategy of survival to police one's own expression of queerness wherever that is possible, though for some this is not a possibility.³ As Barton's student Hank illustrates, people of color do not typically have the option to police their presentation in order to present as white in a culture that privileges and polices for white normativities.⁴ ⁵ Similarly, some queer folk have less ease than others in passing for the privileged social norms of straightness and gender conformity. For those of us able to pass, there are varying levels of shame regarding our survival through inauthenticity, and for those unable to pass, there are aching questions about our capacity to protect ourselves. For those unwilling or unable to pass, there is a related hyper-visibility. And for all, there are long-term impacts of shame, and a toll on our nervous systems due to

² For the remainder of this paper, I'll follow Barton's usage of "Gay" alongside my own preferred term Queer.

³ Barton, *Pray the Gay Away*, Location 501.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Location 3191.

⁵ Indeed, even terminology, such as "people of color," POC, QPOC, etc. may be categories that individuals embrace or not, but by virtue of existing in our society must recon with these imposed terms. Similarly, as Barton notes, in the Bible Belt the nuanced articulations of gender, orientation, identity and expression that are available to Queer folks in US American coastal cities are typically subsumed by the dominant culture categories of Gay and straight.

the heightened arousal of constant vigilance—whether to dangers of being outed, or dangers of being out.⁶

Whether through micro-aggressions, overt discrimination, violence, or neglect, there is a cost placed on our bodies. It is a sometimes invisible tax, extorted in conversations, legislation, beatings, expulsions, invalidations, sermons, and often in interactions with our own families. If we can accept that these messages become internalized in our enculturated ways of making meaning, may we also be persuaded that what neuroscience is revealing also holds true: these stressors become rooted in our biological systems and impact the body's capacity for attachment within relationships. The work of restoring capacity locates itself where it lives--not only in the biases of normativized thinking, but also in our bodies.

But what, then, is this work of repair? My own experience tells me that even though I have fled the Bible Belt, its welts remain with my body through internalized patterns of hyper-vigilance. Moreover, I have taken up residence in a West Coast city with iconoclastic sensibilities towards the cultural symbols of Christendom. In the Bible Belt, I can count on bumper stickers, yard signs, t-shirts, and billboards to function like surveillance cameras, making visible the functional policing of queerness. The relative invisibility of symbols of Pacific Northwest homophobia (much like our racism) only adds another layer of complexity, leaving us wondering if our experiences of discrimination and micro-aggressions are legitimately happening in the moment, or if they are shadowy projections from internalized oppression that shape our perceptions of present events. As we beg the question, “does ‘it get better’?” (more pointedly, does it get better

⁶ Ibid., Location 1693.

for anyone besides able-bodied, white Queers), I find that am interrupted by where this work is located. It is not in the theoretical or the theological. It is in my body, the location where trauma has taken hold.

In my process of writing this paper, I began by asking what Barton's work was revealing about the formational pattern language of oppression—embedded in the context of religion and prayer—that takes a toll on our bodies as Queer people in the Bible Belt. Moreover, I wanted to see if there might be relational and liturgical approaches to, in a sense, create a formational pattern language of liberation for Queer folks who still find religion compelling.⁷ But the further I looked into trauma theory, and the more carefully I considered the ways in which socially imposed normativities inflict harm on Queer bodies, I experienced my own bodily inter-ruptions. I wanted to suggest that prayer is a bodily category, born in hands, knees, lips, vocal chords, tongues, and tears; and that prayer as a means of inflicting trauma on the body might, when re-incorporated, also function for some as a fruitful means of re-facing trauma. But what I found was that *my own body* cries out; and these eruptions are grounding my theory in what my body has already been raising to the surface.

While theological frameworks making sense of trauma may appear beneficial, in her work *Spirit and Trauma*, Shelly Rambo describes the implications that trauma research reveals about the limited functionality of such theological movement, saying,

⁷ I am borrowing the notion of pattern language from the work of architects Alexander, Ishikawa, and Silverstein in their 1977 book *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction*. What they have observed sociologically in regards to the functional (and dysfunctional) patterns that emerge architecturally in a place, I have applied intrapersonally to the psychological movement of internalization of external cultural structures to create an internal world wherein external realities—in this case homophobia and heteronormativity—are built into the fabric of our internal worlds.

“Cognitive assurance may be helpful, but it is secondary. Instead, safety has to be restored on a more basic level, a level of the senses.”⁸ In essence, my theological meaning making was leading me down a path toward theory around prayer, while my trauma responses were interrupting, asking my to linger with the language of my body’s prayer. Describing the work of Theology in response to the body’s language of trauma, Rambo suggests, “the story itself must take different shape. It is more akin to testimony, a genre that, according to Elie Wiesel, emerges in response to the silencing force of violence. It is a genre that assumes that the whole story cannot be brought into speech.”⁹ And it is this reconfiguration from theorizing to bearing witness that has led me to break from conformity with my own internalized expectations of how this academic work was supposed to have looked.

In order to credibly explore these categories of trauma and address the ways in which they have been experienced by this particular Bible Belt Gay, I find that it is not only necessary to disclose my starting location for this work, but it is essential to allow this work to be mapped upon the body in which it lives—my body. Which is to say, my theoretical work is just an abstracted observation of the actual work which is happening interpersonally, neurochemically, and biophysically as I linger with “this topic”--or as I like to call it, my life and the lives of those around me. Moreover, if there is validity to my quest to find forms of prayer born out of particular, traumatized, Queer bodies, then a starting place may be the language my own body is already re-incorporating into prayer.

⁸ Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma* (Westminster John Knox: Lexington, Kentucky, 2010), 163.

⁹ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 163.

In my early stages of engaging with Barton's work, I quickly recognized several things. My reading was taking on a sense of dread. There was little to nothing in the interviewees' descriptions of their lives in the Bible Belt that surprised me. Still, each time I sat down with the text, I felt my stomach sink; my chest tighten; my breathing become erratic; at times my hands began to shake. Processing these bodily sensations with my therapist, I identified these sensations and the feeling of dread with the deep ache I had had growing up—the feeling that I was utterly isolated and alone within my family, church, and community. It was at this point that I sent out a message to a number of friends and members of my family of choice, asking for co-readers to accompany me in moving through all these narratives. I did not need cognitive assurance that I was no longer alone, as I had been as an adolescent. The texture of trauma is that it remains with us as a historical present. The presence of trauma within me required the actual presence of accompaniment of witnesses with me, in order to move through this work.

Trauma theorist, Bessel van der Kolk describes therapeutic engagement with historic trauma saying, "Clearly, treatment cannot address past trauma unless its reenactment in current relationships is vigorously taken up as well. Treatment often starts with prolonged negotiations centering around the issues of trust, power, and safety. Often little is accomplished until a major conflict arises and is negotiated successfully."¹⁰ This suggests that trauma lingers with us because it impacts our ability to trust. It does this in a way that weaves together bodily and relational aspects of

¹⁰ Bessel A. van der Kolk, "The Complexity of Adaptation to Trauma: Self-Regulation, Stimulus Discrimination, and Characterological Development," in *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*, Eds. Bessel van der Kolk, Alexander C. McFarlane, and Lars Weisaeth (The Guilford Press, New York: 2007), 197.

trauma. The passageway into bearing witness to past trauma is found in the ways that trauma currently emerges in our bodies, bearing with us in current relationships.

One of the people that I invited to accompany me as a witness in this work is the man who, over the last six years, has become my brother. Jeffrey and I connected with one another in graduate school and, through the slow weaving of relationship, he has become a trustworthy witness of much of my journey back through the trauma of growing up Gay in the culture of the Bible Belt. So, when I found myself furious with him in the middle of one of our conversations, I became curious about what was going on. What became apparent over several days of feeling angry with him, was that I had stumbled into *being able to be* angry with him. The words I returned to him were that I “need[ed] to thrash against” him, because I now could—a visceral rather than verbal expression that echoes a preverbal sense of attachment. It turns out that my anger, born out of frustration of feeling invisible as I tried to articulate parts of my adolescent experience that felt inarticulable, was not, in fact, too much for our relationship to bear. This straight, football-loving, New-Englander was able to participate with me in countering the traumatic narrative of isolation that I had lived with in my youth and that seeks to play itself out presently when my body tells me I am alone.

As Jeffrey and I waited, continuing to stay with these feelings coming up within my body, I found that being met in my anger allowed room for deeper experiences of grief at the immensity of neglect that I experienced as a Gay teenager. Between silences and deep breaths, I recounted stories of being at home alone and wandering into my parents’ closet, trying on first my father’s old football jersey, then my mother’s lingerie and lipstick, before finally opening up the gun case to contemplate the rifle my

father and grandfather had given me when I was five. It is with a great deal of discomfort that I tell this story now. Not only because it is a story that I kept to myself, barely accessible in the corners of my breathless memory, only to be told after Jeffrey and I had our argument. But because, if what I am suggesting is true—that prayer itself is a category of our bodies, then I must be open to the possibility that this dressing room scene—trying on gender presentations and suicide—was, both then and now, one of my body’s ways of praying in the midst of trauma. To tell this story now is uncomfortable, because it calls me back to my adolescent body, to my experience of my breathing and trembling in this moment, and my historic and present need for witnesses.

To take the time in the midst of this presentation—in the domain of the academy—to remain with the impact of trauma on my own body is, in terms of academic normativity, self-sabotage. Yet, to retreat from the particulars of my own body as I talk about the particular impacts of stress and trauma on Queer bodies is, in terms of my humanity, the real act of sabotage.

Throughout this project, I have experience muscle tightness and pain throughout my back. Through breathing, stretching, telling stories, hot baths, and therapeutic massage, I have engaged with this pain, allowing it to surface feelings and memories that needed to be named. This pain placed limitations on me, requiring modifications to my work and play. Because of my awareness of the co-occurrence of this pain with the work of this presentation, I deliberately engaged in what felt like a vulnerable act of disclosing this pain to others, asking for assistance and care, rather than silently bearing with my own pain, as my life’s narrative would invite me to do.

And in the final week before traveling back to Atlanta, the place where I received and internalized the messages of the Bible Belt, I felt an acute rise in anxiety. Carrying a stack of twenty books on trauma out of the library one week ago, I assured myself that I was just covering my bases--making sure that I was prepared to defend, intellectually, what I would be presenting to you here today. It wasn't until I got home and sat them down, that I was able to walk away from the books and name that the strategy of intellectualization had been a key to my survival and escape from home-schooled fundamentalism and my journey through a pentecostal undergraduate institution where colleagues were expelled for being gay. I learned to survive by using my mind to dissociate from the anxiety of my body. Indeed, my unconscious internalization of the external policing of my body runs so deep, that I found myself strategizing about my gender presentation for each leg of this trip--considering when it would be alright to wear nail polish or eyeliner. When I'm presenting? Okay. When I'm out with my sister in the town where I went to college? Maybe not. When I'm representing my employer that exercises its right to withhold workplace protections in the name of Christianity? That's dicey. In what could easily be the textbook description of internalized homophobia, van der Kolk describes the impact of trauma on a person's identity, saying:

If they have been victims of interpersonal abuse, they often identify with the aggressor and express hate for people who remind them of their own helplessness. Identifying with the aggressor seems to help them deal with their anxiety. Many of these patients have learned to behave competently and responsibly early in life, and continue to act that way as adults. Simultaneously, they tend to perceive themselves as being unloveable, despicable, and weak. . . . These patients often experience their competence as part of a 'cover story' with which they 'fake' their way through life.¹¹

¹¹ van der Kolk, "The Complexity of Adaptation to Trauma," 197-198.

To say that this description feels exposing hardly begins to name my own discomfort right now. It is my hunch that there are others of you in the room who may also catch sideways glimpses of yourselves in this mirror. By policing my persona according to the categories of dominantly accepted norms, I am praying to a god who writes destruction on my body. And yet, these stress responses of my body, along with the internal defensive structures they provoke served, for a time, as my body's prayer of survival. Listening to my body's expression of trauma that remains, I move into a different form of prayer--one which, bearing kindly with my own lament, might be a turn of repentance.

In conclusion, through the process of moving into the work of asking what Bible Belt Gays and others in similar situations may encounter by bearing witness to our trauma, I found ways of beginning to listen to what my body was already praying. The strategies I undertook to care for myself offer a particular instance of mapping the witness of trauma as bodily prayer. Out of this vulnerable work, I am able to engage with more freedom, tendering a sense of play that I hope will invite others to explore the utterances of their own bodies in regards to the trauma of enforced normativities. To suggest play as an outcome of bearing witness to trauma seems to be an absurd claim. Yet, play is the realm of imagination, where space is held open to try on new possibilities not available in what we have come to expect of the world around us. When asked, by Jeffrey, how I would like to celebrate finishing this presentation, it didn't take long for me to come up with a way of celebrating that I would never before have considered. "I want you to come for a drink with me at OutWest." I told him. He responded enthusiastically, not just because of the playfulness of me inviting him to accompany me to the local gay bar, but because of the visibility and vulnerability it

invites in both of us as we bear witness with each other. And this too, feels to me like prayer.

Bibliography

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