Small Towns, Boys and Ivory Towers: A Naked Academic

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> Mother will never understand
> Why you had to leave
> But the answers you seek
> Will never be found at home
> The love that you need
> Will never be found at home
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> Run away, turn away, run away, turn away, run away.
> (Bronski, Somerville, Steinbachek, 1984)

> At that period of my life the average length of my tenancy of any one room was about four months, so I would have described myself as having lived in Chelsea for a long time. I was there just over a year. Towards the end of my stay it transpired that I had only imagined that I was among friends.
> (Crisp, 1977, 103)

> Quentin was a regular taunt at school since *The Naked Civil Servant*
> was shown on TV. I watched it open-mouthed. A man on TV with dyed
> hair openly admitting, 'I am an effeminate homosexual for all the
> world to see.' Mum and Dad were embarrassed, I was glued to the TV.
> It was the talk of the school for weeks. Everyone thought he was
> 'disgusting'. I thought he was brave and stylish, I wanted to meet him.

> Kids at school had always called me a queer, a poof, and a pansy. I stopped caring. 'So what if I am? Takes one to know one.' I didn't want to be part of their boring little world.
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> (Boy George, 1995, 52)

In a small town with only two comprehensive schools, when you go to the one that two thirds of all the kids go to, and when you're the most effeminate of all the boys who aren't any good at games and who volunteer to be prefects and library monitors so that you can get into dinner early and avoid the cruelties of the dinner queue, you don't ever get used to be stared at; your life isn't a triumph, only adversity. Walking along the only shopping street in town on Saturday afternoons, getting my stiff, self-conscious limbs to propel me forward was an act of valour. I'd like to say that, like a teenage Boy George, I stuck my tongue out at the ruddy farmer's sons who laughed at me, or, that like Quentin, I sashayed on, revelling in my habitation of this incriminating body. I'd like to say that I swished my hips and sucked off the rugby players with their hairy legs and BO behind the gymn. I'd like to say that I dyed my hair orange and wore my mum's housecoats to go to the shops. I'd like to say that I at least volunteered at the local arts centre, all liberal beards and bad poetry. But I didn't do any of that. I just wanted to get away, desperately, to a place where I could start to think about what it might mean to be me. While waiting, I swotted on at school, and fantasised about my heroine, the evil space queen, Servalan, from the BBC series, *Blake's 7*.

The position of gay life-stories, or of coming-out narratives, in relation to some of the themes explored in this collection is ambiguous. This book approaches the notion of autobiography in terms of an exploration of de-legitimated narratives, and the ways in which the kinds of stories we can make about ourselves are circumscribed by so-called 'master' narratives, and other institutional discourse. The editors note recent developments in autobiography, related to ideas about the decline of the public sphere, the overlapping of ideas about fact and fiction, the narration of ordinariness, and the growing awareness of the importance of spatial considerations in life-telling. Yet gay life-telling has been an incredibly important part of homosexual/homophile/queer subcultural life for some time, as it has been for feminists throughout their second wave, and has been an important part of the liberation project since the early seventies, precisely because of the importance for gay people of destabilising the master-narrative of sexuality which inscribes silence as naturalised heterosexuality. To identify gayness, is not only an articulation notable for what it identifies (homosexual object-choice) but for its resistance of heterosexual naturalisation; that is, it is notable for its very speaking. Heterosexual people do not come out as heterosexual; gay and lesbian people are told to stop going on about it.

Thus the cultural visibility of homosexuality in a post-gay liberation time has been dependent on a whole range of different kinds of autobiographical narratives to a significant degree. Indeed the obligatory coming-out narrative which ahistorically begins with Shakespeare or some other early-modern, renaissance or nineteenth century ‘queer’ and ends with oneself has become such a cliché (and yet so fabulously seductive and important) as to be parodied in the title of one of the valuable volumes of autobiography published by the National Lesbian and Gay Survey, *Proust, Cole Porter, Michelangelo, Marc Almond and me: Writings by gay men on their lives and lifestyles from the archives of the National Lesbian and Gay Survey* (1993). What is notable about much gay autobiography is precisely that it narrates the stories of the ordinary, indeed, what makes it meaningful within a liberationist agenda is the ability of the ‘ordinary’ to overcome homophobia and repression and make different kinds of gay lives for themselves. Thus a whole range of volumes of autobiographical writings have been published, amongst which are the two volumes published by the National Lesbian and Gay Survey, which organise short autobiographical accounts into thematic and historical chapters, such as ‘Together’, ‘Virus’ and ‘Pride’; the published volumes taken from the Hall-Carpenter Archives; the collection edited by Kevin Porter and Jeffrey Weeks, which narrates the lives of homosexual men who lived in the pre-Wolfenden era; as well as work which directly addresses the importance of geographically specific life-stories, such as the Brighton Ourstory Project, which has so far published one volume, and regularly organises exhibitions and evenings as part of the annual Brighton Lesbian and Gay Pride Festival.[1] Furthermore, the relationship between truth and fiction, reality and performance, in a subculture which has made irony and performative guile one of its key modes of articulation, has always foregrounded issues that have become commonplace within the dominance of post-modernist accounts of western late-twentieth century culture.

Given all this then, it would seem that the subject of gay life stories would be well situated to address many of the themes of this collection: the political and cultural place of narratives from the margin, the validation of ‘ordinary’ (that is, non-famous) lives, the importance of space and location in autobiography, and the imbrication of truth and fiction in questions of autobiographical narration and memory. In this chapter, which is based upon my ‘politics of location’ (Rich, 1986), however, I want to question ways in which gay autobiography, either in published volumes, or in oral subculture, naturalises some key assumptions in the forms of the narratives we tell about ourselves. I shall be discussing ways in which we can understand coming-out narratives as functions of their ‘spatial metaphors’ (Pile & Thrift, 1995), that is, metaphors which connote the limitations and possibilities of subjectivities as functions of location, movement and cultural transformation. In coming-out narratives motifs of movement are the very axis of the transformation into gay subjectivity that enables the enunciation of the autobiographical narrator.

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[1] The National Lesbian and Gay Survey, ibid., and *What a Lesbian Looks Like: Writings by Lesbians on their Lives and Lifesyles* (London: Routledge, 1992); Hall-Carpenter Archives, *Walking After Midnight: Gay Men’s Life Stories* (London & New York: Routledge, 1989), and *Inventing Ourselves: Lesbian Life Stories* (London & New York: Routledge, 1989); Kevin Porter & Jeffrey Weeks, *Between the Acts: Lives of Homosexual Men 1885-1967* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991); Brighton Ourstory Project,

The lyrics to Bronski Beat's 1984 hit 'Small Town Boy', plaintively sung by Jimmy Sommerville, encapsulate a key element of gay autobiography, and that is the understanding that becoming gay, coming out, necessitates spatial progression, if only to be understood as running away from bullying and repression. Specifically, it involves leaving behind family and the small town bullies of the provinces, and geographically relocating to one of the city spaces understood to sustain an active gay subculture. For Quentin Crisp, the Mother of all Queens, this mobility did not end with his relocation to the cosmopolitan environment of London, but it did begin with the move there:

> At the end of one of the ominous but not hostile conversations with my father that took place during my mother's absence, he said, 'The trouble is you look like a male whore.'
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> This cheered me up a little as I had not then taken my final vows. I was in a twilit state between sin and virtue. The remark was the first acknowledgement that he had ever made of any part of my problem. In gratitude I promised that when I went up to London at Christmas, I would try not to come back. (Crisp, 1977, 40)

This spatial transition from province to city has other fundamental elements of contemporary gay narratives mapped onto it: emotional and political transitions from closeted repression to out gayness, self-loathing to queer celebration. Quentin may still have inhabited the provinces of suburban Surrey at the time of his father's understanding of him as a male whore, but the tremendous relish with which the adult Quentin narrates this scene, and the joy and admiration this relish solicits from his

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Daring Hearts: Lesbian and Gay Lives of 50s and 60s Brighton (Brighton: Queenspark Books, 1992).

readers, is a function of the fruition of queer subjectivity (his and ours) enabled by the spatial relocation to urban gay subculture.

However, despite the way in which autobiography has flourished in gay culture, particularly as publishers have cashed in on the way in which gay (male, particularly) culture has embraced the commodification of identity, there remain particular orthodoxies about the kinds of stories that we have the ability to tell about ourselves, and to have disseminated. There are a number of reasons for this. Our commodification is a function of assimilationism and the current dominance of rights agendas in gay politics (equalisation of the age of consent, parenting, adoption and so on, gays in the military, and gay marriage). These agendas rest on our appropriateness: they mark out same-sex desire as our only and insignificant deviation, they offer this desire as insufficient reason to perpetuate our continuing exclusion from the dominant institutions of society, at the same time as glorifying this desire itself, selling it, commodifying it, insisting in its centrality to contemporary gay subjectivity. We're normal except for with whom we practice sexually, and we question why this should disqualify us from becoming good citizens. As Leo Bersani has said, 'It would be difficult to imagine a less gay-affirmative question at a time when gay men and lesbians have been strenuously trying to persuade straight society that they can be good parents, good soldiers, good priests.' (Bersani, 1995, 113). The extreme commodification of gay identity, which offers many glorious pleasures, as well as difficulties, makes emotional telling either a function of commercial spectacle (for example, in films, such as *The Opposite of Sex*) where autobiographical narratives are subsumed within more conventional and dissociated narrative forms, or the purview of parodically naïve confessionals.

One of the problems of inhabiting an excessively commodified subculture, is that all expressions of the subculture become subject to the devastating assessments of fashion; nobody wants to be perceived to be making themselves the subject of talk-show salacious discourse, or US therapeutic-speak, or so-called victim culture; we'd rather, apparently, shop till we drop. There's no place for whinging or whining, and oppression doesn't go with this season's colours. In the bars in Soho's Compton Street, or along Manchester's Canal Street, the small town boy may find a cosmopolitan culture welcoming in its beauty, availability, glamour and gayness, but he will have to manage his complex emotional needs, his pent-up distresses, frustrations, his curiosities and passions into modes communicable through cruising rituals and performances of bodily commodification. The scene has many pleasures to offer but ultimately they are a function of desire and sexual success. There was a time when such small town boys could have found, in less salubrious bars, the kinds of shockingly unfashionable but infinitely valuable old Queens who inducted generations of us, into ways of resisting, flouting, bitching, screaming and caring that we didn't need a Platinum card for, but which I for one couldn't have lived without. You can't sell that kind of wisdom; you can't professionalise it, and its doyennes don't connote the kind of endless present, endless youthfulness that (post)modern gay venues require.

I want to introduce the idea that a standard narrative of gay autobiography, which depicts the small town boy moving to a big city, rests on particular understandings about the kinds of space that that boy leaves behind, and the kind of space that he gravitates to. As de Certeau has said, 'Every story is a travel story – a spatial practice' (1984, p.115) and coming out stories are certainly no exception; yet, I want to argue that the narrative of space they offer, the dichotomy between repressive province and liberationary metropolis, is problematic in its understanding of what constitutes free, liberated homosexual expression. This is a critique of the discourse of spatial progression enshrined in gay autobiographical narratives; however, as I've indicated, it's also a critique of the way in which such narratives can coalesce with the current modes through which gay identity is commodified, as a function of sexual activity and success, to foreclose that identity. There are myriad terms through which companies like Millivres, Prowler Press and others that dominate the subculture, commodify gay identity as a function of sex, to such an extent that it becomes difficult to make ourselves intelligible in any other way. As Michael Warner has noted, with devastating accuracy: 'Post-Stonewall urban gay men reek of the commodity. We give off the smell of capitalism in rut.' (Warner, 1993, xxxi). It is worth remembering that for Quentin Crisp, hanging out in Soho cafes with the 'girls' in the twenties, 'It never occurred to any of us to try to be more loveable' (Crisp, 1977, 28). As Alan Sinfield has remarked, Crisp's demeanor 'was not designed to attract men' (Sinfield, 1994, 46). Queer subjectivity, performance, affectation, for Crisp and the subculture he aligned himself with, was not about engaging in sexual transactions, was not a function of the commercial representation of sex and desire, but about resistance of straightness, dullness, suburban mediocrity, masculinity and normality. Such resistance necessitated becoming fabulous, not getting fucked.

Although, I would argue, most accounts of homosexuality are shot through with assumptions about the gendered nature of gay identities, they rarely account for their representation of gender in a self-conscious way. The small town boy (so the story goes) who moves to the big city (or literally keeps moving, as an airline or railway steward, who joins the forces, or who gravitates to the service of perpetually itinerant communities, in the hotel and catering trade) does so to come out, but also to come into sexual expression (or a less discrete, less desperate expression). You move away from your small town to get laid. This is all very well (providing of course that you do actually get laid in your new metropolitan environment) but inevitably the discursive idea of gay identity formed in such narratives makes that identity a function of desire. It would be silly to underestimate the importance of desire in constituting gay identity, nevertheless, as I have argued elsewhere, gay identities are also expressions of gender identification.[2] For those of us nelly queens who find this aspect of their identity important our histories are full not only of the autobiographies of the famous, like Quentin and George, but also of marvellous, ordinary queens like Shelley Summers, a drag queen whose experiences of being called up are preserved in the joyous book *Men in Frocks*: 'I wasn't really cut out for war. I went through it all in a bit of a dream.' She goes on:

> We used to have aircraft recognition classes, where they projected pictures of different aircraft on the screen…I never had any interest in it, so I'd go off into the spirit world and think, 'If I wash my hair with so-and-so and push my cap at this angle, it won't flatten my hair…'
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> …We ended up in Burma. Rangoon had fallen by the time we arrived. The whole place was in flames. The fighting was over but there were bodies everywhere. I just couldn't get it out of my head that I was Scarlet O'Hara at the burning of Altamont. (Kirk & Heath, 1984, 14)

It's telling, however, that this kind of sublime queenery is safely framed within gay culture as being about drag. Drag queens are a key emblem of gay identities (just look at the virtually religious significance attached to *Torch Song Trilogy* or *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* by gay men), but drag holds an ambiguous position in gay culture; many of the implications about gender that drag raises are displaced through a voyeuristic celebration of the gowns and the attitude, but drag's status as performance keeps it safely at a distance (particularly when it becomes a function of historical accounts). Liberal rights and assimilationist models, which seem to predominate currently, as I've suggested, tend to foreclose what I have called the heterosocially identified aspect of homosexuality in favour of desire-based understandings of gayness, and which are especially compatible with commodification.

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[2] See Maddison, *Fags, Hags and Queer Sisters: Gender Dissent and Heterosocial Bonds in Gay Male Culture* (London: Macmillan, forthcoming 2000) and Maddison, 'Gay men and

And certainly in a climate where gender dysphoria or gender dissent is associated with transgendered identities, rather than gay ones, and under the influence of our increasing incorporation and respectability, then the more excessively gendered aspects of gayness are becoming more and more difficult to express, autobiographically or otherwise.

I now want to pick up the question of spatial mobility in gay autobiography by returning to the scene of my own habitation of the closet and the particular provincial environment that necessitated such discretion, in order to then problematise the binary opposition province/repression – metropolis/liberation.

I spent my adolescence in the small market town of Kendal in the north west of England, just outside the Lake District National Park. Given its strategic place on the main M6 motorway north, Kendal has benefited not only from tourism, but from manufacturing industry (K Shoes Factory is located in the town and it continues to be the home of the confectionary Kendal Mint Cake, whilst its industrial heritage includes major snuff factories, and some industrial manufacture serviced by now decayed canal infrastructure), and the growth in the financial services sector (what was the Provincial Insurance company had its head office in Kendal; Provincial is now owned by the Axa Insurance Group, who retain a large presence in the town). Kendal is also the largest town in a highly agricultural area, surrounded by large sheep farms, and a number of significant dairy herds. Kendal is thus one of the most affluent towns in Cumbria, and has rapidly expanded since the early eighties, with clutches of middle-class, lower managerial housing estates being built at the feet of the fells that surround the town. This is not to say that Kendal sustained anything remotely approaching a diverse cultural environment. As I was growing up it was home to only one very conspicuous

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female identification: pathology or cultural dissent?’ in Campbell & Harbord (eds) black family. The one cinema in the town closed down in the very early eighties. The one wine bar in the town played host not to double income, fashion conscious Yuppies, but to school leavers and young farm labourers who appreciated its late licence. The bar of the local arts centre had a few resident goths, but none of the eccentric, theatrical types I longed to meet: no caftans or foot-long cigarette holders, just some bad Peruvian knits. Not a very encouraging environment for a young gay lad to grow up in. I suppose I had the good fortune to be in part shaped by my family's upward class mobility: from a very early age it was assumed that I would become the first family member ever to go to university, and in so far as this would provide me with the opportunity to leave Kendal for what I imagined to be the sophisticated cosmopolitanism of undergraduate life, I did nothing to dismay these parental aspirations. When the time came I had been sufficiently cowed by my experience of growing up in Kendal to seek the compromise offered by the University of Kent at Canterbury: leafy campus life in one of the smallest cathedral cities in the country, rather than the untender mercies of anonymous big city life.

The very significance geographical mobility plays in many of the most familiar autobiographical coming out narratives, where repressed boy from small town moves to metropolis and discovers other boys and a coherent gay subjectivity, glosses over the more intricate and complex ways in which we are shaped by our provincial backgrounds (those of us who have them). Indeed the very recognition, in activism and academic gay writing, about the problematic nature of constituting gayness outside metropolitan city spaces tends towards a condescending pity for those residing in the spatial margins that then reproduces these difficulties. One definitive problem with autobiographical narratives, that most commercial story-telling tends to naturalise, is the way in which memory is not experienced temporally, at least not until memories are organised,

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Psychopolitics and Cultural Desires (London: UCL Press, 1998).

rationalised, sanitised. Indeed, given that remembrance is experienced more as the function of inspirational stimuli (epiphanal catalysts, perhaps, which unlock episodes) rather than linear progression, experiences of space and place are especially important.

The cliched narrative of the small town boy who moves to the metropolis necessarily makes the assumption of a coherent, enculturated or politicised gay identity a function of either the itinerancy of the boy concerned (the act of moving away, or of relocation itself precipitates gay subjectivity) or of the gay subcultural scene offered by the metropolis. In many respects the spatial dynamics of the coming out narrative reproduce the kind of romanticism of the city as the apex of modernity depicted in Marshall Berman's famously optimistic manifesto (Berman, 1983, 15-36, 131-171). Indeed Elizabeth Wilson (1992), and more explicity Sally Munt (1995), have both reclaimed Baudelaire and Benjamin's archetypal modernist subject, the *flaneur* ('stroller'), as feminist and lesbian subject. The small town, the provincial space left behind in the rush to inhabit the subjectivities offered by modernity, like the *flaneur*, becomes but the repressive catalyst that necessitates relocation: its very meaning in such narratives is antithetical to gayness. In this way the apparently liberationary conventions of gay autobiography may actually condense the possibilities of expressing the pain of being gay in a small town where that pain itself is also the vehicle for more provocative expressions of gayness (notwithstanding a romanticisation of my own youth). Speaking (with some degree of self-consciousness) anecdotally, I know of many friends who now have access to diverse and thriving metropolitan gay environments who nostalgically hanker after the one small backroom of the pub in the provincial town they left behind. A bar where you could find no self-conscious strollers, but where you could find the subcultural wisdom of the older queens and dykes, which as I've said, was a function of the kind of brittle urbanity offered by Quentin, and not shaped by acts of consumption.

Notwithstanding that such desires may be as much about a romanticisation of our own youth, that is that they are temporal, rather than spatial desires, there remain elements of the small town boy narrative that need more careful thought. Knowing that you inhabit a hostile place, knowing that those men and women in that pub's backroom, the friends, ex-lovers, elusive objects of desire, the competition, are the only ones in that place who acknowledge your identity, knowing that you only really have each other, may be what the very pain and frustration of the place is about. Yet the limitations of small town homosexuality necessitate clean understandings about where you will be safe, and where you won't, and engender strong subcultural alliances (sometimes a mixed blessing). From that knowledge about safety you can then determine the extent of your resistance or transgression of the conditions of that safety. You can do a Boy George, and walk around Blackheath in a Roman gladiator's outfit, all gold and plumage, or you can keep your head down and wish you had the courage for the sequins. However precarious provincial gay life might be, the general level of ignorance about homosexual life, and its social rejection, may actually enable more opportunities for transgression and for clandestine activity than institutions such as universities, or commercial gay ghettoes, which the coming out narratives I've been discussing here understand as liberationary. I have already suggested ways in which the commodification of gay subjectivity may foreclose the transgressive possibilities of that subjectivity. But what of my own spatial narrative? What kind of opportunities for gayness did this small town boy find in the process of relocation?

Like many other lesbians and gay men (and many who are their respective family's first generation of university entrants) once I had relocated within academia I set about making it a more permanent home. This necessitated, eventually, becoming a graduate student, and finally a professionalised academic. It is a central assumption of the kind of academic cultural politics to which I subscribe that contemporary gay identities are a function of subcultural experience and assimilation. Such assimilation arises out of becoming situated in an urban environment like those that have become so celebrated in London's Soho, along the canal side in Manchester, and of course in Brighton, where I now live. We could suggest that the undergraduate milieu, and possibly the university culture itself, operate as a similar kind of space. Yet the assertion of the importance of the subculture in fostering gay self-awareness ironically overlooks what I have come to understand to be crucial ways in which my own experience of being gay has been compromised, in ways not dissimilar to those I experienced as a small town boy.

Sally Munt (1995) has written evocatively of the camp excesses and spectatorial pleasures of Brighton. Her vision of the place is a more articulate and well-observed version of the kinds of understandings I had gained of it before I moved there. Munt's Brighton of dirty weekends, smutty grandeur and aristocratic eccentricity was all there, laid out before me - but others were experiencing it. It comes as a shock when small town boy arrives in gay mecca and doesn't get laid, but my problems weren't just about sex, but about re-thinking how to be gay. Before arriving in Brighton to begin my postgraduate studies I had already done a degree in Canterbury, which was a long way from Kendal, and considerably more cosmopolitan (to my eyes), but scarcely more gay.

The undergraduate life of endless tea and biscuits, late-night soul-searching and fierce politics, underpinned by a commitment to the Gaysoc and the SU, allowed a degree of social articulation of my homosexuality that I had not experienced up until that point, but the enforced and passionate intimacies of life in halls of residence are a great equaliser. Not only is campus life a distinct social microcosm, but its physical remove, and its temporal rhythm cosset you in a way which I now think of with an embarrassing level of nostalgia, but which at the time was often claustrophobic. Nevertheless, such tightly structured independence, in a context of shared dislocation and excitement is a very different kind of social environment to operate in than a small town without such communal and generational intimacy. Undergraduate life, for school-leavers, immerses you in an alienation that democratically facilitates an immediate intimacy, born of the release from desperation and childhood. Life beyond campus parochialism seems rather harsh. In Brighton I could see the splendours of gay life, but it did not seem available to me, and it did not seem to be the kind of gay that I understood as me. Gay urban spaces, like those offered by Brighton aren't commonplace, but they are visible enough to warrant academic study. The collection *Mapping Desire* seeks to understand the spatial dimension of sexualised identities, and in so doing confirms the very terms of my initial alienation in Brighton:

> the landscapes of desire which this book seeks to address are the eroticised topographies – both real and imagined – in which sexual acts are performed and consummated. (Bell & Valentine, 1995, 1)

The most accessible way of being gay in a social context that Brighton was offering me was to pick up men in bars and cruising grounds and have sex with them. I was not familiar with the competitive etiquette of eroticism on offer. I was too gauche, too studenty: my previous sexual encounters had come about through political intimacies, or through elaborately studied, adolescent crushes. I had no vernacular for what seemed to be this harsh, transitory way of making an impression. And I looked all wrong: I was too girly, too bitchy, too combative. Whatever qualities I had to offer would not be immediately apparent or valuable as sexual commodities. The bookish competitiveness of postgraduate life was a space I felt much more familiar with: its strict hierarchies and its valuing of personal alienation as the methodology of inquiry felt familiar, allowed me to use the skills of self-preservation I must have learned in Kendal.

The kind of so-called privileges of becoming a professionalised gay man in academia can be seen in many ways to be as prohibitive, and perhaps less inspirationally formative than the experiences of a small town boy denied access to the subcultural milieu. There is a high level of toleration of homosexuality in higher education, especially so given the increasing institutionalisation of lesbian and gay studies in the last decade. This institutionalisation is incredibly important, both in terms of the provision of undergraduate teaching, so that queer students may experience themselves more fully incorporated into the framework of knowledge offered about the world, and in terms of graduate work and research: universities themselves are exploiting the productivity of lesbian and gay academic professionals through the Research Assessment Exercise, who are 'benefitting' from such institutionalisation. However, I would suggest that institutions of higher education solicit a particularly deadening assimilation as the price of that toleration.

The liberal, totalising tendencies of academic discourse and academic life may actually produce a more restrictingly homophobic environment, than romanticised notions of the ivory tower will allow. Academic discourse retains its dominant institutional position in terms of enabling the acquisition of particular kinds of social status and the maintenance of educational hierarchies by fixing rigid conventions about the ways in which material can be handled. As teachers we call this marking. As writers and professionals we experience difficulties getting work published, or getting promoted, or getting permanent contracts, until we adopt an appropriate condition of forebearance with regard to the levels of emotional repression with which academia operates, whilst purporting to account for the world in all its infinite variety. Academic discourse is a discourse of control: the issue is the balance individual paticipants can bring about between regulation and resistance, or dissent. This is one reason why this collection's interest in autobiography is such a compelling opportunity to reflect on such matters: enabling the personal and experiential to read the institutional, the mandarin. Yet even here, our work is framed by the requirements of our professional location, and the inducements of status which facilitate self-regulation. As with all cultural production, academia produces regulatory systems; unlike most, academic agents inhabit their theoretical practices as though they were liberation itself (this is a particular tendency in

Cultural Studies and Critical Theory), when they are but more discourse, maybe promising entrapment alongside dissident articulation. There is, of course, a paradox here. One of the reasons this first generation university entrant has stayed within academia is because I do experience it as offering political and personal mobility, but such mobility is always a negotiation of the regulatory effects of the academy. Academic practice may be individually liberating, but that liberation is always a function of the authoritative position universities maintain in wider systems of class and other power structures. No wonder professional academics experience their use of theory as empowerment: it is a form of class mobility, whatever insights our skills may otherwise facilitate.

There's nothing necessarily brave about growing up in a small town and being one of the most conspicuous residents of your generation in it. You just don't have any choice. Provincial life experienced by small town boys, like that I experienced in Kendal, does not offer the kinds of pleasures of modern urban gay subcultures, nor does that life offer any kind of institutional assimilation whereby feelings of safety and belonging may be inculcated. However, representing the idea of how far the Lake District, for example, is from the cosmopolitan queerness of Manchester or London not only makes it even further away, but elides the ways in which such parochial and conservative environments give rise to their own brands of radical swish. Kendal certainly never tolerated my homosexuality, but unlike academia it never offered the opportunity for my assimilation to its brand of mediocre heterosexuality; Kendal didn't offer liberalism, soliciting my ventriloquisation of dominant authority as the price of toleration, as academia does. Institutions of higher education naturalise dysfunctional heterosexuality, mundane dominance, through their toleration of queer difference. Similarly, capitalism naturalises its own diseased control of our lives by tolerating our perversions as long as they remain functions of commodified exchange which make our subjectivities functions of consumption. I'm glad my own coming out narrative conforms to the archetypes of the small town boy narrative, but I think our narratives of spatial progression, where that progression promises liberation, but merely offers different, more agreeable forms of incorporation, needs retelling. Foucault's still better than the bar at the arts centre in Kendal, but only because what he represents has enabled my assimilation into a more powerful place in society.

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