Emerging Critical Scholarship in Education

NAVIGATING THE DOCTORAL JOURNEY

Edited by

JEAN RATH and CAROL MUTCH

Emerging Critical Scholarship in Education: Navigating the Doctoral Journey

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CHAPTER NINE

CRITICALLY CHRISTIAN? MY EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND SPIRITUAL JOURNEY AS A SEXUALITY RESEARCHER

TEGUH WIJAYA MULYA

In this chapter Teguh Wijaya Mulya narrates his personal journey(s)—academic and spiritual—in the first year of his doctoral study. He details the excitement and struggles in embracing poststructuralism and queer theory to comprehend the knowledge in the field of sexuality. Unexpectedly, these theoretical frameworks further excavated the epistemological foundations of his Christian faith. How can queer theory be "reconciled" with Christianity? As Teguh embarks on this adventure, he invites other doctoral students to travel with him, particularly those who find that PhD is a life-changing journey in which their basic beliefs are turned upside-down.

I've come to change everything, turn everything rightside up…
Do you think I came to smooth things over and make everything nice?
Not so. I've come to disrupt and confront!
—Jesus Christ
(Luke 12: 51–53. The Message Bible, Peterson 2005, 1432)

Introduction

I came to New Zealand for doctoral study in 2011 on a government scholarship. I wished to study sexuality education and accumulate knowledge that would be useful for my country—Indonesia. It was as though I simply wanted to read as many books as possible, and bring this neat pile of knowledge home with me. However, after one year as a doctoral student I have realised that instead of being stacked nicely awaiting transportation home, my knowledge has been disrupted and complicated—old books have been thrown away, new books cannot fit the current categorisations, and stacks of books have collapsed.

The first part of this chapter provides a glimpse of my pre-New Zealand background, particularly the national and religious discourses which shaped my sexual subjectivity. Then I discuss my navigation in the field of sexuality study, and how it affects my ontological and epistemological assumptions. Lastly, I share my spiritual journey as I try to figure out how my faith can walk side-by-side with my critical adventure. I hope my narrative brings simplicity and complexity, hope and despair (temporary), answers and (further) questions to my readers.

Sexuality in Indonesia

Sexuality is an intriguing mystery for me. I recall the so-called "naughty boys" group in my junior high-school class talking about pornography and masturbation during break-time. I tried to listen to their talk, while carefully staying away. I was always fascinated by the excitement of the strange sexual feelings I began to have. But there was no space for me—a high-achieving student, church minister's son, almost always teacher's pet—to talk and ask questions about sexuality.

Silence is the historical stance for approaching youth sexuality in Indonesia, and it is still dominant now (Parker 2009). For instance, Indonesian parents generally do not discuss sexuality with their children (Smith-Hefner 2006; Utomo and McDonald 2009). Sexuality education is absent from the national curriculum. The word "sex" is formally mentioned only in a single lesson under biology, namely "reproductive physiology" (e.g., Parker, 2009; Smith-Hefner, 2006). The government has explicitly rejected calls to incorporate sexuality education into the Indonesian educational system. In 2010, the Minister of Education, Muhammad Nuh stated:

> In my view, sex education is not needed at school. In terms of sex, all societies have their own knowledge naturally without being taught by anyone. So I disagree with the suggestion of sex education at school. (Burhani 2010, ¶ 2, 6)

Government-based sexuality education programmes available for youth are organised by *Badan Kependudukan dan Keluarga Berencana Nasional* (BKKBN, or National Board of Population and Family Planning) under the Ministry of Health. Although not specifically targeting youth, BKKBN has a Directorate of Youth Resilience Development (*Direktorat Bina Ketahanan Remaja*) which coordinates reproductive health campaigns for youth (Direktorat Bina Ketahanan Remaja, 2011). These campaigns largely perpetuate a prohibitive discourse by reiterating "danger and

control" themes such as unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and HIV/AIDS. In these programmes, youth are encouraged to abstain completely from sex (see BKKBN Jawa Timur 2009), because sex is only for married (heterosexual) couples.

In Indonesia, sexual activity is expected to be located only within legally recognised marriage. Any sexual practices outside of wedlock are socially sanctioned as immoral, dangerous, entailing health risks, and needing to be strictly controlled by the state. For instance, when a non-married heterosexual couple is suspected of engaging in consensual sexual activity, either in their own home, student boarding house, motel, or elsewhere, the neighbours or police can conduct mass raids to stop the activity (see Padang 2012; Wibisono 2012). There are also media reports of random police inspections at internet cafes and schools to check whether youths possess condoms in their schoolbags, or pornographic material in their laptops, mobile phones, or other gadgets.

Furthermore, these negative portrayals of sexuality are imbued with divine endorsement through religious institutions. Hard-line Islamic groups such as *Front Pembela Islam* (Front of Islamic Defenders), *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (Indonesian Council of *Ulama*), and *Partai Keadilan Sejahtera* (Party of Welfare and Justice) stand behind political and social action enforcing sexual norms (Parker 2009). They successfully prevented Lady Gaga's 2012 concert in Jakarta by arguing that her performances oppose Indonesian religious values (Liu 2012); cancelled the 2010 ILGA (International Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, and Intersex Association) Congress in Surabaya (Akbar 2010); and legitimated the long-debated 2008 Anti-pornography Bill (Parker 2009), among other actions.

Christian groups (approximately 8.7% of Indonesia's population) (Ministry of Religious Affairs 2005), are not involved in overt political action as such, but they play a role as disciplinary agents by continuously portraying youth sexuality as sinful and by promoting sexual abstinence. Prominent in this field is Dr Andik Wijaya, who conducts seminars, workshops, counselling, and youth programmes to promote heteronormativity and sexual-abstinence-until-marriage among Indonesian Christians (Yada Institute 2011). In my 25-year Christian journey, after being deeply involved in five churches in three different cities, I conducted research and interviewed various Christian leaders. I found—regardless of denomination—there is almost no alternative to these discourses.

This is the context in which my understanding of sexuality developed. I chose to stay silent, stay abstinent, stay normal. Nevertheless, my interest in this mysterious subject grew. Eventually, I decided to focus on sexuality for my doctoral study.

Epistemological turn: From firm foundation to shaky foundation

The first few months of my doctoral study were a honeymoon period. I moved to a beautiful new country. I began a new and very interesting field of study with a new theoretical approach. I celebrated my access to thousands of books and journals by borrowing and reading as many as I could. This was a luxury compared to my access to literature in Indonesia.

I fell in love with the various critical theories I read—completely new territory for someone previously educated and employed in traditional mainstream psychology. I was drawn into a new ontological and epistemological universe.

I was particularly fascinated by Michel Foucault's works on power, resistance, and subjectivity. For Foucault, power is relational, impersonal, and pervasive. It does not merely constrain individuals, but is also productive and enabling (1978). Power operates through various invisible strategies and systems of examination, surveillance, discipline, training, and correction; in order to govern and normalise the subject (Foucault 1979). Subjectivity is continually constituted within the omnipresent nexus of power relations. Power categorizes the subjects, attaches to them a certain identity, and imposes "laws of truth" in which the subject must recognize and be recognized by others (Foucault 1982). To maintain one's existence as socially intelligible, the subject must engage in continual acts of re-enacting, reproducing, and reiterating norms so that they congeal and appear commonsensical—what Butler (1990) called "performativity". However, although the process of subjection inevitably involves subjugation to norms, the subject is also a social agent who is able to reflect on discursive practices operating upon them, and therefore is capable of resistance (Weedon 1987). In this continuous process of becoming, the subject can exercise various agentic disruptions to norms by cultivating new forms of subjectivity (Foucault 1982, 1985, 1986). While reading these works, I kept thinking of how I became myself; especially how I became a sexual and religious subject within various religious, cultural, and academic discourses operating upon me.

I was also captivated by queer theory, which takes Foucauldian poststructuralist work to a radical stage. It problematises the taken-for-granted, the normative, the familiar knowledges and practices such as sexual categories, identities, and assumptions (Hennessy 1994; Jagose 1996; Wittig, 1992). The queer literature I read demonstrated that the notion of sexual identity is discursively constructed, repeated performatively (Butler 1990), and fractured and inconsistent (Sedgwick 1991). It seeks to

disrupt, transgress, and denaturalise normative performances which constitute our commonsense (Jagose 1996; Sullivan 2003). I then started to question my rationality, my commonsense, and my assumptions.

Previously—within mainstream psychology—I believed knowledge to be an objective reflection of reality and that the foundation of truth is rationality. Social realities could be reduced into quantifiable and controllable variables which were related to each other mechanistically. Thus, the purpose of research was to find the universal principles/mechanisms governing these variables. However, once I engaged with poststructuralist and queer literature, I realised that social reality could be understood differently. It is messy, and loaded with conflicting forces. Knowledge, as a historical and political product, is constructed through discourses, and often generates oppressive actions. There is no discourse-free truth. Knowledge is shaky. Thus, my research aims to problematise these social constructions.

How did I choose Foucault and queer theory as my theoretical framework? When I sought the answer to this question, I found that the question *itself* is not really correct. I did not independently "choose" my theoretical framework; rather my decision is entangled in certain discursivities. I am not an autonomous researcher freely determining my research approach. I am constrained and (enabled) by discourses available to me within my relationships with literatures, school, supervisors, and fellow students. Just as my "choice" to be a Christian is not simply a rational decision independent of my context (a Chinese-descendant Indonesian; born in the 1980s; with parents who converted to Christianity and then entered the ministry; who went to a Christian-majority secular school). With this awareness, I am unable to claim simple and individualistic reasons to explain why I chose Foucault and queer theory. I related to these theories and their explanative power enticed me; I took them on board.

I take this theoretical framework to critically read Indonesian sexuality literatures. I have located two groups of research in my exploration in this field. The first mainly considers health concerns as the principal axis of researching youth sexuality, and thus, positions sexuality education as a means to control risks. I find these studies perpetuate normative discourses of youth sexuality; as they are based on (and try to prove) some normative assumptions. The discourse of danger is assumed as the only important focus for youth sexuality; consequently, the purpose of study is merely to prevent or manage health risks (for instance, see Diarsvitri et al. 2011; Utomo and McDonald 2009). Other studies assume that youth are vulnerable, irresponsible, and unable to make informed decisions and

therefore, they need to be protected through education. These studies mainly report sexuality education initiatives in terms of their effectiveness in preventing STIs, HIV/AIDS, and unwanted pregnancy (Diarsvitri and Dwisetyani 2011; Pohan et al. 2011). The second, less explored, research area focuses on critically challenging dominant understandings about youth and sexuality in Indonesia. These studies demonstrate that Indonesian sexual norms are enmeshed in complex interplays of religious discourses (Bennett 2005b; Kholifah 2005), patriarchal culture (Beazley 2008; Parker 2009), postcolonialism (Butt and Munro 2007), racism (Munro 2012), heteronormativity (e.g., Blackwood 2008; Boellstorff 2007; Wright Webster 2008), and dominated by adult-perspective knowledge (e.g., Harding 2008; Holzner and Oetomo 2004; Smith-Hefner 2006). This research area also reveals how Indonesian youth engage with and negotiate these normative sexual discourses, and constitute their subjectivities in complex and multiple ways. Some studies identify various strategies of negotiation and resistance of young Indonesian women, such as practising clandestine courtship (Bennett 2005a), refusing to wear hijab (Parker 2009), giving alternative meanings to their experiences of pregnancy (Butt and Munro 2007), and creating spaces to make autonomous decisions regarding their bodies and sexualities (Kholifah 2005).

My study aims to contribute, extend, and complicate knowledge in this second area of research. These studies elucidate sexual subjectivities of various Indonesian youth, however, no study to date has narrated Indonesian Christian youth's engagement with normative sexual discourses and how their engagement can inform sexuality education theory and practices. As a unique group with certain ontological beliefs, historicity, and social locations, Indonesian Christian communities develop their own ways of sense-making, along with their norms and resistance strategies. It is these unexplored narratives that I am interested in investigating.

For my PhD project I am studying the community I love, the community in which I have always invested my time and energy, which shaped who I am and who I want to be. And, even better, I am studying this community with a theoretical framework that really excites me.

However, as the honeymoon euphoria slowly fades and I come back to the reality of my daily life, I realise there is something standing in my way and it is no small thing. The more I read poststructuralist and queer texts, the more I feel related to them: they make sense to me. But at the same time, I have find my (current version of) Christian faith is no longer relevant.

Spiritual turn: Wrestling with (the queer) God

As an Indonesian-raised Christian I was exposed to only one way-of-being Christian. This way-of-being was sustained by the inscription of certain interpretations of the *Bible* on my everyday religious practices. I was often told: "This is the truth, it comes from God himself, accept it. It is coherent, sacred, and higher than any human knowledge." How, then, did this certainty face the radical deconstructive nature of queer theory?

I explored the intersection of queer theory and Christianity. Within a few internet searches, I found myself downloading articles and books under new tantalising keywords: "queer theology".

Queer theologians advocate opposition toward hegemonic knowledge, based on the belief that theology is basically queer. As noted by Loughlin (2008), queer theology's attempts to disrupt mainstream theology are not new; all theologies are always strange, marginalised, and therefore potentially transgress mainstream human ideology as they always refuse to conform "to the pattern of this world" (*Romans* 12:2). Theology's paradoxical approach to theorise the incomprehensible mystery of God is also similar to queer enthusiasm for generating, while simultaneously problematizing, knowledge (Loughlin 2008). This questioning of norms is identified by Althaus-Reid and Isherwood (2007) as the principal characteristic of queer theology. For instance, queer theologians deconstructed the normative image of (male, asexual) Jesus that was created by powerful-decent-white-straight-male theologians (Goss 1993; Jantzen 2001) and offered alternative images such as a transvestite Jesus (Liew 2009). They did it by stripping off heteronormative and other normative ways of thinking from theology (Althaus-Reid 2000, 2003). In this endeavour, various queer theologians have reframed their reading of the *Bible*, and queered some Christian doctrines such as sin, redemption, fidelity and marriage, bisexuality, and sex work.

As I did with studies on Indonesian sexuality, I took my queer theological framework to examine recent studies in sexuality and Christianity. Again, I found two major—but loosely categorised—groups. The first is studies which describe sexual experiences of Christian youth as a generalised group and how churches respond to sexuality. There are studies reporting church youth's sexual attitudes (e.g., Eriksson et al. 2011), sexual behaviour (Crawford et al. 2011; Rosenbaum and Weathersbee 2011), and variables related to them (Luquis, Brelsford and Rojas-Guyler 2011). Other studies address church responses to youth sexuality issues, such as incorporating sexual health in premarital counselling (Aholou, Gale, and Slater 2011), initiating church-based

sexuality education (Freedman-Doan et al. 2011; Wilner 2011), and discussing obstacles perceived by church leaders (Eriksson et al. 2010). These studies show that sexuality is intimately connected to Christian faith practices. Christian communities have been concerned with, dealt with, and established, strong discourses around sexuality: the discourse of sin and morality, and the discourse of abstinence-only-until-marriage (e.g., Edger 2010; Eriksson et al. 2011; Wijaya Mulya 2010). In my study, I am keen to explore how these discourses are contextualised, negotiated, and resisted among Indonesian Christian youth.

The second group of studies explores the experiences of marginalised Christians, such as—but not limited to—gay and lesbian Christians. Yip (2010) categorises studies in this area into several themes: struggle to negotiate religious and sexual/gender identity (e.g., Maher 2006; Yip 1999), unique ways of believing and practising Christian faith (Gross and Yip 2010; Yip 2002), the intersectionality of sexual identity with broader social networks (Ferfolja 2005; Yip 1997b), and spiritual experience outside the traditional religious and spiritual space (Thumma and Gray 2005). Some studies document diverse church responses to homosexuality, such as accepting, supporting, rejecting, punishing, and so on (e.g., Holben 2000; Kirkley and Getz 2007). There are also homosexuality studies in pedagogical situations, in which sexual diversity and Christianity interact. These studies uncover heteronormativity's salience at the classroom level. For instance, in the US context Todd and Coholic (2007) and Deeb-Sossa and Kane (2007) reported their struggles in challenging heterosexism in their classes. In my study, I draw on the knowledge produced by these studies as a starting point; although I am cautious of the difference in theoretical, social, and cultural contexts between these studies and my own.

I identify basic attributes shared by these two groups of research: both attempt to claim a more accurate description or explanation of sexual experiences of groups of Christian youth, either generalised or marginalised. Yip (1997a) observed that one of the strategies employed by his participants is reinterpretation of biblical scriptures using historical–critical hermeneutics and socio-cultural relativity, claiming gay interpretative appropriation of biblical doctrines is more historically accurate, exegetically sound, and culturally relevant than their churches' interpretations. Correspondingly, Todd and Coholic (2007) and Deeb-Sossa and Kane (2007) also proposed their gay-affirming biblical interpretation to their students as if their interpretation is more accurate, objective, true, and less oppressive. Drawing on Martin's (2006) and Kumashiro's (2002) works, I argue that this strategy is modernist and as

oppressive as the very oppression they attempt to challenge. I position my study in opposition to both the above approaches, desiring a queerer stance—a more suspicious, interrogative, and disruptive problematisation of dominant knowledge (Hennessy 1994; Jagose 1996; Jakobsen 1998; Sullivan 2003). I seek to problematise and complicate the discourses of sexuality, Christianity, and education. Examples of this approach are in David Nixon's works (2003, 2008; Nixon and East 2010). Using narratives from queer trainee teachers to disrupt dominant theological understanding about Jesus, he eloquently revealed how Jesus might be considered a fluid example of queer resistance (2003). In another publication, Nixon and East (2010) reflected on their experience as a researcher and an educator, and demonstrate how their subjectivities are challenged and made uncomfortable by the discourse of sexuality and Christian faith. These works inspire me to engage with and generate further alternative views particularly by employing the disruptive potential of the queer theology framework.

While "reconciling" Christianity and the queer framework for my study, in contrast, I still struggle to reconcile them in my personal and church life. Applying queer theologian thoughts to my conservative Christian beliefs resulted in an endless process of redefining my religious subjectivity. Is itt true that there is no single way to grasp Christian 'truth'?

Two texts convinced me that the answer is yes. The first is James Smith's (2006) *Who's afraid of postmodernism?*. Here he discusses the works of three French philosophers—Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault—and demonstrates how Derridean insights of the interpretation-mediated experience, Lyotardian objection of the myth of rationality, and Foucauldian understanding of knowledge–power relationships are allies for contemporary Christians in refusing modernist claims on a single biblical truth. Smith argues that Christianity at this time is deeply infiltrated by a modernist obsession with rationality and certainty, and that the contemporary practice of Christian faith must redeem Christianity from those obsessions. In the same vein, Dale Martin (2006) criticizes a myth of textual agency in which many Christians believe that the *Bible* "speaks" and our task is to just "listen". Informed by Derridean reading, he argues that no text is able to speak for itself; agency belongs to the human interpreter. Martin demonstrates how historical criticism never fulfils its promise because historians always disagree with each other. He also tackles the fear that the postmodern stance of *Bible* reading will result in unethical reading and/or interpretational anarchy by asserting Foucauldian existential aesthetics and eloquently promoting historical evidence that

holocaust, slavery, genocide, racism, and other kinds of violence are often performed by fundamentalists, not postmodern religious groups.

I embraced both Smith's and Martin's thoughts, and happily embarked on my new spiritual journey—a transgressive, disruptive, queer journey, but I am still actively involved in an Indonesian church (in New Zealand) where the dominant operating discourses are quite similar to my old version of Christian faith: single-absolute-biblical truth. I was banned from teaching Sunday school as I am accused of questioning the *Bible*'s authority. I was investigated by the pastor and elder who wanted me to repent and return to my old version of Christianity. I have learned that there are uncomfortable consequences for transgressing dominant discourses.

Another challenging task concerned the meaning of life. Trying to follow my queer and poststructuralist thinking, I often felt trapped in a sense of nihilism. At times a strong sense of meaninglessness overwhelmed me. Nevertheless, I decided not to give up. I wrestled with these thoughts; brought them to bed, to church, to my writing, to my social interactions. I talked to other Christians who read critical theories (who are not easy to find). As I expected, there is no easy answer—it is a never-ending journey. While I am learning, playing, and enjoying this journey; my ethical commitment is to identify, challenge, disrupt, and hopefully change some of its oppressive rules. That is what Jesus did. He fed the hungry, healed the sick, liberated the oppressed, and challenged dominant discourses. He came to the world to disrupt and confront!

Ending: The cost of (queer) discipleship

At the end of my first year, I feel that I have advanced academically, intellectually, and spiritually. When I look back over my diary and writings, I found myself creating new binaries: two groups of sexuality study, mainstream psychological approach vs critical studies; single-truth-style Christianity vs postmodern biblical reading; and uncritical me vs queer me. I have ignored the complexity within these categories. I wrongly assumed that my journey was as simple as moving from A to B, without acknowledging A and B's varied situations.

Should I reject these binaries now? And dismiss this first-year journey because it is uncritical? No. I believe that being an ardent disciple of a queer version of Jesus does not mean living in a binary-free world. Rather, it is an attitude, a commitment, a willingness and a readiness, to continuously be dismantled, challenged, and disrupted; while at the same time trying very hard to stand on this shaky foundation. To be queer I must

keep in mind that everything "would have to be left permanently open, permanently contested, permanently contingent" (Butler 1994, 8).

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